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Author(s): David Killingray and James Matthews

Source: *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 13, No. 1/2 (1979), pp. 5+7-23

Published by: Canadian Association of African Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/484636>

Accessed: 29/12/2008 10:51

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beasts of burden: british west african carriers in the first world war

DAVID KILLINGRAY *
and JAMES MATTHEWS **

INTRODUCTION / WEST AFRICAN
CARRIER STATISTICS / RECRUITMENT /
CARRIER ORGANIZATION / LIFE IN THE RANKS /
DEMOBILIZATION / POST-WAR IMPACT

* Senior Lecturer in History, Goldsmiths' College, University of London.

** Doctoral Candidate and Teaching Assistant in the Department of History, University of California, Santa Barbara, California.

The East African Military Labour Corps was the subject of a government report in 1919,¹ but West African carriers received scant mention in this or other wartime and post-war official correspondence. While several studies have been made of East African carrier service during the First World War,² relatively little has been written about the military role of West African porters during this period. The collective economic, social and political impact of carrier service was understandably greater in East Africa than in British West Africa since more East Africans served as carriers during the war effort. However, the recruitment of tens of thousands of British West Africans during World War I represented for West Africa a mobilization of its labor force on a scale unknown until that time.

I — INTRODUCTION

One of the endemic problems for the political administration and commercial houses in Colonial British West Africa was securing an adequate supply of labor. A large part of the labor pool was required for the hard and uncongenial work of carrying goods and people in territories unsuited to animal transport, served by few railways and lacking all-weather roads.³ Up to and including World War I no military operations could be effectively launched until sufficient carriers had been recruited, trained and organized for the movement of artillery, ammunition, food and supplies. Consequently the military authorities in tropical West Africa were also heavily dependent upon large numbers of carriers.⁴

The problems involved in recruiting, training, organizing, feeding and paying for carriers helped to prompt the Colonial and War Offices' decision

1. Public Records Office, London : CO553/216/4603 "Report on the Period from August 4, 1914 to September 15, 1919 by Lieutenant-Colonel O. F. Watkins, Director of Military Labour to the B.E.A. Expeditionary Force," 9a Enclosure, Monson to Col. Office, December 31, 1919.

2. See Donald C. Savage and J. Forbes Munro, "Carrier Corps Recruitment in the British East African Protectorate, 1914-18," *Journal of African History* VII, no. 2 (1966) ; Anthony Clayton and Donald C. Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya 1895-1963* (London, 1974), ch. 3 ; G. W. T. Hodges, "The Carrier Corps and its Impact in Kenya," unpublished paper given at conference on Africa and the First World War, Centre of African Studies, University of London, March 1977 ; "African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914-1918," *JAH* XIX, no. 1 (1978) ; Melvin E. Page, "The War of *thangata* : Nyasaland and the East African Campaign, 1914-1918," *ibid.*, and also his unpublished Michigan State University Ph.D. thesis, 1977, "Malawians in the Great War and After, 1914-1925."

3. See 'Deji Ogunremi, "Human Portage in Nigeria in the Nineteenth Century - A Pillar in the Indigenous Economy," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* III, no. 1 (December 1975).

4. For example, in the Asante War 1873-74, over 8,500 carriers were required to accompany 1,457 European and 483 West Indian troops in the advance on Kumasi ; see Henry Brackenbury, *The Ashanti War 1873-74* (London, 1874), vol. II, ch. 1, p. 141. In the Asante campaign of 1900 a column of 1,260 African rank-and-file were accompanied by 1,500 carriers ; see C. H. Armitage and A. F. Montanaro, *Ashanti Campaign 1900* (London, 1901), p. 244. Thus, even when African troops had replaced the European and West Indian soldiers in Britain's West African army, non-combatants outnumbered combatants.

of 1897 to form the West African Frontier Force⁵ with its own enlisted (i.e., on the Regimental Establishment) carriers who were recruited specifically for artillery and machine gun portage. They served for two years (soldiers for six), with an option of re-engaging, were subject to military training and discipline and, like the rank and file, were entitled to pensions and gratuities.⁶ On punitive expeditions the WAFF could thus function as a self-supporting force. For the large military operations, however, additional non-enlisted carriers had to be recruited or impressed. During the inter-war years as the use of motor lorry increased there was a corresponding decrease in demand for human portage, but the WARFF, despite some mechanization within the force, remained essentially a foot soldier army supported by a permanent establishment of enlisted carriers. Even as late as 1944–45 the West African carriers proved their value in the Burma forests.⁷

II — WEST AFRICAN CARRIER STATISTICS

During the First World War the British Government used carriers from West Africa in Togoland, Cameroons, and in East Africa⁸ while a small number of laborers were sent to Mesopotamia. On the outbreak of war in August 1914, two thousand Gold Coast carriers were hastily assembled for the British attack on German Togoland. For the Cameroons campaign British West Africa supplied nearly 14,200 carriers drawn mainly from Sierra Leone and Nigeria. Most of the 3,300 carriers supplied by the Gold Coast during this operation were Ewe from occupied Togoland. In addition between 10,000 and 15,000 carriers were recruited in the Cameroons by the Allies, while the Germans impressed several thousand more for their military forces.⁹

In mid-1916 West African troops were sent to fight in the East African campaign. Despite the very large number of carriers recruited in East Africa by the end of 1916, wastage from disease and overwork had resulted in an acute shortage of labor and a serious problem of maintaining lines of supply. By February 1917, a British advance on the Rufiji valley was held up by lack of carriers; non-combatants were more urgently required than combatants. Indian and European troops were ill-suited to the East African climate and were gradually replaced by African troops. Consequently India was ruled out as a

5. On the formation of the WAFF, see Samson Ukpabi, *The West African Frontier Force: An Instrument of Imperial Policy 1897–1914*, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1964.

6. The military role of enlisted carriers is dealt with by W. C. G. Heneker, *Bush Warfare* (London, 1907), and C. B. Wallis, *West African Warfare* (London, 1906).

