

The Hut Tax War in Sierra Leone 1898-99

In 1897 Captain Harold Galway Warren of the Limerick City Militia was seconded to serve in the then British colony of Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa. His appointment as Assistant Inspector of the Sierra Leone Frontier Police and Justice of the Peace was recorded in the *Sierra Leone Gazette* of 24th August. (Fig. 1). Warren arrived in the colony just as the Hut Tax War was about to break out. Sierra Leone had been declared a British protectorate in 1896 and the Hut Tax was imposed on January 1st 1898 to pay for the running of the colony. Local chiefs resentful of their loss of sovereignty and angry at a tax that was often greater than the value of the huts being taxed rebelled and a brutal war followed in which Warren and his Frontier Police played a prominent part.

During the course of the campaign Warren wrote three, at times very graphic, letters to his superior officer in the Limerick City Militia, Major, later Colonel, Bentley of Trough Cottage, County Clare, describing events in the war. These letters are preserved in Limerick City Museum.

Warren who was born in 1874 and rose in 1909 to the rank of Honorary Colonel in the Limerick City Royal Field Artillery that had replaced the Militia. Despite the impression in his letters that he disliked service in Sierra Leone much of his career was served there, rising to First Class District Commissioner in 1911. Warren never married and died in Sierra Leone in 1919 of Blackwater fever. In 2003 Warren's medal for the war, the East and West Africa Medal with clasp for Sierra Leone, was sold at auction by Dix Noonan Webb.

[1] Kwilu, (now Kwalu)

February 8th 98

My dear Major,

Many thanks for your letter which I received a few days ago. You may expect to receive a few recruits from this place shortly.

I have been keeping pretty fit only had two goes of fever, but the life is killing, and I hardly think this place will see me again that is to say if I can get another billet. I shall try & get some job in a Native battery, as the work would be more suitable to me. I never was much of a man at Infantry work.

I have my hands pretty full at present, as, I have had an extra 70 men up here as we expected to have a bad row on account of the Hut Tax which I think I told you was in force here for the first time, so far we are doing pretty well but not much money coming in for the tax, chiefly goods such as rice, kolar nuts, cattle and other produce.

by *Brian Hodkinson*

The tax for this district alone is £5,000, so if we get 1/2 that we shall do pretty well. Money is badly wanted out here as the Colony is very hard up but so long as I

receive my hard earned 350£ a year I do not mind very much.

We expect to get 3 new fellows out here soon as there are 3 vacancies here at present. I hope to be made Inspector very soon which will give me another 50£ a year.

The life is most exciting as you never know what each day will bring one day I

No.



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OFFICIAL GAZETTE.

His Excellency the Administrator
has been pleased by Commission
issued on the 20th instant under
the Public Seal of the Colony of
Sierra Leone to appoint
Capt. HAROLD GALWAY WARREN,
Assistant Inspector,
Sierra Leone Frontier Police,
to be a Justice of the Peace of
the said Colony.

By His Excellency's Command,

F. A. MILLER,
For Colonial Secretary.

Colonial Secretariat,
Freetown, Sierra Leone,
24th August, 1897.

Printed by G. T. PARKER, Government Printer. 150,— M.P. 3514
1897.

Fig. 1 Announcement of Warren's appointment (Limerick Museum)



Officers at Pangumah during the siege, Warren at left

(The Graphic, April 8, 1899)

am off after warboys the next down with a bad go of fever and the day after that reading the burial service over some poor Frontier who has to be buried in his blanket I had the lot only a couple of days ago it is rather a melancholy affair but you get hardened to these sort of things up in the bush.

I have to send down to Freetown every month for the pay of the men. A month ago I send an escort of 1 Corpl. and 3 men, they are generally away for 3 weeks as it takes a long time to get to Freetown & back, the escort in question was bringing 120£ back. When they got to within a couple of days march of this place I had a flying report that the escort had been robbed. I immediately set off with my sub inspector and 10 men and arrived at the place the same day after placing all the escort under arrest also another frontier who had taken my returns (monthly) down to Freetown for the

previous month. My suspicion was very strong against this man as it happened that the escort was robbed in the town which the man originally came from, and by the statements of the the (sic) escort I convicted the man of stealing the money which he denied but eventually I found out that he had stolen the money and had handed it to his brother for safekeeping and who had buried it in a mangro swamp a mile from the town. The man was sentenced to 3 years Impt. H.L (imprisonment with hard labour) by the district Commissioner here with the option of appealing to a higher court, which appeal he made & was only waiting until the following day to be sent down under escort to Freetown gaol and while waiting he managed to escape the alarm was at once given and I sent out patrols in different directions in search for him but 4 days passed without any success. I again sent out another patrol with the

instructions that if they saw him they were to shoot him if unable to catch him this lot was more successful and brought him back the next day being shot just below the knee, he is now in hospital. So although the life is not as it might be we have always something to do. I have up to the present had no proper rows here but several little palavers which might have ended in something if they had not been stopped in time.

