

My Illustrious (but brief) Military Career Or How My Name Never Made it Onto The Regimental Roll

[Jitze Couperus]

You may be interested in some background as to why I never made it officially on to the Kenya Regiment Long Roll; I was basically, a Uganda boy and while Uganda boys did participate in the CCF (Combined Cadet Force) while at the Prince of Wales School, they were never actually called-up into The Regiment on leaving school. This was because, as Uganda residents, they did not live in a British Colony – rather they lived in what was merely a British Protectorate where conscription rules did not apply.

However, Murphy's Law struck. During my last term at the Prince of Wales, two things happened. My parents moved to Nairobi (thus I was in transition to becoming a Kenya resident) and peace in the Congo blew apart within hours of independence. So my last term at school was cut short; the other boys were sent home early because the dormitories were needed to house Belgian refugees, but I had to stay on as one of a few senior prefects to help receive and settle the refugees.

During this exercise it was discovered by "the authorities" that I spoke Dutch (my parents had come originally from Holland) - which was very useful in communicating with some of the Belgians – as Dutch is very similar Flemish. Also I was conversant in the local variety of Swahili spoken in Western Uganda and across the border in The Congo - which was useful in communicating with Greek refugees whom the Belgians had originally imported to work as *fundis* (craftsmen) in the mines at Union Minière. We didn't speak Greek, they didn't speak English, so my rudimentary command of this flavour of Swahili was vital to conducting any kind of interaction with the majority of the refugees in the POW dormitories.

The chief-in-charge of the refugee camp was Mr. Goldsmith, more usually Assistant Headmaster of the school, and OIC of the Cadet Force which was actually run by Capt Fyfe I think was his name. Goldsmith decided my skills would be invaluable in assisting the Kenya Regiment to deal with the problems they were facing in confronting the Congo situation. So he decided to have me called up for military service, and put me on the train to Lanet to pick up my uniform and formally join up.

On arrival at Lanet, there was a hasty conference where it was decided that technically I was still a Uganda resident, and thus not eligible for the Regiment, but having already signed documents, was under Her Majesty's Command and that I should therefore continue my train journey to Jinja and join 4th (Uganda) Battalion of the Kings African Rifles (KAR) instead

This I did, but it was a tricky situation. Whereas the Kenya Regiment was a Territorial Force geared up for two year conscripts, the KAR were Regulars with white Officers, who after training at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in the U.K. were posted to various British infantry battalions, including the KAR. However, Warrant Officers, NCO's and other ranks were recruited from the local African population.

So here I was, a pimply, white, eighteen-year-old, with a few years of CCF under my belt, and only committed to eighteen months I think it was. So I certainly didn't qualify as an officer, but neither did I have the complexion to fit in with other ranks.



This disparity seemed to bother nobody – things were getting urgent in the Congo. They assigned me a three ton Bedford, two LMG's (Light Machine Guns), and 20 *askaris* (African soldiers), each with a .303 rifle and two magazines of ammunition. Together with three more similarly equipped lorries, I was given orders to proceed across the border to the town of Bukavu in The Congo (the word "invasion" was not used) and rescue/retrieve/evacuate people who were under siege from rebels.

During this trip, my particular lorry was diverted to proceed instead to Butiaba on Lake Albert in Western Uganda, with instructions to takeover an EAR&H steamship (SS Robert Coryndon) and commandeer it in the name of Her Majesty. The Captain, a permanently sozzled Scot, and his crew were already government employees and happily took their orders from a new but very young *Bwana*

Mkubwa (Important Person) who carried a swagger stick under his left arm, and was too naïve to know what he was doing.

We made three or four voyages in as many days across the Lake, visiting various spots on the Belgian side picking up women and children and carting them back to Butiaba, where buses had been assembled to transport them on to Kampala.

After a few days, our job was done, my *askaris* had liberated a trove of some cases of Nile Lager which they found in the hold of the Coryndon and got to sleep it off before we were once again sent to join the rest of our “forward expedition” near Bukavu.

