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**‘The Generalship of Jan Smuts during the First World  
War’**

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## **Background and abstract**

This paper analyses the generalship of Jan Christian Smuts during his time as Commander-in-Chief of British and imperial forces in East Africa between February 1916 and January 1917. While it focuses primarily on the views of his command expressed by contemporaries and the campaign's main protagonists, it also considers the opinions of later writers. 'Slim Jannie' – 'Clever Jannie', as he was known in South Africa – has achieved a reputation as a general that varies between glorification and demonization. Somewhere between these disparate viewpoints, it will be argued, lies a more objective assessment.

## **About the author**

Shaun Corrigan has a BA from the University of Natal and an MA in the History of Warfare from King's College London. This paper is based upon the dissertation he wrote as part of the University of Oxford's Postgraduate Certificate in Historical Studies.

## **Introduction**

This paper analyses Jan Christian Smuts's performance as a general by examining his aims, leadership, strategy, tactics, and the difficulties presented by the campaign in East Africa. The skills and mindset of his opponent, General Von Lettow-Vorbeck, is also considered, as no commander operates in a vacuum. When General Smuts assumed command of the East African theatre in 1916, he took over a polyglot army bedevilled by a range of problems. The mixed imperial forces had been sitting mainly inert and on the defensive following the serious reverse at Tanga in 1914. The force was comprised of generals, men, and officers of vastly differing quality; only one battalion was from the regular British army, others drawn from the Indian Army, Imperial Service Troops, and various colonial units. The largely untried South Africans, who had arrived before Smuts, had already suffered a serious reverse at Salaita Hill on the Kilimanjaro front. Lord Kitchener as Minister for War had had no intention of allowing the force to go onto the offensive, and it was only by subterfuge that Sir Arthur Bonar Law, the new Colonial Secretary, and Sir Archibald Murray, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, had managed to activate the front while Kitchener was away at Gallipoli. Kitchener had responded by blocking the dispatch of the 10,000 British troops, artillery and engineers that the subcommittee of the Committee for Imperial Defence had recommended.<sup>1</sup> Without these troops, the brunt of the fighting would now be borne by the South African troops that the Dominion's Prime Minister, General Louis Botha, had promised following the conclusion of the campaign in German South West Africa, and which were in the process of arriving in theatre.

Appointing Smuts as Commander-in-Chief was a gamble. The position that he had held during the Anglo-Boer war was not comparable to a British general. He had commanded a commando of 300-400 men in terrain with which he was familiar, and where logistics did not

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<sup>1</sup> Huw Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, p. 134.

present the same formidable problems as East Africa, due to the general sympathies of the local Boer farmers, and the nature of the climate. At best he could be seen as holding the equivalent rank of a brigadier in the British Army. Critically, he had no staff training. But Smuts had been Bonar Law's first choice, though initially he felt unable to accept the position owing to the domestic situation in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien had consequently been appointed, and had begun to assemble a staff and plan the campaign from London. When Smith-Dorrien had been taken ill on his way to East Africa, Smuts had again been offered command, and this time felt free to assume it as the domestic political situation had improved following the recent South African elections.<sup>3</sup>

Facing the British imperial force was a well led, and well trained German force strongly entrenched around the Kilimanjaro area, partially on British territory, which blocked the logical line of advance into German East Africa through the Taveta gap. In addition, other German units were active in the area of the Great Lakes, while raids were being carried out on the main railway running through British East Africa. The Germans had the advantage of interior lines of communications, knowledge of the country, and two railways to facilitate movement. Any advance moreover would have to contend with the difficulties of terrain, disease, and weather. Further complicating matters was the German commander Paul Von Lettow-Vorbeck, who had experience as a bush fighter from the Herero wars, during the course of which he had observed the Boers at first hand because some had fought alongside the Germans.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, he had a sound idea of the tactics that would be employed against him.

All of these issues confronted Smuts, but vital to any assessment of his generalship must be the different roles that he had to balance. He was a theatre commander who

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> W. K. Hancock, *Smuts The Sanguine Years 1870-1919*, p.409.

<sup>4</sup> P. E. Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, p. 16.

nevertheless often acted as an operational commander. Simultaneously he was also a politician acutely aware of the volatility of the South African situation in light of the Boer rebellion of 1914. The uprising had sought to take advantage of British weakness due to the war and reassert Boer independence. Many regular officers of the Union Defence Force had defected to the rebels before Botha had crushed the revolt, being careful to use only loyal Boers to do so. The tensions between those of English extraction and those of Dutch extraction at home were mirrored in the South African component of Smuts's army, in which most of the mounted units were Dutch and the majority of infantry English. Alongside Smuts's concern for the South African domestic situation must be placed South Africa's own imperial ambitions. Here a strong body of opinion believed that it was South Africa's destiny to rule the whole of the sub-continent up to the Zambezi River and to exert a hegemonic role beyond, particularly in East Africa.

Many criticisms of Smuts as a general have been levelled. One of those often repeated<sup>5</sup> is that of his intelligence officer Major Richard Meinertzhagen, who commented: 'He is a bad tactician and strategist, an indifferent general, but in many ways a remarkable soldier.'<sup>6</sup> He is also criticised for fighting a war of 'manoeuvre' and thus being adverse to casualties;<sup>7</sup> for being too often on the frontline, and thereby losing overall control of the campaign; for poor control of logistics;<sup>8</sup> for allowing his divisions to fight as separate commands; for not appreciating the role that sea power could have played in the campaign;<sup>9</sup> and for subjecting his force to avoidable casualties from disease.<sup>10</sup> Command can be viewed as having two essential components, firstly the tactical and strategic elements, and secondly

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<sup>5</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, p. 194.

<sup>7</sup> R. Anderson, *The Forgotten Front The East African Campaign 1914-1918*, p.297.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>9</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, pp. 135-138.

<sup>10</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, p. 200.

the less tangible feature of 'leadership'. Due to the often blurred line between tactics and strategy, there will of necessity be some interplay during the discussion of these issues.

### **Historiography**

The East African campaign has not had the attention from historians that the Western Front has received. Quite rightly, it has been viewed as a sideshow to the cataclysm in Europe, or even the subsidiary campaigns of Gallipoli or the Middle East, with their much greater potential to unlock the strategic stalemate. After the campaign several books were written referring to it, including Reitz's *Trekking On* and Fendall's *The East African Force 1915-1919*. Fendall's work, which first appeared in 1921, has perhaps been underutilised given that it offers a detailed critique of the campaign while stoically refusing to name some of the protagonists, especially those whom in his opinion blundered. *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa* by Crowe has withstood the test of time and offers perhaps the best contemporary analysis. *Marching on Tanga* by Young provides a vivid account of the advance down the Pangani valley with all of the accompanying difficulties of disease and terrain, as well as a personal view on Smuts' leadership. Von Lettow-Vorbeck's *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, first published in 1920, gives a German perspective on the campaign. Unfortunately most of the other German memoirs are not available in English, imposing limits on the perspectives currently accessible to Anglophone historians. Meinertzhagen's *Army Diary, 1899-1926*, published in 1960, was a later addition to the books written by those who had fought in the campaign.

