

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN IN GERMAN SOUTH WEST AFRICA

Dave Young



*1914. Postcard. "Xmas Day. D Squadron, Imperial Light Horse, C Force via Cape Town".
Signed by Bob Reid, ILH. (Paynes Studios, Strand Street, Cape Town).*

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THE SOUTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN IN GERMAN SOUTH WEST AFRICA SEPTEMBER 1914 - JULY 1915

INTRODUCTION

Using correspondence posted from Union Defence Force field based soldiers the exhibit traces the South African Campaign in German South West Africa through three of the four main UDF offensive movements namely the Eastern Force B, the Central Force C and the Northern Force D which were deployed to overpower the German army. The exhibit is supported by post cards and real photographs.

THE BUILD UP TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In Europe on 29th July 1914 Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Two days later on August 1st Germany declared war on Russia and the following day invaded France. On 4th August, Britain sent an ultimatum to Germany demanding the neutrality of Belgium. Germany attacked Liege that day. Thus on 4th August 1914 at 11a.m. Great Britain declared war on Germany. The First World War had begun.

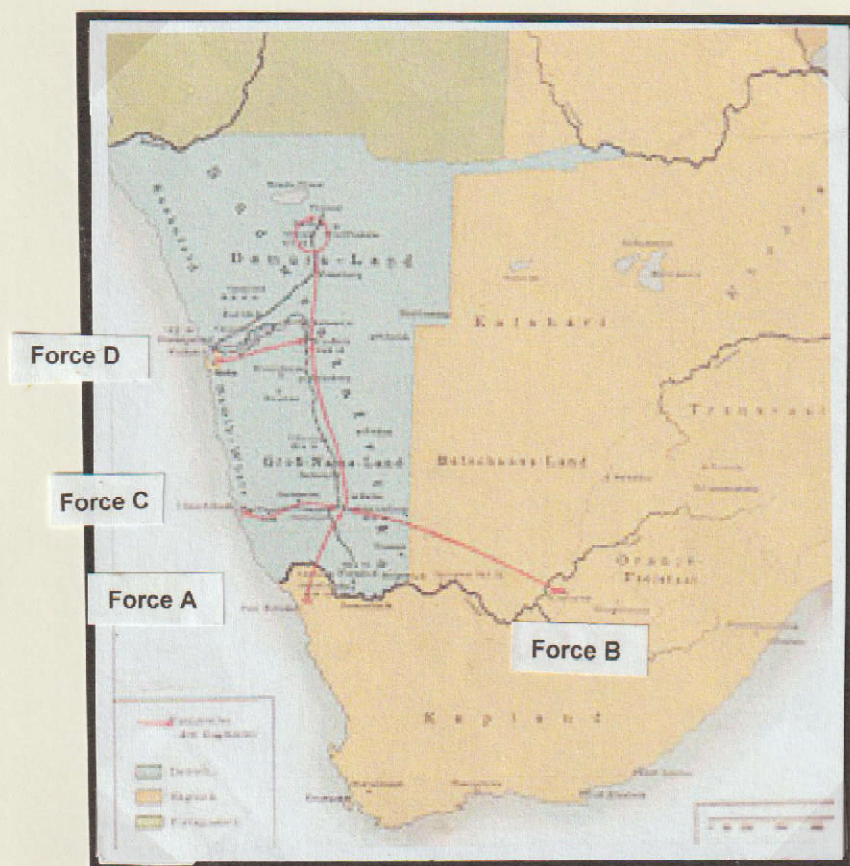
SOUTH AFRICA ENTERS THE WAR ON 21st AUGUST 1914

Upon declaration of war, Great Britain was immediately concerned about the security of the sea trade route around South Africa, the jugular vein of the British Empire. Great Britain requested "Urgent Imperial Service" from the Union of South Africa, involving the capture of the ports of Luderitz Bay and Swakopmund, the silencing of the radio transmitters there and especially that of the powerful one in Windhuk, which, when conditions permitted, was capable of sending signals to Nauen in Germany. The transmitters could be used to contact the powerful South Atlantic German fleet and feed intelligence via the inland and coastal transmitters. On 21st August 1914, German forces began digging trenches near Nakob, within the South African border. This action justified General Louis Botha's decision to go to war against Germany.

THE UNION DEFENCE FORCE STRATEGY

The British Navy bombarded the transmitters as part of the UDF military strategy which comprised of four separate offensive Forces designated A,B,C, and D. Each Force would be responsible for separate thrusts:

- Force A** To land at Port Nolloth to operate against the colony's southern border via Raman's Drift.
- Force B** Based at Upington to apply pressure on the colony's eastern border.
- Force C** Sail from Cape Town to Luderitz Bay, destroy any remains of the transmitter, proceed inland.
- Force D** Sail from Cape Town to Walvis Bay, occupy Swakopmund and proceed inland via the railway.



THE BRITISH SEA OFFENSIVE BEGINS 14th SEPTEMBER 1914

On 14th September 1914 Luderitzbucht was shelled by the British Auxiliary cruiser Armadale Castle to destroy the Wireless Transmitter. The German army, anticipating an attack, had already relocated the transmitter 132km inland, to Aus, a position thought to be entirely safe due to the harsh desert conditions.



The Armadale Castle prior to its conversion to a Cruiser c 1911

THE CENTRAL FORCE MAKES A SEA BORNE LANDING AT LUDERITZBUCHT 18th SEPTEMBER 1914

Force C was renamed the Central Force at the start of the campaign and departed Cape Town mid September 1914 for Luderitzbucht on the Galway Castle, a liner converted to a troop ship. An unopposed landing was made four days later on 18th September as the German army had withdrawn inland to Kolmanskop. Luderitzbucht was found to be intact becoming the supply base for the Central Force.



Luderitzbucht as it would have been found by the Central Force

THE "INVINCIBLE" GERMAN SOUTH WEST AFRICAN ARMY

Although the Germans were anticipating some form of retaliation for invading South Africa they expected this attack to come overland from the Orange River. A sea borne invasion was not considered due to the vast desert expanses between the coast and Windhuk. The German forces relied on their railway system and camels for overland transport of some goods. German troops also made extensive use of horses. The UDF consisted of hardened men used to riding horses at speed and familiar with semi desert terrain. They were also excellent marksmen, able to shoot whilst mounted.

