

## **J&K State Forces and the East African Campaign**

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**Abstract:** *The J&K State was amongst the largest princely States under the British Empire. It had also maintained its own defence forces like other major princely States. But unlike other princely units, its forces were much better equipped and professional due to the States strategic location, which forced the British authorities to train and equip it much better in comparison to other princely forces. This training and professionalism was depicted by it when it was called upon to take on the most advanced and fiercest British enemy of that time, the German Empire during the First World War.*

**Keywords:** *J&K State forces, Expeditionary forces, Tanga, Yasin, Umba Valley, North Lancashires, General Aitken, Lt.Col Raghbir Singh.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The annexation of *Alsace* and part of *Lorraine* by Germany after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 was largely responsible for the continues bitter hostility between France and Germany which carried forward into the 20th C.E. Danger of war had always hung over Europe like a dark Cloud but its outburst had been long delayed. However, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austro-Hungarian Empire was assassinated on 28th June 1914 along with his consort in *Sarajevo*, the dark thunder clouds finally made its unrestrained outburst.

The war could not, however, remain confined to Europe alone. All major European powers had their colonies in Africa and Africa which automatically got involved in the war. In India there was a spontaneous display of loyalty for Britain at the outbreak of the war and all classes and professions without exception supported the British cause. Indian Army units were deployed in large numbers on more than one front in various Expeditionary forces. One such front opened up in East Africa which necessitated use of Indian troops there on large scale which included the forces of various Princely states. J&K State Forces was one such important participant whose contribution concerns us the most.

At the commencement of these hostilities the situation in British East Africa (BEA) was precarious. The East Africa protectorate force under Lieutenant Colonel ES Ward consisted of only the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the King's African Rifles (KAR) and part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the same regiment. In addition to these 1200 or so regulars, there were some 2000 paramilitary troops. Within a fortnight some 1000 white settlers were brought under arms, being organised into the East African Mounted Regiment and the East African Regiment. The British strength was obviously inadequate to be able to hold out against an enemy estimated to be some 16,000 strong. To meet the threat, therefore, orders for mobilization of an Indian Expeditionary Force for British East Africa were immediately issued.<sup>i</sup> It was not only the Indian Army from which the British could draw to meet their requirement in Africa. There were also at their disposal the Imperial Service Troops that were being maintained by all the princely states in India.

Maharaja Pratap Singh of Jammu and Kashmir had made an offer of three infantry Battalions and one Mountain Battery for service under the British. While the offer was gratefully accepted, only one and a half Battalions were immediately requisitioned for employment with the Indian Expeditionary Force 'B' which was being organised for service in British East Africa. The state consequently earmarked the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kashmir Rifles (50 percent Gorkhas and 50 percent Dogra Muslims) and four companies of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (50 percent Gorkhas and 50 percent Hindus) under a small headquarters and issued orders for their mobilization. Owing to the unserviceable condition of the rifles and carbines in possession with Kashmir Imperial Service, the Government decided to re-arm the troops with Lee Enfield short rifles.<sup>ii</sup>

### **II. THE INDIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE 'B'**

The Indian Expeditionary Force 'B' consisted of two Infantry Brigades. The Bangalore Brigade and the Imperial Service Infantry Brigade. The Bangalore Brigade consisted of four Battalions which included 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Loyal North Lancashire, 63<sup>rd</sup> Palam Cottah Infantry, 98 Infantry and 101<sup>st</sup> Grenadiers. The Imperial Service Brigade consisted of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kashmir Rifles, 4 companies of 3<sup>rd</sup> Kashmir Rifles, 4 companies of the 3<sup>rd</sup>

Gwalior Infantry and 13<sup>th</sup> Rajput . The two half Battalions of Jammu and Kashmir and Gwalior being formed into a composite Battalion . Brigadier General Aitken was detailed to be the GOC of the Expeditionary force while Brigadier Wapshare and Colonel Tighe were to command the Bangalore Brigade and the Imperial Service Brigade respectively. Mobilization of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kashmir Rifles under Lieutenant Colonel Raghbir Singh and 3<sup>rd</sup> Jammu & Kashmir Rifles (half) under Lieutenant Colonel Durga Singh which had commenced on 12 and 15 September 1914 respectively. The two units left Jammu at the end of the month to join Imperial Service Brigade which was scheduled to concentrate at *Deolali* by 1<sup>st</sup> October.<sup>iii</sup>

From Deolali they moved to Bombay with rest of the Brigade and after embarking on 9<sup>th</sup> October, sailed to East Africa by '*Khosrou*' and '*Barjera*' respectively on 16 October. The mobilized strength of the Kashmir Units that left for East Africa are as follows:<sup>iv</sup>

