

Bwanas in Burma: British officers and African regiments
in Southeast Asia, 1944-45

by

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Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

ALFSEA: Allied Land Forces, Southeast Asia

ANCO: African non-commissioned officer

AOR: African other rank (non-officer)

Askari: Swahili for “warrior,” used as a general term for African soldiers.

Baraza: Swahili for “meeting”

Bde: brigade

BIA: Burmese Independence Army

BNCO: British non-commissioned officer

BOR: British other rank

Bwana: Swahili for “master,” used as a term of respect for British officers

CnC: Commander-in-Chief

CO: Colonial Office

CSM: Company Sergeant Major

EA: East Africa

HQ: Headquarters

INA: Indian National Army

IWM: Imperial War Museum

KAR: King’s African Rifles

KiKAR: The official language of the KAR, a modified form of Swahili

L/Cpl: Lance corporal

LHCMA: Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives

LMG: Light Machine Gun

MMG: Medium Machine Gun

NCO: Non-commissioned officer. A non-commissioned officer is an enlisted man who holds some degree of authority, usually a specific role as opposed to the more general command role of an officer.

Ny: Nyasaland

Panga: A long cleaver-like cutting tool, similar to a machete.

RAR: Rhodesian African Rifles

RWAF: Royal West African Frontier Force

TNA: The National Archives of the United Kingdom

TT: Tanganyika

WA: West Africa

WO: War Office

Chain of Command in India and Southeast Asia, as of April 1944

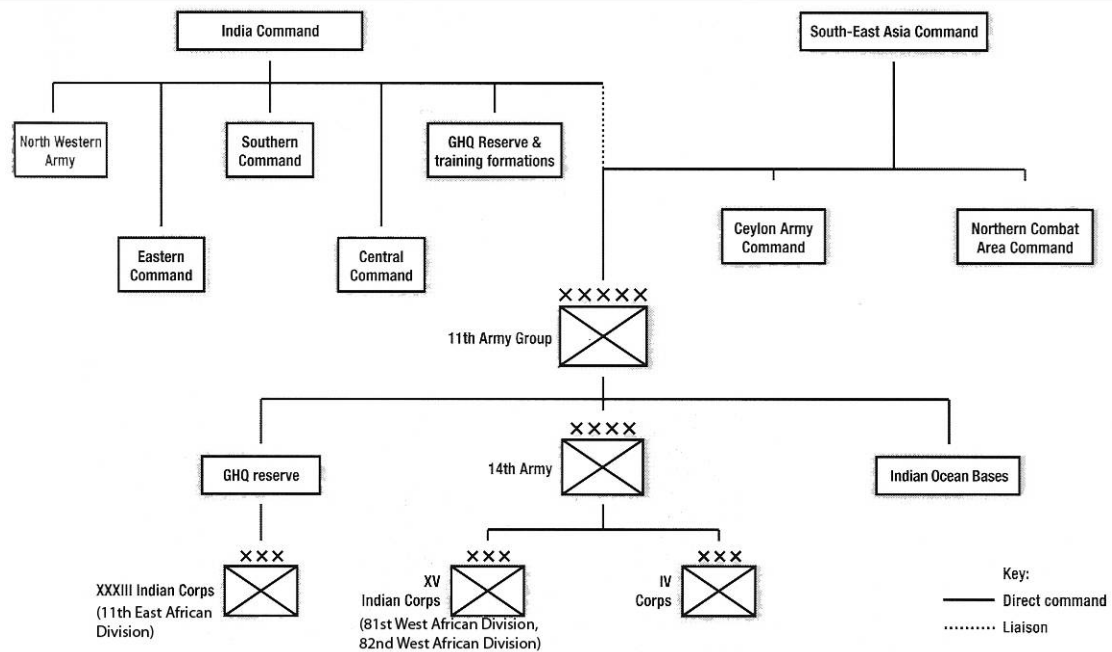


Figure 1 - The chain of command in the Southeast Asian theatre, with the corps in which African troops served labeled. (Based on charts found in Jeffreys, *The British Army in the Far East 1941-45*, (Oxford: Osprey, 2005), 7-8.)

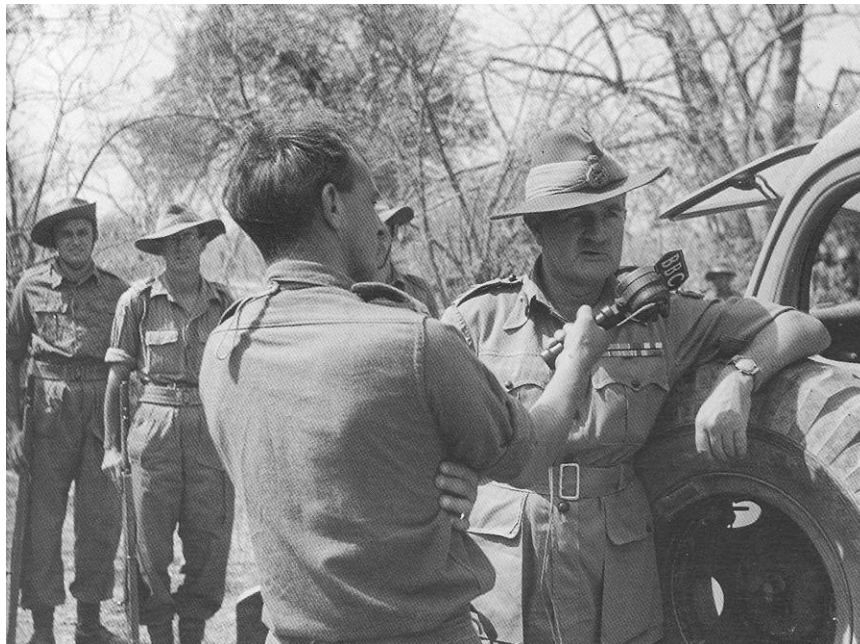


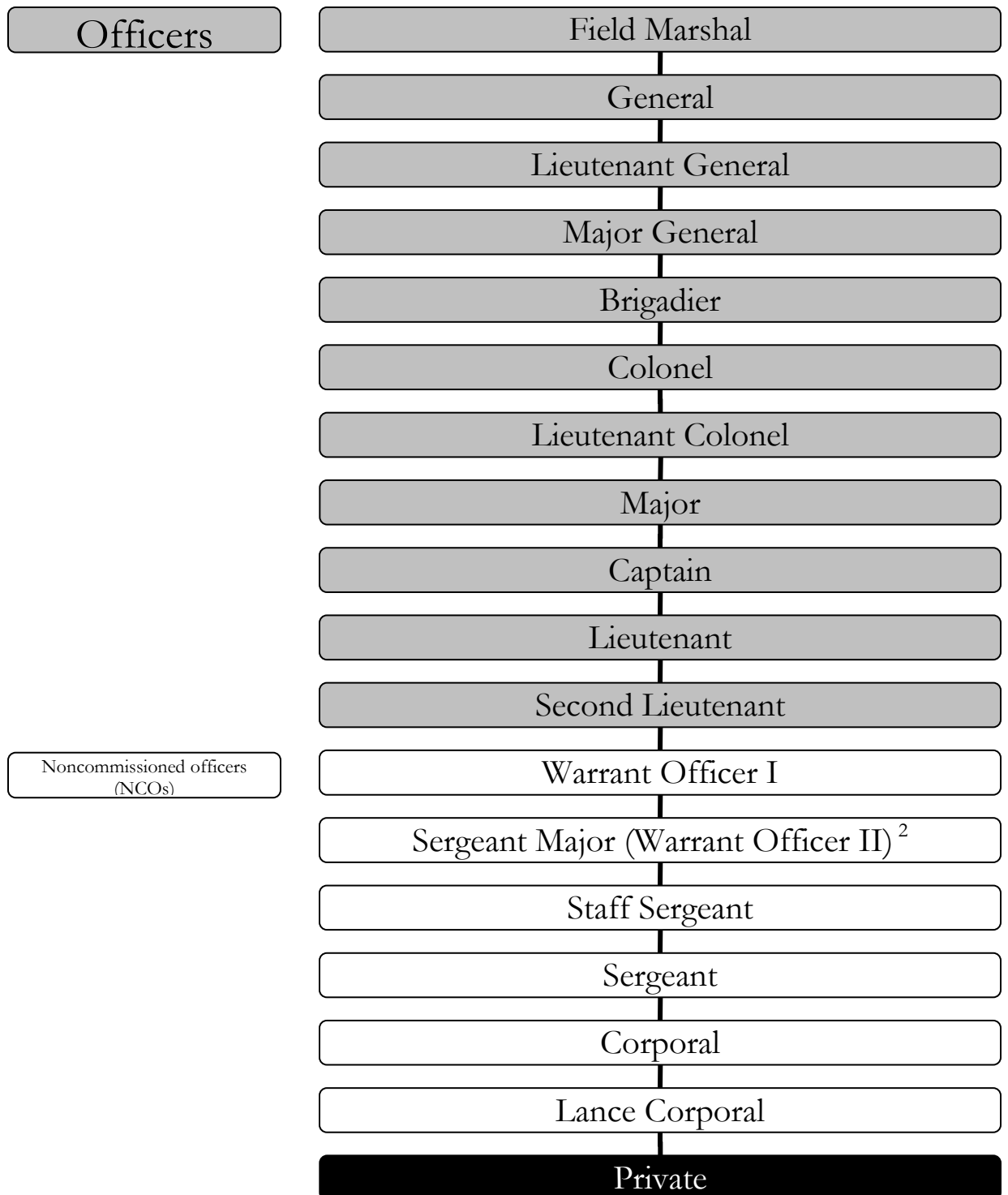
Figure 2 - General William Slim, Head of the 14th Army, addressing the troops (Reproduced from Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), image 28.)

British Military Units and Theoretical Strengths¹

Type of Unit	Contains	Soldiers	Commanded by
Army	Three corps	60,000-100,000	General or Field Marshal
Corps	Three divisions	30,000-50,000	Lieutenant General
Division	Three brigades	13,700	Major-General
Brigade	Three battalions	2,500	Brigadier
Battalion	Four companies	800	Lieutenant Colonel
Company	Three platoons, plus ancillary troops	127	Major
Platoon	Three sections	32	Second Lieutenant, Lieutenant or Captain
Section	n/a	8	Corporal

¹ Based on information found in Allen, *Burma: The Longest War*, 654. Commanding rank is accurate based on pre-war organization, but often changed during the war due to officer casualties and delay in promotions.

Order of Ranks in the British Military, Highest to Lowest²



² Based on information compiled from a number of sources, especially Alan Jeffreys' *The British Army in the Far East 1941-45*. Oxford: Osprey, 2005.

³ This was the highest rank attainable by any African during the war; see Chapter 2 for further details.

Introduction

On October 28, 1944, in the middle of the Burma campaign of World War II, Brigadier K.H. Collen of the 22 (Nyasaland) Brigade of the King's African Rifles (KAR) wrote a letter home to his wife,

By incredible guts and determination, [three companies of the 22 (Ny) Brigade] fought their way to the top, only to be literally blasted off by the M.M.Gs, L.L.Gs and grenades. I was so terribly proud of them but it was just too agonizing...I couldn't see them, it was so frightfully thick, dust and smoke from the shells. But I could hear them whooping and yelling "Sokolai, sokolai, Yao-oo-oo" the Nyasa war cry. Then the most appalling noise – all hell let loose; then worse still, the Company Commanders on the phone asking for more and more stretcher-bearers...You will, I know, be awfully sorry to hear that Hugh Mills was killed – most gallantly at the head of his platoon...And so much for my dear brave faithful askaris who paid the supreme sacrifice – who I knew and loved so well.

He updated his wife on the situation a few days later, writing to her:

Hugh was buried between two of his men, L/Cpl Jeffrey and Private Ulanda. I have found out now what happened. Hugh was killed almost the moment they crossed the start line by a grenade fired by four Japs from a bunker. To avenge him, four of his men led by Ulanda and Jeffrey crawled up to the bunker to throw their grenades through the aperture. Ulanda and Jeffrey were killed before they could get there, but Petro and William Chimowa got there safely, threw their grenades and killed all four Japs.⁴

This battle, as described by one of the officers in command at the scene, encapsulates the multicultural and geopolitical drama of the African colonial

⁴ K.H. Collen to his wife, 28 October and 3 November 1944. Private Papers of K.H. Collen, Imperial War Museum, United Kingdom (IWM) 79/21/1.

forces engaged in the Burma campaign: up against a fierce enemy in difficult terrain, African soldiers fought under the leadership of British and African-born European officers to help re-establish control of Burma and India. Despite the many differences between these officers and their men, and difficulties resulting from the influence of colonial politics on the fighting of the war, African involvement in Burma was a successful short-term strategy for the British, although it would have large repercussions on colonial and military administration after the war.

The involvement of African forces in the Burma Campaign of World War II has remained an understudied subject, perhaps because it is a small facet of a small campaign in a huge global war. When it is mentioned in the larger context of the war, discussion tends towards generalizations and assumptions about both African and European involvement that in many cases have little or no basis in historical fact. The scant scholarly research on the topic has focused on the strategic; general histories of the African divisions such as Hubert Moyse-Bartlett's *History of the King's African Rifles* or Haywood and Clarke's *History of the Royal West African Frontier Force* discuss the Burma campaign in terms of military maneuvers and tactical decisions, neglecting to fully capture the story of the troops' experience.⁵ Moyse-

⁵ Moyse-Bartlett, H. *The King's African Rifles: A Study in the Military History of East and Central Africa, 1890-1945*. Aldershot, England: Gale & Polden Ltd, 1956; Clarke, F.A.S.

Bartlett, Clarke, and Haywood were in fact the official historians of their respective regiments, and wrote with the approval and supervision of the military command. Their works, then, can be taken to represent the military's 'official' description of these events. Two social histories, Timothy Parsons' *The African Rank-and-File*, and O.E. Shiroya's *Kenya and World War II* use interviews with ex-soldiers and documents from the colonial archives to discuss the social impact of African service in the KAR throughout that regiment's history.⁶ These provide valuable insight into the experience of the East African soldier, but the Burma campaign remains one small part of these works, and the experience of the West African troops remains largely unexplored. What little has been written on the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF) focuses on the force as an extension of British Imperial power and mobilization, rather than on the experience of the Africans or British who fought with that group.⁷

British officers serving with African troops occupied a unique position in the Second World War. They were asked to command troops of

and Haywood, A.H.W. *The History of the Royal West African Frontier Force*. Aldershot, England: Gale & Polden Ltd., 1969.

⁶ Parsons, Timothy. *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999; Shiroya, O.E. *Kenya and World War II: African Soldiers and the European War*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1985.

⁷ For instance, David Killingray's article on the British Empire in West Africa, "The Idea of a British Imperial African Army". *The Journal of African History* 20. 3 (9), 421-436. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/181123>.

a different racial and social background, who spoke a multitude of different languages and had little military experience. With those troops, they were plunged into combat in a harsh country where even the climate and landscape were unfamiliar, to say nothing of the languages and culture. As much as they struggled against the Japanese forces, they also struggled against the limitations of their own troops – limitations, in many cases, imposed by the colonial system that had led to those troops being employed in Burma to begin with. As these officers struggled to craft an effective fighting force out of these Africans, and recorded their experiences in letters, diaries and memoirs, they reveal the tension between the British Army deployed abroad and the entire British colonial system. Though their role in the Second World War may have been small, their experiences illustrate a larger aspect of the British Empire, exposing the strengths and weaknesses that both made the Empire so powerful and led to its collapse.

The Southeast Asia Theatre of World War II

It is often forgotten or unnoticed that the Second World War was not just a conflict between nations, but also a conflict between empires. As the fighting spread and intensified, these empires turned to their colonies and territories to increase their resources and manpower, and the fight for territorial control spread throughout countries' colonial possessions. The

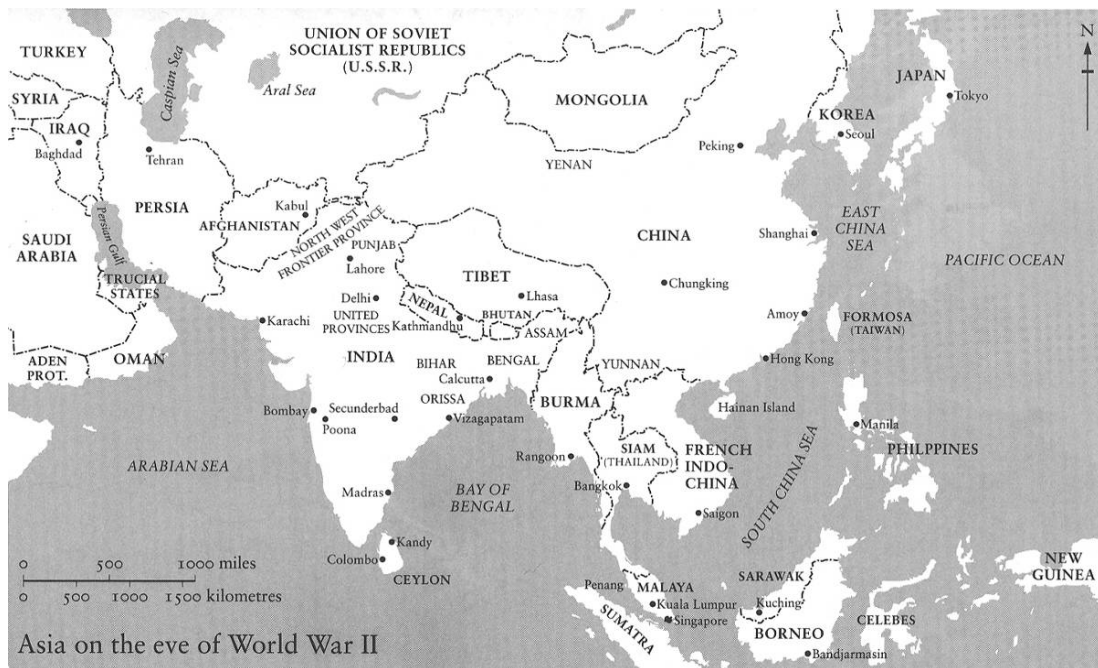


Figure 3 - The South Asian theatre of World War II (Reproduced from Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), xi.)

Southeast Asia theatre of war was perhaps the most characteristic example of imperial warfare, as the Japanese Empire sought to expand into territories then under the control of the British.⁸ As the Japanese fought to take over China in 1937, they soon realized that the British and Americans were supplying the Chinese forces through a jungle trail leading from Rangoon to Yunnan, known as the “Burma Road.” The United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands also responded to Japanese expansion with restrictions on the sale of iron ore, steel and oil to Japan, thus limiting the raw materials Japan needed to continue the growth of its economy and

⁸ For a general narrative of the war in the Far East, see: Thompson, Robert Smith. *Empires on the Pacific: World War II and the Mastery of Asia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001; Tarling, Nicolas. *Britain, Southeast Asia, and the Onset of the Pacific War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

its expansion. In response to these pressures, the Japanese military created a plan designed to seize the economic resources controlled by Great Britain and the Netherlands, while preemptively destroying the United States' ability to defend British and Dutch positions in the Pacific.

With the attack on the American forces at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the ensuing attacks on Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma, New Guinea and the Dutch East Indies in the following month, the Japanese managed to quickly strike and gain an enormous amount of territory at the expense of the Allied Powers. Great Britain's defenses had been weakened by the need for forces in Europe and the Mediterranean, limiting the number of troops and materiel that could be used in defending its position in the Far East. By May 1942, Britain had suffered one of its worst military setbacks, with Singapore and all of Burma in the hands of the Japanese. The British had been forced to retreat across all of Burma to the Indian border and were now suffering from Japanese naval raids in the Indian Ocean, as well as the powerful threat of Japanese invasion into India.