German provisions being offloaded at a railway siding onto camels



THE CENTRAL FORCE ADVANCES FROM LUDERITZBUCHT TO GRASPLATZ 26th SEPTEMBER 1914

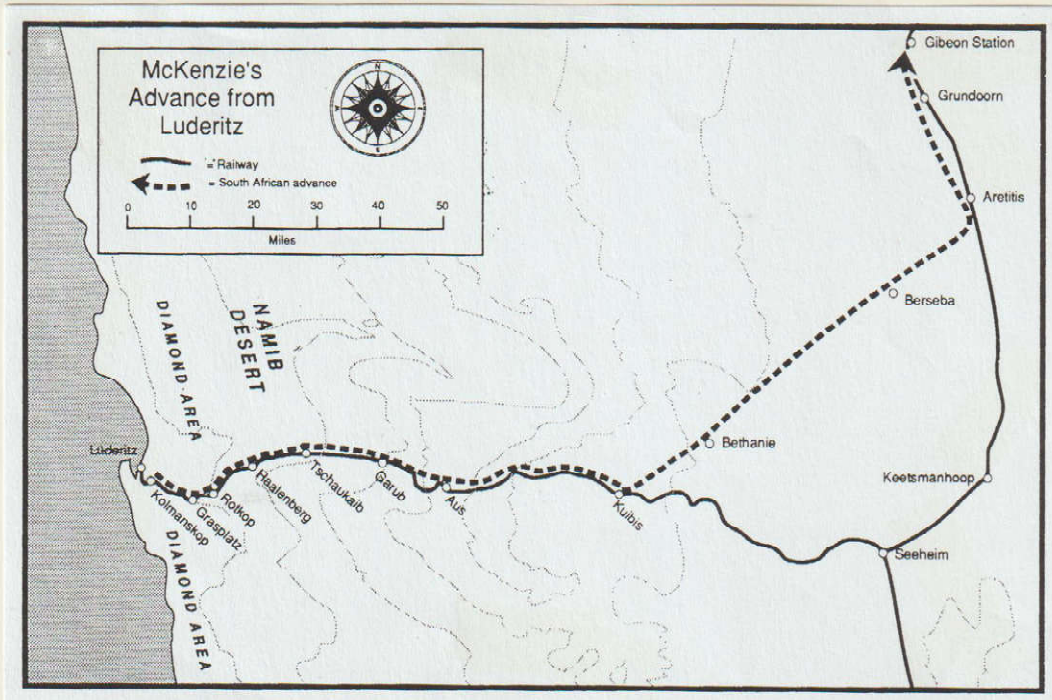
Under the command of Brigadier-General Sir Duncan McKenzie the Central Force consisted of:

Two ACF Mounted Rifle Regiments - the Natal Carbineers

Five infantry battalions

A six gun battery of field artillery and two four gun heavy artillery units

The Central Force advanced east from Luderitzbucht along the railway line eliminating the German outpost at Kolmanskop followed by Grasplatz on 26th September 1914. The objective was to reach Aus, destroy the relocated radio transmitter now positioned there and then proceed to Windhuk.



TSCHAUKAIB IS TAKEN ON 8th NOVEMBER 1914

On 8th November 1914 the settlement at Tschaukaib was taken together with 32km of railway line and an overhead water tank. The UDF advance halted here for replenishment of supplies until 13th December. Meanwhile the Army Postal Services had set up a Base Post Office, No. 4, on 23.9.1914, at Luderitzbucht.



Circular dumb canceller

ARMY BASE P.O.4 SOUTH AFRICA NOV.14. - 5pm

Straight line censor cachet:

POSTAGE FREE.
PASSED BY CENSOR.

Oval cancellar:

NATAL CARBINEERS OFFICIAL FREE

The postal date of Nov.14 indicates that the card was written six days after the capture of Tschaukaib. The post card depicts a view of Bethanie, a village en route to Gibeon Station.

The card reads:

My Dear Adeline,

Received your letter & pc & paper for which many thanks. I have received all your letters & pc but cannot understand how it is that you do not receive my letters. I have a nice lot of pc's. I am saving a lot of local view PC's until I get home which I intend giving you. D'ont forget to write whenever you can. I am feeling better today & hope you are the same . Goodbye, Yours Bertie

The Natal Carbineers

The Natal Carbineers, namely the 1st and 2nd Mounted Rifles, were mobilized on 23rd August 1914. Both Battalions saw service in German South West Africa with the main battle being fought at Gibeon Station on 25th April 1915. The Carbineers lost two men killed in the engagement. The Regiment received Gibeon battle honours on this occasion.

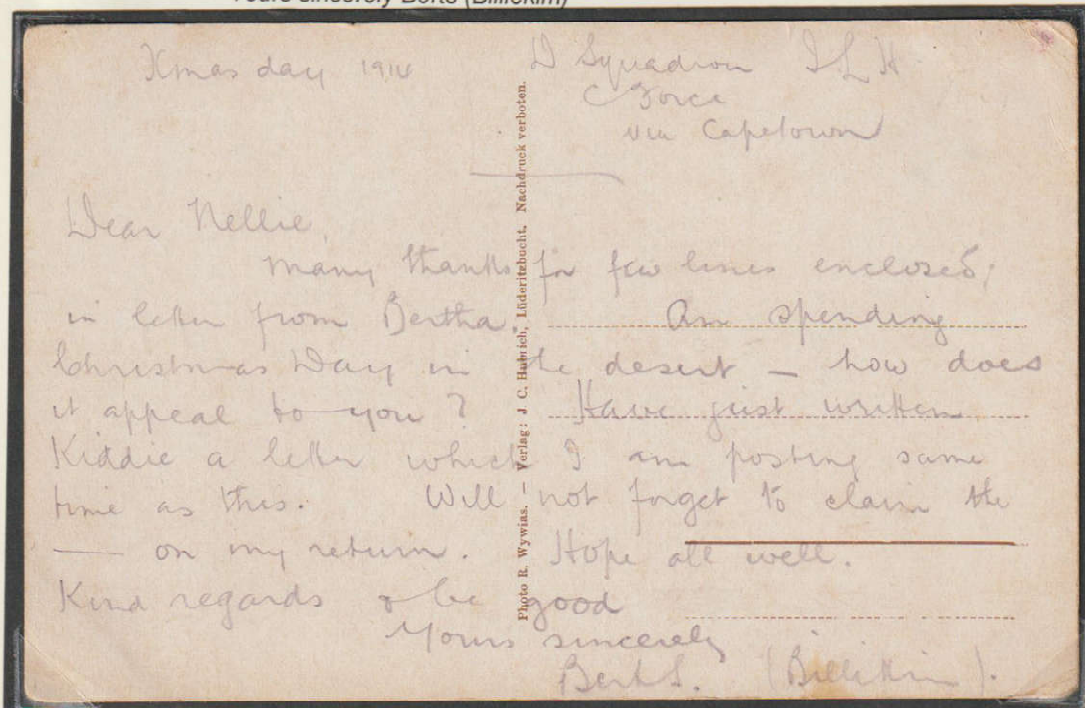
THE CENTRAL FORCE, IMPERIAL LIGHT HORSE, D SQUADRON, 25TH DECEMBER 1914

On 25th December the ILH, as it is known, was in the area of Tschaukaib. The correspondence illustrated is of interest as it is well annotated with the squadron details as follows:

"Xmas Day 1914 D Squadron ILH C Force via Cape Town
Dear Nellie

Many thanks for few lines enclosed with the letter from Bertha. Am spending Christmas Day in the desert - how does it appeal to you? Have just written Kiddie a letter which I am posting same time as this. Will not forget to claim the.....on my return. Hope all well & be good.

