

THE ONE-HUMPED CAMEL IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: IMPORTS TO AND USE IN SOUTH WEST AFRICA/NAMIBIA

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ABSTRACT

The one-humped camel has been introduced to many regions outside its natural area of distribution in North Africa, the Near and Middle East and South Asia. Camels were imported into four separate entities in southern Africa at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The German Colony of south West Africa was principal amongst these southern African countries and imported well in excess of 2000 camels from a variety of originating countries. These animals were used by the military in operations against the native people, in transporting goods for railway construction, for postal deliveries and by police patrols. Camels were replaced by mechanised transport by the police towards the end of the 1930s. In the early twentyfirst century there are probably less than 200 camels in Namibia that are mainly used for tourism.

Key words: Camel corps, introductions, police patrols, postal services, tourism

The one-humped camel was probably first domesticated in the Middle East. Over the years it spread "naturally" (that is on the hoof overland) east to Pakistan and India and west to northeast and north Africa. It is now most numerous in the Horn of Africa in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and northern Kenya (FAOSTAT, 2011) with smaller numbers in the countries along the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The camel has spread "unnaturally" (mainly by sea transport) to many countries outside its normal area of distribution including Australia, North and South America, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, southern and central Europe. It has also been resident in the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean off the west coast of Africa for several centuries. The Canary Islands has given service as a staging post for many of the subsequent colonisations by the camel because it acted as a natural quarantine station (Wilson, 1984; 1998). Amongst the countries which first imported camels from The Canaries was German South West Africa (now Namibia). This paper, which is one of a series that narrates the presence and role of the camel in southern Africa (Wilson, 2007; 2009; 2013) provides information on the numbers of camels imported into SWA/Namibia and their functions from the late nineteenth to the early twentyfirst centuries.

Imports

Germany joined the ranks of the colonial powers when it acquired South West Africa (SWA)

in 1884 (Grunow, 1961). Initially the defence force (Schutztruppe, literally "protection troops") comprised between six and ten men. In 1889 an additional eight regular soldiers and 13 reservists arrived from Germany under the command of Lieutenant Hugo von François. The British ship, the "Clan Gordon", on which they travelled made a stop at Tenerife in the Canary Islands. The troop was here joined by Captain Curt von François who had sailed from Cameroon and Togo and who was the brother of Hugo. It was Captain von François who first realised the possibilities for camels in the deserts of SWA. He gave names to the animals he bought – the number seems to be unknown – and then set sail for the German colony. In Herero tradition the year 1889 is known as The Year of the Camel (Grunow, 1961). According to one source (Zondach, personal notes 1991 quoted by Nolte, 2003) 10 camels arrived at Walvis Bay on 23 July 1891. It was to be another eight years before a further 20 camels were imported from the Sudan in 1899 (Grunow, 1961; Dierks, 2002). The next import in 1904 was a much more ambitious venture of 2000 camels with 1000 saddles and all accompanied by Arab camel drivers. This lot -- whose initial role was to help build the railway from Lüderitzbucht to Keetmanshoop -- was under the command of Karl Hagenbach (Hagenbach, 1909; Grunow, 1961). In respect of these camels, and in response to a request from the Acting Resident Magistrate of the Walvis Bay enclave on the performance of camels (Cape Town Archives

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Repository, Source NA 703, Reference B2855), Herr Secklenberg the Acting Governor of German SWA commented with some ambivalence but rather on the negative side that the experiments carried out with camels in former years had not allowed a conclusive judgement on their use. This was because the animals purchased from Cairo and the Canary Islands had not since their youth been accustomed to the long distances and want of water with which they had to contend in SWA. In addition those who had the care of camels were not in every case acquainted with the proper methods of caring for or working with them and training manuals had to be prepared in an attempt to overcome this problem (Bolsinger, 1926; Fig 1). Secklenberg went on to give some costings per animal as: purchase price in Cairo according to sex £12-14, freight £17-10, £2-10 for fodder and £12-10 for each attendant. The landed price had been increased, however, due to the animals having to be put in quarantine in Hamburg due to an outbreak of mange.

