

The Uniforms of the East African Rifles, c.1900

Introduction

Since I first saw this illustration by Richard Simkin in the "The Vinkhuijzen Collection of Military Uniforms" at the NYPL Digital Gallery, I have wondered which regiment the artist intended to illustrate.



Based on the men, their uniforms and the native village in the background, it was clear to me that the motive was African, but as for the unit, I was not able to give any definite answer.

The original plate is in a rather miserable condition, thus the version here has been subject to some photo editing.

A reply by Timothy Lovering in the Uniforms of the World Forum to my recent plea for help with identifying the plate, pointed me in the direction of the East African Rifles, one of the predecessors of the King's African Rifles. The basis of Mr Lovering's assumption is an illustration in an issue of the Navy and Army Illustrated from c.1900.

Problem solved

At 27 June 2008, a Veterans Day was held on Trafalgar Square in London [1](#), and I happened to be in London at the time. Many associations etc. were represented, and at a Ministry of Defence (MoD) stall I got hold of a copy of a booklet - *We Were There*, published in 2006.



The East Africa Rifles from the Army and Navy Gazette, 6th September 1902.

Courtesy of: National Army Museum (3209)

Military Types - No. 177: The East African Rifles, published in ARMY & NAVY GAZETTE, Saturday, September 6, 1902.

From Source 1.

The booklet was published in connection with an exhibition with the same title, "*highlighting the significant but little known contribution made by Britain's ethnic minorities to defence over the past two hundred and fifty years*".

Apart from many other interesting items, the main feature in this context is a reproduction of the Simkin plate in question.

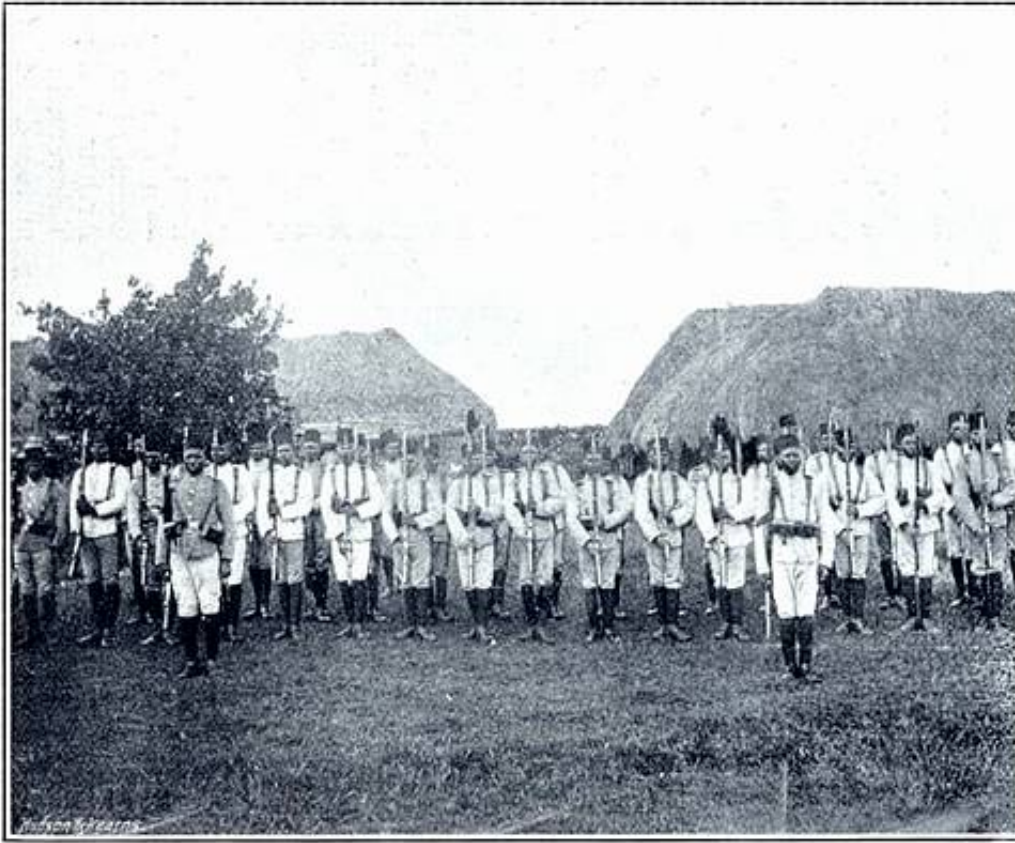
Later, I have discovered that the plate is available at the We Were There website (Source 2).

By a stroke of good luck later the same afternoon, I discovered Volume XI of the Navy and Army Illustrated, covering issues 190 (22 September 1900) to 215 (16 March 1901) for sale at the second-hand book dealer Quinto, 48a Charing Cross Road, London.