Yours sincerely Berts (Billiekim)"



The second card is also to Nellie, although dated 17th August 1915 it is signed by Bob Reid I.L.H.

(The writing is the same on both cards).

Clearly Bob Reid survived the campaign.

Photo taken by
Paynes Studios
Strand Street (Cape Town)



GENERAL LOUIS BOTHA TAKES THE ARMY SALUTE AT TSCHAUKAIB FEBRUARY 1915

En-route to Walvis Bay the Commander-in-Chief General Louis Botha, landed at Luderitzbucht and travelled from there inland, by open rail wagon, to visit the troops at Tschaukaib. The troops cheered the General, who, shortly after the parade returned to Luderitzbucht. The two photographic post cards vividly show the harsh desert conditions as well as the size of the Central Force contingent.



Although not dated the card reads:
 "This is the day when General Louis Botha came and visit us the guns is our field atellery(sic) the ink dot shows the General the man holding out his hand is Capt. De Millen (sic)" = Capt. C.K. De Meillon

POST CARD

This space for communication The address to be written here

This is the day when General Botha came and visit ~~us~~ us the guns is our field ~~atellery~~ atellery the ink dot shows the General the man holding ^{out} his hand is Capt. De. Millen

THE CENTRAL FORCE OCCUPIES GARUB IN FEBRUARY 1915

Garub was well defended by the German forces and necessitated the UDF to reconsolidate their forces at Tschaukaib between November 1914 and February 1915. The garrison also had to deal with intense heat, prolonged sandstorms and intermittent air attacks. Difficulties in providing water forced the replacement of the mounted rifle regiments with infantry. The planned date set for advance was delayed. Garub was finally occupied by the infantry on 22nd February 1915.

The date of the Army Base P.O. 4 - 2nd March indicates that this card was written towards the end of February 1915 and thus places this card at Garub.

The card is addressed to: Miss. Emma Smith c/o The Widow M.J. Smith, Cape Flats, Wynberg, via Cape Town, received in Cape Town on 12th March 1915.

The message reads:

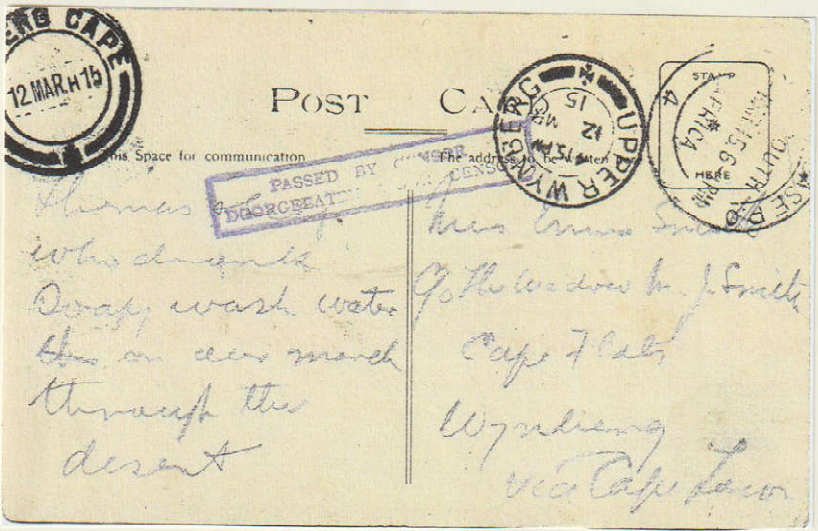
"Thomas and George who drank soapy wash water on our march through the desert"

Circular dumb canceller

ARMY BASE P.O.4 SOUTH AFRICA 2 MAR 15. 6 - PM.

Straight line censor cachet:

PASSED BY CENSOR
DOORGELATEN DOOR CENSOR



This emotive photographic post card epitomising the infantry weariness and dusty conditions that had to be endured on the march to Garub.

AUS IS TAKEN 30th MARCH 1915

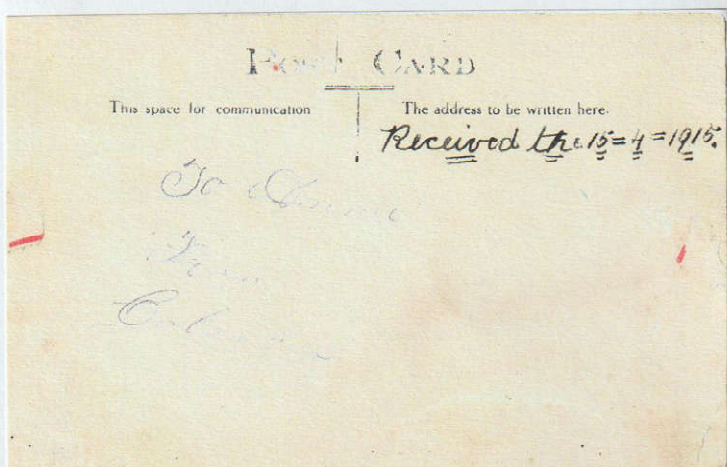
With the occupation of Garub the UDF turned Garub into a base for preparation of the attack on Aus. By 22nd March the daily yield from the Garub wells was 270 000 litres allowing three mounted brigades to be brought forward to Garub in preparation for the attack on Aus.

The wireless transmitter at Aus went silent on the night of 28th March with the German forces abandoning Aus in favour of relocating more troops to northern defences where the UDF D Force was threatening Windhuk. Aus was occupied without any fighting.

The UDF relied on horses for troop movements.

This real photo post card was sent
"to Annie from Columbus"
Annie wrote on the card
received 15th April 1915"

Postal services were good and other cards indicate that it took around ten days for post from German South West Africa to reach South Africa. This would place this photo to be taken in the area of Aus c 5th April 1915.