	British Officers	Indian Officers	Other Rank	Remarks
2 <sup>nd</sup> Kashmir Rifles	2	22	703	offrs incl 2 doctors
3 <sup>rd</sup> Kashmir Rifles	1	14	302	offrs incl 2 doctors

### III. THE BATTLE OF TANGA

The Force arrived off Mombasa on 31 October and without disembarking proceeded straight towards the German port of Tanga. The plan was to capture Tanga and thereby relieve enemy pressure on Mombasa. At dawn on 2 November the force arrived off Tanga. At noon on 4 November General Aitken launched his attack on Tanga with units disposed as follows:<sup>v</sup>

1. In the forefront, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Kashmir Rifles on the right and North Lancashires and the 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry to the left.
2. In the rear, 101<sup>st</sup> Grenadiers positioned behind the 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry and 98<sup>th</sup> Infantry was placed 200 paces behind North Lancashire.
3. The 13<sup>th</sup> Rajputs near Brigadier Tighe in rear in the rear of and about 274.3 metres behind the centre of the Kashmir Rifles and 61<sup>st</sup> near General Aitken himself about 274.3 metres in the rear of Rajputs.

The advance was of the troops was unopposed till they got within 7,315 metres of the town, when they came under heavy fire. Due to massive firing the 63<sup>rd</sup>, 61<sup>st</sup> and part of 13<sup>th</sup> Battalions got demoralized and broke. The Grenadiers attempted to fill the gap left by others but they too came under heavy fire making them to just hold on to their positions.<sup>vi</sup>

The Imperial Service Brigade on the right met with little opposition till the enemy position at deep railway cutting came in sight. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Kashmir rifles made steady way and drove the enemy from the cutting. Subedar Randhir Singh was conspicuous for his gallantry as he personally led the assault of his company on one of the enemy positions and captured it.<sup>vii</sup> Meanwhile, the Gwalior Infantry broke up under pressure of enemy fire and disappeared. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Kashmir Rifles having elements of composite Battalion held on and joined hands with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion while moving over to the right.

On the Left of the Kashmir Rifles, the North Lancashire made steady progress and together they entered the town at the Northern end. The enemy had prepared every house in the town for tiers of machine guns and rifles. The Kashmir Rifles captured a machine gun and killed the garrison of several houses in hand to hand fighting. However, the Lancashire had been forced to retire and the entire left flank of the Kashmir Rifles had fallen. Therefore, the Kashmir Rifles were ordered to withdraw to the railway cutting and to take up defensive position along the Lancashires.<sup>viii</sup>

As many as four Battalions in the force had proved to be 'unreliable' in action. General Aitken therefore decided against any renewal of attack and planned to withdraw his force from German territory. The covering party of re-embarkation consisted of the North Lancashires and Kashmir Rifles who took a strong defensive position under Brigadier Tighe. After the re-embarkation was completed, the wounded on 6<sup>th</sup> November and later the rest of the force sailed out of Tanga towards *Mombasa*.

The Kashmir Rifles had suffered large number of casualties but they had performed outstandingly in their first ever encounter with a class one enemy like Germany. In fact, after the war they were rated as '**reliable**' troops as against large number of '**unreliable**' ones about whom General Aitken complained most bitterly. Both the commanding officers Lieutenant Colonel Raghbir Singh and Lieutenant Colonel Durga Singh handled their units with conspicuous gallantry and skills and this was reported by the GOC Force 'B' in his despatch on Tanga operations to the war office London.<sup>ix</sup>

Awards received by J&K State Forces in this battle:<sup>x</sup>

1. Lt. Col. Durga Singh (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion) Indian Order of Merit (IOM) 1<sup>st</sup> class.
2. Sepoy Ganga Ram (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion) Indian Distinguished Service Medal (IDSM)
3. Sepoy Devi Singh (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion) Indian Distinguished Service Medal (IDSM)
4. Subedar Randhir Singh (2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion) Indian Order of Merit (IOM) 2<sup>nd</sup> class.

