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# National Geographic: The Jungle Navy

By Unknown

Central Africa. 1915.

A small band of British soldiers  
marches through the jungle  
on a bizarre and secret mission.  
In Europe, the first World War has  
become a murderous stalemate...  
but the clash of kings and empires  
reaches far beyond Flanders -  
to a pivotal naval battle for  
control of the Great Lakes of Africa.  
In command of the British  
expedition is Lt.

- Commander Geoffrey Basil  
Spicer- Simson... an officer  
whom the fates of war will label  
a hero, a madman, and a god.

June 1915.

Under the guidance of South  
African John Lee,  
hacking a highway  
through the unbroken rain forest  
- 150 miles of manual labor in  
the tropical heat.

Lee's bush road leads across jungles  
through swamps and over mountains  
to the Great Lakes of Africa

- Tanganyika, Victoria, Nyasa.

Two already are in British hands  
- but Tanganyika is the jewel of  
the German empire

- a prize that London desperately  
needs

to turn the tide of the African war.

It is a vital lifeline needed to arm  
and supply a jungle army.

Whoever controls the lake,  
controls the surrounding  
territories.

One man rules her waters.

Kapitan Gustav Zimmer of the  
Imperial German Navy

commands a powerful marine  
unit of 150 men

- his fleet of three heavily-armed

gunboats  
has obliterated the puny armada  
of the Belgian Congo  
...- to win the battle for Central  
Africa,  
Zimmer's navy must be defeated.  
Yet for the job of destroying him,  
the Royal Navy selects a former  
military surveyor  
who has never led a brigade  
into battle.  
Lt. -Commander Geoffrey Basil  
Spicer-Simson  
is an old Africa hand who has  
spent the first year of the war  
behind a desk in London.  
Then chance, not choice, gives  
him an opportunity for greatness.  
"Why did we go to Tanganyika?  
Because the Germans with four  
ships on the Lake  
- were commanding the lake,  
and by means of these steamers  
were able to supply their troops  
on the frontiers with provisions  
and munitions.  
It was important that this should  
be stopped."  
Spicer's orders are almost surreal  
- London wants him to tote his  
own toy navy  
from England to Central Africa  
a pair of 40-foot motorboats  
- to be dismantled and freighted  
to Cape Town  
- then tugged overland by steam  
tractor to the Congo  
- a trek of over nine thousand  
miles  
- with Zimmer's gunships waiting  
at the other end.  
Spicer assembles the team.  
Former architect of the  
Rhodesian railway,

Paddy Wainwright is the  
chief engineer

- I'm tropical disease specialist,  
Dr. Hother Hanschell,  
will be the Medical Officer.

As a casual friend of Spicer's,  
Dr. Hanschell knows Spicer is  
not your average leader.

"Spicer-Simson was a vain man  
worthy of ridicule and on occasion,  
great admiration at the same time.

This paradox was only possible  
because of the very nature of  
Spicer-Simson's own behavior,  
which was quite often bizarre."

they are gunners, mechanics,  
and engineers

- not one has ever served  
under Spicer.

The plan to take Tanganyika from  
the Germans is a simple one.

Get to Tanganyika, and destroy  
the German fleet  
by stealth and surprise.

But their own warships are  
converted supply boats.

"The two boats taken to Africa  
by the expedition were...

not at all suitable as they were,  
but they were the only ones  
obtainable at the time.

My orders were to get away at once."

Spicer gives his mahogany warships  
names befitting pleasure boats

- HMS Mimi and Toutou are quick  
- top speed, 20 miles per hour.

Spicer tests them on the Thames  
and has a 3 pound Hotchkiss gun  
mounted in the fore

and a .303 Maxim in the rear.

June 15, 1915.

Stage One.

The Naval Africa Expedition  
leaves England

on a 6,100 mile voyage for the  
Cape Colony.

While Spicer and his men enjoy  
a placid southbound cruise,  
John Lee's army of African  
tribesmen hacks its way north.  
By early July, at Cape Town  
in British South Africa,  
the caravan transfers from ship  
to train.

