

Nigerian Contribution to the Conquest of Cameroon Under the Anglo-French Expeditionary Force, 1914-1916

*Ibiang Oden Ewa*¹

Abstract

In the wake of the First World War, the Nigeria Regiment suffered defeat in all its encounters with the German forces in Cameroon. When, however, Nigerian soldiers came under the Anglo-French Expeditionary Force to reengage the German forces in unrelenting offensives, the tide was turned against the Germans. The soul of German resistance in Cameroon was broken when Nigerian troops, in a two-pronged assault, captured Duala and Bonaberi and, in subsequent operations, took Yaunde and Mora. The immediate response of the Germans to the gains of Nigerian soldiers was to surrender Cameroon to the British. With Nigerian soldiers participating and distinguishing themselves in nearly all the combat operations and with most of the fighting being strictly between Nigerian and German forces, Nigeria can be noted as a fundamental factor in the conquest of Cameroon.

Keywords: Nigeria, Cameroon, Anglo-French, First World War,

Introduction

When the First World War broke out in August, 1914, the Nigeria Regiment was not adequately prepared for it. Apart from the fact that as a newly integrated force, it was still grappling with the problem of operational synergy on the outbreak of the war, the regiment was not adequately oriented to fight an enemy force led by highly disciplined European officers and armed with sophisticated weapons. The responsibilities of the regiment, as originally conceived and laid down by the Committee of Imperial Defence, were to maintain the internal security of Nigeria, defend her territorial frontiers and, if necessary, give military support to other British colonies in West Africa. The First World War, being a global emergency, did not fall within the province of these responsibilities. Yet the Nigeria Regiment, with only a total of 5,721

¹Senior Lecturer, Department of History and Strategic Studies, Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria (ibiangodenewa@yahoo.com)

personnel, sparsely distributed over a 335,000 square mile territory, would have to be mobilised on an unprecedented scale to fight the cosmopolitan war (Ewa, 2010). Following receipt of notification of war, the Nigeria Regiment, whose commandant was Colonel C. H. P. Carter, was mobilised in four columns and positioned in four strategic areas along the Nigeria-Cameroon frontier, which ran almost 1,000 miles from the Lake Chad in the north to the Atlantic coast in the south. The four columns were each positioned at the frontier towns of Maiduguri, Yola, Ikom, and Calabar.

The responsibilities of the columns were to garrison the frontiers, maintain surveillance, and repulse enemy aggression. The columns were not to go into any offensive against Cameroon until the arrival of the Anglo-French Expeditionary Force, which was the actual force being constituted to fight the war in Cameroon. But the columns, on orders from Colonel Carter, advanced into Cameroon. They went beyond their responsibility of frontier defence to launch offensive against the Germans. However, owing to their insufficient knowledge and proper understanding of the geography of Cameroon, inchoate operation plans, and improper co-ordination, the Nigeria Regiment columns were defeated in their confrontations with the German forces.

It was against this development, that the Colonial Office, via Lord Lugard, ordered the withdrawal of the columns to their defensive positions on the Nigerian frontier. The columns were to maintain their positions, as originally planned, and wait for the arrival of the expeditionary force. The aim of this paper is to indicate how the Anglo-French Expeditionary Force was prepared for the war in Cameroon and how it conducted the campaign. Most significantly, the paper will, as much as possible, identify the contribution to this campaign of Nigerian soldiers, whose role in this great expeditionary force has not been adequately brought out in the literature on the conquest of Cameroon.

Preparing the Anglo-French Expeditionary Force

Seaborne from Liverpool on August 31, 1914, General Dobell, supreme commander of the joint Anglo-French Expeditionary Force, headed for the west coast of Africa. He passed through Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Gold Coast, taking along with him the contingents for the expeditionary force from these colonies. He finally landed in Lagos on September 17, 1914, where he assembled the force. The expeditionary force, as originally constituted, was composed of about 7,000 troops drawn from French West Africa, especially Senegal, and from British

West African colonies of Nigeria, Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, and Gambia (Osuntokun, 1979).