The 1970's saw a revival in interest with the publication of Millar's *The Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa*, followed by Paice's 2007 work, *Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa*. Both must, however defer to Anderson's

work, *The Forgotten Front 1914-1918*, with its greater use of primary sources, and clear tactical analysis. Huw Strachan's *The First World War in Africa* provides a masterful overview of the campaigns waged all over Africa. For an understanding of the South African perspective, Hyam's *The Failure of South African Expansion 1908-1948* is essential reading, with the later work by Samson, *Britain, South Africa and the East Africa Campaign, 1914-1918*, focusing on South Africa in more detail. Smuts's own papers have been edited by Hancock, and Van der Poel with Hancock have produced a very detailed biography of Smuts. The biography of Smuts written by his son entitled *Jan Christian Smuts*, while somewhat hagiographic, does provide insights and the personal views of the statesman. It also contains extensive quotations from books that have proved hard to obtain. Armstrong's biography is less flattering, but provides an interesting alternative point of view. No examination of the campaign would be complete without consulting *The Carrier Corps Military Labour in the East African Campaign, 1914-1918*, which through meticulous research shows that by far the greatest suffering befell not the military forces in the field, but rather the indigenous inhabitants of the region. Aspects of the East African campaign have also been addressed in works such as Melvin Page's *Africa and the First World War* and a 1978 special issue of *The Journal of African History*.

Paice and Millar, and to a certain extent Strachan, drew heavily on Meinertzhagen, as his book was a firsthand account, written at the time as a diary. In addition Meinertzhagen was Smuts' intelligence officer so was ideally placed to observe Smuts' generalship, and to comment on it. Meinertzhagen makes clear his regard for Smuts<sup>11</sup>, but offers a critical view of his generalship. However, sometimes standing too close to an object can blur one's objectivity. A new publication by Brian Garfield, *The Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of a Colossal Fraud* casts serious doubts on the integrity of Meinertzhagen himself,

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<sup>11</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926* p. 165

but does not necessarily detract from the validity of his critique, although some of his conclusions are decidedly counterfactual.

### **The aims of the campaign**

The way that Smuts waged the campaign and why South Africa offered help cannot be divorced from each other. Following the Anglo-Boer war both General Botha and Smuts had become committed anglophiles, and in 1914 were ‘not the men to desert England in this dark hour.’<sup>12</sup> However, behind this imperial patriotism lay another motivation: South Africa’s own territorial ambitions. The idea that many South Africans felt it their destiny to rule up to the Zambezi has been explored by Hyam. This is evident in Smuts’ own words, when he wrote that German South West Africa formed a part of the ‘Afrikaner heritage’.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, it was apparent in his reply to a letter from the Cape politician John X. Merriman. Merriman had suggested that South Africans would be more gainfully employed using mounted tactics suited to the South African tradition and ‘gaining a country’<sup>14</sup> in the process, as opposed to being in Europe. Smuts’s reply expressed the opinion that ‘if that country were conquered by us we could probably effect an exchange with Mozambique and so consolidate our territories south of the Zambezi and Kunene.’<sup>15</sup> Access to Delagoa Bay had been a theme of South African politics since Smuts had been Attorney General of the erstwhile Transvaal Republic, so it seems natural he would return to it now, when a scenario for absorption presented itself.

Another assumption that can be made from the letters above was that the aim was conquest, not only to achieve the defeat or surrender of the German forces. If the strategic ambition was to be fulfilled it was imperative that the country fall to South African arms. An

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<sup>12</sup> W. K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel (eds), *Selections from the Smuts Papers (Volume III)*, volume. 12, no.162, p.202.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, (Vol.3) vol. 12 no.143A, p.197.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, (Vol.3) vol. 13 no.89, pp.307-308.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, (Vol.3) vol. 13 no.154, p.310.

additional factor was also at play in that many Boers were extremely reluctant to serve outside Africa. Campaigning in East Africa, therefore, presented a neat solution. One assumption of Merriman's that was to prove flawed, however, was that tactics that worked so well in South Africa would prove to be as effective when utilised in East Africa.

It therefore seems safe to say that Smuts set off for East Africa with a sincere desire to aid Britain in the war. The politician in him would also have recognized that by conquering German East Africa he could secure the best possible advantage for South Africa at any peace talks after the conclusion of hostilities. But here Botha – and it must be assumed Smuts too, owing to their close political and personal relationship – had committed a grave error. They did not insist that responsibly for the entire theatre be turned over to South African control, as they had in German South West Africa. Consequently it remained under the control of the British War Office. Thus, at the cessation of hostilities, South Africa was not the de facto ruler of the territory and therefore had a much weaker hand to play in pursuit of its ambitions for territorial aggrandizement.

### **The campaign strategy**

Smuts adopted the broad strategic plan that had been formulated by Smith-Dorrien. This involved co-ordinated advances by colonial and imperial forces from Nyasaland and Southern Rhodesia into the south-western part of the German colony and by a Belgium force from the Congo into the north-west. The most important advance was planned from British East Africa through the narrow Taveta gap in the Kilimanjaro area. Smuts personally assumed command of the latter front. It was here, partly on British territory, where the main German force – in strongly prepared defensive positions – was concentrated under the command of Von Lettow-Vorbeck. If this force was destroyed, or if it surrendered, the others

could be defeated in detail, or would surrender. The Kilimanjaro area was the key to German East Africa, as once through this natural choke-point different strategic options could be explored. The capture of the area would deny Von Lettow-Vorbeck his food resources, and put the British astride one of the two railway lines. In addition the railway from British territory could be extended to meet the German line during the rains, in preparation for the next stage of the campaign.

Smith-Dorrien had wanted more time to prepare, and only planned to begin after the rains. He had warned of the dangers of the campaign, but the politicians in London expected a speedy victory.<sup>16</sup> He had also requested more motor transport, being aware of the danger that tsetse-fly posed to animal-based transport. After a brief reconnaissance of the front, Smuts modified the plan and decided to move almost immediately, in order to utilise the brief window still available before the rains began. It is not entirely clear what his reasons were. Perhaps he was motivated by pressure from London, possibly due to a belief that he could conclude the campaign swiftly, or perhaps because he feared for the health of the troops if they sat out the rainy season: his papers do not provide his reasons. The *Official History* suggests that it was because of a need to restore morale after the initial reverses, and to ensure a strategic advantage before the rains began.<sup>17</sup> This seems logical as the best way to restore morale would be a victory which would presumably aid the recruitment then underway in South Africa.

