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# The Mules are Splendid Company: One Man's Experience of WWI Africa

Sally Wilson

Ryerson University, [swilson@ryerson.ca](mailto:swilson@ryerson.ca)

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The Mules are Splendid Company

# The Mules are Splendid Company

One Man's Experience in WWI Africa

Sally Wilson

Ryerson University  
Toronto

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## Before the War

Thomas Wilson was born on February 5, 1880 to Thomas Wilson and Mary Scott Wilson (nee Greive) at Roberton near Hawick in the Scottish Borders.

His father, Thomas Wilson, was schoolmaster at Roberton, a position he held for over 50 years. He married Mary Scott Greive on December 29, 1875 at the parish church in Ashkirk, several miles north of Hawick. They had five children: James (Jim), Margaret, Thomas, Christina (Chrissie) who was a schoolteacher for many years at Ashkirk, and George, a doctor who practiced medicine in Redditch, England.

Thomas spent his childhood at the School House in Roberton. After leaving school he became a civil engineer and an Associate Member of the Institution of Civil Engineers (A.M.I.C.E). He worked as a civil engineer in Carlisle, England, in Glasgow and latterly in Malaya where he was working when war was declared in 1914.

## 2 The Mules are Splendid Company



*Wilson Family c1897/1898 Back row: George, James (Jim), Thomas, Thomas (father) Front row: Christina (Chrissie), Mary (mother), Margaret*



*Wilson Family and Friends on an Outing Back row: Jim Wilson (left), George Wilson (centre) Centre row: Chrissie Wilson Front row: Tom Wilson (centre)*

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## Rugby Incident



*Photo of Thomas Wilson taken while he was working in Carlisle, c1907.*

Thomas was a keen sportsman as were many of his contemporaries. Three of his Greive cousins played cricket for Scotland. William played for the national team against Ireland in 1910; Walter made two appearances for Scotland between 1912 and 1914; and John played for Scotland several times and, in 1920, he set up a record in Border cricket by scoring 1,011 runs, including three of his 30 centuries.

Thomas's game of choice was rugby, a game that he also played at the national level. He played amateur rugby for several rugby clubs including Clydesdale (in Glasgow), Hawick and Carlisle, England. When, in late 1907, an Anglo-Welsh team was proposed to travel to New Zealand for a tour in May of 1908, his interest was piqued. Although Scottish by birth, Wilson had played for Carlisle's rugby team for several years while he was employed as a civil engineer in that town. This made him eligible to play for the English team destined for New Zealand.

In late 1907 he accepted an engineering position in Glasgow and joined the Clydesdale team. This put him in a difficult position with regard to the proposed tour of New Zealand. The Scottish Union

did not support colonial tours as they believed that they negatively impacted the amateur status of the players. With tours of this nature, teams were in a position to profit from the games' ticket sales. The Scottish union had hosted games with touring New Zealand and South African teams in the past, but while the NZ and SA teams had profited from the games, the Scottish teams had not. The Scottish Union was in a position to maintain its amateur status while the games were played on Scottish soil, something that was harder to do overseas.

Wilson wrote to the Scottish Union in December 1907 to inquire about playing on the Anglo-English touring team. In a second letter on December 23 he wrote:

*"I was under the impression that the Scottish Union were in favour of the proposed New Zealand tour, and my letter of the 19th inst. was merely an intimation that I had sent in my name to the secretary. I shall certainly not go to New Zealand without permission from the union, and I shall be glad to know whether I have their sanction to accept an invitation or not."* <sup>1</sup>.

In reply the secretary of the Scottish Union, Mr. Smith, wrote:

*"I have to thank you for yours of yesterday, which makes matters quite clear. I may say at once that the committee will not grant permission to any of their players to go with the proposed team to New Zealand and in that connection the past paragraph of your letter is very satisfactory indeed"* <sup>2</sup>.

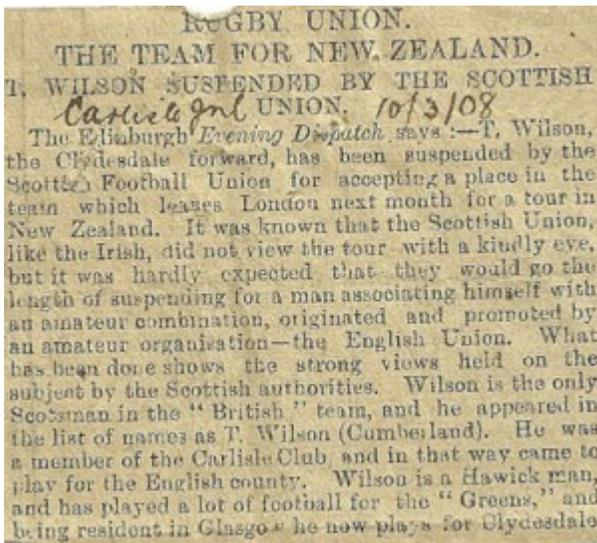
Subsequently Thomas resigned from the Clydesdale club in order to play with Carlisle. When the list of the names of the players going on the New Zealand tour was published, T. Wilson was included on the list. The inclusion of his name on this list led to his suspension from the Scottish Football Union.

Although there is no law in sports indicating that one union must honour the other's suspensions, the unions generally acknowledged

them. Consequently the Emergency Committee of the English Union also provisionally suspended him. This action by the English Union was subsequently revoked as the suspension by the Scottish Union was not for rough play, misbehaviour or breach of professional law.

This meant that Wilson could play for England but he would not be allowed to play football in Scotland in future unless the Scottish suspension was also dropped.

Although the English Union removed its suspension from Wilson, he did not make the tour of New Zealand.



Article from the Carlisle Journal, March 10, 1908.

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## WWI in Africa

At the turn of the 20th century, Africa was an important continent for many European powers with colonial possessions. When war broke out in August 1914, Belgium, Portugal, Great Britain and Germany all had significant interest in Africa that they wished to protect. Initially war in Africa seemed unlikely as the 1885 Berlin Act excluded the colonies of the Congo Basin from “universal war” and neither Germany nor Britain had significant troops in their colonies.

## 8 The Mules are Splendid Company



### *Colonial Africa, 1914*

Conditions in Africa were harsh; either the heat was scorching and there was no water or there were torrential rains that rendered movement impossible. Even under good conditions advances were difficult due to the lack of railway lines and roads. Huge numbers of African porters were needed to transport military equipment and supplies. Rations were meagre, disease was rampant and the wildlife dangerous.

At the outset of the war Britain and Germany had a similar number of troops in Africa. The majority of the troops were native Africans with some European officers. Britain had 17 companies of the [King's African Rifles](#) (KAR) comprising approximately 2,400 officers and [askari](#) (native soldiers) while Germany had 216 officers and 2,540

askari<sup>3</sup>. As the war progressed Britain brought in troops from India and South Africa considerably enhancing their forces. Although vastly outnumbered, Colonel Paul Emile von Lettow-Vorbeck, the leader of the German forces, was able to fight defiantly and did not capitulate until after the Armistice was declared.