The main military forces which provided the troops were the Nigeria Regiment, the Gold Coast Regiment, the Sierra Leone Battalion, the Gambia Company, the West African Regiment, the Senegalese Tirailleurs, and the West India Regiment, which provided a small detachment (Burns, 1978; Haywood and Clarke, 1964). Out of 7,000 men that made up the force, about 3,000 came from French West Africa, while the rest were drawn from British West Africa, with Nigeria providing the bulk of them. The ultimate total contribution of personnel to the expeditionary force by the Nigeria Regiment stood at 4,000 Nigerian soldiers and 350 British officers (Geary, 1970).

General Dobell lost no time. On September 17, 1914, the very day of his arrival in Lagos, he mobilised his force to strategic locations in its area of operation. The Nigeria Regiment troops were divided up for frontier service and internal security duties within Nigeria as well as for overseas operations in Cameroon. Those for frontier service were mobilised to the eastern frontier of Nigeria, beginning from Maiduguri in the north to Calabar and Lagos in the south. They were strategically positioned either in columns or detachments at Maiduguri, Nafada, Yola, Ikom, Calabar, and the southwestern frontier capital city of Lagos. For internal security duties within Nigeria, detachments of the troops were garrisoned at Sokoto, Birnin Kebbi, Kano, Lokoja, Ogoja, Okwoja, Abakaliki, Udi, and Okigwe (Haywood and Clarke, 1964). For the overseas expedition into Cameroon, four companies of infantry under the command of Lt.-Col. J. B. Cockburn were concentrated at the Forcados. Another four infantry companies, commanded by Lt.-Col. A. H. W. Haywood, together with a two section battery of four 2.95 inch quick firing mountain guns, under the command of Capt. C. F. S. Maclaverty, were collected at Calabar.

Apart from the West African Regiment, which formed part of the reserve and garrison in Duala following its occupation by the expeditionary force, troops from the forces of other British West African colonies were brought together in a composite battalion under the command of Lt.-Col. R. A. de B. Rose; they were kept on reserve and later used as reinforcements for the Nigerian force operating within Cameroon (Haywood and Clarke, 1964). The French contingent in the force was placed under the command of Col. Z. F. Mayer. It was sent out into Cameroon, where it successfully operated against the German force at Yapoma Bridge and Edea (Haywood and Clarke, 1964).

The Nigeria Regiment was supported by the other bodies; namely, the Nigeria Marine Contingent, the Royal Navy, the Nigerian Land Contingent, and the Nigeria Police. The Nigerian Land Contingent, which was a voluntary formation of the British officers serving in Nigeria, and the police were involved in internal policing, even though some personnel of the former participated in the operation in Cameroon. The Nigeria Marine Contingent and a squadron of the Royal Navy garrisoned the harbours against German aggression and provided naval support during military operations. The command of the operation was as earlier indicated, with Lt.-Col. Cunliffe commanding all operations in Northern Cameroon; Lt.-Col Mair commanding those in Southern Cameroon, from the upper Cross River to Calabar; and General Dobell commanding the entire operations.

Meanwhile, another French force of about 7,020 native soldiers and 575 French officers, based at Brazzaville in the Middle Congo and operating under the supreme command of the French General Aymerich, was operating westward from the French Equatorial Africa frontier into Cameroon (Haywood and Clarke, 1964). Columns of the force were positioned strategically at Chad, Ubangi-Shari, Middle Congo, and Garbon, from where they would advance into Cameroon. Three companies of the force publique of the Belgium Congo were also merged with General Aymerich's force (Osuntokun, 1979). In January, 1914 General Dobell abdicated his supreme command of the operation in Northern Cameroon due to communication problems. Consequently, Lt.-Col. Cunliffe was, on Lugard's request, immediately promoted to the rank of Brigadier-General to enable him assume supreme command in the Northern Cameroon. On assumption of the command, the French force at Chad, with Col. Brisset as its commander, was combined with the Nigerian forces under Cunliffe's command (Osuntokun, 1979).

