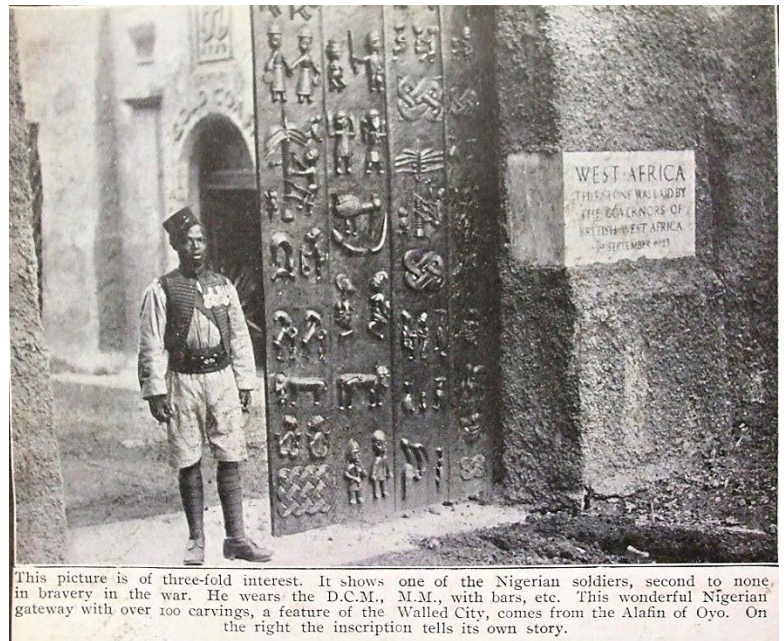


## Belo Akure – a Nigerian First World War hero at Wembley.

Much of what we learn about the First World War is centred on British soldiers, and their hardships and sacrifices on the Western Front. But there were other battlefields, and a wide range of people involved in this global struggle for supremacy between the major European nations. Britain was supported in the war by soldiers from across its Empire, and when the British Empire Exhibition was held at Wembley in 1924, some of those soldiers came here to represent their countries. This picture was one of many which appeared in newspapers to publicise the exhibition that year, and although it does not give the name of the Nigerian soldier shown, Belo Akure, this article will tell his story.

[Source: Brent Archives - Cutting from an album donated to Wembley History Society in 1964 by Mr D.M.H. Beck]



The piecemeal colonisation of Africa, which had been taking place for centuries, reached its height in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Berlin conference in 1885 was supposed to divide up the continent between the main European countries, but there were still disputes about where the borders between them should be drawn. Britain's Royal Niger Company had its own small private army, and in 1897 it recruited native soldiers to help protect the frontier of its lands from French intrusion. Four years later, in 1901, all of the native forces were brought together into two Nigerian regiments of the West African Frontier Force ("W.A.F.F.").

Belo Akure must have joined the W.A.F.F.'s Southern Nigeria Regiment at around this time. During the first decade of the 1900's, when he was a bugler with Major Trenchard, in a campaign against tribes opposing the British "Protectorate" in the Cross River (Calabar) region, he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal ("D.C.M.") for 'bravery in the field'. His bravery and leadership skills meant that by 1914 he had risen to the rank of Company Sergeant-Major.

When the First World War began, British forces from Nigeria were sent to attack the neighbouring German colony of Kamerun (Cameroon). On 4 November 1914, Belo Akure showed great bravery in holding off a German attack on one side of the Mungo River, while his soldiers made their escape in a canoe. When they were safe on the other side, and could give covering fire, he swam across himself. He was awarded a clasp (or bar) to his D.C.M. medal for this, and was 'mentioned in dispatches' for his cool conduct and sound judgment during other actions, including the attack on Fongdonera.

The German forces finally surrendered in March 1916, leaving Cameroon under joint British and French control. However, the war was not going so well for the British and their allies on the other side of the continent. A small, but well organised, German-led army from German East Africa (now Tanzania) had invaded British East Africa (now Kenya) and Uganda in 1915. Although this assault had been repelled, the German forces adopted "guerrilla" tactics which they hoped would force the British to move soldiers from the Western Front in Europe to control.