There were sound reasons to move early. If the gap could be forced early once the rains stopped, the whole plan could be activated with the largest and most important force in a more advantageous position when the other forces advanced. Also, from a political point of view it would have made sense, although there is no firm evidence to support this as a

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<sup>16</sup> R. Anderson, *The Forgotten Front: The East African Campaign 1914-1918*, p.107.

<sup>17</sup> South African Army General Staff. *The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918: Official History*, p.67.

motive. Smuts as a politician may have thought of the boost to morale in South African and in Britain if the Germans were evicted from the British territory that they occupied. This is given credence by Botha's letter telling him how the victories had lifted spirits.<sup>18</sup> The obvious drawback was that the lines of supply would be lengthened, leading to an undesirable dependence on them for supplies during the rains.

It says a lot about Smuts's 'first class brain'<sup>19</sup> that he was able to sum up the situation and make a decision so quickly. It also speaks of his confidence in his judgement. Confidence is one of the qualities that contribute to good generalship, and his confidence in his abilities and the capability of his force was to permeate down to his men. Overconfidence can, however, be dangerous, and it does seem Smuts was overconfident about logistic capacity and the ability of his men to endure the hazards of the territory throughout which they were to campaign.

Once the gap had been forced (discussed below) the hold on the area around Kilimanjaro was consolidated with the capture of the terminus of the northern railway. Smuts had taken a risk by advancing into German territory but had greatly enhanced his strategic position. It must also be acknowledged, however, that he had reduced the operational effectiveness of his force because it now had longer supply lines over rough terrain, a factor that was only going to become worse with the impending rains. This, it seems fair to conclude, was a characteristic of his generalship: logistics came second to the attempt to obtain a tactical or strategic advantage.

After a brief reorganisation of his forces (discussed below) Smuts again showed flexibility and decisiveness. He sent a division to occupy Kondoa-Irangi as the rains came,

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<sup>18</sup> W. K. Hancock and J. and Van der Poel (eds), *Selections from the Smuts Papers. (Vol.3)*, vol. 14 no.14, p. 346.

<sup>19</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926* p. 165.

thereby gaining control of the Masai Steppe, and placed a force in a position to intercept the Germans if, or when, they retreated for the area of the Great Lakes once the Belgian advance began. One can contend that this action has been looked at in light of the logistic difficulties suffered by the isolated division,<sup>20</sup> and not closely enough in the light of its strategic implications. Strategically, control of Kondoia-Irangi meant that Smuts was simultaneously threatening both railway lines, forcing Von Lettow-Vorbeck to divide his forces. The implication is clear that Smuts saw clearly that once these lines had fallen, the German forces would have to surrender or retreat into the southern Tanganyika, which held no economic or military value. It seems evident that Smuts' grasped the whole strategic picture of the theatre of operations and through swift, creative action changed it to his advantage in a very short period. He had seen the opportunity after Taveta and sought immediately to exploit it.

**There is a view that Smuts was wrong to allow his divisions to fight as virtually separate commands, not reporting back to a staff that lacked authority to exercise initiative<sup>21</sup> is not supported by Kondoia-Irangi.** It accords with the way that the Boers had fought, and was in any event a function of the territory over which the conflict was taking place. It may be presumed that due to Smuts's own experiences as a Boer commander, he wanted his generals to display initiative, not the staff. In a conflict where communications were at best rudimentary, it might be argued that Smuts was attempting to give those that he trusted the flexibility to operate independently. Van Deventer, whose division was sent to Kondoia-Irangi, was especially trusted, and Botha had specially requested, if not directly ordered, that he be given a command.<sup>22</sup> In a territory as vast as German East Africa it is not obvious what other style of command could have been adopted. Obviously, the effectiveness of this structure of command depends on the quality of subordinates. In Van Deventer, and at

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<sup>20</sup> R. Anderson, *The Forgotten Front The East African Campaign 1914-1918*, p.121.

<sup>21</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, pp. 135.

<sup>22</sup> W. K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel, J (eds) *Selections from the Smuts Papers. (Vol.3)* vol. 14 no.10, p.337.

a later stage in the campaign, Northey, Smuts had commanders who were able to execute his broad strategic plan effectively at the operational level. In Steward at Taveta, however, he had a commander who badly botched the plan, as is explained later.

When the rains lifted Smuts continued with the same overall strategy, though now Van Deventer's division was also in the interior and was able to gain control of the southern railway, showing the value of taking Kondoia-Irangi. Brigadier-General Northey advanced into the southwest from Bechuanaland, the Belgians together with a British force under Brigadier-General Sir Charles Crewe from the Great Lakes. A net was being cast in an attempt to trap the German forces. Smuts remained in operational command of the main force and began to push the Germans down the Pangani valley, an arduous drive against the well prepared German positions, the terrain, and the unhealthy conditions. After the valley fell, the force moved south seeking a juncture with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division under Van Deventer, pushing east along the line of the southern railway.

It has been suggested that Smuts was not 'sea minded', the implication being that he failed to grasp the strategic implications that control of the sea in the theatre would have offered.<sup>23</sup> It seems that amphibious landings of a brigade had been envisioned by Smith-Dorrien at Dar-es-Salaam, or at Tanga, supported by cruisers. This argument overlooks some very important facts. Firstly, the navy had a poor working relationship with the army.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, it had failed dismally at Tanga by negating the element of surprise and – more crucially – had failed to aid the landing with proper supporting fire. Indeed, with dire implications for the duration of the campaign, two German blockade runners had slipped through allowing critical resupply for the German forces. It is entirely probable that, had these ships been interdicted by the Royal Navy, then Von Lettow-Vorbeck would have been

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<sup>23</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, p. 137.

<sup>24</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926* p. 191.

forced to surrender due to a lack of ammunition. It is correct to assume, therefore, that sea power could have been decisive in the overall campaign, but the point when it should have been applied was much earlier - by proper support of landings, and an effective blockade.