Operations

The positioning of the Anglo-French forces and other Allied forces clearly presented a situation in which German Cameroon was encircled by British and French forces. Although the war lasted longer than was initially estimated, the strategy of encirclement eventually worked out in favour of the Allies, as the beleaguered Germans were put rather on the defensive throughout the war, with little or no breath and initiative for offensive against the Allies. The Germans had only 2,000 troops and 2,200 policemen with paramilitary orientation and as Osuntokun

(1979:184) put it, "the commandant of the German force, Lieutenant-Colonel Zimmermann, had to make the best of a bad situation."

Nigerian Troops Move Against Cameroon

Although her conquest was achieved by a combination of Allied forces, our concern, particularly, is to indicate the role played by Nigerian soldiers in the fall of Cameroon. Offensive against Cameroon commenced with a move to take Duala, her capital city, located southwest on the Cameroon estuary. The capture of Duala was an amphibious operation, involving a detachment of the Royal Navy, the Nigeria Marine, and troops of the Nigeria Regiment. The operation commenced on September 20, 1914 when General Dobell left Lagos by sea to Calabar via the Forcados. Coming on board with him from Forcados were soldiers of No. 1 Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment, led by Lt.-Colonel Cockburn and conveyed in two ships, *Nigeria* and *Lokoja*. The convoy was joined at Calabar by soldiers of the No. 2 Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment on board another ship, *Boma*, which was commanded by Col. Haywood. The entire flotilla moved into the Cameroon estuary on 23 September, 1914. Meanwhile, Dobell had called on the Cameroonian authorities to surrender Duala and Bonaberi beforehand.

A two-pronged invasion in which Duala was to be attacked simultaneously by the detachment of the Royal Navy from the south and by the Nigeria Regiment on land from the southeast was planned. Based on the plan, about twelve vessels of the Nigeria Marine and the naval detachment on board the warship, *HMS Challenger*, led by Navy Captain Cyrill Fuller, advanced towards Duala (Osuntokun, 1979), while Dobell was also trying to move his force to Duala through a small road from the north bank of the Dibamba River. Before Dobell could reach Duala with his troops, the contemptible German force there had, under the naval fire from the *Challenger*, which had blown up the wireless station in Duala, given up what the German Lieutenant Mathnagel saw as "useless opposition" (IWNL, 87/55/1, 1914; CSO26: 18762 VOL. 11, 1929). Duala, along with Bonaberi, was thus conceded to Fuller at 7:30 am on 27 September, 1914, thereby preempting their invasion by troops under Dobell. On the same day, the formal surrender of Duala, with Bonaberi, was effected between the commander of the German force in Duala, Lieutenant of Reserve Bottcher, and the Imperial District Commissioner of Duala, Lieutenant of Reserve Otto Wieneke, on one hand, and the commander of the Allied troops, General Dobell, on the

other (CSE 19/2/1.L. 245, 1915). Duala was subsequently garrisoned by the Nigerian troops under Cockburn, while Haywood, with his troops, moved to occupy Bonaberi.

The capitulation of Duala inflated the moral of the Nigerian soldiers and enhanced further advance for other German strongholds in Cameroon. While in Bonaberi, Haywood was reinforced with more Nigerian troops to enable him to invade Maka, situated northwest of Duala on the Northern Railway. On 1 October, 1914 Haywood left Bonaberi with a column of his troops and advanced in the direction of Maka. In the morning of the next day, 2 October, 1914 he bombarded Maka, drove off the Germans there, and occupied it. About one week later Haywood advanced further along the railway with two columns of his troops to occupy Susa, north of Maka on the railway, without resistance from the enemy.

Between 1 and 15 November, 1914 three Nigerian columns under Haywood, Cockburn, and Colonel H. E. Gorges of the West African Regiment, who doubled as the commander of one of the columns and of the whole operation, launched offensives simultaneously against Victoria, Tiko, Mpundu, and Muyuka, clearing off the enemy from the area, west of the Northern Railway. The accomplishment of these offensives propped up Gorges to advance on Buea, which he occupied on 15 November, 1914 with Nigerian troops without opposition (Haywood and Clarke, 1914). It was during these operations, that one of the Nigerian soldiers, Company Sergeant-Major Belo Akure, displayed exceptional gallantry while retiring an advance post being heavily assailed by the Germans. His gallantry on the occasion was known by the military authorities and acclaimed in a glowing citation:

On the Mungo River on the 4th November, 1914, his [Belo Akure's] behavior was particularly cool and courageous. He received order to conduct the retirement of an advance post which was being heavily attacked. The post was separated from the main body by an unfordable river 35 yards in width. Sergeant-Major Belo Akure got his men into the only available canoe, and, finding it would founder if he entered it himself, with great self-devotion he lay on the bank and covered its retirement, being all the time submitted to heavy fire, one bullet penetrating his sleeve. When the canoe reached the farther bank he ordered the men into their trenches and swam the river to join them (Haywood and Clarke, 1924, p.128; Burns, 1978, p. 229; Nigeria, 1915).

This great Nigerian soldier had, before the First World War, been awarded a West African Frontier Force DCM (Distinguish Conduct Medal) during an operation with Major Trenchard in the Cross River region, and now on account of his gallantry during the Mungo River affair, he received a clasp to the DCM. Belo Akure, who also later received the Military Medal for his gallantry in the East African campaign, has remained, to this day, a celebrity in Nigeria's military history.

Another Nigerian soldier remembered for his gallantry and courage in the Cameroon campaign was Private Usuman Gombe of 1 Battalion, Nigeria Regiment. On 15 October, 1914 Private Gombe was wounded in the face at Jabassi, while trying to put in order a jam in a maxim gun (Burns, 1964). In spite of everything, Gombe remained there until he corrected the jam and the gun worked before he could even dress his wound and return to the post.

The original plan of the Allies was to invade strategic German bases and subjugate the German colony. As it appeared that this would not do for the truculent Germans, in March, 1915 France insisted on the conquest of the German colony along with the entire protectorate. Britain accepted the scheme but observed, that the capability required to execute it was not available to the colonies. Consequently, the War Office on 1 April, 1915 wrested control of the military operations in the Cameroon from the Colonial Office (Haywood and Clarke, 1964).

Following the decision to advance for the conquest of the German Cameroon, the Allied forces took on the Germans in a series of military operations in which Nigerian soldiers gave a good account of themselves. The most important of such operations were the capture of Yaunde, a major stronghold of the Germans, and the conquest of Mora, their last bastion. The move by Nigerian soldiers to take Yaunde and Mora was begun rather strategically with the conduct of minor operations against Cameroon. As part of the operations, soldiers on the Cross River axis under Mair had, by mid January, 1915, advanced beyond the Nigerian frontiers, clearing the territory eastward to as far as Ossidinge, Nsanarati, and Tinto, which they occupied. By the same date, also, Nigerian soldiers from Maiduguri and Yola had invested Mora and Garua, while awaiting further plans and orders for their invasion (Haywood and Clarke, 1964). In June, 1915 Cunliffe and his Nigerian soldiers, assisted by French troops, attacked Garua (CO 445/36, 1916).

Having dislodged and emasculated the Germans in various operations and effected a blockade against Mora, Nigerian troops were now set to pounce on Yaunde. However, owing to the rains which

became an impediment to the conduct of military operations especially in southern Cameroon since July, 1915, no action against Yaunde was commenced until October.

After advancing on the enemy positions at Ndupe and Mbila River and capturing Wumbiagas, Send, and Eseka between 8 and 24 October, 1915 under the leadership of Gorges, Haywood, and Rose, the Nigerian troops further skirmished their way eastward towards Yaunde. They eventually arrived at a place just east of Chang Mangas, where one of their battalions, 1 Nigeria Regiment, under Cockburn, formed part of the general reserve under Gorges, while others constituted the centre column under Haywood. The centre column, which comprised 2 Nigeria Regiment, one section Nigeria Battery, a Howitzer detachment, and a field section of the Royal Engineers, advanced from east of Chang Mangas, beating the enemy off his position along the line of advance. On 26 December, 1915 the column reached the enemy's position on the Ngoa River, dislodging the German force there. The next day Cockburn, with his 1 Nigeria Regiment, continued the advance up to Unguot, which they captured. Cockburn and his troops moved further to flush out the Germans from their entrenched positions, near the Mopfu River, on 29 and 30 November, 1915 (SNP5/1 Acc. No.343, 1914-1916).