This was the position Great Britain found itself in once the Japanese attack stalled due to the British defenses and monsoon conditions in 1942.⁹ India, as Britain's most valuable colonial possession, had to be defended,

⁹ For general information on the fight for Burma, see Bayly, Christopher and Harper, Tim. *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*. London: Penguin Books, 2004; Allen, Louis. *Burma: The Longest War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.

but in order to do so the British would need to muster more forces even as the European campaign against the Axis powers continued.¹⁰ The Indian Army had been reactivated in 1938 in light of the pressing world threats to British power; it would serve as the vast majority of the British forces opposing the Japanese. Alongside this force were several divisions of British troops and two divisions of Chinese troops led by an American general, Joseph Stilwell. Finally, in 1944, to replace beleaguered Indian Army units, three divisions of African troops were sent in as relief. By 1944, about 70% of the 14th Army, the main force in Southeast Asia, were Indians, Gurkhas, Burmese, or African.¹¹

The Japanese Army fielded about ten divisions of troops, about 300,000 soldiers, assisted by units of what was named the “Indian National Army” (INA) – an anti-British military unit formed of Indian POWs captured in the fall of Singapore. This group was organized by Subhas Chandra Bose under the oversight of the Japanese Army. Also fighting with the Japanese was a parallel organization of Burmese troops called the Burmese Independence Army (BIA), similarly made up of Burmese who opposed British control of Burma and looked to the Japanese for help in gaining Burmese independence. Japan drew about 80,000 friendly troops

¹⁰ Gallagher, John. *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire: The Ford Lectures and other essays*, ed. Anil Seal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. 134–141.

¹¹ Bayly and Harper, 294.

from these groups, although they were hardly a reliable force due to their limited training and uncertain allegiance.¹² However, despite the Japanese promises that independence would be granted to India and Burma in exchange for their assistance in fighting against the British, Burma remained under Japanese military control throughout the war, to the anger and eventual opposition of the Burmese resistance.¹³ Though these two forces did not compose a serious percentage of Japanese forces, they still fit into the Japanese plan for the conquest and control of India and Burma and also represented serious political opposition to the British reconquest of these colonies.

Politics of the Second World War in the British Colonies

As many scholars have noted, Great Britain had to rely on its colonies for support during the Second World War, at the least for the strategic reasons of obtaining the manpower and resources it needed to fight campaigns in multiple theatres. However, the contemporary politics of colonialism were counterproductive to this effort, for a number of reasons

¹² Ibid.; Allen 560-587. As most of the INA forces had been recruited from POWs in the Indian Army, many simply took membership in the INA as an opportunity to escape from Japanese prison camps back into India; as a result, many simply surrendered and allowed themselves to be captured as soon as they encountered British forces. BIA allegiance shifted as it became more apparent that Japan did not plan to grant Burmese independence.

¹³ Allen, 579-587.

that would lead to tensions during and after the war. Most notably, as referenced earlier, India was undergoing major strain as Great Britain's largest and most important colony. Demands for Indian independence had been going on in a serious fashion since 1919, and the British had been acting for years to stop both violent and non-violent protests, and in doing so, realizing their own limitations in preventing civil resistance.¹⁴ Despite the rising political will for independence and "Home Rule," India remained an important keystone in British foreign policy, especially as an area of geographical importance and a critical piece of Imperial strength.¹⁵ This included, notably in the process leading up to Britain's involvement in the Second World War, the vast number of Indian troops making up the majority of the British Army in the inter-war period.¹⁶

Thus, with the threat of Japanese forces in Southeast Asia and German and Italian forces in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, the need for Indian troops and support was pressing upon the British Empire. The British Raj, still possessing some political power, simply took the opportunity to declare that India was also at war without consulting any Indian political representatives. While Indian political leaders like Gandhi

¹⁴ Ferguson, Niall. *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. London: Allen Lane, 2002. 276–279.

¹⁵ Brown, Judith M. "India". In *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, ed. Judith Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, 421–446. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 440–444.

¹⁶ Gallagher, 98–99.

and Nehru supported the Allied efforts against the Japanese, British fears of a potential revolt as the war progressed led them to make an offer to Indian politicians: Sir Stafford Cripps declared in 1942 that Indian support in the war would lead to full dominion status or the option to quit the Empire after the war. Despite crises in Indian politics throughout the war, such as were generated by the famine that struck Bengal in 1943, and the presence of the aforementioned Indian National Army, Indian troops served in the British Indian Army fighting in all theatres, in Europe and North Africa as well as in India and Burma.¹⁷

The combative relationship between Great Britain and India would also significantly affect relations between Great Britain and its African colonies, because any tensions between colonists and African natives were viewed as particularly alarming in light of Indian independence movements. Compared to India, British relations in Africa were somewhat more stable, but also played a huge role in determining the course of events in the Burma campaign. The major political conflicts in the African colonies were not between the Africans and the British, but rather between British

¹⁷ Unlike other uses of the Indian Army however, the British government agreed to pay for all defense expenditure not directly used to defend India; this would help contribute to a massive debt owed to India by Great Britain after the war and would play a huge role in British-Indian relations in the post-war period. Jeffery, Keith. "The Second World War". In *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, ed. Judith Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, 306-328. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 311-320; Ferguson, 288-289; Brown, 421-445.

government in London and the white settlers who had staked out their claims across Africa. White colonists had strong local authority, as the British system of Indirect Rule meant that there was very little interference from the British government in London; however, this changed as Great Britain looked to Africa as a potential source of resources during the Second World War and the government became directly involved in stimulating and regulating production across Africa.¹⁸ African colonies were used as a source of maize, sugar, sisal, rubber, tin, palm oil, ground nuts and many other goods.¹⁹

In addition, the need to raise African troops to combat Axis threats in Africa led to further conflicts between the settlers and the Imperial administration. Settlers were used to colonial administrations providing them with cheap and easily managed labor, particularly in East Africa, and felt that this system was threatened by the higher wages and better privileges offered by the British military.²⁰ The British government was highly susceptible to political pressure from white settlers: economic development across the continent depended upon the cooperation of these settlers, and the government also worried of tensions similar to those seen with South

¹⁸ Gallagher, 145–147.

¹⁹ Jackson, Ashley. *The British Empire and the Second World War*. London: Hambledon & London, 2007. 197-237

²⁰ Parsons, 108–110.

Africa.²¹ The Colonial Office, deeply influenced by these white settlers, therefore sought to moderate the actions taken by the War Office and the British military in operating the African divisions. Decisions made on the battlefield were often made, then, not for the purpose of winning for the war but for perceived ease in administrating the colonies once the war was won.

The Burma Campaign

Fighting in Burma spanned the entire length of the war in Southeast Asia, as it was the principal battleground between the British and Japanese. Roughly, it consisted of three separate segments: First, the initial conquest of Burma by the Japanese, from their invasion in January 1942 to the British retreat across the Burma-India border in May 1942. The Japanese were able to attack by land through neutral Thailand and they quickly demolished British resistance and swept up the Burmese river valleys until they captured Rangoon, the center of British operations in Burma. At that point, British resistance crumbled and their forces retreated quickly northward and out of the country, barely avoiding being captured and destroyed at several points by the Japanese forces.

²¹ Gallagher, 149–150.

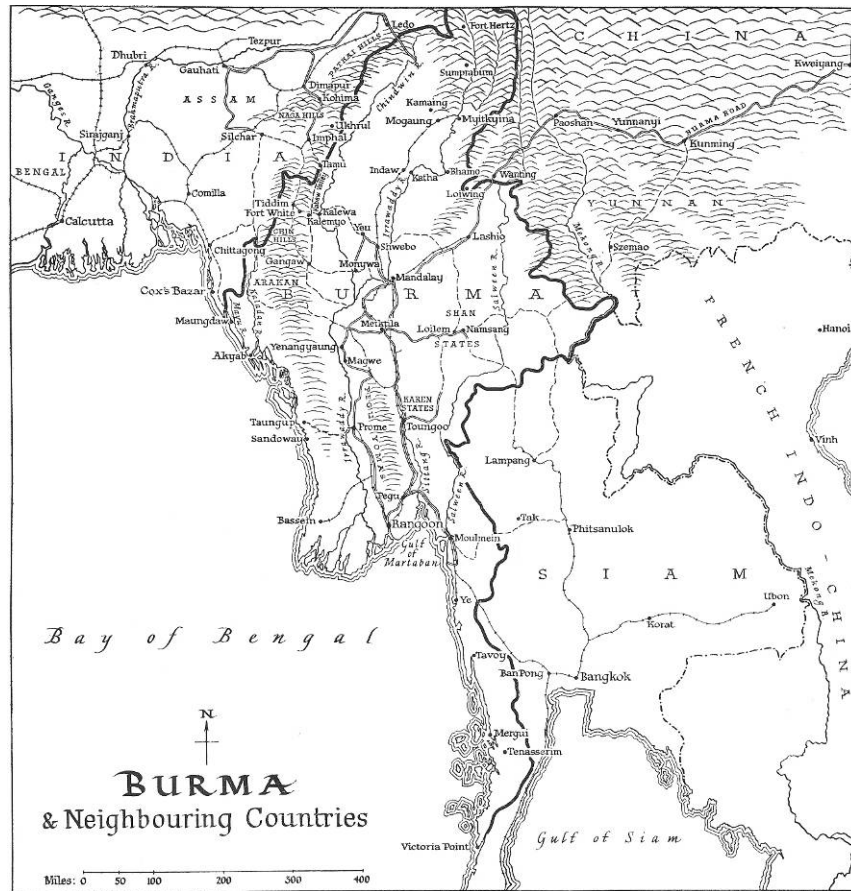


Figure 4 – Burma during the Second World War (Reproduced from Slim, General William. *Defeat Into Victory*. (London: Cassell & Co., 1956), 22.)

After a brief period of rest enforced by the monsoons that swept across Burma, the British began counterattacking in early 1943, but poor organization and low morale prevented any real success. Spurred by this failure, the Allies began reorganizing and training their forces in Southeast Asia and the British stepped up recruitment of Indian troops and began the process of introducing African troops into the area. Thus when Japan attempted an invasion of India starting in February 1944, the British forces

were well prepared to resist them and defeat the Japanese forces decisively at the battles of Kohima and Imphal.

In the third and final period of the campaign, the British forces began a counterattack against the Japanese that was largely successful. Troops in the north Arakan region were able to push through the Japanese ranks thanks to air supply from the British Royal Air Force (RAF), and in fighting through the monsoon British, Indian and African troops pushed south through the Japanese lines, battling their way down the very same river valleys the Japanese had taken. The Japanese forces were unable to cope with superior firepower, and in many cases were abandoned in their positions without orders or supplies. It was to be the worst defeat suffered in Japanese military history, until the dropping of the atomic bombs in August 1945.

The conditions in Burma's landscape and climate led to a distinctive mode of combat in the Second World War. Fighting in the jungle, with its vegetation, wildlife, unique terrain and tropical diseases such as malaria made the campaign very difficult for both sides. It placed restrictions on mobility, line of sight and supply lines that would have to be solved in order to fight effectively. General William Slim, commander of the 14th Army wrote that most of the success of the British counter-attack in 1944-45 occurred as a result of their ability to resupply by air and their restructuring

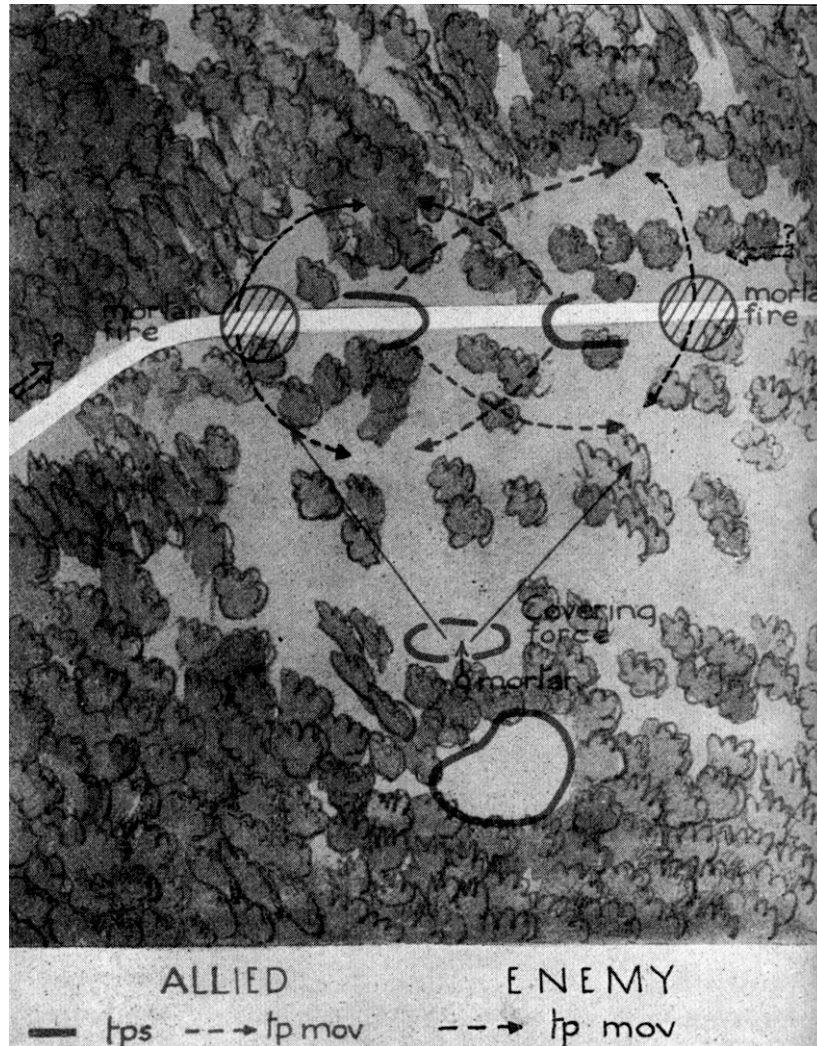


Figure 5 – Diagram drawn by British officers, indicating ambush tactics while on patrol. (Reproduced from Jeffreys, Alan. *The British Army in the Far East 1941-45*, (Oxford: Osprey, 2005), 62.)

of forces in favor of lighter and faster troops and equipment, thus improving their mobility and lengthening their supply lines.²²

“Above all it was a platoon and company commanders’ war,” wrote J.J.

Cherns, a lieutenant and platoon commander in the 6 (West African)

Brigade.²³ The terrain and vegetation meant that there were very few

²² Slim, 544–546.

²³ Cherns, J.J. Private Papers of J.J. Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

instances where larger formations were directly engaged and commanders would often be cut off from their groups and forced to act and move independently for maximum efficiency against the enemy forces. Combat often took the form of offensive patrols, in which small groups of about 30 men and an officer would go out in order to obtain information by ambushing and attacking the enemy. As the British tactics were based on the Japanese tactics used in the advance through Malaya and Burma, this often meant that entire battles consisted only of small groups attempting to outflank each other across large swaths of jungle.²⁴ These tactics put immense pressure on the ability of commanders to effectively lead their troops and act with initiative; in the case of African units, this was exacerbated as a result of poor leadership from officers and noncommissioned officers as well as communication and training problems caused by the lack of common languages.

African Forces in the Second World War

African forces had been established in the British Empire since 1897, but it was the threat of Italian forces in East Africa that led to their heavy mobilization and increase in numbers during World War II. Italian forces in Somalia and Ethiopia, composed primarily of East Africans, were massing

²⁴ Jeffreys, Alan. *The British Army in the Far East 1941-45*. Oxford: Osprey, 2005, 60–63.

against British holdings in Kenya and British Somaliland and Italian war ships on the African coast threatened British shipping from India. To counter these forces, the British increased their recruitment of African forces from their colonies. The King's African Rifles (KAR) recruited from Kenya, Uganda, Nyasaland (now Malawi), Tanganyika (Tanzania) and a few from Somalia. The Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF) gathered troops from Nigeria, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Sierra Leone and the Gambia. These recruits contained people from a vast range of societies in East and West Africa. In the KAR, the diversity of ethnic groups included Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin, Kikuyu, Embu, Meru, Kamba, Maasai, and Mijikenda soldiers.²⁵ The West African troops have not been as well documented or researched, but officer accounts note the presence of Tiv, Ibo, Yoruba, and Hausa troops, among others.²⁶ These units were organized along the hierarchical model of the British Army, with British or European colonists serving as all officers in the divisions.

Following the Italian attack on British positions in July 1940, the British counterattacked and were able to take the final Italian position by

²⁵ Parsons, 70–91.

²⁶ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1. Given that this thesis is, for the most part, based off of the writings of British officers and officials who neglected to distinguish between groups, it is similarly difficult to indicate the backgrounds of the Africans being referred to in this work. In many cases, since the British did not distinguish between them, statements about how they were viewed or treated remain constant despite their backgrounds. Still, attempts have been made to indicate the ethnic and national origin of those being written about whenever possible.

November 1941.²⁷ By December 1941, military and colonial administrators were already posing the question as to whether African troops could be used in Burma. The future of the African divisions was unclear, given that the East African Campaign against the Italians had concluded and there was a need for more forces in Southeast Asia. There was some opposition to placing Africans in Burma, many argued that Africans were not effective when used outside of Africa due to disciplinary and education problems, but as will be discussed in the next chapter, these concerns were dropped due to the urgent need for more troops to join the fighting in Southeast Asia. By late 1942, plans were made for East and West African troops to be sent to India and Burma.

Besides the need for increased manpower, there were two reasons for Africans to be sent to Burma: some British policymakers believed that African troops would be less susceptible to malaria and that they would be naturally skilled at jungle warfare, due to the presence of jungles on the African continent.²⁸ These beliefs, based on the unfortunate tendency of the British to view the continent with the most human diversity on the planet as a monolithic entity and resulting prejudices about “African” qualities, would

²⁷ Page, Malcolm. *KAR: A History of the King's African Rifles*. Trowbridge: Redwood Books, 1998. 75-107; Clarke and Haywood, 328–363.

²⁸ The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO) WO 32/10241; Cherns, IWM 03/23/1. While care has been taken to trace the source of statements made in official government documents, in many cases this is simply unavoidable due to the bureaucratic and often faceless nature of these institutions.

prove to be groundless; still, they played a significant part in the War Office's decision to send African troops to Southeast Asia.

With these African troops went their officers, the support staff at the General Headquarters in Ceylon and the commanders of the forces in Southeast Asia. It is largely through these men that this paper has been constructed: the personal papers and memoirs of officers and the official documents of the War and Colonial Offices as they monitored the progress and abilities of the African forces. In these documents, a narrative emerges not just of the campaign as it was fought on the ground, but also of the campaign as it was fought in meeting rooms and policy sessions in Ceylon, Nairobi, Lagos, and London. As the War Office and the colonial military sought to expand privileges and compensation for African soldiers in order to improve morale and performance, the Colonial Office sought to limit such grants, as they were detrimental to the goals of future British colonialism.

