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A Report on the Official Celebrations during November 2018 to Mark the Centenary of the 1918 Armistice Signifying the End of the First World War in Africa

Christopher Mellor-Hill

A representative group from the King's African Rifles (KAR), East African Forces (EAF) and the Great War in Africa Associations (GWAA) made the long journey to Zambia to mark the end of the First World War in Africa. In the group was Brigadier David Williams, President of the KAR & EAF Association and formerly of the 1st KAR; Dr Anne Samson, an eminent historian and the Coordinator of the GWAA, with her husband John; Colonel David Bates, a member of KAR & EAF Association with close ties to Malawi; Christopher Mellor-Hill, a member of both Associations who was born and brought up in Zambia; Anthony Allen, a member of both Associations and a descendant of Kenya settlers, who travelled all the way from Australia, and John Bannon with his sister Bridget McCann whose grandfather was the Regimental Sergeant Major of 1/4 KAR, the Uganda battalion that was prominent in the final battles during 1918 through Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). They were accompanied by Jack Losh and his cameraman Alessandro Pavone who were making a documentary film for Al Jazeera reflecting the contribution of soldiers from Africa and were using this occasion as the backdrop. They proved to be stimulating companions and their film is due to be screened in February 2019 and can be found on their website under "Forgotten Heroes of Empire"¹.

The group was fortunate to be in the company of General Lord Richards with his wife Caroline as the senior UK representative in his role as Deputy Grand President of the Royal Commonwealth Ex-Services League (RCEL). Hans-Caspar Graf zu Rantzau, the grandson of Major General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who was the commander of the German colonial troops in East Africa from 1914 to 1918, was also with our party. A charming German aristocrat, his presence added much to the historic significance of the occasion. Colonel Mike Geldard, the Defence Attaché in Harare, Zimbabwe, who covers also Malawi and Zambia, appropriately represented the UK Forces. Colonel Nigel Dransfield, Controller Finance in RCEL, timed his tour of East Africa to be in Zambia at this time to provide staff support to General Richards along with Lieutenant Colonel Mike Reeve-Tucker, who lives in Lusaka, and who is the UK Council member for Zambia in RCEL.

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2019/02/forgotten-heroes-empire-190212202052563.html>

A great deal is owed to Peter Jones, Chairman of the Zambian Tourist Authority, for conceiving and organising two events in North Eastern Zambia. The first was at the Chambeshi Bridge Memorial near to where General von Lettow-Vorbeck met the then North Eastern Rhodesia District Officer Hector Croad² to agree the terms of surrender. This was commemorated on the day of the centenary on 14th November 2018 by Peter Jones and other Zambians. They were joined by some German visitors. The main event was a parade on 25th November at the site of the signing of the German surrender in Mbala (formerly Abercorn). This was a State occasion, hosted by the President of Zambia, His Excellency Edgar Lungu, with representatives from all the nations which were involved in the East African campaign.

The VIP group travelled in a chartered aircraft. The rest of us went by road in hired 4 x 4s covering nearly 2,000 miles in the process. Our representative group flew into Lusaka on the 22nd November and met up at the Fringilla Lodge on the Great North Road. Here we were delighted to be joined by Brigadier-General Oscar Chapula, the Zambian Defence Attaché from London, whose presence proved invaluable in oiling the wheels of progress.

As old Africa hands appreciate, driving in Zambia is stressful and potentially hazardous, especially after dark. The Great North Road has only two lanes with a high density of large trucks and buses driving to and from the Copperbelt. Periodic police checkpoints also slowed us down. Fortified by a full English breakfast at the well-known Fig Tree Café, we proceeded in convoy on November 23rd taking almost 10 hours to reach the estate of Shiwa Ngandu (built by Sir Stewart Gore-Browne, whose pioneer story is told in the book *The Africa House: The True Story of an English Gentleman and His African Dream* by Christina Lamb) where hosts, Charlie and Jo Harvey (his grandson) welcomed us warmly with a drink followed by an excellent meal. After dinner, we dispersed to various houses on the estate driving on bush roads water-logged after heavy early rains which, for the farmers, was most welcome. The VIP group, who were all staying in Shiwa house, flew in to the local airstrip the next morning. After breakfast together, we all drove in convoy the two hours to the Chambeshi Bridge Memorial for our own service of remembrance on 24th November – ten days after the centenary of the original meeting. This followed a printed order-of-service produced by John Catton of the KAR & EAF Association and ex-6 KAR (Tanganyika) to his usual high standard, including prayers by Bishop John Kirkham, honorary chaplain to the KAR & EAF Association. Hans-Caspar Graf zu Rantzau read out prayers in German and English to honour the memory of the