THE CENTRAL FORCE BATTLE FOR GIBEON 27th APRIL 1915

Gibeon is situated on the railway line to Windhuk and as the crow flies, some 180 miles from Aus. Gibeon was heavily fortified and was the last main German resistance before Windhuk. Failure to hold Gibeon would spell the end of the German hold on southern German West Africa. Unexpectedly the Central Force developed a strategy not anticipated by the Germans in that the Force struck across country, via Bethanie and Berseba, instead of following the longer railway line route. Notwithstanding this brilliant strategy Lt. Colonel Royston's advance on Gibeon resulted in defeat with 3 killed. With a second front General McKenzie's troops defeated the Germans but lost a further 24 killed. After Gibeon the Central Force mounted troops moved easily to Windhuk from where they returned home at the end of hostilities in July 1915.

The Imperial Light Horse Regiment (The Natal Carbineers) lost two men killed in action.

Soldiers killed in action at Gibeon were buried with ceremony. The real photograph, illustrated, is dated 4th May 1915 and although the whereabouts are not stated, research indicates that this cortege was more than likely at Gibeon. It is inscribed "Marching to the Graveyard".



Marching to the Graveyard 4th May 1915

"Dearest Cousin,

Am sending you these few snaps to show you how we are getting on and how we are overcrowded at some places. I am still enjoying sound health, trust this will reach you in same condition. I only get very few letters.

Remain as always, fondly yours, Johannes"

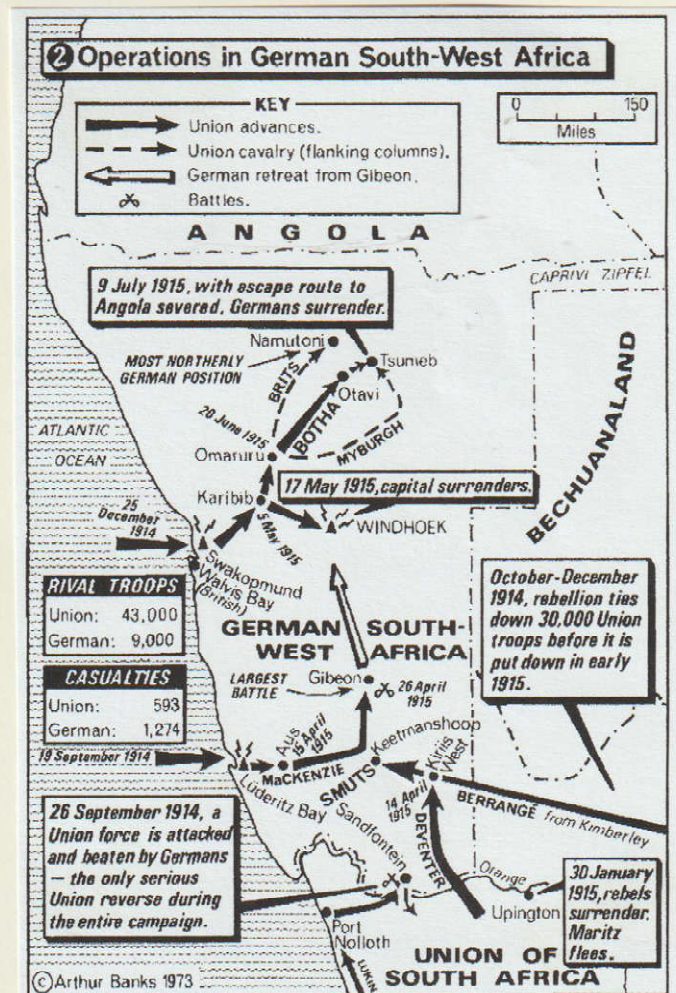
THE SOUTHERN FORCE A AND THE EASTERN FORCE B ADVANCE NORTH, APRIL 1915

Concurrent with the advance of the Central Force both the Eastern and Southern UDF Forces were engaged in heavy fighting in the east and south east of German South West Africa. The Southern Force led by van Deventer captured Ukamas an important German military base in January 1915 followed by Kalkfontein on 5th April 1915, the southern rail terminus also an important German military base. From Kiriis West both the Eastern and Southern Forces forces advanced towards the rail junction at Seeheim. Contact was made with the German army en route leading to the German army's retreat from Seeheim.

The railway station at Seeheim c 1915



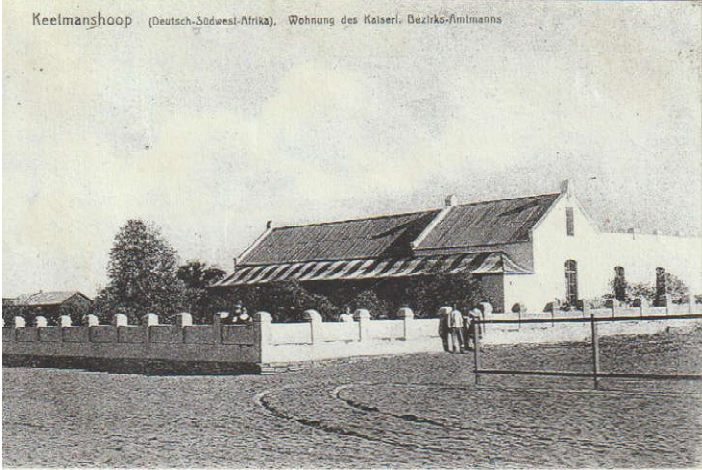
The Eastern and Southern Force movements



SEEHEIM IS TAKEN LATE MARCH 1915 FOLLOWED BY KEETMANSHOOP ON 14TH APRIL 1915

With the abandonment of Seeheim the German Army made a hasty retreat to Keetmanshoop. Even Keetmanshoop was abandoned when Berrange advanced northwards from Garuchab and Kalkfontein. The distance from Kalkfontein to Keetmanshoop is 130 miles and General Smuts was quick to congratulate the troops on their endurance and rapidity of movement, considering the nature of the terrain to Keetmanshoop and the German destruction of all water wells en route.