July 19, 1915.

Stage Two.

The entire expedition  
consisting of men, boats  
and hundreds of boxes of supplies  
are moved north by rail.

At Fungurume, in the Belgian Congo,  
they will meet up with Lee.

Two thousand, seven hundred  
miles of European-built railways  
pierce the heart of a colonized  
continent.

After two weeks,  
Spicer and his men reach the  
village of Fungurume as expected.  
Morale is high.

But then, just as his expedition is  
about to begin its overland odyssey,  
Spicer fires the man who blazed  
the trail.

He dismisses John Lee, and offers  
no explanation to his men.

He alone will lead his men across  
the burning plains

- into a jungle few Europeans  
have crossed

since the days of Stanley and  
Livingstone.

To prepare the boats for their waterless voyage,  
engineer Wainwright orders them  
stripped of all fittings

- propellers dismounted... the  
axles of the carrying wagons  
reinforced to carry the eight and

a half-ton loads.  
While final preparations are  
being made,  
a critical member of the team  
arrives by a rather odd means.  
Ex-policeman, Arthur Dudley has  
pedaled 200 miles over jungle trails  
to reach the expedition.  
His role,  
to organize and lead the African  
laborers transporting the supplies.  
"Dudley was Royal Navy Reserve.  
He'd served in the Boer War,  
now he was fooling about in Rhodesia  
doing transport work.  
But he was capable, just the sort  
of fellow for that.  
Just enough sea knowledge  
and just enough military training  
to manage well."  
Two months after leaving London,  
Spicer's navy-on-wheels is joined  
by the steam engines  
that will pull the boats through the forest.  
The tractors are built for level  
country furrows  
- but ahead of them lie some of  
Africa's most forbidding peaks.  
But this strange caravan is  
being shadowed  
by Zimmer's African spies -  
"we knew that the English  
intended to challenge  
our supremacy of the lake.  
We also knew that the Belgians  
were building a boat.  
Where they were building, or  
wanted to build, was unknown."  
If Spicer and his men make it to  
Lake Tanganyika, Zimmer vows,  
they will not leave Africa alive.  
August 18, 1915.  
Stage Three.  
forgiving terrain

on Earth await the British troopers  
- a wild land of disease and  
sudden death.

At first light, Geoffrey Spicer  
leads his men out of camp.

"There were no roads such as we  
call roads in this country,  
and except for about 25 miles  
the whole route ran through the  
thick African forest."

The dry season will last only  
a few more weeks

- then the autumn rains will come  
- if mud swallows the tractors,  
Spicer's mission... and his only  
shot at glory -

will be over before it begins.

The steam tractors are in the lead,  
each hauling one of Spicer's  
little ships,  
and ten tons of wood for the  
insatiable engines.

Four hundred Africans... men and  
women

- carry water, food, ammunition,  
medicine  
- a procession that stretches for  
nearly two miles.

On the first day, at the first river  
crossing,

Mimi and her tractor nearly  
tumble into the current.

It is the first test of Spicer's  
leadership.

Undaunted, Spicer has chief engineer  
Wainwright come up with a plan.

Wainwright has more trees cut,  
reinforces the bridge,  
and the convoy plods forward.

"The work was completed at 2:30 p.m.  
and the trailers were towed across  
and a start was made along  
the road at 3.

good progress was made along

the road

and at 6 p.m. a camp was formed  
for the night."

Spicer knows there are more than

The path they are following

continues uphill for 60 miles,

then they reach the Mitumba

Mountains, a 6,400 foot range.

Day by day, mile by mile, the former

desk officer grows more confident

- his boasts more outrageous...

the men love him.

"...he appealed immensely to

the ratings...

They all appreciate a commanding

officer who's a bit mad, eccentric.

And he was obviously mad.

Therefore he was marvelous.

"I'd say he could not refrain from

telling absurd stories

about his prowess at shooting

the lions he'd shot,

although I'd never heard of any

lions in Gambia."