For the British officers fighting the war on the ground, this inter-office battle would not be directly obvious, but it would have very real effects on their ability to lead and fight as well as their very perception of the war at the time and after. The initial conditions set for the African regiments by these colonial demands, and the subsequent experiences of both Africans and British because of these demands provide insight into the

operations and limitations of the British Empire. Combat, military and popular perception of the African forces, and even the daily life in the regiments would all play out based on the racial and class tensions prompted by these disagreements between the colonial administration and the military. In the end, the racial biases and barriers put in place by colonialism would prove to have damaging results for the operation of the war and the Burma campaign specifically, even if the British and Africans were ultimately victorious against the Japanese. Officers' writings tell of their own experiences in the jungles of Southeast Asia, but also reveal the conflicts occurring within the British Empire and its colonies throughout World War II and afterwards.

Chapter 1:

“Are these African soldiers of yours any good? And are they well led?”²⁹

The Leadership

In peacetime, there was a simple structure in place for assignment of officers for the African colonial regiments. Officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were part of a regiment in the British Army from which they would be attached, or ‘seconded,’ to an African regiment in either the KAR in East Africa or the RWAFF in West Africa, for a tour of three years. Once this tour was up, they would be returned to their home regiments for the remainder of their service. This differed greatly from the Indian Army, in which officers would serve in the regiment they were placed in for the duration of their career.³⁰ The African colonial forces were often seen as an ideal spot for a young officer, given their promise of adventure; in several documents, officers write of being motivated by the promise of big-game hunting, exploration, and travel.³¹ Others were motivated primarily by the increased pay given to officers serving in colonial regiments, compared to

²⁹ General William Slim, quoted in Pitt, J. Private Papers of J. Pitt, IWM 89/1/1.

³⁰ Menezes, S.L. *Fidelity and Honour: The Indian Army from the Seventeenth to the Twenty-First Century*. New Delhi: Viking, 1993. 13–26.

³¹ Hart Dyke, T. Private Papers of T. Hart Dyke, IWM 96/12/1; Birkbeck, T.H. Private Papers of T.H. Birkbeck, IWM 83/23/1.

that of the regular army.³² In addition, many saw it as an easy duty, given the lower standards and decreased attention given to colonial troops. The African colonial infantry was much less formal than the regular army; military standards were relaxed for officers, and there were increased opportunities for leisure activities and casual drinking.³³ One officer, in a guide written to prepare new officers in joining the KAR, makes a special point to inform new recruits to bring their rugby and cricket boots.³⁴

Various traditions that had sprung up over the history of the African regiments represented a loosening of standards and regulations. Some of the most surprising of these were the *barazas*, informal meetings between officers and their troops in the KAR. In these meetings, the participants would discuss policies and come to agreements about what would be accepted in the company.³⁵ This gave African soldiers the opportunity to address their grievances directly, but also meant a loss of authority for the British officers, as it gave the Africans a way of circumventing the hierarchy of the military. Many officers worried that this laid the foundation for possible direct rebellion in the future.³⁶ Equally traditional were the *ngomas*,

³² Boreham, A.C. Private Papers of A.C. Boreham, IWM 91/21/1; Grant, Edward Hamilton, interview by the Imperial War Museum, 22 April 1982, IWM Sound Records (SR) 6187.

³³ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

³⁴ Birkbeck, IWM 83/23/1.

³⁵ Ibid.; IWM Misc 34 Item 612.

³⁶ Dunseath, D.R. Private Papers of D.R. Dunseath, IWM 96/17/1.

or celebrations, which were held in both East Africa and Burma. Entirely planned and led by the East African troops, these consisted of drinking, music and dancing. However, they also created a deliberate subversion of military rank: the soldiers in charge of the *ngomas* gave themselves mock military titles, such as “General Officer Commanding Ngoma” and the officers attending had to remove their own badges of rank.³⁷ Many saw this as a potential disciplinary problem. General Dimoline warned his company commanders in 1945 of the excessive familiarity that could occur between East Africans and Europeans as a result of too many *ngomas*, mentioning that some Africans were even using them as an excuse for “European beat ups,” taking the opportunity to settle grudges with their officers through physical violence. Still, he closed by saying, “Our Ngomas are traditional and historic, and in my opinion they should be jealously guarded.”³⁸

As World War II intensified in Europe, trained and experienced officers in the British Army became more highly demanded for service there. However, threats from the Italian and German forces in Africa meant there was also a higher demand for officers in African regiments to manage the greater numbers of troops also being recruited. This led to situations

³⁷ Nunneley, John. *Tales from the King's African Rifles: A Last Flourish of Empire*. Surrey, United Kingdom: Askari Books, 1998. 62–65.

³⁸ Dimoline, William. Letter to battalion and brigade commanders, 4 December 1945, Dimoline Papers, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, United Kingdom (LHCMA) Dimoline 9/2.

where commanders would “discard their duds,” sending their worst officers to the African forces as a means of getting rid of them.³⁹ This in turn led to crises such as the “court-martial draft,” where twenty-five of thirty officers sent to East Africa in 1942 were brought up on disciplinary charges that year.⁴⁰ Although officers in the African forces and in the War Office warned that proper leadership would demand that officers be selected who were prepared and willing to serve in the African forces, the demands of the war meant that the War Office eventually had no choice but to begin randomly drafting men for the colonial forces.⁴¹ This led to a larger number of officers being seconded even though they had no interest in serving in Africa or with African troops. Others signed up for positions where they felt they would see more action or opportunities for advancement, and found themselves assigned to duty in Africa or with African troops in Southeast Asia, both of which were seen as backwaters away from the real opportunities for glory, namely Europe and the Middle East.⁴²

³⁹ TNA: PRO CO 820/48/27.

⁴⁰ Parsons, 106.

⁴¹ TNA: PRO CO 820/48/23; another factor rarely used in selecting officers, but noted as a serious problem on the battlefield, was that of the mental health of the officers in question. A report from the Royal Medical Army Corps on psychological breakdowns of officers during the fighting in Southeast Asia remarked, “Some [officers], in fact, were literally worse than nobody for they were a dead weight on their units . . . If there were no one better to send, it would have been better to send no one.” TNA: PRO WO 203/599.

⁴² Boreham, IWM 91/21/1.

For many, this posting was intolerable, and they immediately planned how they could be transferred to a European or Middle Eastern posting.⁴³ At least one officer even refused to learn the language spoken by his troops, since demand for officers who spoke native languages was high and that would keep him serving with African troops for the rest of the war.⁴⁴ It was not the posting or the languages required that bothered him, but rather having to serve with the Africans themselves that he found objectionable. Another officer, who did serve throughout the war and afterwards in the KAR, noted in a speech to fellow officers in Kenya, “personally speaking, when the war broke out I, and I think every regular officer in East Africa, immediately applied to go home to my own regiment.” He claimed that for most, the reason for trying to transfer was a desire to be closer to their own families; given the attacks on Britain in the early years of the war, it is understandable that service in Africa would be seen as less important than stopping the Nazi advance across Europe.⁴⁵ For others, it was the lack of immediate combat and action that disappointed them; they longed to prove themselves martially and Africa seemed too far away from the then-ongoing

⁴³ Nunneley, 91.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁵ Birkbeck, IWM 83/23/1; R.L. Barclay to his wife, 11 July 1942, Private Papers of R.L. Barclay, IWM PP/MCR/373.

conflicts in Northern Europe and the Middle East.⁴⁶ Most transfers, however, were rejected, given the relatively small number of open positions in other groups as well as the pressing need for officers in the African forces.⁴⁷ This did mean, however, that there were many serving in the African regiments who did not want to be there. With the demands placed upon them by the war and their position as officers of colonial forces, this would often lead to disciplinary and morale issues for both the officers and their troops.

In fact, complaints against the quality of British officers and NCOs were some of the most frequent comments made when discussing African troops during and after the war. Repeated requests for better officers for the regiments were met with the same response from the War Office: they understood the problem, but there was a limited supply and the African forces would have to do the best they could.⁴⁸ General Mansergh, head of 11 (EA) Division in early 1945, after listing problems such as selection of soldiers and limited training of African troops, concluded, “The greatest factor, however, I consider to be the lower standard of both officers and British NCOs which we have had to accept.”⁴⁹ This would be used as a

⁴⁶ Price, IWM 84/23/1; Nunneley, 91.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁸ TNA: PRO WO 203/4536.

⁴⁹ Robert Mansergh to brigade commanders, 31 January 1945. LHCMA Dimoline 9/4.

major point in assessing the quality of African troops, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

To help fill this need for white officers to be attached to African positions, requests were made for African-born white citizens living in Africa to join with the colonial forces. This led to the colonial forces commissioning a large number of European settlers as officers.⁵⁰ They were given small amounts of training with existing African units before being placed with African regiments.⁵¹ Brigadier K.H. Collen described his fellow officers in a letter to his wife,

They are such an amazingly mixed hotch potch too . . . Then there is Jim Hillyar, a Kenya farmer . . . Old Hugh [Bayldon], my wonderful 2nd in command is a rough diamond, has knocked about the world since he was about 17, a gold miner, and almost everything else you can think of . . . Jack Howman has just taken over command [of A Company]. I have great hopes of him. He's typically Southern Rhodesian – the best Chinyanja speaker I have met . . . Then Dick Widdows, the best of the lot – Southern Rhodesian, hard as flint, pretty merciless to his men but so competent that the morale in his Company is terrific . . . Then there's Bobby Gibbings of HQ Company, a Rhodesian of uncertain origin, competent and efficient . . . and Eric Ford, a Nyasaland Bank Clerk – a first class adjutant and a charming person.⁵²

This description of the officers placed with the 22 (Ny) KAR reveals the wide range of backgrounds and origins that might be found among officers in the African regiments. Officers would be recruited from colonial

⁵⁰ Parsons, 106.

⁵¹ Boreham, IWM 91/21/1.

⁵² Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

populations across Africa, including South Africa and French Cameroon.⁵³

This diversity of origin among the officer corps meant that official documents and records would describe officers of African divisions not as British, but as Europeans.⁵⁴ This is significant because of how it obscures the reality of the situation – many of the officers were not European but Africans themselves, albeit with European heredity. The real difference, although not articulated by official documentation, was that they were white while their troops were black. This aversion to vocalizing the racial makeup of their forces was a trademark of the British African forces, and will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Further blurring the lines between British and African settlers, there was rarely any distinction made in official reports or documents between officers recruited from Britain and officers recruited from the colonies, despite differences in their origins and level of training. Morale reports conducted in Burma, for instance, only designate between the black Africans and the white “British”, with no line drawn between those white officers from Britain and those who had joined from Africa. This is particularly strange given the difference in the level of training between the

⁵³ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

⁵⁴ This is prevalent throughout the official records. For example, see TNA: PRO WO 172/4028, which discusses the different levels of training for “AORs”, “ANCOs”, and “Europeans”.

two groups; while all of the British officers actually went through full officer training at military academies such as Sandhurst, the African-born officers were only given limited training in African units before being placed in positions in the colonial forces.⁵⁵ It is also unusual given the “sense of superiority” that the British were said to have felt over colonists.⁵⁶ Again, this likely speaks to the real distinctions being drawn in the colonial forces; the division did not need to be made between colonial-born and British officers, because the distinction that mattered was between the black soldiers and their white officers.

Among officers serving in Burma, the consensus seems to have been that colonial-born officers were more naturally suited to command in African groups. “Our morale and the success which we have had in training [East] Africans . . . have sprung from our overwhelming proportion of East African British Ranks who are by nature interested in the Africans and do not have to be taught to try and understand them,” wrote one officer in a report to General Dimoline.⁵⁷ Brigadier K.H. Collen, in a report written on intelligence services in the KAR, agreed and added that another important element was the colonial-born officer’s knowledge of the languages needed

⁵⁵ Boreham, IWM 91/21/1.

⁵⁶ Cannadine, David. *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 124–125.

⁵⁷ “Reggie” to General Dimoline, 9 February 1946. LHCMA Dimoline 9/2.

for effective communication.⁵⁸ For officers struggling to figure out their roles in new territory and new cultures, having others there with experience of the country and language would be enormously helpful.

While the British officers might have felt very positively towards white African-born officers, and the British army may not have distinguished between them, it was a difference that had great significance, usually negative, to the African troops in their employ. For many, the prior knowledge of Africans that the white African-born officer brought reflected negatively on their interaction with the troops. For Robert Kakembo, for instance, the colonial-born officer was too prejudiced by earlier experiences and biases against Africans to fairly assess their prowess. To his eyes, the British officer was better able to differentiate based on skill, rather than race.⁵⁹ Similarly, in letters written home, many Africans complained of the officers from Africa as opposed to officers from Great Britain, saying that African-born officers created racial discrimination.⁶⁰ Many East African troops complained that the African-born officers treated them more like farm-workers than soldiers.⁶¹ The relations between the officers and their

⁵⁸ Collen, 79/21/1.

⁵⁹ Kakembo, Robert. *An African Soldier Speaks*. London: Livingstone Press, 1947. 14–15.

⁶⁰ Shiroya, 50–51.

⁶¹ Parsons, 106.



Figure 6 – West African carriers on the march in paddy country. (Reproduced from Clarke, F.A.S. and Haywood, A.H.W. *The History of the Royal West African Frontier Force*, (Aldershot, England: Gale & Polden, Ltd., 1969), 448.)

troops may have then been motivated by background as much as behavior, as both officers and men had to deal with the preconceptions of the other.

Officers and Servants

British officers could look forward to one luxury in the colonial forces: the presence of personal servants, or orderlies as they were officially called in the colonial armies. This position was filled by a civilian, as opposed to the traditional military “batman” who would be selected from the officer’s own men.⁶² In the KAR, the orderly would be paid by the officer from his own personal salary rather than by the Army as was the case with batmen, while in the RWAFF the servants were paid by the Army,

⁶² Farrington, R.A. Private Papers of R.A. Farrington, IWM 85/49/1.

and the officers would give a small ‘dash’, or tip, for small luxuries such as pineapple for their tea.⁶³ One officer even reported that in the Gold Coast battalions, the practice was to employ a native servant and also have a soldier as an orderly while outside barracks.⁶⁴ Regardless, they would be enrolled in the Army as non-combatants and would be supplied and managed by the Army in the establishment of the units.⁶⁵ Each officer had his own orderly, who would be expected to take care of his clothes, make and tend to fires and cleaning of quarters, and generally act as a lackey for the officer.⁶⁶ Having a personal servant in addition to or rather than a batman was seen as one of the perks of being posted to the colonial forces. Thanks to the low cost of labor in the colonies, officers could simply employ a native as a servant rather than having to rely on the work of a randomly-selected British soldier, many of whom were unhappy about having to perform servant duties.⁶⁷ This practice was only employed in the regiments made up of African troops, as all-British units such as the Queens Royal Regiment still used British batmen even when stationed in Africa.⁶⁸

⁶³ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

⁶⁴ Grant, IWM SR 6187.

⁶⁵ TNA: PRO WO 172/4026.

⁶⁶ Nunneley, 19–20.

⁶⁷ Birkbeck, IWM 83/23/1; C.G King, a Gunner in the 365 Battery, 92nd Field Regiment serving in Europe, wrote in his memoirs, “To most British soldiers, the thought of cleaning an Officer’s room or of taking tea to him in bed was most repugnant.” King, C.G. Private Papers of C.G. King, IWM 85/50/1.

⁶⁸ Stokes, J.R. Private Papers of J.R. Stokes, IWM 99/22/1.

While these orderlies were taken as far as the Southeast Asia Command Headquarters in Ceylon, beyond that point it became too difficult for the British Army to continue to move and supply non-combatants. As a result, the division commanders ordered that all personal servants would either have to enlist and be given basic infantry training, or they would be returned to Africa.⁶⁹ A few servants had formed a bond with their employers and so chose to enlist; others decided to enlist in order to gain the higher prestige granted to a member of the armed forces.⁷⁰ Most, however, chose to return to Africa.⁷¹ The African divisions then moved to the traditional role of batmen and officers simply selected servants from their own units, keeping themselves well tended despite the loss of their personal servants.⁷² As a result of this there was some amount of personal comfort available to British officers even as they entered the Burmese jungle; K.H. Collen wrote to his wife, “I have a large very waterproof ground sheet around which the faithful Silus and London built a marvelous house.”⁷³ This, of course, also led to a certain amount of resentment among the African troops who acted as servants, as it was an example of officer privilege at the expense of Africans; J.J. Cherns writes of several servants

⁶⁹ LHCMA Dimoline 9/1; TNA: PRO WO 172/6534.

⁷⁰ Collen, IWM 79/29/1; Nunneley, 123.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Birkbeck, IWM 83/23/1.

⁷³ Collen, IWM 79/29/1.

who claimed to have lost the loads they were carrying through the jungle to avoid having to carry what he refers to as the “fairly lavish standard of camp equipment” expected by senior staff.⁷⁴ It is not clear that the role of personal servant or batman was seen as a demotion by Africans in the same light as the British example used above, however; the position of batman held its own perks in terms of access to better food and accommodation, and many saw it as an upgrade in status.⁷⁵ For the British officers, though, the ability to use both servants and batmen represented a special benefit granted to them by being in the African forces, and one that they took advantage of wherever possible. It represented an instance of the Colonial and War Office working to make their lives more comfortable, something that was rare during the fighting in Burma.

Perceptions of the African soldier

In obtaining African troops to fight in the Second World War, the British Army drew on, as has been mentioned, several colonies across West and East Africa. Troops were recruited, and in some cases, coerced, from different ethnic groups and nationalities, and placed within units sorted only by national origin. However, in discussing the relative qualities and issues of

⁷⁴ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

⁷⁵ Nunneley, 19–20, 104.

African troops, apart from a small interest in the theory of “martial races” (to be discussed later), British officials and officers failed to note the vast differences that existed between different ethnic groups and nationalities among their own troops. One African ex-soldier, writing after the war, commented, “I would like to correct the mistake many Europeans make – that of generalizing about the African. Although there are underlying features common to many African tribes, it must be kept firmly in mind that no two tribes are quite alike, and that changes are taking place every day with different speed in different tribes.”⁷⁶

British official documents make little attempt to differentiate between African troops, often even between West and East Africans, and certainly never between Africans of different ethnicities or nationalities. The lone exception to this rule is the Somali scouts, who, as a small, distinguishable, and ethnically homogenous group were easy for British officials to isolate and discuss both as troops and as examples of their particular ethnic group.⁷⁷ Thus, despite major differences between soldiers of different ethnic

⁷⁶ Kakembo, 16.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, a letter from General Dimoline to ALFSEA Headquarters, dated 12 May 1945: “The 71 (Somalian) Bn KAR came under my command in CEYLON in May of last year . . . I have never had Somalis under my command before . . . The Somalis are of a very proud and independent nature, and tend to look down on other African soldiers, regarding them as Pagans, they themselves being very strict Mohammedans . . . The Somali as an infantryman is an experiment without precedent . . . They are nomads and hate regimentation and are ‘bad mixers’. They have a great contempt for anyone who is NOT a Somali and have had little or no contact with other races outside

groups, backgrounds and national origin, British officials chose to treat them all identically, which in many cases led to low morale and disciplinary problems.⁷⁸ Even General Dimoline, himself a major violator of failing to distinguish between different African groups, would complain when the military administration ignored differences between West and East Africans when discussing disciplinary issues, saying, “although there have certainly been incidents they have, in our case, been grossly exaggerated, and we have again been tarred with the same brush as West Africans.”⁷⁹ Problems that occurred in one unit or division would be taken as examples of all the Africans in Burma, thus hurting their reputation and causing morale issues for the commanders who led them. By ignoring major distinctions between Africans, British officers hampered their own ability to effectively lead them.

Although British officials did not distinguish between different African ethnic groups in most of their writings, there was still a strong British belief in the doctrine of “military race.” Under the British Army’s standards for recruitment and training, certain ethnic groups were

SOMALILAND . . . They are brave and courageous individuals whose chief value lies, in my opinion, in guerilla tactics in open warfare.” LHCMA Dimoline 9/4.