It is probably quite true that the seaborne dimensions of the campaign were not foremost in Smuts's mind, but this is not to say that he was unaware of the implications of sea power. It can be contended that British control of the sea had been a vital component of the British victory during the Anglo-Boer War. The navy's ability to stop potential supplies from reaching the Boers and the ability to ferry in British reinforcements had added to the Boers' woes. The South Africans were not entirely blind to sea power and had employed it by landing at Walvis Bay during the campaign in German South West Africa. Finally, sea landings at Tanga, or Dar-es-Salaam were two of the three options considered for renewal of operations once the rains stopped, with both being discounted for military reasons.<sup>25</sup>

The evidence suggests therefore that Smuts was fully aware of the implications of sea power, but for operational reasons decided to forgo them until later in the campaign. All harbours were in fact occupied along the line of the advance south, though no South African troops took part. Dar-es-Salaam surrendered to a force landed to the north of the town in conjunction with the navy entering the harbour. After this the navy was requested to occupy entire coastline.<sup>26</sup> From this we can perhaps deduce that Smuts did not want any bold ventures from the navy, rather the occupation of ports that could be used by his advance and which he could support.

In August Smuts and Van Deventer again joined up near Morogoro where Von Lettow-Vorbeck had consolidated, and sought a decisive battle. Despite the surrender of a

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<sup>25</sup> J. H. V. Crowe, *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa*, pp. 126-133.

<sup>26</sup> South African Army General Staff, *The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918: Official History*, p.82.

thousand askaris, the Germans again slipped away. This time Von Lettow-Vorbeck moved into the wild south, and over the Rafiji River. By September all towns had fallen, either to the South Africans, Northey, or the Belgians. In a mere ten months Smuts had captured virtually the entire territory of German East Africa, including all of the centres of population and food production, a startling achievement. The strategy had worked; Von Lettow-Vorbeck had ceased to be a military threat and the colony was in British hands. In purely military terms then, one can only rate the campaign as an operational success, limited somewhat by the failure to run Von Lettow-Vorbeck to ground. However, the cost had been that the army was totally shattered.

## **The tactics employed by General Smuts**

At the outset of the campaign, to force the Taveta gap and to bring Von Lettow-Vorbeck to battle, Smuts had at his disposal a force that had previously suffered only reverses. It would need its morale restored, and this would best be achieved by a victory. His preferred tactical approach was that of manoeuvre.<sup>27</sup> Meinertzhagen wrote that Smuts ‘is quite determined to avoid a stand-up fight. He told me openly that he intends to manoeuvre the enemy out of positions and not push them out. He told me he could not return to South Africa with the nickname “Butcher Smuts”’.<sup>28</sup> This rings true, although not – it will be argued – the aspect about not wanting to fight, and accords very much with Smuts’s dual role as soldier and politician. The fault lines running through South African society were such that there could probably be no other way. The assault of the South Africans against Salaita Hill under Major-General M. J. Tighe, and the ensuing casualties, had been lamented by Botha, and had already caused disquiet in South Africa, Botha having to keep the figures out of Parliament.<sup>29</sup> Political considerations had always to be viewed alongside military ones for Smuts; one can also understand what needless casualties would have meant for the citizen soldiers of South Africa. Any South African general who threw his troops against a well-defended position as the British had done during ‘Black Week’ was sure to receive a drubbing in the South African press – as well as to spark indeterminate political unrest in a deeply fractured political environment.

Apart from casualties the morale of the soldiers had to be taken into account by Smuts. Many had not been under fire before. Von Lettow-Vorbeck said of the South African soldiers: ‘The training of these newly raised formations was slight and the conduct of the Europeans, many of whom were very young, proved that many had never yet taken part in a

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<sup>27</sup> Smuts in J. Crowe, *General Smuts’ Campaign in East Africa*, p.ix.

<sup>28</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, p. 166.

<sup>29</sup> W. K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel (eds) *Selections from the Smuts Papers. (Vol.3)* vol. 14 no.10, p.337.

serious action'.<sup>30</sup> This was after the initial engagement at Salaita Hill. So Smuts had to find some synergy between the 'way' he went about the battle and the 'means' at his disposal. With more artillery, and a division of first grade British infantry, a direct approach may have carried the day, and ended the campaign there. But he had neither.

The plan to force the gap and hopefully destroy the Germans envisaged 2<sup>nd</sup> Division advancing into the gap, manoeuvring the German troops out of their entrenchments as much as possible by using mounted troops to envelope the positions. With their front so occupied, the German troops were to be taken in the rear by the 1<sup>st</sup> Division under Major-General Steward, which had begun to swing around from the north-west of Kilimanjaro. The intension was for this column to get astride the escape route thereby blocking the line of German retreat towards the Usambara railway. Tactically and strategically the plan can only be viewed as sound. In this way the Germans would be surrounded and destroyed, or would at least surrender with their honour intact after a fight. The problem, as so often with the best laid plans, came in the execution.

Tactically, for the advance through the gap, Smuts departed from what Tighe, who had commanded the Kilimanjaro front until Smuts's arrival, had planned and indeed attempted at Salaita Hill. Tighe had tried to take the hill with a flank attack by the South African 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade through the German fire zone, and in full view of the enemy, not the soundest tactical move.<sup>31</sup> Smuts's plan was much more subtle. He transferred a mounted brigade under Van Deventer from the 1<sup>st</sup> Division and moved it to the front directly facing the gap. This Mounted Brigade would be the key to unlocking the gap.

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<sup>30</sup> P. Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, p. 104.

<sup>31</sup> South African Army General Staff, *The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918: Official History*, p.67.

His tactics of manoeuvre were put into practice when the battle began with the Mounted Brigade moving out on the night of the 7 March 1916. The strategically important Salaita Hill, where the South Africans had been so badly mauled on the day Smuts left for East Africa, had to be taken in order to force the Taveta gap. Smuts now used Van Deventer's mounted troops to outflank the position, and the Germans withdrew as a consequence. The strongly held Latema-Reata position fell again to an outflanking movement by Van Deventer and a group of the infantry that had managed to consolidate behind it after passing through in the second of two bayonet charges. Within five days Smuts was through the gap. Irrefutably, Smuts had achieved what Tighe had failed to, and with far fewer casualties. There were less than 300 casualties in the entire engagement forcing the gap,<sup>32</sup> as compared to the failed action at Salaita Hill where 133 South Africans had died.<sup>33</sup> The tactics minimised casualties while achieving success. This speaks of Smuts's self-confidence and the faith he placed in those he trusted, especially in this instance his old comrade-in-arms Van Deventer. For a man who had only ever commanded a Boer commando it was a remarkable achievement, and shows his awareness of the value of mobility and a capacity to successfully read the ground.

However not all went to plan with the battle as a whole. Steward was slow and Von Lettow-Vorbeck, realizing that he was to be taken in the rear, slipped away again. The Germans moved further down Usambara railway as Smuts tried frontal attacks to pin them down while using mounted troops to get behind him. This was the best chance that Smuts was to have to destroy Von Lettow-Vorbeck. But the blame for the failure to achieve this must be laid at the door of Steward, as the whole strategy depended on him reaching his objectives on schedule. Indeed Meinertzhagen,<sup>34</sup> Fendall<sup>35</sup> and later Anderson<sup>36</sup> all single him

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<sup>32</sup> J. H. V. Crowe, *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa*, p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> W. K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel (eds) *Selections from the Smuts Papers. (Vol.3)* vol. 14 no.10, p. 337.