The caravan survives on the skill

of its African hunters,

living off wild buck and guinea fowl.

As for water,

Hanschell and a team of Africans

find the nearest water source.

Much of the water is for the steam

tractors.

The rest is filtered, boiled,

then filtered twice more and

used for tea, cooking

and the next day's water rations.

The steam engines are insatiable

consumers of water and firewood

- advance parties prepare

storage caches of lumber.

"The journey through the Bush was

divided up into three 50-mile stages,

and at the end of each stage was

built a depot



to keep the sun off the provisions  
and ammunition."

The Englishmen, many of them  
new to Africa,  
fear lions and crocodiles,  
but Doctor Hanschell's duty is  
keeping the men healthy  
in a region plagued by unseen  
killers.

"One very valuable thing was the  
paymaster.

He began to get some boils on his  
shoulders,  
and out of the boils popped worms,  
big maggots rather.

The men all saw this, I showed it,  
and I said, "Now see, here you are  
going through a country  
where the danger's from insects,  
not from wild animals but insects.  
You see what they can do."

From the spies, crude telegraph  
lines convey fragments of news  
to Kapitan Zimmer  
- he believes that Spicer has  
come to help the Belgians  
build new warships at Lake  
Tanganyika...

"Around Lukuga and south of  
there by Kalemie  
there seemed to be only  
defensive building going on."

But, about Mimi and Toutou  
, Zimmer knows nothing.

While the confident Germans wait,  
the English plod on... one  
agonizing mile at a time.

"Three and a quarter miles a day  
was the average for the boats.  
Occasionally we did rather more,  
and on one occasion we covered  
but there were many days  
when we were lucky if we did a  
mile and a half.

One day, we did only three-quarters of a mile."

By late August, Spicer knows he needs help if he is to outrun the rains.

At a village called Mwenda Makosi, the British commandeered 42 oxen to help

drag the boats up the Mitumba Range.

When the rains begin, they will turn the plains into a quagmire

too shallow for ships, too muddy for wheels.

Until then, heat is the deadliest enemy

- the thirst for water is unquenchable

- water for the engines... water for the oxen...

a few cupfuls a day for the men.

Then, in early September... a sudden storm of fire.

Spicer has his men create a fire break.

He then orders that the precious mahogany boats must be protected from flying embers.

For Doctor Hanshell, it is a day of sheer terror.

"...we nearly lost the whole thing by fire..."

Here was this war train bearing down on us at a terrific rate. We'd burnt off, we set fire to it, only just in time, just in time, we moved the guns, the wagons and everything onto the burnt place, and the thing stopped... it was so damn near it came."

In the weeks that follow, the oxen prove their worth.

"The top of the plateau was reached on September 8, 1915, and this was a very triumphant

moment for the expedition,  
for there were some who had said  
that it was impossible to get there.  
Our difficulties were by no means  
at an end,  
for on the downward trek from this point to Sankisia  
there was some risky work to be done  
in lowering the boats down the  
sharp spurs of the mountain..."  
They are still weeks away from  
the combat zone.  
Using 42 oxen, 2 road locomotives,  
and hundreds of men,  
the expedition struggles to get  
down the mountain.  
"On more than one occasion  
the wheels of the boats dropped  
into ant-bear holes.  
The only way to get out was to fill  
up the hole with logs,  
gradually jacking the boat up until  
it reached the level.  
It was only by good luck that they  
received no damage."  
"There is a great deal of thunder  
and it appears the rains are not  
far away.  
The journey now, has become a  
race to get to the railway  
before the rains brake and the  
roads become impassable."  
Finally, the land is level, but the  
dangers remain deadly.  
This is the country of the tse tse  
fly  
- carrier of the sleeping sickness  
that kills both men and beasts...  
villages are nearly deserted  
- the ghost towns of central Africa.  
No rain falls... this is a dreadful  
blessing -  
drought scorches the plains.  
"At one point the traction  
engines came to a standstill