⁷⁸ One Nigerian soldier notes, for instance, that there was no attempt to diversify food supplies despite the typical diets of soldiers of different backgrounds, which meant that Africans from ethnic groups with less presence in the colonial forces would often have to skip meals or forage for their own food supplies. Fadoyebo, I. Private Papers of I. Fadoyebo, IWM 97/2/1.

⁷⁹ Dimoline to Brigadier Rossiter, 8 January 1946. LHCMA Dimoline 9/3

considered to be more capable warriors and were selectively recruited for frontline battalions until the demands of the war meant that this was no longer possible.⁸⁰ In East Africa, groups such as the Kamba were seen as the best fighters, while others such as the Luo or Lombwe were seen as weak and non-martial.⁸¹ The martial status of various ethnic groups shifted as the war continued and more men were needed to serve in different positions, but the idea of the “martial tribe” would persist in British military thinking throughout the war. Moyse-Bartlett wrote in his official history of the KAR, “[the askari] possesses certain hereditary skills that make him, in the right circumstances, the equal or even the superior of the European,” but only if “drawn from tribes proved by experience to provide the best soldiers.”⁸² This system of classification was almost never used to the soldiers’ benefit: a soldier who performed beyond the expectations for his

⁸⁰ These beliefs were very common among imperial forces; certainly, they were followed with the Indian Army, where Gurkhas and Sikhs were considered to be better soldier material than groups such as the Madrassi, particularly after the Mutiny of 1857. Similarly, Richard Fogarty has found the idea of military race doctrine in the use of African and South Asian forces by the French during the First World War, as Madagascans and Indochinese were relegated to non-combat duties in favor of the seemingly more warlike West and North Africans. This idea was even present in the early days of the British Army: as Linda Colley notes in her work *Britons*, even certain English counties were seen as more martial than others. Menezes, 286–305; Fogarty, Richard. *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 72–87; Colley, Linda. *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. 292.

⁸¹ Parsons, 88–91.

⁸² Moyse-Bartlett, Hubert. “The History of the King’s African Rifles”, 1950. Private Papers of T.H. Birkbeck, IWM 83/21/1.



Figure 7 – Major-General Dimoline inspecting the East African Engineers (Reproduced from Page, Malcolm.

KAR: A History of the King's African Rifles.

(Trowbridge, UK: Redwood Books, 1998), image 15.)

ethnic group was seen as a sign of the abilities of his officer, while less effective soldiers would be held as examples of lesser ethnic groups.

Training African troops

Before being used in the fighting against the Japanese, West and East African troops were given military training, including specialized jungle training designed to prepare them for eventual use in Southeast Asia. This was the first experience many of their officers had with them, and the nature of the training would shape many of their opinions of African troops throughout the campaign. As noted previously, there were many different languages spoken throughout the African forces, with only poorly

established common languages between officers and their men.⁸³ As such, training relied on rote phrases and chants to try to teach Africans military behavior through repetition and memorization.⁸⁴ As one African recruit noted, “the African soldier has not only to learn movements but the language as well at the same time.”⁸⁵ Understandably, this led to issues in training, as many officers stated that training African troops took much longer due to the language barrier and illiteracy of their troops.⁸⁶ Training was seen as poorly organized by many; one battalion commander noted, “the people who really know something about training as applied to African troops have not yet been consulted” (emphasis original).⁸⁷ In addition, the reliance on rote memorization in training itself was seen as a problem with African troops. One officer described the training of West African troops,

To British troops drill is boredom, to be endured. To Africans it is part of an initiation to being a soldier, to be practiced and perfected. On drill parades dark faces are rigid with desire to understand and execute a command correctly . . . How on earth are these men to be converted into intelligent, modern soldiers? The drills and routines which to British troops are simply aids to be absorbed into reflex actions are here an end to themselves; it seems dubious whether they

⁸³ As will be discussed in the next chapter, despite there being common languages set up in both the KAR and RWAFF, they often were not languages spoken by the African troops, and many British officers were never able to learn them.

⁸⁴ Parsons, 112.

⁸⁵ Kakembo, 10.

⁸⁶ Grant, IWM SR 6187; Upjohn, Gordon Farleigh, interview with the Imperial War Museum. IWM SR 6188/05. Literacy was highly valued in the British Army as a way of easily communicating information to soldiers via signs, notices, or pamphlets; it was also useful as a method of training as it was used for field manuals and guides.

⁸⁷ Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

can be absorbed into reflex reactions rather than deliberate and conscious effort by numbers.⁸⁸ The nature of the training demanded by the entrenched language issues and poor training protocols meant that the African soldiers were not receiving the most effective training possible. As seen in this example, however, problems with the training were seen as problems with the Africans themselves. Not only stereotyping the behavior of the British, this officer also assumes an idea of transformation in becoming a soldier that the African must be feeling. For the British, being a soldier is simply a job, while for the African it must be a higher role that will elevate them above the ordinary African. Enthusiasm about training is taken as a marker of poor understanding of the purpose of training, and that reflects poorly on the African soldier as compared to the British rank.

Evaluation of African troops

Looking back years after the war, many officers in the KAR and RWAFF had strong favorable impressions of their African troops. Their efforts in fighting a difficult campaign against the Japanese were considered to have been a major accomplishment; General William Slim, the head of the 14th Army in Burma, stated, “It was thought that no major formation could move or fight in the worst possible jungle country through a

⁸⁸ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

monsoon. They did it.”⁸⁹ Other officers agreed, complimenting the good humor and spirit of the African soldier. One officer wrote, in a letter to his wife, “In its small way [the battalion] was a complete success . . . but oh! the troops were so good.”⁹⁰

Despite the high praise and support from platoon and company commanders for their troops, there were still negative views of African troops being expressed by staff officers in the War and Colonial Offices, and even in ALFSEA HQ. This is a general trend within the British military and colonial establishment: the further the officers were from the troops, the less favorably they tended to view them. Many in the War Office thought there were too many problems with African troops for them to be very effective. A report on African troops made after the war stated, “It is clear that that in operations in BURMA they [African troops] were of limited value. Reports from Commanders in that theatre give unfavourable accounts of the behaviour of the East African Division, and stress that the West Africans are also of limited value against a determined enemy.”⁹¹

The argument could be made that many of the officers serving directly with African troops were only subject to a limited perspective and may merely be expressing their opinion of the specific troops they served

⁸⁹ Quoted in Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 681–682.

⁹⁰ K.H. Collen to his wife, 30 September 1944. IWM 79/21/1.

⁹¹ TNA: PRO WO 106/5217.

with. However, comparing reports on the same unit from different sources reveals the same disparity in how the troops are viewed. For example, there are many conflicting accounts of the battle of Pagoda Hill, on April 3, 1945: The War Diary of the 11 EA Division Scouts records the description of a battle in which the East Africans were driven off of their position on Pagoda Hill “due to the fact that ammo was almost expended and unit had to withdraw.” The report immediately following in the same file, written at the Divisional level, reads “when cornered at Pagoda Hill they would not face Japanese charge and deserted their [officers] . . . general conclusion these troops suitable guerilla troops but NOT for stand-up fighting.”⁹² Further, one officer reflects on the same battle, writing, “The missing brigade, or even a unit of heavy machine-guns, would have made all the difference in holding Pagoda Hill, but reinforcement was denied by the higher command . . . The troops themselves were hardly at fault for these factors beyond their control.”⁹³ These contradictory perspectives on the efficacy of African troops reveal differing and in many cases predetermined attitudes within the British military on the abilities and potential of native troops.

⁹² TNA: PRO WO 172/6489.

⁹³ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

In general, there seemed to be a negative bias against African troops going into Burma, as initial reports on the possibility of sending Africans to Southeast Asia expressed doubts at employing them outside of Africa.⁹⁴ Still, that bias often disappeared with more experience with African troops, as a letter from Ceylon Army Command to Dimoline reported: “I think its true to say that, when 11 Div was here, a good many of their BORs wrote in the same [derogatory] strain, but as soon as they saw the Askari fighting, the tone changed, and comments are all on the line of ‘a grand fighter’ – ‘more than a match for the Jap’ etc etc.”⁹⁵ Morale reports from Burma also reported that British ranks were surprised by how effective the African soldier could be once actually in combat.⁹⁶ One captain summed the situation up saying, “One of the problems that we whites suffered from was that we were slow, often very slow, to realize that Africans, given time and patient training, could do most of the things which we, at first, considered to be beyond them.”⁹⁷ The negative views of African troops, then, meant that they were not trained or used as effectively as they could have been without that initial prejudice. In addition, the bias against African troops

⁹⁴ TNA: PRO WO 106/5214.

⁹⁵ Ceylon Army Command to Dimoline, 4 October 1944. LHCMA Dimoline 9/2.

⁹⁶ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

⁹⁷ Pitt, IWM 89/1/1.

also reflected negatively on their officers, who felt that they were not getting the respect they deserved.

A common complaint leveled against African troops was that they lacked the discipline of other regiments. This was attributed to a number of factors. The War Office claimed that Africans were much more difficult to control outside of Africa, although the reasons for this were not specified.⁹⁸ In addition, it was also argued that Africans were naturally more cowardly and more likely to retreat in the face of firm opposition, as seen in the example of Pagoda Hill.⁹⁹ Others argued that the real issue was that the African troops were not recruited from the so-called “martial races”, and as a result, they lacked the military tradition necessary for firm discipline.¹⁰⁰ This would lead to major issues with recruitment and evaluation of African troops, as will be discussed below.

Beyond these reasons, there were many other expectations and biases that came up in the evaluation of African troops. For example, as Captain J.J. Cherns points out, there was a belief that Africans would be naturally more effective in the jungle given that there were rain forests in Africa, even though very few of the Africans recruited actually lived in that type of

⁹⁸ TNA: PRO WO 106/5214.

⁹⁹ TNA: PRO WO 172/6489,

¹⁰⁰ Parsons, 70–91; TNA: PRO WO 106/5217.

terrain.¹⁰¹ In addition, many officers and military officials assumed that all Africans would be naturally talented at tracking, bushcraft, and camouflage, even without any experience or training in these fields. A training instruction written by General Dimoline warned, “We must continually strive to maintain the Africans’ hunting instincts, which appear to get lost when we dress him up in uniform”. These ideas ignored the varied backgrounds of African troops, many of whom had no hunting experience at all.¹⁰² These ideas are based on racial stereotypes of Africans as more primitive and close to nature, and led to low opinions of African troops when these assumptions proved to be faulty.

British officials also disregarded the many reasons that Africans had for joining the military. One Kenyan soldier was motivated by the idea of national defense, saying, “we had been told our country was threatened by invasion by the Germans and Italians, whom we could only imagine to be the worst monsters on earth.”¹⁰³ Other Africans saw their service as part of their membership in the British Empire, seeing themselves as “a soldier of

¹⁰¹ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

¹⁰² Dimoline, William. 11 (EA) Division Training Instruction No. 3, 30 March 1945. LHCMA Dimoline 9/1.

¹⁰³ Itote, Waruhiu. *Mau Mau’ General*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967. 14; He later reconsidered his motivation after being questioned about why he would choose to fight to defend the Empire (rather than for the freedom and independence of Kenya and Africa), stating “At first I could only ease the conflicts in my head by thinking of myself simply and purely as a mercenary, fighting for a foreign power which just happened to be our colonial ruler. But being a mercenary seemed cheap and second-rate.” Ibid., 10.

the Great Empire . . . His Majesty's soldier", or that they were fighting "to get more land for Kingi George."¹⁰⁴ Another soldier argued that many African soldiers joined to protect their families and loved ones, even if they had no personal connection to the Empire.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, British propaganda during the war stressed the obligation to the Empire and home defense as a reason for Africans to sign up for the military.¹⁰⁶ In East Africa, a significant portion joined thanks to British influence on the local hierarchical structure: by putting pressure on district officers and chiefs, they were able to directly influence if not coerce many Africans to sign up for military service.¹⁰⁷

Despite these disparate reasons Africans had for serving in the KAR or RWAFF, British officials and officers assumed that all African troops were essentially mercenaries – as opposed to the British officer or BOR who fought for his country and Empire, the African fought merely for money and so had no real loyalty to the crown. The official historian of the KAR wrote, "It must be understood that the attitude of an African askari

¹⁰⁴ Shiroya, 34, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Kakembo, 8–9.

¹⁰⁶ Brands, Hal. "Wartime Recruiting Practices, Martial Identity and Post-World War II Demobilization in Colonial Kenya." *The Journal of African History* 46, no. 1 (2005): 103–125. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4100831>. 109–110.

¹⁰⁷ John Mandambwe writes of being selected for military service by missionaries who worked at a local school, who simply employed the tactic of drawing a line on the wall and sending every boy taller than the line off to sign up for service. John Mandambwe, interview by Mario Kolk, in *Can you tell me why I went to war?* Zomba, Malawi: Kachere Books, 2007. 16–17; Parsons, 70–83.

serving so far from home was essentially that of a mercenary soldier.”¹⁰⁸ As mercenaries then, their loyalty and courage could not be trusted to the same extent as British forces that had a deeper connection to the issues that were being fought over. One officer lamented,

How to deal with Africans whose notions of the wider world are almost as limited as those of children? Most are unable to comprehend the concepts of geography from a map, or to understand what the Japanese are all about, or where they came from, or what they are doing, let alone what the British Empire is all about, or Singapore or Malaya, or how India or Burma or China fits into the picture. The more intelligent of the African NCOs have a grasp; but to the majority of the troops they are in the Army, their job is to fight, the white men obviously rule a lot of lands besides Nigeria and want to defend them or get them back from their enemies, the Japanese. What motivation can they have when they really have no clear idea where in the world they have arrived, to fight a strange enemy in this strange land they are now entering?¹⁰⁹

This may have contributed to British views of African troops as weak or cowardly, as standard British ideologies of fighting and bravery in combat could not be applied to them in the same manner. However, it would also affect officers’ perception of African fighting prowess after the war – as will be discussed in the third chapter, African success in Burma was taken as a reason for them to be granted additional privileges and rights in Africa after the war. In general, misperceptions in how both Africans and British viewed military service may have led to political and administrative issues after the war when the question arose of how wartime service would be repaid.

¹⁰⁸ Moyse-Bartlett, 680–681.

¹⁰⁹ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

Relations with other groups

In using African troops in the Far East, the British Army worried about relations not only between Africans and their European officers, but also between Africans and the other races they would come into contact with. There was doubt initially that the African soldier would prove effective against the Japanese. African success against the Italian forces during the Abyssinian Campaign was considered negligible, as the Italian soldier was a “second class enemy.”¹¹⁰ The British also had a high respect for the Japanese Army, who they termed “supermen” following the Japanese capture of Singapore and the subsequent British retreat across Burma at the beginning of the war.¹¹¹

As mentioned previously, this view rapidly changed with contact between African and Japanese troops. Instead, British officers wrote of the superiority of the African over the Japanese, emphasizing the savage qualities of the African soldier even as they explained their superiority. “The Japs were absolutely scared stiff and took every possible opportunity of beating it. I suppose a mob of yelling askaris with bayonets and pangas is a pretty formidable sight,” wrote one British officer after a battle.¹¹² In other reports, officers claim that the Japanese were terrified of rumors that the

¹¹⁰ TNA: PRO WO 106/5217.

¹¹¹ TNA: PRO WO 203/4536.

¹¹² Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

African troops were cannibals.¹¹³ A rare instance of Japanese troops being captured occurs because of a reported Japanese belief that their bodies will be eaten if they are killed by African troops.¹¹⁴ In this way, the potential savagery of the African soldier could be claimed as an asset.

Similarly, many were quick to record the reactions of the Japanese as they fought against Africans. One officer notes that the Japanese had a better opinion of African soldiers than the British Army's administration did, as the Japanese could directly and impartially evaluate African strengths against that of other British forces.¹¹⁵ British officers also supported the idea that the Japanese found defeat by Africans particularly repugnant. One Japanese officer is quoted as saying in his final moments, "For the sake of the Emperor we came to these filthy hills to be disgraced. Dragged on my behind by blackamoors! We came from Indo-China to be disgraced and clowned by blackamoors."¹¹⁶ "I was informed by those who took part in the final battle that the Japanese were fond of shouting 'Africa Chal' as they fled in disorderly retreat," stated one Nigerian soldier.¹¹⁷ It was seen as a special humiliation for the Japanese to be beaten by African troops, presumably because the Japanese racial theories could not allow for the possibility of

¹¹³ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

¹¹⁴ Haywood and Clarke, 385–86.

¹¹⁵ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Nunneley, 140.

¹¹⁷ Fadoyebo, IWM 97/2/1.

African martial ability, or because they legitimately feared cannibalism or corpse mutilation would take place if killed by Africans. These claims of Japanese fear of African troops allowed British officers to obtain a level of superiority and open-mindedness. By emphasizing the Japanese belief in the African as a savage and a lesser race, they could showcase their own ability to ostensibly treat the African in a respectful and fair manner.

British officials may have especially wanted to show the Japanese being humiliated by the African troops because of their own negative views towards the Japanese. As has been noted by several historians, racial hatred between the Japanese and Allies was particularly prominent during World War II, and examples can be seen throughout the conflict in Burma.¹¹⁸ This hatred was exacerbated as rumors of Japanese atrocities filtered down through the ranks, especially those committed against British and Indian POWs in Singapore.¹¹⁹ One officer of the 1st Battalion North Rhodesia Regiment described his opponents in terms of animals, “The Japanese have a peculiar animal-like quality. Even their dead look like shot game . . . they crouch in small niches and holes like trapped beasts, often weeping hysterically but fighting desperately to the last. It is impossible to predict

¹¹⁸ For example, see John Dower’s book *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon, 1987.

¹¹⁹ Ferguson, 289.

their behaviour or reactions.”¹²⁰ Brigadier Collen wrote to his wife, “From a personal point of view, I don’t think there is anything bad enough one can do to any Jap – I think race suicide, which I sincerely hope they will indulge in, is the only possible solution. They present a worse problem, to my mind, than the Hun.”¹²¹

This hatred found its place in the battlefield, where British, Africans, and Indians ruthlessly killed the Japanese they came across, taking very few prisoners.¹²² Collen noted in another letter, “[we] sent five more of the “sons of heaven” to their last rest. So we added five killed and three wounded to our vermin score! . . . One was an officer too – he finished his day without a head, an askari took a fancy to it!”¹²³ The brutality of the fighting was regarded as a reasonable response to previous atrocities, and Africans were encouraged to behave savagely as well.

In addition to their concerns with the Africans and Japanese, the British were also worried about the negative potential of African contact with other races in Burma. Reports from the field warned of African contempt for Indian troops and civilians, saying “[the askari] has begun to despise the Indian civilian and wonders why Indians are considered superior

¹²⁰ Monteith, Malcolm. *From Ceylon to the Chindwin*, 1945. Dimoline Papers, LHCMA Dimoline 9/10.

¹²¹ Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

¹²² Bayly and Harper, 388–390.

¹²³ Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

to Africans in Africa.”¹²⁴ Another quoted an African soldier as writing, “The Indians in this country are horrible. Although in Africa they are well off, here they are poor and dirty and begging is uncontrolled. I have never in my life seen such filthy beggars as these Indians. Mind you, in future we will wring their necks.”¹²⁵ Such statements caused worry of future negative relations when the British army began repatriating African troops. In some cases, this even led to violence between Africans and Indians, leading to the necessary intervention of British martial law.¹²⁶ Officers were also apprehensive about the presence of Indian independence movement signage and behavior, which they worried would inspire the Africans to contemplate independence of their own.¹²⁷ Some officers tried to limit contact between Africans and Indians as a result of these ideas, although this was seen as detrimental to their improvement by some of the higher-rank commanders.¹²⁸

British officers were also concerned about the relations between Africans and the local Burmese population, especially as they saw Africans as more unruly when abroad than other troops.¹²⁹ In addition, the relations between the military and the local population had particular military

¹²⁴ TNA: PRO WO 203/2045.