The next lot of camels to arrive in SWA was from the east coast of Africa and Port Said and were bought by Hagenbach's son. These were loaded on the Marie Menzel out of Hamburg but at this time in 1906 camels were very hard to come by. The British, for example lost 60 000-70 000 camels in the war against the Mahdi in the Sudan, the Italians had bought 30 000 for their Abyssinian (Ethiopian) railway project and then another 30 000 were taken for the war against the "Mad Mullah". In the first instance it was only possible to buy 76 camels at port Said but then, because Hagenbach (father) was much respected by the Somalis and the Arabs another 403 were bought and these were accompanied to SWA by 60 Arab camel handlers. Some of these were landed at Swakopmund, being swung over the side of the freighter into barges, as the larger ships could not get through the breakers: others were landed at Lüderitzbucht. Finally amongst these early importations 2000 camels from Somalia arrived off the coast of SWA after a sea journey of 192 days. The initial purpose of these camels was for them to be used transporting materials in the building of the railway from Lüderitzbucht on the coast in the extreme southwest of the country to Keetmanshoop some 300 miles to the east in the interior of the country.

A secret document of the Cape of Good Hope dated 19 June 1909 with reference number E./73/09 from F A Fortescue to "My Dear Fife" reported on a trip to Egypt by the Principal Veterinary Officer of the German South West African Forces

for the purpose of buying camels (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source PMO, Volume 240, Reference 123.09). Fortescue had learned from the Director of Intelligence, War Office Cairo that the German Colonial Office had approached the Sudan Government with a view to purchasing 2 male and 100 female camels. Permission for this having been granted Stabeveterinäre Bakette and Lieutenant Oberg of the Colonial Forces left Cairo on 23 April 1909 first for Berber Province and then in the neighbourhood of Suakin and Port Said (presumably mis-typed for Port Sudan). The intention was to embark camels at Port Sudan and ship them through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea to German South West Africa. Other information in the letter referred to large quantities of railway material at Angra Pequena (the Lüderitzbucht referred to earlier) awaiting transport to Kalkfontein which the railway line was expected to reach in June. Thence the contractors would extend the line to Ukumas only 18 miles from the border of Cape Province.

Use

The 1891 Walvis Bay imports were used by troops for the transportation of goods between Windhoek and Walvis Bay. Camels were originally imported for military purposes and for use by the Schutztruppe to control the indigenous population who, not surprisingly and not infrequently, took exception to this imposition. One of the earliest and perhaps most assiduous of the Schutztruppe officers was a Friedrich von Erckert. Born in 1869 von Erckert joined the Schutztruppe in 1899 and very quickly became notorious for his actions against the indigenous population. In 1908 in one of his most celebrated actions he led an expedition across the Kalahari (Fig 2) in order to arrest the rebellious native chief Simon Kopper: he finally arrived at the chief's kraal but was killed during the ensuing action (SANA, 1971). Not all the military's time was spent in harassing the natives, however, as even they were entitled to some relaxation. They took advantage of this to hold camel races for their own sport and for the delectation of the German administrative personnel. Camel racing is a popular sport in many parts of the world at the beginning of the 21st century but the use of camels in hurdle races (Fig 3) appears to be unique to South West Africa at the turn of the nineteen/twentieth centuries.

