

THE FIRST WORLD WAR FORTIFICATIONS IN MBALA

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For most Zambians the importance of the First World War is merely seen in the context of a conflict between European powers. This could not be further from the truth. The First World War had a direct impact on Zambia then Northern Rhodesia. As elaborated in the June issue of the *Lowdown*, many indigenous Zambians were recruited to fight in both World Wars. However, Zambia's participation in the First World War is more significant because Zambian soil witnessed actual physical fighting. Numerous First World War Sites in Northern Zambia attest to this significant but largely unacknowledged fact of History. Without a doubt, one of the most important and magnificent-and sadly one of the most unknown- of these sites are the First World War fortifications built by British forces found in Mbala.

During the First World War, the northerly border towns of Zambia namely Isoka, Nakonde, and Mbala and also Kasama and Mpika witnessed hostilities between British soldiers on the Zambian side and German forces on the Tanzanian side. Tanzania (then called German East Africa) and Zambia were at that time respective colonies of German and Britain, and were therefore at war with each other. At the centre of this action was General von Lettow Vorbeck, a German commander who had headed a successful campaign from East Africa and was determined to cross Zambia, first to take over the strategic Zinc mines at Kabwe and also to unify the German colonies of German East Africa and German West Africa(Angola) by taking over Zambia which is sandwiched between these territories. Through Guerilla warfare that usually left the British forces baffled, he successfully passed through Nakonde, Mbala, Kasama and Mpika. He was only forced to surrender at Chambeshi not because he was defeated but because the war had ended in Europe three days before. He marched back to Mbala and officially surrendered there. The Moto Moto Museum History Gallery has exhibited this history and related artifacts in great detail in its history gallery.

The fortifications in Mbala were built by British forces at unknown dates but between 1917 and 1918, the period when the war between Zambia and Tanzania intensified. The stonewall fortifications are located in chief Zombe's area about 20 Kilometers from Mbala Town on the Kaseshya road, two kilometers from the border with Tanzania.

The fortifications were constructed on a hill called *Kalwazi*- foot in *iciLungu*-because the top of the hill is shaped like a human foot. The hill is sometimes referred to in the local language as *Kamba*, meaning camp, for the fact that British soldiers camped on the hill for a considerable duration of time as evidenced by the fortifications. *Kalwazi* hill on which the stonewall fortifications are found is one of the highest hills of the range of hills in this mountainous area, and was strategically chosen for the fortifications because it has a commanding view of all directions, especially on the side facing Tanzania. (Every time I climb up the hill, I wonder why it is called a *hill*; the one hour sweaty climb up the site qualifies it to be called a mountain-at least in my books!)



View from the top of the hill on the Tanzania side where the German forces were advancing from

The fortifications comprise an outside enclosure measuring approximately two kilometers all round. These stonewall fortifications were built as a defensive fortress by British soldiers. Before collapsing, the walls of the fortifications are reported to have been about 4 meters high and of considerable thickness. The fortifications have since collapsed.

Inside the enclosure are separate systems of stone fortifications which must have been used as bunkers, sleeping quarters, observation/sniper points and for storage of weapons among others. The inside fortifications are very elaborate and interesting. At several places along the outside enclosure are heaps of stones forming approximately a meter buffer which military personnel whom I took to the site conclude were sniper points. There are at least four such heaps on the North Westerly side of the camp which is also the side where the German forces were advancing from.



Unidentified bottle with elaborate decorations inside the enclosure

In the centre of the camp, about 100 meters away from the inside fortifications is an unmistakable remain of a gravesite with part of the tombstone still intact. The concrete slab reads ‘erected by E P Chesnaye, est dist comm., Abercorn.’ The grave belonged to a British soldier who must have met his fate at the hill. The grave was reportedly exhumed by ‘foreigners’ in the 1980s and the remains of the deceased presumably taken back to his homeland.



Small portion of the walls of the outside enclosure



Bunker in the centre of the site

Remains of a grave and part of a broken tombstone

*Indicating that it was 'erected by E P CHESNAYE, EST
DIST COMM, ABERCORN*

On one of my visits to the site, I had the pleasure of chatting with Chief Zombe on the history of the site. As usual, his narrative was poignant, engaging and nuanced. We sat on his veranda on a warm morning, the air sweet with the earthy smell of newly cultivated fields. I thought he looked chiefly in his tall arm chair, holding a wooden carved ornamental walking stick, with the head carved into a coiled snake. Kalwazi hill sat smugly in the far distance, west of the Chief's residence. You could not have guessed that it holds such magnificent historical treasures.

