

THE BATTLE FOR TAVETA

by Dr Norman Parsons Jewell



The high, steep banks of the Lumi River created obstacles for the four ox-carts carrying medical equipment in March 1916. This cart overturned. They eventually manhandled the carts and oxen with ropes across the river.

1916 The build-up for the advance into German East Africa was now nearly complete...The assembly of British troops at Maktau for the offensive was built up over a number of weeks to total about 10,000 men...

Our first objective was a place called Serengeti, a fortified German camp, only a few miles from Maktau base and on the line of advance towards Taveta and the frontier. Serengeti was occupied without any opposition, but our next objective, Salaita, a small hill that was well fortified, repulsed our first attempts at capture. It was about a week before the German troops evacuated the post under strong attack from our third attempt to gain the objective...

The way was now open to Taveta, the last post before the border, which was a District Commissioner's (DC) residence on the slopes of Kilimanjaro and at dawn one morning the first British troops crossed the Lumi River to engage the German forces defending Taveta. Our ambulance unit was on the heels of the first troops and the high, steep banks of the Lumi River, created obstacles for the four ox-carts which carried all our equipment and it was not until we had evolved a system of manhandling the carts and oxen with ropes across the river that we were able to catch up with the advance. We ascended the rising ground to the DC's quarters at about 8 am to find the 3rd KAR deployed widely over the ground in front of some hills with a valley between them, and the Germans

tenaciously defending the hills and the gap. Four twelve-pounders of the Calcutta Battery were firing in support of the KAR advance to soften up the German defence. The hills were called Latema and Reata and the gap between them was the gateway into German East Africa.

The KAR advance was under continuous fire and casualties were heavy and the ambulance unit was ordered out in support of the African troops who were conducting their attack in the classical manner of advance taught to the KAR. When a whistle was blown by one of the officers, the Askaris jumped to their feet from the cover of the long grass and ran forwards about fifteen yards before flinging themselves to the ground again before the next charge forward. The long grass provided ample cover for the British troops, but this, in turn, was partly to blame for the situation where I found myself with a number of stretcher-bearers leading the KAR advance. It was only when we heard the whistle blow and saw Askaris rise from the grass behind us that we realised we had passed right through our own advancing troops. I ordered the stretcher-bearers to lie down and we waited until the advance got well ahead of us before we moved again. As we moved I met Colonel Graham of the KAR going back to report progress of the advance to the General Officer-in Command (GOC).

Within a few minutes he was back again on his way to the front line some fifty to sixty

yards ahead and it was only a matter of further minutes when I was told that Colonel Graham had been shot through the head as he reached the foremost positions and was dead. Casualties mounted through the day and the long, thick grass, which had provided such effective cover for our advancing troops became a handicap for the ambulance unit in trying to locate the wounded. However, we were able to evacuate many casualties to the rear.

The battle raged throughout the day...As darkness approached with a moonless night I moved my stretcher-bearers back to base at Taveta where a field hospital had been set up and reported to Major Harris, of the Indian Medical Service, who was officer commanding the ambulance units.

Acting on reports that many wounded troops still remained in a section of the battlefield, Major Harris announced that he would go investigate in spite of my assurances that the section was in the area which had been covered by my own stretcher-bearers who were sure that all the wounded had been tended and brought back. Nevertheless, Major Harris insisted that he look for himself and, as I knew the area which was now in no-man's land between the British and German forces, offered to accompany him...We arrived...and there were no wounded to be found. As we started back for our own lines, a terrific battle started with concentrated firing, and still between the British and German lines we decided to lie down. Bullets whistled overhead and through the grass nearby but only a few hit the ground around us. After about half an hour, the firing finished as suddenly as it had begun...so we decided to attempt to return to our lines. In the darkness we could not see each other and as we came closer to our own positions we kept on talking both to maintain contact with each other and also to act as a warning to the British troops that we were English and not Germans. Suddenly I heard Major Harris say something in Hindustani so I stopped dead and asked him what the matter was. He said we had run into men from the 130th Baluchis...I felt out in front of me and found two bayonets only six inches away and pointed straight at my stomach, but I still could not see the men who were holding the rifles. We were, however, allowed to pass through...

It was about midnight when we returned to base...I sat down in a circle of people around



Stretcher bearers waiting to rush in and evacuate the wounded in 1916.



British soldiers, possibly Baluchis, march forward with the ambulance team right behind in February 1916.

a fire...The Padre of the 2nd Rhodesians, the Reverend Suter, came up to the fire breathing heavily and dropped down beside us with the comment that he had been paced back from the Rhodesian position to the base by a lion. The Padre had been a well-known long-distance runner in England before the war but his story seemed far-fetched. 'You don't expect us to believe that?' said one of the men beside the fire.

'If you don't, look over there,' replied the Padre. 'You can see it for yourself.' Twenty yards away a lion stood staring at the fire. Finding itself surrounded by heavy firing the lion had probably been thoroughly frightened and decided to follow the Rhodesian Padre, either for his company or in hope of finding a way out. After a few minutes the lion disappeared again into the darkness.

Casualties were coming in all night and the medical units were kept busy...During the night fierce fighting had been continuous in the area around the gap and under sustained British attacks the German forces had eventually withdrawn but with heavy losses on either side, including many British troops that I knew personally. It was a sad day and a busy one getting the wounded off to the base hospitals where they could receive more comprehensive



Dr Jewell's ambulance crew tend to the first man wounded at Latema Riata in the battle for Taveta.

medical attention and the convoys of motor ambulances carried back the largest number of casualties which had been received in the fighting in East Africa up to that time.

In the morning I had the opportunity to examine the camp which the Germans had deserted for their entrenched positions...I was impressed by the bandas, which comprised of a wooden framework for walls and roof to which grass had been thatched to provide a comfortable dwelling. I was also impressed with the precision with which the camp had been laid out with the bandas in straight lines. Inside there were tables and armchairs, all made from wood and grass, as were the beds. It was of great interest to study the technique, which had been used in the building of the German camp. This knowledge proved to be invaluable in later years for the building, not only of dwellings, but also hospital wards for the rain seasons.

The decision was made to destroy the encampment, which the Germans had occupied almost from the onset of hostilities in east Africa. During the process of destruction in which the bandas were either set afire or pulled down we were besieged by hundreds of rats which tried to escape from the bandas and within a short time about a hundred men were busily engaged in the extermination of the rats.

During the few days in which we stayed at... Taveta, I had the opportunity to make several

small expeditions along the banks of the Lumi River...The Lumi River took its origin from springs in the side of the mountain fed Lake Chala, which appeared to be a crater lake, and, at that time, its depths had not been plumbed. From the rim of the lake the view overlooking the Serengeti Plain toward the Taita Hills was one of extreme beauty and it was difficult to associate this scene of peace with the noise and bloodshed of so few hours before...

*This account of the battle for Taveta is excerpted from the book **On Call in Africa** (2016). Dr Norman Parsons Jewell led ambulance crews throughout the East African campaign and his personal and official war diaries (the latter at the UK National Archives and retrieved by Dr Anne Samson) provide the basis for the book. As a keen photographer, Norman recorded many of his war experiences. The book therefore provides an excellent written and illustrated first-hand account of World War I in East Africa, 1914-1918. The website www.oncallinfrica.com provides details on how to order the print book (free airmail to Africa). Kindle and epub editions are also available. 210 high quality black and white photos by Norman Jewell may be viewed at the Mary Evans Picture Library www.maryevans.com (including the 145 in the book).*