

No Longer are they Forgotten: Nigerian Soldiers in the East African and Burma Campaigns of the Second World War 1940-1945

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Abstract

The strategic relevance of colonial resources among rival European powers became most manifest during the Second World War, as Britain effectively mobilized them for victory. A great portion of the colonial soldiers who fought in the campaigns in East Africa and Burma came from Nigeria, Britain's most populous African colony. The combatant contribution of the Nigerian soldiers in these campaigns is largely incognito in the historiography of the Second World War. However, a careful study and analysis of archival material, private reports of veterans, and scholarly works on the war reveal that Nigerian soldiers, trained and led by British officers, fought gallantly in the combat operations in East Africa and Burma. They distinguished themselves with their lightning advances against the entrenched Italian forces in East Africa and fought intrepidly for Japanese defeat in Burma. Allied victories in East Africa and Burma drew remarkably from the Nigerian soldiers.

Keywords: *British Hegemony, Burma, East Africa, Nigerian soldiers, fight, Second World War*

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Introduction

The Second World War, whose origins can be linked with conflicts and rivalry among European powers, "was by no means purely a European war"² or confined to Europe. Other continents such as North America, South America, Australia, Asia, and Africa were also involved in it. Africa's involvement, in particular, was both unique and significant for four reasons. First, as pointed out by Nofi, "Africa was the only theatre in which Western Allies were engaged in land combat with the Nazi Empire."³ Second, Africa was the theatre "where the Allied fortunes would be decided" because of its value as a source of military manpower and industrial raw materials that were vital to the prosecution of the war.⁴ Third, Africa naturally became a campaign ground because of the presence of European imperial positions.⁵ Fourth, Hitler had in 1941 directed the German forces under Field Marshall Kesselring to carry out military operations along the corridor between Southern Italy and North Africa.⁶ Kesselring's operation, aided by Italy's alliance with Germany and Spain, made it possible for Hitler's forces to cut off British supplies to the Middle East and Far East.⁷ In the circumstance, Nigeria assumed great geostrategic importance in the war, more so as British reinforcements passed through there to Khartoum, Cairo,

² A. J. Grant and Harold Temperley, *Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries 1789-1950* (London: Longman, 1952), 536-537.

³ A. A. Nofi, "Armee Afrika and the War in the Desert, June 1940 - December 1942", in *The War Against Hitler: Military Strategy in the West*, ed. Albert A. Nofi (New York: Hipporene, 1982), 80.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ P. Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, *Total War: Causes and Courses of the Second World War* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 151.

⁶ H. R. Trevor - Roper, ed., *Hitler's War Directives 1939 - 1945* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1964), 164.

⁷ R. Headrick, "African Soldiers in World War II", *Armed Forces and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4, 3 (Spring 1978):503.

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and India.⁸ Owing to the strategic importance of Africa and the threat which the war posed to the British colonial interests in East Africa and Southeast Asia, the decision for the military involvement of Nigeria, Britain's largest dependency in Africa, came without delay. Nigeria's military readiness was demonstrated when in 1939 the Nigeria Regiment provided one brigade of troops for the war in East Africa. In 1943, the regiment also entered the campaign in Burma, Southeast Asia, with a war effect of ten battalions.

The gallant and heroic service of the Nigerian soldiers in East Africa and Burma, where they cheerfully offered themselves as cannon fodder in most lethal combats, has not been located in the mainstream of the Second World War historiography. In recent years, lamentation on the forgotten participation of African soldiers in the war has become a sing-song among some Africanist scholars,⁹ who tend to blame it on Western egoistic scholarship in general and the opportunistic domination of military historiography by Western scholars in particular. While it is important to note this warm crimination, it is no longer fashionable to use it as an apology to abandon the reclamation of what is possibly left of the forgotten history of Africa's military participation in the Second World War. It is in line with this thinking, that this paper was produced, hopefully to accentuate the combatant role of Nigerian soldiers in the multilateral campaigns in East Africa and Burma.

⁸ R. C. Nevin, *A Short History of Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria:1965), 252.

⁹ An example of such scholars is A. Ofajaja, "The all but forgotten contribution of African Soldiers to the Allied Victory in World War II," available at: <https://archived.thisisafrica.me/.../the-all-but-foirgotten-contribution-of-africans...> (accessed 28 August 2020). Barnaby Philips, in tracing the life of Isaac Fadorebo, one of the forgotten heroes of World War II, laments: "They performed heroically in one of the most brutal theatres of war, yet their contribution has been largely ignored, both in Britain and their now independent home countries." See *The Burma Boy*, <https://www.aljazeera.com> (accessed 28 August 2020).

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Ian Lister's methodological principle, that "wars are fought by historians in cloistered studies long after the smoke of battle has cleared,"¹⁰ mirrors the challenge in studying this subject, which has come under the erosive passage of time. Another challenge came from the fact, that the combatant role of African soldiers in the Second World War has been generally despised and obscured in European-kept archival records and military reports. It is also no simple task to seek to particularly bring out the role of the Nigerian soldiers in composite campaigns involving soldiers of different contingents as was the case in the Second World War. Yet, an attempt must be made to place these naive African soldiers on the landscape of the military history they helped to make.

