

King's African Rifles Soldier versus Schutztruppe Soldier

Osprey Combat series No. 20 (2016)

Text by Gregg Adams

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Review by Jonathan Aird

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The Combat series is a sort of hybrid of the Duel series – assessing one troop type or weapon against another – and the Campaign series, illustrating the differences between troops through a look at a number of battles in some detail. East-Africa



was something of a sideshow of World War I, but one with a serious aspect. Control of East Africa would allow Germany to have resupply ports for their commerce raiders – additionally, every Empire soldier tied down preventing the local German forces from achieving this aim was one less soldier for the Western Front. For the ruling British, this colonial war had mirror-image aims – curtail the freedom to roam of commerce raiders and destroy a threat that was a drain on resources. That the combat went on to the end of the war means that it could be claimed that both sides had a victory -- the German's never got their desired port access, but the British had to use precious resources to prevent that occurring.

The discussion of the opposing sides highlights differences in approach, with the Germans quickly taking the initiative to expand their forces. When trained men encounter poorly trained men then the advantage is with the former, and that was the early situation – however ,Gregg Adams argues convincingly that the Empire forces were not the second-rate troops they are often considered to be, outmanoeuvred by wily masters of bush combat such as Lettow-Vorbeck. A lot of the difference in achievement is explained in the two sides having different

short-term objectives – the German's were not overly interested in holding ground other than their breadbasket and so were happy to raid, ideally capture equipment, and then retreat away again. On the other hand, the Empire troops were definitely in the business of taking and holding land.

There is a good discussion of the equipment available to both sides, with the German's limited in their options to expand troop numbers by availability of basic kit, including rifles and ammunition. Where the book gets really interesting for the wargamer is in the analyses of three battles/short campaigns. Here the difficulties of bush fighting come to life, with troops encountering small numbers of the enemy but assessing them to be much larger forces, or long firefights leading to few casualties, or manoeuvring forces trying to outflank missing each other by a few hundred yards and having no idea that this has happened. There are deceptions – including the classic “campfire maintained while the army slips away.”

The diverse nature of the troops – with the King's African Rifles supported by penny packets from other regiments and small detachments of artillery – offer a diverse and interesting force to the wargamer. This also adds an unavoidable weakness to the readability of the combat examples as Gregg Adams is forced to keep track of odd platoons or a gun or two being deployed here and there into different commands which leads to text such as “*Linforce was organised as follows: No.3 Column under Brig-Gen O'Grady (1/2nd KAR, 3/2nd KAR and the Bharatpur Imperial Service Infantry half-battalion); No.4 Column under Lt-Col Taylor (3rd Nigerian and remnants of 8th South African Infantry*”

Completely necessary of course but clunky to read when two such forces meet and the various battalions and half-battalions of different regiments start moving around. The maps accompanying the battle descriptions are quite good at helping keep track of where everyone was at any given moment.

The illustrations throughout are excellent – good uniform images as well as the split-screen combat scenes with the view from both sides showing that often troops were firing at almost nothing. The importance of dug-in positions and the careful deployment of machine guns is well brought out as well. The period photographs help to bring out the difficulty of the terrain and how this hampered logistics or the deployment and movement of battlefield artillery. The later introduction of mechanised transport meant that the Empire troops also found themselves to be roadbuilders, whilst the appearance of aeroplanes was an unsolvable problem for the German troops.

In all, a very good introduction to the subject that is likely to inspire the jaded Western Front gamer into considering an African excursion – as only small numbers of figures are needed and there is a nice diversity of troops and equipment, as well as unique tactical problems. It wouldn't take much to be tempted.