

January Speaker, Kevin Patience: The True Story of The African Queen

Our January Speaker, Kevin Patience, revealed the true story of the First World War campaign in Africa which inspired the novelist C S Forrester to write his book, *The African Queen*. This was subsequently made into the film of the same name starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn. Many readers will remember that in the film Bogart played the drunken Charlie, owner of an ancient boat *The African Queen*, who met Rosie, played by Hepburn. Rosie's missionary brother having been killed by the Germans at the outbreak of the War, she persuades Charlie to retaliate by attacking a German gunboat sheltering in a large lake downriver.

In real life, during the battle for German East Africa in WW1, the German warship *Konigsberg* was sheltering deep within the Rufiji River delta, over 100 miles south of Dar-es-Salaam. This gave it supremacy over the strategically important Lake Tanganyika.

Reconnaissance flights had shown the warship's position, but owing to the nature of the delta, attacking it was impossible by all but very small boats.

In June 1915 Geoffrey Spicer-Simson "the oldest lieutenant commander in the Royal Navy" became the unlikely hero of the real battle for Lake Tanganyika. Given the mission to attack the *Konigsberg*, he loaded two small armed boats known as *Mimi* and *Toutou* on to larger boats for the first leg of his 9,310 mile journey.

Arriving in Cape Town and with the help of local guides, the convoy dragged the boats firstly by rail, then by oxen, traction engine and sheer effort through the jungle and over mountain peaks finally arriving in Bukama. From there they paddled the boats 56 miles upstream before finally reaching Kabalo, where the remainder of the journey to Lake Tanganyika could be completed by rail.

On arrival at Lake Tanganyika, and after their second attempt, the *Konigsberg* was finally scuttled by *Mimi* and *Toutou* in July 1915.

One of the two boats used in filming *The African Queen* can be seen today in Key Largo, Florida, where it is available for daily canal cruises and also for private events.