7. On the use of West African carriers during the Second World War, see "Athos" (Brig. F. A. S. Clarke), "Recollections of an Area Commander in Africa," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* XCIV (1949).

8. The number of carriers required for military operations against neighboring French and German territories were carefully calculated in the defense schemes of each colony; see CAB 11/101, 104, 105, 106, 107.

9. The original carrier force in Cameroons in August 1914 numbered 3,670 British and 1,000 French. WO33/781 gives the total figures for carriers in Cameroons.

source for carriers as was the Belgian Congo ; Britain was unwilling to be placed under any obligation to the Belgians which might complicate the future control of Tanganyika. The French refused to allow labor to be supplied from Madagascar and the majority of carriers that the South African government was able to recruit for its Native Labour Contingent was sent to France. The Allied military establishment in East Africa now turned to West Africa (and later Portuguese East Africa) as a source of transport.

In late December 1916 General J. C. Smuts, Commander in Chief in East Africa, petitioned the War Office for a carrier corps of 4,000 Hausas to be attached to the Nigerian Regiment.¹⁰ This request was relayed to the Colonial Office which replied that Hausa were a "combative race" and could not be spared as carriers, which instead should come from "non-combative" peoples such as the Mende and Temne of Sierra Leone.

Sir Frederick Lugard strongly supported this Colonial Office decision. Like most of his contemporaries in West African service, the Governor General of Nigeria regarded certain ethnic groups as either martial or non-martial.¹¹ Early in 1917, he had issued instructions that no carriers should be recruited from the "fighting races" and "pagan tribes" of Nigeria because this would interfere with recruiting men in arms. Lugard wished to limit carrier recruitment to southern provinces. The Government of the Gold Coast successfully resisted most of East Africa's carrier demands by arguing that carrier recruitment would interfere with the campaign to enlist soldiers, and that it would reduce labor in the gold mines which were vital to the Imperial war economy.¹² By late January 1917, the authorities in Sierra Leone had overcome Admiralty objections to syphoning off the labor force from Freetown (an important port for naval transport and escort work) and promised 3,000 carriers, while Nigeria pledged an initial draft of 1,000 men.

In January 1917, General A. R. Hoskins, who replaced Smuts as Commander in Chief in East Africa, found himself faced with serious supply problems

10. CO445/37/62587, Smuts to War Office, December 15, 1916.

11. Books written in the late 19th and early 20th centuries about West Africa frequently comment on the suitability or unsuitability of various ethnic groups for combatant and non-combatant service. In an emergency, W. E. H. Migeod, Head of the Gold Coast Government Transport Department, advocated the use of Mende, Hausas, Wangara "and other Mohammedans," Memo on Transport Organization in Event of Disturbance or War, August 29, 1908, Royal Commonwealth Society Library, London, Migeod papers, 11/2. See also Migeod's assessments of ethnic groups as carriers in the Cameroons campaign, WO/33/781, table 3. One problem was that some of the best carriers were often to be had from ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria and the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast that were generally recognized as "martial races" and from whom the bulk of combatants were drawn. Many coastal and southern peoples were regarded by political and military officials as non-martial and often useless even for carrier work. The riverine peoples of the Niger Delta were thought of as ideal for water transport service but not for headloading.

12. See Ashanti Goldfields Corporation papers, Guildhall Library, London, 14,171/41, p. 99, Watkins to Mann, March 22, 1917 ; and CO96/576/36407 of August 1, 1916 ; also CO445/41/16462 CO minute by Beattie on WO letter from Cubitt to U.S/S, March 29, 1917, which said that the Gold Coast was not to supply labor for East Africa.

and an acute shortage of labor. He asked the War Office for a further draft of 5,000 West African carriers which he said were "...of the utmost importance."¹³ The Colonial Office, subjected to increasing and sometimes conflicting demands for carriers from the "woolly" War Office and uncertain of how many were actually required from West Africa, arranged an interdepartmental conference for 28 February 1917 when the whole matter was thrashed out. The first West

TABLE I
West African Carriers Employed Overseas

	Gold Coast (Togoland)	Sierra Leone	Gambia	Nigeria	Total
<i>Togoland</i>	c. 2000				
killed					
died from disease, etc.					
<i>Cameroons</i>	3294	5888		5002	14,184
killed	7	10		9	26
died of disease	1521	3153		93	309 (515)
& missing, etc.					
invalided	1521	3153		3034	8,883
<i>East Africa</i>	400	4952	75	3964	9,391
killed in action					
died of disease, etc.	75	852		834	1,761
<i>MT Drivers</i>	993			353	1,346
<i>Inland Water</i>					
Transport Services		978		818	1,796

Source : CO445/48/27111, September 1, 1919.

Only 21 W.A. (ten S.L. and eleven Nigerian) carriers were killed in action between May 29, 1917 and March 16, 1918 ; CO445/44/34950, March 27, 1918. (See also n. 13)

TABLE II
Total Carriers Recruited in West Africa, 1914 - 1918

	Enlisted Carriers	Transport Carriers	Drivers (MT)	IWTS
Nigeria	1,802	35,064	353	818
Gold Coast	486	4,830	993	—
Sierra Leone	250	11,890*	—	978
Gambia	7	37	—	—
Totals	2,545	51,821	1,346	1,796

* Includes a number of Gambians.

Source : CO445/48/27111, September 1, 1919.