Nigerian Soldiers in the East African Campaign 1940-1941

Following the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Italy began the mobilization and strategic positioning of her military forces in Italian East Africa, without formally proclaiming her entry into the war. The forces were going to operate under the auspices of the Italian East African Armed Forces Command. When it became obvious in 1940 by Italy's heavy military build-up in East Africa, that the British colonial territories in the region were under the threat of a possible invasion from the Italian troops, a body of Nigerian soldiers, known as the Nigerian Brigade Group and led by British officers, was mobilized for war in East Africa. Following receipt in May 1940 of the code word, "tempest," the Nigerian Brigade Group, together with another British-led Brigade group from the Gold Coast, set sail for East Africa in early June 1945.¹¹ Their destination was Kenya, which they would use as a take-off base for operations against the Italian forces. On 11 June 1940, while the Nigerian soldiers were *en route* round the cape on the Indian Ocean, Italy formally entered the

¹⁰ I. Lister, *The Cold War* (London: Methuen, 1974), 11.

¹¹ Rhodes House Library Oxford (RHLO), Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF), Lt. Col. Jack T. Ennals, MSS. Afr. s. 1734, Box 3, (131). 1935-43.

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Second World War on the side of Germany and declared war against Britain. At the time of Italy's declaration of war, the British were not ready to frontally engage the Italian troops in East Africa. Apart from the fact that Italian troops and their military equipment on ground were more in strength than those of the British,¹² the training of the in-coming British African drafts was far from adequate and had needed to be further carried out on arrival of the troops in Kenya.¹³

The Nigerian Brigade Group, with its Gold Coast counterpart, arrived in Kenya at the end of June and were immediately reorganised into two African divisions. One of the divisions, 11th African Division (11 A. Div), comprised the Nigerian Brigade Group (23 N. Bde), while the other division, 12th African Division (12 A. Div), consisted of the Gold Coast Brigade Group and another East African Brigade Group. The Nigerian troops, along with their East African comrades, were responsible for operations on the River Tana and the coastal area up to Mogadishu region in the Italian Somaliland.¹⁴ The East African force was commanded by Lieutenant-General D. P. Dickinson up to early November 1940, when Lieutenant-General Alan Cunningham took over the command.

¹² For instance, the Italians already had on the Juba River alone, two divisions of military personnel; 20,000 rifles; and 84 guns against a British East African force of one division; 36 field guns; a few obsolete mountain guns, and 12 old patterned light tanks. The Italians also had not less than 40,000 rifles in the Galla-Sidamo area, south of Addis Ababa. The British would later scale up their force to a total of three divisions, one of which was reserved for a move for Mogadishu. However, they never really used more than three brigades at any given time in the entire campaign. See Special Correspondent with the East African Force, "The East African Campaign: How the Time-Table was Beaten," *The Times* (Weekly edn, 15 October 1941), 1-2.

¹³ A.H.W. Haywood and F.A.S. Clarke, *The History of the Royal West African Frontier Force* (Aldershot: Gule and Polden, 1964), 328, 331. RHLO, Ennals.

¹⁴ RHLO, WAFF, Lt. Col. John R. Filmer-Bennett, MSS. Afr. s. 1734, Box 3, (139). 1934-43.

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Initially, owing to the ill readiness of the British force, as previously pointed out, the Nigerian soldiers were engaged in defensive operations. They were moved from Nairobi to River Tana, which offered a most strategic defensive position between Nairobi and the eastern frontier of Kenya. From their camp in Garissa on the river, the Nigerian troops carried out frequent patrols, which had deterrent effect on the Italian troops. The patrols went on for some weeks until reinforcements were landed. As soon as the British forces in East Africa were reinforced to war strength and the appropriate military build-up and readiness attained, the strategy shifted from defensive to offensive. In consequence of the shift in strategy, the Nigerian troops were mobilized to Malindi, a settlement on the coast, located about 40 miles north of Mombasa, also on the coast. In what was code-named "Operation Canvas,"¹⁵ the troops commenced advance from Malindi into Italian Somaliland in January 1941, with the foremost objective of taking Mogadishu, its principal port, and moving ultimately in a northerly detour for the recapture of Harar in Ethiopia. From Malindi, they advanced indefatigably under their British officers to Bura, Gallina Galla, Mabungo, and Jelib, from where they made a north-eastward movement by road towards Mogadishu. In the afternoon of 23 February 1941, the troops entered and occupied Modun, the nearest inland strategic base for offensive against Mogadishu.¹⁶ From Modun, the Nigerian troops advanced for Mogadishu, the outskirts of which they made in the evening of 24 February 1941. The next morning, after a brief skirmish and a bayonet charge against the Italian forces, the Nigerian soldiers took Mogadishu. In an ostensible mop-up exercise, conducted on the following day, 26 February 1941, the Nigerian troops of the 1st Battalion entered an Italian army barracks and demasted its flag,

¹⁵ Imperial War Museum London (IWML), 02 (660) 72/581/17, H. W. Baldwin, "The Development of Training and Operation of the West African Engineers and the Operation of the Works Services in West Africa to 1959," March 1981.

¹⁶ RHLO, Ennals. Haywood and Clarke, History of Frontier Force, 338.

