

The Military Labour Corps

At the start of the First World War, there were very few roads in West, Central and East Africa and only a handful of railway lines. Although the military campaigns in Africa often began following the established roads and railway lines, the armies quickly found themselves in territory where supplies of food, equipment, medical supplies and ammunition could not be taken by road or rail transport. Much of the territory was not even suitable for pack animals and air transport was not sufficiently developed at that time to allow the possibility of air dropped supplies, such as were used later in the Second World War. Therefore the only option available was to employ large numbers of men to carry the necessary supplies. Still more were needed to improve and extend roads as fast as possible to make more areas easily accessible.



Although some units such as the King's African Rifles already employed carriers, far more were needed, as the number of carriers required by an expedition was often greater than the number of soldiers involved (supplies were required for the carriers as well as the soldiers and these had to be carried too by further carriers). The longer the expedition, the greater the number of carriers required.

To begin with, the Military Labour Corps was organised into battalions of one thousand men, divided into ten companies of one hundred, each led by three headmen. Soon it was found that smaller units were more useful and the battalions quickly broke up. There were also problems of desertion and men leaving companies to join others where they had found friends. Because of these issues the battalion system was abandoned and the corps was reorganised into twenty five man gangs which were allotted as units to carry supplies for troops, build roads or serve as hospital porters. However, when men became sick and needed hospitalisation or were separated from their gangs, it proved difficult to return them as their gangs had often moved on to other locations. The system was therefore modified again to fix the number of men in each gang but

make its membership more fluid. Depots were established in a number of locations and when gangs had lost men, the appropriate number of men was sent from the nearest depot to make up the numbers, rather than trying to get the original men back to their gangs. This worked well for rest of the war. Extra leadership was also added to ensure better running of the system through a better ratio of officers to men.



The men's payment proved more difficult. To begin with each man was given an identity disc showing his depot number and a pay book which recorded his name, tribe, rate of pay and the date of the latest payment. However, the majority of the men in the Labour Corps failed to understand the importance of the discs and pay books and frequently lost them or traded them with each other, meaning they could not be paid. This problem was solved by recording finger prints. From then on, each man going to the depot to receive pay was identified by his finger prints rather than items which could have been lost or traded. Depots were staffed with trained finger print analysts and the payment system worked well from then on. Food supplies were also arranged by depots and dedicated hospitals were established in a number of places to treat sick or injured labourers.



Until late 1915, the armies were almost entirely dependent on human carriers to carry their supplies, but after that, due to the equal concentration on road building, it became progressively easier to transport supplies by road. However, vast numbers of carriers were still needed right up to the end of the war. This led to depopulation of some tribal areas as farms fell into ruin due to the lack of manpower on farm and a rebalancing of power in some tribes.

Although the Military Labour Corps has been largely forgotten in Britain, it is remembered in Africa on war memorials and in places such as the Carrier Corps Market in Dar Es Salaam.