13. CO445/37/62587 minute, December 30, 1916.

African carriers arrived in East Africa in May 1917 ; by the end of the War the corps numbered over 9,400 men.¹⁴

In addition to supplying carriers West Africa was also tapped by the Imperial Government for other forms of labor. Certain members of the Cabinet and the War Office saw West Africa as a reservoir of manpower for deployment in imperial military service. From March 1916 onwards there were suggestions that West Africans should be used in the docks of the Channel ports, for building munition factories in the United Kingdom, as miners on the Western Front, and for artillery supply work in France. The Colonial Office and the colonial authorities strongly resisted all these proposals to use West Africans in Europe. They also raised initial objections to proposals to recruit non-combatants as motor transport drivers for East Africa and an Inland Water Transport Service for Mesopotamia. By late 1916, following discussions with the local colonial governments, these objections were overcome and it was agreed to supply both drivers and water transport workers. Nearly 1,350 motor drivers, principally English speaking literates from the Gold Coast Colony, went to East Africa. Recruiting for the IWTS was resisted by the Gold Coast and Nigeria. It saw service in East Africa, India, Mesopotamia, and the Persian Gulf.¹⁵

III – RECRUITMENT

Carrier work of all kinds was generally avoided by West Africans unless they were compelled to service by economic circumstances or impressment.¹⁶ Many Africans disliked commercial carrying as this frequently meant being in the employ of Europeans ; others despised such labor as “donkey work.” Military carrier service with all its attendant risks and hardships was even more eschewed : “The West African carrier is little better than a beast of burden... He has to go under fire like a soldier, he is sniped at from the bush ; he runs the same risk of disease without any reward beyond his pay, not even a medal as a record of his service.”¹⁷

14. There are various conflicting figures for the total number of West African non-combatants in the War. CO445/48/27111 CO memo Reorganization of the WAFF and KAR, May 5, 1919, provides figures to September 1, 1918 which are at variance with those given in CO537/954 Haywood to S/S, secret memo, July 3, 1923, “Manpower – Native Races of West Africa.” On West African carriers employed in East Africa, CO445/44/34950 returns compiled by Lt. E. R. Langley, March 27, 1918, states that 8,916 West Africans served for the period 29.5.1917 to 16.3.1918. This substantially agrees with the figure of 8,911 given in CO445/42/48141, minute by Beattie, September 27, 1917. A calculation made from the monthly returns from the C-in-C East Africa to the WO for the period July 4, 1917 to November 30, 1918, gives a peak figure for non-combatants of 9,150. One difficulty, unresolved even by the WO, was determining the difference between “enlisted” and “recruited” carriers, “porters” and “carriers” and “labourers” and “carriers”, see CO445/56/16908, March 11, 1921.

15. CAB 45/113.

16. See Roger Thomas, “Forced Labour in British West Africa : The Case of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast 1906–1927,” *JAH* XIV, I (1973).

17. H. C. J. Biss, *The Relief of Kumasi* (London, 1911), p. 92.

In the major pre-World War I military campaigns, West African colonial authorities used force to secure carriers.¹⁸ For example, a political or military official might demand the services of additional carriers from the villages through which he trekked and if they were not forthcoming simply impress men and sometimes women and children.¹⁹ Gerald Adams, an officer in the Southern Nigeria Regiment, described how he impressed twenty carriers at a town near Abakaliki while on an expedition in 1910. When one of the carriers bolted, Adams promptly drew his revolver and shot him dead, explaining that "...it would have been fatal to let him escape to tell his friends and tribesmen that white men with soldiers had tried to take him as a carrier, but that he had been too much for them."²⁰ Thus by 1914 the military and political authorities in British West Africa had considerable experience in "carrier recruitment," a contemporary euphemism for forced labor.²¹

A system of formal conscription to raise troops and carriers was discussed by the colonial authorities in late 1916 and 1917. Major A. Haywood, sent out by the Colonial Office to West Africa in late 1916 as Assistant Director of Recruiting, provided calculations of the probable number of carriers that could be raised in each territory by voluntary methods and by conscription. He warned that while conscription might please the French it would also result in widespread opposition requiring increased garrisons to maintain law and order.²² Consequently the Colonial and War Offices, conscious of the problems facing the French in West Africa from their policy of impressment, declined to adopt an official system of carrier conscription. But the political and military officials in West Africa did not necessarily support the Colonial and War Offices' consensus. Donald Cameron, Governor of the Gambia, agreed with Captain Law, Commander of the Gambian Company, that only compulsion would produce the required number of labor and troops from the territory: "... a show of armed force and an intention to use it if necessary to obtain what we want, is the nature of the compulsion that I have in mind, and it is the only practicable one."²³ Faced with similar difficulties in getting labor for the

18. See Brigadier General Crozier's *Five Years Hard* (London, 1932), the account of the conquest of Sokoto and the various methods used to conscript porters. See also Brackenbury, *The Ashanti War II*, ch. 1; Frederick Boyle, *Through Fanteeland to Coomassie: A Diary of the Ashanti Expedition* (London, 1874), pp. 115–117, 251–252; Armitage and Montanaro, *Ashanti Campaign*, p. 116. The Gold Coast Compulsory Labour Ordinance of 1895 was introduced to recruit carriers for the Asante campaign; see F. Agbodeka, *African Politics and British Policy in the Gold Coast 1868–1900* (London, 1972), pp. 134–135. Force was also used in peace time recruitment; see J. A. Braimah and Jack Goody, *Salaga: The Struggle for Power* (London, 1967), pp. 62–63.

19. A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs. Indirect Rule in South Eastern Nigeria 1891–1929* (London, 1972). Hereafter cited as Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*.

20. Rhodes House Library, Oxford, Mss. Afr. s. 375, "By Force or Argument," in *Five Nigerian Tales*, typescript, pp. 11–12.

21. Robert Huessler, *The British in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford, 1968), p. 44, n. 3.

22. CO445/42/27100, Haywood to Adj. Gen. at WO "Recruiting in West Africa" secret, May 2, 1917, suggested that by compulsion c. 40,495 carriers could be raised from the "non-fighting tribes" in West Africa while voluntary methods would produce c. 14,200.

23. CO445/38/19493, Cameron to Long, secret memo, June 10, 1917.

Cameroons campaign in late 1914, Lugard ordered that carriers should be impressed.