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which they returned to Nigeria with at the end of the campaign.¹⁷ The flag eventually found a home in the regimental museum of the Nigeria Regiment in Zaria.¹⁸

General Cunningham observed no respite. He immediately ordered the Nigerian troops to turn northward from Mogadishu into Abyssinia. In a meteoric move, the troops advanced 1,054 miles within 30 days, occupying Jijiga and pushing through the Babile Pass to take Harar at 18:00 hours on 25 March 1941.¹⁹ Adding 235 miles earlier made during their three days of advance for Mogadishu, the Nigerian troops had covered a distance of 1,285 miles in 33 days. This, according to Lunt, is "one of the fastest advances" in the history of British warfare.²⁰ Cunningham, who led the Nigerian soldiers, commented thus on their speed:

In 30 days, they had covered 1,054 miles, an average of 35 miles a day. The final 65 miles into Harar entailed an advance through the most difficult country in the face of opposition from three strong positions, yet the distance was covered in three and a half days.²¹

From Harar, the Nigeria troops advanced about 300 miles westward, at which point they were the leading column on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. They were ready to make another historic event by

¹⁷ Nigerian Army Museum, *The History of the Nigerian Army in Pictures* (Lagos, Nigeria: Directorate of Army Education, 1987), 28.

¹⁸ H.A.J.W. Stackpole, *Regimental Museum Nigerian Military Forces: A Short Historical Background* (Zaria, Nigeria: Gaskiya Corporation, 1959), 10-11.

¹⁹ H. W. Baldwin, *The Crucial Years 1939-1941: The World at War*. (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 1976), 214. Haywood and Clarke, *Frontier Force*, 346.

²⁰ J. Lunt, *Imperial Sunset: Frontier Soldiering in the 20th Century* (London: Macdonald, 1981), 188.

²¹ Haywood and Clarke, *History of Frontier Force*, 346-47.

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going to be the first British column to enter Addis Ababa, when they received an order which halted them, while a South African Brigade that was trailing behind was allowed to advance ahead²² and occupy Addis Ababa on 6 April 1941 before the arrival of the Nigerian soldiers a couple of days later. This development was unpleasant to the Nigerian soldiers and was perceived by their British officers as "purely political."²³ However, with the liberation of Addis Ababa, the Nigerian troops had contributed greatly in clearing all the Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia, with the exception of Gondar, of Italian forces.

It is important to note, that the success of the East African campaign drew substantially from the professionalism and experience of General (later Field Marshal) Archibald Percival Wavell, a complex veteran of the Second Boer War, the Bazar Valley campaign, and the First World War. He was given the task of mapping out and directing the Mediterranean and Middle East Theatre of the war, which included East Africa. In carrying out the task, Wavell made use of what he described "as an improvisation after the British fashion of war."²⁴ The adoption of the British fashion of warfare led him to basically use the strategy of interdiction in the entire East African campaign to force the Italians to change their plan from offensive to defensive. Wavell also cut off of the Italian forces from communications and supplies. This was achieved through sea blockade by the Royal Navy, air support from the Royal Air Force

²² N. Orpen, *South African Forces World War II (Volume I) East African and Abyssinian Campaigns* (London, Purnel and Sons, 1969), 237.

²³ RHLO, Ennals.

²⁴ I.S.O. Playfair, *History of the Second World War The Mediterranean and Middle East I: The Early Success against Italy (to May 1941) United Kingdom Military Series* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Books, 2014), 392. Available at: <https://www.ibiblio.org>. *Hyper War: The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. 1, Chapter XXI (accessed 25 August 2020).

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and the South African Air Force,²⁵ and a strategic positioning of land troops. Once beleaguered, the Italian forces were left with no other initiative than to fight a defensive war, with all its disadvantages, until they were defeated in May 1941.

According to Winston Churchill's account of the Second World War, 3,000 Nigerian soldiers fought in the East African campaign.²⁶ Although they took part in the campaign as a British West African contingent of a multilateral Allied force, they were able to court recognition as a distinct group by excellent performance. Their lightning advances and victories against the Italian forces and their display of bravery, courage, endurance, discipline, intrepidity, and gallantry during the operations, particularised them as "Nigerian soldiers." By their exploits, the Nigerian soldiers quickly gained popularity, earned a reputation as an invincible group, and attracted the coverage of the reputable *East African Standard*. The special correspondent of this newspaper, Mr. G. Kinner, was with the East African Force. He skewedly reported on "Nigerian," rather than "West African," soldiers. Thus the *East African Standard* published reports on the war under such headings as: "The Nigerians Prove Their Mettle," "Ferretting Out Machine Gunners At The Strange Battle Of Soddu: A Nigerian Episode," and "How K.A.R [Kings African Rifles] And Nigerians Forced The Omo 'Soldiers Battle' In The Darkness: A Thrilling Story."²⁷

It is something of note, that the Nigerian soldiers did not suffer relatively heavy casualties in a campaign, where the Italians

²⁵ Special Correspondent with the East African Force, "Progress On The African Fronts," *The East African Standard*, (4th March 1941), 4.

²⁶ W. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. II, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassel and Co. Ltd., 1950), 376.

²⁷ See *The East African Standard* (March 14 1941; September 16 1941; and September 26 1941).

