

British Journal for Military History

Volume 12, Issue 1, April 2026

Escape from Moyale: Corporal Daniel Mawendo

Melvin E Page

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 17 April 2026

Citation: Melvin E Page, 'Escape from Moyale: Corporal Daniel Mawendo', *British Journal for Military History*, 12.1 (2026), pp. 177-184.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Escape from Moyale: Corporal Daniel Mawendo

MELVIN E PAGE*

East Tennessee State University, USA

Email: PAGEM@mail.etsu.edu

ABSTRACT

This significant early Second World War operation by 1 Kings African Rifles in East Africa is illuminated in newly available oral history interviews. The account featured here – the most extensive of those recorded – is placed in its historical context incorporating evidence from other newly released oral histories describing the same heroic action. And it is contextualised by reference to previous considerations of its importance.

Introduction

Kenyan historian Meshack Owino opens his survey of Africa and the Second World War by noting that

in 1939, the colonial government in Kenya began military preparations for the outbreak of full-scale war. A colonial military unit was ... dispatched to the Kenya border with Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland.¹

After Italian success in overwhelming Ethiopian resistance, signalling Mussolini's imperial ambitions, six King's African Rifles (KAR) battalions were ultimately assigned to counter the numerically superior Italian forces on the British imperial frontier in East Africa. Owino does not mention the initial mobilisation involved primarily Nyasaland *askari* serving in the first battalion of the KAR. One of their number, Elton Nkhwazi, actually recalled his first combat experience was when 'the war started with

*Melvin E Page is Professor of History (Emeritus), East Tennessee State University, USA

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v12i1.1963](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v12i1.1963)

¹Meshack Owino, 'Africa and World War II', in Martin S. Shanguhya and Toyin Falola, eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 355. Okete J.E. Shiroya's earlier *Kenya and World War II*, (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1985), is much more a social history with minimal attention to specific theatres, deployments, or engagements.

the Italians at Moyale'.² That outstation was only a 'little mud-walled fort', one of three situated on the 'barren ... entirely artificial border'.³ Although Nkhwazi's company was later replaced by another at that isolated frontier outpost, in an ironic twist one of the two Second World War battlefield honours awarded his Nyasaland KAR battalion was for its actions in defence of Kenya Colony at Moyale in July 1940.

A quarter century later Malawi's then President, Kamuzu Banda – with a measure of his typical bluster – opened a second Malawi Army garrison at Mzuzu, naming it Moyale Barracks in honour of that 1 KAR milestone. Though the action at Moyale was not in defence of Nyasaland itself, the President was anxious to tap into what historian and KAR veteran George Shepperson recognized well before independence: that the tradition of 'the old soldier patriot has been a ... notable feature of Nyasaland' – and later Malawian – history.⁴ The KAR achievements at Moyale were certainly a significant part of that heritage and, in an effort to claim political advantage from them, Banda actually amplified the KAR accomplishment, claiming a great victory: '120 men holding at Moyale ... defeated the Italians there and the Italians ran away. 4,000 Italians, not from an African tribe but Europeans, and 120 of our boys!'⁵

Although the Italians ultimately proved no match for British forces in East Africa, the KAR achievement at Moyale was actually of a different sort. After being surrounded by Italian troops, a company-sized Nyasaland unit defending the fort on the Ethiopian border, rather than surrendering, actually managed an extraordinary escape.⁶ As KAR

²Elton Nkhwazi, interviewed 8 Jul 1991 at the Old Soldiers Memorial Home, Mzuzu by James Njoloma and the editor, in *Chiwaya War Echoes: Malawian Oral Histories of a Second World War and After* (Rickmansworth: Great War in Africa Association/TSL Publications, 2022), Interview 232, p. 259. Nkhwazi later served in Madagascar.

³Andrew Stewart, *The First Victory: The Second World War and the East Africa Campaign*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 9.

⁴George Shepperson, 'External Factors in the Development of African Nationalism, with Particular Reference to British Central Africa', *Phylon* 22, 3(1961): p. 212.

⁵H.K. Banda, 'Speech by the President Ngwazi Dr. Kamuzu Banda at the Opening of the Moyale Army Barracks at Mzuzu on December 5, 1967', (Blantyre: Malawi Information Department, 1967), p. 3. (Mimeo pamphlet.) Uncharacteristically, Banda actually reduced the number Italian attackers by one-half! See Stewart, *First Victory*, p. 56.