Casualties list of the British Expeditionary Force in Tanga:<sup>xi</sup>

Unit	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Total	Strenght	Percentage
2 <sup>nd</sup> Loyal NL	29	63	23	115	832	13.8
63 <sup>rd</sup> PLI	12	37	36	85	762	11.2
98 <sup>th</sup> Infantry	7	33	39	79	762	10.4
101 <sup>st</sup> Grenadiers	184	31	7	222	762	29.1
13 <sup>th</sup> Rajputs	52	44	-	96	766	12.5
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Kashmir</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>732</b>	<b>5.6</b>
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Kashmir</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>5.5</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup> Gwalior	1	1	-	2	379	0.5
61 <sup>st</sup> Pioneers	52	57	39	148	766	19.3
Staff and Support	5	1	2	8	174	4.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>359</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>817</b>	<b>6314</b>	<b>12.9</b>

#### IV. THE BATTLE OF YASIN

After the Tanga debacle, some offensive action was launched in the *Umba* valley in December 1914. The occupation of major portion of Umba valley forced the inhabitants to flee and take refuge under the British and the continued occupation of the Umba valley territory led to the faith of the locals in the British ability to protect them to start weaken. This necessitated the British occupation of Umba valley. Operations in this coastal region were started in December 1914 under *Vanga* force of which 2<sup>nd</sup> Kashmir Rifles formed a part. Vanga had been retaken and the entire Umba valley cleared of enemy by end of the month and in order to secure occupation of the valley the operations were then carried out inside the German territory. The Yasin port was captured on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1915. The place was garrisoned by three companies of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion under Lt. Col. Raghbir Singh and one company of Indian Army.<sup>xii</sup>

Meanwhile, Expeditionary Force ‘C’ under Brigadier Stewart was merged with Force ‘B’ under the command of Brigadier Wapshare. Now the Germans planned to evict the British from Yasin and the first attack came on 12<sup>th</sup> January but this was repulsed by the Kashmir Rifles, with Germans suffering heavy casualties. The Germans attacked again with much greater strength on 18<sup>th</sup> January but was also repulsed. The enemy unable to take the position laid siege to it. The telephone line was cut and the garrison lost contact with the headquarters. For the next 9 hours the garrison fought valiantly until they completely run out of their ammunition and suffered large number of casualties that included Lt. Col. Raghbir Singh Killed. The garrison was forced to surrender on 19<sup>th</sup> January. The determination with which the Kashmir rifles had before their ammunition ran out can be gauged by the fact that out of the 135 odd prisoners taken by the Germans , 115 were wounded and unfit to fight. Besides their unit had suffered 16 killed including their commanding officer and of the wounded 8 had been severely wounded and subsequently died of their wounds. Among these was assistant surgeon Lt. Sadhu Narain. Nevertheless, the unit made the Germans pay heavy price for their victory which included 18 killed and 32 wounded. Brigadier Tighe the commander of the Vanga force in his report on the action of Yasin considered behaviour of the troops as magnificent.<sup>xiii</sup>

Services of Sepoy Bal Bahadur Chettri and Sepoy Dal Bahadur Thapa who volunteered to carry a message to the post when telephone line had been cut along with another two of the King’s African Rifles was recognised. Although not successful in reaching the post, their effort resulted in bringing back useful information regarding the enemy. For this action they both received Indian Order of Merit (IOM) 2<sup>nd</sup> class for this act of gallantry.<sup>xiv</sup>

In spite of the fact that expeditionary forces lost on both the occasions against the Germans in these two early battles. The performance of some of these units was exceptional which includes the extraordinary level of bravery and sacrifices made by 2<sup>nd</sup> Kashmir Rifles and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Kashmir Rifles. This can be gauged from the number of gallantry awards won by these two units in a lost cause. They performed outstandingly in their first ever assignment outside India in an extremely hostile climate and surpassed many of the regular Indian Army units in battle performance. This added to the already glorious past of the J&K State Forces and more such glorious events which were to be achieved not only during the First World War but also during the Second World War and the brutal Pakistani invasion of the state post partition

<sup>i</sup> *The Times History of War* Vol 1, The Times, London, 1917.

<sup>ii</sup> Jammu Archives Mil Block A-9 of 1914 file no 13-W.

<sup>iii</sup> Singh, K. Brahma, *History of Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (1820-1956)*, Lancer International, New Delhi, 1990.

<sup>iv</sup> Jammu and Kashmir Administrative Report, 1914-1915.

<sup>v</sup> Singh, K. Brahma, *History of Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (1820-1956)*, Lancer International, New Delhi, 1990.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Jammu Archives General Orders Commander-in-Chief (GOCC) no. 27 of 1915.

<sup>viii</sup> Singh, K. Brahma, *History of Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (1820-1956)*, Lancer International, New Delhi, 1990.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Jammu Archives Mil Block G-36 of 1928 file GO 81/84-85.

<sup>xi</sup> Anderson, Ross, *The Battle of Tanga*, Tempus Publishing Ltd, Charleston, 2002.

<sup>xii</sup> Singh, K. Brahma, *History of Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (1820-1956)*, Lancer International, New Delhi, 1990.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jammu Archives GOCC-27 of 1915.

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