¹²⁵ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268. Errors in original.

¹²⁶ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1; TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

¹²⁷ Boreham, IWM 91/21/1; Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

¹²⁸ Kenneth Anderson to General Dimoline, 1 June 1945. LHCMA Dimoline 9/3.

¹²⁹ TNA: PRO WO 106/5217.

significance. The Japanese creation and use of the Burmese National Army gave the British cause to worry about the potential harm that could arise from unfriendly relations with the local population.¹³⁰ In response, they brought in more food and medical supplies to be given to the Burmese, and kept careful watch on the African troops to try to forestall issues before they could arise.¹³¹ One officer even wrote that his unit was occupied for several months building huts for Burmese rendered homeless by the Japanese.¹³² Despite these efforts, issues between African troops and the local population led to an assessment of the Africans as a poor occupational force, as their behavior when not on active operations was seen as worse than British or Indian forces.¹³³ It also led to increased tensions between the Africans and their officers, as the large number of disciplinary problems between the Africans and Burmese as the campaign wore on led to a decreased opinion of the African soldier.¹³⁴

As with many other issues with the perception of African troops, many in the British military simply took a few examples of African misbehavior, and used that as evidence that all African soldiers were poor troops without considering other mitigating causes. While the reports cited

¹³⁰ TNA: PRO WO 172/9546.

¹³¹ TNA: PRO WO 172/6585.

¹³² Price, IWM 84/23/1.

¹³³ TNA: PRO WO 203/4247.

¹³⁴ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

from the War Office label African troops as poorly behaved, it is notable that many other officials viewed the Africans as well-behaved with a few bad examples caused by the long period of waiting for repatriation. General Dimoline himself stated in 1946, "I would pay tribute to the behaviour and bearing of the African ranks during the long months of waiting. Relations with the civil population have been excellent and we have had no serious trouble whatsoever . . . I feel this fact is insufficiently known and is often taken for granted."¹³⁵ Again, a small number of incidents were taken as an example of poor African performance throughout the war, an attitude that hurt morale of both African troops and their officers.¹³⁶

The relations between these multiple groups would play out across the Burma campaign. The opinions held by the different sides would shift and change as the war progressed, but even initial impressions would prove to have a huge impact on how the war was fought and how it was viewed after the fighting was over. In determining the use of African forces, prior beliefs about their value would be used along with restrictions put in place by colonial governments, and these would have serious effects on the results of the Burma campaign.

¹³⁵ General Dimoline to the Press at Bombay, 3 May 1946. LHCMA Dimoline 9/5

¹³⁶ Price, IWM 84/23/1.

Chapter 2:

“At Close Quarters and in Trying Circumstances”¹³⁷

Conditions in Burma

Despite the dangers of being on campaign in the Burmese jungle, the strenuous nature of the fighting, and the difficulties of leading troops from different cultures and nationalities, most British officers tended to focus on the basics of life in their letters and memoirs about their war experience. For instance, many of them write more about the friendships and connections they made with other officers while on campaign. Numbers vary on the exact distribution of ranks throughout the forces, but on average each group had about 50-75 African soldiers for every British officer.¹³⁸ With this huge disparity in numbers between British and Africans, it is not surprising that British officers would feel isolated in their platoons and companies and would make close personal connections with the few other officers and NCOs with whom they shared a language. As one officer stated of the conditions in Burma, “society is limited to fellow officers, BNCOs and one’s boy and orderly.”¹³⁹ K.H. Collen, writing to his wife, noted one facet of service in Burma saying, “Another thing I enjoy seeing is

¹³⁷ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

¹³⁸ Numbers taken from TNA: PRO WO 203/5447, Shiroya, 34, and Boreham, IWM 91/21/1.

¹³⁹ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.



Figure 8 – West African troops awaiting a supply drop. (Reproduced from Clarke, F.A.S. and Haywood, A.H.W. *The History of the Royal West African Frontier Force*, (Aldershot, England: Gale & Polden Ltd., 1969), 449.)

all my old friends again. In Ceylon we were so far apart that we hardly ever saw each other but here you never know when someone won't bob up."¹⁴⁰ This contact with other officers created friendships that helped increase morale as well as allow for information and knowledge to be passed between officers with different training and skill levels.¹⁴¹

Another major issue for the daily lives of British officers was the rations provided on campaign. Food supplies were often limited by the need to provide food via air drop, as well as the different dietary preferences of

¹⁴⁰ Collen to his wife, 5 September 1944. IWM 79/29/1.

¹⁴¹ Nunneley, 180–181.

African, Indian and British troops.¹⁴² In cases where these supplies were confused, differences of taste often led to problems, as one officer noted,

Before the Service Corps learned better we had the most extraordinary comestibles in our rations. Detached from the Division we were the only West African Unit for about 400 miles, and since the Indians were being asked to supply the sort of exotic force with which they had no previous experience, they did their best by providing food as for Indian troops. It was overlooked that Europeans were part of the RWAFF and the Africans missed their normal 'chop', heartily disliking the sepoys' atta and ghee. As for us, we were completely beaten back by some of the strange commodities which the Ration Corporal brought back for our consumption . . . So it went on, we managing somehow on our dry rations, rarely finding the issues of 'fresh' rations being worth the trouble of collection.¹⁴³

Many British, then, refused to eat food designed for other groups, and this strict segregation of diet was maintained throughout the war, even as officers frequently complained of inconsistencies and monotony in their food supplies.¹⁴⁴ This did improve as the war continued and the Service Corps improved in their ability to deliver supplies. In some cases, officers were able to supplement their supplied rations with game caught by their troops, and were also able to purchase meat from locals' animals that had been injured in air strikes.¹⁴⁵ Other accounts reveal the ingenuity that came about as a result of the desire for fresh food; one intelligence officer reports

¹⁴² Slim, 232–236.

¹⁴³ Pollock, E. Private Papers of E Pollock, IWM 13 Con Shelf.

¹⁴⁴ TNA: WO 203/4537.

¹⁴⁵ IWM Misc 34 Item 612.

his platoon using its extra grenades as a way of obtaining fresh fish from a nearby river.¹⁴⁶

Officers in Burma missed their drink as well as their food. “Our only serious moan is the lack of rum—or any drink at all,” reported one officer in a letter home. “The Europeans get three tots of rum a week and the troops nothing. It’s causing a lot of discontent and it is pretty scandalous.”¹⁴⁷ Morale reports from Burma warned, “The supply of beer is most inadequate and the shortage of spirits persuades those who can afford it to buy low grade and possibly dangerous spirits of doubtful manufacture. The beer shortage is a constant source of complaint.”¹⁴⁸ These complaints were taken very seriously as a problem for morale and the fighting ability of British army forces, as can be seen in the official morale reports and responses to them by military officials. Once the complaints had been made public, more and better quality food and drink were shipped in for the divisions.¹⁴⁹ The War Office even took special interest in trying to supply proper provisions for African troops, going as far as to try to find and properly ship kola nuts for West African soldiers.¹⁵⁰ These basics of life had a major impact on how the British officers viewed the war, and were seen as

¹⁴⁶ France, F.H. Private Papers of F.H. France, IWM 01/13/1.

¹⁴⁷ Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

¹⁴⁸ TNA: WO 203/4537.

¹⁴⁹ Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

¹⁵⁰ TNA: WO 203/814.

a possible source of morale issues, but they are also notable as an example of the War Office working to provide better conditions for the British officers in the field. This would not always be the case throughout the campaign.

Racial tensions within the military

In *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*, David Cannadine argues, “[the British] were more likely to be concerned with rank than with race . . . the colour of a person’s skin was less significant than their position in the local social hierarchy.”¹⁵¹ However, he derives this argument only from the British treatment of high ranking colonial subjects; for colonial subjects of a lower status, racial differences were still very important in how they created barriers to upward mobility. Even in the colonial military, race created its own limitations on rank and class that would greatly affect African troops and the British military administration that sought to use them.

Race created a core around which the British ran their military administration. Equipment supplies were segregated by race, which led to many complaints from Africans that their uniforms were inferior to those of the British. One Nigerian complained that even the assignment of weapons

¹⁵¹ Cannadine, 123–124.

could be done on a racial basis; in his medical (and thus non-combatant) unit, only the white officers and NCOs were given pistols or rifles.¹⁵² Even some of the support services were racially segregated: separate hospitals were set up for East Africans and for West Africans, and treatment was thus divided based on race rather than unit.¹⁵³

At the least, the British Army realized the dangerous potential of poor race relations and made efforts to avoid conflict on the basis of race. The very first instruction given to officers seconded to the Royal West African Frontier Force stated the importance of proper race relations, stating, “The native population and soldiers are not to be addressed as niggers or coons or in any other derogatory way.”¹⁵⁴ They also tested possible recruits, looking for officers who would be more open to serving with African troops, but as previously mentioned, due to the demands of the war they were not always able to select the officers assigned to the African colonial forces.¹⁵⁵ Documents from military officials show that they also worried about the possible effects of South Africans serving as officers in African divisions, due to the very different views on race relations between the British and South Africans. Still, they did nothing to prevent

¹⁵² Fadoyebo, IWM 97/2/1.

¹⁵³ Fadoyebo, IWM 97/2/1; LHCMA Dimoline 9/3.

¹⁵⁴ Price, IWM 84/23/1.

¹⁵⁵ TNA: PRO WO 203/4761.

South Africans from serving in the colonial forces where available.¹⁵⁶ These efforts did not prevent racial problems from arising, both on institutional and personal levels.

Despite the modest British efforts to ease racial tensions, the enforcement of an established “colour bar” raised tensions within the African troops. The color bar simply made it near impossible for any African to be promoted to any position higher than sergeant. This bar had been formally abolished in 1939, but it remained in practice until well after the war.¹⁵⁷ This took place even as the African NCO was regarded as the most important element within the division, as the only one able to communicate with both the European commissioned officers and the African troops.¹⁵⁸ Captain J.J. Cherns of the RWAFF wrote, “The African NCOs are the main contact with the troops. The life and chatter of the Africans themselves are almost a closed world.”¹⁵⁹ The color bar was strongly opposed by both the Africans and Europeans who served with them. For the Africans, the imposition of the color bar was an insult to their own capabilities and a reason for the many other indignities suffered during the course of the war. A petition sent by East African troops serving in the

¹⁵⁶ TNA: PRO WO 106/5214.

¹⁵⁷ Jeffery, 313.

¹⁵⁸ Parsons, 107.

¹⁵⁹ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

Middle East declared, “If one is a soldier of our Great Empire, there should be no discrimination as that of saying, ‘because this is a European and this is an Indian and this is an African . . . perhaps we are not well treated because we have no (African) leaders of our own.’”¹⁶⁰ Others attributed it to their commanding officers rather than a general policy, as one soldier wrote to his corporal in 1942, complaining of a Captain Smith,

We have seen that he do not like African soldier . . . Again he and [Sergeant] Morgan say no war in West Africa so they will not allow any soldier to get his promotion. Sir you can go and wit-ness so many application written by the soldier. It is also general procedure in this unit that application for posting are not entertained though these transfer him from the unit.¹⁶¹

Even cases where there were Africans as NCOs and in other leadership roles, British NCOs and officers were placed at the same level in the same unit, ostensibly to provide training and support for these officers but in reality to keep control of the units in European hands.¹⁶² This was argued as necessary because of the innately low military abilities of the African troops; War Office documents record that it was a natural assumption that African troops should require more supervision from British officers than Indian troops.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Shiroya, 31

¹⁶¹ Kwasi Saman to A. Morgan, 26 August 1942. Private Papers of A. Morgan, IWM 07/27/1.

¹⁶² Upjohn, IWM SR 6188/05.

¹⁶³ TNA: PRO WO 203/1052; TNA: PRO WO 203/1059.

Colonial Office records show that the idea of creating African officers came up on multiple occasions, with serving British officers receptive to the idea, but these attempts ultimately failed. 81 WA Division even had a provision by which troops who had served for two years as Cadets and had obtained the “Officers Qualification Certificate” could be granted a commission, but many eligible candidates were ultimately rejected (after great discussion of the political issues involved, as well as whether or not they should receive the same pay as other officers) on the grounds that they were not up to the standard required for British officers.

In one particularly noteworthy case, the grandson of a chief of the Gold Coast applied for an officer’s commission on the basis of his own familial rank and status in the Empire. Thanks to that status, he was considered for a commission in the British Army, but his application was delayed by discussions of the political implications of appointing an African officer, as well as the implications of having an African officer serve over British troops or serving outside of Africa.¹⁶⁴ In many of these cases, pressure from the African settler community, seeking to keep African prestige and authority low, maintained the racial segregation in the army’s hierarchy.¹⁶⁵ This was in stark contrast to the Indian Army, which had had

¹⁶⁴ TNA: PRO CO 820/48/18.

¹⁶⁵ Parsons, 109–110.

native officers since 1905, and even in opposition to the history of the King's African Rifles, which had established Africans as officers until 1932, when they were removed as a way of cutting costs in the Colonial forces.¹⁶⁶ Throughout the course of the war, several Africans did obtain commissions in one form or another, but it was always firmly maintained that they were not allowed to be in charge of non-African troops, and the experiment was considered to be a failure.¹⁶⁷

Despite the political barriers put in to prevent the advancement of African soldiers, many of the British officers in the Burma campaign had no problem allowing Africans to take leadership positions. In a report on the 11th KAR in the 1944 Burma Campaign, Lt. Col. Birkbeck wrote, "My unit commenced operations with four African platoon commanders and I have no hesitation in saying that their leadership, particularly on patrol, was extremely good. There is no doubt that we must rely more and more upon the African platoon commander."¹⁶⁸ Others went as far as to promote their troops to higher positions if possible; Brigadier K.H. Collen was so impressed by his personal orderly that he had him promoted to staff sergeant. He would later say, "I always considered him the best African

¹⁶⁶ Menezes, 306–309; Moyse-Bartlett, 465.

¹⁶⁷ Parsons, 109.

¹⁶⁸ Birkbeck, IWM 83/23/1.

leader I ever knew.”¹⁶⁹ Even General Slim complained of the large British presence in African units, arguing that “[the] effect of so many British was to stifle the initiative of the Africans . . . the African NCO thus had, at least during training, a white man always at his elbow to whom he could turn for orders. Naturally he did so, and when in battle the Britisher became a casualty or for some other reason the African was left on his own, he was lost.”¹⁷⁰ Others bemoaned the inefficiency and waste of having multiple officers to do the same thing; one colonel complained,

You can’t have a British Company Sgt. Major and an African Company Sgt. Major in the same company without something going wrong, and it seemed a mistake to have a British administrator who didn’t actually go into the front line with the soldiers. Perhaps it was necessary in some cases, but personally I always felt that the British army was so extended that they could not really find people of the caliber required to fit in such a delicate job of being a Company Sgt. Major where there already was one, and handing the balance nicely.¹⁷¹

Indeed, as the campaign across Burma continued, the growing casualties of European officers meant that leadership responsibilities more and more often fell onto the African NCOs and troops who had more experience, and as J.J. Cherns put it, had “proved themselves competent without direct European supervision.”¹⁷² Further, when the order finally came to the King’s African Rifles

¹⁶⁹ Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

¹⁷⁰ Slim, 166.

¹⁷¹ Williams, Humphrey Pigot, interview by the Imperial War Museum, 15 October 1979, IWM SR 006185.

¹⁷² Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

allowing the establishment of the rank of African Platoon Commander in June 1945, selection was made “with difficulty from the many N.C.O.s who had distinguished themselves in two campaigns.”¹⁷³ Still, the inconsistency between responsibilities and especially in pay between Africans and Europeans of the same rank led to grumbling and complaints from the African troops.¹⁷⁴ In addition, regardless of rank, Africans were always lower in the hierarchy than Europeans; a European could always take command over any African in an “emergency.”

In this, the hierarchy simply reflected the situation in African civil society, and it was race that ultimately gave authority rather than position or ability.¹⁷⁵ However, in doing so, it also weakened the command structure of the military – Africans were never able to fully act independently, which meant that they were also not as able to take command when needed in a crisis. This hampered their performance in the field, as well as their eventual evaluation once the war was over.

¹⁷³ IWM Misc 34 Item 612.

¹⁷⁴ Itote, 22; Shiroya, 32.

¹⁷⁵ Parsons, 107–108.



Figure 3 – British officers and African troops in the Arakan, 1944.
 (Reproduced from Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), xi.)

In one notable instance, in an effort to reduce casualties to Europeans, the commanding officer of the 36 KAR ordered that Africans be placed in charge of all patrols.¹⁷⁶ While certainly demonstrating a much higher regard for European lives over African lives, it also shows a willingness by high-level commanders to allow for African control of vital strategic action. Perhaps more tellingly in terms of the relationship between soldiers and officers, many officers chose to go around this order by simply having the patrols leave camp under the command of African sergeants and

¹⁷⁶ Nunneley, 167.

then be joined by European officers – so that no offense would be taken by the Africans for being lower-valued.¹⁷⁷

Even the War Office itself worried about the possible negative self-image that Africans might have. One morale report warned of what it saw as too much “colour consciousness,” saying “they[Africans] are wont to express on occasions . . . that Africans are unlucky to be born black and so they are endowed with much less wisdom than Europeans.”¹⁷⁸ Tellingly, though, none of these reports disagreed with this notion, but rather simply worried about the possible impact it might have on the morale and hence the fighting ability of their troops. For many officers, it was not even seen as a concern; one officer noted that the success of his unit was based on the fact that “differences in our two ways of life not only existed but were recognized and strictly maintained.”¹⁷⁹ Another wrote of his African CSM, who would reprimand soldiers by saying, “Get away you horrible black man.” He found this amusing, as both men were Africans, seemingly having no issue with race being used as a negative attribute.

¹⁷⁷ Id.

¹⁷⁸ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

¹⁷⁹ Pollock, IWM 13 Con Shelf.