⁶The British official history, however, merely notes dryly that 'after three days of intermittent fighting the Brigade Commander judged that to hold Moyale any longer would absorb too much of his strength. The withdrawal was successfully achieved'. I.S.O. Playfair, et al., *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, v. 1, J.R.M. Butler, ed., *The Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941)*. History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series. (London: HMSO, 1959), pp. 180-181.

ESCAPE FROM MOYALE: CORPORAL DANIEL MAWENDO

regimental historian Lieutenant Colonel Hubert Moyses-Bartlett suggests, 'the evacuation of Moyale coincided with the grimmest period of the war' for Britain and offered a welcome glimpse of imperial military determination.⁷ 'With Italy in the war and France out of it', for the British 'the future was desperate'; even General Sir Archibald Wavell, senior general in the region, suggested the subsequent East African Campaign was 'an improvisation after the British fashion in war'. Nonetheless, the KAR 'had fought well at Moyale' and contributed mightily to the ultimate British victory in East Africa.⁸

The 1940 action at Moyale is only briefly mentioned in some accounts considering Africa and the Second World War. Another KAR regimental history offers even less on the askari role than does Moyses-Bartlett.⁹ And until recently the only published first-person account of the action was that of H.G. Graham-Jolly who, as a I KAR subaltern, commanded a mortar detachment at Moyale. He describes the nervousness which afflicted the entire garrison because it was under siege, though barely mentions the important role of the African *askari* in implementing the successful escape plan.¹⁰ Even a more recent military history of the East Africa Campaign praises the officers who led the escape while downplaying contributions of 'the African troops alongside them, barefoot, carrying their rifles and ammunition'.¹¹ Newly available evidence, however, may rescue these ordinary African soldiers from near anonymity.

Daniel Mawendo's *askari* oral history offers a counter-point to Graham-Jolly's recollections while confirming a number of the critical details. It is extracted from an interview recorded on 30 June 1991 with the assistance of the then Malawi Army historian, Lt. Col. James Njoloma. Corporal Mawendo spoke at the Old Soldiers' Memorial Home on the Cobbe Barracks campus in Zomba, Malawi. Mawendo's account of his Second World War military service includes this African version of the historic I KAR action at Moyale, by far the most complete of four Moyale survivor

⁷H. Moyses-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1956), p. 489. The KAR retreat from Moyale occurred just six weeks after the end of the Dunkirk evacuation, receiving 'considerable acclaim in the British press'; Stewart, *First Victory*, p. 56.

⁸Michael Glover, *An Improvised War: The Ethiopian Campaign, 1940-1941* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), p. 18, p. 28; Wavell quoted, p. 61.

⁹Malcolm Page, *A History of the King's African Rifles and East African Forces* (London: Leo Cooper, 1998), pp. 67-68; (the author is not related to the editor of this note.)

¹⁰H.G. Graham-Jolly, 'Moyale', *Society of Malawi Journal* 41, 2 (1988): pp. 10-15. Another account – relying heavily on the text of associated honorary award citations – is Harry Fecitt, 'The withdrawal from Moyale, 14th July [1940]', in 'Harry's Africa', <http://www.kaiserscross.com/188001/583622.html>. Accessed 28 Dec 2023.

¹¹Stewart, *First Victory*, p. 57

testimonies collected from 1 KAR veterans during research undertaken in 1991 but only made publicly available in 2023.¹²

Corporal Mawendo's Story

Corporal Daniel Mawendo spoke of his experience with little hesitation and minimal interruptions:

At the time I was joining the army I was staying at home, and I came to Zomba to live with my brother, Corporal Anderson Chikungwa. Staying with him, I discussed my willingness to join the army. ... My actual reason for joining the army was the zeal and determination of seeing what it is that my brother was looking for in the army. So, having learnt its weak and strong points, I then ... joined the army ... [as a] bugler ... [and] was assigned to be a member of the band. ... [I was] sent ... to Tabora ... and I stayed there.

Now reports got to us that there was need for a first class bugler in Somaliland. And they wanted someone no other than the one they had sent to Tabora, somebody no other than me! I had stayed for a month at Tabora as I was then only a bugler boy. In Somaliland it was a married bugler that they needed. So they said they were going to give me seven days off so that I had to go home and fetch a wife to accompany me to Somaliland.¹³ I got my wife, and off I went to British Somaliland.