Based on Mr Lovering's information, I went through this volume, and discovered the photos of the East African Rifles in question. Quite a coincidence that of all the volumes published, this one was the only one available!

In British East Africa - With the East African Rifles

(from Navy and Army Illustrated, 13 October 1900)



SUDANESE COMPANY—EAST AFRICAN RIFLES.

The Old Sergeant on the Right Served with Emin Pasha and General Gordon. Most of the Men were Recruited in the Sudan within Three Months of the Battle of the Atbara, where they Fought against us. They are First-rate Fighting Men, and will follow their British Officers anywhere.



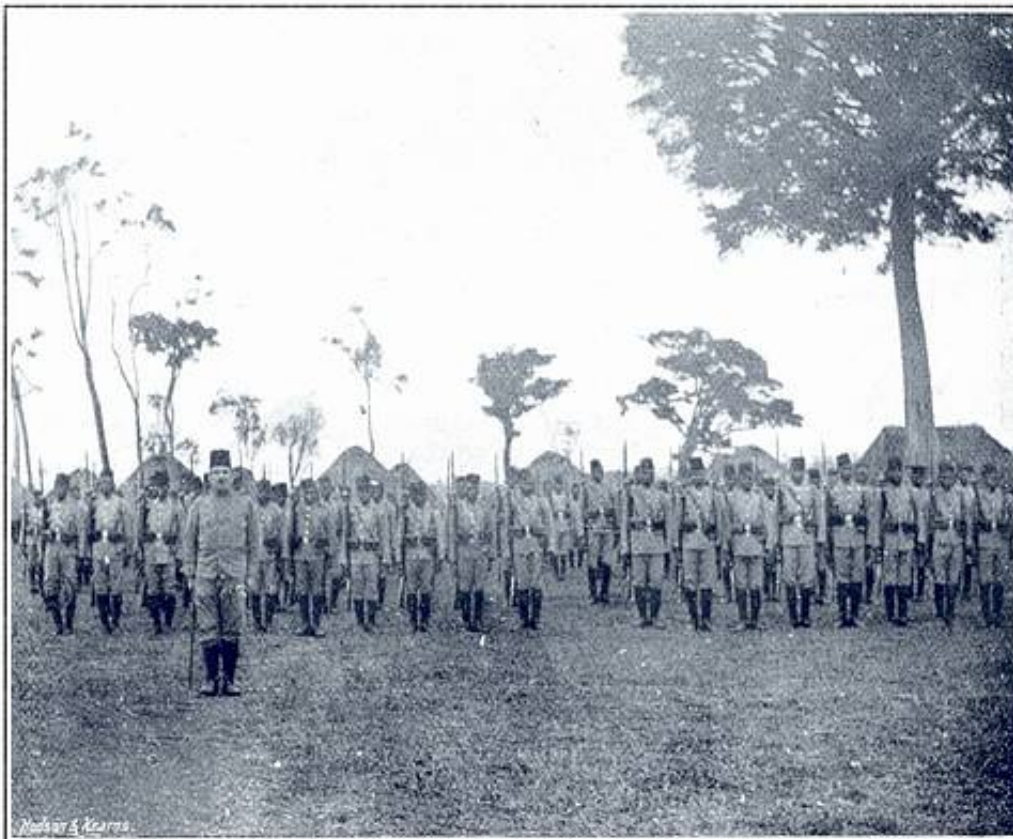
SUDANESE TRANSPORT.

Two Women, Part of a Sergeant's Household. On the March the Women Carry their Husbands' Loads, and in many cases a Baby as well. Strapped on Behind.



AN OFFICER AND HIS PETS.

*Baby Cheeiah Fed from the Bottle. The One Awaiting his Turn is Chewing
Rhinceros Hide as an Appetizer*