Keetmanshoop (Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika), Wohnung des Kaiserl. Bezirks-Commissars

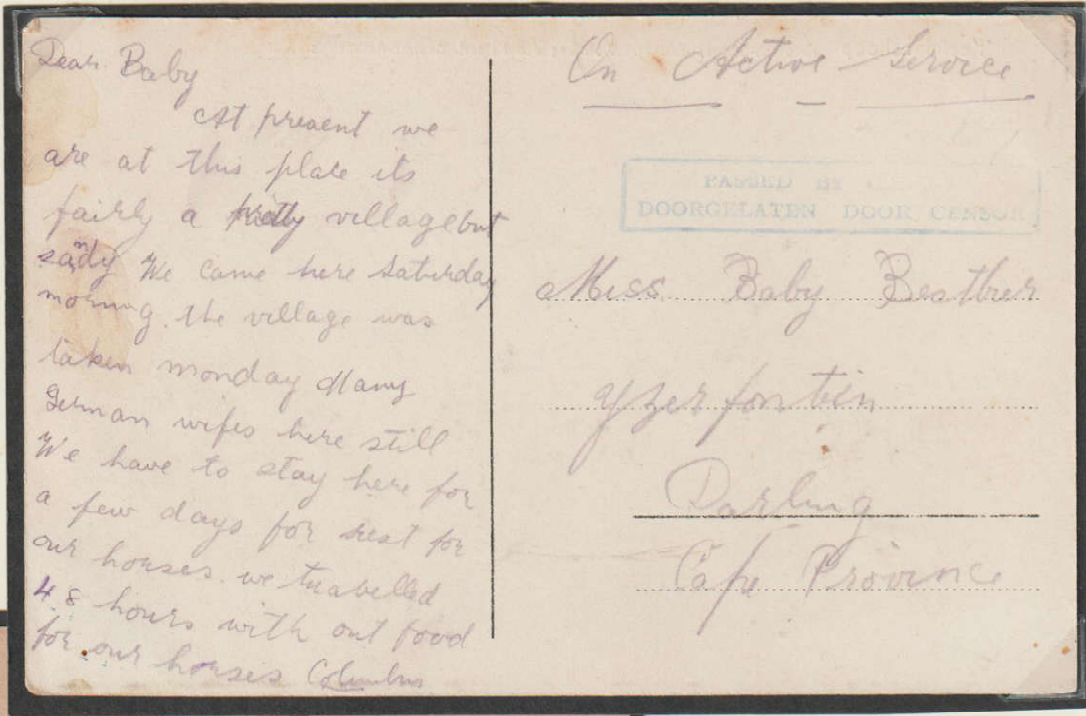


The card is addressed to: Miss Baby Beatbier, Yzerfontein, Darling, Cape Province, reading:
 "Dear Baby,
 At present we are at this place its fairly a pretty village. but sandy. We came here Saturday morning. The village was taken Monday. Many German wives still here. We have to stay here for a few days rest for our horses. We travelled 48 hours without food for our horse. Columbus"

Censor cachet

PASSED BY CENSOR
 DOORGELATEN DOOR CENSOR

Card written 6 days after the capture of Keetmanshoop



Bahnhof Keetmanshoop



Keetmanshoop
 Station
 c 1914

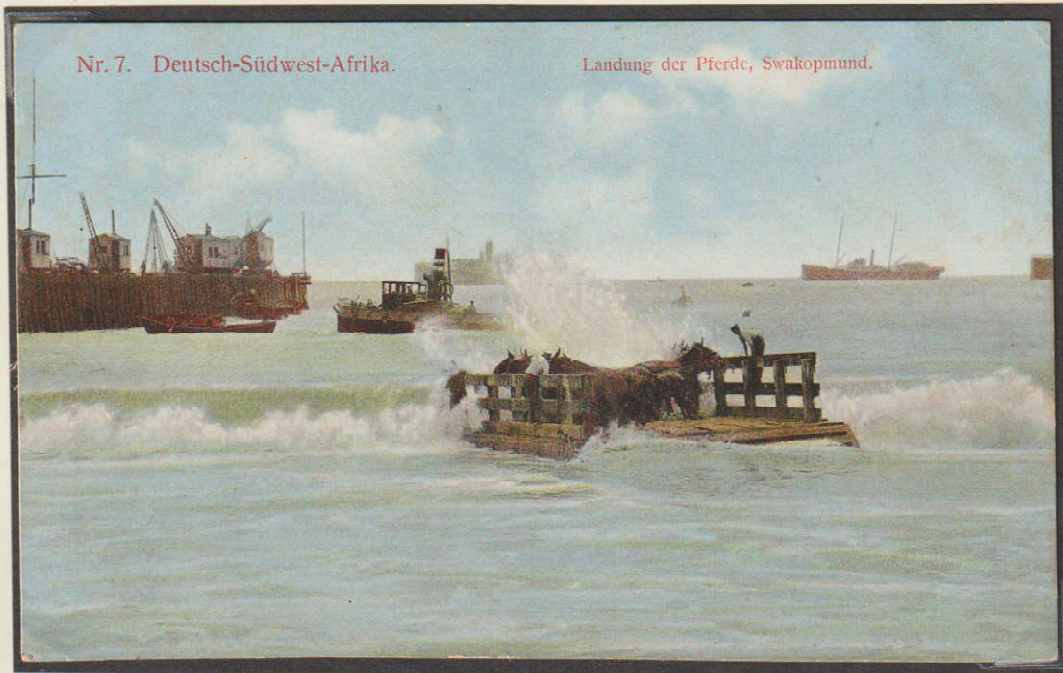
THE D, NORTHERN FORCE, INITIAL OFFENSIVE BEGINS 14th SEPTEMBER 1914

A naval bombardment on 14th September destroyed the wireless station at Swakopmund. Separately UDF scouts entered Swakopmund but were then withdrawn. The reason for this being that the Southern B Force was heavily engaged in the south at Sandfontein and needed support. As a result the D Force offensive was delayed until 25th December 1914.

THE D FORCE LANDS AT WALVIS BAY 25th DECEMBER 1914

After consolidation of the D Force at Walvis Bay a 350 strong reconnaissance force set off for Swakopmund on 3rd January 1915. Some German resistance was encountered and the town was taken the following day.

Swakopmund then became the new forward base for the D Force, resupplied by sea from Cape Town.

