The war-time experience of two official photographers in East Africa 1915-1917
Dr Anne Samson, KCL, 19 September 2015

In these twenty minutes I want to explore the role of two ‘official’ photographers of World War One – two men who served in Africa, in different capacities for different services. Doing so, opens up a myriad of areas for further investigation around inter-service collaboration and enforcement of policy or not as the case may be.

I should point out at the start that I regard these men as official war photographers as they were officially sanctioned in their roles, but they did not fulfil the role of ‘official photographer’ being that of a specific role taking photographs for prosperity or propaganda purposes. What I mean will become clear as I give you brief overviews of the work the two men undertook in Africa.

We’ll start with Frank Magee and then turn to Cherry Kearton despite the latter seeing service in East Africa first.

Frank Magee was the photographer who accompanied the Lake Tanganyika Expedition which took two boats overland from Cape Town to Lake Tanganyika to wrest supremacy of that lake from the Germans and support the Belgians.

Material on Magee is scarce, more so than that on Kearton’s war time service. There is no file on Magee at The National Archives and sources conflict about his nationality, some claiming he was American. He apparently was a reporter during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 but came to prominence between 1909 and 1912 as a photographer with the Daily Mirror covering the war in Tripoli and then in Bulgaria during the First Balkan War. In the latter, he exposed the use of wooden bullets and in the New York Times, it was reported that Magee had brought back a sample of these bullets that the Turks had been issued.

The next we hear of Magee is with the Lake Tanganyika Expedition in Central and East Africa during World War 1. He was appointed with the rank of Petty Officer, later Warrant Officer, at the request of Commander Geoffrey Basil Spicer-Simson who was in command of the lake expeditionary force. Magee’s title was noted as ‘Writer’. Dr Hothar Hanschell who accompanied the expedition recounted in interviews to Peter Shankland that Spicer-Simson had taken Magee on the expedition in order that he could record the adventure. Hanschell’s recollection has to be treated cautiously; he did the interviews aged 80+ and had a dislike for Magee as the latter had refused to sell him some of the photos. With this in mind, and it being the only description found to date, he describes Magee as ‘a little young scoundrel’ and later as ‘unscrupulous’. He ‘was a journalist and at one time Northcliffe made a fuss of him, sent him to the Libyan war. ... He was a shifty fellow... not trusted very far. He managed to travel with us all of the time but didn’t do a stroke of work... Was a Warrant Officer... Magee was there for public relations or something like that. It was to do with Spicer-Simson’s swollen head. He took him along as public propagandist, got him ranked as Warrant Officer but what

for? He took along his camera but they were banned by the Admiralty. Suppose they fell into enemy hands?

Frank Magee left for Cape Town on 22 May 1915 before the main expedition for Africa and a month after Kearton. Magee went out with John Lee, the man who had come up with the idea of transporting the boats across land. They were to select the best route for the boats. In Shankland’s account, A Phantom Flotilla based on Hanschell and others’ accounts, Magee was meant to help with the ‘clerical work’. On 15 June 1915, the two men, Lee and Magee, left Cape Town for the interior but on 7 July 1915, reports were received from Lieutenant Hope of the Lake Tanganyika Expedition via the administrator in Elizabethville that they were reported drunk to the local Police. Soon after, Lee was returned to Cape Town and discharged from service. However, Magee continued with the expedition. Interestingly, on the information reaching London, Vice Admiral David Gamble at the Admiralty and the man overseeing the expedition on behalf of that body wrote: ‘It appears that the necessary steps are being taken on the spot with regard to this very regrettable incident. Lieut Hope is the officer appointed to replace Lieut Higgins, who died, but I cannot find out who “Magee” is, probably a Petty Officer’. What is remarkable about this statement is that Gamble had authorised Magee’s appointment to the expedition less than six months previously, yet no record could be found on him. Then on 27 July 1915, less than a month after the complaints about drunken behaviour are passed onto London, Spicer-Simson promoted Magee from Petty Officer to Warrant Officer noting that his task was to make photographic record of expedition. In October 1915, having arrived at their destination on the lake, Spicer-Simson issued orders for camp management, Magee being told he ‘will assist the Surgeon when necessary but he will also provide himself with a haversack full of rifle ammunition for distribution amongst the riflemen’.