Following quickly on military applications was the use of camels in the postal service (Fig 4). The camel postal service operated through the Cape of

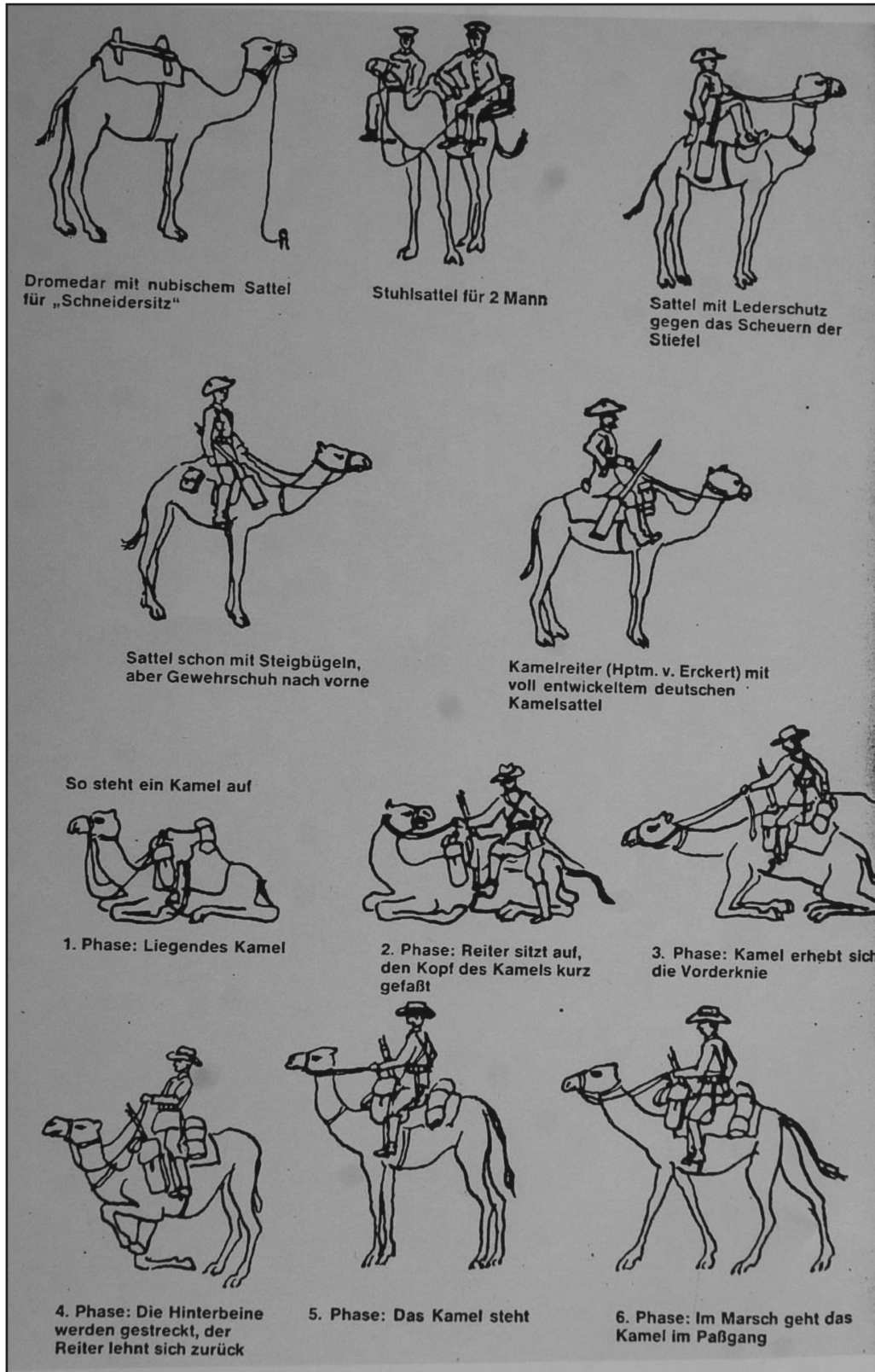


Fig 1. Training sheet for camel handlers (Bolsinger, 1926) [the captions read (left to right and top to bottom) Camel with Nubian (Sudanese) pack saddle; 2-man chair saddle; Saddle with leather flaps to protect boots from getting scuffed; Saddle with stirrups and front gun holster; Rider (Capt v.Erckert) with full German camel saddle; How to mount a camel Phase 1 - Camel lying down; Phase 2 - Rider sits on camel and turns head; Phase 3 - Camel begins to rise on front legs; Phase 4 - Camel lifts back legs and rider leans backwards; Phase 5 - Camel stands; Phase 6 - Camel walks off at a pace.

