



Kenya Africa

British Military Strategy in Kenya

The British forces in Kenya employed the tried and tested tactics which had worked so well in the counter-insurgency operations in Malaya. The problem was to balance the wealth of knowledge with the flexibility of response, allowing the knowledge of past experience to meld with what was needed in the theatre, but not to rigidly apply that knowledge to the exclusion of ingenuity and individual experience. This knowledge dates back to the Boer War and beyond to colonial operations.

This wealth of accumulated knowledge by no means made the British Army's task easy and comfortable. The first step in the British strategy was, as in Malaya, to establish strong proper relations between the administration and the Military branches of the government. In the British army's war against Mau Mau it was evident from the start that both branches of the government were agreed that "Mau Mau had to be suppressed; political negotiations were totally inconceivable."

After the declaration of the State of Emergency it soon became clear that the colonial government had no strategy for dealing with the revolt and unrest. The governor requested and obtained British and African troops including the King's African Rifles. The troops were composed of:

- 1st Lancashire Fusiliers (from the Canal Zone)
- 4th KAR (from Uganda)
- 6th KAR (from Tanganyika)
- Local KAR Battalions.

Other KAR units were engaged during the course of the campaign. The initial assignments were in random searches and harassment expeditions which were eventually called general sweeps. Up to 1953 these troops with a fast expanding police force struggled to contain the unrest by demonstrations of force, with the British troops assigned to the European dominated areas and the KAR troops assigned to the African dominated areas of the Central Province.

In January 1953, Major General Hinde was appointed as director of operations, although the efforts lacked any real coordination and strong influence by the contentious settlers were strongly affecting the task of formulating a coherent policy. This was further complicated by the complete lack of military experience of the Governor, Sir Evelyn Baring. The Governor was also generally weak, sickly and often seen as indecisive, influenced by his desire to build an amicable relationship with the administration and settlers.

The situation in early 1953 did not improve, the troops failed to isolate the Mau Mau guerrillas and the territory of Nairobi remained contested throughout 1953. In this area troops generally harassed the populace, arresting and deporting large numbers of Kikuyu. Night raids also became common, collecting, harassing and screening the residents of the slums.

Also in 1953, the Government enacted several decrees restricting movement and commercial activities of the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru people in the city. The Government was suffering primarily from lack of intelligence about the Mau Mau and against this background of frustration, the British Government appointed General Sir George Erskine as commander-in-chief of the colony's armed forces in May 1953. Erskine was big, flamboyant and with the



personal backing of Winston Churchill, had the backing to render him almost indifferent to the peculiar military wishes and instructions from the vocal settler community. Erskine started to implement his own strategies towards the end of 1953, having warned the government that "the campaign will be longer than originally thought." *Pictured right is a Special branch officer searching a suspect for Mau Mau razor cuts*

The military orders continued to be implemented through the system of emergency committees throughout the provinces and districts. Cooperation was not always harmonious but order was at least brought to bear on that aspect of the emergency operation. The Special Branch was expanded under the direction of British Intelligence officials. Military intelligence expanded through the work of Field Intelligent Assistants coordinated by British army officers. Intelligence was gained primarily through interrogation, which yielded valuable intelligence as Erskine worked his way through the districts systematically.

Perpetual harassment and infiltration by trained spies and informers further weakened the protective cover of Mau Mau adherents. There were the dreaded screening teams. These teams had been given a particularly foreboding quality by parading arrested persons before hooded loyalists, who pointed out Mau Mau activists for the security forces. Additional information came from African Loyalist Home Guard and confessions of captured guerrillas, but still remained primarily incomplete. Especially lacking in details of the organizational structure of the Mau Mau forces and without this crucial tactical information, it was impossible for the British army to plan an effective offensive against Mau Mau.



Image courtesy of the IWM

Photographer: Gowers BS (Sergeant)

Description: A Daimler armoured car and crew of the East African Independent Armoured Car Squadron after returning from patrol.



This situation changed drastically with the capture of Waruhiu Itote (General China) on 15th January 1954. He was the most senior Mau Mau guerrilla leader captured by the government since the start of the emergency in 1952. After a brief hospitalization for wounds suffered in the battle which led to his capture, he was declared fit for interrogation. China was interrogated for a total of 68 hours at the office of the Special Branch of the Kenya Police. After some initial problems he revealed detailed information about the Mau Mau command structure and his own sphere of influence.