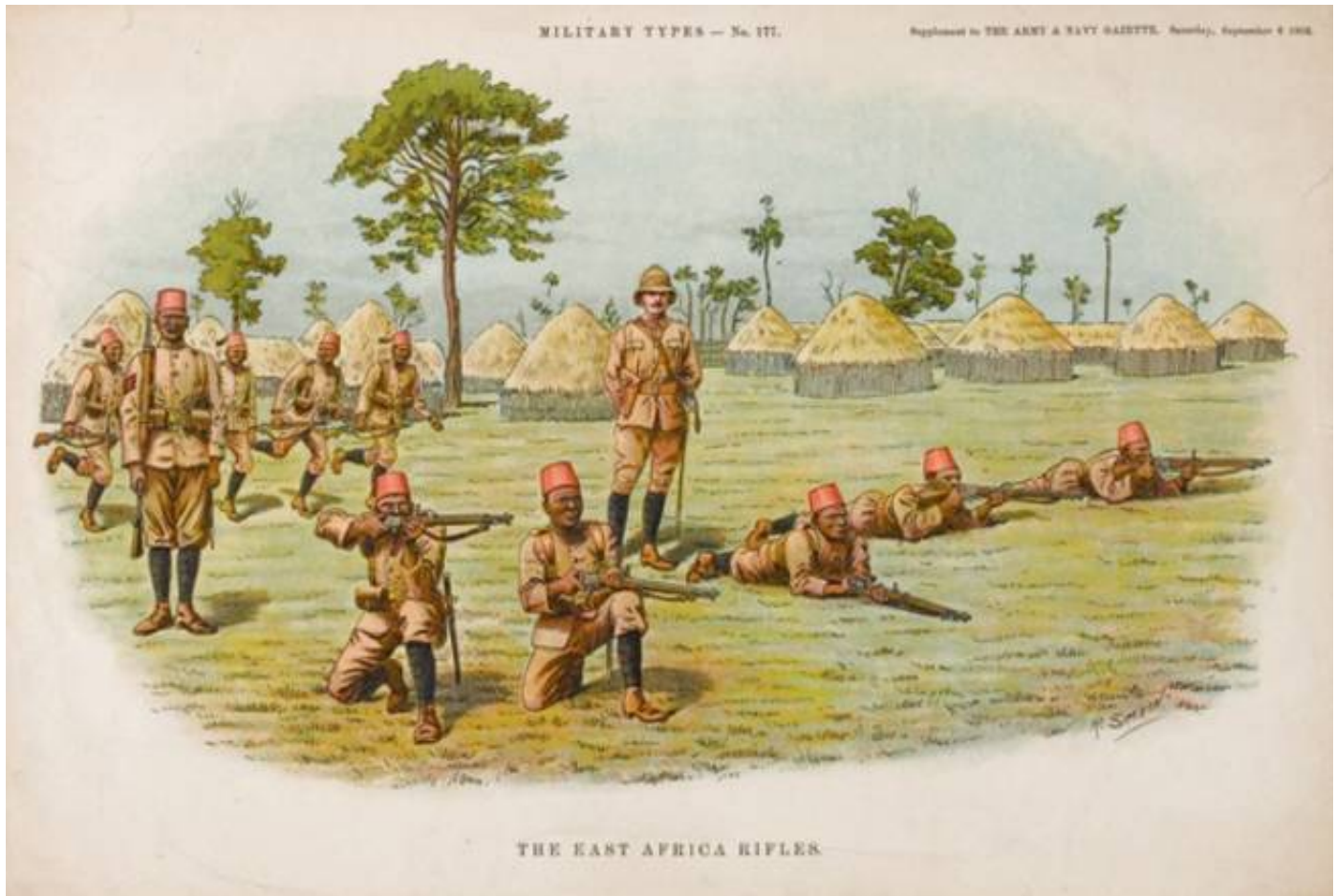


SWAHILI COMPANY—EAST AFRICAN RIFLES.

*These Men are Recruited in East Africa on the Littoral. The Photographs here Reproduced
were Taken at Fort Smith, in the Kitnuga District. The Fort was Built in 1891 by Major
Eric Smith, who is now in South Africa in Command of Imperial Yeomanry.*

The article concludes with the statement, that the photos were taken by a Military Officer, especially for Navy and Army Illustrated.

The East African Rifles



Military Types - No. 177: The East African Rifles, published in ARMY & NAVY GAZETTE, September 6, 1902.

This version of the Simkin plate derives from Source 2, which gives the National Army Museum Collections (3209) as the reference.

Referring to the above Navy and Army Illustrated photos, in it is perhaps anybody's guess whether Askaris drawn by Simkin are Sudanese [2](#) or Swahilis, but at least the khaki uniforms in the Simkin plate are a close match to the Swahilis shown in the Swahili Company photo.

Troops in British East Africa

A short version of the history of the East African Rifles is found in Charles Hordern's *Military Operations East Africa, Volume I, August 1914 - September 1916* (Source 4):

"Between 1888 and 1895 the local forces of the Imperial British East Africa Company, consisted of Zanzibaris, Sudanese, Swahilis and Somalis, fluctuated in numbers between 200 and 1,000 men. They were organized and trained, so far as circumstances permitted, under British Army officers placed at the Company's disposal. A part of these forces accompanied Lugard [3](#) to Uganda in 1890 and rendered useful service in the operations of the two following years.