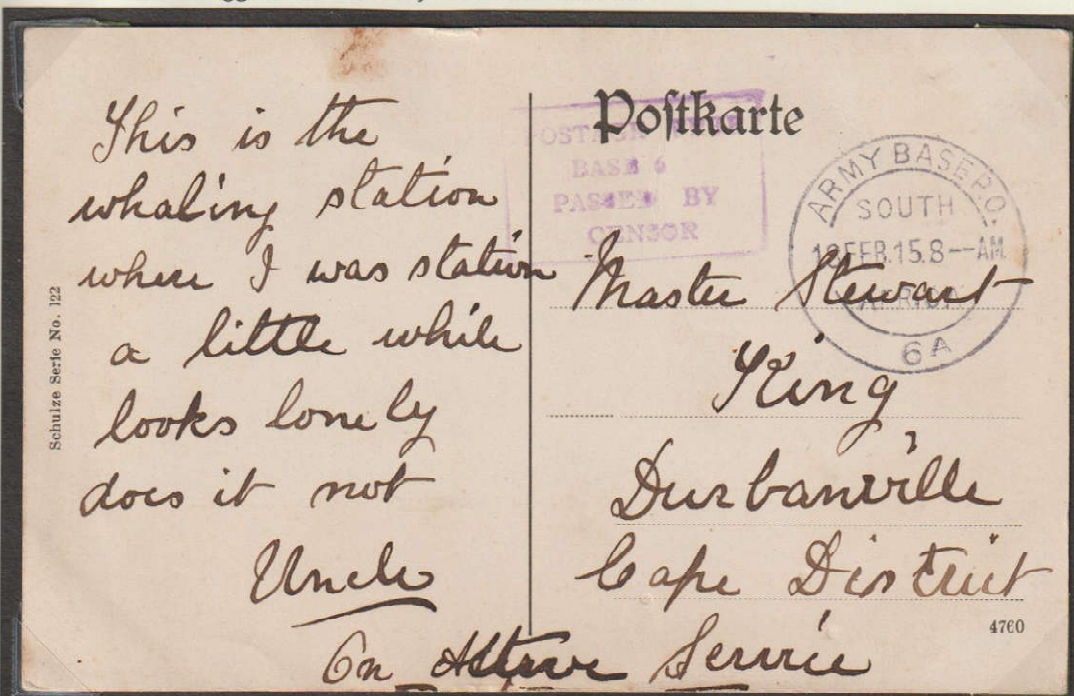
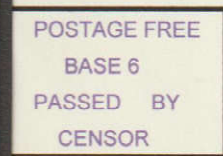


Landing horses at Swakopmund

EARLY ARMY BASE POST OFFICE AT SWAKOPMUND

The Army Base P.O. 6A canceller dated 18th Feb. 1915 was used at Swakopmund. It has been recorded used from 16.2.15 to 2.3.15. The censor mark is recorded from 22.1.15 (with Army Base 6 P.O.date stamp) which suggests that 6A may have been used earlier.

Censor cachet



Die Walfangstation bei Walfishbay

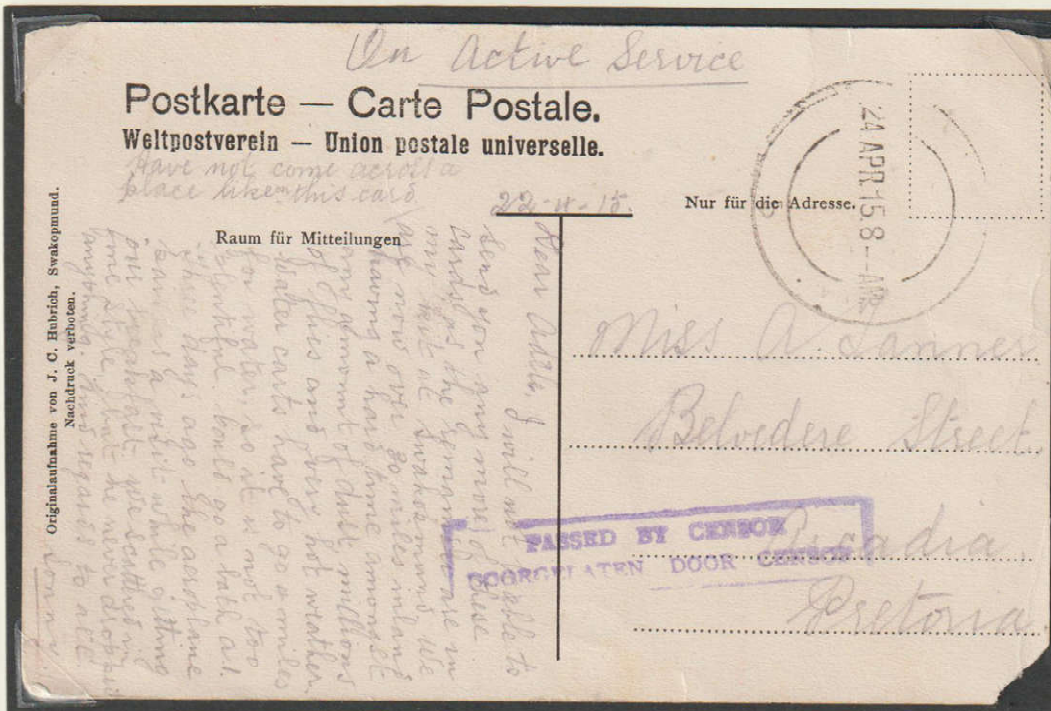
Schulze Serie No. 122

THE AIR ATTACK ON UDF TROOPS AT ARANDIS 15th APRIL 1915

The UDF force advancing to Karibib along the railway line had reached Arandis where their advance was halted due to German resistance. This was one of the UDF camps where an aeroplane of the German Army was to bombard the UDF troops. This occurred on 19th April 1915. This event is recorded in post card below, written on 22nd April 1915 from Army Base P.O. 5, dated 24th April 1915

The Army Base P.O. 5 dumb canceller was used at Luderitzbucht from 23.9.1914.

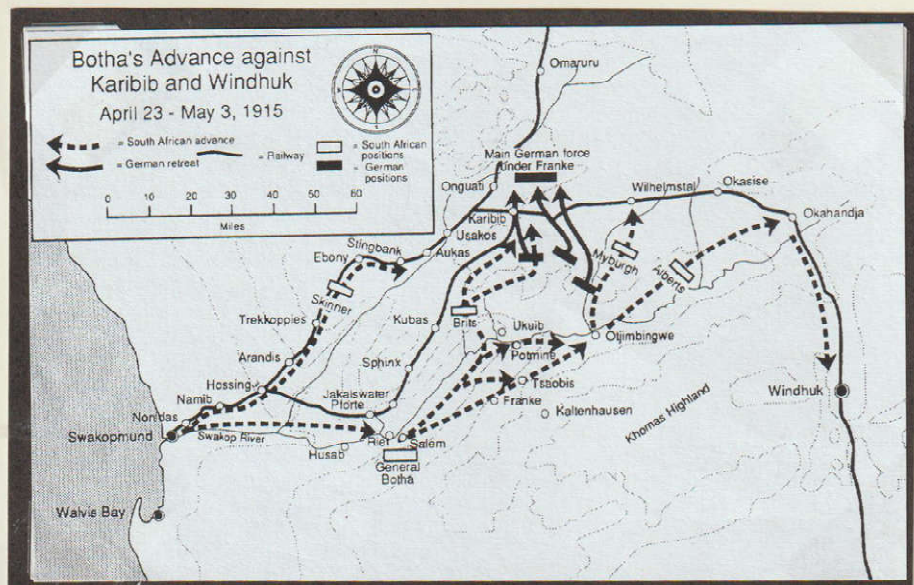
The boxed censor cachet:



Sent to Miss. A. Tanner, Belvedere Street, Arcadia, Pretoria, the card reads:

"Dear Adele I will not be able to send you any more of these cards as the remainder are in my kit at Swakopmund. We are now over 30 miles inland having a hard time amongst any amount of dust, millions of flies and very hot weather. Water carts have to go 4 miles for water so it is not too plentiful. Could go a bath. Three days ago the aeroplane paid us a visit while getting our breakfast. We scattered in fine style but he never dropped anything. Kind regards to all. Sonny".