Although the war in Africa was often viewed as a sideshow to the action in Europe, the loss of life was significant. Approximately 9% of the serving troops, about 11,000, perished in Africa, two-thirds from disease; however, this pales in comparison to the death toll suffered by the African porters. Estimates put this number at close to 95,000.<sup>4</sup>



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## Thomas Wilson's War

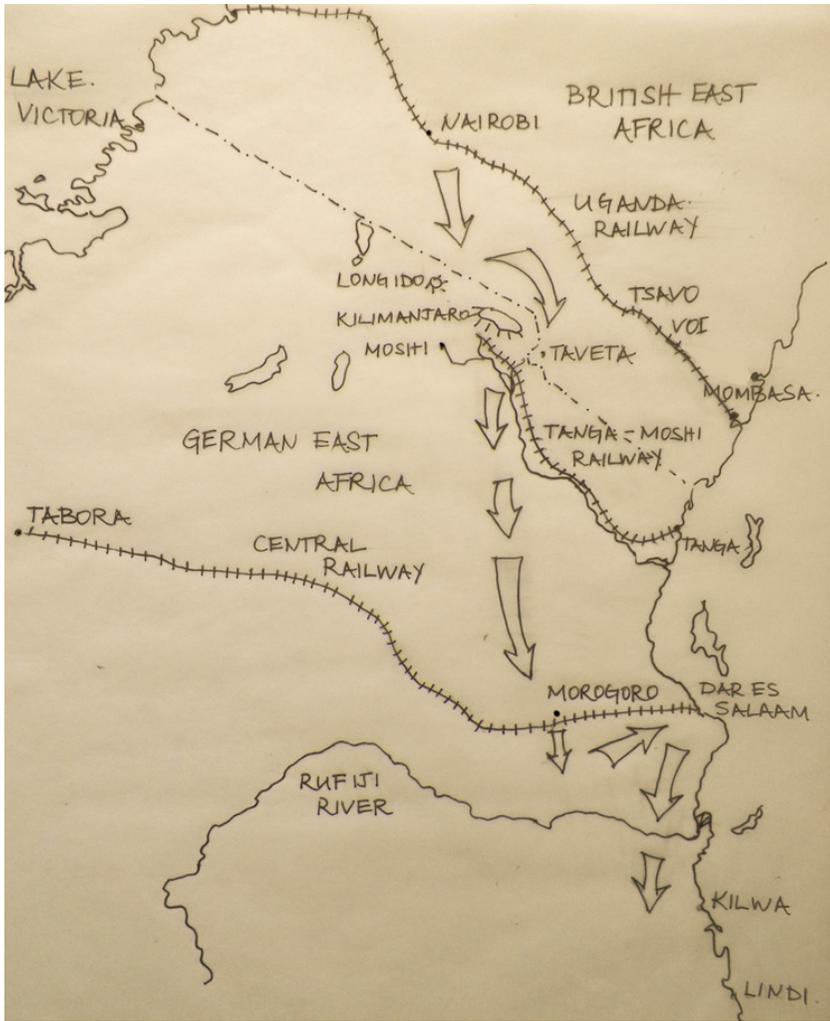
In 1914, Thomas was working in Malaya as a civil engineer. At the outbreak of the war he returned to Scotland and enlisted. Perhaps because of his experience working in a tropical climate he was selected to serve in British East Africa. He enlisted in May 1915 and arrived in Mombasa, British East Africa in June of 1915.

He was initially a Lieutenant in the King's African Rifles. At the outbreak of the war, the King's African Rifles (KAR) was a three-battalion regiment consisting of a small number of British officers and approximately 2,300 Africans from various British colonial territories. While posted with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion King's African Rifles (3/KAR) Thomas saw action in several battles. His actions in the battle of Longido West on September 20, 1915 resulted in his being awarded the Military Cross. He was transferred to the Royal Engineers in the spring of 1916 as a Lieutenant and latterly acted as Captain while Lieutenant Colonel A.A. McHarg was on extended leave in 1917. In addition to being awarded the Military Cross, Thomas was twice mentioned in despatches by his commanders: on May 8, 1916 by Lieutenant General Jan Smuts and on October 11, 1917 by Lieutenant General Jakobus van Deventer.



*Thomas Wilson in Military Uniform*

Thomas Wilson wrote a series of letters from East Africa while he was serving with the King's African Rifles and later with the Royal Engineers. Eight of these letters remain and are transcribed here. He started his African posting in [Nairobi](#) and eventually travelled as far south as Kilwa Kivinje, which is just south of Dar es Salaam. His letters are presented and transcribed here and are interspersed with accounts of the major actions in which he took part.



*Thomas Wilson's route through British East and German East Africa while serving with 3/KAR and the Royal Engineers*

June 26, 1915

2<sup>d</sup> Battalion  
King's African Rifles  
Nairobi British East Africa  
24/6/15

Dear Father

We arrived Kenia town after a very uneventful journey on the Murch boat. There was a good number of passengers on board including Lady Crowworth & a miscell lot of English French & Belgians. The heat in the Red Sea was terrific, but it is very cold here I never imagined it could have been so cold in a tropical country. Nairobi is 5000 feet above sea level & you have to wear a thick shirt & flannel it seems to be a fine country for agriculture purposes see the vegetables that grow on some farms quite well but judging by the way everything is done from the East to the settlers there seem to be very little money in the country. There are large stretches of open land & so far I have seen none of the thick jungle with which the whole of the area is covered. What jungle there is I have seen

June 26, 1915 15

3rd Battalion  
Kings African Rifles  
Nairobi, British East Africa  
26/6/15

Dear Father,

We arrived here last week after a very uneventful journey on the French boat. There was a good number of passengers on board including Lady Cranworth and a miscellaneous lot of English, French and Belgians. The heat in the Red Sea was terrific, but it is very cold here. I never imagined it could have been so cold in a tropical country. Nairobi is 5000 feet above sea level & you have to wear a thick shirt & flannel. It seems to be a fine country for agricultural purposes and the vegetables that grow at home thrive quite well but judging by the way everything is done from the Govt to the settlers there seems to be very little money in the country. There are large stretches of open land & so far I have seen none of the thick jungle with which the whole of Malaya is covered. What jungle there is I have seen is very small scrub. We saw large herds of some sort of game coming up in the train. We all had to report here which is the headquarters of the 3rd battalion & also of the General staff. We were then distributed amongst the various battalions. Two of them were sent out fighting straight away and I hear that the force they went with has had a great success up on the lakes. I have to go over & join my Company next week with the 3rd Bat. The service dress is shorts, puttees and tunic but the regular officers have been originals in the Indian Army & transferred here. They are a very swank crowd. The Indian troops here have been a failure & they are only using them now for patrol work. They are what they call Imperial Service Troops provided by the rulers of the nation states in India. According to all accounts they seem to bolt immediately they come under fire. I will have to get this posted at once or it will not go for another month. I am writing it in my tent.

Yours Aye,

Tom

to very small scrub. We saw large  
 herds of all sorts of game coming up  
 in the train. We are glad to report  
 here which is the headquarters of the 3<sup>rd</sup>  
 Battalion & also of the General Staff. We  
 were then distributed amongst the various  
 battalions two of them were sent on  
 fighting strength away & I hear that the  
 force they were with has had a great  
 success up on the lakes. I have to  
 go on & join my Company next  
 week with the 3<sup>rd</sup> bat. Our service dress  
 is in shorts puttees & tunics. All the  
 regular officers have been organized in the  
 Indian Army & transferred here; there are  
 a very weak crowd. The Indian troops here  
 have been a failure & there are over many  
 them now for patrol work. There are what  
 they call Imperial Service troops provided  
 by the rulers of the native states in India.  
 According to all accounts they seem to be  
 emmerated they come under fire. I will leave  
 to you this paper as once it will not go for  
 another month. I am with it in my tent.

Yours  
 Tom

July 9, 1915

3<sup>d</sup> KAR  
Nairobi  
British East Africa  
9/7/15

Dear Father,

I am still in Nairobi & it looks as if I were going to be here some time as the Coy I am to join is coming to base-quarters. but I don't expect they will be here long as they keep shifting them about all over the place. I am at present doing machine gun training as there is one machine gun officer for each Coy. I shall be glad when I get away from here as there is too much formalities & expense about the place considering that it is war time.