In 1895 on the transfer of the Company's territory to the Government of the United Kingdom, the best men, including 250 of Selim Bey's troops [4](#), were formed into a new force designated the East African Rifles. A contingent of 300 men raised in India brought the total strength to 4 British officers and about 1,000 men. Detachments of this force cooperated usefully with Indian troops in suppressing Mbaruk's rebellion of 1895-6 [5](#), and the Uganda mutiny of 1897-8, and on two later occasions served against the Ogaden Somalis [6](#).

After the Uganda mutiny the East African Rifles were re-organized into five companies of Sudanese and three of Swahilis, with an establishment of 19 British officers and 880 men. In 1900 the Indian contingent, then 560 strong, returned to India, and an additional company of Swahilis were enrolled in its place. In 1901 the Sudanese companies were reduced to four, with an increased establishment, and furnished a camel corps of 100 men for services in Jubaland. The total strength in 1901 was 1,080.



Badge of 3rd King's African Rifles.

Own design, based on
Armies in East Africa by Peter Abbott,
Men-at-Arms No. 379,
Osprey Publishing,
London 2002,
ISBN 1-84176-489-2.

On 1 January 1902 the East African Rifles was incorporated into the King's African Rifles as the 3rd Battalion - 3rd King's African Rifles - consisting of 7 companies and 1 camel company."

A Roman III was used in the badge before the First World War, but was later substituted by a Hindu-Arabic 3, on red background.

Based on the date of publication of the Simkin plate, the illustration may have been made before 1 January 1902 when the King's African Rifles were formed, thus giving the assumed date - c.1900 - used in the title of this article.

Uniforms of the East African Rifles

To supplement the Simkin illustration, the following information on the uniforms of the East African Rifles is found in H. Moyses-Bartlett's history of the King's African Rifles (Source 5):

"The forces that Lieutenant Lloyd Mathews, Royal Navy, began to raise in 1877 were the first body of native troops in East Africa to be trained on European lines. The uniform designated for it consisted of a blue jacket and trousers for native officers and a black jacket, short white trousers and a red fez for the men.

The 200 volunteers from the Zanzibar Army who accompanied Portal to Uganda in 1893 were dressed for their long safari in khaki tunics, knickerbockers puttees and sandals. By 1894 khaki drill had become the normal uniform at Zanzibar for everyday use, white being reserved for guard duty and "baraza day", when the troops formed a guard of honour for the Sultan.

The Imperial British East Africa Company does not appear to have evolved any formal "uniforms" for its troops. Ternan, on his way to Uganda early in 1895, described the garrison of Fort Smith as "a motley crowd of Swahilis without uniform of any kind", with a band consisting of a drum and a penny whistle. But the khaki blouse or tunic, knickerbockers and puttees, which was the usual type of clothing for campaigning, fatigue or undress wear, became customary for issue to askaris when obtainable, and this general pattern was followed by the East Africa Regiment."

Sources

1. *We Were There* published by Directorate General Media and Communication, Ministry of Defence, 2006.
2. *We Were There, Pre-1914, Africa* (UK Ministry of Defence).
3. *In British East Africa - With The East African Rifles*, *The Navy and Army Illustrated*, 13 October 1900. (Page 96)
4. *History of the Great War, Military Operations East Africa, Volume I, August 1914 - September 1916* by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Hordern, HMSO, London 1941. Reprinted in 1990 by Battery Press and Imperial War Museum. (Page 550.)
5. *The King's African Rifles. A Study in the Military History of East and Central Africa, 1890-1945* by Lieutenant-Colonel H. Moyses-Bartlett, Gale & Polden Ltd, Aldershot 1956. (Page 690.)

In conclusion

I would like to express my thanks to Timothy Lovering for his kind assistance in pointing me in the direction of the East African Rifles and the Navy and Army Illustrated article.

Per Finsted

Notes:

- 1) The London event leaflet is available as a PDF file at the Veterans Day website. This event is rather new, actually the first ever, and to quote the website: "Veterans Day is both a celebration of the contribution made by all those who have served in the Armed Forces, and a means of raising public awareness of veterans' issues."
- 2) *Soudanese*, is an older type of spelling for Sudanese.
- 3) Refer to Frederick Lugard (1858-1945) (Wikipedia) for information on this famous soldier, explorer and colonial administrator.
- 4) Refer to Uganda, Military History, Early Developments (Uganda Country Study by Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress).
- 5) For information on the Mbaruk rebellion, see *The Mwele Campaign 1895-1896* by Kevin Patience (Naval Historical Collectors & Research Association). In Source 4, the name of the rebellious Mbaruk bin Rashid is spelled *Mubarak*.
- 6) These actions took place in the Jubaland Province of the British East Africa Protectorate in 1898 and 1901; Jubaland was transferred to Italy in 1925 and became a part of Somalia 1960. See Jubaland (Wikipedia) for the history of Jubaland.