The Northern Force Advance



THE BATTLE FOR TREKKOPIES 25th/26th APRIL 1915

The distance from Arandis to Trekkopies is some 14 miles hence the closeness of the battle dates. The 2' 0" gauge German railway had been removed by the retreating German army. However the line was replaced by South African Sappers with the standard 3' 6" South African gauge from Swakopmund, inland. It was imperative to keep the line open as a supply route which was Colonel Skinner's role being responsible for the UDF troops advancing along the railway line. General Botha was in the meantime advancing along the Swakop River to the south of the railway line.

The undulating terrain at first favoured the German army but through a number of counter attacks by the UDF Forces, the German army retreated from Trekkopies

The UDF Force casualties were 9 dead and 32 wounded whilst on the German side casualties were 11 dead, 14 wounded and 27 captured.

The event is related to in the card below, written on 15th May 1915 from Army Base P.O.5 dated 18 May 1915 and received at Colenso on 28th May.



Sent to Miss. Elsie Wood, Geluk, Colenso Station, Natal

"Dear Elsie,
Hope you are all well at home. At present we are leading a very lazy life. Now we have got over our fight at Trekkopye we are all wishing for another cut at the enemy but am afraid it will be some time yet. Errol"

The card is sent from (left hand top corner):

W.E. McLarin
"B" Section
2nd M.B. P A (Natal) = 2nd Mounted Brigade
Northern Force

The boxed censor cachet is in blue:



THE NORTHERN FORCE PINCER MOVEMENT RESULTS IN THE DEFEAT OF THE GERMAN ARMY

Under the command of General Louis Botha the Northern Force consisted of:

Two Mounted Brigades (5 000 men total) with each brigade supported by a four gun battery of field artillery.

Two Infantry Brigades, the first composed of the SA Irish regiment, the Rand Rifles and the SA Engineers the second the 2nd Transvaal Scottish, the 2nd Kimberly Regiment, two batteries of heavy artillery, two machine gun batteries, an anti aircraft gun and a motorised contingent.

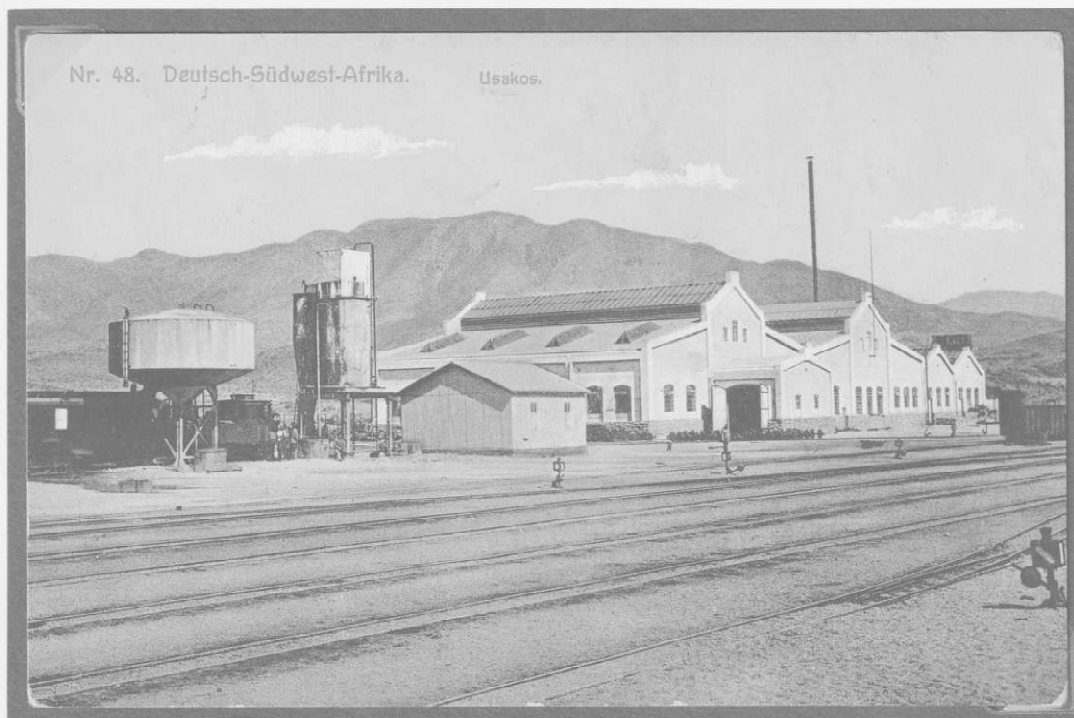
Two unbrigaded Infantry Battalions

A Mounted Regiment

Heavy Artillery consisting of six guns.

The Northern Force advanced east from Swakopmund to Nonidas where the force was split into two separate offensive groups, the one advancing along the railway line linking Swakopmund with Windhuk and the other along the Swakop River. The route along the railway passed through Arandis, Trekkopies and onto Usakos railway station, a major supply depot and army base camp.

Usakos Railway Station, supply depot and German army base



The Northern UDF Force pincer movement resulted in the capitulation of the German army with eventual cessation of hostilities on 15th July 1915.

REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Urgent Imperial Service" by Gerald L'ange
(*South African Forces in German South West Africa 1914-1915*)

Military History Journal Vol 13 No 2 "First Allied Victory"
"The South African Campaign in German South West Africa, 1914-1915"

"Putzel SWA" with thanks to Alex Visser

THE RETURN HOME TO SOUTH AFRICA

Shortly after the German surrender the UDF Forces began returning home. The post card below, dated 2nd August 1915, is from "Arnold" having served in the 2nd Motorised Transport Corps saying "From GSWA All's well."



THE CAMPAIGN LEGACY

Postal censorship remained in place in South West Africa after the war was finished, as per the censor cachet on the card illustrated, posted from Luderitzbucht to Green Point (Cape Town, South Africa) on 23rd November 1915. Note the absence of the wording Deuche Sud Wes Afrika in the post mark.