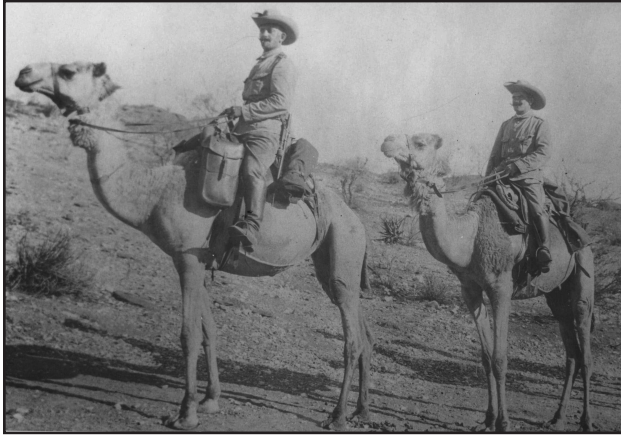


Fig 2. Two mounted Schutztruppe: the man on the left is possibly Friedrich von Erckert (Namibia Archives Photo 00098).

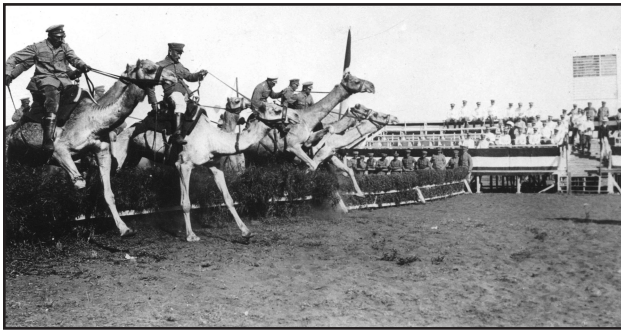


Fig 3. Schutztruppe taking part in a hurdle race in South West Africa, early 20th century (Namibia Archives Photo 00661).



Fig 4. South West Africa Centenary of Postal Services stamp (1988) commemorating camel post.

Good Hope, British Bechuanaland (Botswana) and South West Africa (Anon, 1893) and some individual letters actually traversed all three territories (Fig 5). The service was suspended by the Cape Government from 9 March to 18 May 1900 during the Anglo-Boer War to prevent the animals being captured by raiding Boer Commandos who were very active at the time in the Northern Cape. During this



Fig 5. A post card with cancellations from three countries.

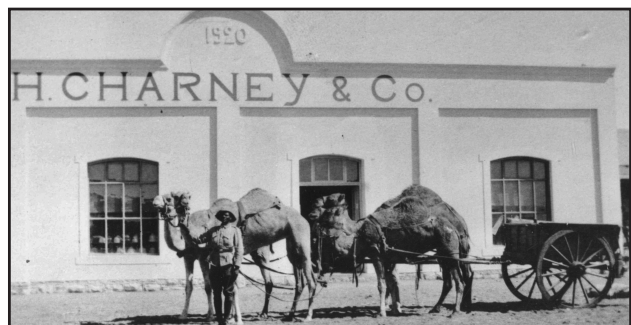


Fig 6. Camel cart in front of H Charney and Co premises in Lüderitzbucht, early 1930s (Namibia Archives Photo 00847).