On Boxing Day 1915 the first of the German boats was captured and by July of 1916 the British and Belgian forces had command of Lake Tanganyika. On 24 August 1916, his task of obtaining control of Lake Tanganyika from the Germans, Spicer-Simson was permitted to return to England due to poor health and on 2 October relinquished his command. Magee was not mentioned in his final report summarising the good work of specific individuals. Magee arrived back in London at some stage during 1917, although it is not clear exactly when. In 1922 he published an account of the expedition for National Geographic and it is believed that most of the photos in circulation of the Lake Tanganyika Expedition are those which Magee took and had turned into postcards for members of the expeditionary force. According to the doctor, there were others which he refused to sell as he felt he would get a better price for them in some other form. What happened to Magee after 1922 is also uncertain. Shankland mentions some Americans having tracked him down to the Peabody Estate at Kings Cross, London in subsequent years but could not find him for the documentary they were wanting to make.

https://archive.org/stream/nationalgeograp421922nati#page/n13/mode/2up

Cherry Kearton (1871-1940) was a nature photographer of some standing before the outbreak of war. Some regarding him as the forerunner to David Attenborough. By all accounts he was one of the first to publish photographs of wild animals and to film them, which he did from 1909. In 1911,
he accompanied United States President Teddy Roosevelt and his son for part of their African safari and in early 1914 completed a two year trip across the African continent from East to West.

Kearton’s second wife, Ada, whom he met after the war and married in 1922, wrote of Kearton’s wartime experience in her autobiography, On Safari. There are some inaccuracies in her account which I’ll deal with later, but it is worth quoting her account as the most succinct overview of Kearton’s service.

In 1914 he went to the front as an independent photographer, and one of his first assignments was to take pictures of Cardinal Mercier standing beneath his beloved Malines Cathedral, as the German shells reduced it to a heap of rubble. He photographed the first battle of Ypres, and took the only pictures that survived of the fall of Antwerp. A year later he showed these films in America, where their effect was so great that pro-German elements procured their suppression.

In 1915 he joined up as a Tommy and was sent with the Royal Fusiliers to German East Africa. He quickly won his commission and served ‘for special duties’ in the same Company as the big-game hunters, Selous and George Outram, with both of whom he became a life-long friend. He took many photographs from the air, in planes of the Royal Naval Air Service, and later explored the shores of Lake Victoria photographing the Koenigsberg guns. On one occasion, Smuts sent for him personally to try and photograph a certain gun position that had remained undetected for twelve days. Within three hours Cherry had a well-defined picture of it.

By the end of the war he had become second in command of his battalion, the Royal Fusiliers, and had been through the bitter campaigns of Tringa [Iringa] and Lindi. His battalion was almost wiped out; of the 1,200 men and 33 Officers only 119 men and one Officer – Cherry – survived, and Cherry was so wasted with fever and dysentery that his survival was a near miracle.

After the Armistice he was invited by the War Office to lecture troops in Belgium and Germany; the lectures were often given under difficult conditions, but they were very much appreciated, especially when Cherry spoke of African wild life, or his unique collection of pets.

At the outbreak of war, Kearton was a director and major shareholder of the Warwick Trading Company which produced the first film gazette in Britain. When war broke out, he tried enlisting in both the Flying Corps and the War Office where he was told that ‘no more men were needed’. He was 43 years old. As a result he started a supplement called The Whirlpool of War which produced its last edition in February 1915 with the company closing later that year. In his autobiography, Adventures with Animals and Men, Kearton tells of some of his escapades in Belgium which I won’t go into now as it’s not East Africa, however he did note that the footage he took of the Front was ‘in the early days of the fighting, before the days of the war correspondents came to an end’. His films ‘were first shown in the Palace Theatre by arrangement with Sir Alfred Butt’. The British Film Institute holds some of the footage which has survived – 2 being of East Africa.