We have got to put on muffs after coming off parade in the afternoon as we are not allowed to appear in uniform in the town when off duty. & then we have to change again for dinner.

They have a great night with the band in attendance. We get five rations when out on safari as the case is & a ration allowance when staying at base-quarters.

3d KAR  
Nairobi  
British East Africa  
9/7/15

Dear Father,

I am still in Nairobi & it looks as if I were going to be here sometime as the Coy I have to join is coming to head-quarters, but I don't expect they will be here long as they keep shifting them about all over the place. I am at present doing machine gun training as there is one machine gun officer for each Coy. I shall be glad when I get away from here as there is too much formality & expense about the place considering that it is war- time. We have got to put on mufti after coming off parade in the afternoon as we are not allowed to appear in uniform in the town when off-duty & then we have to change again for dinner. They have a guest night every Thursday when they dine in great state with the band in attendance. We get free rations when out on safari as they call it & a ration allowance when staying at headquarters which only amounts to about one third of your mess bill. We have got no pay yet as they have got no information from you how we are being paid. I arranged before I came away to get half my salary paid into Cox's bank & the other half over here it will be pretty tight work to make the half go the full length out here if I have to stay at headquarters long, the actual food does not amount to so very much 3 ½ rupees per day but there are so many extra things that you have got to stump up for which runs the thing up very considerably. When on safari they have no expenses at all.

The war at home does not seem to be improving much & it looks as if there would be another winter of it. If I go out on safari soon it will be some time before I can get the chance to write again & there is sometime no mail boat for a month at a time.

Yours Aye,

Tom

July 9, 1915 19

which may amount to about one third of  
your gross bill. We have got no plan  
yet - as then have got no information from  
you how we are being paid. I arranged  
before I came away to get half my  
salary paid into Co's bank & the  
other half on here it will be pretty  
tough work to make the cash go the full  
length on. Even if I have to start an-  
half-quarters long, the actual food does not  
amount to so very much \$2 per day  
but there are so many extra things that  
you have got to stump up for which runs  
the thing up very considerably. On a  
safari then have no expenses at all.

The war in Europe does not seem to be improving  
much & it looks as if there would be another  
winter of it. If I go out on safari soon it  
will be some time before I can get the  
chance to write again & there is sometimes  
no mail boat for a month at a time.

Yours,

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## Battle of Longido West

Longido Mountain is located to the north-west of Kilimanjaro just inside German East Africa (present-day Tanzania). Several skirmishes had been fought at this location with the British taking control of the area in November 1914. In August 1915, the Germans had returned to the area and taken over the abandoned camp and started to show signs of activity.

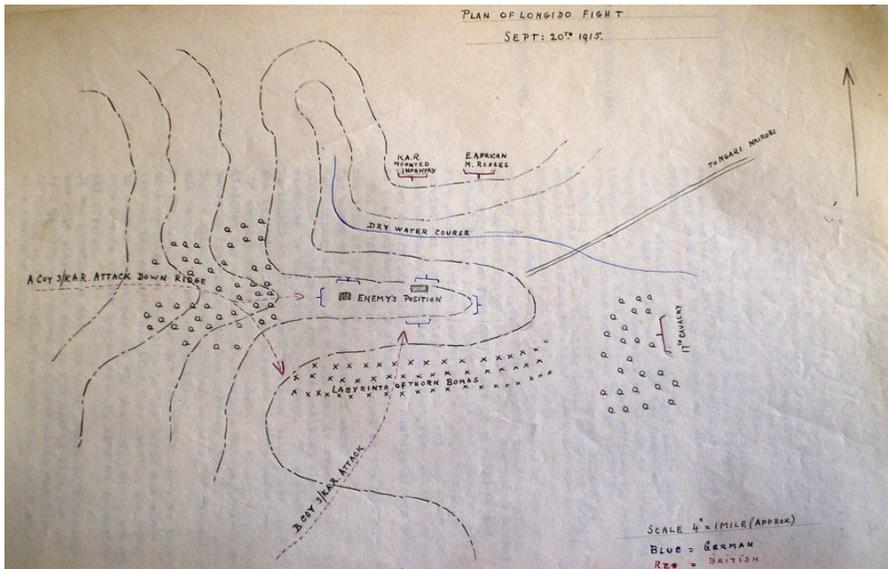
Because British troops in the area were sparse, Companies A and B of the 3rd Battalion of the King's African Rifles were sent to Bissil, some miles north of Longido in British East Africa, to strengthen the troops there. Thomas Wilson had recently joined B Company of 3/KAR in Nairobi and was with them when they arrived in Bissil on August 26th. The two companies of 3/KAR remained in Bissil with the [East African Mounted Rifles](#) (E.A.M.R), the 17th Cavalry and Mounted Rifles of 3/KAR until September 16 when they moved out to West Orok under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Jollie in preparation for an attack on Longido on September 20.

During the two days the troops were readying in West Orok, E.A.M.R. scouts were sent on a reconnaissance mission to observe the enemy. The German camp was well-hidden among the rocks and was well-defended, so little useful information was gleaned as to the strength of the enemy's position.

The plan was to launch a surprise attack at dawn on the morning of September 20. A Company of 3/KAR was to get in position above the enemy on Longido Mountain before first light when they would proceed with a silent bayonet attack. B Company was to take up position below the enemy and were to advance up the ridge when Company A started the attack. Even if A Company was not able to reach their position by dawn, B Company was instructed to attack.

The E.A.M.R. and K.A.R. Mounted Infantry (K.A.R.M.I.) were to

position themselves on a ridge to the north overlooking the enemy's position. The idea was that the enemy, surrounded on three sides, would have to retreat in the only direction left open to them and into the arms of the 17th Cavalry who were to be awaiting on the plain.



*Plan of Longido Front, September 20, 1915 The National Archives of the UK: ref. WO 106/273*

All did not go according to plan. A Company of KAR was not able to reach their position by dawn. B Company proceeded alone, but quickly became entangled in thorn **bomas** that had been erected as defence by British troops that had previously occupied the area. This resulted in splitting B Company into several smaller groups. The noise made by these men attempting to communicate with one another alerted the Germans of the attack. As B Company crested the ridge they were met by heavy fire from the Germans and, unfortunately, from the E.A.M.R. and K.A.R.M.I. on the opposite ridge. Meanwhile, A Company eventually reached their position and descended upon the enemy; however, while descending, they split into two groups. One group succeeded in reaching its objective, but the other descended into B Company.

The situation got worse as casualties started to mount and communication was difficult. Meanwhile, the 17th Cavalry who were to cut off the retreating Germans inadvertently advertised their position by sending up large clouds of dust as they moved about on the plain. This alerted the Germans to the dangers of retreat in that direction.

Little progress was made and the mounted troops retired at 11 am. An hour later 3/KAR was sent the order to retire, but by then they had suffered 41 casualties. Although the attack did not achieve its initial objective, the Germans did evacuate Longido that night.