for want of water,  
and the members of the expedition  
were getting only half a pint a day."  
Lt-Commander Spicer offers local  
women a bolt of colored cloth  
if they will trek eight miles to the  
nearest well  
- hundreds accept the bargain,  
and the convoy moves on.  
For the first time since he tested  
them on the Thames,  
Geoffrey Spicer's two-boat flotilla  
reaches water deep enough  
to sail upon  
- Mimi and Toutou are reassembled  
and lowered into the Lualaba River.  
October 1, 1915.  
Stage Four.  
They will float, or drag their boats,  
- strange apparitions to the  
resident wildlife.  
"Progress on the river is very slow.  
I think Mimi and Tou-Tou hold the  
record for grounding,  
as on October 7 they were  
aground 14 times  
in twelve miles."  
Even on water, Spicer's flotilla  
manages barely ten miles a day  
- then, at the rail depot at Kabalo,  
Mimi and Toutou must be  
- packaged safely for another  
journey by rail.  
October 22, 1915.  
Stage Five.  
The final phase of the long  
odyssey  
- 173 miles across precarious  
trestles and crumbling bridges  
- to the Belgian shores of Lake  
Tanganyika.  
Spicer rivals are already  
preparing their reception  
- Gustav Zimmer has followed every

mile of Spicer's incredible trek,  
still unaware of the unlikely cargo.  
"...the effort to find out more  
about the area around Lukuga and  
Kalemie was resumed in earnest.  
...we took down a lot of telegraph  
wires,  
and blew up telegraph stations.  
As soon as the British reach their  
final destination,  
he will send his gunboats to  
destroy Geoffrey Spicer  
and his half-mad dreams.  
October 28, 1915.  
After four months and over 9,000  
miles of travel,  
the unlikely odyssey of  
Lt. -Commander Geoffrey Spicer  
reaches the blue heart of Africa...  
Lake Tanganyika.  
Finally, he has reached his  
battleground.  
At Kalemie on the western  
shoreline,  
a defensive network of guns,  
troop quarters,  
and shipbuilding facilities guards  
the back door of the Belgian Congo.  
For their British allies, the Belgians  
have prepared simple dwellings  
- Spicer claims the largest to be  
his headquarters...  
and hoists the banner of the  
Royal Navy  
- an emblem of his growing lust  
for power.  
Kalemie has guns, but no  
harbor.  
To protect his boats from the  
Germans,  
Spicer insists the Belgians  
construct a harbor.  
"The decision to build the port  
was come to owing to the facts

that it is impossible to operate  
without a defended port,  
and the existing defenses at  
Kalemie  
will amply protect the port  
selected.  
Hundreds of tons of rock are  
blasted  
and positioned into the  
crocodile-infested waters  
to create an arced jetty.  
Atop the rocks, traintracks and a  
launching slip are lain  
which will allow Spicer to slide his  
miniature Navy  
into the lake in minutes.  
While the jetty is taking shape,  
the Belgians give Spicer the  
details of the 3 German ships  
he must destroy.  
The smallest German vessel is  
the Kingani.  
At 55 feet long and 12 feet wide,  
she is far larger and better armed  
than Mimi or Toutou.  
Her compatriot, the Hedwig von  
Wissmann,  
is even larger, but slower.  
Carrying two powerful guns and a  
crew of 22 sailors,  
she has room for 200 extra troops.  
The Graf von Gotzen dwarfs them all.  
An 800 ton monster,  
she is over 20 times the size of  
the British speedboats.  
Her massive guns can blast  
Spicer's boats  
to oblivion with one shell.  
The little British boats are  
seriously outmanned,  
outgunned and outsized.  
To tilt the balance of power,  
Spicer plots a surprise attack to  
capture the Kingani