Race on the Battlefield

Not only was race a serious problem within the British military culture, but it also played an important role on the battlefield. Due to the aforementioned color bar, the difference between the officers and their men became an obvious visual one, as the white officers stood out in comparison to their African troops. This did not go unnoticed by the Japanese, and military officials noted that British officers in Burma were twice as likely to be wounded and three times more likely to be killed than their men.¹⁸⁰ The response from the British was to diminish the visual differences between the officers and soldiers, as this training instruction from then-Brigadier Dimoline of July 1944 indicates:

- To avoid unnecessary British casualties it is essential that the following precautions are introduced forthwith:
- i) Clothing, Equipment and Arms – all to be identical with the African Rank. Badges of rank will be removed or made as inconspicuous as possible before operations. This precaution is equally important for both British and African [Warrant Officers] and NCOs. All British ranks will carry pangas. Binoculars will never be worn conspicuously and will be used behind cover as if they were weapons. Map cases will never be carried but maps carried in the left leg pocket of Battle Dress.
 - ii) Mannerisms – British ranks and African NCOs must be warned against using visual signs to indicate action e.g. arms used to indicate flanks etc. All commands must be given as inconspicuously as possible without drawing attention to themselves as leaders. British ranks must endeavor to copy the gait, bearing and mannerisms of their own troops.
 - iii) Personal Camouflage – All British Ranks in a contact area will keep their faces and the exposed portions of their bodies blackened. For this reason British Ranks will not be stripped to

¹⁸⁰ TNA: PRO WO 203/681. This is stated to be true for all British officers, not just those serving with troops of a different skin color.

the waist in these areas. Arrangements for a supply of 'Face Black' are being made.¹⁸¹

Other British officers write of being ordered to grow out their facial hair, or otherwise being ordered to change their gait or manner of dress.¹⁸² This destruction of the major differences not just in racial identity but also in rank led to confusion among the divisions. Several officers tell a version of a story here told by Lt. Colonel TH Birkbeck, "[after the Battle of Jambo Hill] Major-General Fowkes arrived to give his personal congratulations to the 11th. As everyone's face was blacked, it was difficult to distinguish between officers and askari, and he sometimes used the wrong language."¹⁸³ This tale appears in several other accounts, sometimes with Lord Mountbatten substituted for Fowkes, and with the language issue occasionally further extended to the presentation of the wrong medal.¹⁸⁴ In any case, the point remains the same: due to the similarity of appearance caused by this camouflage, the distinction between the European officer and the Africans under his command became indistinguishable, even to those in charge. One African soldier even wrote, "We all wanted to merge

¹⁸¹ Dimoline, William. Training instruction no. 11, 26 November 1944. LHCMA Dimoline 9/1

¹⁸² Nunneley, 141, Cherns, IWM 03/23/1, Fadoyebo, IWM 97/2/1.

¹⁸³ Birkbeck, IWM 83/21/1; TNA: PRO WO 172/6586.

¹⁸⁴ TNA: PRO WO 172/6586.

into one anonymous group,” using the familiar “we” to merge himself linguistically with the officers who had been his superiors at the time.¹⁸⁵

It is important to note that the use of camouflage and face paint was not unique to the African forces; they were used throughout the British Army, with black face paint usually being used to hide white faces during night operations. However, what is singularly unique about the usage in the African forces is the insistence that this camouflage was being used to eradicate the color differences between the Africans and their officers. In the Indian Army, by contrast, it was argued on several occasions that the visual distinction between white officers and their Indian troops was not a major source of danger for officers.¹⁸⁶ As this idea of racial difference as danger only arises in the African units, it implies that the color bar was seen by military officials as a threat to the military establishment, including the very safety of their officers and troops.

To most British officers, the camouflage was seen as mere military expediency. If mentioned, most treat it as another addition to the litany of dangers to be found in the Burmese jungle. Many even saw it as humorous; it was joked that the facial cream used for the camouflage had been

¹⁸⁵ Itote, 24.

¹⁸⁶ TNA: WO 203/640; WO 203/681.

designed by the famous cosmetic manufacturer Elizabeth Arden.¹⁸⁷ Given that these men were already in a situation that was completely alien to them, it would be easier for them to accept losing their racial identity, especially if it was seen as something that could save their lives.

There were some objections to the use of face paint, but these had less to do with the confusion of race, but rather with the confusion of rank. A study on face paint in the Indian Army conducted by the SEAC Operational Research Division concluded, “If an officer wants to make himself look like a soldier, besides colouring his face he will have to act the part. But under battle conditions this is impossible if he is to do his job as an officer. In 1940 the British army learnt . . . the difficulties that ensure [sic] in having your officers look too much like soldiers.”¹⁸⁸ Another Operational Research report concluded, “The difference in appearance between British officers and their troops is NOT a cause for increased risk,” although it still concluded that officers should still attempt to behave in the same manner as their men except when needed to for leadership purposes.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, many reports of the camouflage mentioned that it was only of limited effectiveness due to the necessity of officers to still act as officers; Moyse-Barlett writes, “no officer could exercise his powers of

¹⁸⁷ Nunneley, 150.

¹⁸⁸ TNA: PRO WO 203/640.

¹⁸⁹ TNA: PRO WO 203/681.

leadership effectively without making his position apparent to the enemy when at close quarters.”¹⁹⁰ By the time of its use in the campaign against the Mau Mau in 1957, the view of such camouflage had soured, especially in light of the diminishing British Empire; Lt. Col. Birkbeck, in a poem entitled, “On the KAR Going Near the Kenya Frontier” wrote, “There’s no doubt in the world, Johnny / And its no good looking back / The way to get on this world today / Is to paint our faces black.”¹⁹¹

It is difficult to assess the value of such camouflage. Casualty totals for the XIV Army reveal no real difference between the number of officers killed before or after the camouflage was instituted and across divisions.¹⁹² Still, shifts in location, enemies, and roles in battle mean that no direct comparison of the figure can—or could—be accurately done, and thus the actual efficacy of such camouflage is unknown. More important is the decision of the British to continue using the face cream as camouflage, even viewing it as an important weapon in the fight against the Japanese. “By all accounts this disguise quite upset the enemy,” wrote John Nunneley, “who assumed that by first knocking out the Europeans they would dishearten the African soldiers.”¹⁹³ The idea of camouflage also persisted as a reason for

¹⁹⁰ Moyse-Barlett, 617–618.

¹⁹¹ Birkbeck, IWM 83/21/1.

¹⁹² Based on analysis of numbers given in TNA: PRO WO 203/4635.

¹⁹³ Nunneley, 150.

officers' survival; the war diary of the 1 (Ny) battalion of the KAR reports an incident in 1945 when a Japanese ambush killed the platoon's interpreter, who would have been seen as giving orders, rather than the face-blackened Lieutenant actually in charge.¹⁹⁴

The confusion of differences in race and rank caused by these defensive measures may account for the many instances in the writing of African troops that note the relative lack of distance between officers and men in the African divisions. One African wrote, "One thing that impressed me so much when I was in the battlefield was the degree of friendliness . . . Officers and men of all ranks often exhibited inclinations to come together intimately and sometimes shared food and other things. Each soldier would appear to be his brother's keeper and the difference in rank could hardly be noticed."¹⁹⁵ Another soldier noted that

Among the shells and bullets there had been no pride, no air of superiority from our European comrades-in-arms. We drank the same tea, used the same water and lavatories, and shared the same jokes. There were no racial insults, no references to 'niggers,' 'baboons' and so on. The white heat of battle had blistered away all that away and left only our common humanity and our common fate, either death or survival.¹⁹⁶

Some Africans, then, viewed their officers as compatriots as much as commanders, seeing a closeness formed by the pressures of combat. There is no evidence that this feeling was shared widely among the British officers

¹⁹⁴ TNA: PRO WO 172/9477.

¹⁹⁵ Fadoyebo, IWM 97/2/1.

¹⁹⁶ Itote, 27.

though; most instead make the claim that the most important factor for success in Burma was that they and their troops maintained strict discipline and proper separation of the ranks.¹⁹⁷ This may again reflect differences in perception: what the Africans perceived as unique and special was viewed by the British as simply necessary for survival.

Other African troops viewed the officers' camouflage very differently, particularly after it was then used in the suppression of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya after the war.¹⁹⁸ Many of them viewed it as a cowardly attempt to hide themselves from attacks by hiding themselves among their men, especially as they thought that Japanese soldiers were "most reluctant to kill African soldiers."¹⁹⁹ Others claimed after the war that the real danger to British officers came not from Japanese soldiers but from the Africans themselves rebelling against their officers, and thus the real purpose of the face paint was not to protect them from Japanese snipers but rather to avoid being killed by their own African troops.²⁰⁰ This claim can be seen as counterfactual – clearly Africans would be able to identify their own officers despite the use of face paint. Still, the existence of such

¹⁹⁷ Robert Mansergh to brigade commanders, 31 January 1945. LHCMA Dimoline 9/4

¹⁹⁸ White, Luise. "Matrimony and Rebellion: Masculinity in Mau Mau." In *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*, Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephan F. Miescher, 177-191. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003. 184.

¹⁹⁹ Itote, 24. Note that Itote says this not as a criticism of the British but rather an assessment of why the camouflage was used; still, it reveals the extent of African feelings on the Japanese perception of race.

²⁰⁰ Parsons, 200–202.

claims reveals the extent to which Africans who no longer felt that they could trust the British vilified the use of camouflage after the war.

Official publicity and morale

There was already a perception among all officers serving in Burma that they were being neglected and ignored by the media and by the military command, leading to the epithet of the “Forgotten Army.”²⁰¹ As one morale report put it, “The opinion generally is that ‘the Authorities’ are indifferent to the troubles of the British soldier.”²⁰² For officers serving with African troops, there was an added need to prove that their men were proficient and valuable in the war effort. “You sometimes hear people, who have never been in action with the African soldier, saying that they do not think he would be very good,” stated Lt. Col. Birkbeck in a speech at the Goan Institute during the war, “but I would as soon have the African askari with me than I would my own people.”²⁰³ Another officer complained that the Japanese enemy had a higher respect for African troops than the British Army administration.²⁰⁴ In their eyes, their direct experience with African troops was far more valuable than any picture that the War Office might

²⁰¹ TNA: PRO WO 32/11477.

²⁰² TNA: PRO WO 203/4536.

²⁰³ Birkbeck, IWM 83/21/1.

²⁰⁴ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

have of their effectiveness. Despite various attempts by the War Office to increase the publicity for forces in Southeast Asia, the African troops were not subject to this increase and efforts to reduce the image of the “Forgotten Army” tended to focus merely on the British troops.²⁰⁵

The limited publicity led to morale issues for those who felt forgotten, as one officer noted, “Little was generally known during the war itself about the employment of West African troops in the Burma theatre Specific publicity recognition of them or the exceptional conditions under which they were operating . . . was scarce, even in the context of occasional publicity ‘boosts’ about the ‘forgotten’ 14th Army. It sometimes seemed as if we were fighting a war almost on our own in isolated terrain.”²⁰⁶ Many officers and soldiers felt despondent by the lack of positive publicity, and this was enough for officials in the War Office to mark the low publicity as a serious cause of concern for morale in Southeast Asia.²⁰⁷

Discipline and Punishment

This is not to say, though, that there were no disciplinary problems with African troops. As noted, there were often tensions between soldiers and their commanders, and these were often exacerbated by the tensions of

²⁰⁵ TNA: PRO WO 32/11477.

²⁰⁶ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

²⁰⁷ TNA: PRO WO 203/4536; TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

combat and problems caused by the conflict. Morale reports also list dozens of physical attacks on officers by their troops a month, along with assorted instances of insubordination or neglect of duties.²⁰⁸ John Nunneley reported of several killings of officers done by their soldiers, disgruntled at being put on disciplinary charges.²⁰⁹ In another instance, one officer received a letter from a West African soldier complaining of the treatment he had received from a certain sergeant, saying that if the trouble continued, “I will take serious action against him; and I hope no one would be surprised to hear of it.”²¹⁰ In fact, O.E. Shiroya records from interviews with ex-soldiers after the war that many of them even considered or planned a mass rebellion against their British officers, although ultimately deciding against it.²¹¹ Even without there being a massive rebellion, African troops still occasionally turned to strikes and mass refusal to fight in order to gain rights from the British Army; notably, there were several strikes by troops in Southeast Asia to protest the lack of leave for African soldiers.²¹²

While these problems may have been confined to just a few “bad hats,” as Brigadier Richard Rossiter termed them, rumors of poor discipline and performance by African troops still spread and affected morale and

²⁰⁸ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

²⁰⁹ Nunneley, 107–109.

²¹⁰ Morgan, IWM 07/27/1.

²¹¹ Shiroya, 34–35.

²¹² Parsons, 205–207.

reputation across Burma.²¹³ Even officers serving with other units heard rumors of African divisions having disciplinary problems. Lt. Col. William Farrow of the 1st/11th Sikh Rifles wrote in his diary, dated March 26 1945, “According to Brigade HQ patrols from units of the 28th East African Brigade were suspected of returning false reports. The story was that unless the patrol was led by European NCO or above they would just find a comfortable place between their main position and their objective and file a false report upon the patrols return later in the day.”²¹⁴

General Dimoline, upon taking command of the 11 (EA) Division, dealt with several reports of poor discipline and revolts among the soldiers. These included claims that East African troops had chased their officers into the bush with bayonets upon not receiving their pay on time, as well as complaints that East Africans had assaulted nurses in the field hospitals.²¹⁵ In these cases, while Dimoline and the staff at the East African Administrative Headquarters did try to remove the problematic troops and maintain order, their primary concern in responding to these reports was in keeping the stories low-key so as to prevent a loss of morale among the British officers. Upon hearing of several officers complaining about the problems with African troops, the head of the East African Base

²¹³ Rossiter to Southeast Asia Command, 28 July 1945. LHCMA Dimoline 9/3.

²¹⁴ Farrow, W.L. Private Papers of W.L. Farrow, IWM 95/33/1.

²¹⁵ LHCMA Dimoline 9/3.

Administrative Headquarters wrote a letter to Dimoline saying, “it would be a good thing if I were given a brief summary of any instances of collective insubordination so that I can correct any rumours circulating in the back areas . . . You may also think it advisable that British ranks are warned that any unfortunate remarks on their part are liable to disciplinary action.”²¹⁶

This approach would be continued in several of the official histories of the war, as none of them make any mention of such incidents, and many British officers fail to mention them even when they happened in their own units.²¹⁷ This was most likely caused by the need to continue good relations with natives and colonial governments, as well as continuing the colonial forces even after the war.

When incidents of African insubordination or poor discipline were reported, they were often not attributed to any quality of the Africans themselves. Rather, the defining characteristic of many reports is the almost total attribution of these events to the quality of the British officers as opposed to the Africans themselves. “During the last month there have been four cases of attempts by Africans of 81st West African Division to murder their British N.C.O.s or officers,” read an administrative report in September 1944. “It is considered that this would not occur if the officers

²¹⁶ Head of East African Base Administrative Headquarters to Dimoline, 12 April 1945, LHCMA Dimoline 9/3.

²¹⁷ Parsons, 201; TNA: PRO WO 203/1966.

or N.C.O.s were really good.”²¹⁸ Another report near the end of the war stated, “Any performances by African troops that fell below requirements were invariably traceable to faulty and inexperienced leadership.”²¹⁹ This interpretation of the causes of poor African discipline represents the value placed on the institution of the Army as a unit for social change, a significant idea within the British Army. There was a predominant view of the African as simple and childish, needing the support of others for improvement. As one Major General put it, “he’d only just come down from the tree—he needed a big helping hand.”²²⁰ In this light, the Army was a place where proper instruction and leadership from quality officers could bring the “savages” of Africa into civilization. This meant that crises of discipline were not indicative of the poor quality of African troops, but simply indicated how much further they had to go.

Even if officers were often blamed for the shortcomings of their troops, African soldiers who committed offenses would still find themselves punished for it, using punishments which went beyond the typical standards of the British military at that point. Specifically, the African forces were still using flogging as a means of administering discipline until the end of World War II, despite the fact that the British Army had generally banned corporal

²¹⁸ TNA: PRO WO 203/4761.

²¹⁹ TNA: PRO WO 203/1717.

²²⁰ Upjohn, IWM SR 6188/05.

punishment in 1881.²²¹ Still, it persisted in the African forces, as many officers believed that it was necessary to teach the “uncivilized” African discipline and prevent insubordination.²²² Others assented to its use with hesitation, accepting it as a part of the African military tradition.²²³ It was further claimed that Africans saw corporal punishment in a completely different light, and took it much less seriously. One officer argued, “The old African I mean, it was child’s play to him, he didn’t care about it – it didn’t hurt anybody, the only thing that was hurt was his dignity.”²²⁴ But, interviews with African soldiers done after the war show a completely different perspective – in fact, African soldiers found the practice humiliating and resented the fact that they were the only soldiers flogged in the British military.²²⁵

This issue even became a small scandal for the British military in 1944, when the practice became well-known and the Colonial Secretary from Kenya had to defend its use before the British Parliament. The testimony from this case reveals the thinking behind the practice of flogging by military authorities. A captain of the RWAFF, speaking in defense of corporal punishment, argued, “while I have great respect and liking for

²²¹ Parsons, 186–187.

²²² TNA: PRO CO 820/52/8.

²²³ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

²²⁴ Upjohn, IWM SR 6188/05.

²²⁵ Parsons, 188–189.

native troops, I submit that at this stage in their civilization power to administer corporal punishment may well be necessary, and it is not regarded by them in the same light as it is by Europeans.”²²⁶ The conclusion, then, was that corporal punishment was still an acceptable punishment for African troops, due to their particular needs as soldiers, and it was a practice that would continue until 1946.²²⁷ Again, this is representative of the systemic low opinion of African troops; they were still seen as uncivilized and uncontrollable enough that corporal punishment was still required to control them. As with so much else, it also had serious effects on morale and combat in the field: many Africans responded to flogging with violence of their own, and as a result there were many attacks on British officers by their troops that are directly attributable to flogging; in one instance, a private sentenced to be flogged in Burma went so far as to threaten his officers with a grenade.²²⁸

Language barriers

For British officers placed in command of African troops, there were many obstacles that would interfere with their ability to lead and direct these men. One of the most evident and troublesome for them was the issue of

²²⁶ TNA: PRO CO 820/52/9.

²²⁷ Nunneley, 188–189.

²²⁸ Nunneley, 107–109; 170–171; Parsons, 200–201.

language. Coming from a wide variety of regions and ethnic groups, troops in both the KAR and the RWAFF often shared no common language. In one case, an officer of the RWAFF described his batman Yakoob's difficulty in getting along with the other West African troops in their platoon, only to discover months later that "Jacob" had been raised in a French mission and thus spoke only French.²²⁹ In practice, both the KAR and RWAFF had established common languages for their officers and troops to use. For the KAR, that language was KiKAR, a modified and extremely simple version of Swahili, despite the fact that none of their troops were recruited from Swahili-speaking tribes. It used a simplified grammar structure and invented new words and phrases that were unique to the military.²³⁰ In addition, Chinyanja was used in two battalions where that was a more common language, and evolved its own differences from standard Chinyanja.²³¹ Further, the Somali Squadron of the KAR spoke only Somali, which kept them from fully integrating into the Regiment.²³²

²²⁹ Pollock, IWM 13:Con Shelf.

²³⁰ Parsons, 112.

²³¹ Id.; Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

²³² LHCMA Dimoline 9/4. There were a few small advantages to the multiple languages spoken among the KAR; Dimoline states, "on the signals side we enjoyed the most tremendous advantage because we were able to transmit in clear in three languages, none of which was known to the enemy – Swahili, Chinyanja, and Afrikaans." Quoted in "East Africa Troops for the East," *East African Standard*, 8 September 1943. LHCMA Dimoline 7/1.

In the RWAFF, the language used was Hausa, which was most commonly spoken in Nigeria, despite the large numbers of troops recruited from other regions.²³³ The choice of these languages was very arbitrary and based on the historical composition of the regiments, rather than an accurate analysis and selection of the most common language. In this way, it resembled other decisions taken by the British in their colonial administration, such as the disregard for differences between different African ethnic groups mentioned in the last chapter, in that convenience and simplification for the British won out over consideration for the Africans involved, even if this was to cause administrative problems on a larger scale.

In addition, most of the troops recruited were illiterate even in their native languages, which meant that in many cases the British Army was also forced to educate them as well in order to have the basic standard of literacy among their troops needed for training and communication.²³⁴ Officers were expected to learn the language spoken by their troops and pass a fluency test within six months of their being posted to an African regiment, but there were still many issues with this due to the number of languages

²³³ Price, IWM 84/23/1.

