

## Stanley James Cole's War

Stanley James Cole was born in Stanley in Yorkshire on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1884 where his father was the master of the workhouse. His father was James Cole (1847 Coventry) and his mother Annie (1847) was from Ireland –Stanley was their only child.

By the time of the 1891 Census the family of three had moved to Kenninghall in Norfolk where Stanley's parents had again taken charge of a local workhouse. From here the family moved to Ely and Stanley attended the National School in Ely for a short period before being sent to Banham Grammar School in Norfolk. Stanley captained the school's football and cricket teams, and we know that whenever he was back in Deacons Lane, Ely, with his parents over the next few years he would turn out for Ely City Cricket Club as their wicket keeper and a "useful bat".



At seventeen Stanley Cole enlisted in the Irish Guards and was initially serving in Ireland in 1901. He became a career soldier, and was eventually seconded to the Colonial Forces, serving in Africa. In 1908 Stanley, was sent as a Quarter Master Sergeant to the West African Frontier Force (5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Nigeria Regiment). The Ely Standard records that he was on leave in Ely in 1913, where he was a popular member of the Constitutional Club. He then returned to Cameroon in West Africa, which was where he was still stationed when the War began ("the Kamerun Campaign". He was a friend of Bertram Gentry (one of the cathedral lay clerks and a musical leader in Ely) with whom he corresponded, and who was sent the four letters quoted below.

In 1914 the German colony of Kamerun was made up all of modern Cameroon as well as portions of Nigeria, Chad, Gabon, the Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. Kamerun was surrounded on all sides by Allied territory, including British-held Nigeria to the north-west, where Stanley was posted. At the outbreak of war in Europe the German colonial administration in Kamerun attempted to offer neutrality with Britain and France, however France invaded the German colony, followed swiftly by the British troops from Nigeria on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1914. Stanley was with Brigadier General Charles Macpherson Dobell in the operations up the Dibambu Creek and the attack on Douala, the colony's largest city and commercial centre. The city surrendered on 27<sup>th</sup> September and the occupation of the entire coast soon followed.

We first hear from Stanley with Brigadier General Edmund Howard Gorges' force at the Battle of Jabassi ( Yabassi) which was a pair of assaults on **7th and 14th October 1914** on German positions at Jabassi on the Wuri River. The action resulted in British victory and their occupation of the station, while the Germans were forced to withdraw back into the highlands.

### **9<sup>th</sup> October 1914 from Jabassi on the River Cameroon, West Africa**

*"Just a line virtually from the battlefield. Had a big scrap yesterday from early morning until night and am now waiting to recommence. It was an awful blazing day, and we were nearly all dead with*

heat, completely beat at night. For four days now I have had no clothes off, and I am beginning to feel awfully dirty; but can manage to get a shave. I had a fairly easy day yesterday compared to some, I came under fire very unexpectedly, and I can assure you I bolted for cover like a rabbit. Throughout the day bullets occasionally sang over my head, and I can assure you the sensation of being shot at is very unpleasant, especially at first, when one feels inclined to bolt. We lost a good few men too, and one poor fellow I saw was hit in the mouth, and took the roof of his mouth off and part of his nose off in coming out – not a pleasant sight. The sight of the first limp corpse being brought in, shot in three places, was not cheering, but one gets callous.”

“...we attacked Jabassi again on the 14<sup>th</sup> (October) and took the place towards evening. We had a Naval 6-inch gun mounted on a lighter, and I was just behind it, so am nearly deaf. At a place up the river called Nsake there were two prominent houses. Three shots from the 6 inch and puf! There were no houses left. It's a terrible weapon. We had few casualties this time, but on the way up we passed many bodies floating down river. It rained all the time so we were perpetually in a wet and clammy state. I found a hole through my puttee after the last show.....Am keeping splendidly fit and weary. I am beginning to see names of many I know in the European casualty lists.”