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sustained 350,000 troops destroyed or captured and lost nearly 400 planes against 138 of the British.²⁸ The East African Force in particular suffered "slight casualties – some 500 men killed, wounded, and missing."²⁹ Only 80 of these casualties were recorded by the Nigerian Brigade "during the entire campaign in East Africa."³⁰

Nigerian soldiers proved their mettle with their decisive victories over Harar, Mogadishu, and Abalti, and the duties they performed in aid of the civil authority in Ethiopia. To commemorate their exploits and inspire successive generations of Nigerian soldiers, two Nigerian Army barracks in Abuja and Lagos were, in later years, named Mogadishu Barracks and Abalti Barracks respectively.³¹ As part of their duties in aid of civil authority, Nigerian soldiers were among the military personnel that provided security for Emperor Haile Selassie on his triumphant return to Ethiopia from asylum on 5 May 1941. Soldiers of the 1st Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment in particular were among those that mounted his guard of honour.³² Outside this, Nigerian soldiers shared most significantly in winning such battle honours as "Marda Pass," "Babile Gap," "Colito," and "Abyssinia."³³ On 14 March 1944, NA 29299 CSM Garuba Illo, a

²⁸ Baldwin, *The Crucial Years*, 214.

²⁹ A. Stewart, *The First Victory* "The Second World War and the East African Campaign (London: Yale University Press, 2016), see the Introduction. See also *Ibid*

³⁰ 82nd Division, *A Short History of the 82nd (West Africa) Infantry Division* (2010). Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/82nd_\(West_Africa\)_Division](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/82nd_(West_Africa)_Division) (accessed 30 August, 2020).

³¹ See full list of Army Barracks in Nigeria and Locations – Nigerian Infopedia. Available at: <https://nigerianinfopedia.com.ng>. (accessed 30 August 2020). See also Museum, *History of Army in Pictures*, 29. Note, however, that there is no army barracks in Abeokuta with the name, Abalti, as found in this source.

³² Lunt, *Imperial Sunset*, 189. Nigerian Army, *The Nigerian Army* (Lagos, Nigeria: Nigerian Army Public Relations Department, 1978), 31.

³³ *Army, Nigerian Army*, 34.

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Nigerian soldier, who served with the 1st Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment during the campaign, was awarded the "Africa Star."³⁴ NA 31335 Private Ali Basawal also received the "Africa Star."³⁵

The fall of Addis Ababa marked the end of the participation of Nigerian soldiers in the East African campaign. The troops would be required for further service in West Africa. The fall of France, and the rise of a hostile government based at Vichy, posed a serious threat to the security especially of Sierra Leone and Gambia. Thus, after their withdrawal from East Africa, Nigerian troops returned to West Africa in August 1941 and were deployed in Sierra Leone and Gambia.³⁶ Although no fighting took place, the troops garrisoned these territories for some time against possible invasion from enemy forces. However, their greatest involvement in the prosecution of the war would be in the campaign in Burma.

Nigerian Soldiers in the Re-conquest of Burma 1943-1945

The British loss of Burma to the Japanese in 1942 impelled Britain to seek the support of her African colonial troops in the campaign to recover Burma. The decision, in particular, to deploy West African troops in Burma was taken at the end of 1942, when the Vichy threat to the region had whittled down. British West African soldiers, many of them newly trained recruits and most of them from Nigeria, were mobilized up to the strength of two divisions known as the 81 West African Division and 82 West African Division.³⁷ The 81 (WA)

³⁴ Y. J. Nasara, *The Nigeria Regiment: Spearheads of Victory* (no date and place of publication: copy available in the National Army Museum, London), 5.

³⁵ Nasara, *Nigeria Regiment*, front cover.

³⁶ Colonial Office, *Annual Report 1946* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1947), 96.

³⁷ Details on how the two divisions were formed and trained are available in Chukwuma Osakwe, "Jungle Warfare: The Formation and Training of 81st and 82nd West African Divisions for the Second World War, 1939 - 1945, *Arts and Social Science Research Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences*, 6 (September 2011), 41-57.

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Division was constituted on 1 March 1943, under the command of Major General C. G. Woolner; while the 82 (WA) Division was formed in August 1943, with Major-General Mc I. Bruce as its GOC (General Officer Commanding). Their immediate successors were Major-Generals F. J. Loftus-Tottenham and Hugh Charles Stockwell respectively. Each division had an establishment of 28,000 soldiers, tactically organized in three brigades.³⁸

The Nigeria Regiment furnished ten battalions for the war in Burma. Four of the battalions were in the 81 (WA) Division, three in the 82 (WA) Division, and the other three served with a special Allied force called Chindit, which was commanded by Major-General Orde Wingate. The Nigerian soldiers who served under the 81 and 82 West African Divisions fought in the Arakan region of Burma, while those in the Chindit force operated in central Burma.³⁹ The ultimate task of the Nigerian troops in Arakan was to take possession of the Kaladan and Kalapanzin valleys and, thereafter, collaborate with other Allied troops in the conquest of Myohaung. The Nigerian troops with the Chindit force, after receiving training in "Long Range Penetration Operations" in central Burma, would, along with their fellow Chindits, operate behind enemy lines, cut the enemy off from communications, engender immense confusion in their ranks, inflict the greatest possible damage on them, and eventually assist the advance of General Stockwell's column on Myitkyina.⁴⁰

The two divisions, concentrated in Nigeria, left for Burma at different periods. The 81 Division embarked in July 1943 and the 82 Division

³⁸ David Killingray, *The British Military Presence in West Africa: Oxford Development Records Project Report 3* (Oxford: Rhodes House Library, 1983), 83.

³⁹ K. G. Exham, "A Tradition of Bravery in Battle," *The Newsletter of the 4th West African Brigade* (1961), 2.

