



Northrup and Grogan in 1917 collecting abandoned enemy supplies along the Tanga/Taveta railway line.

William Northrup McMillan (1872 – 1925) larger than life American millionaire, big game hunter and pioneer settler played a small but significant part in the First World War in East Africa.

When things were not going well for the British after the defeat at Tanga, he rushed to London early in 1915, to sign up. As only British subjects were eligible to join the British Army, he forfeited his American citizenship and signed naturalisation papers, showing his determination to do his bit for his adopted home. He volunteered for the 25th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, a special force of over 1,000 men privately recruited by Colonel Daniell Patrick Driscoll and created specifically to fight in East Africa. Various known as the 'Legion of Frontiersmen', the 'Old and Bold' or the 'Boozaliers' Driscoll's battalion consisted of an extraordinary mixture of adventurers from all walks of life, but all with a passion for Africa. Unlike some of the volunteers, Northrup at 41 was within the age limit, but with a 64-inch sword belt, his enormous bulk and weak health made him poor fighting material. His expertise would have to be used elsewhere.

Northrup and his fellow recruits left Plymouth on 10th April on board the *SS Neuralia* and arrived in Mombasa 4th May, 1915. The first major battle Northrup

was involved in was at Bukoba in June. Here the Frontiersmen joined forces with soldiers of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment under the command of General James M Stewart. At Kisumu a force of about 2,000 men were loaded onto four old lake steamers and ferried across to the eastern end of Lake Victoria to the small German held port of Bukoba. The original plan was to surprise the Germans at night but the moon was too bright so instead, the next morning, the troops were landed at the foot of a steep cliff three miles north of the town. From there the soldiers were told to advance and take the town. Despite a near mutiny this is precisely what they did and the Germans were taken completely by surprise. Northrup reportedly fought for two days beneath equatorial sun and stormed crags and cliffs under fire of machine guns and rifles, and in recognition of his strenuous exertions was promoted from Second Lieutenant to Captain. The victors very hungry and thirsty looted the town. It was not one of the more glorious episodes of the war, though this was glossed over in subsequent reports.

This appears to have been the only active service Northrup saw, as he was then assigned to the Commissariat, Supplies Section, in Nairobi. However his input continued through other channels. On September 7th 1915 Northrup chaired the influential meeting called by Grogan at the Theatre Royal in Nairobi to try and raise morale and instil more fighting spirit. As a result of this meeting, when Grogan gave a rousing speech, settlers and officials agreed to take a more proactive role and a War Council was set up. Charles Bowring, Chief Secretary to the Colony chaired the Council. This was an immensely powerful body comprising three officials, two soldiers and three unofficials. To begin with Northrup, Grogan and JJ Toogood the general manager of the Standard Bank sat on the Council to represent the settlers (the unofficials). Northrup described how to begin with they met every morning, framing resolutions, which were then passed to the Governor in the afternoon. A few days later a slip of paper would come back informing them of action taken by the Governor and within a few weeks many of the suggested measures were enforced. All European civilians both men and women were now required to register and were either sent to the front or designated essential jobs. Within a few short months British East Africa was placed on a proper war footing.

The turn of the year between 1915 and 1916 saw an improvement in British fortunes as Smuts the experienced South African general took overall command and slowly but surely drove the Germans back.

Passing references to Northrup in 1916 show him stationed in the base camps in Mbarara and then Mbuyuni, during the campaign to retake Taveta and regain control of the border with what is now Tanzania. Later that year he was posted to Tanga to oversee the deployment and provisioning of 400 new recruits to the Legion of Frontiersmen being sent to fight near the Rufigi Delta. It was here that he met up with his great friend Selous for the last time and shared quarters with him for eight weeks. He persuaded Selous to give evening talks to the men about his hunting adventures, to keep up their morale during the waiting. In December Selous and his men were entrained to Dar-es-Salaam and then to Mikessi and then walked for two weeks to Kissaki to join up with the rest of the regiment.

There in the Beho Beho Hills Selous was killed by an African sniper while leading his company in action on January 5th 1917. Northrup was completely devastated by the loss of his brave friend. He helped raise money for a memorial bust for the natural History Museum in London and for a bronze of a buffalo, which was placed in the main lounge of the Nairobi Club.

But the war continued and a few months later Grogan and Northrup were sent on a mission to collect abandoned enemy supplies along the Tanga-Taveta railway. The border was now fully in British hands and much of the German railway as well.

Both Northrup's town house Chiromo and his farm at Juja were now in use as hospitals for the Frontiersmen and Lucie his wife was personally helping with the nursing, rolling up bandages, handing out tea and providing home comforts for the wounded heroes. Northrup did not forget the hardships suffered by the African troops fighting alongside the European soldiers and a letter preserved in his archives showed how he sent supplies and stores to the KAR Hospital for Natives from his estates. One list dated 30 July 1917 included 22 cases of lime juice, six cases of Ideal Milk, four of potted meat, boxing gloves and 100 emergency Medical Cases.

Early in 1918 he was promoted major and given a knighthood for 'unusual services'. His acceptance of this honour and the announcement appeared in the London Gazette of 6th February, 1918.

Northrup's final contribution to the war effort in East Africa was to hold an enormous charity fete in the grounds of Chiromo House to raise money for a ward in the Star and Garter Military Hospital in Richmond. This took place just a few weeks before the final surrender of the German army on 25th November 1918. It proved to be a most memorable and successful fundraising event and a large amount of money was sent to the hospital for the care of severely injured British soldiers.

This information has been taken from Chapter IX of Judy Aldrick's biography of Northrup published by Old Africa Books in 2012: *Northrup; The Life of William Northrup McMillan*

This article was written in 2018 to commemorate 100 years since the ending of WWI