Censor cachet No. 4



During 1914/1915 the anti German sentiment was quite strong in certain parts of South Africa. This went as far as demonstrations for the local internment of Germans living in Johannesburg. One of the largest German owned Jeweller's shops in Johannesburg, Wehrley's, was targeted and set alight on 12th May 1915. The card was postally used from Johannesburg to England, dated 27th May 1915



HIS MAJESTY'S SHIP "EBANI"

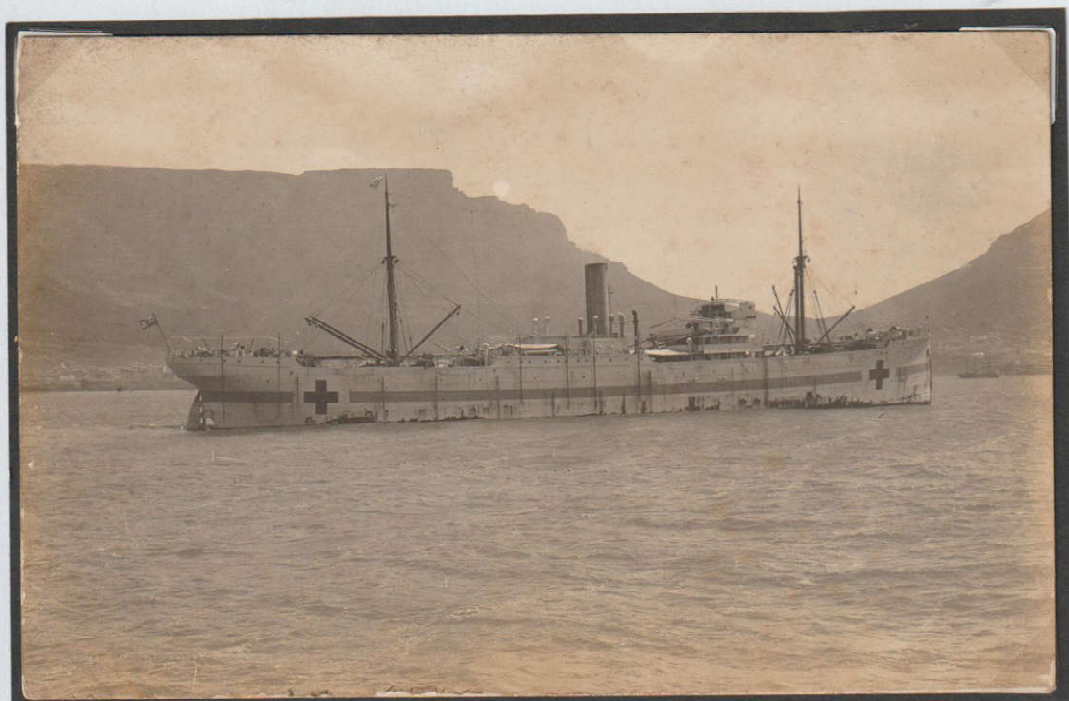
The only practical way to return wounded soldiers from GWSA was by sea to Cape Town. To this end a special fund was established by Lady Jessie Rose-Innes to equip the cargo ship "Ebani" as a hospital ship. A large operating theatre and some smaller theatres, a special ward for contagious diseases, a pharmacy and a number of wards on various decks were prepared. In an emergency the ship could accommodate some 500 patients.

The SS Ebani was registered as a hospital ship and formally inaugurated in this capacity as HMHS Ebani in Cape Town by Her Excellency Viscountess Phyllis Buxton on 1 December 1914. Although HMHS denotes His Majesty's Hospital Ship both the Royal Navy and SA Navy web sites show the Ebani as the "South African Hospital Ship". Lady Buxton was on board the hospital ship on 14 December 1914 to inaugurate the Ebani as the "South African Hospital Ship Ebani". This technically made the HMHS Ebani South Africa's first naval vessel, although she was not a fully fledged man-of-war. The medical staff on board were trained South African nurses from Wynberg Hospital (Cape Town) and male counterparts from the South African Medical Corps.

Some photographs were taken for the inauguration and made into post cards. These cards are relatively scarce and rarely seen. I illustrate two real photographic cards – both postally unused, one of the vessel off Cape Town Harbour – similar to the one depicted in most articles and the other one of the deck wards showing two nurses and two SAMC orderlies.

The ship is also recorded as having transported German POW's from Walvis Bay to Cape Town. The rear of the cards under the 'Correspondence' section also has the German word "Mitteilung" indicating that the cards may have also been used by the German prisoners.

On completion of the military campaign in German South West Africa the Ebani was declassified as a hospital ship from 1 June 1915 and had to remove her Red Cross emblems. She was thus no longer under Geneva Conventions protection. Although still transporting sick soldiers, she also carried limited stores, fresh provisions, a limited number of passengers and small detachments of soldiers returning to South Africa. On her last trip she arrived back in Cape Town on 30 July 1915. Two days prior to this on 28 July 1915, the Admiralty requested that they take over the vessel for the East Africa campaign. Reclassified, again as a hospital ship, the Ebani was transferred to the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. Refitted the vessel reported for duties in Kildini, German East Africa on 19 March 1916. HMHS Ebani did several trips after this date and had regular stops in Cape Town, Durban, Dar Es Salaam, Zanzibar, Mombasa, Alexandria, Kilwa, Tanga and Port Said. The last military voyage was on 27 March 1919. HMHS Ebani travelled over 200 000 nautical miles for the Admiralty and transported more than 50 000 sick and wounded officers and men.





Few postally used items from the Hospital Ship Ebani have been observed. One such item is in the possession of Hugh Amore member of the Royal Philatelic Society of Cape Town. Acknowledgement is given to Hugh Amore and the Post Office Stone (The Official Journal of the Postmark and Postal History Society of Southern Africa incorporating the Colonial Society) for the following:

"The cover was posted from HMHS Ebani which was docked in Cape Town at the date of posting 1 Dec.1916 and received in Pietermaritzburg 4 December 1916, 6.15pm. A letter appears to be missing from the lower end of the cachet (? E.F); E F is presumably for Expeditionary Force". One can deduce that the missing letter would have been "M" for Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.



Persons interested in the detailed history of HMHS Ebani, should study the attached article contributed by Deon Brand to the Navy News, date unknown. Acknowledgement is given to the author and the Navy News.

Dave Young, Fishhoek Philatelic Society Cape Town.



The End

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A grateful South African Philately Club thanks

Dave Young

for sharing his collection with us.

12/10/2020

If you have questions and want to contact Dave, please contact:

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