British methods of compelling Africans to serve as carriers took several forms : political and economic threatening of chiefs and headmen, intimidation and extortion of individuals and kidnappings en masse. A European official in Ondo, Western Nigeria, wrote in 1915 : "I have evidence that, in the past, men have invariably been compelled to serve as carriers... On all sides I hear charges of extortion and oppression... It is possible, also, that harsh treatment in the past may have caused an added distaste for such work. An English officer has recently told me in confidence that he has known of instances of carriers being put in prison for three or four days at a certain station to prevent them going away..."²⁴ In the Cameroons, British officers forcibly recruited and detained carriers with the help of indigenous, irregular troops. Major W. Mayer-Griffith, line of communications officer to the Yaounde Column, recorded in his diary : "2 May 1915 : brought back 260 local carriers and located them in the fort and allowed their wives (ladies with tails) to bring them chop twice daily. 3 May 1915 : local partisan leader sent out with strong patrol to rope in more local lights ; brought in another 109."²⁵

Official war sources often describe carrier recruits as "volunteers" supplied through the agency of the chiefs. G. H. Findlay, an administrator in Southern Nigeria, recorded that he repeatedly "threatened" chiefs to get carriers.²⁶ From Sierra Leone in 1917 the Governor reported that "...recruiting has latterly been done through the D.C. and chiefs ; and in one or two cases at least the old West African tendency to requisition and use forced labour has asserted itself."²⁷ A district officer was much more frank than his Governor : "...as long as the chiefs are called upon by the Government to assist in recruiting, the carriers are not strictly volunteers. It may, in fact, be said that the greater portion of these men may agree to serve as carriers simply because they are under tribal discipline and any arrangement therefore, which would tend to remove them from tribal discipline on their return would not only be highly unpopular with the Chiefs and Headmen, but would render recruiting in the future more difficult and uncertain as without the cooperation of the Chiefs little can be done in this matter."²⁸ Certain traditional rulers sought to gain political advantages by supplying colonial authorities with carriers. For example, Sri III, the Fia of Anlo Ewe, said that he volunteered the bulk of the carriers in the

24. Quoted in Elizabeth Isichi, *History of West Africa Since 1800* (London, 1977), p. 227.

25. "Some Sidelights on the Cameroon Expedition" – based on the diaries of the late W. Meyer-Griffith, *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* LXV (1919).

26. RHL, Findlay diaries Mss. Afr. s. 1035, January 24, 1917.

27. CO445/39/35856, Wilkinson to Long, conf., July 2, 1917.

28. Capt. Stanley to Colonial Secretary, Pujehun Arch. N. Sherbro Out Letter Book II, p. 178, February 11, 1917, quoted in John Grace, *Domestic Slavery in West Africa* (London, 1975), pp. 221–222. Hereafter cited as Grace, *Domestic Slavery*.

Togoland offensive because he "...believed Britain would unite them with their Togoland brethren once again as a family."²⁹

The final word on enforced recruitment comes from an African, carrier #1475, recruited in Southern Nigeria in 1914 : "We came back one night from our yam farm. The chief called us and handed us over to a Government messenger. I did not know where we were going to, but the chief and the messenger said that the white man had sent for us and so we must go. After three days we reached the white man's compound. Plenty of others had arrived from other villages far away. The white man wrote our names in a book, tied a brass number ticket round our neck, and gave each man a blanket and food. Then he told us that we were going to the great war to help the King's soldiers, who were preventing the Germans coming to our country and burning it. We left and marched far into the bush. The Government police led the way, and allowed no man to stop behind."³⁰

Unlike the soldier, World War I carriers had no prospect of gratuity or pension or even a disability allowance.³¹ And pay rates provided little incentive to voluntary enlistment. In the Gold Coast in 1917, it was reported that cocoa provided a much more profitable source of income and that the people would neither work nor carry. Also carrier pay was often irregular; Lugard was of the opinion that failure to pay carriers engaged for the Cameroons had seriously hindered further recruitment and that, even more than the rate of pay offered to recruits, enlistment depended on the season; men refused to leave their farms as soon as the rains broke.³² Carriers, especially those employed near home, were likely to return to their farms or go to employment that was both easier and better paid. Major Crookenden, reporting on the Cross River Column 10 February 1915, said that carriers did three months work and then wanted to return to their farms.³³ Lack of shipping for transport to East Africa also hindered recruitment. The Governor General believed that carrier recruits stranded on Lagos docks "...in some cases nearly two months seriously militated against engagement."³⁴ Many of the three thousand carriers assembled at Freetown in late February 1917 waited over three months for transport with the result that there was widespread discontent and also desertion.³⁵

As unwilling recruits, carriers inevitably tried to escape although this was unlikely on overseas service remote from home and friends. In all probability impressed carriers often resisted, or showed their resentment, in the only ways

29. A. Lethbridge, *West Africa the Elusive* (London, 1921), p. 55.

30. "The Carrier's Tale," by E. M. Falk (D. O. Owerri, S. Nigeria), in an unidentified British newspaper, n.d., found in Falk papers RHL Mss. Afr., s. 1808 (6). Hereafter cited as Falk, "Carrier's Tale."

31. CO445/45/52172 states that under WAFF regulations non-enlisted carriers were eligible for disability compensation but all evidence suggests they did not receive this benefit.

32. CO445/40/17335, Lugard to Long, March 1917.

33. WO95/5382, Crookenden to Lugard.

34. CO445/40/17335, Lugard to Long, March 1917.

35. N. A. Cox-George, *Finance and Development in West Africa: The Sierra Leone Experience* (London, 1961), p. 182. Hereafter cited as Cox-George, *Finance and Development*.

left to them – by malingering, looting or discarding their loads, feigning sickness, and willfully misunderstanding orders – in short by resorting to all the passive resistance techniques of enforced labor. In order to escape recruiting parties young men took to the bush or crossed into neighboring territories. For example two hundred Mende fled into Liberia in 1915 to avoid carrier service.³⁶ In some instances chiefs led their people in flight across the nearest frontier. More often chiefs supplied the military authorities with social misfits and the infirm.³⁷