⁴⁰ IWML, Baldwin. Lunt, *Imperial Sunset*, 196.

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in November, same year. By February 1944, the two divisions had arrived and assembled in Burma. The three Nigerian battalions, which later formed part of the Chindits, made the journey to Burma with the 81 Division, under which they were brigaded. They broke off from 3 (WA) Brigade on arrival in Burma to join the Chindits under General Wingate.⁴¹ The Nigerian troops under the 81 (WA) Division first swung into action at the Kaladan Valley. In January 1944, they left their base at Chiringa to rally at the Daletme area in the Kaladan Valley, from where they advanced southward along the valley. By the middle of March 1944, the division had occupied the entire stretch of the valley as far south as Kyauktaw, after engaging and defeating a serial of Japanese forces. After making Kyauktaw, the division withdrew northward to halt at Kaladan Village, from where, on receiving orders, they moved westward, crossed the Mayu Range, and penetrated the Kalapanzin Valley, near the coast, in April 1944.⁴² However, with the coming of the monsoon, the division was compelled to commence withdrawal to its base at Chiringa. By the middle of May 1944, the retreat had been accomplished, marking the end of what can be regarded as the first phase of the 81 Division's offensive in the Arakan.

As soon as the monsoon reduced, the 81 Division plunged into the second phase of its offensive in the Arakan. This time, the division left its base at Chiringa and entered the Kaladan Valley along the West Africa Way. As the division entered the valley, it split up into two separate columns, one made up of 5 Brigade and the other 6 Brigade. While the 5 Brigade advanced south of the valley, the 6 Brigade column moved southwards to Pi Chaung and eventually to Auklo. The movement of the 6 Brigade to Auklo, which Brigadier Baldwin assesses as "one of the hardest and longest of the second campaign,"⁴³ was done through a range of jungle, featured by

⁴¹ IWML, Baldwin.

⁴² Lunt, *Imperial Sunset*, 192. IWML, Baldwin.

⁴³ IWML, Baldwin.

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mountains of over 200 feet. The movement of the column enabled the division to bring under its control the Thayettabin-Apaukwa area. After the recovery of the Kaladan region, the 81 Division's movement continued southwards, climaxing in its battle for Myohaung, which it jointly captured with the 82 Division on 24 January 1945. The 81 Division's involvement in the reconquest of Burma ended with the battle of Myohaung.

The 82 Division came into action in the Arakan from the beginning of the last quarter of 1944. From its concentration camp at Chiringa, the division began advancing in the direction of Kalapanzin in September 1944. The Division's task was to move down to Kalapanzin River and ultimately offer protection to the left flank of the 25 Indian Division operating at the Mayu Peninsula. It was also to rid the Kalapanzin Valley of the enemy and occupy the Kaladan Valley on the withdrawal from there of the 81 Division. In the middle of October 1944, as the division continued its movement southward on the eastern bank of the Kalapanzin River, the 2 Brigade took over the garrisoning of the Gloppe and Taung Bazars on the river from the 26 Indian Division. Meanwhile, the rest of the division moved further to collect at Maungdaw on the Araka road. From Maungdaw, a detachment of the division advanced on Buthidaung and occupied it. The occupation of Buthidaung paved the way for the division to move ahead, cross to the west bank of the Kalapanzin River, and enter the Kalapanzin Valley.

The advance for the Kalapanzin Valley was made in spite of opposition, the greatest of which was encountered by the troops of the 2nd Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment under the 82nd Division in a small village called Dodan. In the course of patrols, it was found that the Japanese were in the village. On 18 December 1944, Nigerian troops infiltrated Dodan and, in what seemed a fusillade, attacked it with the support of artillery and mortars. As the Japanese successfully repelled the attack, the Nigerian troops withdrew. During the night, the village was once more brought under an

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artillery barrage which failed to emasculate the Japanese. Two more attacks, supported by artillery and air strikes, again failed to effectively repulse the Japanese, who rather responded with heavy and accurate fire. The solution to the stalemate came when, while the two sides were still contending, a group of troops of the battalion stealthily found their way into Seinyinbya, a village behind Dodan, in an outflanking move against the Japanese. In Seinyinbya, the troops met a Japanese patrol, which they drove out in a skirmish. In the course of the skirmish, a Japanese sniper was seen hiding in the top of a tree. A Nigerian soldier carefully tiptoed up to the tree and shot him dead.⁴⁴ From Seinyinbya, Nigerian troops engaged the Japanese; and on 22 December 1944, Dodan was liberated and occupied by the battalion, which recorded about 80 casualties in the process.⁴⁵ A Nigerian Army residential village in the Nigerian city of Lagos would later be named Dodan Barracks, in remembrance of the historic sacrifice.

By the beginning of 1945, the 82 Division had cleared the Kalapanzin Valley of Japanese troops and was now positioned to take over the Kaladan Valley from the 81 Division, which would evacuate and return to India after the proposed joint attack on Myohung. In January 1945, the 82 Division joined forces with the 81 Division for the conquest of Myohaung. In a celebrated battle on 24 January, in which all British West African troops in the Arakan were involved, the Japanese were routed; and Myohaung, the ancient capital of Arakan, passed into the hands of Nigerians and other West African troops.⁴⁶ Again, the present Myohaung Barracks in Lagos had to take its name from the historic Battle of Myohaung. As the 81 Division left for India after the fall of Myohaung, the 82 Division assumed control

⁴⁴ Division, *History of 82nd West Africa Division*, 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Haywood and Clarke, *History of Frontier Force*, 449. Lunt, *Imperial Sunset*, 193.

