



# Mimi and Toutou's Big Adventure: The Bizarre Battle of Lake Tanganyika

*Giles Foden*

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## **Mimi and Toutou's Big Adventure: The Bizarre Battle of Lake Tanganyika** Giles Foden

When the First World War breaks out, the British navy is committed to engaging the enemy wherever there is water to float a ship—even if the body of water in question is a remote African lake and the enemy an intimidating fleet of German steamers. The leader of this improbable mission is Geoffrey Spicer-Simson whose navy career thus far had been distinguished by two sinkings. His seemingly impossible charge: to trek overland through the African bush hauling Mimi and Toutou—two forty-foot mahogany gunboats—with a band of cantankerous, insubordinate Scotsmen, Irishmen and Englishmen to defeat the Germans on Lake Tanganyika. With its powerfully evoked landscape, cast of hilariously colorful characters and remarkable story of hubris, ingenuity and perseverance, this incredibly bizarre story—inspiration for the classic film *The African Queen*—is history at its most entertaining and absorbing.

## **Mimi and Toutou's Big Adventure: The Bizarre Battle of Lake Tanganyika Details**

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Author : Giles Foden

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## From Reader Review Mimi and Toutou's Big Adventure: The Bizarre Battle of Lake Tanganyika for online ebook

### Ruthanne Taylor says

This is a delightful telling of one of the strangest, unlikely battles in WWI. It is believed to be, loosely, the basis for the C.S. Forester book *The African Queen*. I don't normally like war stories, but I thoroughly enjoyed this well written romp thru a piece of the war. If you are a WWI enthusiast, this is a book for you. If you, like me, adore *The African Queen*, book & movie, read this for some fascinating background.

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### Chris says

As I have myself crossed Lakes Victoria and Tanganyika and am a huge fan of Huston's *African Queen* I read Foden's book with great interest. Mimi and Toutou were two armed motorboats transported by rail and on foot from Cape Town to near Kigoma to take on a formidable German naval presence. The Belgians, allies of the British also make an appearance. This very well-written, densely researched book is worth buying alone for the portrait of the vainglorious Geoffrey Spicer-Simpson, inveterate liar, incompetent naval "commander" and wont to wearing a skirt in the tropics. The final engagements with the German "navy" led to a relatively small number of horrific maimings and deaths.

The book also contains a sketch of the most distinguished participant in the WWI East African war, von Lettow-Vorbeck, who effectively beat the British with his askaris and his skilful guerrilla tactics. When news of Germany's defeat in Europe finally percolated to Africa, Lettow-Vorbeck, wishing to surrender, was told by the enemy: "Awfully sorry, old chap, but we have no facilities for prisoners of war here. Would you mind frightfully marching your chaps to Abercorn?" I am open to correction but I recall this was a distance of some 1000 miles. Abercorn, now Mbala, has a statue commemorating the parlous British victory. I have seen it.

Lettow-Vorbeck, an honourable Prussian, had no truck with Hitler. In the early 1950s a Brit or a South African financed a return visit for him to Tanganyika. He received a hero's welcome.

But this book is primarily about the arduous trek made by Spicer-Simpson and his men, many of whom were as unhinged as he was.

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### Edward Sullivan says

The little-known true story of the Battle of Lake Tanganyika during World War I that served as the inspiration for C. S. Forester's *The African Queen* and great film adaptation. An engrossing, entertaining tale of swashbuckling action and adventure, and comical ineptitude.

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### Nocheevo says

The supposedly Great War, WWI, had numerous sideshows. Little forgotten battles. Often triggered by left

field strategic thinking and carried out with lack lustre intent in some forgotten corner of the globe that generally slipped in to a diminutive satire of the larger European play.

Mimi and Toutou Go Forth covers one such campaign in East Africa. The British plan to engage German forces on Lake Tanganyika, which is the longest Lake in the world and was of great strategic advantage in Central Africa at the time.

