

Mimi and Toutou Go Forth: The Bizarre Battle of Lake Tanganyika by Giles Foden
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By June 1915 almost a million men had been killed in the trenches of the Western Front. Under the circumstances it seems eccentric of the Royal Navy to have dispatched an expedition to Africa to sink a German ship on Lake Tanganyika.

Giles Foden's new book, his first entirely non-fiction work, undertakes to explain the reasons behind this strange decision. As often with tales of foolhardy adventure, it is difficult to separate the abstract reasons for the venture from the personalities involved, and this tale certainly has its share of personalities.

Chief amongst these is Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey Spicer-Simon, "boastful and vainglorious," whose personality, according to Foden, "involved as much cowardice as heroism, as much self-regard as self-belief."

This strange man, the oldest Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Navy, was plucked out of obscurity and failure to lead the expedition to sink a German warship, the *Hedwig von Wissmann*, reported to have taken control of Lake Tanganyika. At this crucial stage of the War, after the disaster of Ypres, "[t]he conflict on the plains, lakes and mountains of Central and East Africa had almost slipped from the mind of the British authorities," says Foden; but Sir Henry Jackson, the First Sea Lord, maintained that "It is both the duty and the tradition of the Royal Navy to engage the enemy wherever there is water to float a ship."

Lake Tanganyika certainly had enough water. The longest freshwater lake in the world, it extends almost 700 kilometres up Central-East Africa: as Foden says, "control of Lake Tanganyika meant control of a vast swathe of Central Africa." Furthermore, the danger was that the Kaiser, if victorious, could conscript hundreds of thousands of African troops to supplement the huge numbers of Europeans being slaughtered on the Western Front.

To gain control of this strategic body of water, the British needed ships; and they reasoned that the only way of getting them there was overland from Cape Town. Enter *Mimi* and *Toutou*, two rebuilt motor boats, which had to be shipped from England, taken by train from Cape Town to Elizabethville in the Belgian Congo, and then dragged overland and by river to Lake Tanganyika.

Much of Foden's book consists in recounting the predictable enough mishaps befalling this strange expedition; anybody who has read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or seen John Huston's *The African Queen* (both of which Foden refers to), will have some idea of the almost generic conditions and pitfalls of such a venture. What makes this story unique is Spencer-Spicer. Smoking his hand-made cigarettes, with his name engraved down the side; boring whatever company he is in with impossibly tall tales of his exploits as a big-game hunter; taking to wearing a skirt in the middle of the forest, and to displaying his much-tattooed torso to whoever cared to attend his very public morning baths, he is not so much heroically exceptional as decidedly odd. Vain and over-sensitive, he seemed for much of the time to be completely out of touch with the situation; and yet could be surprisingly cool when things went wrong – possibly because he did not realise just how wrong they had gone.

Once arrived on the Lake, Spicer managed, with a little bit of luck and a little (ultimately unacknowledged) help from his friends, to sink the *Hedwig*, a feat for which he was rewarded with a medal and a DSO by the Navy, and elevated to the status of god by the Holo-holo tribe.

This is by no means the end of the tale. Through some strange onset of funk, Spicer failed to follow up on his success, and declined to sink a second and much larger German warship which made a tantalising appearance soon after the sinking of the *Hedwig*. Why Spicer's nerve should have failed him at this crucial stage is not clear; Foden speculates, somewhat half-heartedly, that "perhaps he believed he had fulfilled his orders by sinking the *Hedwig*." Later he reveals that Spicer's brother was killed in action in Europe at this time, and "it seems certain that some time during the expedition he would have been informed of his loss." The implication seems to be that Spicer may have been paralysed with grief; but not even Foden seems really to have much faith in this explanation.

This tentativeness about the motives of his central character is representative of the weakness of Foden's method, which is in part an over-conscientious adherence to the facts. His information on Spicer is derived largely from Peter Shankland's book *The Phantom Flotilla*, which in turn relied heavily on the recollections of the expedition doctor, Dr Hanschell. The consequence is that what Hanschell did not know, Foden cannot know and will not guess; and when close to the book's end we are told "the doctor was as mystified by Spicer as ever," that means Foden is pretty well baffled as well. Ultimately, one feels, Foden is an author in search of a character. Spicer should have been it: flamboyant, self-obsessed, he is the stuff that heroes are made of. But Foden is too conscientious to treat Spicer with novelistic licence: he restricts himself to observations made about Spicer by people who knew him, and, inevitably, these observations are from the outside.

Of course, it is unfair to expect of Foden to invent material in what is after all a non-fiction book. But a different way of making the same point is to say that as non-fiction this also falls short: Foden's treatment of his subject, though not inward enough for a work of fiction, is too speculative and ruminative for non-fiction.

We are left with an interesting but ultimately unsatisfying rag-bag of ill-assorted facts and half-hearted speculations. Foden's other books have been works of faction, in which the facts are fused with novelistic invention. It is to be hoped that his next book will be a return to this genre.