There is little evidence that literate Africans remonstrated against carrier conscription. An unnamed correspondent protested to the *Times of Nigeria* in 1915 that the massacre of the Ijemo “...and the recent impressment of some Egba citizens as carriers in the Cameroons expedition are momentous matters demanding speedy solution in the interests of justice.” Therefore, continued the anonymous writer, a number of Egba had banded together to form the Abeokuta “Reform Club.”³⁸ But in general the educated elite declined to criticize the government’s forcible recruitment of the illiterate population and instead actively supported the war effort in the hope of gaining for themselves post war political concessions.³⁹

IV – CARRIER ORGANIZATION

West African carriers were organized into three Carrier Corps, from Sierra Leone, Southern Nigeria, and Northern Nigeria. The small number of carriers from Gambia and the Gold Coast were attached to the Sierra Leone Corps. On enlistment, recruits, whose ages varied from 16 to 40 years,⁴⁰ were medically examined, vaccinated (although not always) and given basic training in drill and communication by signals. Carriers were organized in companies, where possible by ethnic group, of one hundred men under an overseer and further divided into gangs of twenty-five with a headman. The overseer was expected to be able to understand English and translate orders. White officers and B.N.C.O.’s on average a ratio of 1:100, supervised each Corps. Each carrier was issued with a pay book and a numbered disc to wear while his name was entered into a register. Carriers scheduled to serve overseas were occasionally

36. Bo Archive M.P. 28/15, Manager Bank of British West Africa to Col. Sec., January 29, 1915, quoted in Grace, *Domestic Slavery*, p. 188.

37. For a discussion of Nigerian responses to military recruitment during the war see James K. Matthews, “Nigerian Military Experiences in the First World War – Recruitment, Service and Demobilization,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, June 1979.

38. *The Times of Nigeria*, November 2, 1915, p. 6.

39. An editorial in the *Gold Coast Leader*, May 4, 1918, stated that “...never before in modern history has the black man had better opportunity for his uplift than in the present war... we shall not be left out of the reckoning at the last day.” Even as articulate an opponent of colonial rule as I. T. Wallace Johnson volunteered as a clerk in the Sierra Leone Carrier Corps.

40. T. D. Hewer, RHL Mss. Afr. s. 821, was in charge of Sierra Leone carriers in 1917.

given their kit after training but in most cases clothing and equipment were not distributed until they were about to embark or had arrived at their destination. For example, the Sierra Leone carriers did not receive their khaki shorts, drill blouse, water bottle, machete, haversack and cloth or reed head pad⁴¹ until they disembarked at Kilwa in mid-1917. Carriers serving in the Cameroons were given an old kernel sack for a jumper as additional protection during the rainy season. In nearly all cases, carriers went barefooted; kerosene and tar were at times applied to feet in an attempt to prevent jiggers. At Duala and the East African ports of disembarkation carrier encampments of corrugated iron huts were erected, while in the field carriers built their own shelters each night. The Corps was run as a military unit and deserters could be, and were, shot; the most common punishment was a fine deducted from wages, while for more serious offences carriers could be flogged by the headman.

The basic role of carriers was head portage in support of combatants but this quickly changed during the war and they came to be regarded as general laborers: "Spells intended for rest were often spent cutting roads... great trees had to be felled to allow motor cars to hurriedly bring up supplies. A few Nigerian carriers with machetes often did more to speed up progress in this way than a corps of trained South African labourers with picks and shovels."⁴² Carriers were also allocated specialists tasks such as dock worker and boatman which required additional training. In East Africa a few were switched to enlisted carrier status or combatant roles while others became lorry drivers.⁴³ Complaints by medical officers about careless movement of the wounded in the Cameroons resulted in the creation of specially trained medical assistants and stretcher bearers. The medical units in East Africa "...owed a debt of gratitude to the Nigerian Carrier Corps. The heroic work of tending the wounded and fever stricken by the two Nigerian Field Hospitals and the various sections of the West African Field Ambulance stand out among the feats of military medical enterprise in the East African Campaign... owing to sickness and heavy casualties [in Portuguese East Africa] field medical arrangements had almost broken down... the 30th Nigerian First Field Hospital... saved the situation."⁴⁴

Military regulations strictly laid down that carriers must not head load more than fifty to sixty pounds weight, depending upon the man's build and that this burden should not be transported more than fifteen miles each day. Standing orders also stated that: "An officer or B.N.C.O. in charge of the rear guard will not leave sick carriers on the road on any account."⁴⁵ With the outbreak of war, carrier rights such as these were unenforceable. Headloads

41. Gumo in Hausa, Fuko in Mende.

42. "The Nigerian Carrier Corps," by the "Passerby," *West Africa*, July 24, 1920, p. 1004. Hereafter cited as "Passerby," *West Africa*.

43. WO95/5310, Col. P. O. Hazleton, Dir. of Supply and Transport, East African Force, reported April 2, 1918 that a shortage of motor drivers due to sickness had led to carriers being trained as drivers.

44. "Passerby," *West Africa*, July 24, 1920, p. 1004.

45. CO445/34/29603, Regimental Standing Orders, Nigerian Regiment, 1914.

were not weighed, miles were not counted and lame carriers were left in the bush to fend for themselves.

V — LIFE IN THE RANKS

In the Cameroons and the East African campaigns carriers suffered great privations. The war, in both theaters was one of constant movement over a harsh and often inaccessible terrain that presented line of communication problems with which the developing commissariat and medical services of the army found it difficult to cope. It was not only a question of supplying the combatants with ammunition, food and water, but also maintaining the carriers themselves in a country which presented limited opportunities for foraging. As a consequence, carriers and troops suffered from shortages of food and water, became weakened and increasingly susceptible to disease which the tightly stretched medical services were incapable of preventing or treating adequately. And carriers, although vital to the campaigns, were a very low priority in the wartime military global order of things directed from London. As Fiddian of the Colonial Office minuted many years later : "Of course before the end of the East African campaign... the rate of mortality in East Africa only stopped short of a scandal because the people who suffered most were the carriers — and after all, who cares about native carriers?"⁴⁶ Few carriers became casualties as a result of enemy action. The vast majority of deaths and disablings were due to disease, overwork and undernourishment.