With no British naval forces on the lake an expedition was undertaken to transport two reconditioned gunboats overland through central Africa, defeat Germans and..... I am not too sure, East Africa hardly was going to open a flank on the Western front. A plan later riffed upon with the film the African Queen. The expedition was undertaken by third string naval officers and the freebooter types lurking about in colonies. It plays a bit like a real life Catch 22. A farce in the face of jingoism.

A generally enjoyable easy read. Humorous without eliciting belly laughs. A more fiction styled narrative may have worked better.

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### Shannon says

Mimi and Toutou's Big Adventure was a book with potential. Set in Africa during World War I, I was intrigued, especially having read Running the Rift, Purple Hibiscus and The Thing Around Your Neck earlier this year. I had hoped Mimi and Toutou would help me understand how events in the early twentieth century shaped the experiences of the fictional late twentieth century/early twenty-first century characters in these books. Instead, it was the story of a specific battle between the British and the Germans, with an emphasis on Britain's efforts to get two ships from England to Lake Tanganyika.

If you're a fan of war history or interested in battles, ships and bizarre English characters, this book might be worth a read. For me, the author missed a chance - time and again - to either zoom in on one of the peculiar (but interesting) characters in this story or to zoom out and situate the story within the broader scope of history. Either would have been more satisfying to than reading about a pulley system that moved two boats over a mountain.

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### D.J. Cockburn says

Foden is better known for novels like *The Last King of Scotland* and *Zanzibar*, but this book shows that he is equally adept at non-fiction. The *Mimi* and *Toutou* of the title were a pair of British motor launches sent to gain control of Lake Tanganyika during the First World War. The commanding officer's first choice of names, *Dog* and *Cat*, was rejected by the Admiralty as being too frivolous. He retaliated by naming them with the French equivalents of 'Miaow' and 'Woof-woof', adopting a hint of the ridiculous that the expedition never seems to have escaped.

It would be easy to dismiss the expedition as a harebrained colonial adventure if it hadn't actually succeeded in sinking the German armed steamers dominating the lake. Most of the members had little or no relative experience, while their eccentric commanding officer insisted on wearing a skirt and bragging about fictional big game hunts. Their accident-prone progress through the Belgian Congo involved accidentally setting fire to the bush, running aground on sandbars and running out of water in the middle of the dry season. Hauling eight-ton launches from Cape Town to Lake Tanganyika would be a major undertaking now, let alone in 1915, and *Mimi* and *Toutou* were expected to fight a battle at the end of it.

As with most colonial ventures, it could never have got underway without the involvement of far more

Africans than Europeans. Given the conditions in the Belgian Congo at the time, their involvement was unlikely to have been entirely voluntary. As is common in the accounts of colonial expeditions, the Africans are presented as a faceless mass while the Europeans are individuals. Where Foden goes beyond many of his peers is that he devotes an entire chapter to the reasons for this, describing his efforts to find some sort of oral history among the people who live on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. To his frustration, the opportunity to record the African view appears to have been lost.

All things considered, Foden covers the episode from several different angles, and always with an eye to the absurd, which makes this both a fascinating history and a good read.

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## Harry Buckle says

Simply a 'must read.' A true story featuring a number of remarkable English eccentrics and their battle to retain control over an almost ocean sized lake in central Africa. I just re-read this having found my copy (originally called Mimi and Toutou Go Forth ) propping up the corner of an old copper rum still in my office: Don't ask! If you have even a vague liking for Alexander McCall Smith's series of African/Botswana stories then this real world adventure-will make you smile. Despite this being a First World War contest over a strategically important part of Africa, the true misery of that terrible time is more than softened by the situation where local conditions and distance from 'the real world' were as much if not more a part of the problem than the need to prevail over the Germans. Echoes - even then, of a by gone age. The real story though is about the English eccentrics and adventurers...'lets take some little steam boats from the Thames overland several thousand miles through the wilds of Africa and sort out those dastardly chaps on the lake. ' Actually one of my favourite books - and rediscovering it then meant taking the rest of the day away from the typewriter. I think for only the second time here on GR I would say: 'Please get this...I don't think you will be disappointed.' If it wasn't a true story it would make an exotic fiction. Actually years later in the '60's when the despotic and dangerous Idi Amin had seized control in Uganda he declared war on the US Navy. This caused considerable merriment and scorn in the US media considering that, much like days of Mimi and Toutou , Amin also only had a couple of very ancient smallish river steamers in his navy. Given Uganda firmly also located in central Africa, when the US really studied the matter they found the likely logistics of transporting ships thousands of miles through desert and jungle not so simple. As their spokesman at the time said...'shuffling his feet with embarrassment...'We might- just-possibly-hard to imagine-but taking into account the conditions and the need- err- we might not just bother!' Now days of course a drone or two would be despatched to bomb the wrong targets. But back to the sunnier times of Tea drinking English Navel Officers wearing skirts and Giles Foden's wonderful 2004 book...Mimi and Toutou. Get it and Enjoy. The explanation of why I happen to have a full size working rum still in my office is for another day...it would be good for 'the blog' section on GR but I can't figure out how to make that work..so possibly the days of eccentrically incompetent Englishmen in hot climates aren't yet over...no skirt though. Yet.