"Apart from the stone fortifications and bunkers," the chief intoned, "there are also trenches at the bottom of the hill. Some of these are hidden and only known by a few people. The trenches are very big and even huge snakes, as huge as an adult human and several metres long live there.' He nodded towards two retainers seated on the other end of the veranda and added, "Ask them, they will tell you."

A glance at the two gentlemen revealed twin smirks, as if they were ready to produce the reptiles on site. Aware that they would accompany the museum officers to the top of the hill and not wanting to give them a reason to take the longest route, I tried to give a friendly smile and reverted my attention to the traditional leader.

Taking advantage of the easy friendships that Easterners and Northerners share, I looked the chief in the eye and blurted, “Have you ever seen the snakes?”

The subtle challenge was not lost on him. Sitting up straighter in his chair, he shifted his walking stick so that the snake’s head was now facing me and demanded in what I perceived was his chief’s no nonsense tone, “Can a chief lie?”

I furiously took notes.

The rumored trenches do in fact exist and were obviously constructed by the British forces as part of the fortifications. The trenches are located at the bottom of the North-Easterly side of the hill. The trench forms are huge y-shape. The main trench, which is almost a kilometer long, starts from the Northerly side of the hill through to the bottom of the eastern side. Due to overgrown vegetation, it is difficult to locate the exact points where the trench starts and ends. In the middle of the trench, another trench joins the main one thereby forming the y-shape. The second trench is smaller and leads to a natural water hole some meters away from where the smaller trench joins the larger one. The water hole was obviously used by the British forces for water supplies.



Remains of the trench leading to waterhole

I recently sat in a history class where students were urged to consider rumors and lies as significant mirrors to historical events. I have encountered the stories regarding the huge snakes that reside in the trenches, on several occasions and have concluded that they possibly point to the significance that the residents of Zombe and surrounding areas attach to the First World War trenches at the site and elsewhere within the area. The First World War and the incidents regarding the construction of the fortifications and trenches are significant aspects of the surrounding villages' history and have rightly been imbedded in these societies' memories. The passage of the histories regarding these memories through oral narratives have allowed the stories to evolve, and the elaboration of how big the trenches are and especially the rumored snakes are a way that society-consciously and unconsciously- retains the significance of the sites and the attached histories.

As part of its core mandates, Moto Moto Museum continues to carry out research on the World Wars' heritage of Mbala. Aspects of this heritage have been exhibited in the museums permanent exhibition. In August, the museum assisted Zambia National Broadcasting Cooperation in producing a two episode documentary on the fortifications at Zombe which was aired on the National Broadcaster. A recent temporal exhibition highlighted the remains of the Second World War polish refugee camp located within Mbala town. The museum also conducts lectures and site visits on Mbala's military history. Retrospectively, most of the museum efforts are hampered by lack of resources. There is need for instance, to comprehensively document and study the sites as well as collect their oral histories.

Northern Zambia has a great potential of developing a rich heritage tourism industry based on its layered and rich historic heritage. One area worth exploring is the numerous First World War Sites that are scattered throughout the region. These include sites in Nakonde, Isoka, Kasama and most significantly Mbala. The fortifications built by British soldiers in Chief Zombe's area in Mbala, are without a doubt one of the most important of these sites which needs to be further explored and publicized.

Every time I visit the First World War Fortifications at Zombe, am overcome with awe. Firstly at the fact that I have the privilege of seeing such a significant part of Zambia's history which so many will never see. Secondly at the imagination that I always allow to consume me-of how the constructions of the fortifications were done, the unprecedented activity that the hill must have witnessed, the feelings of the African soldiers about what they were experiencing and about their role in these events, what food the forces ate, what kind of interactions they had with the local residents. During many of these visits, I have looked around at the serene hilltop, and wondered what tales the hill and its piles of stones could tell if they could *only* talk.

**For request for museum tours, lectures and field excursions contact Moto Moto Museum
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