²³⁴ Grant, IWM SR 6187.

being used and the difficulty of learning these languages.²³⁵ One officer remembered, “At the time I was 2nd in command of the 1st Battalion Northern Rhodesian Regiment and was sent for one day to see the General [Fowkes]. I could speak Chinyanja well but had only a limited knowledge of Swahili. On entering the General’s tent he looked up and said

“Can you speak Swahili boy?” to which I answered

“No sir!”

“Well” he said “You’d better ruddy well learn as you are going to take over command of the 11th today!””²³⁶

Thus language proficiency was seen as important for officers, but clearly not essential for them to assume command.

As a result of these linguistic differences between the African troops, communication within the ranks was difficult. Commands often required the use of translators. Corporal Cherns wrote of his troops in the RWAFF, “Orders, apart from drill orders, given in English and recognized by all, frequently have to be conveyed at second-hand, by translation from English or Hausa by the African NCOs. I soon learn that the hesitation with which orders are sometimes carried out is often due to an imperfect understanding

²³⁵ Nunneley, 84.

²³⁶ Birkbeck, IWM 83/21/1.

of them.”²³⁷ This may explain a view expressed by General Mansergh that there was a need to be more elementary in training African soldiers, and this made them much more difficult to train than the Indian soldier.²³⁸ Of course, there was a longer history of service with Indian troops and by the time of the Second World War the need for their officers to speak the language of their men was well established.²³⁹

This also meant that the opportunities for African soldiers within the military were limited; it was difficult for most to serve in more specialized positions such as signaling or engineering due to the difficulty in training them in these more technical fields.²⁴⁰ Reinforcements for East African forces in Burma were also difficult to obtain; KAR policy held that the battalions should be grouped on the basis of language and territory, which complicated the process of obtaining reinforcements that had the correct technical background.²⁴¹

To further complicate matters, communication with the European officers was often hampered by their inability or refusal to learn the necessary languages to speak directly to their men. Despite the presence of a

²³⁷ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

²³⁸ Mansergh to Brigadier J.S. Lethbridge, 4 February 1945. Dimoline Papers, Dimoline 9/4.

²³⁹ An organized military force of Indian troops with Hindustani-speaking British officers was first established in 1757. Menezes, 9–12.

²⁴⁰ Grant, IWM SR 6187.

²⁴¹ TNA: PRO WO 106/5217.

lingua franca, many in the KAR reported that all orders were given in English.²⁴² Lieutenant John Nunneley of the KAR wrote of one fellow officer, “In no circumstances . . . would he learn Swahili as to do so would doom him to serve for the rest of the war with African troops.”²⁴³ Often this was related to the officers’ own willingness to be assigned to African units; as one War Office report put it, “regular officers and NCOs who came here voluntarily made excellent progress [in] this respect [of learning languages,] those sent compulsorily not good.”²⁴⁴ In other cases, it was simply a matter of necessity that decided how much of the language was learned. Brigadier General Grant of the RWAFF stated that due to the presence of translators, he “never bothered to learn [Hausa].”²⁴⁵ This was a common factor of rank in the African regiments: the higher ranks tended not to know any African languages while company commanders would have a much firmer grasp of the necessary tongue. The service newspaper of the KAR even joked,

An African driver taking a Captain of a local Company to the station and much to his astonishment discovered that the Captain could not speak Swahili. Later he met the Major of the Company, and he also could not understand Swahili. Upon returning to camp the driver went to his C.O. and expressed his astonishment in that a Captain of His Majesty’s Forces

²⁴² Kakembo, 10.

²⁴³ Nunneley, 29. As noted in the previous chapter, this symbolizes not just a refusal to learn the languages required, but a refusal to even attempt to lead African troops in any meaningful way – a complete rejection of service in the African colonial forces.

²⁴⁴ TNA: PRO WO 106/5214.

²⁴⁵ Grant, IWM SR 6187.

could not speak Swahili – and as for the Major not speaking Swahili, well, that was excusable as very few Majors could!²⁴⁶

There were some attempts made to counter the language barrier by teaching African soldiers to speak English, as the War Office attempted to set up classes for African troops to learn spoken English.²⁴⁷ However, these were largely ineffective, as relatively few soldiers could be trained in English due to a lack of training instructors. Most of those trained were only taught what was practical for the British military, usually the memorization of spoken orders.²⁴⁸ “[Hausa] took precedence over the English language,” wrote Private Isaac Fadoyebo, a Nigerian serving in the 81st WA Division, “because the British Officers themselves had to master the language to enhance their efficiency in the management of the rank and file the vast majority of whom were illiterates.”²⁴⁹ The lack of a common language was cited as one of the gravest mistakes after the war, as a report on the RWAFF noted, “It is most desirable that the BNCOs should speak the lingua franca of the soldiers under their command, but it is vital that these soldiers should speak English.”²⁵⁰ During the war, however, the difficulty for Africans to learn English and the corresponding difficulty for the British to learn native languages meant that communication could only be done

²⁴⁶ TNA: PRO WO 172/9546.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.; Parsons, 113–115.

²⁴⁸ Shiroya, 39.

²⁴⁹ Fadoyebo, IWM 97/2/1.

²⁵⁰ TNA: PRO WO 32/11771.

through a combination of the two, which reduced the effectiveness of African forces in the field.

These many significant issues decreased the effectiveness and increased the danger to British officers serving with African troops. Limitations placed upon them by the requirements of the Colonial and War Offices placed them in danger as much as the conditions of the war. Despite the many challenges, however, they persevered and were in fact ultimately successful in defeating the Japanese in Burma. Still, the struggles created by these externally-created restrictions would hurt that effort greatly, and contribute to their opinions and thoughts about the Africans, the Empire, and the war long after their military service concluded. For many of the Africans, the experience fighting in the Burma campaign, despite the limits imposed by the Colonial and War Offices, would affect their own perception of their place in the war effort and the Empire, and would further have an impact on how they acted and were viewed in regards to the colonial governments after the war.

Chapter 3:

“The Decline and Fall of Our Great Empire”²⁵¹

Entering the Second World War in 1939, the British Empire had limited prospects. Its military lacked troops and materiel to defend its ranging interests after budget cuts for years leading to the war. Yet the pressures of the war created a revitalization of the Empire as it returned to older models of imperialism, wherein Great Britain would extract resources and manpower from its colonies outside Europe in order to defend its interests in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East.²⁵² The need for forces for defense of British interests required the call-up of troops from the Commonwealth, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and even India and Africa. Demands for supplies led to increased British intervention and tighter control of African colonies to fulfill food production imperatives.²⁵³

Despite the seeming rebirth of the British Empire, the Empire collapsed soon after the war, and all of the African colonies achieved full independence by 1963. The myriad arguments explaining this collapse are too numerous to discuss in the confines of this paper, but Keith Jeffery offers one compelling explanation. In his essay on the Second World War in

²⁵¹ Hart Dyke, T. IWM 96/12/1.

²⁵² Jeffery, 306; Gallagher, 117–135.

²⁵³ Jackson, 197–217.

The Oxford History of the British Empire Jeffery outlines how the British Empire collapsed due to changes generated by the war effort itself: the expansion of economic activity led to increased industrial development and thus more self-sufficiency for many colonies, and the need for effective administration increased the powers and capabilities of local governments. In addition, self-government was promised throughout the Colonial Empire, most immediately and notably to India. Thus after the war, these changes and expectations, put in place to facilitate Great Britain's own wartime efforts, resulted in the collapse of the Empire itself.²⁵⁴ Concrete evidence of this process is suggested by the writings of the British officers who served the Empire in African regiments, which were particularly pertinent given their unique positions leading troops of one British colony to defend another.

During the war, the revival of the Empire was certainly noted and celebrated by the British officers serving in the KAR and RWAFF. John Nunneley, in writing his account of his war experience, noted that the war had brought him to the places of Africa and Asia glorified in his favorite accounts of Victorian British imperialism.²⁵⁵ One war correspondent embedded with the KAR wrote, "When Singapore fell nasty things were

²⁵⁴ Jeffery, 324–327.

²⁵⁵ Nunneley, 21–27.

said about British Colonial Administration: our African soldiers are one good answer.” This was neatly clipped out of the *East African Standard*, and pasted into Brigadier K.H. Collen’s scrapbook of the war.²⁵⁶ Some British officers described how they had gained understanding of “the African” through their joint service in the war, and even complained that racism and prejudice should be eradicated as long as “African troops are considered good enough to fight and perhaps die for the British Empire.”²⁵⁷ Other officers made plans for future developments in Africa based on the assumption that Great Britain would be in control there for many years to come, and economic development and investment would be important to ensure the best results from the continent.²⁵⁸ And still others looked to emigration to parts of the Empire as a solution if work could not be found in Britain after the war.²⁵⁹ The Empire was seen as a growing enterprise, and many officers saw their wartime experience as the perfect preparation for the careers and lives they would build in the colonies.

The only pessimistic opinions of the Empire stemmed from developments in India, especially as the growing Indian independence movement made it clear that Great Britain might not remain in control of

²⁵⁶ Kinnear, George, *East African Standard*. Private Papers of K.H. Collen, IWM 79/21/1.

²⁵⁷ Hart Dyke, IWM 96/12/1.

²⁵⁸ F.M. Burnham to Dimoline, 1 July 1945. LHCMA Dimoline 7/1.

²⁵⁹ TNA: PRO WO 203/4538.

India for very long. Many officers bemoaned that they had struggled to protect India, and felt that in doing so, they and their compatriots had fought for something quite distinct from the Empire itself. These officers felt particular bitterness about the marked difference between the reception of British troops liberating Europe from the Nazis and the reception of British forces bringing Burmese and Indian villages back under British control. While British officers felt they were liberating Indians and Burmese from the tyrannies of an evil Empire, the reaction of native population was far less congratulatory, which added to the low morale and bitterness towards the natives after the war. One report noted,

[The British soldier or officer in Burma] regards himself as fighting to defend India, the majority of whose inhabitants show no trace of interest in his battles. Several BORs in their letters contrast the cheering crowds which greet our conquering armies in Europe with the unglamorous sight that meets their eyes on recapturing a Burmese village – a landscape the main features of which are dead bodies, begging villagers, and dirty bashas.²⁶⁰

Resentment was felt equally for the people and for the country itself, which was seen as foreign and unfamiliar.

By comparison, KAR and RWAFF officers' view of Africa and Africans, as well as their evolving mutual relationship, were almost overwhelmingly positive. Many felt that the war and the experience of fighting in Burma had brought about significant positive change in the

²⁶⁰ TNA: PRO WO 203/4538.

Africans who had participated. On a military level, many officers credited the war with establishing a trained and loyal group of soldiers that could be used after the war to improve the defense of Africa while reducing the number of Europeans needed for defense.²⁶¹ One officer credited the war with finally uniting Africans from different colonies and ethnic groups, claiming this union could only happen where “the Europeans were firm, paternalistic and just directors, controllers and instructors.”²⁶² Other officers noted that the training and language instruction given to African troops had made them much more hard-working and receptive to instruction by future (white) employers.²⁶³ The war was seen as an event which enabled the British to pass their knowledge and experience on to the Africans, with the result that these Africans would go on to become more productive and useful subjects of the Empire.

Fall of the Empire

Another result of the fall of the British Empire was that the war costs meant Great Britain was financially dependent on the United States of

²⁶¹ Radford, J.V.D. “Report on the Future of East African Artillery”. Dimoline Papers, LHCMA Dimoline 9/4.

²⁶² Pollock, IWM 13 Con Shelf.

²⁶³ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

America, which was unwilling to subsidize Imperial expenditures.²⁶⁴

Beginning with the granting of independence to India in 1947, and the withdrawal from Palestine in 1948, the British government began disengaging from colonial rule. British withdrawal would not go entirely smoothly, as Cold War tensions would lead to crises in several British colonies, such as in Malaya in 1948, where Malayan-Chinese Communists attempted to drive the British out. Similarly in Egypt, a peaceful British withdrawal from the Suez region in 1952 was followed by a British invasion in 1956 after the new Egyptian government nationalized the Suez Canal. These two crises are characteristic examples of the issues facing the British Empire after the Second World War. In Malaya, the British were able to work with the ruling Malayan government to quell the Communist uprising with the promise of granting independence, which was given in 1957.²⁶⁵ By contrast, in Egypt, the British attempted to keep control of the Suez Canal with a joint Anglo-French invasion, but it quickly failed due to the Americans' refusal to support the move.²⁶⁶

In Africa, there were initially harsh reactions to African attempts for self-governance, especially by white settlers who felt that they were not

²⁶⁴ Ferguson, 298–301.

²⁶⁵ Louis, Wm. Roger. "The Dissolution of the British Empire". In *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4, ed. Judith Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, 329–356. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 344–345.

²⁶⁶ Ferguson, 295–297.

obtaining needed support from the British colonial government. These tensions led to conflicts such as the Mau Mau crisis in Kenya in 1952, where members of the Kikuyu ethnic group organized an armed resistance movement to British rule. It was crushed heavily by the use of British military force (including battalions of the KAR, complete with officers in blackface) and concentration camps for Kikuyu suspects.²⁶⁷ Decolonization moved quickly under the leadership of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, who was elected in 1957. Wanting to avoid the troubles the French were then experiencing resolving the Algerian Revolution, he felt it more prudent to settle with the African liberation movements, including the Kenyan resistors, before violence between blacks and whites spread across Africa, or African nationalists began turning to the Soviet Union for sponsorship.²⁶⁸ Britain had granted independence to all its African colonies by 1968, starting with the Sudan in 1956 and ending with Swaziland in 1968 (Rhodesia, interestingly enough, would return to British control in 1980 as a way of

²⁶⁷ For more information on the Mau Mau Uprising, see David Anderson, *Hungry for Memory: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005 and Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York: Owl Books, 2005. One notable source used for this thesis is the work of Waruhiu Itote, later named General China during the Uprising; his book, *Mau Mau General* contains information both on his service in Burma with the KAR and his leading of a Mau Mau band during the Uprising.

²⁶⁸ Louis, 347–355.

settling the civil war going on there between the black and white populations, although only for a period so that elections could be held).²⁶⁹

British officers, African troops, and the Empire

Thus, with the collapse of the Empire, many officers found themselves in the position of having fought to defend territories that were no longer considered part of Britain. Understandably, this produced some bitterness, especially given the negative depictions of the British Empire that came with decolonization. One officer wrote in a poem dated 1957, in the midst of the decolonization in Africa, “Time was when we were proud / To show the good old Union Jack. / But now it is just a coloured rag / For any coloured basket to crack.”²⁷⁰ Similarly, another officer wrote in his memoirs, “I sometimes envy those old comrades of mine who lie in many lands and never lived to see the decline and fall of our great Empire which we were so proud to serve”.²⁷¹ One ex-officer subtitled his own account “A Last Flourish of Empire” and compared his own exploits in Kenya and Burma with those of Henry Morton Stanley and H. Rider Haggard’s Allan

²⁶⁹ Cooper, Frederick. *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 49–85.

²⁷⁰ Birkbeck, IWM 83/21/1.

²⁷¹ Hart Dyke, IWM 96/12/1.

Quartermaine.²⁷² For many of these men, service in the Colonial Army was their first real experience with the British Empire, and to see that Empire collapse after they had fought to defend it was difficult and painful.

For the African troops who served under these men, their service in the British Army during the Second World War had a huge impact on how they viewed themselves and their British counterparts, especially in light of their position within the British Empire. For the Africans as well, the war was their first real experience as a part of the Empire, and their own ideas of the Empire and their place in it changed as a result. Just as the creation of volunteer corps in Britain during the Napoleonic Wars greatly increased the civic identity and experience of the men who served and greatly increased their own patriotism and identity as “British,” the experience of African soldiers in the British Army contributed to their identities as Africans and Imperial citizens.²⁷³

A significant part of the African experience in Burma was the connections that African troops made with troops fighting for the British in other parts of the world. One report from January 1944 noted, “Askaris have been taking a real interest in the progress of the war-in the West as

²⁷² Nunneley, 25–27.

²⁷³ Colley, 313–319.

well as in the East”.²⁷⁴ In addition, the interactions between Africans and Indians were noted as an example of the African becoming more “Imperial.” This applied not only to military practices that the African could learn from the Indian, but also to cultural awareness and lifestyle. General Dimoline wrote during repatriation in 1946,

During our stay at Ranchi all ranks had an opportunity of getting to know the Indians and the Indian way of life, with its many problems. This has been very valuable since it has widened the African’s outlook and taught him once again the value of the ‘Empire Spirit’ in which he left East Africa and which has done so much to win us this war.²⁷⁵

This statement reflects the optimism felt by many British officials towards the Empire during the war: they viewed interactions between different colonies as evidence of the Empire's success in connecting people of different backgrounds for their own mutual benefit.

Not all British officials saw interactions between colonial subjects of different origins in such a positive manner, however. As noted earlier, interactions between Africans, Indians and Burmese were often heavily scrutinized for signs of disaffection with the British or potential problems for the colonial administration after the war. Again, the mixed feelings that the British felt towards the Empire at the end of the war played out in their opinions on the mixing of Imperial troops. For those who saw the colonies as a possible source of conflict, the interactions between Africans and

²⁷⁴ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

²⁷⁵ Dimoline to Press at Bombay, 3 May 1946. LHCMA Dimoline 9/5.

Indians or Burmese were something to be viewed with doubt. This had real effects on the treatment of Africans as soldiers as well; as mentioned in the last chapter, there was a complaint that company commanders were not allowing Africans and Indians to mix enough and that it was hurting their ability to grow as soldiers.²⁷⁶

At first, the British were not shy about stating their high opinion of the African troops. British officials had been highly complimentary of the Africans during the war, and both military and civilian leaders publicly acknowledged the efforts of African troops.²⁷⁷ Even Winston Churchill complimented the African divisions in a speech given in 1944, a fact which was quickly picked up on by both officers and men alike.²⁷⁸ The British Army also relied on the use of wartime praise to increase morale—such as the ‘orders of the day’ given at the end of a campaign—to congratulate individual soldiers for their efforts.²⁷⁹ African soldiers also received praise from the general public who were aware of their exploits; a letter written to the *East African Standard* stated, “No tribute could be too high for the work

²⁷⁶ Kenneth Anderson to Dimoline, 1 June 1945. LHCMA Dimoline 9/3.

²⁷⁷ Dimoline, “Notes for Divisional Commander’s Speech at 11 KAR Dinner”. LHCMA Dimoline 9/2.

²⁷⁸ K.H. Collen to his wife, 30 September 1944, IWM 79/21/1. He writes, “I see in Churchill’s speech he gave a hand out to the 14th Army and mentioned the ‘excellent African Divisions’”.

²⁷⁹ Parsons, 243–244.

these men have done on behalf of the British Commonwealth.”²⁸⁰ This information was publicly and directly communicated to the African troops through speeches made by their officers and commanders.

Immediately after the war as well, the work done by the African troops was considered important enough for the presentation of medals – Africans received the 1939-45 Star and the Burma Star as tokens of appreciation for their service, and Africans took that as a mark of distinction and honor.²⁸¹ In addition, a small contingent of African troops played a part in the victory celebrations in London after the war, an enormous public acknowledgment of African efforts during the war.²⁸²

Even as the war was ending, however, British authorities were already modifying their post-war praise for African troops to account for possible African demands for better treatment. One officer warned,

Many of the troops lived a simple African way of life in remote places before they joined the Army. They have now learned . . . to enjoy a life-style far removed from their native origins. They have traveled far and wide. They have lived in close contact with white men under all sorts of circumstances and have ceased to regard them with awe.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Shiroya, 42.