<sup>34</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, p. 164.

<sup>35</sup> C. P. Fendall, *The East African Force 1915-1919*, p.73.

<sup>36</sup> R. Anderson, *The Forgotten Front*, p.116.

out for the failure to bring the Germans to a decisive battle at this juncture. Smuts tried everything he could to speed the advance including dropping notes from an aeroplane, but to no avail.

After the conclusion of the battle Smuts, ‘after a stormy interview’,<sup>37</sup> fired Stewart and also Brigadier Malleon, whom he refused even to see. Malleon had commanded a brigade, but returned to Nairobi during the battle, forcing Tighe to assume direct command of the brigade. He also had Tighe returned to India, but made it clear that it was not for his performance. One thing that must be acknowledged, however, is that no matter how well planned an engagement is, success is also dependant on the way an adversary behaves, and it seems very unlikely that Von Lettow-Vorbeck was never going to allow his forces to be encircled. The moment that he detected the approach of units towards his rear he ordered an immediate withdrawal.<sup>38</sup> Von Lettow-Vorbeck demonstrated a mastery of manoeuvre and redeployment throughout the campaign, of which this was an early example. He would prove a tough and able adversary. Smuts had had his first experience of the frustrations and difficulties of becoming the gamekeeper, when for so long, while fighting the British, he had been the fox.

One of Meinertzhagen’s major criticisms of Smuts’s generalship is his assertion that Smith-Dorrien would have sacked the incompetent British generals; Stewart, Malleon, and perhaps Tighe, who contributed to the failure to achieve a decisive victory at Taveta, before the campaign commenced.<sup>39</sup> This counterfactual claim obviously cannot be tested, but ignores several issues. First, it seems inconceivable that a South African general would have sacked British generals before they had been given a chance to demonstrate their incompetence. Second, Smuts had been in theatre a mere three weeks when the battle began:

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<sup>37</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, p. 175.

<sup>38</sup> P. Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926* p. 205.

with whom would he have replaced them? Finally, he began the campaign earlier than Smith-Dorrien had envisaged. Perhaps if he had had more time to observe them during a longer build up he would indeed have fired them. On this point, a phrase that Smuts is purported to have uttered is illuminating: ‘Are they all like this?’, he asked about British generals, saying that he now understood how the Boers had outwitted them.<sup>40</sup> It shows a complete collapse of trust in the British leadership and leads on to Strachan’s criticism that on clearing out the British generals, he replaced them with South African generals of little more experience than himself.<sup>41</sup>

One of the first moves made by Smuts after Taveta was to reorganise the force. He expanded his force from two to three divisions, an entirely logical decision due to the increasing number of South Africans in theatre. Again, logically, the two South African divisions were placed under South African commanders, Van Deventer and Britz. Smuts obviously wanted people whom he trusted to carry out his orders, and whose military judgement he felt that he could rely upon. Also as a politician with an eye on the domestic situation, it is highly unlikely that casualties incurred by South African troops under a British general would have been tolerated. Similar sensitivities existed amongst the Australians, and their domestic situation was less volatile than that of South Africa. As South African troops were now to provide the bulk of the fighting units in East Africa, it was reasonable that they should fight under their own commanders, as did Dominion troops in other theatres.

But Strachan seems to make a factual error in his criticism of Smuts on this point<sup>42</sup> (although it may be a misreading). The third division, composed of mixed imperial, British, colonial and Indian troops, was not placed under a South African commander, but under the British Major-General Reginald Hoskins. It seems a reasonable decision from a

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<sup>40</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, p. 167.

<sup>41</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, p. 135.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

point of view of morale and familiarity with tactics, and training methods. However, on another level it does seem to have been a huge mistake to appoint Hoskins to command a division. He had been Inspector-General of the King's African Rifles, so was familiar with East Africa, and had been designated to become Chief of the General Staff, this now went to Brigadier J. J. Collyer another South African with no staff training.

This criticism then must be seen as very relevant when analysing Smuts's generalship. He had already begun to operate in his preferred manner with an advanced General Headquarters close to the frontline, leaving his staff in the rear. While this gave Smuts the ability to influence an engagement it must be seen as a black mark against him, because of the exacting logistical problems that bedevilled the campaign (discussed below).

So in analysing the battle, the conclusion must be that it was a major achievement for a general unused to handling such large numbers of troops. A major set piece battle had been victoriously concluded, with the numbers of casualties kept to a minimum, the strategic picture had changed, a large area of valuable territory captured and denied to Von Lettow-Vorbeck, and all before the rains began to fall and effectively ended the campaigning season. He had analysed the ground and used his superior mobility to achieve a result. However, in the restructuring of his force, he compounded the already enormous logistical problems that he faced.

### **Smuts's attitude to fighting**

The notion that Smuts was not prepared to fight must now be addressed, as the evidence indeed seems to suggest otherwise - if the stakes were high enough. It is quite clear – by the evidence of a number of actions – that Smuts was willing to fight. Forcing the Taveta gap and the subsequent consolidation of the position had been a battle which although involving manoeuvre, had involved some fierce fighting, notably at the Latema-Reata position.

Furthermore, the culmination of the confrontation was to be the encirclement and destruction of the Germans.

The engagement at Kondoa-Irangi is another case in point. Here Smuts flung a wide right hook, with a division under Van Deventer to Kondoa-Irangi, in an attempt to dominate the Masai Steppe. It has been suggested that this was indeed a step too far that left his force exposed, while a mounted force closer to British East Africa, and consequently shorter supply lines, would have attained the same result.<sup>43</sup> There is merit in the critique that Van Deventer's division was indeed left dangerously exposed with the rains falling, because the mounted component had by far outstripped the infantry, and it was short of both provisions and ammunition. Instead of recalling the force the infantry brigade continued on a forced march to reinforce the position, even discarding their kit along the way. The implication here is clear: he expected the position to be held, not the action of a general reluctant to fight. Van Deventer's mounted brigade could, after all, have been extricated as easily as been reinforced. Captured documents had provided information that Von Lettow-Vorbeck was planning to reinforce Kondoa-Irangi<sup>44</sup> so it was not a move without risks, but rather can be seen as a move made with the intention of bringing the Germans to battle and improving the strategic position.

