



The South African Military History Society

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

P.O. Box 59227
Kengray
2100 South Africa

Tel (+27) 010-237-0676
Fax (+27) 086-617-8002

Email: scribe@samilitaryhistory.org
Web: <http://samilitaryhistory.org>

NEWSLETTER - AUGUST 2017

Due to a series of difficulties the Meeting Opening was postponed for 10 minutes which enabled the large audience time to settle and purchase tickets for the Winter Raffle- A set of DVDs titled "The Great War." Jan-Willem Hoorweg, the Chairman welcomed all and after a brief "Notices" advisory, introduced the Speakers and Subjects for the night. First on the podium was David Katz, whose subject was "**Ludwig Boell and the other side of the hill.**"

Ludwig Boell was a soldier and scholar who accompanied the famous German East African commander Lt. Col. Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. Boell's viewpoint on the campaign in German East African throws a slightly different light on the manner in which both adversaries conducted it. David's view that in the light of the campaign having long been regarded as a "sideshow" in the general appreciation of the Great War, it has recently received more attention. Sadly most of the accounts that have emerged have been of a political slant and such is the nature of things, is that they are mainly from an "Allied" point of view.

Many of the writings appear to rely in great part on myth and where personalities form part of the tale a leaning to self-aggrandisement is more than evident. At times many publications seem to fall short on objectivity and students tend to find a lack of facts showing a fuller picture. Alternatively sources emanating from a German point of view are few and far between and many of the accounts published in English are merely a rehash of old secondary sources. Virtually little new has been added to the pool of knowledge. However what has lately come to light is an important new insight to the long campaign, being a book by an author whose name has thus far been notable by its absence in the past: Boell's "Die Operationen in Ostafrika: Weltkrieg 1914-1918." The volume, according to Katz, is the closest that the Germans came to producing an official history of the campaign.

Boell's credentials are good: he served for the duration of the campaign as a Staff Officer in the "Schutztruppe" and in what position could any author better be situated to compose a history? The work however, is monumental in size and scope, and it will be some time before its contents will be available to scholars and historians in the English speaking world. David Katz and Dr. Anne Sampson are presently engaged in a joint venture to translate the book into English. Military historians can look forward to hearing more on this interesting project which so far has thrown some light onto generally accepted aspects of the campaign. A primary one being the respect which von Lettow-Vorbeck appears to have had for Smuts who is generally pilloried for his conduct of the campaign.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck was a Prussian Officer down to his fingertips, steeped in German Military doctrine and not liable to deviate from a plan. He encountered much opposition from the German Colonial Government authorities on how to resist the obvious British response to the presence

of a major armed force in the colony of Tanganyika-German East Africa. The port of Dar-as-Salaam was envisaged to be a major support base for German Naval operations despite the fact that the Royal Navy held the upper hand at sea, notwithstanding the activities of the SMS *Konigsberg*. The German forces using the men known as "Askaris" supported by European "*Shutztruppe*" were formidable. Drawn from various tribes with warrior histories from as far afield as Somalia, the Sudan, and Portuguese East Africa as well the Belgian Congo, a fighting company had three German Officers, one Medical Officer plus a sergeant and a medical sergeant. With a core of 45 men who were bolstered by additional men as required, each company had 3 to 4 machine guns and light cannon. The firepower of these units was never matched by the Allied forces during the campaign. They were highly mobile and in addition von Lettow-Vorbeck had excellent control over the internal railway system and utilised its rolling stock to his considerable advantage. German Colonial forces' morale from the very beginning was high, especially after the resounding defeat of the Anglo-Indian assault of Tanga which resulted from a combination of German aggression and British ineptitude.

In 1916 with the introduction of South African troops and the bloody nose inflicted on them by the Askaris and "*Shutztruppe*" at Salaita Hill, general belief is that von Lettow-Vorbeck ran rings around his enemies and in fact felt little or no admiration for his opposite numbers. Contrary to this belief, Boell describes a different attitude, in fact one of respect especially after Smuts' generalship at Mahiwa. Von Lettow-Vorbeck in a good defensive position and with excellent intelligence of Smuts' plans to encircle his position was forced into abandoning prepared defences and altering his defence due to Smuts suddenly changing his attack plan by ordering Gen. Stewart's Mounted Infantry to use an entirely unexpected route. Forced to have to alter his defence and relocate, too late, von Lettow-Vorbeck had to give up the position. Boell's book is only partially translated at this stage but English speaking historians and students of the War and the East-African Campaign can look forward to new revelations in the near future.

Next to the podium was Ian van der Waag of Stellenbosch University. Unfortunately circumstance forced a change of the published subject and in its place Ian lectured on "**South African Traitors and Collaborators and the Third Reich, 1939-1948.**"

It was hardly surprising that the first renegades and collaborators appeared soon after South Africa's declaration of War in late 1939. The Smuts Government and its newly expanding Armed Forces soon became aware that a small number of South Africans had volunteered their services to Germany. The impact of War on a community as seen, even in WW I with the division of loyalties dating from a generation before between Boer and Brit, evidenced to an extent in the 2nd World War. Although not having huge numbers of citizens of German extraction, sympathies were easy in some cases with German ideology and the manner in which people perceived they had suffered British oppression in various forms.