²⁸¹ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268. There was even some discontent when a shortage of ribbon meant that the troops of the 81 WA Division were not able to wear their medals at the same time as the East African and Indian troops.

²⁸² Page, 176–181.

²⁸³ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

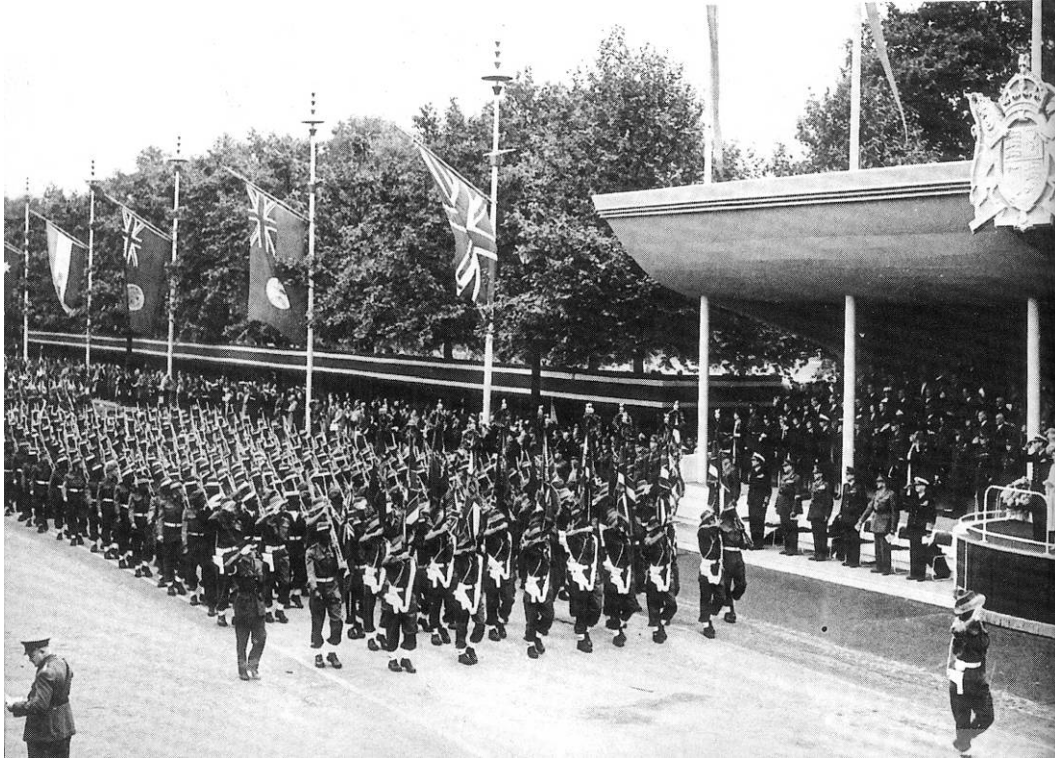


Figure 10 - East African troops marching in the Victory Parade, London 1946
 (Reproduced from Page, Malcolm. *KAR: A History of the King's African Rifles*. (Trowbridge, UK: Redwood Books, 1998), image 21.)

New plans included what were called “Lectures to Troops,” designed to put the war in its “proper perspective” for Africans. The stated aim of the project was to “correct the perspective of the *askaris* in regard to the part they have played in the war and the reasons why they went to war. They are too apt to say, “We won the war for King George, what are we going to get?”²⁸⁴ Essentially, this meant an explanation of the war that minimized the importance of African involvement, and emphasized the role of the British in defending Africa from the threat of invasion. Africans were reminded that Africa itself had been spared any major damage from the Axis powers,

²⁸⁴ Quoted in Shiroya, 29.

whereas British property had been damaged.²⁸⁵ This propaganda was designed to prevent Africans from claiming their service in the Army as a reason for additional rights or privileges after the war.

Despite these efforts, African perspectives on their role in the war and the Empire changed in ways the British authorities could not predict or control. Many still saw their participation as crucial to the victory against the Japanese in the East Asia, and expressed pride and excitement about serving in that fight. O.E. Shiroya reports in his work on Kenya and World War II, “Interviews with ex-soldiers show what they believed – and still believe today – that they contributed more than their share to the British victory in World War II”.²⁸⁶ Medals for service in the war and service in Burma were received with great excitement, and some veterans were still wearing their medals decades after the war had ended.²⁸⁷ Many Africans took this praise and recognition as a sign that they would be compensated financially and socially in like measure after the war.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ Ibid. This may be linked to the perception of the British officers, mentioned in Ch. 2, that they did not receive enough attention from military and civilian officials during and after the war. Cherns himself noted, in his memoirs of the Arakan campaign, “Little was generally known during the war itself about the employment of West African troops in the Burma theatre . . . No doubt there were semi-political reasons in the circumstances of war-time India why mention was minimal.” Cherns, IWM 03/23/1.

²⁸⁶ Shiroya, 27.

²⁸⁷ Mandambwe, interview in Kolk, 73–78.

²⁸⁸ Parsons, 243–244.

In response to recognition from high-ranking British officials like Winston Churchill, many Africans expressed pride at having become truly “British.” One officer wrote of his troops’ reaction to a visit by Lord Mountbatten: “They said, ‘Truly then our Lord the King has not forgotten us, and under his brother’s command we can not fail.’”²⁸⁹ African soldiers documented their experiences of having British officers treat them as equals, and many believed this was because the Europeans had grown to understand them as people. Robert Kakembo, an African sergeant in the KAR wrote,

This war, thank God, is not only opening the eyes of the African, but those of Europeans. Every one of us, Black or White, is learning about one another in the best and only justifiable way, that of contact. The European is seeing Africa and Africans for himself, instead of being fed on lies made as black as possible to convey a picture of the dark continent of Africa . . . We will not have to invent our own ways of civilization, it is already done by our elder-brother races; we shall build on their foundations and adjust our African civilization to fit in with the new era. The British are now more conscious of their duty towards their colonies than they ever have been before.²⁹⁰

This new kinship led Africans to expect changes in their circumstances in the colonies: not necessarily financial rewards, but the addressing of injustices in the colonial colour bar and privileges afforded based on race, such as segregation of public spaces and racial discrimination in hiring and pay.²⁹¹ One soldier remarked on his surprise at returning home to Nyasaland

²⁸⁹ Birkbeck, IWM 83/21/1.

²⁹⁰ Kakembo, 20.

²⁹¹ Itote, 32–37.

to discover that there was still apartheid and segregation, even against those who had served. They felt that their close service with European officers had given the British a better understanding of Africans and thus better that this would bring about political and social change in Africa.²⁹² Although promises had been made for Indian independence following the war, no such plan was promised or even expected for Africa. In fact, African troops did not even expect independence, but instead looked for smaller social and economic benefits that would result from the war.²⁹³

Among such benefits were issues related to the standard of living provided for troops serving in the Army, which soldiers wanted to be available to Africans post-war as well. Soldiers serving in Burma received the same food rations as other Imperial troops, meaning they were supplied with food and cigarettes far beyond what was available to unskilled African laborers back home. Despite protests from settler farmers that they could not provide a similar level of food and that this would only lead to complaints from the Africans, the African regiments kept their high standard of diet, even until years after the war for those still enlisted in the military.²⁹⁴ The Army had also supported educational institutions, teaching both vocational and language training that was not open to Africans outside

²⁹² Shiroya, 29.

²⁹³ Parsons, 231–233.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 120–121.

the military. Finally, many soldiers had big plans for the pay and bonuses they had acquired during their service. Plans were made for acquiring land or property, or for investing in various industries.²⁹⁵ As Robert Kakembo put it, “The African in the Army will never go back to put on his skins again . . . The African soldier is used to wearing boots, to smoking cigarettes, meat is a daily item in his food, tea and coffee have become his essential breakfast; and he must continue to have these things.”²⁹⁶

Kakembo and others also mentioned the vast discrepancy in pay between soldiers in the colonial forces and ordinary African laborers, a disparity that had led many Africans to join the colonial forces to begin with. Colonial governments worked with British settlers to ensure cheap African labor for European farms by limiting pay and other opportunities for employment.²⁹⁷ Pay for African military forces had been raised during the war to attract additional forces for defense, but even this was controversial as settlers claimed it would hurt their ability to hire cheap labor in the future.²⁹⁸ Again, the British Army kept on with the higher pay rate despite settler protests, but this difference inevitably led to problems in civil life when the settlers refused to match these pay rates after the war.

²⁹⁵ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

²⁹⁶ Kakembo, 23.

²⁹⁷ Cooper, 21–24.

²⁹⁸ Parsons, 65–77.

Moreover, Africans were prevented from working in many industries, as governmental land controls and racial segregation in hiring were heavily in use to try to keep a steady labor market from which colonial settlers could draw.²⁹⁹ East and West African governments were simply not willing to give as much to African ex-soldiers as they had received from the military, and they were not willing to modify the legal and social boundaries that prevented Africans from modifying their own terms of employment and improving their own quality of life.

British officials saw African demands as unreasonable expectations, and were surprised that their praise of African soldiers would be taken as a promise of compensation to come. As on many other issues, officers were split on whether to award such recompense. Several argued that the African colonies deserved independence for their role in protecting British interests; Waruhiu Itote describes a conversation he had with an Englishman who was surprised that Africans had not already demanded independence as a condition for their service in Burma.³⁰⁰ Others argued that the African troops deserved larger pensions, wartime bonuses, and the opportunity for

²⁹⁹ Id., 253–255; Cooper, 21–24.

³⁰⁰ Itote, 9–10.

higher rank as a reward for their service. They felt this would preemptively ward off possible future demands for compensation.³⁰¹

Some officers, though, claimed that Africans should be grateful for what they had received in the Army and not ask for anything more, as in the case of the officers who told Africans asking for new boots: “How many of you even knew the use of boots before you joined the army? You did not know anything about boots. You should be thankful for the one pair you now own.”³⁰² Reports noted increased dissatisfaction with privileges given to Europeans and not to Africans, such as increased leave and pay, and worried about African insistence that the “black man is as good as the white.”³⁰³ Even some British who had served alongside African troops still found it hard to accede power and control to them after the war, likely due to the many prejudices that existed against the Africans prior to and during the war. The African soldier was still viewed as a child who needed to be led and guided towards civilization, with the firm guidance of the British military and Colonial authorities.³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ TNA: PRO WO 203/1794.

³⁰² Shiroya, 32–33.

³⁰³ TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

³⁰⁴ Pollock, IWM 13 Con Shelf.

African veterans and post-war politics

The common assumption of the Second World War and African troops is that the experience gave African soldiers the knowledge and ability to become deeply involved in political activity when they returned to Africa. This is highly disputed among a few historians, who claim that African ex-servicemen were more focused on individual issues of their own economic status and so did not widely participate in nationalist or political movements. For the purpose of this thesis, it is not essential to establish whether or not African veterans actually became involved in politics after the war, as it has little relevance to the interaction between officers and their troops during the war.³⁰⁵ The major question here is why African ex-soldiers' involvement in politics was so feared by British officers and military officials during and immediately after the war.

As mentioned previously, many official reports as well as letters and diaries written by officers mention the possible threat emerging as a result of African demands for independence. In the case of officers serving with Africans in Burma, the issue may lie in the comparison they made between Africa and India: India at the time of the Second World War was

³⁰⁵ For a good summary of the historiographical divide on this argument, see the footnotes of Hal Brands' paper "Wartime Recruiting Practices, Martial Identity and Post-World War II Demobilization in Colonial Kenya." In fact, both Brands and Timothy Parsons argue that a major factor in post-war demands was the recruiting practices of the African colonial forces before and during the war. Parsons, 243–244.

undergoing political turmoil, and in fact had been offered some form of independence as a reward for its participation in the war.³⁰⁶ Many officers saw this and remarked on it as a possible influence on African troops, who might then demand their own independence, without considering the internal political differences between the African colonies and India. Although the African colonies had their own political struggles, during the war these were nowhere near the same level as India; political resistance was limited to scattered workers' strikes, and no African countries had been promised independence. Rather, British apprehensions were more a reaction to the major political upheavals that took place in the British Caribbean and Asian territories before the war.³⁰⁷

This apprehension of African political involvement also reflect the values of the British officers who made these observations; as noted before, some commented that they personally would not have fought without the reward of independence as a motivating factor. As they saw protecting their freedoms and their families as part of their goal, they projected that possible desire onto their African troops. Those writing their memoirs decades after the war also used their knowledge of the eventual crises and decolonization that were to follow the war in Africa to reflect back on events during the

³⁰⁶ Jeffery, 321.

³⁰⁷ Killingray, David and Rathbone, Richard. *Africa and the Second World War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. 3–6; Cooper, 30–35.

war that had seemed innocuous but now seemed to hold greater significance.³⁰⁸

British officers after the war

As for the British officers who had served with these African troops, their story after the war was very similar to the post-war repatriation of most of the British serving in the Second World War, as they were placed in the same repatriation and post-war scheme as the rest of the British Army. Those officers who had been professional soldiers serving in the KAR or RWAFF before the war continued serving in the colonial armies until the end of their tours, or in some cases until those armies were disbanded during decolonization. This meant that some found themselves serving with the KAR helping to end the Mau Mau emergency, or sent abroad again during the fighting in Malaya.³⁰⁹ Other officers re-enlisted in the KAR to fight against the Mau Mau, as in the case of one Kenya resident who re-enlisted and wound up serving five years for murdering Kikuyu prisoners during the course of the Emergency.³¹⁰ Many of those drafted into the armed forces returned to their homes in Africa or Great Britain. Years later,

³⁰⁸ Cherns, IWM 03/23/1; Dunseath, IWM 96/17/1; Pitt, IWM 89/1/1; Nunneley, 63–69.

³⁰⁹ T.H. Birkbeck describes his time serving with the KAR during Mau Mau, and Dimoline records the experiences of those members of the KAR sent to Malay. Birkbeck, IWM 83/21/1. LHCMA: Dimoline 14/2/1.

³¹⁰ Anderson, 258–259.



Figure 11 – Troops of the RWAFF in the Arakan, painted by a former officer in 1991. (Hugh Micklem, *Troops of the Royal West African Frontier Force in the Arakan, Burma, 1944*. Oil on canvas. National Army Museum, London, United Kingdom.)

they would still meet and share their experiences (and in fact, are still meeting to this day) in organizations such as the King's African Rifles Association, founded in 1947.³¹¹ Others became greatly involved in trying to record and preserve information about their own struggles in Burma; it is thanks to this that so much of the memory of British officers has been preserved.³¹²

³¹¹ The Regimental Association of The King's Africa. <http://www.rhino-e-link.co.uk/index.php>.

³¹² Nunneley, 193–202.

Conclusion

The tensions between African soldiers and the British Empire have not ended. Many African ex-soldiers felt and continue to feel that there were “unkept promises” that the British government failed to make good on, even after the end of colonial rule in Africa. This largely concerned issues such as pensions and bonuses promised as rewards for service in the war, which were largely ungranted due to organizational issues and a lack of motivation within the colonial bureaucracy; once the war was over, there was little need or political pressure to provide these rewards. After decolonization, the newly enstated African governments had even less desire to use their scant resources to support those who fought on behalf of the colonizers in foreign wars.³¹³

The fight for ungranted benefits from the Second World War continues today. In 2006, following a public campaign connected to the release of the film *Indigènes*, which told the story of five North African soldiers who fought against the Nazis to liberate France, the French government agreed to pay full military pensions to the colonial soldiers who

³¹³ Parsons, 257–260.

fought during the Second World War.³¹⁴ The United Kingdom, however, has been more stubborn: there has been no attempt by the government to track down the members of the African forces who never received any pensions or bonuses, and the few pensions paid out are still set at a third of the level given to British troops. The Kenyan Ex-Servicemen's Union threatened to take their case to the United Nations, claiming that the British government had granted pensions to the British who had fought in the war, but had ignored the African veterans.³¹⁵ One veteran speaking in 2007 stated,

“When we came back from the war, at first, we were not getting anything. Nobody! I don't know what happened. The first pension I received, I think was in 1998 . . . They were hunting in the books to see who had been in the army. The [Royal] Commonwealth Ex-Services League [RCEL] of Malawi remembered us. Every month I get a little pension now.”³¹⁶

The RCEL tries to help ex-servicemen in all the Commonwealth countries, providing basic food and shelter and funding for some medical treatment. It also works to find veterans and connect them with any benefits that might be owed to them.³¹⁷

³¹⁴ Lichfield, John. "Film moves Chirac to back down over war pensions." *The Independent*, 26 September 2006. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/film-moves-chirac-to-back-down-over-war-pensions-417581.html>.

³¹⁵ Parsons, 274.

³¹⁶ Mandambwe, interview in Kolk, 81.

³¹⁷ The Royal Commonwealth Ex-Services League. <http://www.commonwealthveterans.org.uk/>.

The royal commonwealth ex-servicemen's league is just one of a host of organizations that have directed their energies toward the remuneration of WWII veterans from African and other colonies. Other major forces have included the foreign branches of the British Legion, and locally organizations of ex-veterans that are able to gain larger shares of attention. One example would be the British Gurkha Welfare Society, which in 2009 was able to get legislation passed allowing Gurkhas with at least four years of service to the British Crown to immigrate to the United Kingdom, although a bid by the same group looking to gain the same pension rights as British troops failed in January 2010.³¹⁸

For some East African troops, one of the most helpful sources for funding and support has actually been the same British officers who fought with them during the war. British veterans' groups have organized themselves to provide assistance to their former troops even as the British government has rejected their claims. The King's African Rifles & East African Forces Association has been providing funding to former troops in Africa as part of their "Askari Appeal" since 1999.³¹⁹ In other cases,

³¹⁸ Cohen, Tamara. "Gurkhas lose battle for the same pension as UK troops." *The Daily Mail*, 12 January 2010. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1242505/Gurkhas-lose-battle-pension-UK-troops.html>.

³¹⁹ The King's African Rifles and East African Forces Regimental Association. <http://www.rhino-e-link.co.uk/index.php>.

individual officers have taken time and effort to look up former members of their platoons and provide them with financial assistance.³²⁰

These British veterans have acted of their own initiative to mend an injustice and support the soldiers who fought under them during the Second World War. Even though the British government acted against the African troops in failing to provide promised benefits and pensions after the war, the personal relationship between the British officers and their African troops allows for some measure of assistance to be provided for these men. As during the war and the Burma campaign itself, the relationship that developed between these officers and their troops means that support continues to be given even where the official mechanisms have failed. And as during the war, even this support is not enough. The small payments available from these veterans' groups and charities are not enough for these ex-soldiers to live on or alleviate their poverty. Still, the memory of the war lingers on for these men; as John Mandambwe stated in his own account of the war, "The pension is little money, but at least I am recognized as a soldier."³²¹

"I am very glad that I came out here," one unnamed officer was quoted in a British morale report in Burma. "I have had some great

³²⁰ Parsons, 273–274.

³²¹ Mandambwe, interview, in Kolk, 81.

experiences and some great times as well and when I get old I shall look back and say them were the best times of my life I spent out in the Far East.”³²² While not all could look back at their experience in Burma so fondly, it still remained a significant experience in the lives of both the British and the Africans who fought there. For these men, the fighting was a struggle against the Japanese forces, the landscape of the Burmese valleys, and against the biases and limitations placed upon them by the British administration. Racial and political tensions complicated the efforts of African colonial forces to successfully complete their military goals, as military leadership, communication and organization were hampered by the need to maintain the racial and social boundaries between the Africans and the other ethnic groups within the British Army.

³²² TNA: PRO WO 203/2268.

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