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## AJ P says

3.5 stars.

I am not a big reader of military history (or small reader for that matter). It just doesn't excite me, so books about military history are typically not at the top of my list - and even when I add them, I tend to avoid reading them. It's probably an unfounded bias since I wouldn't say I have read enough of them to have a real opinion on the genre. But, that's how it's been. Then, a coworker gave me this one to read, and since I was actually

handed the book and given an in person positive review... I figured I had to do it.

It took me over a year to read it, because it was one of the books I left on my desk and read page by page over various breaks or lunch periods. But, I am glad I read it. It was fascinating and certainly covered an aspect of military history in Africa that I was completely ignorant about. And it was told in a novelistic style, so certainly wasn't dry and academic. Of course, having an eccentric main character didn't hurt the telling of the story, either. So, if there are more military history stories of this ilk, I may not be as hesitant to read the genre. I even enjoyed the last portion of the book in which the author recounted the making of The African Queen and his own travels to east Africa to unearth some of the details of the story (or at least connect with it). So, all in all, a very nice book. And definitely something that provides great insight into the colonial period during World War I. No complaints from me.

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### **Tim Mercer says**

This was an interesting book for several reasons. Primarily it is about Spicer-Simpson who was the leader of the British expedition that transported the 2 gunboats overland to Lake Tanganyika and subsequently commanded them in their luckily successful encounters. Unfortunately he is a classic example of incompetence saved by hard working subordinates. With officers like Spicer-Simpson, the British empire was doomed. In my opinion his only redeeming feature is that he was also responsible for naming the gunboats Mimi and Toutou. Cool names for gunboats I think.

However this book is fascinating with its description of the African landscape and life of the period as well as how the expedition overcame many of the problems in transporting the ships. Even 100 years ago the landscape was changing as Europeans finished their claiming of the continent. They had at a minimum significantly changed the lifestyles of the native tribes if not exterminated or completely subjugated them. However their story is peripheral to the story told which is primarily about the man and his involvement in the expedition. The book itself is written in a very easy to read style. 4.5 stars for it's entertainment value.

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### **Jeroen Van de Crommenacker says**

I thought I would enjoy this book more. It's a fun telling of a minor historic episode in Africa, but probably the subject is a bit too thin.

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### **Rob and Liz says**

I really loved this book. It's my favorite sort of combination of history, personal interest, humor and a good story. It's also about Tanzania, at least partly, and there are very few decent books written about Tanzania.

"Mimi and Toutou Go Forth" is the story of a fascinating battle that took place in Lake Tanganyika, in western Tanzania, during World War I. Mimi and Toutou were 2 British warships that were carried all the way across the inhospitable rain forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo for the express purpose of fighting a brief battle with 2 German ships that were already stationed on lake. The concept and people that brought these boats to Lake Tanganyika were bizarre and their journey and battles were even more bizarre. The story is of particular interest to us because one of the German ships mentioned in the book is still functioning on Lake Tanganyika. Even after 100 years, it is still the best ferry on the lake and we saw it while we were visiting Kigoma with Rob's parents!

