

Arthur John Byng Wavell 1882 - 1916

Arthur John Byng Wavell, was born on 27 May 1882 at 6 Neville Street, South Kensington, London, the first of four children (three sons and a daughter) of Colonel Arthur Henry Wavell (1836–1891) of the Welsh regiment, and Beatrice Matilda (1848–1918), daughter of the Revd John Byng, a collateral descendant of the unfortunate admiral of that name. Field Marshal Lord Wavell, greatest of all the Wavells, was a cousin.



Arthur John Byng Wavell in Damascus

Arthur Wavell spent three years at Winchester College before going to the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. He was commissioned in the Welsh regiment in 1900, and saw service in the South African War before he was nineteen, being awarded the queen's medal, with three clasps. Afterwards he was specially employed by the War Office to travel and make maps and report on practically the whole of Swaziland, Tongaland, and northern Zululand. In 1905 he was again employed by the War Office to cross the Kalahari Desert and report on the protectorate of Bechuanaland.

In 1906 Wavell resigned his commission and went to British East Africa to indulge in big-game shooting. Later, with others, he acquired a vast tract of land in Nyali; in due course this was registered as Nyali Sisal Estate Ltd and, in 1911, as the Nyali Plantation Ltd.

In Mombasa he learned Arabic and Swahili, and interested himself in Islam. From this study grew a desire to explore Arabia, and in 1908 he proceeded to realize his ambition by setting out from London disguised as a Zanzibari with a Turkish passport, using the name Ali bin Muhammad, in the company of a Swahili from Mombasa called Masaudi; at Marseilles Wavell invited 'Abd al-Wahid, an Arab from Aleppo who had been long resident in Berlin, to join them. The trio reached Damascus and ultimately Medina and Mecca without serious difficulty.

Wavell then returned to his sisal estate at Nyali, and was still there at the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. Although he had already joined the special reserve of his old regiment, the Welsh, he was retained in British East Africa because he was regarded as necessary to its defense. At this time there were no coastal forces in Mombasa, but two so-called reserve companies were soon formed, one from former askaris of the King's African rifles, and one from Hadhramis and other Arabic speakers. This latter unit, created and inspired by Wavell's unique personality, was widely known as 'Wavell's own'.

Promoted major and put in charge of the South Coast, near the border with German East Africa, he proved conspicuously successful in handling the men under his command. He built a fortified observation post at Mwele in the Shimba Hills.

On 8 January 1916, he marched out against a German column but was caught in a well prepared German ambush. In spite of wounds he kept on firing, dying on 9 January; he was buried with Lieutenant John Lachlan Mackintosh at **Mkongani** before being reburied at Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire, England after the war.

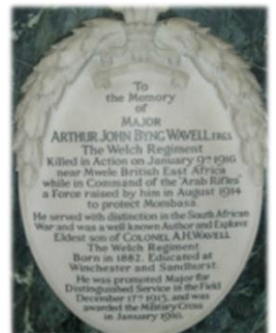
A little to the east were buried three NCOs and some thirty askaris of the Arab rifles who died in the same operation. There can be little doubt that for a brief period, from August 1914 to January 1916, it was principally on account of Wavell and Wavell's Arabs that Mombasa, with its port and railway terminus, remained unoccupied by German forces.



Wavells Memorial at Mkongani



Memorial to the NCO's who died during the fight at Mkongani



Wavell's memorial stone at Winchester Cathedral in England