Kondoa-Irangi was a bloody engagement where the South Africans performed admirably. Heavy casualties were inflicted on the Germans, one assault being repulsed with the bayonet. Von Lettow-Vorbeck had heavily reinforced his own forces for the attack, and been in personal command. Both he and Smuts had realized that the engagement could be significant and neither recoiled from it. The encounter shows that Smuts's delegation of authority to commanders he trusted could be effective. It does, however, also demonstrate

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<sup>43</sup> C. P. Fendall, *The East African Force, 1915-1919*, p.66.

<sup>44</sup> J. H. V. Crowe, *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa*, p. 113.

one of Smuts's cardinal weaknesses as a general – the almost total subordination of logistical to strategic demands. The men could only be supplied with the greatest difficulty, and suffered disease and deprivation during the rains as a result. It seems that Brigadier Fendall best sums up Smuts's attitude to fighting best: 'General Smuts had, above all things, a logical mind. He objected to giving the enemy the advantage of fighting in a position, or on ground chosen by himself. His idea was plainly to use his superior strength to make the enemy leave his chosen position; to manoeuvre him out of it, in fact, and then to use his mounted troops to intercept and force him to fight on ground of his, General Smuts's, choosing.'<sup>45</sup>

This is also an accurate summary of the tactics that Smuts sought to employ throughout the campaign, and a key lesson he would have learned during the Anglo-Boer War when the Boers sought always to maximise their own advantages. Fighting on ground of your own choosing has been a maxim for many great commanders in history. The problem that Smuts so often encountered was that the ground was nearly always chosen by the Germans with their superior knowledge of the land, but the solid military principle cannot be faulted.

### **Difficulties of the campaign**

The entire campaign in East Africa was fought in extremely arduous conditions for the British. Where terrain offered obstacles to the attacker they offered advantages to the defender, and the British were always the attackers. The composition of the force itself - administrative, medical, supply and transport - all presented obstacles to be overcome. Then there was Von Lettow-Vorbeck himself. With regards to the 'means' at the disposal of Smuts - that is, his troops - several issues must be examined. Firstly the troops he found in theatre

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<sup>45</sup> C. P. Fendall, *The East African Force, 1915-1919*, p.85.

were of widely differing quality, with some formations not considered fit for combat. His South Africans were now expected to provide the bulk of the fighting efficacy, but were newly raised and we must therefore assume not fully trained.

Fendall stressed that new battalions needed to be blooded gently, introduced slowly to fighting if they were to succeed.<sup>46</sup> He was writing of the King's African Rifles but, leaving aside his racial stereotypes, it can be taken as broadly accurate. This illustrates how important and effective Smuts's policy of keeping casualties low was. Lack of training was compounded by the speed with which the campaign began, so a gradual introduction to combat with tactics designed to assure victory, boost morale and maximise skills were appropriate, and the improvement was noted by Von Lettow-Vorbeck.<sup>47</sup>

For any formation to fight effectively it needs seasoned officers and NCOs, and here the South Africans were indisputably deficient. The problem with officers was highlighted before the campaign in German South West Africa, when Smuts was given advice on whom and how to select officers.<sup>48</sup> This problem was obviously compounded by some regular officers proving inadequate during this campaign.<sup>49</sup> Surprisingly there does not seem to have been any comment by historians on the effects of the 1914 rebellion on the officer corps of the South African Defence Force. The rebellion led to large-scale resignations of officers which could only have impaired South African fighting efficiency.

Meinertzhagen identified this weakness in the officers and NCOs of the South African contingent.<sup>50</sup> Prior to the Kondoa-Irangi operations he observed that the troops had not dug in

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-107.

<sup>47</sup> P. Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, p. 104.

<sup>48</sup> W. K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel (eds) *Selections from the Smuts Papers. (Vol.3)* vol. 12 no. 33, p. 187 and vol. 12 no.41, p.222.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., (Vol.3) vol. 13 no.15, pp. 269-270.

<sup>50</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, p. 200.

when it seemed an attack was imminent.<sup>51</sup> There is a strong suspicion that Meinertzhagen revised his diaries to accord with later events, and in this instance he is supported by Crowe who reported that the defences were anything but formidable.<sup>52</sup> Exhausted as the men were, it is inconceivable that more experienced NCOs would not have had the men entrench themselves as soon as they arrived. These observations reveal one of the inherent problems with 'citizen soldiers' who have not had prolonged training: a lack of discipline. It is therefore impossible to escape the conclusion that a strong cadre of officers and NCOs would have increased fighting efficiency. These problems were not unique to the South Africans; the 'lack discipline' of Australian troops was also noted by disapproving British officers, but accords with the tradition of settler communities. It can be argued that Smuts had to husband his resources and always keep in mind the fierce independence of the Boers. It was not that Smuts was a slack disciplinarian; far from it, Botha noting with approval his 'strong line with the officers'.<sup>53</sup> From this perspective it appears that Smuts marshalled the troops at his disposal in the most effective manner possible. It may also partly account for his propensity to lead from the front and his statement 'that a commander who shirks from such efforts should stay at home'.<sup>54</sup> With a better trained force Smuts may have tried a more direct approach.

One matter that Smuts had no control over was his opponent. Von Lettow-Vorbeck had been preparing meticulously for the war since his arrival in the colony in 1914, believing that war was imminent and that he must play a role.<sup>55</sup> He had gone on an extensive tour of inspection of the colony, he had maps and local knowledge and, most important of all, a superbly trained force of local askaris. He made use of science in matters such as the locally

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 181.

<sup>52</sup> J. H. V. Crowe, *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa*, p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> W. K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel (eds), *Selections from the Smuts Papers. (Vol.3)* vol. 14 no.14, p.346.

<sup>54</sup> Smuts in J. H. V. Crowe, *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa*, p.xiii.

<sup>55</sup> P. Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, p. 3.

produced quinine, the infamous Von Lettow-Vorbeck 'schnapps', producing bandages from bark, and providing detailed maps of the tsetse-fly belts through which he often withdrew. His internal lines of communication and local knowledge gave him the ability to realign his forces much more rapidly than Smuts could. He prepared fields of fire and other features of the country in order to meet the British as they advanced towards him.<sup>56</sup> The dense nature of the bush made accurate observation and shooting almost impossible, as well as impeding the mobility of horses.

Another point not commented on in any of the sources is that Von Lettow-Vorbeck had a number of men with military training to call upon at the outbreak of war. Germany had a long-standing system of conscription so most, if not all, of the settlers that were drafted into his units had military training, and many were deployed as NCOs. It might be contended that they stiffened his force of well trained and disciplined askaris. Against this Smuts was severely at a disadvantage while trying to 'seek out and destroy the enemy's forces in the field'.<sup>57</sup> Von Lettow-Vorbeck frustrated him. The aims of the two generals were different: Von Lettow-Vorbeck was intent on keeping his force in existence while Smuts was intent on destroying him or at least occupying the territory and driving the Germans into the wild south. In this it can only be said Smuts was out generalled, but it is doubtful that any other general could have done better against such a stubborn and resilient opponent.

