

From War Ship To The African Queen

[Zahura Yunus]

To break Germany's control of Lake Tanganyika, the British would need boats.

They had two ideal candidates – motor launches the British admiralty had requisitioned from the Greek Air Force. But they were in Tilbury, in Essex.

So a team of 26, under the command of Geoffrey Spicer-Simson, was set the mission of delivering them – rechristened HMS Mimi and HMS Toutou – to Lake Tanganyika over 4,000 miles away.

The boats were sailed to Cape Town on the southern tip of Africa, before being taken by train, deep into Belgian Congo.

With the help of hundreds of locals, Mimi and Toutou were dragged by steam tractors over wild terrain, crossing temporary bridges built over gorges and streams, before floating down river to the crocodile-infested entrance to Lake Tanganyika at Albertville.

They arrived three months after leaving Britain.

In the encounters that followed Mimi and Toutou would encounter the Graf von Gotzen, the largest German ship on the lake.

Published accounts of their extraordinary journey inspired the author C.S Forester to write a story called The African Queen in the 1930s.

In 1951, Forester's story was made into a film starring Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn.

It tells the tale of Charlie and Rose who meet in German East Africa in World War One. After a daring journey down river on Charlie's boat they destroy an imposing German gunboat.

Forester was probably also inspired by the Konigsberg – another German gunboat from World War One.

It would capture the imagination of audiences around the world, and win Bogart an Oscar for his performance as Charlie.

An extraordinary true tale had provided the springboard for an extraordinary piece of Hollywood storytelling.

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