#### **A long letter to Bertram Gentry appeared in the Ely Standard of 13<sup>th</sup> February 1915:**

“After a brief stay in Duala again, we left there with the headquarters staff on 1<sup>st</sup> December for a place on the Northern Railway called Mujuka. There a column was being organised to try and capture this same blessed railway and all it contained up to the railhead, no small job. There we left on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, and started our task along the railway line. The word railway conjures up two different things to the mind of the dweller in Europe and the unfortunate in the land of “stinks and smells”. At home railway means beautiful permanent ways, luxurious trains, handsome buildings, and such like triumphs of modern comfort. Out here it means one single line placed on the ground through dense and dark forests, so that willy-nilly one is compelled by Hobson's choice to travel along the rocky and stony line all the way. A little reflection will bring to your mind what this means when a huge body of troops are advancing up a narrow railway line with such dense bush on either side. Open formations are impossible against an enemy who is up to all tricks of the game, authorised and otherwise. What you imagine would happen in these circumstances did happen. We never knew the moment when crack-crack-crack sounded from somewhere in front or on the flank, and the echoes in the bush were terrifying, especially when they let off some of those awful Elephant Guns they have armed the natives with, shooting 450 soft-nosed lead bullet, which, when it hits you, carries away enough flesh with it to make a hungry dog replete. They have a nasty habit of sticking a few snipers up the trees, who let fly at you as come within range. Above all the pop-pop-pop, pop-pop-pop of the machine guns in the bush is not to be recommended as a tonic for nerves. Then, as we got to a camping place and started to make defensive preparations for bivouacking, the gentlemen in front would start to fire at the camp. Generally, however, a couple of strong parties and a gun would clear them out, while the remainder went calmly on with munching such food as one might have, now and then a winged messenger moaning its way overhead.

“Another delightful method they devised of stopping our advance was to fill a truck with dynamite and stones and sent it careering down the line, with a time fuse fixed on, guaranteed by them to go off just when it was amongst us. However, thanks be to Allah, they had two tries, but each time the

*blessed thing went off with an awful bang before it reached near enough to do any damage. One of these little games they did at night, and about 3 a.m. one thought the earth had cracked.*

*“At one camp, thoroughly tired out with the intense heat of the day and the long and tough going, I was sleeping ever so soundly, when at 1 a.m. there was such a hullabaloo among our carriers and crack-crack-crack started. That is one of the most fearful nerve-racking things going; a sudden attack in the dark. However, it was only a small reconnoitring patrol, and it was our own picquet paying them the delicate attention of welcome during war. So as Pepys said, “To bed again”. I remember the salient thought in my mind at the time, as I hurriedly rose, was not so much one of anxiety, although one did not know what was coming next, but a speechless anger at the Germans far disturbing the rest of a decent citizen.*

*“Well, so we went on until we got to a place where there was a big bridge spanning a fast moving river. Needless to say, they had utterly destroyed the bridge, and they had a very clever ambush for us in which our advance troops got hung up. One poor engineer officer, who had got down a steep sided cutting to look at the remains of the bridge, was caught between the fire of two Maxims, and the inevitable result followed. I saw the poor chap’s body next day.... Another officer got hit in the mouth and lost all his lower teeth, and the side of his face made like a shambles, but he is doing all right. One of the native soldiers was hit three times by a big elephant bullet. The first took half his hand away, and the second tore a piece out of his leg, and the third hit him in the leg too. He was not a pretty sight either, but is also doing well, minus some large chunks of anatomy. We suffered a few casualties that day, and I believe some Germans solved the great mystery too. These things make one think how unreasonable war is. Personally, I have not one atom of animosity against any single German. I have met some good ones out here, and yet I would do my level best to send them out of this world. However, on earth, country comes first. Well, a footbridge was soon thrown across by some clever work by the Engineers and Pioneers, and we went on next day. On the 10<sup>th</sup> we got within a short distance of railhead here, and commenced an advance on Ukongsamba. We were opposed somewhat strenuously until about 10.30 a.m., when a German officer came out with a white flag and surrendered the towns of Ukongsamba and Bare to us, asking our Commander to protect the lives of many women and children and some men left in the town. The German troops had withdrawn. We marched along to occupy the place, and I am blessed it, even after they had surrendered, a party started taking pot shots at our column as it moved along the road. That was not playing the game, and I think it was the act of an irresponsible individual rather than with the knowledge of the German Commander, who has the reputation of being somewhat of a gentleman, as they are made. He is named von Engelbrechten, is an officer in the Prussian Guards, and we have his wife as a prisoner of war on the SS Appam. Well, we marched into the town, and I was told to take down a German flag at the hospital building. There were several German men and a lady there. The lady, a lively little thing, at once offered me a whisky and soda, but as the sun was high I declined. Then she offered tea, but I could not manage that. We have got quite a lot of German ladies here, and I cannot help thinking what an unconscious compliment they paid to the British when I saw some of these ladies go about our camp at dusk without an escort or fear of molestation. Our old country does play the game, and it is the inherent spirit of sport that, in my estimation, gives us that feeling. The enemy are still round us somewhere, and in a day or two I expect we shall get on the go again and attack their next stronghold, where they may make us sit up for a bit. The prospects of spending Christmas in the firing line are great, so when you are dodging mince pies I may be not exactly dodging, but wondering if they are always going to pass overhead, or whether at*