I am very much afraid I shall not be able to put in a training with the old Limericks next year. My leave will commence on the 19th of Nov & will last for 6 months so in that case I should be due back here before training begins.

What do you think this will do as regards the Militia, they certainly ought to do something. Have we got any new fellows besides Heather & Co?

So poor old Wright had to go I must write to the poor old man, he will indeed be missed by you all. So you are to use the mess this year. Can you give me the contract for rice I could supply you all at about 4d a bushel. Have you heard from Nicholson lately? I have only had one letter since he went out. I am afraid he is not getting on very well. I shall be sending a draft home to England very soon & I will send the balance of my mess bill for 1897. Please remember me to the Colonel when you see him and also Miss Maunsell & any other of the old Limericks. Write me a long letter soon with all the news.

With kindest regards to all your people
Believe me Yours
V. Sincerely
6x6x9

[2] Kwilu
March 28th 1898

Dear Major,

As I have not opened an account in England yet I have written to my people to pay the balance on my mess bill which I hope you will receive alright.

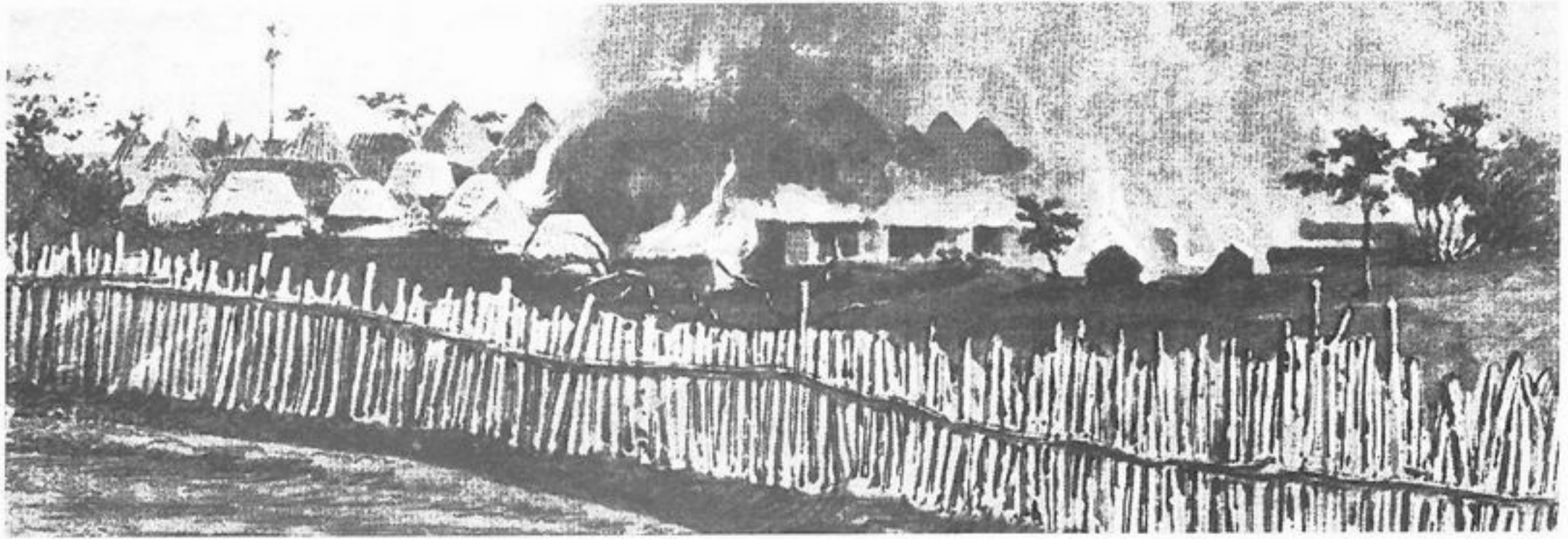
We have had great rows here with the Hut Tax. The West Indian Regiment from Freetown had to be sent up here but they turned out practically useless as they could not stand the marching with the heavy kit. Our fellows behaved A1 & shot splendidly.

I had one days Black game shooting to myself & accounted for a very good bag



The barracks at Pangumah before the siege

(The Graphic, April 8, 1899)



Pangumah in flames, burnt by the besieged

(The Graphic, April 8, 1899)

including 4 women which we shot when firing into the bush. They don't fight in a sporting way; as a general rule they lie in ambush & pot at you as you pass. We have had several white officers wounded but none killed.