- it is an audacious plan...  
for a desk officer who has never  
led a combat mission.  
Across the lake,  
Gustav Zimmer plans his own  
strategy of strength.  
"...we learned from intercepted  
Belgian telegram communications  
that they were looking for a  
building location...  
As soon as it was practical, the  
reconnaissance work began."  
December 1, 1915.  
German Lieutenants Walter  
Rosenthal and Job Odebrecht  
embark on a stealthy mission of  
reconnaissance.  
In four successive evenings,  
the two ships slip in under  
darkness, snapping off night  
exposures of the harbor.  
The next evening,  
Lt. Rosenthal risks his life in a  
daring solo mission.  
"He wanted to swim ashore,  
to find out more about the drydock  
and the building of the new ship,  
despite the danger of crashing  
waves and crocodiles...  
he reached the drydock, took  
notice of two boats,  
then swam back to the designated  
meeting place."  
But a panicky German officer orders  
the Kingani to leave without him.  
Rosenthal is forced to hide out on  
the Allied side of the lake.  
At daybreak, abandoned in enemy  
waters,  
Rosenthal is taken prisoner  
- Zimmer is still ignorant of  
Spicer's Jungle Navy.  
Mid-December, the rains come  
- work is impossible -

all they can do is wait.

"We are having heavy rains almost daily, and one or two members of the expedition on an average, are always down with slight attacks of fever."

On December 23, Spicer decides it is time to go to war.

Far from his desk in London, Africa has freed Spicer's spirit. His battle dress reflects his liberation.

"...to the amazement of the crew and to the Belgians and the natives, he didn't wear shorts, he wore a little, tiny little khaki skirt with pleats in it."

Spicer and Britain need allies - the men of the Ba Holo Holo nation see the eccentric white man as a natural chief.

Christmas Eve.

The mahogany gunboats undergo their first trial runs on African waters.

"On Christmas Day we took a rest, and it being the first time the whole expedition had been together, we had a big celebration.

December 26, 1915.

The Germans come to fight.

Spicer is reading prayers when an enemy ship is sighted.

Spicer ignores the enemy's approach

- he alone will decide when his private war will commence.

"I finished prayers and then sent off the hands to get ready."

Doctor Hanshell and other non-combatants head to the cliffs to watch the battle as if it was a cricket match.



"...The paymaster and I and the petty officer Murphy and so on, we had a grandstand view of it. It all happened right under our eyes."

**At 11:**

Spicer and his fleet set off in pursuit of the enemy.

Spicer is in the Mimi and Lieutenant Dudley

- without his bicycle...

is at the helm of the Toutou.

Spicer's plan is to sneak in

behind the Kingani,

and attack her from both sides.

The Kingani can only fire on them with her bow guns.

Kapitan Zimmer has sent the Kingani to blow up the Belgian harbor installation.

But instead, is confronted by Spicer's entire navy.

"She was well inside the bay before she was aware of the existence of the British boats on the Lake ...and the Mimi and Toutou rapidly overhauled her and opened fire."

"An early shot from one of our guns carried away her mast, and she got several hits below the water line."

In the ensuing half hour, eleven enemy sailors are rounded up.

Lt. Dudley takes control of the captured Kingani, and brings her and the captured survivors back to base.

At Kalemie, Spicer is showered with sand... a traditional gesture that confirms his mastery of the earth he stands on.

Three German sailors are buried

with military dignity.  
The British have suffered no  
casualties  
- but the battle for the blue heart  
of Africa has barely begun.  
In London, he was ignored,  
but at Lake Tanganyika,  
Geoffrey Spicer is hailed as a hero  
for his brilliant ambush  
of the Kingani.  
He must now repair his damaged  
prize.  
British and Belgian engineers  
patch up the Kingani's 11 holes,  
and refit her with a larger  
When they are finished, Spicer  
re-christens the German gunboat  
as if she were a French poodle,  
naming her HMS Fifi.  
With a bolstered sense of  
confidence,  
Spicer's behavior becomes  
more outrageous, more bizarre.  
Twice a week, he performs a  
ceremonial public bath,  
complete with cigarettes and  
vermouth  
- his body is decorated with  
symbolic tattoos...  
Spicer's men suspect he has  
gone mad...  
but the Ba holo holo warriors  
understand the white man's message  
- they call him  
"bwana chifungatumbo"  
- Lord of the Loincloth...  
February 8, 1916.  
". we got information from  
native spies  
that the Kingani had been sunk  
by a new coastal artillery battery.  
I decided to check into this myself  
and sent along the Gotzen, the  
Hedwig von Wissmann,

and a smaller boat."