*Stretcher-bearers of 3/KAR at Longido.*

The official record of the actions of 3/KAR makes note of Thomas Wilson's contribution to this battle:

Lieut. T. Wilson, who was in command of the machine gun detachment, did excellent work in this action and was awarded the Military Cross for his gallant conduct in mending his machine gun, which had been put out of action, under heavy fire.<sup>5</sup>

January 17, 1916

3<sup>d</sup> King's African Rifles  
Beitrah East Africa  
17<sup>th</sup> Jan 1916

Dear Father

It is now sometime since I had news of any sort from home & what we see in the telegrams is not too good & I expect we won't get the troops on here we were expecting now. We are having a very jumpier time at present - trying to keep the Germans off the railway, till the South Africans get up. They always pick out the places where the bush is so thick that it is hopeless trying to go after them, & always the danger of being hit like an ambush. I am attached to what they call a flying column supposed to be ready to take the road with 20 miles of receiving notice to be nearly always in the middle of the night or the early hours of the morning that we get turned out, & if we are ordered to take one day's rations we are generally on - for three days, so if we go on with three days' rations it is just before we get back. The South Africans are starting to come up now & it will be a relief to everybody when they are got through. Gen Smith-Dorrien is also expected to arrive shortly. We were out & made a reconnaissance in force against one of the German positions but it was decided

January 17, 1916 25

3d King's African Rifles  
British East Africa  
17th Jan 1916

Dear Father,

It is now some time since I had news of any sort from home & what we see in the telegrams is not too good & I expect we won't get the troops over here we were expecting now. We are having a very jumpy time at present – trying to keep the Germans off the railway that the South Africans got-up. They always pick out the places where the bush is so thick that it is hopeless trying to go after them & always the danger of being led into an ambush. I am attached to what they call a flying column supposed to be ready to take the road within 20 mins. of receiving notice. It is nearly always in the middle of the night or the early hours of the morning that we get turned out & if we are ordered to take one days rations we are generally out for three days, so if we go out with three days rations it is six days before we get back. The South Africans are starting to come up now & it will be a relief to everybody when they all get through. Gen. Smith-Dorrien is also expected to arrive shortly. We went out & made a reconnaissance in form against one of the German positions but it was decided that it was too strong to attack so we came back again. We were sent out a few days later to attack a German force which had just arrived at a certain place & had not had time to consolidate, it was about 4.30 pm before we got in touch with them & we had to withdraw at dark. By the next morning the whole of the Germans had vanished. They always do that if they find they are up against a superior force simply scatter in the bush & re-assemble somewhere else. I see the *King Edward* has been sunk in the North Sea, but there does not seem to be so many air raids now. They have got one or two aeroplanes out here but they have great difficulty in flying. They complain about pockets in the atmosphere and other atmospheric troubles. Has Joe Brunton ever turned up yet?

The Germans do not seem to bother about many prisoners even now-a-days & I expect we will be doing the same. We are at present in the hottest part of the country & it is pretty trying when we have to do much marching.

Yours Aye,

Tom

that it was too strong to attack. so we came back again. we were sent on a few days later to attack a German force which had just arrived at a certain place & had not been time to consolidate, it was about 4.30 p.m. before we got in touch with them. & we had to withdraw at dark. By the next morning the whole of the Germans had vanished, they always do that if they find they are up against a superior force simply scatter in the bush & reassemble somewhere else. I see the King Edward has been sunk in the North Sea, but there does not seem to be so many air raid notes. They have got one or two biplanes on their line but they have great difficulty in flying. They complain about fumes in the atmosphere & other atmospheric troubles.

Has Joe Bonston ever turned up yet? The Germans do not seem to bother about many prisoners now-a-days. & I expect we will be doing the same. We are at present in the hottest part of the country & it is pretty trying when we have to do much marching.

Yours  
Tom

February 28, 1916

British East Africa.  
28<sup>th</sup> Feb 1916

Dear Father.

I get about 6 weeks mail altogether the other day but then no sign of the Cameroon or the Xmas gift yet. They will probably arrive in time for Xmas. It is very difficult to get anything where we are now as we are in the advanced zone 20 miles from the base (Wakhan) so we are at present living on our rations (very meagre ration as that) & using as little soap as possible. We are part of the 1<sup>st</sup> East African Brigade which consists of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rhodesians, North Tanks, 130<sup>th</sup> Beluchis & 3<sup>rd</sup> KAR. The South Africans have not come up to expectation so far & have all been withdrawn to somewhere in the rear for two or three months training so that there is not much chance of an early finish to the war out here. I expect if I am you details they would out-pass the Camero, but I should say the prestige of white men amongst the natives as here just now is about nil. The warfare we have to gradually evolves into trench warfare like in British East Africa in German East go to <sup>(according to the papers)</sup> supported at home. South African turned in & resigned in the Cape, & Gen Smuts

British East Africa  
28th Feb 1916

Dear Father,

I got about 6 weeks mail altogether the other day but there is no sign of the camera or the Xmas gift yet. They will probably arrive in time for next Xmas. It is very difficult to get anything where we are now as we are in the advanced post 20 miles from the base (Maktau) so we are at present living on our rations (very meagre rations at that) & using as little soap as possible. We are part of the 1st East African Brigade which consists of the 2nd Rhodesians, North Lancs, 130th Baluchis & 3rd K.A.R. The South Africans have not come up to expectations so far & have all been withdrawn to somewhere in the rear for two or three months training so that there is not much chance of an early finish to the war out here. I expect if I gave you details they would not pass the censor, but I should say the prestige of white men amongst the natives just now is about nil. The warfare out here is gradually evolving into trench warfare still in British East & not in German East as is supposed at home (according to the papers). **Smith-Dorrien** turned in and resigned at the Cape, & Gen. **Smuts** has come up to take his place. We had to go out when he arrived here & form a scrum in front of the German position while he climbed up a tree & had a look at the place, but I suppose the only remark he made was that "it was a very hazy day". It is going to be pretty bad here when the rains start. There was a thunderstorm the other night accompanied by a terrific downpour of rain & everything was swimming in water in no time. We had 48 mules in a dugout & had to go out & rescue them at 2 am as they were then up to their necks in water. I do not suppose there will be much done now til after the rains as they are due very soon. We have got one or two aeroplanes & a lot of armoured cars. There were 12 new aeroplanes arrived from home with the wrong propellors which would not fit. These sort of things are pretty common out here & I expect it will be just as bad

at home. We were handed over 24 Max Gun mules the other [day] (as teams for 4 new guns) without bridles or saddles. We refused to take over the mules at first but were ordered to do so as they had been allocated to us but as there were no saddles or bridles available in the country it would be about 6 months before they arrived, meanwhile the mules are splendid company. It is no wonder that you see some people praising the marvelous organisation of the British Army. We do not get much time to ourselves out here as when we are not digging trenches we are out on patrol or some other duty. I hear from the Colonel that I have to be awarded a Military Cross for Longido last September. I expect by the time this reaches you that it will be time for getting in the garden again.

Yours Aye,

Tom

**Serengeti** 28/ 2/16

has come up to take Luis' place. We had  
 to go out when he arrived here to form a  
 screen, in front of the German position where he  
 climbed up a tree & had a look at the place,  
 but I suppose the only remark he made was  
 that it was a very large day. It began to  
 be pretty bad here when the rain started.  
 There was a thunder storm the other night  
 accompanied by a terrific downpour of rain &  
 everything was swimming in water in no time.  
 We had 48 mules in a dug out & had to go  
 out to rescue them at 2 a.m.; as they were then  
 up to their necks in water. I do not suppose there  
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 biplanes, & a lot of armored cars. There were  
 12 new airplanes ordered from Lima with the wrong  
 propellers which would not fit. These sort of things are  
 pretty common out here & I suspect it will be just as  
 bad at home. We were handed over 24 Mule teams  
 the other (as teams for 4 new guns) without bridle or  
 saddles. We refused to take over the mules at first - but  
 were forced to do so, so they had been accepted to us,  
 but as there were no saddles or bridles available in  
 the country it would be about 6 months before they  
 arrived, meanwhile the mules are splendid company.

It is no wonder that you see some people  
 praise the marvelous organization of the British  
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 at home as when we are not digging trenches  
 we are out on patrol or some other duty.  
 I hear from the Colonel that I have to  
 be awarded a Military Cross for long and  
 less September. I expect by the time this  
 reaches you that it will be time for getting  
 in the garden again.

Siruguti 28/76

Yours  
 J. H. H.