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8 Cherry Kearton, Adventures with Animals and Men, pp 178-9
such as *Antwerp under Shot and Shell* (1914), *With the British and French; Battle before Calais* (1914); *Our Boys* (1915), *With the French and British Armies in Flanders* (1914), *The War against the Huns* (1914), *War with Turkey* (1914)

[http://collections-search.bfi.org.uk/web/results](http://collections-search.bfi.org.uk/web/results)

Kearton was able to eventually join the armed forces as a member of Colonel Daniel Patrick Driscoll’s Legion of Frontiersmen who formed part of the 25th Royal Fusiliers, raised specially for service in East Africa. Kearton was, along with FC Selous, appointed as Intelligence Officers. They arrived at Mombasa on 4 May 1915 and moved to their base at Kajiado and Magadi Soda Lake on the Uganda Railway line. Whilst at Magadi, Kearton was ‘ordered to report at the Headquarters at Nairobi for special work’, because his ‘reputation for photography had reached the military authorities’. He was ordered to Lake Victoria where the Germans still had superiority of the lake. Kearton notes that on his return to Nairobi to develop his photos, he stayed with the American hunter who was also a member of the Legion of Frontiersmen, Northrup McMillan.

Kearton then participated in the battle of Bukoba as ‘galloper on foot’ between Driscoll and General Jimmy Stewart who was commanding. Following Bukoba, the Fusiliers were sent to Bura close to where the Germans were occupying British territory. Here, the Royal Naval Air Service submitted a request for Kearton to be ‘loaned to them as a photographer’. He noted, ‘I then did a great deal of work first for them and later for the RFC, and eventually I found myself in charge of an aerodrome in Tanganyika’.

His first posting with the Royal Naval Air Service was at Maktau, where Dr Norman Parsons Jewell, who befriended the photographer recorded that Kearton had ‘set up his dark-room in a large packing-case, which had once, contained an aeroplane. He developed and printed the films, which were taken by the pilots of the reconnaissance aircraft...’

Kearton was invalided in 1917 arriving back in Britain in 1918 with the rest of the 25th Royal Fusiliers. The Ministry of Information wanted his services in America but the army seemed to prefer to want men for fighting purposes. Kearton was finally discharged in August 1918 due to ill health. After the war Kearton undertook lecture tours in both Europe and America. He continued making wildlife films and broadcasting until he died suddenly outside BBC Broadcasting House in 1941.

Of Kearton’s time in East Africa during the war, the following is known to still exist: photos published in his various books, four short films and some hitherto unpublished photos held at the Natural History Museum.

We get some idea of the challenges Kearton faced as a photographer from a 20-odd page handwritten report by then Wing Commander Frederick Bowhill. Bowhill served in East Africa, Zanzibar and then Lindi, from 7 August 1916. He does not mention Kearton in his report which is not too surprising as Kearton served inland and was officially part of the 25th Fusiliers. I’m going to quote quite extensively from Bowhill’s notes as they will hopefully be of interest to a number in this audience. However, I ask now for forgiveness in case of technical inaccuracies as I am not a

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9 Cherry Kearton, *My Dog Simba*, pp 99-100
10 Cherry Kearton, *Adventures with Animals and Men*, pp 223-4
12 TNA: WO 374/38843
13 RAF Hendon, B3820
photographer. What struck me in reading the report, though, is the level of detail provided and the conditions under which the men worked.

Between March 1916 and December 1917 over 500 aerial photos were taken, the majority of which were from seaplanes or working from seaplane carriers. Others were exposed from seaplanes by the unit working with the army from Lindi and Massassi. This army unit might well have included Kearton, but this needs to be confirmed. ‘Practically all flying had to be done in the early morning as the air became too bumpy later during the heat of the day. Owing to this early morning flying, it was very difficult to obtain a fully exposed negative without getting movement, and in many cases, the under exposed negatives had to be intensified before the required prints were taken off. The light out in the tropics is extremely deceptive and new arrivals who take photographs invariably underexpose their negatives at first. The cameras used were Thornton Pickard Aerial, Nos 24A with Aldis lens and 1A with Cook lens and McKenzie Wishart slides.’ However, it appears that Kearton used Prozenski’s Aeroscope Camera according to Richard Abel’s Encyclopaedia of Early Cinema (p355). This camera, using compressed air allowed it to be handheld which was quite a breakthrough when one considers the ‘common’ camera used at the time.\(^\text{14}\) How Kearton’s camera compared to the Thornton Pickard one is not clear although to this unexperienced eye, Kearton’s looks more compact and therefore manageable in an aircraft.