Unfortunately there were submarines that were causing a lot of troubles in the under ocean. So they ordered us not to proceed because that could have affected our lives. So we went back to Tabora, ... [though] in this war the band did not perform any task but those of the signals section. ... However, we were told to proceed and meet the Italians; ... as a result we deployed¹⁴

¹²The complete interview is found in Page, *Chiyawa War Echoes*, Interview 217, pp. 193-203. This presentation of Mawendo's account was initially offered at the (U.S.) African Studies Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, December 2023. The editor is grateful for comments received at that time, as well as suggestions from two anonymous *BJMH* readers; all of that advice served to improve this version.

¹³Despite a somewhat casual approach taken by officers toward marriage in the ranks, 'the one rule strictly enforced in all KAR battalions was that ... every female living in the lines had to be endorsed by a District Officer, medical officer, and trusted African NCO', thus necessitating Mawendo's sudden leave; Timothy H. Parsons, *The African Rank and File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1954*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999), p. 151.

¹⁴The interview transcript provided by the Malawi Army has 'diverched' here and elsewhere, but 'deployed' is substituted in each case.

ESCAPE FROM MOYALE: CORPORAL DANIEL MAWENDO

at Moshi. Having done so, we were supposed not to proceed, but have a test of some sort. Our bosses requested us to go ahead. But since they were persuading us they just asked us to retrain and we did so for some time, enough for us to really get bored.¹⁵ ...

[When] you've trained quite enough the only thing remaining now is for you to open the actual fire [in combat]. We left that place and deployed at another place. We were received at that place and stayed there for a month or so. It seems the name of this place was Nanyuki, (Kenya). We then left Nanyuki and camped in the bush. There, a hot debate broke out as regards the war situation; as a result, we left for not Nahalewe, but this place called Moyale. We stayed here for almost a month.

At this time we were seeing our 'friends' just by, [that is] the Italians. We were seeing them in the mountains of Moyale. Then we complained because [our officers] were telling us not to shoot while we were seeing the enemies. We told them we were anxious to fight; we wanted to struggle with them. However, our bosses insisted on the point of not fighting. So, as [it was a] command, we had to obey. They told us to be cool until their power was reduced.

Now after this we had to show them our power. Then we were ordered to open fire and we did as commanded. The enemies started retreating at Moyale. Unfortunately they surrounded us.¹⁶ Then we questioned: How are we going to get out of here? However, we did not want to show our power in the eyes of our enemies. We had to do it silently, and we did it successfully and silently.

We had our Greek [actually of Afrikaner origins] officer [Lieutenant Sarel E.] Du Toit. He advised us to take it easy while we were inside the gate and our enemies were parked outside. We agreed that if we were to be commanded not to fight or open fire, we should not open fire. Now *bwana* Du Toit advised

¹⁵Moyse-Bartlett nonetheless suggests 'the long period of training ... proved extremely valuable' to KAR successes in the East Africa Campaign; *King's African Rifles*, p. 572.

¹⁶For details of the Italian dispositions see Marek Sobski, 'Fighting for Fort Moyale', in Marek Sobski, trans. Tomasz Basarabowicz, *East Africa 1940-1941 (land campaign): The Italian Army Defends the Empire in the Horn of Africa, Mussolini's War*, vol. 1 (Ziolana Góra: the author, 2020), pp. 110–116.

us to be on the alert to care for our gun and *bandalia*¹⁷ [and] to take off our shoes. We did as commanded. Now when the time [came], 11:30 PM, Captain [Lieutenant] Du Toit [sent us into action].

While we had our doubts, he skilfully cut open ... the wire [surrounding our camp] and made a door-like opening. The whole group of ours went through the wire. ... One could not imagine that it was war ... we had to fight on our arms; now that's an African battle! ... We went out and the [Italian] soldiers were still looking inside the wire not knowing that we had gone out. We deployed so that our enemies were not to know how prepared we were. We had to follow our enemies from the rear while their eyes were still facing the gate. ... Some Italians together with our planes died there. There were four dead Italians. The 'soldiers for the queen' [at that time King] had to pass by, [all] going to the same place and they did what they wanted. ... That's when we had gone out of the wire. ...

We fought with the Italians and the war was over. ... Now at that point everybody was dispatched home and that's where we were given our leave. ... Then we all came back and ... advanced for the second time. This time it was the battle against the Japanese. ... Now this was at Burma.¹⁸

Since I left this place [Malawi] a bit educated ... I was good at compass and map reading. ... That is why I had this chance of taking this intelligence work and leaving that of a bugler. ... It was the same job that later on led to my being injured. ... But after recovery I told them that I ... insisted on going on to the battlefield, but they refused ... [and then] after the war we were given a rest.