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of the Kaladan Valley. In Kaladan, the division fought strenuously for the capture of Tamandu in the Southern Arakan. In March 1944, Tamandu was taken, but not before the commanding officers of the 5th and 10th battalions of the Nigeria Regiment were killed by the enemy.⁴⁷ After the capture of Tamandu, the division undertook mop-up operations in the southern part of the Arakan until the coming of the monsoon, when the troops withdrew to Taungup, where they were caught up by the formal capitulation of the Japanese on 15 August 1945.⁴⁸

As the war was being prosecuted in the Arakan region, another group of Nigerian soldiers, one brigade strong, were engaged as Chindits under General Wingate in central Burma. The soldiers were those who formed the 3 (WA) Brigade under the 81 Division but were detached for special service with the Chindits on arrival of the division in India.⁴⁹ They were in three battalions; namely, 6 Nigeria Regiment, 7 Nigeria Regiment, and 12 Nigeria Regiment. The Chindits campaign opened in March and closed in August 1944. The Nigerian troops were brought into the area of operation in north-central Burma in different trips at different times between March and April. The Chindits operated especially at the Indaw area, with specific focus on the Rangoon-Mqandalay-Myitkyina Railway. In various offensives, they unleashed confusion in the area, destabilized the Japanese, and cut them off from communications, supplies, and reinforcements, while successfully defending their strongholds against the enemy.

Nigerian troops distinguished themselves by their spectacular exploits. They defended the Allied stronghold called Aberdeen, while advancing without any event up to the north of Mawbu on

⁴⁷ Lunt, *Imperial Sunset*, 194

⁴⁸ *Division, History of 82nd West Africa Division*, 49.

⁴⁹ IWML, Baldwin.

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the railway. Most remarkable was their defence of another Allied stronghold called White City. In spite of serious bombardment of the White City by the Japanese, 12 Nigeria Regiment, later assisted by 6 Nigeria Regiment, held tenaciously on to the stronghold. While still defending White City against Japanese offensive and inflicting heavy casualties on them, a detachment of two platoons strong broke off from the garrison to recapture O P Hill that had been lost to the Japanese since 16 April 1944. As a confirmation of their exploit, the Nigerian soldiers returned from their counteroffensive for the O P Hill with 32 Japanese heads, the display of which startled their British officers.⁵⁰ Troops of 7 Nigeria Regiment also ambushed a Japanese convoy along the road at Tonlon Chaung, destroying its six lorries and killing 39 Japanese.⁵¹ The next remarkable action of the Nigerian troops was their advance on the well-fortified village of Ywathit, where the Japanese had dug in. Ywathit was taken after three hours of siege. In May 1944, withdrawal of the Nigerian troops from the area of operation commenced. The troops skirmished their way against efforts by the Japanese to contend their movement. By the end of August 1944, the entire Nigerian troops had evacuated, and in January 1945, they rejoined their fellow Nigerian soldiers in the 81 Division for the conquest of Myohaung.

Nigerian troops prosecuted the war in Burma with grim determination, courage, great responsibility, and inenarrable sacrifice.⁵² A British officer who commanded them described the Nigerian soldiers as "sustaining hardship with equanimity, the worse the condition, the more fortitude the men displayed."⁵³ The role of the Nigerian soldiers is more appropriately conveyed in Brigadier Clarke's generic statement:

⁵⁰ Haywood and Clarke, *History of Frontier Force*, 419.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² National Army Museum London, File 7811-37 Archives. *Africans in the Arakan* by Lt. C. F. Paddison, n. d.

⁵³ Charles Carfarae, *Chindit Column* (London: William Kimber, 1985), 168.

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In Burma the R.W.A.F.F. had faced the greatest test in their half century of existence, where their qualities of gallantry, loyalty and cheerful endurance had been tried as never before. They emerged from this test with great credit and enhanced traditions.... They were able to undertake operations of a kind no other formation could attempt...⁵⁴

For instance, Nigerian troops under the 81 Division were, while fighting on ground, supplied by air and were able to cope with the logistical maneuvers which such a composite operation entailed.⁵⁵ The 81 Division thus became the "first normal formation in the British Empire and the Commonwealth to be maintained entirely by air."⁵⁶ The air supplies to the 81 Division were enhanced by the ancillary support of carriers, very often unmentioned in the history of the military operation in the war. Borne in a jungle, which presented obstacles to motorized movement of troops and equipment, the Burma campaign made a most effective use of Nigerian and other West African carriers to reverse a supply problem that could have vitiated Allied gains. Provision was made, at any given combatant operation, for 40 carriers per company.⁵⁷ The carriers' pottered the air drops for use by the soldiers in the battle fronts.

The Burma campaign was deadlier for the Nigerian soldiers than the East African. For the six months, from December 1944 to May 1945, that the combatant operations in which the Nigerian soldiers were engaged lasted, the Allied side, made up of the 81 and 82 West African Divisions plus the 25 and 26 Indian Divisions, suffered a

⁵⁴ Harywood and Clarke, *History of Frontier Force*, 470.

⁵⁵ For more details on the air drop operations, see Chukwuma Osakwe, "Air Power in the Arakan Campaign, 1943-1945," *Journal of Defence Studies*, 18 (March 2013), 8-12.