In the Cameroons campaign there were two levels of field rations, both of which were reported as being generally "insufficient." The Number 1 ration consisted of 2,702 calories, the Number 2 ration only 1,741 calories. The Medical Department reported that "...the carriers, both British and French, suffered much more seriously than the native troops and Europeans. This was undoubtedly due to their having more fatiguing work, less nutritious food and less clothing than the native soldiers."⁴⁷ These meager rations often failed to arrive on time or, when they did, proved to be spoiled or the wrong kinds of food ; maize was supplied to rice-eating Mende carriers serving on the Rufiji, who refused to eat it. At times carriers had no means of cooking their food. Dr. J. Bailey, the medical officer with the Cross River column in the Cameroons, strongly criticized the neglect of the labor force : "Carriers were allowed no loads of cookpots and till the end of the campaign no blankets. This greatly accentuated the very great hardships they were called on to endure and should not be tolerated again. There must be something wrong with a system which entails greater hardships on the friendly carrier than on the enemy."⁴⁸ A very detailed analysis of carrier casualties in the Cameroons was compiled in 1916.

46. CO820/17/22719, minute by Fiddian, May 19, 1934.

47. WO33/781, Encl. no. 7, "Report by Ass. Dir. of Medical Services, Cameroons Campaign, September 1914–September 1916."

48. CO583/49/52682, Boyle to Law, conf., October 16, 1916, encl. letter and reports from the Dir. of Med. and Sanitary Services, including recommendations and criticisms by Dr. J. C. M. Bailey, Sen. Med. Officer, Cross River Column, Cameroon, March 28, 1916.

Of the 14,184 imported British carriers, over half were invalided mainly with either ulcerated feet and legs, digestive and respiratory problems, malaria, and what were termed “debility” and “wasting”. The official report states that the recorded figure of 515 deaths from disease was “certainly” lower than the actual figure.⁴⁹

The rations that reached the carriers in the southern region of Tanganyika were even less than those provided for the Cameroons. In early 1917 Lugard reported that Nigerian carriers and troops “...were on .56 of a full ration – the full ration being only .67 that given in the Cameroons – an average of about seventeen ounces of food per diem... The quality also steadily decreased and they were ultimately existing almost entirely on maize meal which had got wet and heated.” Their received ration was under 1000 calories a day.⁵⁰ In certain areas of southern Tanganyika, so severe did the food situation become that carriers “...driven by hunger were eating roots, leaves and berries and in consequence a large number of cases of alkaloidal poisoning occurred through which several men lost their lives.”⁵¹ The critical reports about conditions and casualties in the Cameroons campaign spurred the Colonial Office – and the colonial authorities in West Africa – to demand that adequate planning and care should be taken in supplying carriers to East Africa in mid-1917. The Colonial Office urged a ratio of one medical officer to every five hundred carriers to which the Army Medical Department, faced with an acute shortage of doctors, replied with a suggested one to two thousand. This forced the colonial authorities to agree to the employment of African doctors with the commissioned rank of Surgeon Lieutenant. Later a ratio of one medical officer to every one thousand carriers was accepted.⁵² In spite of the good intention to make adequate medical arrangements a very large number of carriers arrived in East Africa without being vaccinated against smallpox or treated for cerebro-spinal meningitis.

The casualty rate from disease among West African carriers, most of whom were employed in the malarious south of Tanganyika and in Portuguese East Africa, was extremely high. It was highest among the Southern Nigerian Corps which had an annual death rate of 394 per 1000 and with only thirty-seven per cent of the original force effective after a period of nine months service, i.e., by March 1918; in contrast the Northern Nigerian Corps had a death rate of 83 per 1000 and the Sierra Leoneans 174 per 1000.⁵³ Why there

49. WO33/781, Encl. no. 7, September 1914–September 1916.

50. CO445/40/56471, Lugard to Long, October 12, 1917. During the Second World War carriers in Burma were allocated a diet of about 4,300 calories. But by then the military commissariat services were estimating the numbers of cigarettes and even sheets of lavatory paper required for troops and laborers.

51. CO445/44/24800, Lugard to S/S, despatch no. 39, April 8, 1918; encl. no. 1, Cunliffe to Lugard, March 3, 1918, enclosing report on Nigerian overseas contingent by Dr. T. M. R. Leonard, March 24, 1918.

52. CO445/42/31776, June 23, 1917.

53. CO446/44/34950, West Africa Carrier Corps statistics, May 29, 1917 to March 16, 1918 compiled from data supplied by Lt. E. R. Longley, SLCC/S.O. W. Afr. in report by Capt. H. B. Bateman, Dar es Salaam, March 27, 1918.

was such a startlingly high mortality rate among the Southern Nigerians, a figure considerably in excess of the death rate for locally recruited carriers, is not immediately clear. There are, however, a number of likely causes. The majority of West African carriers were used as front-line porters; they were further weakened by the psychological disadvantages of serving overseas and at a great distance from home; and there may have also been the added feature, suggested at the time, that the Southern Nigerians were subjected to extremely callous treatment.⁵⁴

VI — DEMOBILIZATION

Sick and disabled soldiers and carriers were sent home from the Cameroons and East Africa when shipping became available. Nwose, #1475 of the Southern Nigeria Carrier Corps, was wounded in the Cameroons and landed at Lagos where he and his comrades were quarantined before being sent to their places of recruitment for demobilization and final pay off.⁵⁵ The Colonial Government did not want unemployed idlers in the capital. Also, officials feared that if carriers were to "...receive their pay in full prior to their departure from Lagos they (were) likely to lose their money by thefts and gambling on route to the stations..."⁵⁶ leaving nothing to invest in "...trade goods or cows or farmlands."⁵⁷ Easterners like Nwose stayed in Port Harcourt until rail transport was available to Owerri, a principal demobilization depot. At Port Harcourt the men, including invalids, did not have adequate food, shelter, fuel or sanitary facilities.⁵⁸ Carriers from the North were sent to Ilorin where the Resident put them under the charge of the police who returned them to their villages.⁵⁹

Demobilization of carriers in Nigeria did not run smoothly. Neither the army nor Lugard, who admitted that the carriers in Lagos went "without definite care or supervision" wanted to take responsibility for the men.⁶⁰ It was the Nigerian Comforts Fund, founded in 1917 "...to supply troops and carriers with comforts to provide for the immediate needs of each draft as they return..." that initiated a program for their stewardship.⁶¹ Mr. T.F. Burrowes of the Lagos Customs House and chairman of the Fund explained the problem to

54. Report by Lieutenant-Colonel O. F. Watkins, Director of Military Labour, to the B.E.A. Expeditionary Force, CO533/216/4603, letters of Major Lyon, commanding Ibo carriers, September to December 1917; quoted in G. W. T. Hodges, "African Manpower Statistics," *The Journal of African History* XIX, 1978, no. 1, p. 111, n. 59.