² Hector Croad was one of the very first officials recruited for North-Eastern Rhodesia by (Sir) Harry Johnston in 1894. Known as ‘The Silent One’, there is a short biography of him in: W.V. Brelsford. *Generation of Men: the European Pioneers of Northern Rhodesia*. Pub. The Northern Rhodesia Society. 1965.

Schutztruppe, the (former) German colonial forces. For the act of remembrance, Peter Jones provided recordings of the ‘Last Post’, ‘Reveille’, ‘The Piper’s Lament’ and ‘*Ich hatte einem Kameraden*’³. The Binyon⁴ exhortations followed read by General Richards in English, Brigadier General Chalupa in Bemba, Brigadier David Williams in Chinyanja (Chichewa) and John Bannon in Kiswahili. After the ceremony we all laid stones at the corner of the monument to build a cairn, following the African custom, as suggested by Dr. Anne Samson.

Malcolm and Deidre Alexander met up with us at memorial. Malcolm’s grandfather was the District Officer at Abercorn at the time of the surrender and has recently published his grandfather’s story and photographs in a book titled ‘*Ulendo*’⁵.

After the ceremony we enjoyed a picnic lunch seated in camp chairs on the road leading to the original Chambeshi Bridge. Anne Samson used this opportunity to outline some of the details of the historic meeting between von Lettow Vorbeck and Hector Croad. This prompted an interesting discussion with Caspar zu Rantzau and others. Peter Jones then explained how the original bridge had been demolished during the Bush War (aka the Second Chimurenga) by the Rhodesian SAS to prevent Tanzania-based tanks from crossing and joining in the conflict.

On the drive back to Shiwa, we visited the actual old crossing site on the River Chambeshi near to the original meeting place between von Lettow-Vorbeck and Hector Croad.

That evening we sat down in black tie to a sumptuous dinner in Shiwa House hosted by Charlie and Jo Harvey. John Bannon said the Grace. Speeches after dinner included a presentation by Peter Jones of the original brass plaque from the Cenotaph at Mbala to Caspar zu Rantzau. As is our custom in the KAR and EAF Association, we drank a toast after dinner to the *askari* – on this occasion including the German *Schutztruppe*. We left early on the 25th for the four-hour drive to Mbala, with the VIPs again flying. Prior to the parade a demonstration was laid on by divers from the Zambian Special Forces retrieving weapons that had allegedly been thrown into Lake Chila by the Germans before they surrendered. This was a somewhat contrived affair, but it gave us the chance to mingle on the lake-shore with visitors from the many countries attending the parade.

The parade on 25th November was held around the Cenotaph in the main street of Mbala at the site of the original ‘surrender’ on 25th November 1918. The

³ ‘I had a Comrade’ is a traditional lament of the German Armed Forces. The text was written by the German poet Ludwig Uhland in 1809.

⁴ ‘For the Fallen’. Poem by Robert Laurence Binyon (1869-1943), published in The Times newspaper on 21 September 1914.

⁵Alexander, Malcolm. Foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. *Ulendo: Claude's African Journey into War and Passion*. Aldridge Press. 2018.

monument had been beautifully restored for the occasion by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Soldiers from 3rd Battalion the Zambia Regiment, from Kabwe provided the sentries around the monument, a colour party and two guards. Their standard of drill was of a high order and their steadiness throughout a long parade was most impressive. Their uniforms retained the bush hat, cap-badge and red, white and green hackle from the Northern Rhodesia Regiment⁶. The Band of the Zambia Regiment, in scarlet tunics, provided the music.



