

African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in Africa, 1914-1918

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The incredible true account of World War I in Africa and General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, the last undefeated German commander.

"Let me say straight out that if all military histories were as thrilling and well written as Robert Gaudi's African Kaiser, I might give up reading fiction and literary biography... Gaudi writes with the flair of a latter-day Macaulay. He sets his scenes carefully and describes naval and military action like a novelist."-Michael Dirda, The Washington Post

As World War I ravaged the European continent, a completely different theater of war was being contested in Africa. And from this very different kind of war, there emerged a very different kind of military leader....

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the continent of Africa was a hotbed of international trade, colonialism, and political gamesmanship. So when World War I broke out, the European powers were forced to contend with one another not just in the bloody trenches, but in the treacherous jungle. And it was in that unforgiving land that General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck would make history.

With the now-legendary Schutztruppe (Defensive Force), von Lettow-Vorbeck and a small cadre of hardened German officers fought alongside their fanatically devoted native African allies as equals, creating the first truly integrated army of the modern age.

African Kaiser is the fascinating story of a forgotten guerrilla campaign in a remote corner of Equatorial Africa in World War I; of a small army of ultraloyal African troops led by a smaller cadre of rugged German officers-of white men and black who fought side by side. But mostly it is the story of von Lettow-Vorbeck-the only undefeated German commander in the field during World War I and the last to surrender his arms.

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Chapter 1

Zeppelins of the China Show

A thick, billowing fog bank concealed the rocky shore of the Baltic island of Odenholm off the Estonian coast before dawn in the early morning of August 26, 1914. Odenholm-desolate, beautiful home to a small ethnic Swedish population of farmers and fishermen since Viking times-was also, according to legend, the final resting place of Odin, chief god of the Norse pantheon, patron of death, battles, frenzy, poetry, and a few other things. No one on Odenholm could say exactly where the god was buried, whether beneath this barrow or that mound; some insisted the island itself was his tomb, its cliffs and stony

beaches the monument raised above his massive divine corpse.

But such mythological nonsense did not figure among the matters weighing on the mind of Korvettenkapitan Richard Habenicht of SMS Magdeburg as he threaded his warship through the shallow waters at the mouth of the Gulf of Finland in the last dark hours of the night. Magdeburg, one of the newest and fastest cruisers in the Kaiserlich Marine, 455 feet long, propelled by two powerful AEG Vulcan steam turbines, could make 27.5 knots fully loaded with all arms and ordnance and carrying its complement of 355 officers and men. Her twelve 10.5cm guns could blast an enemy vessel out of the water from 41,700 feet-nearly eight miles-away, as long as atmospheric conditions permitted lookouts to see that far. Part of the Kaiser's newly constituted Baltic Squadron under the command of Rear Admiral Behring, Magdeburg had been sent to harass Russian naval bases and warships in the Gulf of Finland. She had participated, along with SMS Augsburg, three destroyers, and the minelayer Deutschland, in the bombardment of the Russian port of Libau on August 2, the opening naval action of the Baltic Campaign.

Then, on the morning of August 17, these German warships came into contact with a more powerful Russian squadron, including the Admiral Makaroff, Gumboi, Bogatyr, and Pallada. In naval warfare of the era, the captain of an outgunned ship presented with the choice between fight or flight would automatically choose the latter. Korvettenkapitan Habenicht ordered evasive maneuvers and soon put the slower, heavily armed Russians in his wake. A week later, skimming the Estonian coast on reconnaissance duty, Magdeburg came into contact with Bogatyr and Pallada for the second time. Still outgunned, she again showed them her stern; this time the Russian warships gave chase.

Night fell. SMS Magdeburg, with Bogatyr and Pallada somewhere close behind, ran into the fog bank near Odensholm at fifteen knots. Suddenly, a deep shudder ran the length of the ship, followed by a metallic shrieking sound. Every man aboard, from captain to cook, knew the worst had happened: Magdeburg had run aground. Korvettenkapitan Habenicht immediately ordered "full stop," but for a long minute the massive turbines throbbed forward, driving the ship farther out of the water. He then ordered "full speed reverse." No use. The metallic shrieking only intensified and Magdeburg wouldn't budge. "Full stop" again. Magdeburg, the Kaiser's fastest ship, was stuck hard on the rocks beneath Lighthouse Cliff at the northeast tip of Odensholm; she had been called by Odin's ghost to her doom.

Presently, Magdeburg's escort destroyer, known only by its call letters, V.26, approached gingerly through the fog. Tow cables fixed, she attempted to pull the larger ship free, to no avail. Magdeburg was stuck for good, with the Russians lurking somewhere just over the edge of the horizon. Korvettenkapitan Habenicht then gave the order to abandon ship, two words that would haunt him for the rest of his life. The fog complicated matters, but V.26 managed to evacuate most of Magdeburg's crew. A remnant, including the captain, remained aboard to perform a few last duties-most important, the destruction of the codebooks and cipher keys known as the Signalbuch der Kaiserlichen Marine (SKM), of which Magdeburg had been issued several copies. These critical documents allowed the Germans-heavily reliant on radio communication-to talk to one another without the enemy being able to eavesdrop.