⁵⁶ Lunt, *Imperial Sunset*, 199.

⁵⁷ RHLO, RWAFF, Major Joseph Leniewski, MSS. Afr. S. 1734, Box 7, (265). 1941 - 44. See also remarks on carriers in Haywood and Clarke, *History of Frontier Force*, 470-71.

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total of 4,503 casualties, encompassing those killed, wounded, and missing.⁵⁸ West Africa, which contributed an aggregate of 90,000 soldiers⁵⁹ for the campaign in Burma, had a share of 2,317 from these casualties. Most of the West African casualties were suffered by Nigeria, whose 60,000 men⁶⁰ were among the West African aggregate.

In recognition of their gallant actions, distinguished conduct, and excellent tactical initiatives in the Burma operations, six Nigerian soldiers, among them Sergeant Ibrahim Wadai of 2 Nigeria Regiment, were awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Forty-one soldiers, including Trooper Musa Congo and Sergeant Hama Kim, received the Military Medal. Five soldiers, including R.S.M Chari Maigumeri MM and Corporal Bassey Okon, obtained the British Empire Medal; while sixty-nine were mentioned in dispatches.⁶¹ Trooper Musa Congo in particular came from Kano, and the act of gallantry on which his award was founded was widely acclaimed in the Nigerian public and military circles in 1944. Apart from the Emir of Kano, who sent him a formal message of congratulation, Trooper Musa Congo's action was serialised as an archetype in a monthly bulletin of the Nigeria Regiment as follows:

The great example of (a soldier tradesman) that we have just had is Trooper Musa Congo, a driver in the 81st Division Reconnaissance Regiment. He has been decorated in Burma for great bravery. The citation for the decoration states that Trooper Musa Congo was in an Armoured Car

⁵⁸ Division, History of 82nd West African Division, 49. Haywood and Clarke, History of Frontier Force, 509

⁵⁹ Robin Forestier-Walker and Oliver Owen, "Africa's forgotten wartime heroes". Available at: BBC News/Africa/Africa's forgotten wartime heroes.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Africa/8201717.stm (accessed 11 May 2016).

⁶⁰ I. Olomola, "The Demobilisation of Nigerian Troops 1946 - 1950: Problems and Consequences," Odu: Journal of West African Studies, 13 (January 1976), 41.

⁶¹ Haywood and Clarke, History of Frontier Force, 449, 490-91.

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in action against the enemy. His job was to give covering fire to his officer who had gone forward on foot to make a reconnaissance. The enemy fired at Trooper Musa Congo and he was severely wounded in the face and head. Despite these wounds, he stuck on to his gun and returned the fire of the enemy. For this brave deed, he was decorated.⁶²

In spite of their sacrificial service in Burma, the Nigerian or other West African soldiers were, incredibly, not mentioned by Lt. General William Slim, the General Officer Commanding the Fourteenth Army in Burma, in his address at the end of the campaign.⁶³ However, D. Elvet Price, who soldiered with them in Burma, described the Nigerian and other West African soldiers as "happy warriors," [who] "did a marvelous job in Burma and outfought some of Japan's crack troops in the Arakan."⁶⁴ Also, the Commander-in-Chief, West Africa, Lt. General Brocas Burrows, addressed Nigerian and other West African veterans as follows:

The news of the final victory has been received with the greatest joy in West Africa, and on behalf of all ranks in the command I send you best congratulations on the magnificent part you have played in defeating the Japanese. By your bravery, devotion to duty and your cheerful bearing in the face of hardships, you have built up a tradition of which everyone in West Africa is proud.⁶⁵

A report, translated from the diary of a captured Japanese soldier, confirms the comments on the superior martial disposition of the Nigerian soldiers in Burma:

⁶² National Archives Enugu, Nigeria (NAE), CSE, 1/85/86/8648. 18038/90, Recruiting Propaganda, March, 1944. National Archives Calabar, Nigeria (NAC), File No. 396/20, Recruitment Monthly Bulletin, 11 March 1944.

⁶³ Forestier-Walker and Owen, *Africa's wartime heroes*.

⁶⁴ IWML, 84/23/1, D. Elvet Price, *Wartime Memories of Nigeria and West African Soldiers*, 1980.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

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The enemy soldiers are not from Britain but from Africa; because of their belief, they are not afraid to die; so even if their commanders have fallen, they keep on advancing as if nothing had happened. It makes things rather difficult. They have an excellent physique and are very brave. So, fighting against these soldiers is somewhat troublesome.⁶⁶

More revealing of their tenacity and sacrifice is the comment made on the Nigerian soldiers by Major-General Charles Roger Alan Swynnerton, who commanded them under his 1st West African Brigade. He observed that his men were the only soldiers in Burma who were 'capable of operating for months on end in the worst country in the world, without vehicles and without mules, and [were] alone able to carry all [their] warlike stores with [them].'⁶⁷

Conclusion

In the wake of the Second World War, Nigerian soldiers, recruited, trained, and led by British officers, were deployed in the East African and Burma campaigns, where they fought against the Italian and Japanese forces, respectively. How they fared in the campaigns has been examined. Speed and adaptability are critical elements in war.⁶⁸ Nigerian soldiers exhibited these elements in East Africa. In a blitzkrieg strategy, adopted by General Cunningham, they made a lightning advance, which contributed in breaching Italian defenses and collapsing their resistance. The Nigerian soldiers did not only distinguish themselves in East Africa by recording one of the fastest advances in the history of British warfare but also made history

⁶⁶ A Correspondent, "The West African Frontier Force," 2 Infantry Division Mirror: A Military Quarterly Journal, 1, 1 (April - June 1971), 6.