The Germans still do not know  
the Royal Navy has invaded the Lake.

"...The Hedwig von Wissmann  
was to get to the Belgian coast  
in the early morning and enquire  
about the position  
from friendly spies,  
then head back to Cape Kungwe  
where she would meet with the  
Gotzen at around noon  
on February 9th."

Then together, Zimmer and Odebrecht  
will attack the harbor.

At dawn on February 9, the  
dance begins,  
with control of Central Africa at  
stake.

It is a humid, hazy morning  
- distant vessels shimmer like  
mirages in the heat.

Through the haze, Spicer spots  
the Germans.

Spicer leads the attack in his  
new flagship, the Fifi  
- chief engineer Wainwright  
takes the speedier,  
more maneuverable Mimi.

"...the weather conditions  
made the estimation of distance  
very difficult...

and until the enemy closed to  
within 5000 yards,  
he appeared to be a dark blob  
suspended above the horizon."

For more than an hour,  
Spicer's shells fall short of the  
fleeing German ship  
- but the Mimi cuts off her  
escape...

and forces the Germans to turn  
and fight.

As if protected from death by his  
magic tattoos,

the Lord of the Loincloth refuses  
to take cover.

The battle of Lake Tanganyika  
lasts 90 furious minutes.

Hemmed in by Wainwright in the Mimi,  
Spicer's cannon blasts a fatal wound  
in the Wissmann's engine room.

"In a few minutes the Hedwig  
von Wissmann burst into flames,  
and finally she up-ended and  
went down."

From among the wreckage,  
Spicer retrieves the German  
battle flag.

The first enemy banner captured  
in combat... anywhere -  
in the most deadly war in human  
history.

Twenty-one Germans survive  
the explosion

- seven others are killed...

Again, there is not a single British casualty -  
now, only one target remains...

the Gotzen -

the mightiest of all warships on  
this deadly inland sea.

To the Ba holo holo people, the  
sinking of the Wissmann  
confirms Geoffrey Spicer's status  
as an indestructible warrior...

a man whose magic places him  
in the realm of the gods.

For miles up and down the Lake,  
elaborate clay fetishes are  
shaped in Spicer's image.

"And clay and wood images  
grew up all around the place.

The helmet and the beard and  
the jupe and the bare arms  
with scratches on to make the  
tattooing.

He was the great Bwana Ikuba."

At the peak of his powers,  
Spicer is told that his war against

Zimmer is over

- the allies will import a new  
weapon... airplanes...  
to destroy the Gozten from the  
sky.

June, 1916.

Allied seaplanes launch a barrage  
of bombings on Kigoma.

Zimmer decides to scuttle his  
flagship.

"It was hard for us to blow up our  
last ships,

but they could not be allowed to  
fall into enemy hands,  
for they would have construed it  
as a kind of victory.

We conceded to the stronger force,  
but our willingness to serve and  
our enthusiasm was not broken."

Germany's dreams of an African  
empire are shattered

- thwarted by an unlikely hero  
and his jungle navy.

After almost another year of  
protecting the Lake,  
Spicer and his men are ordered  
back to England.

His warships left behind.

The British Naval Africa  
Expedition is a total success.

Its military objective attained,  
its men back home, unharmed.

He has led his men on a bizarre,  
nearly impossible mission,  
a small step on the long road to  
history.

He is awarded the Distinguished  
Service Order

and 15 others including  
Henschell, Wainwright

and Dudley are also honored.

After the awards and the  
ceremonies

the Lord of the Loincloth returns

to the same desk he left in 1915.

As a warrior his duty is done.

"...the expedition was the  
smallest ever sent out  
- there being only twenty-eight  
men all told.

And it was the only expedition  
that had come back without  
a single casualty."