55. Falk, "Carrier's Tale."

56. Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan: Central Secretary's Office, 19/5 N2856/17, CC West to CS 1917.

57. Special Correspondent in East Africa, *West Africa*, May 18, 1918, p. 242.

58. CSO 19/6 N2748/18, E. W. Cox Acting Sec. S.P. to Station Magistrate Port Harcourt, December 13, 1918.

59. CSO 19/5 N2856/17, Goldsmith to C.S., December 4, 1917.

60. *Ibid.*, CC. West to Lugard, December, 1917.

61. CSO 19/5 N1735/17, Pamphlet, "Nigeria in the Great War." Reproduced under permission Elliot and Frey Ltd., London, n.d.

Lugard : "Some organization is required to deal with carriers arriving from East Africa. I am informed that a large number of them, obviously in a bad state of health, were about the public offices yesterday... It is no one's duty in particular to care specifically for these people... they are apt to carry disease... some thousands at a time will have to be dealt with eventually. And in the interests of the town they will have to be isolated for sometime after their arrival ; or at all events they should not mix with the people of the town. The committee suggests that a special carrier camp should be formed where the wants of the men can be met." ⁶²

The military authorities agreed that a camp was needed, and suggested that Ikoyi should be the site. The Comforts Fund provided a market and by January the government had begun construction of barracks for the carriers. But in March, after thousands of carriers, mostly wounded or sick, had arrived in Lagos, Col. F. Jenkins, the Acting Commandant of the Nigeria Regiment, reported that "...the work done (at Ikoyi) so far is most unsatisfactory. Neither the roofs nor walls of the shelters erected afford any protection from the weather. It would be quite impossible to quarter any human beings least of all invalids in these shelters..." ⁶³

Sierra Leone carriers, following their quarantine in Freetown, were also returned to their recruitment depots for disbandment ; a large number of them were domestic slaves lent to the government by chiefs on the understanding that they would be returned to their masters when the war was over. ⁶⁴ But the efforts to keep the demobilized carriers out of Freetown were not totally successful. War veteran carriers "...having through force of circumstances seen something of the doubtful attractions of civilization... (were) unwilling to return to their uneventful and peaceful lives... in the Protectorate (and preferred) to eke out a precarious existence in the crowded capital of the colony." ⁶⁵ Some Sierra Leone carriers used their earnings to redeem themselves from domestic slavery but many chose not to and, as the Governor reported, "...there was no sign of any general desire for redemption although many thousands of carriers had gone to East Africa. The question is one of status rather than actual servitude." ⁶⁶ No doubt significant numbers of veterans were paid off in full and made wise investments with their accumulated pay. But many other carriers were less fortunate.

Carrier pay records all through the war were carelessly kept by their officers. Col. Jenkins stated that owing to the absence of last pay certificates following the Cameroons campaign "...great difficulties... were experienced in

62. CSO 19/5 N2856/17, Burrowes to Lugard, December, 1917.

63. *Ibid.*, Jenkins to C.S., March 15, 1917.

64. Grace, *Domestic Slavery*, p. 198 ; see also F. J. W. Migeod, *A New View of Sierra Leone* (London, 1926), pp. 123-124.

65. Sierra Leone Report of the Census for the Year 1921, London, 1922, p. 5 ; cited in Michael Crowder and J. F. A. Ajayi, *The History of West Africa* (New York, 1974), vol. II, p. 512.

66. CO267/588/57116 Wilkinson to Milner, conf., October 28, 1920.

adjusting the men's accounts (combatants' and carriers')... had such a case occurred in the case of European British soldiers it would have engaged the attention of parliament" and he correctly predicted that the same problems would occur following the East African campaign.⁶⁷ Often, upon enlistment, the British gave the men new names to signify their place of registration (i.e., Ojo Ibadan, Awudu Kano, Momadu Zaria) which was not necessarily their residence. This greatly complicated the problem of accurate record keeping. The Resident at Zaria, an important recruiting ground for both combatants and non-combatants, stated that pay records gave names that did not correspond with numbers, listed villages that did not exist in his Province and names that could not be Northern.⁶⁸

Carriers were re-numbered in East Africa which led to terribly confused pay records. This was most evident when the authorities attempted to settle deceased carriers' estates, which included a £6 death gratuity plus back pay up to £6. On 7 December 1917 the Resident, Bauchi Province, wired the Secretary, Northern Provinces that : "...information supplied is insufficient to identify the men (of the Northern Nigeria Carrier Corps) for the following reasons : the numbers given against the names of the deceased are those of the Carrier Corps nominal roll. No copy of the roll has been supplied to the Province nor do the numbers correspond to those given carriers on enlistment here... the names given occur very many times over in the list so afford no clue to identifying any individual. Even the name of the village of origin is not given."⁶⁹

VII – POST-WAR IMPACT

Chiefs forced to act as Government agents were often caught in a cleft stick, faced with a choice of obeying the authorities while losing the respect of their people which, consequently, contributed to the weakening of the system of indirect rule. At Obela, in Owerri Province of Southern Nigeria, Chief Wandingo was "...driven from his town and threatened with death should he return... because he had endeavoured to persuade certain of his people to act as carriers for the transport of telegraph materials from Akweta to Itu which was urgently required by the troops on the Nigerian frontier."⁷⁰ In the following punitive police action, which became known as the "Owerri massacre," two towns were destroyed and an unknown number of people killed. E. M. Falk, the D.O. at Owerri, reported that the "...relatives of men who have not come

67. CSO 19/5 N1855/17 Jenkins to C.S., July 19, 1917.

68. CSO 19/6 N71/18, C.O. Migeod Res. Zaria to Sec. N.P., November 27, 1917.

69. *Ibid.*, John Molyneux, A.D.O. for Res., December 7, 1917. The Carrier Corps nominal roll or "Red Book" recorded the new I.D. numbers assigned to carriers on arrival to East Africa. Somewhere between there and West Africa or England the book disappeared.

