

INTRODUCTION

The first time I met Reverend Mandambwe was at the end of 2006. He was wearing a priest's collar and two ribbon medal bars on his jacket. I saw that he wore the ribbons with pride. I asked him about them and then he told me that he had served in the King's African Rifles (K.A.R.). He had fought in Egypt and India in the Second World War. He showed me the different colours for the different countries. At the end of our conversation he asked me very sincerely: 'Can you tell me why I went to war?'. That sincere question became the title of the book. A couple of weeks later, I was walking on the shores of Lake Malawi in Malindi, the village where I live. There, I found a coin from Southern Rhodesia, year 1939. Not long after that, somebody showed me some medals, on them the years 1939-1945. The person, who showed them to me, had received them from his grandfather who had passed away. He told me his grandfather received them for his service in a war on foreign soil. That was the only thing the grandson knew about those medals. The Reverend did not know why he had to fight in the Second World War. I had never, before then, heard of the King's African Rifles. Another thing that I did not know was that so many black African soldiers lost their lives in different armies from different colonies in the Second World War. After some research I realized that most of the books and papers about the King's African Rifles in the First and especially the Second World War were written by white Majors and officers. Most of the books and papers spoke highly about the troops from the different tribes of Africa and Nyasaland in particular. They made account of the troop's bravery and commitment. For instance in the book "*Mud, Blood and Laughter*" (1943) from Maurice Broll, a white South African, who fought in 1941 in the Abyssinian campaign in Ethiopia and later was sent to Egypt:

"One African came up to me and proudly held up his fore-finger, or what was left of it. Half of it had been shot away, and the little broken veins and nerves were sticking out like bits of cotton. "Askari kill seven Italians for half of trigger-finger," he explained proudly. It must have been horribly painful and I admired his pluck."

Of the First World War Lieutenant-Commander Whittall, who says:

“In common with all who know him, I have great respect for the native soldier, be he K.A.R. or German askari, he is as good a fighting man as you would ask to have beside you in a tight corner, or as worthy an enemy as the veriest fire-eater could desire as an opponent. He is first and last a soldier. Let him once get to close quarters with the white army, and he will give the best European troops as a merry a scrimmage as they could want and it will not be more than even money on the result”.

“It is a thousand pities that instead of three weak battalions of the K.A.R. we had not a quarter of a million of these splendid black warriors of East and Central Africa when war broke out”.

And Brigadier-General Fendall writes of the K.A.R.:

“They are fit to fight against or alongside any troops in the world”.

I did not find written accounts from black privates or Colour-Sergeants, the men who did most of the genuine fighting. This made me decide to ask the Reverend whether he wanted to share his memories with me about his time in King’s African Rifles. He gave me his blessing. We had dozens of interviews and I could ask him everything. The book is written from the perspective of a, in that time, young black African soldier. Maybe not all the facts and dates are right. It is the recollection of a man, who looks back on a time he seldom talked about in 62 years. It is his truth.

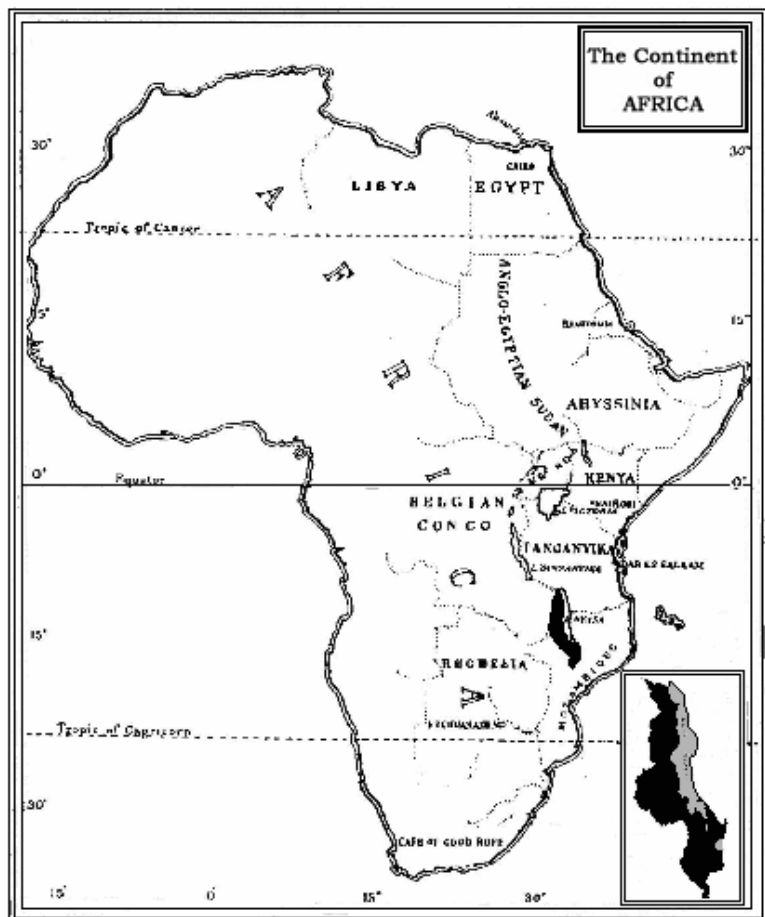
Out of a population of 42 million in the African colonies of the British Commonwealth 372,000 served in the Allied cause during the Second World War. 3,387 soldiers were killed or were reported missing. 5,549 soldiers were wounded. The British officially recruited African soldiers on a volunteer basis and used Chiefs as the main recruiting agents. Recent research, however, has shown that at times a considerable amount of pressure was used to ‘convince’ Africans to volunteer. At the beginning of the East African Campaign, 1941, the Italian troops amounted to 91,000 men of all arms, plus some 200,000 askari (native troops). Between 1943 and 1945 the French alone