*any moment I may not make my exit, or qualify for a long lie in bed. I hope to come through all right, and have the bitterness of seeing Kitchener's Army getting the credit for saving Britain when those who stemmed the Prussian tide are lying in their graves in Belgium, that is the Regular Army. We are absolutely feeling tired with all the gush about the London Scottish in the papers. I wonder how many bayonet charges have been pushed home by Regular troops before they saw the war, and I also wonder if it will not be another case, when the war is done, (as in all other wars)"God is forgotten and the soldier slighted".*

*"There is one thing absolutely certain. If you want a successful military career don't on any account join His Majesty's Regular Forces, but be an auxiliary, of some sort. As a volunteer unit, I have always admired the London Scottish, and admire them as fighting troops, but it is the Press I cavil at, which, when giving honour rightly deserved to a Territorial unit, quite forgets that the first people to fix the bayonets and stand firm were the poor, despised, old Regulars.*

*"This place is situated on the side of a mountain, and we are very high up in the world just now. The whole country is mountainous and striking from a scenic point of view, though on these occasions it is more advisable to dig one's nose in the ground than wander round viewing scenery. Being so high up it is intensely cold at night and very hot by day, and the inevitable result is that I have a most saleable cold in my head, and am sniffing every moment like a duchess forced to pass Billingsgate.*

*"If alive I will try and write you again from the next stronghold. A few things must come and go before then, and though the way is fairly short the time may be long, and some of it may spell eternity.*

*"When you read of deeds of daring done in Germany don't forget we out here are facing danger from bullets, fever, and all kinds of disease and sickness, and doing what in our line of life is our duty, without the adjunct of the limelight.*

*"I shall be real glad to get a meal of some sort again. I nursed a loaf of bread through rain and sun for 14 days and though its colour was a delicate shade of blue and somewhat spotted, yet it was luxury. You see we have no travelling kitchens or things like that. Two small boxes carry all we live on for a month in the way of oddments and tinned stuff, in addition to pots and pans, etc. One thing about the Germans I do like is their sausages. I had one coming up and for three days lived on that and my precious old loaf of blue bread, but my tobacco held out and that is the greatest comfort of all. Alas, there are visions of an approaching end of that now.*

*"P.S. I forgot to tell you that in addition to much rolling stock, we captured two monoplanes, complete and new."*

The operation that Stanley described resulted in the taking of the Northern Railway. He was engaged in the occupation of Dschang and the actions at Harmann's and Stoebel's Farms.

On 12<sup>th</sup> May 1915 Stanley was gazetted Second Lieutenant with the Wiltshire Regiment, although he remained seconded to the West Africa Frontier Force. In August 1915 it was reported that Stanley had been promoted to Lieutenant and attached as an Adjutant to the General Staff of the Officer Commanding the British Contingent of the Allied Forces. **He wrote from Nkongsamba in Cameroon** (this was also the terminus of the railway line built by the Germans in 1911).

*“Since the eventual scrape on March 4<sup>th</sup> last, when my staff officer was killed beside me, much to my sorrow, nothing of great import has happened in my vicinity. The rains are full on and it rains without ceasing, day after day, night after night. That, of course, renders any operation on a large scale out of the question, the country being practically impassable and the rivers flooded, so ourselves and the people in front are sitting down behind outpost defences, keeping a wary eye on the other coxes. Patrols occasionally meet and exchange greetings by express services - Lee Enfield’s firm – but altogether life at the moment is without startling incident, and even one’s walking exercise is necessarily limited, one reason being a pretty little game called “sniping” which you may join in if you walk too far. So one eats, sleeps, attends to military matters, and gazes reflectively into the mist or stares at the pools of silence all around. In other parts of the country events have marched. Garna was a decent haul and a welcome success, for the place was strongly defended, and had some big guns, well handled too.*

*“So altogether there is not much to put in a letter. Isn’t Butler’s success splendid. One feels great admiration for such a fine man. We can’t do that sort of thing here, as the terrain is entirely different, and favours guerrilla warfare to any extent. One company in the dense bush and thick elephant grass can worry an army corps indefinitely. Scouting is difficult, mostly impossible, so the patrols have to stick a few men ahead to reduce the bag if an ambush is laid and ...trust to potshots. It isn’t exactly a nerve tonic.*