Belo Akure was among the Nigerian Regiment soldiers who enlisted to join an expeditionary



force for service in East Africa. Four infantry battalions and an artillery battery sailed from Nigeria, arriving in their new war zone in late 1916. One of the artillery-men was Belo Ojo, who also came to Wembley in 1924, as part of the Nigerian contingent at the British Empire Exhibition.

**Artillery soldiers of the Nigeria Regiment.**

[Source: Brent Archives –  
1925 BEE Nigeria Handbook]

The Nigerians experienced difficult conditions during the “winter” of 1916/17, while campaigning in the Rufigi River area, suffering sickness and food shortages. Despite this, Belo Akure led his men by example, and his actions in March 1917 won him another medal. On a night patrol, with three privates, near Kibongo, they saw a group of about 50 native soldiers, led by two German officers, preparing for an attack. He told his men to wait for him to shoot first before opening fire, then shot (and probably killed) one of the enemy officers. His small patrol then gave rapid fire, before retreating while Akure provided covering fire.

About a week later, Sergeant-Major Akure was with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion’s British Officer, Lieutenant Travers, on a patrol to try and ambush a German detachment. Again it was their officer who was the main target, and this time Akure shot him in the leg, and then went out under fire to bring the German back as a prisoner, to the British base at Mkindu. For these two acts of bravery, Belo Akure was awarded the Military Medal (“M.M.”). The details of Akure’s actions are recorded in a book, “With the Nigerians in German East Africa”, by another of the regiment’s British Officers, Captain W. D. Downes, which was published in 1919. Writing about Akure, the Captain says: *‘I have several times seen this sergeant-major in action, and can honestly state that I have never seen a braver man.’*



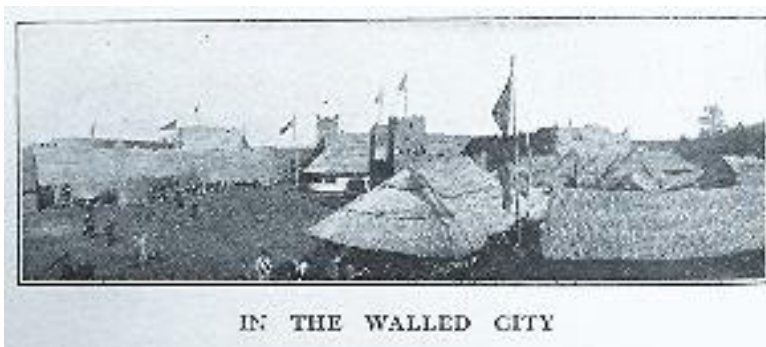
**Company Sergt.-Major Belo Akure, D.C.M., M.M., in 1917.**

[From “With the Nigerians in German East Africa”, 1919]

The Nigerian Regiment continued to campaign as part of the British forces, and in October 1917 it suffered heavy casualties in an attack on the main German army defensive position at Mahiwa. Although the attack failed, it left the German commander, General von Lettow-Vorbeck, so weakened that he withdrew what was left of his army into Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique). With the German threat in East Africa neutralised, Akure and his comrades returned to Nigeria in 1918. But the World War was not yet over, and soon two Nigerian brigades were formed ready for service in Palestine. Just before they were due to sail for yet another war zone, the Armistice was signed in November 1918, and hostilities ended.



Given the record of its soldiers in “the Great War”, it is not surprising that Nigeria wanted some of its heroes to represent it, together with a variety of native craftsmen, at the British Empire Exhibition. Along with the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Sierra Leone, Nigeria had its own



pavilion and native village within a “Walled City” (based on the mud-walled architecture of Kano) which stood next to the new Empire (Wembley) Stadium in the exhibition grounds.

**A view of the West African Walled City.**  
[Brent Archives – 1925 BEE guide book]

Also at the exhibition with Belo Akure, now a Regimental Sergeant-Major (the highest rank a native soldier could hold), whose wife Obiyi accompanied him for their six month stay in Wembley, was another soldier from Ibadan, Battery Sergeant-Major Belo Ojo. Like Ojo, a third member of the party, Police Inspector Ajayi from Lagos, was also a holder of the D.C.M. medal.