To this assessment must be added the 'devil of fever',<sup>58</sup> more dangerous than a bullet and constantly reducing operational strength. Many modern medicines were not yet known and even rudimentary precautions such as mosquito nets could not be used at times.<sup>59</sup> The

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>57</sup> J. H. V. Crowe, *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa*, p.124.

<sup>58</sup> F. B. Young, *Marching on Tanga* p.16.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.71.

ratio of 31:1 has been quoted as battle casualties to disease.<sup>60</sup> As well as the men, the horses suffered and died from sleeping sickness. This reduced the mounted units to infantry, thus confounding their tactical usefulness. The Boers may have compounded this problem with poor treatment of horses, perhaps a further example of poor discipline.<sup>61</sup>

Logistics and transport proved a huge problem during the campaign. As the Germans retreated they destroyed bridges and railways, forcing the advancing troops to spend time repairing them. The black cotton soil became impassable during the rains, and roads had to be hacked through the bush. Kitchener's withholding of engineers obviously impacted upon the capability of imperial formations, forcing Smuts to deal with the problem without the essential means to do so.

Smuts chose largely to rely on animal transport which suffered grievously from tsetse-fly and other diseases. It could be contended that he erred by not switching sooner to porters, as was done in the latter stages of the campaign. However, porters had their own problems, with rapidly dwindling lift as lines extended, since the porters needed to be fed and thus stressed on the supply system themselves. Smith-Dorrien had requested more vehicles to try and surmount this problem. A good idea in theory, it is doubtful if it would have made much difference in view of the terrain, climate and rudimentary infrastructure. In fact, it may have retarded the advance even further, because animals could be replaced more easily than vehicles. The vehicles that were used broke down, drivers and mechanics were half trained, and many from Britain were unfit for frontline duty so consequently suffered an even higher rate of attrition from disease. Consequently the lift of the vehicles always fell short of expected figures.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> J. C. Smuts, *Jan Christian Smuts*, p.169.

<sup>61</sup> C. P. Fendall, *The East African Force 1915-1919*, p. 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-174.

In short, the logistics were a nightmare not helped by infighting among various administrative departments.<sup>63</sup> With Smuts away at the front there was no one with the will or power to cut through this mess. The efficient manner in which Hoskins reorganised the army after Smuts departure<sup>64</sup> shows just how grave a failing it was for Smuts not to have deployed him as Chief of Staff. There can be no doubt that he would have arranged the logistics infinitely better than they were managed.

Apart from the difficulties inherent in a campaign spread across such vast territory, Smuts's frontline style of leadership did little to alleviate these problems. He appears to have been primarily concerned about having his needs on the front met. The contention that a commander with greater experience of administration would have facilitated a more efficient campaign therefore has merit.<sup>65</sup> Smith-Dorrien had the staff experience that Smuts lacked, having commanded an army with the British Expeditionary Force, and he had experience of campaigning in unfamiliar territory. Without doubt, Smuts neglected this side of generalship, and his lack of staff training is evident here. This is, however, somewhat surprising in light of the fact that he was so involved in facilitating the logistics of the campaign in German South West Africa.

Smuts was definitely deficient in the area of administration. He was, it might be argued, suited to operational, not strategic, command. Perhaps the best solution would have been if he had commanded the South African divisions as a corps with someone else directing the broader campaign. Although this point is counterfactual, it does seem to have merit; although Smuts had sound tactical knowledge and was a great motivator of men, he was, in East Africa at least, a poor administrator. But was there any general with the gravitas to command someone who had already served as the acting Prime Minister of South Africa?

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 132-149.

<sup>64</sup> C. Millar, *Battle for the Bundu The First World War in East Africa*, pp. 156-161.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

## **The leadership of General Smuts**

Tactical, operational, and strategic success or failure are quantifiable by results in the field. A less tangible but equally important quality needed by a general is that of leadership. It is here that Smuts demonstrated his greatest qualities as a general. His own confidence, and his decisive action in the Kilimanjaro area, has already been noted. This confidence spread to his troops, boosting morale: nothing can have a greater effect on morale than victory, especially victory at a relatively low cost.

It is fair to say that he projected an air of confidence seeking to motivate his men. Just after arrival, Meinertzhagen remarked: ‘Smuts is as keen as mustard’.<sup>66</sup> In fact Smuts was anything but – his own doubts are evident in a letter that he wrote: ‘I shall do my best where several predecessors have already badly failed. But I feel it is a terrible risk. Pray for your old friend who in these times is forced to do soldiering against his will.’<sup>67</sup> From this it may be deduced that Smuts was consciously putting up a facade and projecting an air of confidence to a force that had lain moribund for so long.

A good general will seek to motivate and inspire his troops and it is evident that Smuts, with his relentless energy, sought to do this from the start, whatever his personal doubts may have been. Field Marshal Montgomery stated that ‘the beginning of leadership is a battle for the hearts and minds of men’.<sup>68</sup> This Smuts sought to do with his proximity to his men and the sharing of danger with them. He inability to see difficulties, only obstacles that had to be overcome, and the effect of his presence, galvanised the force.<sup>69</sup> The intangible quality of leadership that came to the fore. As Young wrote, ‘the spirit of our higher

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<sup>66</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, p. 165.

<sup>67</sup> W. K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel (eds), *Selections from the Smuts Papers. (Vol.3)* vol. 14, no. 206, p.334.

<sup>68</sup> B. L. Montgomery, *The Art of Leadership*, p.10.

<sup>69</sup> J. H. V. Crowe, *General Smuts’ Campaign in East Africa*, p.148.

command was actually more cheering to us than the prospect of food or drink'.<sup>70</sup> It is illuminating that Young was an English medical officer, so his view cannot be taken as a hagiographical South African viewpoint. The observation can be made that if indeed an army marches on its stomach, it marches as much on its will, and Smuts sought to engender that will.

After the war Major-General J.F.C. Fuller examined failed generals and identified common traits in great generals - creative intelligence, courage, and physical fitness (one may perhaps substitute physical fitness for energy). Smuts possessed all three in abundance. There can be no doubt about his creative intelligence and his academic achievements attest to this. Churchill at a later stage also praised his 'profound wisdom and strategic grasp'.<sup>71</sup> He demonstrated this through his immediate and instinctive understanding of the strategic situation in East Africa, and the tactical situation at Kilimanjaro. His decisive action in forcing the Taveta gap changed the British position from being on the back to the front foot within a few weeks of his arrival. His quick thrust to Kondoa-Irangi, although imposing suffering on his men, allowed a rapid enhancement of the strategic situation.