"Mimi and Toutou" is fun, entertaining and an easy read. Plus, it looks like no one else has read it here on Goodreads. Check it out.

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### **Margaret Sankey says**

You just can't make up stuff like this--during WWI, the British Navy sent the most incompetent pack of idiots ever assembled to defeat a German battleship on a lake in the heart of Africa. Sarong-wearing, ship-wrecking, pathologically-lying man saves the day and proves that it is far better to be lucky than smart.

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### **Corto says**

Once, after reading a complicated article on Marine Corps logistics, I asked an officer of said service and branch, "How the hell do guys ever actually get from point A to point B?"

With a weary shake of his head, he responded, "Most of the time, only by sheer force of will."

That sentiment covers a large portion of the action of this book- a very well written and intriguing history of one of the least known naval actions in WWI, in its least known theater, East Africa.

What lies in these pages is a strange story of an eccentric and under-qualified Royal Navy officer and the expedition he led to keep the Germans from maintaining uncontested control of Lake Tanganyika. The British launched the expedition only because they felt they should control any patch of water where a RN vessel could float, and only realized later the economic implications of German dominance in the region.

Foden writes a very colorful and well documented history, fleshing out the only other popular account of this battle which appears in Byron Farwell's "The Great War in Africa".

Foden also takes the time to relate the contributions of the indigenous Africans who made the victory possible.

Thoroughly enjoyable read. I passed it up when it came out years ago, because it seemed too ridiculous, but it's a fascinating story. If reading about Naval history, WWI or imperialism in Africa interests you, put it on your to-read list.

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## Lonette says

This was an unusual read for me. The storytelling was fun, but I'm not sure how historically accurate it was.

In World War 1, Belgian and British troops fought against German forces in Africa. British big-game hunter, John Lee, noticed that the Germans had control of Africa's Lake Tanganyika and he traveled to London to report this fact to the Royal Navy, and to suggest a plan for the Admiralty to send motorboats to challenge the three German steamships that patrolled the lake. This would require the vessels to be shipped to South Africa, and then transported overland to the landlocked lake. Since most of the experienced naval officers were already at sea, the Admiralty chose the incredibly eccentric Geoffrey Spicer-Simpson to lead the Naval Africa Expedition. The author described him as, "a man court-martialed for wrecking his own ships, an inveterate liar and a wearer of skirts." Well, that piqued my interest, I must say.

Several times I found myself giggling at Spicer-Simpson's antics. He wanted to name the two launches that were assigned to him Cat and Dog, but the Admiralty disliked the names and told him to choose different ones, so he selected Mimi and Toutou, which Spicer-Simpson said meant "miaow" and "bow-wow" in French. Spicer was one of the most egocentric, bombastic figures I have encountered in nonfiction. He loved to tell anyone who would listen about his heroism, most of which was fabricated. Modesty would never be an adjective used to describe Spicer-Simpson. He also had a talent for insulting allies, which caused quite a few problems, although he was a resounding success with the local Ba-Holo-Holo tribe who lived on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. They had formerly been allies with Germany, but Spicer-Simpson's peculiarities entertained them so much, that they shifted their loyalties to him. My favorite of these peculiarities was when the commander began wearing a skirt, not a kilt mind you, but a skirt, that I believe his wife designed for him. The natives loved this attire because it showed off the colorful tattoos of snakes and butterflies that covered Spicer-Simpson's body. I wish there had been pictures in the book! He even had monogrammed, hand-made cigarettes.

Despite Spicer-Simpson's chaotic leadership, the flotilla managed to either capture or sink three of the German boats. The final campaign required the taskforce to defend the land operations from the lake. Spicer-Simpson found that the harbor was defended by what appeared to be a heavily-armed fort, so he opted not to attack and went elsewhere. Imagine his chagrin when he discovered that the fort's big guns were made of wood! Needless to say, the commander was thoroughly chastised for this.

All-in-all, I liked the book, but I probably will not be reading it again.

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## Stephen says

Thoroughly absurd.

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