Signal books destroyed, the unfortunate cruiser would be scuttled by charges set in the forward magazine. This sort of operation—fogbound, at night, in choppy seas, beneath a rocky cliff—dangerous at best, was doubly dangerous in wartime. A sailor fell into the cold waters of the Baltic and drowned as the scuttling charges were hostilely set; several more died a few minutes later when they detonated prematurely.

At last, the fog lifted and morning sun lit the scene of Korvettenkapitan Habenicht's nightmare: There, between the bright Estonian coast seven miles off and Odensholm's stony cliff, stood Bogatyr and Pallada. The Russian ships began firing immediately, their big guns booming across the gulf. A dozen sailors died in the bombardment, vaporized by exploding shells. Forty-five more, still aboard Magdeburg, saved themselves by jumping overboard and swimming to the island. The bombardment quickly came to an end; Magdeburg, unable to offer any resistance, was a dead ship.

Korvettenkapitan Habenicht retired to his cabin, determined not to outlast the destruction of the ship he'd stupidly run aground on Odensholm. What had happened? A navigational error, a mistake in dead reckoning in a fog bank at night, had put them closer to the island than he'd suspected. One could blame the navigator, but ultimately the responsibility rested with the captain alone. He sat down behind his desk and tried not to think about the pistol in the drawer. An hour later, a Russian naval officer of English extraction, Lieutenant M. Hamilton, found Korvettenkapitan Habenicht still sitting there, head in his hands.

The captain looked up, all fight gone from his pale blue eyes, as Hamilton entered the cabin. The Russian gestured out the porthole to his torpedo boat, the Boukaroff, just come alongside. He tried Russian, French, and English, but Korvettenkapitan Habenicht didn't understand these languages. Then, in halting German, Hamilton managed, "Wollen sie nach torpedo gehen?" and again gestured to the Boukaroff. At last, the captain nodded.

He rose and strode about the cabin, agitated, picked up a few personal items, put them down, opened his desk drawer, closed it. In the end, he took nothing—then his eyes fell upon his sword hanging on a hook on the wall. He took it down and offered it to Lieutenant Hamilton, who refused politely and handed it back. It was not right, Hamilton later said, to take a captain's sword aboard his own ship. Korvettenkapitan Habenicht, overwhelmed by this small kindness, shook the young officer's hand and with that gesture became a prisoner of the tsar. He would remain so until his escape during the turmoil of the Russian Revolution in 1918.

The wreck of his ship, the SMS Magdeburg, scrapped by the Russians and still visible at low tide off Lighthouse Cliff on Odensholm, is today a popular spot for Baltic Sea sport divers.

The fate of a single German cruiser and the capture of her captain, no matter how keenly felt at the time, remain minor incidents in a major war and would be all but forgotten now except for a single significant oversight: Unfortunately for the German war effort, the

destruction of the Magdeburg's naval codebooks had been interrupted by the premature explosion of the scuttling charges, then overlooked during the tumult of evacuation and bombardment.

The Russians, upon searching the ship, discovered two copies of the codebooks, one at the bottom of a storage locker aft, another-along with the cipher key and secret charts of the Baltic-in the wheelhouse. A third copy, dredged up by Russian divers from the rocky seabed, had been weighted with lead and tossed overboard. This copy, SKM 151, was offered by the Russians to their British allies. The Admiralty dispatched HMS Theseus to Alexandrovsk on the Arctic Circle to fetch SKM 151 to London; First Sea Lord Winston Churchill examined it in his office on October 30, 1914.

"At the beginning of September 1914, the German light cruiser Magdeburg was wrecked in the Baltic," recalled Churchill, getting his dates wrong and, characteristically, sacrificing accuracy for drama. "The body of a drowned German under-officer was picked up by the Russians a few hours later. Clasped in his bosom by arms rigid in death were the cipher and signal books of the German Navy. . . .

"Late on an October afternoon . . . I received from the hands of our loyal allies these sea-stained, priceless documents. We set on foot at once an organization for the study of the German wireless and for the translating of the messages taken in. The work was of great complexity as, of course, the cipher is only one element in the means of preserving a message. But gradually our officers succeeded in translating intelligible portions of various German naval messages."

The organization Churchill and others set afoot became the legendary Room 40, a secret cabal of cryptographers, mathematicians, philosophers, linguists, scholars, and similar useless types-the "best brains in the country." These eccentrics worked in a hidden warren of rooms at the Admiralty in the Old Building, then, as now, presided over by the statue of Nelson in his whitewashed niche. Twice a day, a superannuated functionary called simply Old Maskell, like a character out of Dickens, carried a black box containing deciphered German military communications from Room 40's puzzle-solvers to the strategic thinkers at British Naval Intelligence. These intercepted messages came in from every corner of the empire and from every front where Britain and her allies fought Kaiser Wilhelm II and his "Huns."

