

## Looking for the Lost Records of the Carrier Corps

Of all the uncommemorated personnel from World War 1, the carriers and porters of East Africa are by far the largest group. Various excuses are given, e.g. - no records were kept of the names of African Carriers or of their deaths; African tribal customs meant they were not properly buried; African natives did not care about memorials. Most of these excuses do not survive careful examination, importantly for our research, that there were no records.

The carriers for the British forces in East Africa were organized into a Military Labour Corps known as the 'Carrier Corps'. Its commander was Lt Col Oscar Watkins. His official post-war Report and private papers show how the men were registered and paid, despite constantly moving around; records were also kept of their injuries, diseases, hospitalisation and deaths.

In addition to Registration and Payroll documents, Watkins' staff created and published Death Lists for local authorities. The Carrier Corps staff took over the payment of many ancillary military support personnel in East Africa, including gun porters, dock workers, and builders. Many of the men were recruited in the British or German East Africa colonies (now Kenya and Tanzania) but men brought in from further afield, e.g. West Africa, were often re-registered with the Corps.

Transcripts of the Watkins Report and excerpts from its Appendices showing record-keeping procedures are posted on this website, with an example of a payroll register.

### Location of Carrier Corps Records during WW1 and after

The Carrier Corps headquarters was initially in Mombasa, moved south to Dar es Salaam in German East Africa (subsequently Tanganyika Protectorate) at the beginning of 1917 as the war moved south and the British took the city. It returned north to Nairobi at the end of the war. A letter from Watkins in 1919 to his wife mentions what an operation it will be to relocate everyone and everything back to Nairobi, where the records were to be stored after the war.

Watkins remained as a senior colonial officer in Kenya for the rest of his life. He and other Carrier Corps officers provided photos for the sculpted monuments (which is why they are so lifelike). In 1927 Lord Arthur Browne of the IWGC directed an inquiry about names of African casualties to the Colonial Office, receiving a rather offhand reply that none were known to them apart from Europeans. There is no hint that they even asked Watkins, who was still serving as a senior colonial officer, which suggests the Colonial Office were not very interested in finding any records of Africans, rather than they did not exist. From 1919 to 1934 Watkins pursued a case for unpaid Carrier back pay with the War Office, so it is very likely his Carrier Corps records were preserved at least until then as evidence for his claims.

## Finding Carrier Records

It is thus clear that records of the East African Carrier Corps did exist, including names of the dead, but were ignored or suppressed at the time, for whatever reason. What chance is there of finding Carrier Corps graveyards or records now? There are essentially three avenues of research:

- 1) Search to see if the main Carrier Corps registration records have survived.
- 2) Look for ancillary records, such as death lists and medical lists.
- 3) Look for lost Carrier graveyards near Carrier Depots/Hospitals.

### 1) Main Card Indexes in Archive Boxes

The basic registration into the Carrier Corps, recording name, date, and other information such as tribal affiliation and Chief, were made on cards and kept in archive boxes - 1,000 cards per box - as detailed in the Watkins Report, and Watkins' biography *Oscar from Africa*. These cards were almost certainly returned to Nairobi at the end of the war, and probably preserved until the backpay claims were closed. There would have been a substantial number of archive boxes.

At present none these main registrations cards are known to exist; the only original documents to hand are two copies of 1915 Payroll books found by Michèle Barrett in the Watkins Family Archive now at the Bodleian. The original registration records are assumed to be lost or destroyed. However, it is not clear anyone has ever looked for them.

Possible Locations:

#### In Africa?

-> **Left in Dar es Salaam** (*very unlikely*)

Lost or in the Tanzanian National Archives

-> **Returned to Nairobi** (*most probable*)

Unlikely destroyed immediately due to need for demobilisation records and resolution of claims for back pay.

-> **Remained In Nairobi** Probably the main card records existed for at least ten years after the war. After then they may have been destroyed, lost, left to moulder, put in the KNA (Kenyan National Archives), or as a long shot survive somewhere in a corner. (*possible*)

-> **KNA** Kenya National Archives was started after WW1. A fire in Nairobi ca 1930 destroyed some records but not all. As far as we know the MLC card records are not there but we have not been able to confirm this. (*possible; if anyone has knowledge of the KNA collections we would be very glad to hear from them*)

-> **Private storage** On private property of Watkins or other CC officers. (*possible but unlikely*)

-> **The Migrated Archives** If any Carrier Corps records survived in Nairobi or Dar es Salaam, they may have been considered sensitive and put into the Migrated Archives. So far we

have not found any trace of them in lists from Kenya, which mostly date from WW2 and after, but we have not fully followed this up. (*possible but unlikely*).

### In the UK?

The East Africa Carrier Corps was one of a number military Labour Corps, organised from Britain. Watkins' administration was apparently regarded as excellent and the policies set down in appendices to the 1919 Report were incorporated in MLC manuals. We may ask if Carrier Corps official records were sent to the MLC UK headquarters after the war.

-> **MLC HQ** It seems unlikely all the original cards in archive boxes were shipped back to the UK. A summary or copies may have been lodged; perhaps when Watkins returned to London in 1919 to report back. However before WW2 various Labour Corps historic records were sent to the Army Records Centre in Arnside Street, London, and wholly destroyed in the fire-bombing of 1940. (*Dead end. If they were there they no longer exist*).