W. H. H.

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## Reata-Latema Nek



Thomas Wilson also participated in the battle that occurred in March 1916 in the Latema-Reata Nek area south-east of Mount Kilimanjaro

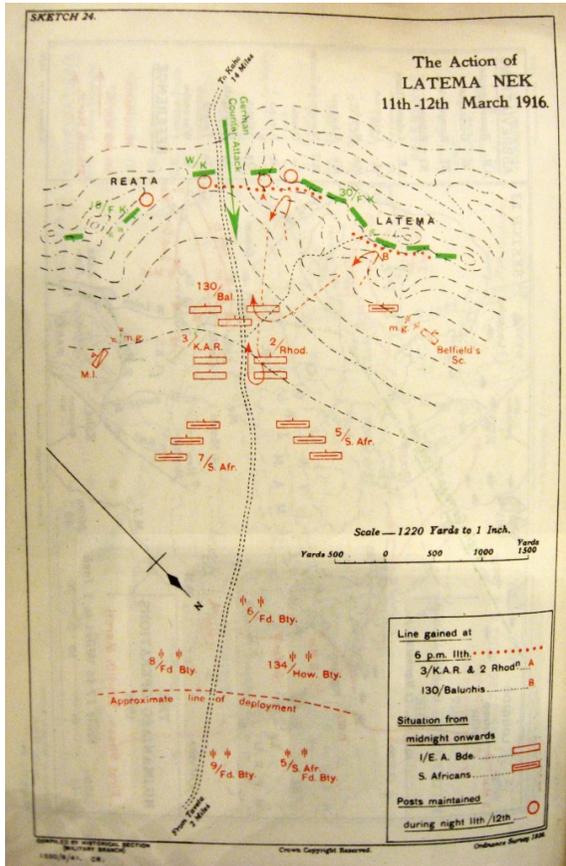
After the British suffered defeats on many fronts in 1914 and 1915, General Jan Smuts was brought in to reverse a floundering campaign. Smuts was a South African who had fought against the British in the Boer Wars, but since then had concluded that allegiance to Great Britain was in the best interests of his country. He arrived in Mombassa in February 1916 with a large number of South African troops and immediately set about touring the Longido-Taveta front to survey the situation and to determine how best to rid the area of the enemy. The area is mountainous and one of the few routes available for pushing into German East Africa lay between the Latema and Reata hills. It was imperative that this area be taken prior to the imminent arrival of the rains as they would render further movement impossible.

The forces were ready for action on March 4. Smuts's plan of attack involved troops converging in the Taveta region from several directions. The 1st Division commanded by Major-General Stewart was to march south from Longido to cut off the enemy's line of communication and to be in position to route the retreating Germans. Stewart started advancing on March 5 and on the first day covered 33 miles of waterless ground, primarily at night. After this initial

rapid advance, further movement was hampered due to dense scrub and limited knowledge of the position of the enemy. By March 10, the density of the bush led Stewart to decide to proceed with his dismounted units as terrain was too difficult for the horses. The vanguard proceeded to the Sanya River.

From the East, the South African Mounted Brigade and the 3rd South African Infantry under Colonel J. van Deventer moved to seize the Chala Heights while **Major-General M.J. Tighe** was tasked with moving against Salaita Hill which he did with tremendous artillery fire. On March 9 when his troops ascended the hill, they found it deserted. Unfortunately the German retreat had not been intercepted.

On March 11 Lieut-General Smuts decided that a frontal attack on the German positions at Latema-Reata should commence. The troops used for this attack were approximately 1,500 men from Brigadier-General Malleison's 1st East African Brigade: 130th Baluchis, 2/Rhodesia Regiment and 3/KAR. Reconnaissance made during the morning of the 11th did little to inform the units of the enemy's defenses that were concealed along the crests of the two hills. <sup>6</sup>.



*Action of Latema Nek 11-12 March, 1916*

3/KAR and the 130th Baluchis started to advance by noon, but were held up by enemy fire at the foot of the hill. Their leader, Malleson, left the field at 2:30 pm suffering from dysentery. His place was taken a short while later by Major-General Tighe who had just returned from his success in taking Salaita Hill. He deployed additional troops some of which were able to reach the crest of the hill. During this push **Colonel B.R. Graham**, of 3/KAR was killed, along with several of his officers and **askari**, as he led the advance. The Rhodesians pushed forward through the 3/KAR forces and held ground at the crest of the ridge until the Germans launched a strong counter attack. In the evening the 5/ and 7/South African Infantry commenced a night attack with bayonets. During the night

communication amongst the various troops was lost. Smuts ordered Tighe to withdraw, but when day broke it became clear that British troops including some members of 3/KAR and the 2nd Battalion Rhodesian Rifles were still on the ridge.

Once Smuts realized that he still had men out in the field, he ordered the 8/South African Infantry and No. 9 Field Battery to rush forward from Taveta. This activity precipitated the German retreat from the two hills.

Although the British had succeeded in occupying the Reata and Latema Hills and clearing the way for the push into German East Africa, this was just the beginning of a prolonged pursuit of the enemy that continued for hundreds of miles through German East Africa into Portuguese East Africa and didn't end until after the signing of the armistice.



*British vehicles below Latema ridge after the battle.*

July 5, 1916

J. C.R.E  
1<sup>st</sup> Division  
Expeditionary Force  
B.C.A 5/76

Dear Father,

This is the first time that we have had an opportunity of sending off mail since we started to advance after the rains on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May. We started to advance on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March after Smith arrived & as usual the K.A.R. got into the thick of it & lost a lot of officers & men. The Colonel was killed in one of our first engagements which lasted for a day & a night. reinforcements from the 5<sup>th</sup> A Troop arrived about midnight after the Germans had started to retire & as they worked on to the Line at day light which had then been evacuated they got all the credit for taking the place. We got as far as the Tanga Mushi R. by the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March & had then to fall down & wait till the rains were over. In the meantime I was transferred to the P.E.s just when I was about to be made a Coy. Commander in the K.A.R. as they are forming 5 new battalions instead of doing so at the beginning of the war. Smith got rid of all the Indian Generals within the first.

July 5, 1916 37

c/o C.R.E.  
1st Division  
Expeditionary Force  
B.E.A. 5/7/16

Dear Father,

This is the first time that we have had an opportunity of sending off mail since we started to advance after the rains on the 18th of May. We started to advance on the 7th of March after Smuts arrived & as usual the K.A.R. got into the thick of it & lost a lot of officers and men. The Colonel was killed in one of our first engagements which lasted for a day & a night. Reinforcements from the SA troops arrived about midnight after the Germans had started to retire & as they walked on to the line at daylight which had by then been evacuated they got all the credit for taking the place. We got as far as the Tanga Moschi Ry by the 22nd of March & had then to sit down & wait till the rains were over. In the meantime I was transferred to the R.E., just when I was about to be made a Coy. commander in the K.A.R. as they are forming 5 new battalions instead of doing so at the beginning of the war. Smuts got rid of all the Indian Generals within the first fortnight. We are now about 250 miles south of the border about 130 miles from the Tanga Moschi Railway which we are using & about 70 miles for the central Railway, and are at present just about at the end of our tether as we can't get sufficient supplies through which all come by motor. There is another column about 200 miles west of us & I think they are about in the same predicament. The Germans have blown up all the bridges as they retired & we have been building bridges & cutting road all the way along. The staff consists of the Colonel & myself & we have at our disposal about 20 Europeans and 350 African coolies and also a double Coy. of Indian Pioneers. The Germans keep always just about 6 miles ahead of us & amuse themselves at times by shelling us from long range with one of their 4 [Naval guns](#). We captured 3 of their Maxims & a pom-pom the

other day but so far they have generally managed to get everything away. They have managed to get in another steamer laden with guns & ammunition. It is supposed to have been a Danish boat which is always going to prolong things a bit more. You might send me out a bit of ribbon for M.C. as I can't get a bit here at all. You had better address my letters c/o B.C.R.E. New Moschi & I expect they will be sent on from there.