Organisations such as the Ossewa Brandwag (OB) flourished to a small degree drawing in several thousands of members. Penetration of the existing structures of the Police and the Army by sympathisers already in place as career officers saw the government and army authorities establishing a sound intelligence system which Smuts used to intern about 2000 people who could have made a serious difference to the Union's war effort had they been allowed to operate unhindered. The fields of such ideologies as a "5th Column" and pro-German propaganda did have an initial effect on the citizenry. In Lourenço Marques, modern day Maputo, in Portuguese East Africa, a very active German Consulate built up a network of agents and propagandists which led to several clandestine MI5 moves and some operatives being kidnapped, spirited into South Africa and eventually landing up as guests of MI5 in Hove, England, at "Camp Zero-two-Zero" This was the unit which "Sanitised" members of the Forces which might require in-depth investigation into matters of Treason and/or Collaboration. Camp 020 was the British center through which all counter-agency, de-briefing work including breaking of agent's codes was done.

Internally the South African Intelligence authorities set up structures to investigate information coming from citizens, monitor suspicious persons and confiscated all amateur radio transmitters. Relatively few South Africans really are known or were found guilty of the various ways in which they betrayed their homeland. Yes, there were a couple whose names will be remembered by people of their generation, operators like Robey Leibrandt.

Leibrandt was recruited by the Abwehr prior to the war, and although notorious, never really succeeded and others, specifically propagandists used to broadcast Radio Ziesen's message were eventually convicted. Zeisen's aim was to sow confusion and despondency among the citizens of the country. Leibrandt, sentenced to death for treason, was eventually freed from prison in 1949 as were those broadcasters who had also been convicted. It was only descendants of people who believed or did suffer badly at the hands of the British in former days which gave impetus to those few who were recruited. One was a student, Charles Oliver Boyd, returning from studying in the USA who was found in an internment camp in France after being rescued at sea from a torpedoed ship. He succumbed to the Abwehr and was attempting to infiltrate via the POW escape route through Lisbon but did not survive MI5's interrogators at Camp 020 who soon exposed him for what he had become.

Others mainly had German South-West African antecedents and instilled hatred led them to attesting on the German side. As far as traitors and collaborators from within the ranks of the UDF (Union Defence Force) these stemmed from a small number who were in POW cages in Italy, Eastern Europe and Germany. At both Sidi Rezegh and Tobruk a large number of South Africans were captured. Conditions in the camps, some of which were extreme, led a small number of soldiers to succumb to recruitment as stool pigeons initially by fraternizing with their captors, then being induced into spying on their colleagues. Once a person was collaborating pressure mounted for them to feed information to their controllers. During the period of most POW's internment the men who became traitors came from all race and language groups although percentages were higher amongst African and Cape Coloured Corps members. Hunger would naturally play a large point in allowing a man to "turn" to accepting food in return for passing information.

Amongst ranks only one Major, two Captains and several Warrant Officers were identified. Sergeants though, proved to be the men likely to recruit other collaborators. Naturally an Allied counter agency existed in the camps and through MI9 information was passed back enabling traitors to be charged and sentenced when hostilities had ceased. The question of why men will collaborate and betray has its answers in some ways such as ideology which might play on a man's feelings of right or wrong or justice, economic pressure, hunger, a history of perceived wrongdoing and plain boredom. At the end of it all the number of men actually identified as traitors was small, possibly a number like 140 in all.

Ian's talk ended with a brief discussion session with contributions coming from the audience.

Colin Harris
Scribe

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FORTHCOMING LECTURES

Johannesburg:

Thursday 10th August

CR: George Shaw: **A South African Foot Soldier's experience in German South West Africa and German East Africa during WW I**

ML: Kathie Satchwell: **Margaret Smith Dewar - Nurse in South Africa, France, Brighton, Macedonia**

Thursday 14th September

CR: Hamish Paterson: **Women in War in the Twentieth Century**

ML: Pierre Lundberg: **The Reconnaissance of and Attack on Namibe Harbour - 4/5 June 1986 by 4 Reconnaissance Regiment**

KZN in Durban:

Thursday 10th August

DDH: Philip Everitt **“Experiences in the Frontier War 1877-78”, based on the unpublished notes of Harry Burgess FAMP, by his great grandson**

ML: Charles Whiteing **The Rescue of Mussolini**

Cape Town:

Thursday 10th August

Greg Pullin **Operation Barbarossa: The start of the Russo-German War, 1941**

SAMHSEC in PE:

Monday 14th August

MS: Ian Pringle **The Anglo-Boer War weekend at Matjiesfontein**

CR: Andre Crozier **The fall of Tobruk, 1942**

ML: Stephen Bowker **Harold Fehrson Sampson,**

CR= curtain raiser; ML= main lecture; DDH = Darrell D Hall Memorial Lecture; MS=Members slot.