*(Stanley then commented on some stories from the Ely Standard Bertram had sent him, and bemoaned his general lack of reading matter. He then goes on to talk about food.)*

*“I do fairly well. A variety (the variety lies in the cooking I might say) of tinned flesh, a comprehensive term for a mystery, native sweet potatoes, at night stimulated by a tot of whiskey. I managed to get some luxuries from Duala, so, except for bread, potatoes, vegetables, and one or two other necessities (so called) I am quite all right. The latest brand of whiskey obtainable from Duala is such that were one’s “boy” to pour whiskey into the lamp and kerosene into the glass, one might look at him somewhat dubiously (after a while) but you couldn’t make a direct accusation, as there wouldn’t be sufficient evidence in the taste to obtain conviction.*

*“I must shut up. My “boy” has just come in with an anxious, if off-handed, enquiry as whether he shall “pahss schop” which being interpreted means “shall I serve dinner?” I have made a rude reply to this, which he takes as acquiescing, so I must give in, as one is the servant of one’s servant in these matters.”*

*Almost as an afterthought, Stanley then told Bertie: “..the high authorities have been kind enough to honour me with a commission, and now I am a humble lieutenant hoping to do my job efficiently.”*

The Ely Express of **31<sup>st</sup> December 1915** carried a Christmas message from Stanley, then at Jounde Road in Cameroon, to his friends in the Ely Constitutional Club: *“To wish you all a happy and hopeful Christmas, looking forward to a victorious and peaceful new year, and a healthy glow of pride in reflecting that, in her great hour, every one of you did what you could, as well as you could, for our old country.”*

**By mid-February 1916**, the German commander in Kamerun came to the conclusion that his campaign was lost, and ordered all remaining German units and civilians to escape to the neutral

Spanish colony of Rio Muni (Spanish Guinea). Earlier in February 1916 Britain and France had already agreed to divide Kamerun, with Britain obtaining approximately the one fifth of the colony situated on the Nigerian border. France gained Duala and most of the central plateau, which consisted of the majority of the former German territory.

With the conflict apparently over, Stanley returned to England on furlough and married Louisa Sophia Frederike Dehner (born 1893) at Hebden Bridge Church in Yorkshire in **July 1916**. Louisa's father, William Dehner, was a Councillor for Hebden Bridge, a local mill owner, a butcher, Jewish, and, since 1903, was also a naturalised British subject, having immigrated from Belsenberg in Germany. The family had been subjected to some of the anti-German hysteria that swept the country at the beginning of the War, but William had publicly proclaimed his loyalty to the British Crown and Sophia's brother Frederick was fighting with the Machine Gun Corps. The newspaper reported that after his wedding Stanley would be "returning to Africa next month for further service with the West African Expeditionary Force" – Louisa is not mentioned, perhaps it was simply assumed she would wait at home!

Back in Nigeria, on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1917, Stanley was made Temporary Captain, and remained in his role as Adjutant. (The "Temporary" indicates his promotion was seen as being only for the duration of the War.)

Stanley remained in Africa after the War. Records from 1925 show that he had been awarded the OBE and was a Brevet Major, serving as a staff officer to the Inspector General, but on retirement pay. On 17<sup>th</sup> September 1931, still in the same post, he was transferred across to the King's African Rifles. In 1925 Stanley and Louisa's daughter Sylvia was born in Cambridge.

Records from 12<sup>th</sup> October 1938 show Stanley as an Adjutant and Quarter Master General, but with the rank of Local Lieutenant Colonel. He had also been made a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George – an award specifically for distinguished service in overseas territories.

With the Second World War Lieutenant Colonel Stanley Cole served in the Colonial Office of the Air Ministry and appears to have lived in the Strand Palace Hotel when in London. He was in charge of Prisoners of War and civilian internees. It was Stanley's idea to attempt to save Jews from the Germans by claiming they were Palestinian subjects (the country was then under the British Mandate) and exchanging them for German internees. Although he knew he had not got sufficient German captives to "trade" he hoped that by this ruse he would at least save those Jews on his lists from the gas chambers. The Jewish Agency representatives in London, Istanbul, Jerusalem and Geneva supplied Stanley with as long lists as they could to further this plan.

Stanley returned to Cambridge where he lived at 276 Milton Road with his wife Louisa. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1949 Stanley James Cole died in St George's Church in Cambridge; he was aged 64. He left his widow Louisa £8874 10s 2d. Louisa lived until 1985.