conscripted over 100,000 soldiers from French West Africa. So it were not a few black Africans who fought in wars that were not theirs.

During my research I visited The National Archives of Malawi in Zomba and The Society of Malawi in Blantyre. I spoke to old war veterans at the Memorial home and had the honour to be invited at the Cobbe Barracks officers mess, both in Zomba. On my visits to war cemeteries in Mangochi and Zomba the gravestones of men served in the K.A.R. bore only names like Browning, Donnelly and Viljoen, but not a single African name like Mpangira or Chiyingeni. Those men are resting in anonymous graves on anonymous graveyards with anonymous histories. In the book I have made use of some Chichewa and Chiyao words (the local languages). If not explained in the text itself, you will find a translation or explanation in the glossary. I have incorporated news tidings, reports and notices from The Nyasaland Times, the most important newspaper in Nyasaland of those days. They will give you a look on how people were informed in Nyasaland at that time.

I'm honoured I have been given the chance to write down the story of one of the soldiers who fought for my freedom. He is the ex King's African Rifle soldier, Reverend Father John E.A. Mandambwe, Sergeant Number SGT/DN/23420/39-45. With his story I honour all those black African soldiers who gave their lives and the ones who are still alive. They fought for a free world. They are part of my freedom!

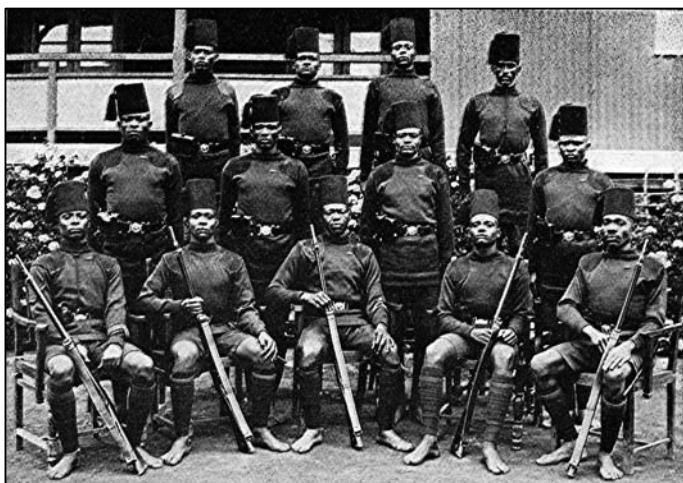
Mario Kolk, Malindi 2007



The continent of Africa with in the cadre Nyasaland

PREFACE

In the 19th and 20th Century, many countries in Africa were ruled by Colonial powers. Nyasaland, nowadays called Malawi, was one of the countries which were under British Colonial rule. The Italians, Germans, Portuguese, Belgians, Spanish and the French, all had territories in Africa. If there were problems or conflicts somewhere, black Africans were drafted. They fought in conflicts and wars that were not theirs, many of them still young boys.



