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**Malcolm Page. *King's African Rifles. A History*. Pen & Sword Books, 2011, paperback, 298pp, illus, maps, index. £14.99. ISBN: 978-1-84884-438-4.**

The curious contrasts to be found in this book begin with the title. On the cover it is simply called *King's African Rifles. A History*. Inside it adopts the less snappy but far more accurate *A History of the King's African Rifles and East African Forces*. The shorter version may have eased the task of the cover designer but while the book is inevitably dominated by the KAR, there is much in it about other units. Page himself served in the Somaliland Scouts for a number of years. The book was first published as a hardback in 1998 and is now being reprinted in paperback to help raise funds for veteran askari who have fallen on hard times.

Much of the book relies on secondary sources as Page is honest enough to admit in his introduction in which he makes it clear that he is not trying to emulate Lieutenant Colonel Hubert Moyses-Bartlett's magnificent history *The King's African Rifles*. Full marks for being open, but the first part of what follows from the complexities of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Imperial politics in East Africa through to the formation of the KAR in 1902 and thence to the First World War is really very dull. Making the campaign against von Lettow-Vorbeck, the German commander in East Africa and one of the authentic heroes of the First World War, uninteresting is quite an achievement. One suspects that Page would be happier writing a war diary than a book and his abrupt factual style is hard going. The reader learns where the KAR and other East African units were, what they did and sometimes what time of day they did it. The broader picture surrounding campaigns is explained perfectly competently but at no stage do you get any deeper understanding of what made these remarkable East African soldiers and their British officers tick.

Then suddenly during the Second World War the book springs to life. The reader learns that the officers of the unorthodox East African Scouts "included an unfrocked priest from South America, an Argentinian farmer's son, a diamond miner from Tanganyika, a Scot from Nyasaland, two settlers from Kenya and a Medical Officer". The reason for this injection of much-needed colour is not hard to find. At this point Page starts to use the recorded experiences of British officers who served during the Second World War, Malaya, the Mau Mau rebellion and the final years of colonial rule. Many of these were sent in for publication in *Rhino Link*, the newsletter of the KAR and East African Forces Dinner Club. Among them is the story of a meeting with an African chief in northern Uganda in the 1950s by Roger Perkins which is an absolute joy.

So this is a book with two titles which falls neatly into two halves and is raising money for a good cause. The best policy is probably to buy it and skip the first few decades which are dealt with much better elsewhere.

**Will Bennett**