I am expecting to be sent with Fairclough who is District Commissioner here, he belongs to the Dublin Fusiliers, up to the French boundary as it is suspected that the French are supplying arms to the natives. We have got 4 new officers to the force, 3 being Irish.

How are the Limericks doing in the way of recruits this year. What is the new adjutant like? Let me know the date of our training this year & the place. I have now completed 7 1/2 months being my 1/2 time here.

Any news of old Nick I have only had one letter from him.

I hope this letter will reach you but the road from here to Freetown is blocked with warboys.

Yours as ever
Harold G Warren

[3] Pangumah
July 5th.98

My Dear Colonel

The very best of congratulations to you on your promotion, and I hope before many more trainings are over I shall have the honour of serving under you.

You will see by the above address I have left Kwilu my former station, and am still going strong and feel very fit although I have gone through a lot of hard work since my last letter to you.

I had only arrived back to Kwilu a day after 3 weeks bush fighting, when the Governor ordered me up here with 30 men as this part was unsettled. I am now right in the middle of the bush several hundred miles from Freetown and practically cut off from every place.

No doubt you have read in the papers of the rows in this part of the world which, joking apart have been very serious. Every white person both man and woman have been massacred and all the black traders who could speak English have been put to death by these "harmless natives" as the people call them at home.

Two days after I left Kwilu they attack-

ed it burnt part of the barracks but were repulsed but not without great loss on each side.

A days march from Kwilu I stayed with two missionary people (Americans) I heard afterwards that both of them were massacred next day and tortured in a most brutal manner.

They were marched into the town naked, the woman was then hacked to pieces in front of her husband and the husband was then killed in slow time, first the hand was cut off, then another. It was a great wonder they did not have a go at me but as I had 30 splendid men with me I expect they thought better of it. I thought I would be returning in a few days and told all the chiefs so, and they pretended to be very pleased saying that I should have rice and sheep etc for my men. I heard afterwards that had prepared lovely ambush for me; all my carriers have been killed returning to Kwilu.

After been here for a week and knowing that I would not return they came and attacked the barracks we put them down to over 8,000 they were coming in like ants and only for our strong stockade and shelter trench we should have all been wiped out for a certainty, as it was they kept at it for 2 days and 2 nights keeping up a terrible fire on us and building stockades quite near our own, at the end of the 2nd day things got too hot, and as our ammunition was running out we decided to charge the devils with fix bayonets, which we did, with great effect, killing over 400 of them, but we lost 50 of our men out of 200 which was a rather high percentage. After the licking we gave them they never came very near us again but whenever we sent out a party for food etc they always got a pretty warm time of it as they always ambushed us.

After been kept here for over 2 months the Governor sent us a relief party to see if we were all cut up. The relief arrived a few days ago consisting of West India Regiment, Frontiers and 1000 warboys (friendly) having found out we were alright they returned leaving us 30 more Frontiers. I expect we shall have to hold this place until after the rains when we shall have a big expedition out from Home and then I hope we will show these brutes something.

When the attack was on here I mounted 2 guns RML which was seized in the town here. I loaded them with stones and did great work with them up to 100 yards. During the rows we have lost a lot of Frontiers but no Frontier officers killed several badly wounded.

The West Indian Regiment have lost 12 officers (2 of which died of fever). Every day we get a few shots fired into the barracks but things are settling down which I am not sorry for. A little of this sort of work goes a long way; for 2 months I never took off my kit sitting in the trench all night in the pouring rain.

The day they attacked us they kept shouting out that they would eat their rice out of the white man's skull that night and brought ropes to bring the women away as slaves

I suppose you have had a good training I should have liked very much to have been out with you. I might be able to hit off the next training with any luck. My leave will be due on the 15th Nov that is to say if I am not kept over my time. With regard to the pepper I will be only too pleased to bring you a few lbs and anything else you may want. I am afraid it is impossible for me to get any stamps for Mrs Jn. as you see I am [never?] in Freetown. I will drop her a line to tell her so.

Is old Nick home tell him to write to me.

I had a very nice dispatch from Chamberlain thanking me for my service out here.

Keep your eye open and have a look at the Graphic and you will see several photos taken of the [crew?].

I am burying the dead in one photo.

With kind regards to you and yours

Yours very sincerely Harold Warren

(Post Script)

July 10th

Had a big night attack at 1.15 am only 1 Frontier killed 2 badly wounded.

What I would have given for No 4 LCA to put some shrapnel in them.

SOURCES:

[1] LM2012.0604

[2] LM2012.0605

[3] LM2012.0606