General Lord Richards shakes hands with Hans Casper Graf zu Rantzau

The ceremony at the parade was led by the Chaplain General of the Zambian Army and included prayers, a scripture reading and a homily. Wreaths were then laid by the President of Zambia followed by General Richards (on behalf of the Northern Rhodesia Police), Graf zu Rantzau (on behalf of the *Schutztruppe*) and others. Colonel Geldard laid a wreath for the Northern Rhodesia Rifles. Brigadier Williams laid a wreath for the KAR and EAF Association; Mike Reeve-Tucker for the Zambian ex-Servicemen and Peter Jones for the British South Africa Police (BSAP). General Richards then made a speech paying a fitting tribute to the loyal service to the British Crown of African soldiers from West Africa and *askari* from East and Central Africa. He was followed by the Northern Province Minister with the President making the keynote speech. After the President formally departed, the Zambian guards marched past with General Richards taking the salute. The parade was clearly a great occasion for the local inhabitants of Mbala who were present in droves. The occasion had been well advertised on roadside bill-boards, combined with an investment Expo in Kasama to promote the Northern Province. Following the parade, scores of

⁶ W.V. Brelsford (ed). *The Story of the Northern Rhodesia Regiment*. Galago Publishing. 1990 (reprint).

friendly locals crowded around us and insisted on taking photos, including selfies with the *Wazungu* (Europeans).

There was a brief ceremony after the parade at the Pioneer's Cemetery where General Lord Richards dedicated a memorial to Europeans lost in the Great War whose graves had been moved to the CWGC graveyard near Ndola. The Northern Rhodesia Rifles, a locally enlisted unit, is listed on the memorial. We were joined at the cemetery by Colin Carlin from Bath, whose grandfather was an early settler in Abercorn and who was brought up in Zambia. The ceremonies at Mbala on 25th November concluded with an excellent sit-down lunch in a marquee at the Zambian Air Force base with Brigadier David Williams and General Richards at the high table. The VIPs then flew back to Lusaka and those of us in the road group spent the night at the Lake Chila Lodge where we enjoyed an excellent evening with the locals in the bar followed by a wholesome meal.

A visit to the local Moto Moto Museum was also made. This had been visited by the Brigadier Williams and other VIPs at the start of their programme on the 25th. It has recently been restored to include comprehensive and impressive displays covering the contribution of the then Northern Rhodesia to the First World War and it was notable how Zambia is now 'owning' this early history and therefore its participation in WW1; allied with the often overshadowed contribution of the thousands of men employed as porters (*tenga tenga*) from Northern Rhodesia & Nyasaland as well as elsewhere in Africa.



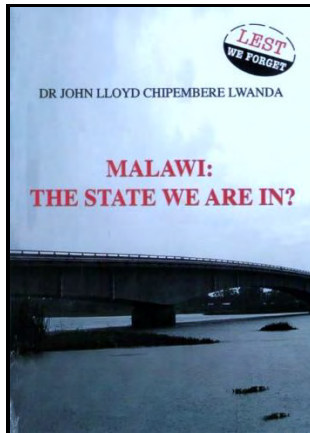
Anthony Allen & Christopher Mellor-Hill at Shiwa Ngandu with a steam tractor that arrived in N. Rhodesia in 1912.

We then went our separate ways. The Samsons and Brigadier Williams attempted to drive to Mpulungu to see Lake Tanganyika. They chose the wrong

option on a dirt road and found themselves bogged down up the axles. A crisis was avoided when about twenty local lads appeared from out of the bush armed with the implements and expertise to dig them out before going on to see Chisamba Falls and spending a memorable 16 hours in the Kasanka National Park seeing the world-famous annual bat migration. The rest of our group with Christopher Mellor-Hill, Anthony Allen, David Bates, John Bannon and his sister Briege, visited the battlefield at Saisi on the road from Malawi (then Nyasaland) between Mbala (then Abercorn) and Tunduma (then Fife) before going on to explore and locate scenes of other skirmishes following the war diary of John Bannon's grandfather which included the last action of WW1: the battle at Malimo Stream on the 12th November 1918, the day after Armistice had been declared and where two Military Crosses and two Distinguished Conduct Medals (including the one to John Bannon's grandfather) were awarded.

For all of us who made the long journey it was a truly worthwhile and memorable *ulendo*. It was thrilling to be back in Africa, to enjoy the big skies and the smell of sweet rain as the thunderclouds brought the wet season to life, the miles and miles of virgin bush, the sighting of game and spectacular birds and the warm and welcoming company of the people with their winning smiles and unflinching humour.

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