Yours Aye,

Tom

fortnight. We are now about 250 miles south of the border  
 about 130 miles from <sup>the present place</sup> the Tanga Moschi Railway which we  
 are using & about 70 miles from the central Railway, and  
 are at present just about at the end of our tether  
 as we can get sufficient supplies through which are  
 come by Hoto. There is another column about 200 miles  
 west of us & I think they are about in the same  
 predicament. The Germans have blown up all the  
 bridges as they retired & we have been burning  
 bridges & cutting roads all the way along. The staff  
 consist of the Colonel & myself & we have at our  
 disposal about 50 Europeans & 350 African coolies, and  
 also a reserve Coy. of Indian Pioneers. The Germans  
 keep always just about 6 miles ahead of us & amuse  
 themselves at times by shelling us from long range  
 with one of their 4" naval guns. We captured 3 of  
 their Maxims & a pom-pom the other day but so far  
 they have generally managed to get everything  
 away. They have managed to get in another skansen  
 laden with guns & ammunition. It is supposed to have  
 been a Danish boat which is always going to places  
 things a bit more. You might send me one or two  
 of ribbon for M.C. as I can't get a bit here  
 at all. You had better address my letters to B.F.R.E.  
 New Moschi & I expect they will be sent on from there.

Yours  
 Tom

November 17, 1916

East African Expeditionary Force  
Darussalam 17/16

Dear Father,

I got no letters or papers for about 3 months, but have got a few back numbers during the last week, which I have been in Darussalam. The division has come back here on its way to somewhere else. Darussalam was the capital of B.E.A. & is a very fine town Nairobi cannot compare with it at all. The Germans left all their women & children behind when they cleared out, but messed up everything. There was going to be of use to us except the electric power station they evidently did not want their women to be without light. The manager was in the place when our troops arrived & he has now been taken on by us as a prisoner. I don't know how long this show me here is going to last now how if it is not over before the heavy rains in February it will not be over this August as it is impossible to move in the rains with any sort of transport - except porters. They are forming about eight new battalions of K.A.F. supposed to be for service somewhere else when this is over here; they applied for me to go back as a Company Commander, but I am remaining where I am at present. They have evidently

East African Expeditionary Force  
**Daressalam** 17/11/16

Dear Father,

I got no letters or papers for about 3 months, but have got a few back numbers during the last week while I have been in Daressalam. The division has come back here on its way to somewhere else. Daressalam was the capital of B.E.A. & it is a very fine town. Nairobi cannot compare with it at all. The Germans left all their women and children behind when they cleared out, but messed up everything that was going to be of use to us except the Electric power station. They evidently did not want their women to be without light. The manager was in the place running it when our troops arrived & he has now been taken on by us at a salary. I don't know how long this show out here is going to last now but if it is not over before the heavy rains in February it will no be over this August as it is impossible to move in the rain with any sort of transport except porters. They are forming about eight new battalions of K.A.R. supposed to be for service somewhere else when this is over out here; they applied for me to go back as Company Commander but I am remaining where I am at present. They have enlisted a lot of German askaris & are at present recruiting in G.E.A. I hear the latest verdict about the war in Europe is that it will take other (sic) two years.

I expect it will be after Xmas by the time you get this. It is very hot down here. As everyone cleared out of Moschi a long time ago, you might address my letters with c/o Engineer's Headquarters Daressalam or c/o C.R.E. 1st Division Expeditionary Force East Africa. The 1st Division is under Maj. Gen. **Hoskins**. Smuts Headquarters are sometimes with the 1st Div & sometimes with the second under Maj. Gen. van Deventer as a rule he is generally with the 1st Division. He takes some big risks sometimes & at one time

used to travel with the advance guard. They say that he does not even tell his own staff what his plans are.

If all his orders had been carried out properly the war out here would have been over long ago. Did you do anything about the rubber shares? They should both have paid a good dividend this year. They may stay up after the war & they may not. I should think there would be the same demand for rubber.

Yours Aye,

Tom

a lot of German askaris & are at present recruiting in E. & A. I hear the latest version about the war in Europe is that it will take other two years.

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As everyone cleared out of Moschi a long time ago you might address my letters either to Engineer's Headquarters Dar-es-Salaam or to C.R.E. 1<sup>st</sup> Division Expeditionary Force East Africa. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division is under Maj. Gen. Hoskins. Smith's Headquarters are sometimes with the 1<sup>st</sup> Div & sometimes with the second under Maj. Gen. Van der Venter, as a rule he is generalised with the 1<sup>st</sup> Division. He takes some big risks sometimes & at one time used to travel with the advance guard. They say that he does not ever trust his own staff what his plans are.

If all his news had been carried out properly, the war out here would have been over long ago. Did you do anything about the rubber shares? They should both have paid a good dividend this year. They may stay up after the war & they may not. I should not think there would be the same demand for rubber.

Yours  
Tom

P.S.

I see Ayer Kuning are now about 28/- or so & Merrimans about 6/-. If you can get the former sold for 30/- & the latter for 6/- you might do so as I expect they will come down with a slump after the war.

Tom

I have had no mail delivered since 18th May.

Tom

P.S.  
 I see Roger Kenigs are now about 30/- or so  
 & Mercurius about 6/- If you can get the former  
 some for 30/- & the latter for 6/- you might do as  
 as I expect they will come down with a slump after the  
 war.

Tom

I have had no mails delivered since 18<sup>th</sup> May.

Tom

December 29, 1916

1<sup>st</sup> Division  
East African Expeditionary Force  
~~29<sup>th</sup> Dec~~ 29<sup>th</sup> Dec 1916

Dear Mother,

I have received your letter dated 1<sup>st</sup> November which seemed to have come fairly quickly. I got the cameras all right & last year's parcel some time in the spring I thought I had written you at the time about them. You forgot to send the slides with the cameras & it is no use without them. I have no p.c. photos here, we are now pretty far south in G.H.A. it seems to be nothing but rain here the rainy season lasts for about six months from Nov till May and for one day you get three wet ones. The roads are never always impassable for any form of transport except porters & even they get stuck up occasionally. You get long stretches of black cotton soil which when it is dry get quite hard & is quite good going, but when it is wet it is just like a flat bog. They have their pack mules, donkeys, & porters but the problem still remains unsolved, and it looks as if we would have to sit down & wait till the dry season comes along. There are a lot of West African troops in the country now & they

1st Division  
East African Expeditionary Force  
29th December 1916

Dear [Mother](#),

I duly received your letter dated 1st November which seemed to have come fairly quickly. I got the camera all right & last Xmas parcel some time in the spring. I thought I had written you at the time about them. You forgot to send the slides with the camera & it is no use without them. I have no pc photos here. We are now pretty far south in G.E.A. it seems to us nothing but rain here. The rainy season lasts for about six months from Nov until May and for one dry day you get three wet ones. The roads are nearly always impassable for any form of transport except porters & even they get stuck up occasionally. You get long stretches of black cotton soil which when it is dry gets quite hard & is quite good going but when it is wet it is just like a peat bog. They have tried pack mules, donkeys & porters but the problem still remains unsolved, and it looks as if we would have to sit down & wait till the dry season comes along. There are a lot of West African Troops in the country now & they do not seem to relish the climate. There is more rain here in a week than there was during the whole wet season in B.E.A. last spring. The natives say that it is only the small rain we are getting just now. I don't know what the big rains will be like if that is the case. I wish the Germans would run out of ammunition but they don't seem to be short just yet. I suppose things at home will be going on in the same old way with a bit more to pay for everything. It was not very like Xmas out here. If the rubber shares have not been sold I think I will stick to them for a bit yet if they are paying a decent dividend. Have you had any Zeppelins the length of Robertson? I expect they will try to get at Gretna.