⁶⁷ John H. Morrow Jr., "Black Africans in World War II: The Soldiers' Stories," The Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science, November 2010, Vol. 632, Perspectives on Africa and the World (November 2010), 19. John A. L. Hamilton, War Bush: 81 (West African) Division in Burma 1943-1945 (Norwich, United Kingdom: Michael Russell, 2001), 28.

⁶⁸ Robert Greene, The 33 Strategies of War (New York: Viking, 2006), viii.

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as one of the forces that contributed to one of the Allied strategic victories in the early and crucial years of the Second World War. The Allied victory in East Africa, which indeed was the first in the Second World War, must have been a source of greater morale for Allied soldiers in other theatres of the war. As the first theatre in which the Nigerian soldiers saw action in a most sophisticated war, East Africa was significant in their experience as a crucible that prepared them for the greater military task in Burma.

Nigerian soldiers constituted about two-thirds⁶⁹ of the 81 and 82 West African Divisions which, along with the 25 and 26 Indian Divisions, served in Burma. Japanese forces had already defeated British forces in Burma and occupied it before the coming there of the Nigerian soldiers. *Ipsa facto* the Nigerian soldiers' expeditionary disposition was to demonstrate their superiority over an enemy that had humiliated Britain, their benevolent colonial master.⁷⁰

Indoctrinated with the British "righteous strategy" theory,⁷¹ inspired by their success against the Italians in East Africa, and stirred by anti-German and pro-British propaganda,⁷² the Nigerian soldiers

⁶⁹ Alan Burns, *History of Nigeria* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), 247.

⁷⁰ Before Nigeria's entry into the war, Britain, with the support of such leading Nigerian nationalists as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Herbert Macaulay, had successfully positioned and endeared herself to the Nigerian people as a benevolent and paternalistic colonial master. See M. Okoye, *Storms on the Niger* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension, 1981), 94. M. Crowder, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), 491.

⁷¹ For this theory, see Greene, *Strategies of War*, xii. The soldiers believed that they were fighting against Hitler's bestiality and desire to forcefully dominate the world.

⁷² NAE, CSE 1/85/8683, *Anglo-German War 1939 - News Bulletin from the Publicity Officer, Lagos, November 1939*. As evident in this source, British propaganda called for help and suggested two options to Nigerians - either to fight for British victory in order to protect the progress and freedom of the colonial people or relent for Hitler to win and bring them under his subjection and servitude.

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engaged the Japanese with utmost determination and impudent courage, driven by stupendous morale. The Japanese admitted that these attributes made fighting the Nigerian soldiers a difficult task. A classical display of these attributes by the Nigerian soldiers was in their arduous capture of Dodan. There was generally a counterpoise of firepower between the Japanese and Nigerian soldiers during the Battle of Dodan, but the Nigerian soldiers defeated the Japanese because of the greater resolve, courage, and morale, which they possessed over them. It can be argued, in furtherance of a continuing debate,⁷³ that where there is a balance of other requirements of battle between belligerents, superiority of soldierly qualities would determine the outcome of battle or war.

For the Nigerian soldiers, the outcome of the Burma campaign was, therefore, not fortuitous. It was simply a reenactment of their tradition of valour and the ardour of invincibility of the Nigeria Regiment, which date back to the pristine of the regiment's evolution in the nineteenth century. The regiment had defeated the Germans in the longest land campaign of the First World War in East Africa.⁷⁴ Once again, it humbled the Japanese in Burma, a theatre of the longest land campaign that the British had to fight in the Second World War. Indeed, the successful way the British trained and led Nigerian soldiers to fight the Italian and Japanese forces reflected the British mastery of the art of modern warfare, a great colonial legacy, which the Nigerian Army would come to live with.

⁷³ For a good idea of this debate, see U. E. Umoh, "Resolve, Capability and the Outcome of the Biafran War (1967-1970)," *Journal of Defence Studies*, 18 (March 2013), 15-37.

⁷⁴ For more details, see I. O. Ewa, "Nigerian Soldiers in the East African Campaign of the First World War: 1916-1917," in *Africa and the First World War: Remembrance, Memories and Representations after 100 Years*, eds. De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway and Kwame Osei Kwarteng (Newcastle, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 12-23. See also K. Bomani, "WWI's Untold Story: The Forgotten Battlefields". Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/Africa/world-war-in-Africa/index.Htm/> (accessed 27 August 2020).

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It is to their credit, that the Nigerian soldiers were remarkably a part of the Allied forces that reconquered Burma from the Japanese and restored British hegemony in the region. It is also to their credit, that all of them, whether or not they survived the war, collectively acquired a good reputation and earned from their British officers the accolade, "Burma Boys." It is by this accolade that they became popularly known both in Burma and Nigeria.⁷⁵ Above all, their gallant performance in East Africa and Burma has given them a voice in the history of the Second World War. No longer would they remain as the forgotten soldiers of the Second World War.

⁷⁵ See B. Bandele's 224-page historical fiction, *Burma Boy* (New York: Random House, 2013).

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