70. CO583/89/45292 Lugard to Harcourt, October 28, 1914. For a discussion of war-time civil disturbances in Nigeria, see Akinjide Osuntokun, "Disaffection and Revolts in Nigeria During the First World War, 1914–1918," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* V, no. 2 (1971), pp. 177–192.

back from military expeditions or railway work invariably consider the chief who recruited the men to be guilty of a species of homicide or slave dealing”⁷¹ and Oba Eweka II told the Commissioner of Benin City that his attempts to procure military portage had failed because “...the Benin people (were) trying to spoil (his) good name and work in order that the government (would) think (him) incapable to control them.”⁷²

The cost of the Togoland and Cameroons campaigns were borne by the local treasuries and, although the imperial exchequer took over responsibility for the carriers used in East Africa, the Nigerian Carrier Corps between December 1916 and December 1918 cost the territory over £46,000.⁷³ By taking the younger, fitter men (although this was not always the case) carrier recruitment did result, in Sierra Leone at least, in a decline of food production and regional scarcities of certain foodstuffs. I. A. Cox-George suggests that carrier recruitment for the Cameroons campaign helped relieve the unemployment situation among the Freetown labor force caused by the completion of military installations in 1911–1912 and the economic depression of 1913.⁷⁴ Wages paid to carriers also encouraged inflation, especially with demobilization in Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

In the Gold Coast and Nigeria, lack of labor contributed to industrial disruption. H. S. W. Edwards, D.O. at Bauchi (Northern Nigeria) reported that railroad construction had been drastically curtailed because a panic was created among the workers in August 1914 and they bolted en masse : “I think they got the idea that those taken by the transport department for military convoys were doomed to go to some far country to war.”

In July, the Emir of Bauchi had supplied 3,000 men for the building of the Bauchi Light Railway, but by the end of September “...owing to the large demands for transport and the unsettled feeling caused by the war, the number of men on the work (was) below 1,000...”⁷⁵ On the outbreak of war the acting manager of the Gold Coast’s Obuasi gold mines reported that government attempts to secure military carriers had led to unrest : “Sixty carriers have been obtained... and the rest of the natives are in fear of arrest for this purpose, with the consequence that yesterday the camp was more or less deserted, most of the boys taking to the bush.”⁷⁶

There was also a diminishing of the labor pool owing to carrier movement spreading disease – smallpox, sleeping sickness and venereal disease – from Sierra Leone and Nigeria to the Cameroons and dysentery and influenza throughout West Africa.

71. Memo no. 32/1919, May 20, 1919, Falk to Resident in NNA OW 215/19, quoted in Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, pp. 273–274.

72. NNA Benin Provincial Papers I 854/14 Eweka II to Commissioner Benin City, November 3, 1914.

73. CO445/48/56419 Crown Agents to US/S CO, September 30, 1919.

74. Cox-George, *Finance and Development*, p. 182.

75. H.S.W. Edwards, RHL Mss. Afr. s. 764.

76. ASH. Gold Corp. 14, 171/36, p. 74 ; W. Sampson to Mann, August 11, 1914.

While very little has been gleaned from the records regarding the impact of carrier recruitment and service on the political and economic institutions of the four British West African territories, even less has been found documenting the relationships between the war experience and post war cultural and social change. West African languages were expanded and molded in their adoption of English words. For example Hausa soldiers and carriers who went overseas "...on ships... learnt the words 'down below' for the vast holds in which bunks had been knocked up for them... and a 'dambelo' became a large barge on the Benue... and eventually... a cheap prostitute who takes any number of men each night." ⁷⁷ Swahili and other East African languages must also have influenced West African tongues.

West Africans borrowed East African cultural accoutrements. F. W. H. Migeod, while on one of his many West African treks, noted the Sierra Leoneans use of the "metallophone" : "I found a biscuit tin was used as a sound box and the half dozen steel notes were made from... perhaps knife blades ground down thin. This instrument does not belong to this country... The idea was brought back by natives who had been to East Africa in the war." ⁷⁸ There may well be other more important cultural diffusion between West and East Africa as a result of war service. For example, what were the ramifications for West Africa of Hausa "...experiments in architecture – of grass and bamboo construction" and the Mendes' enthusiasm for gathering souvenirs such as cowries and other East African shells "...with the intention of presenting necklaces and waist belts to their womenfolk..." back home. ⁷⁹ There was certainly cultural diffusion from West to East Africa. It would be interesting to determine what became of Mende carriers who, having acquired good paying jobs as motor lorry drivers, remained in Kenya. ⁸⁰ Whatever future research uncovers in World War I carrier recruitment, service and demobilization and their impact on West Africa, the success of the Allied effort in Africa owed much to these unsung heroes of whom Falk wrote : "No medal will be theirs, no role of honour will record their names, no monument will mark the graves of those who have perished and tell posterity in what course they lost their lives." ⁸¹

77. Stanhope White, *Dan Bana* (London, 1966), p. 186.

78. F. W. H. Migeod, *A View of Sierra Leone* [London, 1926], p. 82.

79. "A Reader of West Africa in East Africa," *West Africa*, January 11, 1919, p. 85.

80. *Ibid.*

81. Falk, "Carrier's Tale."