

Gambia's forgotten heroes

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During the Second World War some 375,000 men and women from African countries fought with the Allied forces against Germany and Japan. They served with distinction, playing a crucial role in campaigns in the Middle East, North Africa and East Africa, Italy, and in the case of Gambia, in the Far East.

When the French colonies in West Africa were freed from Vichy domination in 1942, British West African troops, no longer needed in such numbers for Home Guard duties, were moved to Burma. In all, around 167,000 Africans were involved in helping to defeat the Japanese there, of whom 3,387 were killed or missing in action, along with 5,549 wounded.

The Gambia contributed men to the 81st West African Division that served with great distinction against the Japanese in Burma, as part of the famous 'forgotten' 14th Army: of the more than 4,000 Gambians who were conscripted, 288 were killed in action.

Volunteers from The Gambia were first sent for training to Nigeria, Britain's largest colony in West Africa, from where they were then sent to India. Away from home, young men from different ethnic groups worked together for the first time for a common cause.

The fighting was tough, and Gambian forces were in the thick of it for three years, until the Japanese were finally pushed out of Burma.

Most were not able to return home until after August 1945, when Japan surrendered.

When they finally returned home, the experiences Gambian and other West Africa veterans brought back to Africa helped transform the continent. Africans were well-informed.

The West African Pilot, a newspaper founded in Nigeria in 1938, published a report on the Atlantic Charter of August 1941, the agreement between the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and the US President, Franklin Roosevelt, which laid out the basic principles of what their

governments hoped the war would achieve. Relevant to Africans was Clause Three of the Charter: '...They [the British and USA governments] respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.' The West African Pilot noted critically that Churchill had quickly claimed that the principles of Clause Three did not apply to Africa. All over the continent Africans bombarded their local newspapers with letters protesting that the clauses of the Atlantic Charter should indeed apply to Africa. For the first time demands for political independence began to become a dominant theme of the emerging African political organisations.

More than 70 years after the end of the war, few survivors from The Gambia's volunteers are still alive. While Remembrance Sunday is commemorated in Banjul on the second Sunday of November each year to honour The Gambia's war dead, there is a feeling in The Gambia, as in the rest of West Africa, that the region's contribution to the Allied cause in World War II has not been properly recognized by the United Kingdom, and could be better highlighted during the Remembrance Day parade in London by the presence of African veterans.

Around 167,000 Africans were involved in helping defeat the Japanese

The Gambia's Fajara War Cemetery contains 203 Commonwealth burials of the Second World War