Contextualising Mawendo's account

In describing the escape from Moyale, Corporal Mawendo emphasises – as does Graham-Jolly – the broader significance of the action in which they were both engaged. His account also confirms the high level of *askari* morale at Moyale reported by the garrison commander, Captain J. David N.C. Henderson, in his after action report.¹⁹ But unlike either of the regimental histories cited above, both Mawendo and Graham-

¹⁷Ammunition belt; the Hindi word came into common military use in East Africa, as the first British colonial soldiers serving there in the nineteenth century were from India

¹⁸For a moving account of this subsequent campaign, prominently featuring Nyasaland and other East African *askari*, see Gerald Hanley, *Monsoon Victory*, (London: Collins, 1946).

¹⁹Moyse-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, p. 489.

ESCAPE FROM MOYALE: CORPORAL DANIEL MAWENDO

Jolly recognize the vital role played by Lieutenant Sarel E. Du Toit in the success of the daring escape plan, for which he, along with Captain Henderson, was subsequently awarded the Military Cross.²⁰ At last Corporal Mawendo's account gives an African voice to the heroic actions of the *askari* under their command.

However, neither his story, nor that of Graham-Jolly, nor the regimental history, mentions the fate of 'the badly wounded men [who] had to be left behind in the fort'.²¹ Gordon Gondwe – another of the intrepid *askari* defenders who escaped at Moyale – was especially focused on their fate in his account, knowing 'the doctor had given them an injection to sleep'.²² Italian sources indicate that having been 'left in the fort in a solid dugout' and awakening the next day, 'they, too, decided to break through the Italian lines. One of them was captured'.²³ That man – Lance Corporal Morton Chawinga – later recalled 'at Moyale we fought heavily; they died and also some of our colleagues died. I was injured at Moyale'. While thus unable to recount any details of his colleagues' escape, Chawinga only remembered 'after I got injured the enemies took me to Addis Ababa'.²⁴

Along with other prisoners he was released a few months later, but mentioned almost no details of his experiences as a prisoner of war after he, too – in a quite different fashion – escaped from Moyale.²⁵ However, due to his injuries Lance Corporal Chawinga did not re-join his battalion for further campaigning. Nonetheless he remained both proud of his service, and – along with Mawendo and their fellow Moyale *askari* survivors – remains a worthy part of the soldier/patriot tradition in Malawian history. Though part of an inauspicious battlefield retreat, their limited success despite

²⁰See Harry Fecitt, *The King's African Rifles and East African Forces in both World Wars*, vol. 2, 1939 – 1945, (Great Britain, King's African Rifles and East African Forces Association, 2021), p. 163. None of the *askari* were similarly honoured.

²¹Moyse-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, p. 489.

²²Gordon Gondwe, interviewed 8 Jul 1991 at the Old Soldiers' Memorial Home, Mzuzu by James Njoloma and the editor, in Page, *Chiwaya War Echoes*, Interview 234, p. 269. Gondwe later served in Madagascar and Burma.

²³Sobski, 'Fighting for Fort Moyale', p. 114.

²⁴Morton Chawinga, interviewed 8 Jul 1991 at the Old Soldiers' Memorial Home, Mzuzu by James Njoloma and the editor, in Page, *Chiwaya War Echoes*, Interview 231, p. 256.

²⁵Prominent among the British prisoners of war was Somali Camel Corps Captain Eric C.T. Wilson, VC, whom Chawinga describes as 'my English boss', suggesting Wilson, as senior British POW, assumed command of the British prisoner contingent; see Fecitt, *King's African Rifles*, v. 2, p. 60. Wilson, Chawinga, and their fellow prisoners of war were released in April 1941, shortly after liberation of the Ethiopian capital; Stewart, *First Victory*, p. 210.

being 'hopelessly mismatched' at Moyale, served as an opening statement in the East Africa Campaign which ultimately encouraged the British public by 'demonstrating the power available to an empire still trying to come to terms with the ... apparently preeminent power of the German blitzkrieg' which in summer 1941 seemed nearly invincible.²⁶ In meeting that global challenge, KAR *askari* – who 'proved their value in defence of their own homelands' in eastern Africa – were soon called upon 'to enter the wider sphere of operations' in defence of the British Empire.²⁷

²⁶Stewart, *First Victory*, pp. 56 and 233.

²⁷Moyse-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, p. 574.