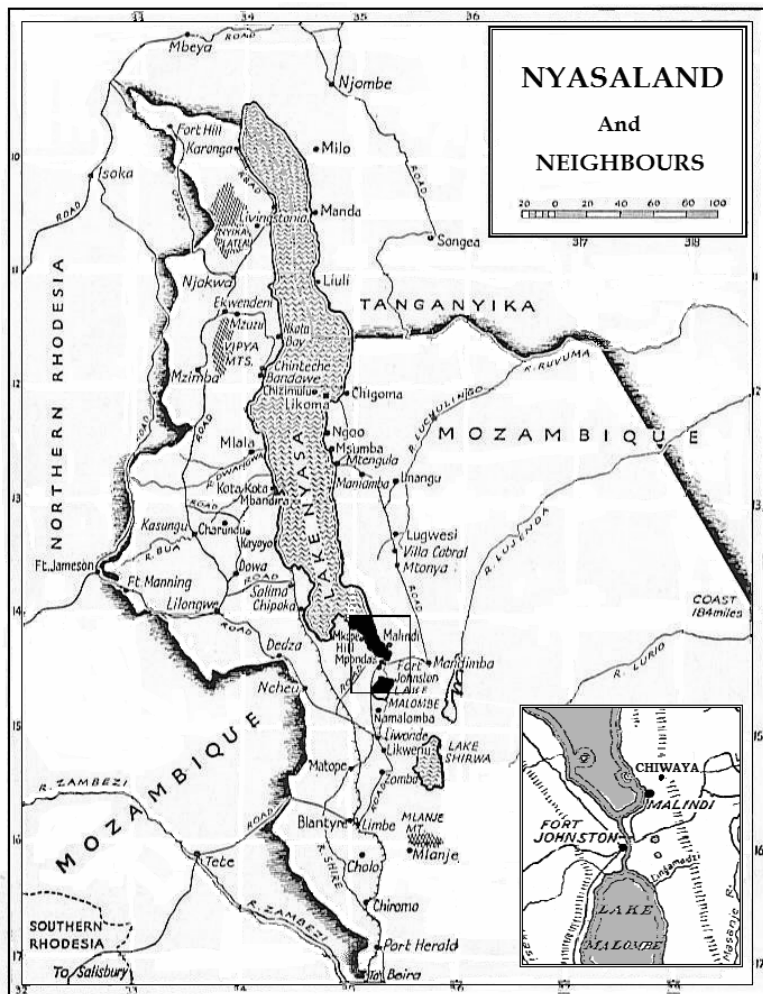
*Soldiers from different tribes enlisted in the King's African Rifles
Top row, from left to right: Abyssinian, Kavirondo, Galla and Somali.
Middle row: Manyema, H'wezi, Muhahi and Yao.
Front row: Masai, Nandi, Nubi, Mkamba and Swahili. (Photo ± 1926)*

On September 3rd, 1939, Great Britain declared war on Adolf Hitler's Germany. France followed later that same day and the Commonwealth countries within a few days. War was declared because Germany invaded Poland and threatened the rest of Europe and the World. The British army in Europe soon lost to the Germans, who quickly conquered most of continental Europe. After the evacuation of the British troops from Dunkirk in France back to England in 1940,

Britain stood alone against Hitler. At the beginning of 1940 Italy had entered the war also, by attacking British African territories. Local troops of the King's African Rifles and the Somaliland Camel Corps were immediately mobilised. Troops coming from the horn of Africa, including Nyasaland, were sent to the North of Africa. Meanwhile Germany tried to conquer Britain. However, the Germans lost the 'Battle of Britain', the first battle fought solely in the air. African infantry, comprising of Gold Coast, Nigerian and King's African Rifles soldiers were involved in the Italian East African Campaign starting January 19th, 1941. It ended with the surrender of the Italian troops at Gondar, Ethiopia November 27th, 1941. Already early 1941, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had sent most of the allied troops from Libya over to Greece to defend it, leaving Africa almost unprotected. A German General named Erwin Rommel lands in Tripoli with a small German army to assist the Italian forces. At first the British 8th Army was on the retreat in North Africa. With the American entry in 1941 into the war, following the attack on Pearl Harbour, Britain gained vital reinforcements in men and supplies. The German supply lines were at full stretch and a string of victories forced the Axis to retreat. The victory in October 1942 at El Alamein in Egypt led eventually to the Germans being driven out of North Africa. The war in the rest of the world went on. At sea German U-Boats had sunk nearly eight million tons of allied ships in 1942. Japan had entered the war in December 1941. Britain had lost to the Japanese in the Far East with Singapore and Malaya falling into their hands at the beginning of 1942. The Japanese were at the gates of India. African troops helped to defend it. It would never fall. After the Allied landings in France, June 6, 1944, the Germans had to pull back. On the end of April 1945, Berlin in Germany was under siege of the Allied and the Soviets troops. Hitler committed suicide and his successor surrendered unconditionally. In Asia a counter offensive was also on its way. The K.A.R. assisted in the defeat of the Japanese on Madagascar and in Burma. On August 6th, 1945, America dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, three days later another one on Nagasaki. Japan surrendered on September 2nd, 1945. It had been six years and one day after Hitler had ordered his troops across the border into Poland. The war was over.



The Reverend, May 2006



Nyasaland now called Malawi, in cadre Malindi area