That whole expedition probably lasted less than a month, until proper “United Nations Forces in the Congo” took over and the four Bedford lorries with battle-hardened troops (ahem!) could return to Jinja. Now that the panic was over, the question of my anomalous status in the regular KAR could no longer be ignored.

In conversation it transpired that I knew how to fly (learned by the side of friends of my Dad over the years, but no license as yet – there was no pilot licensing infrastructure in Uganda at the time – just a “*Barua kwa peleka ndege*” signed by an Assistant Commissioner of Police sufficed). At the same time, it was anticipated that *Uhuru* was to come to Uganda in the not too distant future, and that a cadre should be formed within the KAR in preparation as the nucleus of a future Uganda Airforce.

To this end a small squadron, (I think there were nine) Scottish Aviation Pioneer aircraft had been assigned to Jinja by the RAF to help in this endeavor. These planes had originally seen service in Borneo, then Aden, and came with a squadron leader, a handful of pilot officers and mechanics/fitters – none of whom knew the first word of Swahili, which wasn’t really necessary, for just about all of the NCO’s were reasonably conversant in English; but it was apparent to all that I was the perfect round peg to fit this round hole - flying and Swahili - what a perfect fit.

So once again, my actual status (and rank) was carefully ignored (the KAR paymaster had me as a WO2) and I became both pupil and instructor at the birth of the Air Wing of the 4th Bn KAR. I received a brief but quite extensive training in the profession of reconnaissance pilot before the bureaucracy could no longer be avoided, and as a conscripted Territorial, I was to be sent back whence I came – namely to the Kenya Regiment to which I had never officially belonged in the first place!

This was referred to at the time as a real bugger’s muddle by the authorities in Lanet, because I was on the hook apparently for eighteen months, being now a Kenya resident and already on HM paymaster’s books, but no way could I (re-)join that year’s call up which was already well into its training program. So the authorities decided instead, that I would make a fine police constable and I was sent on to Nairobi to finish my time with the Kenya Police. They in turn decided that in view of my short-term commitment (of which about a year remained) that I could best be deployed as part of a pool of “*Locum Tenens*” (temporary placeholder) civil servants who filled in for others while they were away on long leave. As such I had a variety of temporary assignments for the next year or so, acting as Policeman, ADC (Assistant District Commissioner), Health Inspector, and even on a few occasions as Magistrate presiding at an inquest

This accounts for my motley collection of buckles and badges which my family recently had mounted and framed as a father’s day present – a picture is provided for your amusement.

Starting at the top, left-to-right... Blazer badges of the KAR and Prince of Wales, regular and "Officers Parade" belt buckles, cap badges of Kenya Police and Kenya Regiment (Cape Buffalo), Officer's shoulder pip (Crown) and three brass buttons (Kenya Police), KAR cap badge (Bugle) with just below it a "Sweetheart pin" consisting of a rhinestone-covered miniature of the Kenya Regiment Buffalo. The semi-circular black insignia below left is a "shoulder flash" (worn on the end of epaulettes) of the Kenya Regiment (The "T" indicates a "Territorial" regiment, i.e. conscripted infantry regiment as opposed the lifetime "regulars", and it is painted black for use when concealment is important as opposed to parade use when brass must be highly polished). The last row are "daily use" belt buckles signifying generic "Government Official" and Kenya Police respectively.

Note that the KAR cap badge is for the 2nd rather than the 4th Bn. This is because (so the Indian quartermaster who issued it informed me) they had run out of badges for the 4th because of the sudden influx of new personnel, and were using some old ones from a now-defunct battalion for the duration. Gives some idea of the shambolic situation at the time.

At my final demobilization parade, it was remarked that I was probably the youngest recruit to have ever served in all three service branches - air, sea, and land units - having commanded an infantry platoon, a ship, and an aircraft - by the time I turned 19.