At 6:00 am on 1 January, 1916 the Nigerian soldiers under Haywood in turn relieved their comrades under Cockburn and advanced rapidly for Yaunde. On the same day, January 1, 1916 Haywood and his troops arrived at about 11:00am and occupied the Yaunde fort without any opposition, as the Germans, including their Governor, Ebermaier, had evacuated Yaunde (SNP 15/1 Acc No. 343, 1914-1916; Haywood Clarke, 1964). Governor Ebermaier shifted his seat of regimen to Ebolowa, where he ran to with his convoy. But the Nigerian soldiers pursued him and his German forces into the Spanish frontier district of Muni, where he and his forces took refuge and from where he formally surrendered Cameroon to General Dobell on February 17, 1916. As earlier noted, before the arrival of the Anglo-French Expeditionary Force for the war in Cameroon, Nigeria Regiment columns had had confrontations with the Germans in which they suffered defeat. In one of such confrontations at Nsanakan on 16 September, 1914, the Nigeria Regiment lost two 2.95 inch guns to the Germans. Interestingly, during their occupation of Yaunde, Nigerian troops recaptured one of the guns and eventually took it to Calabar (CSO 26:18762, vol. 111, 1930).

Meanwhile, the isolated obstinate German fortress of Mora, which had been invested with Nigerian soldiers since the previous year, was

yet either to capitulate or be reduced. But Lugard, being humane and in great commiseration with that gallant but helpless German garrison and unwilling to concede any more casualties, proposed that the garrison be offered the option to surrender. When Cunliffe made the offer, Captain von Raben, the German commander of Mora, accepted it on the agreed terms of German officers maintaining their swords, African soldiers having safe passages to their homes, Europeans being taken to England as prisoners, and Raben himself being advanced a credit of £2,000 to pay his African soldiers (Osuntokun, 1979). Raben, with 10 other German officers, 145 African troops, 232 women, 183 rifles, 4 maxim guns, and 37,000 rounds of ammunition, surrendered on 18 February, 1916 (Osuntokun 1979; Haywood and Clarke, 1964). The event marked the complete capitulation and conquest of Cameroon. For the Dobellian phase of the Cameroon campaign, the total Nigerian casualties stood at 217 Nigerian soldiers killed and 689 Nigerian soldiers wounded (Geary, 1970).

Although the Anglo-French force was a body of contingents from the Nigeria Regiment and other colonial forces in British and French West Africa, most of the operations in which it was engaged were more or less bipolar engagements between strictly Nigerian soldiers and German forces. Thus, Nigerian soldiers played the leading role and offered the greatest martial might in the arduous conquest of Cameroon. For this and their gallant performance, they received commendations and accolades from the British military officers who led them. A British officer, writing from the war front, eulogised the Nigerian soldiers in a publication in the *Times*, a London newspaper, in 1915, noting:

They are good fellows and work splendidly; of course they stand things which no white man could... they are good fighters, too, and, considering they have never been up against rifle fire before, they are marvelous, as the black man generally has an unholy fear of a gun. It's an extraordinary experience for them, unlike anything that has ever happened to them before, and when they return to Nigeria again they will be full of swank as to what they have done and seen (Osuntokun, 1979: 197-198)

In his dispatch to Lugard in February, 1916, General Cunliffe proudly and largely ascribed the accomplishment of the Cameroon campaign to Nigerian soldiers,

whose gallantry and willing endurance of real hardship have been remarkable, who were plunged into a form of

fighting of which they could not possibly have had any conception, but who responded magnificently to all the calls made upon them and to whom must forever be credited a large portion of the success achieved (Osuntokun, 1979:197).

Again, in what appeared as an affirmation of his commendation for the Nigerian soldiers, Cunliffe wrote to the War Office in March, 1916, conveying another encomium:

...They were called upon to take part in the great struggle for the rights and wrongs which they can scarcely have been expected dimly to perceive. Their rations have been scanty, their fight at times extremely arduous, yet they have not been found wanting either in discipline, devotion to their officers or personal courage (Osuntokun, 1979:198; Burns, 1968:228; Crowder, 1968:253).