I have lost my fountain pen so have had to write this in pencil.

Yours Aye,

Tom

do not seem to resist the climate. There is more rain here in a week than there was during the whole of the wet season in N.E. last spring. The natives say that it is only the small rain we are getting just now. I don't know what the big rains will be like if that is the case. I wish the Germans would run out of ammunition but they don't seem to be short just yet.

I suppose things at Luau will be going on in the same old way with a bit more to pay for everything. I was not very like I was out there. If the rubber shares have not been sold I think I will stick to them for a bit yet if they are paying a decent dividend. How long had any Zeppelins the length of Robertson? I expect they will try to get at Ormat.

I have lost my fountain pen so have had to write this in pencil.

Yours  
Tom

May 23, 1917

"Harforce"  
East African Expeditionary Force  
East Africa 23/5/17

Dear Father,

I have just got some letters which  
some brainy individual in the K.A.F. had sent  
- come I expect it would be some of the new  
ones, as they have got about twelve battalions now.  
I would have been a Major by this time if  
I had stayed in the K.A.F. as they are very short  
of officers. I am afraid the promotion in the R.E.  
is not so rapid. I have been acting C.R.E. for  
the last two months & am entitled to the rank of  
Major of Captain when so acting but whether I will get  
the rank permanently or whether I will have the  
reversion to my old rank when the Col comes back  
I don't know. He was granted one month's leave  
to go to India at the end of February & has not  
returned yet; the officer appointed in his place  
lasted a fortnight, and was then invalided for  
6 months, and has been carrying on ever since.  
We were supposed to be going to set down & have  
a quiet time till the rains were over & a lot of  
men & officers were assigned to go to India or leave  
and all the South African had already gone, but  
the German chose this time to get aggressive &

“**Hanforce**”

East African Expeditionary Force

East Africa 23/5/17

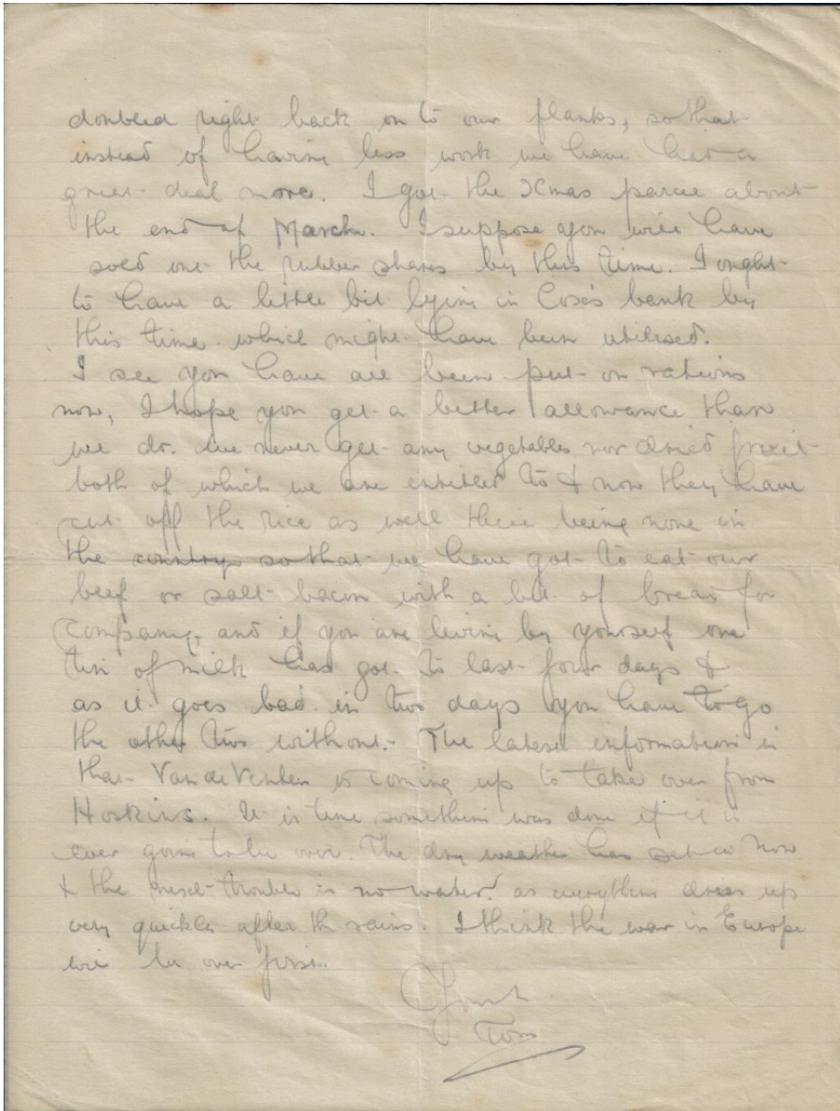
Dear Father,

I have just got some letters which some brainy individual in the K.A.R. had sent home. I expect it would be some of the new men as they have got about twelve battalions now. I would have been a Major by this time if I had stayed in the K.A.R. as they are very short of officers. I am afraid the promotion in the R.E. is not so rapid. I have been acting C.R.E. for the last two months & am entitled to the rank pay of Captain whilst so acting but whether I will get the rank permanently or whether I will have to revert to my old rank when the Col. comes back I don't know. He was granted one month's leave to go to India at the end of February & has not returned yet; the officer appointed in his place lasted a fortnight and was then invalided for 6 months, so I have been carrying on ever since. We were supposed to be going to sit down & have a quiet time til the rains were over & a lot of men & officers were all owed to go to India on leave and all the South Africans had already gone, but the Germans chose this time to get aggressive & doubled right back on to our flanks, so that instead of having less work we have had a great deal more. I got the Xmas parcel about the end of March. I suppose you will have sold out the rubber shares by this time. I ought to have a little bit lying in Cox's bank by this time which might have been utilised. I see you have all been put on rations now. I hope you get a better allowance than we do. We never get any vegetables nor dried fruit, both of which we are entitled to & now they have cut off the rice as well there being none in the country so that we have got to eat our beef or salt bacon with a bit of bread for company, and if you are living by yourself one tin of milk has got to last four days & as it goes bad in two days you have to go the other two without. The latest information is that **Van Deventer** is coming up to take over from **Hoskins**. It is time something was done if it is ever going to be over. The dry weather has set in now & the

next trouble is no water as everything dries up very quickly after the rains. I think the war in Europe will be over first.

Yours Aye,

Tom



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I see you have all been put on rations now, I hope you get a better allowance than we do. We never get any vegetables nor dried fruit both of which we are entitled to & now they have cut off the rice as well there being none in the country so that we have got to eat our beef or salt bacon with a bit of bread for company, and if you are living by yourself one tin of milk had got to last four days & as it goes bad in two days you have to go the other two without. The latest information is that Van der Venen is coming up to take over from Hostens. It is time something was done if it is ever going to be over. The dry weather has set in now & the first trouble is no water, as everything dries up very quickly after the rains. I think the war in Europe will be over first.