-> **National Archives, via War Office** When Watkins returned to London late in 1919 and engaged in an argument about Carrier Corps back pay with the War Office, he must have had records with names, perhaps lodged somewhere in the UK. Although, note these would have been names of *survivors* who Watkins considered were owed money. The National Archives have certain papers relating to the Carriers pay claims. (*Doubtful they contain names of the dead, needs checking*).

### Other Avenues?

-> **Carrier Corps staff**. Papers from the Report, the Watkins Archive, and elsewhere mention a number of Carrier Corps officers names, may be worth looking to see if any have archives.

-> **Watkins Family**. Private correspondence is still in the hands of the Watkins family, which might shed light on exactly when and how Watkins and his staff returned to Kenya, and where the Carrier Corps staff were housed in Nairobi.

## **2) Ancillary Records (including Death Lists)**

In the Watkins Report of 1919 various lists of names are mentioned in the text or given in the Appendices. These include:

**Death Lists:** these were compiled from reports in the field. They were printed and distributed within the organisation and also sent to all District and Provincial Commissioners for areas the carriers came from. These are the holy grail for commemoration, but so far no death lists have been found.

-> **KNA Colonial Officers archives**. Watkins says death lists were circulated to various people including colonial officers. Some Colonial Officer's archives survive in the KNA, and may not have been thoroughly examined. It would be worth figuring out the names of Colonial Officers during WW1, and looking in such archives as exist in the KNA (or elsewhere) to see

if they contain any of the Carrier death lists. (*this is perhaps the most promising avenue for finding Death Lists*)

**Hospital Lists:** Watkins says Carrier Hospitals kept lists of admitted patients. There is a list in the Appendix of the Carrier Corps hospitals; these were field hospitals in the major areas of operations. See 3) for more about this.

-> **RAMC.** The Royal Army Medical Corps . Per the Pike Report of 1917 we know the Carrier Corps was included in the UK Army medical remit, because Pike inspected the major Carrier Hospitals when he came to East Africa, as well as the KAR (Kings African Rifles) and hospitals of other military forces in the area. Carrier hospitals were usually run by British Medical Officers, from the Royal Army Medical Corps. Perhaps medical records were archived with the RAMC (*worth checking*).

**Payroll Lists:** The MLC ran a significant payroll operation in East Africa and actually paid not only the Carriers but also other 'Followers', hospital orderlies, military police, and eventually the KAR too. By the end of WW1, Watkins claims he was running the largest military payroll organisation in East Africa.

-> **Army Payroll Unit.** Watkins says the Carrier Corps admin ended up paying most service people in East Africa. If this was under the auspices of Army Payroll practise it is possible that some records were returned to the UK HQ of the Army Payroll Unit. This unit still exists, and has a museum (in Dorset or Hampshire). There are perhaps military historians who could comment on whether records go back to WW1 and include colonial records. (*worth checking*).

### 3) Lost Graveyards near Carrier Field Hospitals

The Watkins Report says in para 119:

"As regards Hospitals a beginning had already been made by the establishment of a Carrier Hospital at Mombasa on the initiative of the Medical Officers of the Carrier Corps. This was followed, as each Depot opened, by a Carrier Hospital attached to it, till in process of time a hospital came to be recognized as necessary adjunct to a Depot."

These field hospitals would be groups of tents or palm-thatched *bandas* as were commonly used in East Africa. There are photos and descriptions in contemporary documents. Watkins lists 35 Carrier hospitals attached to Carrier Depots and the beds in each; the figures are in the Watkins Appendices doc; the largest at Dar es Salaam could at maximum house up to 2,000 men.

Watkins' tables in Appendix I and II, give total of 40,486 Carrier dead, mostly in 1917 - 18. After the hospitals list he gives 31,293 Carriers who died in Carrier hospitals. Simple arithmetic says over three-quarters of the deaths he lists occurred in hospital rather than in the field.

The rather gothic romantic notion that most carriers died on the march in remote regions and their bodies were superstitiously left in the ditches, may be true in a limited number of cases, but Watkins' account shows that three out of four died in hospital at Carrier bases, and were almost certainly buried in designated graveyards nearby.

By the time of WW1 East Africans by religion were roughly a third each Christian, Muslim and traditional African religions. Christians and Muslims bury their dead according to their own customs, and so do many African peoples, creating graves with recognisable memorials or grave markers.

The graveyards used by the Carrier Corps at Ilala and Pugu Rd in Dar es Salaam were not far from the Carrier Depot in the old Kariakor district. The same pattern is likely in other Carrier depots. This accounts for the Governor of Tanganyika (Sir Horace Byatt) saying "*the vast Carrier Corps Cemeteries at Dar es Salaam and elsewhere should be allowed to revert to nature as speedily as possible.*"

Because these graveyards were allowed to revert to nature, there will now be few or no preserved grave markers or memorials, but in most cases the burials are probably still there. In their lives and deaths during WW1 these Army support troops were known, named and recorded, it is only afterwards they were deliberately *sent missing*. There is a set of lost cemeteries in East Africa, a kind of ghostly shadow of the beautiful maintained cemeteries of the Western Front.

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