About 51 Nigerian soldiers, including a gun carrier, were mentioned in dispatches for their gallant, meritorious, and distinguished performance in the campaign. Thirty-eight of these soldiers actually survived the war, and Brigadier-General Cunliffe recommended that each of them should be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal or given money (Osuntokun, 1979). It is also important to note, that thirty-three engagements, in all, were recognised and officially approved by the British Army Council as classic and notable military events for the entire Cameroon campaign. Of these engagements Nigerian soldieries were exclusively involved in about two thirds and fought in consolidation with other troops in about two thirds of the remainder (For a list of the engagements, see CSO19: N355/1921, 1914-1921).

Conclusion

In the event of the First World in 1914, the Nigeria Regiment was still a colonial force, composed and trained for the military responsibilities of a vast British colony, Nigeria. It was therefore not naturally oriented to fight such a European war as the First World War. When, indeed, columns of the regiment ventured to confront the German forces in Cameroon, against earlier suggestions by the brains in the Colonial Office, they met with defeat.

However, an opportunity offered itself for Nigerian soldiers to reengage the German forces in Cameroon, when the Anglo-French

Expeditionary Force was constituted to fight the war in Cameroon. The expeditionary force drew the bulk of its British West African contingents from the Nigeria Regiment, which offered a total of 4,000 soldiers. Fighting on even conditions with other comrades in the expedition, Nigerian soldiers demonstrated the greatest gallantry and stamina and won the war in Cameroon for the British.

While the expeditionary force had advantage of superior numerical strength, the Germans were favoured by natural defences such as the terrain of the country and the rains that fell heavily (Burns, 1978). In the end it was the strategies adopted by the belligerents that determined the outcome of the war.

The Germans lost the war in Cameroon because their strategy was completely defensive. They concentrated on defending the country and took no initiative to alter the plan of the expeditionary force by launching offensives against it. A purely defensive approach in war can hardly lead to victory. On the other hand, the Allies used the strategy of encirclement by the way they positioned their troops. This strategy enabled them to isolate Cameroon and cut off the Germans from supplies and communication. Given such a strategy, the capitulation of Germany was a matter of time.

References

- Burns, A. (1978), *History of Nigeria*, London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Co 445/36 (1916), Lugard to A. Boner Law, 12 February, Cited in Crowder, M. (1968), *West Africa under colonial rule*, London: Hutchinson.
- CSS 19/12/1 L 245 (1915), Wieneke-Lieut, Otto, German Prisoner of War. Petition by, complaining of the treatment he and other German prisoners received in Duala and on the journey to England.
- CSO, 19: N 355/1921, (1921), Official names of battles during the Great War.
- CSO 26.18762 Vol. II, (1929), History of West African Frontier Force operations in East and West African campaigns, Lethem to Secretary, Southern Provinces, Enugu, 24 August.
- CSO 26, 18762 Vol. III, (1930), History of West African Frontier Force operations in East and West African campaigns, Commandant to Secretary to the Governor, Lagos, 12 April.
- Ewa, I. O. (2010), *A History of the Nigerian Army 1863-1966* Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Calabar, Nigeria.
- Geary, N. M. (1970), *Nigeria under British Rule*, London: Penguin.
- Haywood, A. H. W. and Clarke, F. A. S. (1964), *The History of Royal West African Frontier Force*, Aldershot: Gale and Polden.
- Imperial War Museum, London (IWML), 87/55/1. (1914), Translation of the Diary of the German Imperial Navy from 30 July to 27 September, 1914.
- Nigeria (1951), *Gazette*, Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information.
- Osuntokun, A. (1979), *Nigeria in the First World*, London: Longman, 1979.
- SNP 15/1, Acc No. 343. (1914-1916). Cameroon, War Diary, I Battalion Nigeria Regiment presented to the Officers Mess I Battalion Nigeria Regiment by Lt. Colonel Cockburn 1914-1916.