**Battery Sergeant-Major Belo Ojo, D.C.M., in the Walled City, 1924.**  
[Brent Archives – album donated by Mr D.M.H. Beck]

Around 17 million visitors came to the exhibition at Wembley between April and October 1924, and many people wanted to meet and be photographed with these distinguished servicemen. Akure probably met King George V and Queen Mary, when they visited the Walled City (with the King and Queen of Italy) on 28 May 1924, but unfortunately no photograph of that meeting found its way into the album kept by the British colonial official, Mr Beck, who was resident superintendent of the Nigerian Native Village at Wembley.



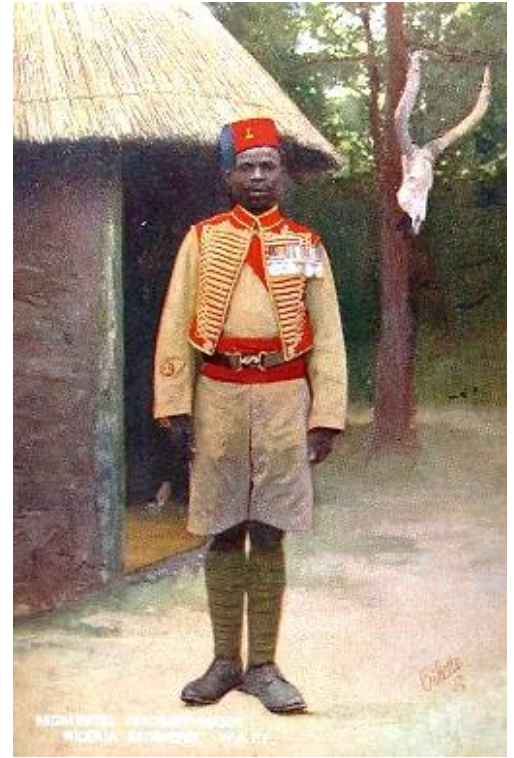
**Exhibition visitor, Miss Winifred Hufton, with Inspr. Ajayi, Mr Beck and R.S.M. Akure, 23 August 1924.**

[Brent Archives - Photo taken by Miss Hufton’s friend, from the album donated by Mr Beck]

Belo Akure appears in a number of photographs from this album, but it would have been impossible for him and his fellow popular uniformed colleagues, who provided security for the many valuable exhibits from Nigeria, as well as for the Nigerian craftsmen, their wives and children in the native village, to meet all the requests for pictures. The organisers of the exhibition’s Nigerian section arranged to have postcards produced of Ajayi, Akure and Ojo, which visitors could buy in the Walled City, either to send or to keep as a souvenir.

These “Oilette” postcards were prepared from black and white photographs, taken in the native village at Wembley, but then coloured by skilled artists using special paints to produce the image from which the cards were printed.

**Regimental Sergeant-Major Belo Akure, D.C.M., M.M., in 1924.**  
[Brent Archives: postcard from album donated by Mr D.M.H. Beck]



I don't know what happened to Belo Akure after the British Empire Exhibition in 1924, but I hope that the details I have been able to share in this article will help to keep alive the story of a notable African soldier who served with distinction in the First World War. He carried the flag for Nigeria (literally, during the Empire Pageant which was staged in the Stadium), and was a popular figure in Wembley when he came here for the British Empire Exhibition in 1924.



**Some of the Nigerian contingent, rehearsing their part in the finale parade for the Pageant of Empire, inside Wembley Stadium, July 1924.**

[Brent Archives: “proof” copy of a photograph taken by the “Daily Chronicle”, from the album donated by Mr D.M.H. Beck]

**Philip Grant, Wembley History Society, July 2017.**

Much of the information in this article comes from photocopied pages from the following books, which were kindly researched and copied for me in 2014 by my late Wembley History Society colleague, Richard Graham, to whose memory this article is dedicated:-

“With the Nigerians in German East Africa” – Capt. W.D. Downes, M.C. (1919).

“The Great War in West Africa” – Brig. Gen. E. Howard Gorges, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O. (1930)

“The History of the Royal West African Frontier Force” – Col. A Haywood, C.M.G., C.B.E., D.S.O. and Brig. F.A.S. Clarke, D.S.O. (1964)

Other information came from a section on “The Nigeria Regiment of the West African Frontier Force”, in the B.E.E. Nigeria Handbook (1925) at Brent Archives.