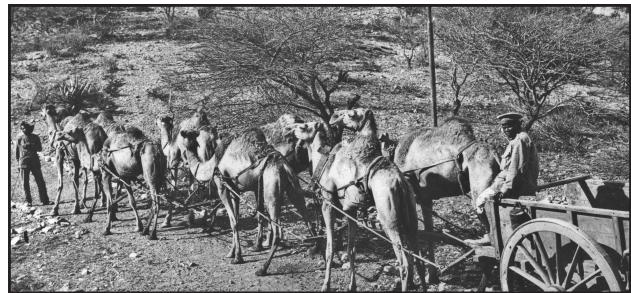


Fig 7. Camel cart requiring four span of two camels in the countryside (Namibia Archives Photo 01440).



Fig 8. A modern tourist camel safari (Cameltrails Namibia (Pty) Ltd).

period Cape camels were taken across the border to German South West Africa to make them less vulnerable to capture (Cape Postal History, 2005). As indicated in the introduction they were also largely instrumental in the construction of the Lüderitzbucht to Keetmanshoop railway line (Hagenbach, 1909; Grunow, 1961).

The German era in South West Africa came to an end in July 1915 when the forces there surrendered to the troops of the Union of South Africa under the command of General Botha. The Military Constabulary was replaced by the South West Africa Police in 1919 which had a camel depot at Kalkfontein-North with more than 400 camels (Dük, 1919; Hayes *et al*, 1998). At this time it seems that Kalkfontein-North was used as the breeding station to supply Schutztruppen Kompagnie and the police with camels for use as part of patrolling and anti-poaching units. Annual death rates here in the four years 1923-1926 varied from 5.53 per cent to 6.42 per cent in camels compared with 21.40-29.79 per cent in horses and 7.89-23.68 per cent in mules (Hayes *et al*, 1998).

Military and police use of camels continued – patrols lasting three weeks were not uncommon – until 1939 when the units became fully motorized with 5 cars, 13 vans and 2 lorries replacing 211 horses, 100 mules and 34 camels (Hayes *et al*, 1998). After the occupation by South Africa there had, however, been a move to put camels to more economically productive civilian work. Transporting commercial cargoes in waggons was one of these activities but camels may have been rather inefficient in the application of power as two span of two camels seem to have been needed for drawing a small 2-wheel cart in what must have been reasonable roadbeds in towns (Fig 6) and four span were used in the countryside (Fig 7).

By the beginning of the 21st century there were not many -- perhaps not more than 200 -- camels left in Botswana. A browse of Botswana websites on the Internet reveals their main function as a tourist safari attraction (Fig 8). Camels have, however, been reintroduced to "useful" work. Some half a dozen camels were being used in 2003 by the Namibian Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) to patrol areas where Black Rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis bicornis* still survived in the Kunene Region (former Damaraland and Kaokoland) in the arid northwest of Namibia (Loutit, 2003). This is a so-called Community Based Project with the camel programme being introduced due to the very rugged terrain in which rhino live. Older local herdsmen remember the days when German soldiers were using camels to patrol the mountains. Three camels

were originally donated to SRT by Skeleton Coast Safaris and another three untrained camels were then bought by the charity. The camel project employs 10 community based game guards who live with their animals and a training programme has been initiated with the aim of increasing the guards' abilities to handle rhino tours on camel back, by vehicle or on foot. The SRT (and the Community Camel Project) is also being supported with funds raised by Chester Zoo in northwest England (Scott, 2005).

Disease

One of the camels of the Community Camel Project died from an anthrax infection (Loutit, 2003). Bluetongue precipitating antibody was demonstrated in 81 per cent of camels (cattle 92 per cent, goats 83 per cent, sheep 36 per cent). Positive reactions for bluetongue were also recorded in wild game including impala (*Aepyceros melampus*), lechwe (*Kobus leche*), kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*), blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*), springbok (*Antidorcas marsupialis*) and tsessebe (*Damaliscus lunatus*). Demonstration of antibodies means only that animals have been exposed to the virus and not that they are necessarily clinically affected (sheep are the only species known to suffer from bluetongue) or act as further transmitters of the disease.

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