Tom

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June 29, 1917



*Grave at Rumbo Lieut. T. Wilson RE Died 29.6.17*

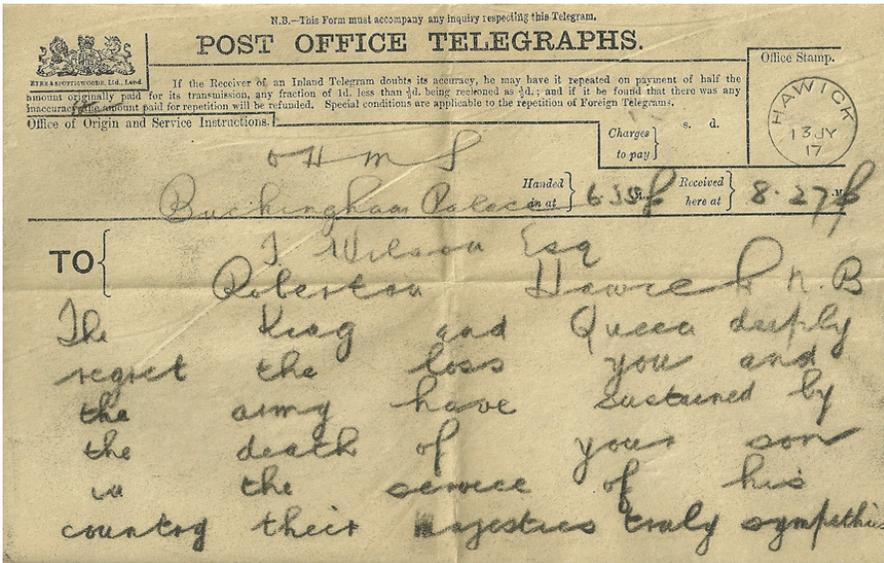
On the morning of June 29, 1917, Thomas Wilson set out from his camp at Mgerigeri in a Ford car with an African porter.

Initially he went to the Rumbo camp to settle some work there. Late in the afternoon he started driving back from Rumbo to the junction of the Mnasi-Mgerigeri road and took the turn toward Mnasi – presumably to give some order to the pioneers working there.

This road was often under attack from snipers and was dangerous to traverse without an escort. While driving along this road about four miles from the junction he was sniped by the enemy. He sustained shots in the arm, thigh and abdomen. The car veered off the road and hit a tree where he died. His African porter was captured by the enemy then re-captured by the British three weeks later.

Thomas was found and brought back to camp on June 30. He was buried on that day by Archdeacon W. Chadwick at the south camp at Rumbo. The service was attended by all the officers in the camp.

Wilson's remains were removed to the Kilve Kivinje Cemetery in 1919 where a permanent headstone was erected in 1927. He was later re-interred to the Dar-Es-Salaam War Cemetery most likely in the early 1970s. He is also memorialized on the War Memorial at Roberton and on his family's gravestone also in Roberton.



*Telegram from Buckingham Palace July 13, 1917 to T. Wilson, Esq, Roberton Hawick, N.B. The King and Queen deeply regret the loss you and the army have sustained by the death of your son in the service of his country. Their majesties truly sympathise.*



*Family Gravestone in Roberton. Also their son Thos. Wilson, M.C. Lieut R.E., A.M.I.C.E Killed in Action in German East Africa, 29th June 1917 Aged 37 Years. Buried at Kilwa Kivinje.*



*War Memorial at Robertson Thomas Wilson M.C. Lieut R.E.*

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## After the War

Thomas Wilson had no direct descendants. His letters were kept by his father until his death in 1935 then were retained by his sister, Chrissie. After her death in 1960, they were passed on to Thomas Wilson's nephew who took them to Canada when he emigrated in 1969. The letters have recently been returned to Scotland and are now housed in the Hawick Museum near Thomas Wilson's birthplace.



*Roberton School House, birthplace of Thomas Wilson, in 2012.*

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# Glossary

## Askari

Askari is the Arabic word for soldier. During WWI in Africa, soldiers were recruited locally to serve in the Italian, British, German, Belgian and Portuguese armies.

## Bomas

A boma can be a livestock enclosure, a stockade or a kind of fort. They were built of poles, stones or impenetrable thickets of acacia thorns.

## Daressalam

Dar-es-Salaam was the administrative and commercial centre of German East Africa.

## East African Mounted Rifles

The East African Mounted Rifles (E.A.M.R.) was a unit made up of British settlers who had been living in British East Africa when the war broke out.

## Graham

B.R. Graham, Lieutenant-Colonel of 3/KAR was killed in the Battle of Latema Nek, March 11, 1916.

## Hanforce

British forces led by Col. Hannington.

## Hoskins

Major General Reginald Hoskins, KAR, took over command of the British forces in 1917.

## King Edward

*King Edward VII* was sunk by a mine off Cape Wraith, Scotland on January 6, 1915.

## King's African Rifles

The King's African Rifles was a colonial regiment consisting primarily of African soldiers. At the beginning of WWI there were three battalions comprising 21 small companies.

## Nairobi

Nairobi, capital of British East Africa, was founded in 1899 as a railway depot on the Mombasa – Uganda Railway.

## Royal Engineers

The Royal Engineers, officially the Corps of the Royal Engineers, is one of the corps of the British Army. The Royal Engineers, often referred to as Sappers, are responsible for building and maintaining transportation and communication infrastructure for the armed forces.

## Serengeti

Serengeti was a small post in British East Africa....

## Smith-Dorrien

Horace Smith-Dorrien was Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in East Africa in 1915.

## Smuts

Jan Smuts, a South African, was Commander in Chief of the British forces in East Africa in 1916.

## Tighe

Major-General Michael J. Tighe, Commander-in-Chief of British Forces 1915-1916.

## Van Deventer

General Jakobus van Deventer was a South African military commander who took over the command of the British forces in East Africa in 1917.

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## Notes

1. Otago Witness, 13 May 1908, p. 60.
2. Ibid., p. 60.
3. Paice, p. 14.
4. Ibid., p. 392.
5. Record of the 3rd Battalion, King's African Rifles, p. 30.
6. Hordern, p. 243.
7. The guns from the German warship, Königsberg, which was destroyed in the Rufiji Delta in 1915, were removed from the ship and used by the German land forces. The naval guns mentioned in this letter may well have been from the Königsberg.
8. Tom Wilson's mother died in 1898, but his father remarried in 1909. This letter is addressed to his step-mother.

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*Thomas Wilson Fonds.* Unpublished manuscript. Scottish Borders Council Museum & Gallery Service, Hawick Museum Collection.

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## Illustration Credits

Wilson Family c1897/1898. (Private collection)

Wilson Family and Friends on an Outing. (Private collection)

Thomas Wilson, Carlisle. (Private collection)

Colonial Africa, 1914.(Derived from a map by Eric Gaba, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license)

The Great War in East Africa. (Mehmet Berker, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license)

Thomas Wilson in Military Uniform. (Private collection)

Letters of Thomas Wilson. (Hawick Museum)

Plan of Longido Front, September 20, 1915, (The National Archives of the UK: ref.WO 106/273)

Stretcher Bearers of 3 KAR. (Imperial War Museum, Squiers J. Granville Collection)

Reata-Latema Nek. (Harry Fecitt,  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/westernfrontassociation/6778136590>)

The Action of Latema Nek 11th-12th March 1916. (Hordern, Charles. Official history of the great war based on official documents by direction of the historical section of the committee of imperial defence military operations East Africa vol. 1 Aug 1914 – Sept 1916)

British Vehicles below Latema Ridge after the Battle. (Harry Fecitt  
[http://www.flickr.com/photos/westernfrontassociation/6778144706/  
in/set-72157629439856945/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/westernfrontassociation/6778144706/in/set-72157629439856945/))

Grave at Rumbo. (Hawick Museum)

Telegraph. (Hawick Museum)

Gravestone at Robertson. (Private collection)

War Memorial at Robertson. (Private collection)

Old School House, Robertson, 2012. (Private collection)

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## About the Author

Sally Wilson is the Web Services Librarian at Ryerson University in Toronto. She is the great-niece of Thomas Wilson.