The interrogation also revealed the fact that the Mau Mau was suffering from an acute shortage of ammunition, which hampered their activities. Food was being supplied by a passive wing in the reserve and that no food was grown in the forest and that the two armies of the Mau Mau were largely independent and there was little active cooperation between them. General China also helped the Government and Mount Kenya (Mau Mau) forces in talks which were named the China Peace Overture, which lasted three months but were destroyed in the end by mistrust and ill will. The three month lull in the fighting was used by the intelligence units to gather extensive intelligence about the passive wing of Mau Mau in the reserve.

Pictured right are Mau Mau suspects waiting trail.

This intelligence was so extensive, that in the three days immediately following the breakdown of talks, more than a thousand terrorists and supporters lurking in the reserves were picked up. These arrests and detentions of suspected Mau Mau supporters led to collapse of morale, political and domestic support as their supporters began to be rounded up by the government and security forces.

Operation Anvil opened on 24th April 1954 after weeks of planning by the army with the approval of the War Council. The operation effectively placed Nairobi under military siege and the occupants were screened and the Mau Mau supporters moved to Langata. Nairobi remained under siege for the rest of the year, with the members of those tribes associated by the Mau Mau having to prove their innocence or be sent to detention camps. The British Army's offensive continued throughout the country, clearing district by district. With the Royal engineers constructing easier access routes and the RAF providing air support the British Army had greater access to the districts. May 1953 also saw the Home Guard officially recognized as a branch of the Security Forces. The Home Guard formed the core of the Government's anti-Mau Mau strategy as it was composed of loyalist African and not an outside force like the British Army and KAR.

By the end of the Emergency the Home Guard had killed no less than 4,686 Mau Mau, which amounted to 42% of the total. The Home Guard was responsible for undermining and neutralizing the Mau Mau organization through their spy network and punitive measures. Other measures included the setting up of controlled villagers as a punitive measure against areas suspected of being solidly behind the Mau Mau. By early 1955 over a million Kikuyu had been settled in these villages.

By 1955, however, corruption and brutality had reached scandalous levels in the Home Guard, with the White colonial and native troops being equally guilty of brutality against civilians. The amnesty of 1955 absolved the Home Guard from any impending prosecution and gave Mau Mau guerillas a chance to surrender.



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This amnesty was proceeded by protracted peace talks but they collapsed on 20th May 1955, and left the Aberdare-based guerrillas in disarray. The Government embarked on its last offensive in the mountains after the amnesty. After 1955, the most effective weapon used by the government against the Mau Mau were the 'pseudo gangs' composed largely of former guerrillas which were later renamed the Special Force Teams. Upto 1955 these units had been led by whites, and were led by loyal Africans thereafter which would go into the forests on seek and destroy expeditions against the Mau Mau hideouts. Kimathi's capture on 21st October 1956 in Nyeri and signified the ultimate defeat of the Mau Mau and essentially ended the military offensive against the Mau Mau.

Two following photographs loaned to the Tank Museum record the activities of the East African Armoured Car Squadron at the time of the Mau Mau terrorist uprising in the 1950's

Drawing its officers and senior NCOs from the Royal Armoured Corps and other troops from the King's African Rifles the squadron was equipped with **Daimler Dingo scout cars**, Series I Landrovers and Morris MPA1 trucks, which operated as troops.

They were equipped to undertake 1,000 mile patrols which lasted a week through threatened areas but their enemy were skilled 'bushmen' and they had nearly as much trouble from the local wild life, particularly elephant and rhino.



Image courtesy of Bovington Tank Museum
Photographer :Unknown

Description: On Patrol in Kenya, not the tow rope, im not sure which vehicle is towing which.
As Dingos are not designed for towing it would seem likely that a failure had occurred.



Image courtesy of Bovington Tank Museum

Photographer :Unknown

Description: The ring, around the top of some Dingos, was not an improved radio aerial but a slip ring for a Bren gun, enabling the vehicle to deliver fire quickly in all directions



Image courtesy of the IWM

Photographer: Chaten (Sergeant)

Description: A Daimler armoured car of the East African Independent Armoured Car Squadron on patrol.



Image courtesy of the Tank Museum Bovington
Photographer: Unknown

Description: Soldiers of the King's African Rifles. on Patrol in Dingo F47381, 14 ZS65 in Masailand.

As can be seen the ring is a rarely used Bren Gun mounting, made to allow quick traversing of the weapon.

Autumn 1954



Image courtesy of the Tank Museum Bovington reference 6140-A6
Photographer: Unknown

Description: Soldiers of the King's African Rifles on Patrol in Dingo F47915 16ZS67 in Masailand.
Autumn 1954