Bowhill continued to explain the plates used which included Pager Autochromatic Press and Wellington Press. The latter were packed in boxes of one dozen plates in sealed tins which started to deteriorate after about three months whilst the Pager only started deteriorating after about five months. The presence of fungus which developed on the film is described including whether it grew from outside in or inside out and the mottled crackling on the slide. Plates had to be loaded into dark slides just before a flight because if loaded overnight marks appear on the plate. The rainy season too had an impact on the plates overnight despite the best attempts to prevent deterioration. Bromide paper gave considerable trouble as it deteriorated very rapidly and instead of clear whites, only dirty greys were discernible for high lights. Having had to default to Velox paper when the former ran out, Bowhill noted vigorous Velox gave excellent results but weak negatives whilst soft Velox gave indifferent results with strong negatives. He recommended that printing paper be sent out regularly in small quantities to ensure it kept.

Temperatures at which work was undertaken ranged between 84 and 90 degrees on shore depending on the time of day and year. 88 degrees in the seaplane carrier darkrooms was considered cool but often work was conducted at 94, 96 and even 100 degrees. Ice was seldom available and if it was, it was only in quantities to cool developer fixer. The portable darkroom which was sent out was ‘practically useless’ as no human being could work in it for more than a few minutes at a time. Cameras warped and lenses fogged up. He also went into detail about the best developers and the challenges they had to contend with. He completed this section of his report with five recommendations dealing with the main points mentioned above. Significantly he noted that ‘All German photographic gear found at Tanga and Dar had been packed in [airtight cases lined with zinc and asbestos] and plates, chemicals and papers were in good condition having been at least two years in this country.’ Kearton’s experience of having worked in Africa for at least five years before the outbreak of war must have stood him in good stead given Jewell’s comment about his darkroom. In addition, the fact that some of his film still survives today and the photos at the Natural History Museum are in relatively good condition, suggests that he must have had better storage systems than the RNAS was using.

\(^\text{14}\) http://www.victorian-cinema.net/proszynski
Where Kearton and the RNAS developed their film on site for immediate use, Magee’s film was returned to Cape Town by the Commandant-General of the Rhodesian forces, Colonel AHM Edwards. In December 1915, Edwards reported that he had forwarded the film onto the Africa Film Trust for development ‘on the distinct understanding that if we allow their development they are not to exhibit them’. The African Films Trust was controlled by the American Isadore Schlesinger which had a monopoly over film distribution in South Africa.

What has been significant looking at these two photographers, is that they worked in official military capacities while their war-time photography was condoned and sanctioned because it met military requirements. In the case of Kearton, that of intelligence whereas Magee’s was to record the achievements of an extraordinary expedition. Although both wrote of their accounts during the war, they did not focus on their photographic achievements. Magee clearly did not make much of a profit from his photos despite Hanschell’s claim as he ended up living on the Peabody Estate. He also only wrote the one account as far as is known. Kearton did not specifically write about his wartime experiences but they feature in various autobiographical accounts. Magee’s photos circulate ‘freely’ on the web, whereas Kearton’s remain ‘hidden’ and I haven’t yet been able to trace any of his aerial photographs other than the one in his autobiography (which doesn’t really look like an African village or military base and which needs further investigation).

Although Magee has a greater ‘fan base’ amongst those studying the German East Africa campaign, it is Kearton’s experience which provides the richer ground for investigation – the refusal of the War Office to use his services on the outbreak of war, in collaboration between the military and RNAS in Africa before and after the arrival of the 26th Royal Flying Corps. Given Bowhill’s report on the challenges facing photographers in tropical zones and the apparent quality of Kearton’s photos as well as his standing in 1915-1917, I wonder why his expertise was not drawn on. Finally, I wait with eager anticipation to see what other photos by both Magee and Kearton come to light which will help shed further light on the campaign in East Africa. This raises another area to explore – why are some photos used more readily and widely than others of the same time and event? The selection shown today depicts a range of scenarios each telling their own story and which, collectively, challenge some of the myths around the campaign.

15 Private collection: Spicer-Simson papers, 18 Dec 1915