All through the first years of the war, the most eagerly awaited-and dreaded-German messages received in Room 40 pertained to the deadly Zeppelin raids on London. During this period, the great city endured her first blitz-a relentless series of air attacks perpetrated on civilian targets by the massive, unwieldy airships, attacks lent an extra punch by their very newness: For the first time in history, a civilian population was being bombed from the skies. The Kaiser, Germany's ultimate War Chief, initially opposed the Zeppelin raids as unsportsmanlike. He also didn't want to bomb his royal cousins in Buckingham Palace. But as the British naval blockade tightened its grip on Germany and the German people felt the hunger pangs of food shortages, his resistance weakened and the Zeppelins began their reign of terror.

"People stand gazing into the sky from the darkened streets," wrote American journalist William Shepherd, describing an early Zeppelin attack on the British capital. "Among the autumn stars floats a long, gaunt Zeppelin: it is dull yellow, the color of a harvest moon. . . . Great booming sounds shake the city. They are Zeppelin bombs-falling-killing-burning. . . . Suddenly, you realize the biggest city in the world has become the night battlefield on which seven million harmless men, women, and children live."

It's hard for us now, living in the faint afterglow of the Apollo missions, to understand the visceral impact of the Zeppelin Luftschiff (airship) on the world of 1914. They had been developed over several decades and through many spectacular disasters by the eccentric, monomaniacal Saxon count Ferdinand von Zeppelin-inspired after going aloft in a Union Army observation balloon at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, during the American Civil War.

The latest iterations, cigar-shaped and long as ocean liners, were ultracomcombustible monsters, kept aloft by canvas bags full of a highly explosive hydrogen/oxygen mixture fixed to a rigid duralumin frame covered by a weatherproofed canvas skin. Five aviation engines suspended from aluminum scaffolding beneath their vast bellies provided forward push; a complex system of wheels, weights, and cables in two separate gondolas allowed for directional control. Their capacious, largely empty interiors, crisscrossed by catwalks and cargo platforms, could carry a payload of thousands of tons of bombs.

Once airborne, the Zeppelin emitted a steady drone, like the buzzing of some giant, destructive insect. In 1915, London Air Defense, casting about for a Zeppelin early-warning detection system, recruited blind volunteers to listen for this drone. Deprived of sight, the hearing of the blind must be that much more acute-so Air Defense reasoned. They thought the blind would be able to hear the Zeppelins coming before anyone else, thus allowing squadrons of B.E.2c fighters more time to scramble from aerodromes hidden around the city. (It took one of these slow, rickety planes an hour to screw up to the Zeppelin cruising altitude, above 10,000 feet.) And so dozens of blind volunteers stood with their ears pressed to giant sound amplification cones all through the London nights they could not see, as if listening for the voice of God. This system, despite its unintended poetry, didn't work very well; apparently the blind hear no better than anyone else.

"England is no longer an island," crowed the editorial writers of Leipzig's *Neueste Nachrichten*. "The city of London, the heart which pumps the life blood into the arteries of the brutal huckster nation, has been sown with bombs by German airships. . . . At last, the long yearned for punishment has fallen on England, this people of liars and hypocrites-their punishment for the overflowing measure of sins of years past. . . ."

Etc.

Less than eighteen months later, the Zeppelins had become a military redundancy. They exploded into flowers of flame with sickening, predictable regularity in the night skies over London. They fell slowly, dripping bright, fiery tendrils into the black water of the English Channel. To save weight and increase bomb-carrying capacity, Zeppelin crews were not

allowed parachutes and so plummeted in their hundreds to the darkened earth and destruction. Once feared airborne predators, the Zeppelins had now become slow, lumbering prey-ridiculed by a no longer fearful British public as harmless airborne gas bags. They had been rendered obsolete for offensive purposes by the invention of incendiary bullets that could ignite hydrogen gas with ease, by an increasingly efficient early-warning system that had nothing to do with superhearing blind people and was instead based on Room 40's deciphered messages, and by advances in aircraft design that allowed fighters to reach ever-higher altitudes. British pilots could now attain those rarefied stratum of the atmosphere where, like giant defecating birds, the Zeppelins did their business.

But, in the fall of 1916, Room 40's puzzle-solvers caught wind of something new and ominous-the faint echoes of an emerging threat, referred to in German coded messages as "China Show." The only thing they knew for sure about China Show was that it had to do with Zeppelins. Did this mean the Germans had developed more powerful airships, somehow impervious to incendiary bullets? Or larger and more destructive bombs for the Zeppelins to drop on London? Or were they planning a new offensive to recover their lost territories in the Far East? Oddly, several of the messages referring to China Show had been intercepted by the listening post atop the Great Pyramid in British-held Egypt.

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The last emperor.

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