Courage is not something that he lacked, as it is evident by the criticism that 'he was too often on the firing line',<sup>72</sup> and he created great anxiety for his staff by reconnoitring at the front.<sup>73</sup> It has been argued that being so close to the action mitigated against effective command,<sup>74</sup> because as theatre commander he should have been behind the lines in a command centre directing the operations of the various columns spread over the country, and more importantly, keeping a close watch on the logistic arrangements. This criticism can only be seen as fully justified. His role in pushing down the Pangani valley could and indeed

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<sup>70</sup> F. B. Young, *Marching on Tanga*, p.59.

<sup>71</sup> Churchill quoted in *The Times*, 25 May 1950, p.8.

<sup>72</sup> R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*.

<sup>73</sup> J. H. V. Crowe, *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa*, p.133.

<sup>74</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, p. 135.

should have been fulfilled by his brigade and divisional commanders, if he was to exercise effective command of the theatre. So here one must conclude Smuts suffered a failure in his generalship as he should in all probability have withdrawn somewhat from operational command after Taveta. It may be that his courage was counterproductive to his command.

The final component – that of physical fitness or energy – Smuts possessed in abundance. Throughout the campaign he drove himself on, sharing the privations of his men.<sup>75</sup> He contracted malaria, which subsequently recurred for the rest of his life. Here one might consider what would have happened if Smith-Dorrien had taken command. He was no longer a young man, and his collapse with pneumonia shows that it is highly doubtful that his health would have lasted for the duration of the campaign. The conclusion therefore must be drawn that in the realm of leadership Smuts was an exceptional general in his ability to motivate and inspire his men on an extremely arduous campaign. However where he was less successful was in his ability to control the logistical aspects of his campaign, and arising from this failing, his force suffered grievously, but seemingly – and tellingly – without rancour.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Smuts can be seen to have displayed both tactical and strategic skill especially in situations where his favoured methods could be employed. However, the outstanding quality that he displayed in his generalship was leadership. He inspired his men as he cajoled and drove them on. He was confronted with enormous difficulties with regard to terrain, climate and disease. At the time there seems little that could have been done about these factors as the necessary technology did not exist. In Burma, fighting over comparable terrain in the Second World War, General Slim had vastly superior equipment, the advantage of

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<sup>75</sup> C. Millar, *Battle for the Bundu The First World War in East Africa*, pp. 178.

airpower, reliable vehicles, specialised equipment, armour, and greatly enhanced communications. Smuts possessed none of these things. The prophylactics and medicines to combat the diseases that afflicted man and beast were in many cases not yet available.

The criticisms that he did not effect overall command because he was in effect the operational commander on the most important front is a valid one. It is mitigated by the fact that he had commanders that he trusted operating as effective separate commands. It is impossible to know but it is highly unlikely that the advance would have proceeded at the pace it did without his presence. In that, he may actually have spared his men, and a more considered deliberate advance would have exposed them for longer to the areas of disease. It is disingenuous to view casualties from disease as the same as those received in combat as most of the sick recovered especially once a system of repatriation for convalescence had been put in place.

It is true that Von Lettow-Vorbeck was still at large and would remain so until the end of the war. That was not due to Smuts but rather due to Von Lettow-Vorbeck who had the sole aim of tying down British imperial troops by keeping his force in being, and he always had the option to determine his own line of retreat into areas with which he had reliable information and Smuts did not. The sicknesses that decimated the horses of Smuts's mounted units robbed him of one of the most potent weapons that his South African troops possessed - their mobility. The close nature of the bush decreased the effectiveness of their other great attribute - their musketry.

On the political front the campaign greatly enhanced Smuts's prestige, at least initially, as at the time he was seen as the only British general winning against the Germans. Once he had demonstrated his capabilities in London that hardly mattered anymore. The involvement of the South African contingent demonstrated their loyalty and, it can be argued,

improved South Africa's standing within the Empire and enabled it to take a place at the 'high table' during the peace. In one respect however, it was a costly failure, as South Africa received none of the concessions in territory after the war that were so plainly part of the private aims of politicians before the war. For that Smuts must carry the responsibility alongside Botha. This, though, was a political rather than a military failure.

One can argue that Smuts's biggest error was in declaring the campaign over, aside from a police action, when he left East Africa.<sup>76</sup> For that his reputation suffered but as his obituary in *The Times* stated, 'If he had remained in command his campaign might not have suffered from the reflected discredit of the two years of aimless guerrilla operations which followed his departure'.<sup>77</sup> It is arguably this period – *after* Smuts had departed – that led to a belief that Smuts's generalship was flawed. But there is merit in Smuts's belief that Von Lettow-Vorbeck's force was finished as a serious military threat when he left. Had the Portuguese not shown total incompetence in allowing him to raid their military bases and use them as virtual supply depots, he may have been run to ground. The other point to note is that when Smuts and most of the South African contingent departed, Von Lettow-Vorbeck's strategy had also largely failed. This was because the replacement troops were largely African and not considered (rightly or wrongly) fit for service in Europe, so he was no longer tying down the type of troops that he had hoped to.

In the final analysis Smuts was a highly successful operational general. He was deficient in the management of supply and logistics. It is evident that he was not suited for the position of Commander-in-Chief, because of his failure to take these problems in hand or appoint a competent subordinate. Where he excelled was in leadership. As Francis Brett Young wrote: 'The more I think of it the more I realise how the personality of that one man

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<sup>76</sup> C. Millar, *Battle for the Bundu The First World War in East Africa*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>77</sup> General Smuts' obituary *The Times*, 12 September 1950, p.8.

dominated the war in East Africa'.<sup>78</sup> The bitter irony of the whole campaign lies in the fact that there was no need to fight it. Kitchener's words on hearing that the campaign was to go ahead in spite of his advice were both prophetic and misplaced; he said that it would 'lead us to place South African troops in positions where they will be liable for disaster'.<sup>79</sup> When these same South Africans left East Africa they were indeed shattered by disease and hardship, but they had not suffered disaster – something largely attributable to Smuts. Smuts was perhaps the last of a breed - a leader of a nation who led his soldiers on the field of battle. For an amateur general and a reluctant soldier what he achieved, in the face of his own deficiencies and the obstacles in his path, was remarkable. His generalship revolved around a sense of duty and the outstanding attribute that he possessed, and one possessed by all great generals – a strong and inspiring capacity for leadership.

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<sup>78</sup> F. B. Young, *Marching on Tanga*, p.238.

<sup>79</sup> Kitchener as quoted in R. Anderson, *The Forgotten Front*, p.106.

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