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# Hauptmann von Raben's Letter

**New evidence for a Christmas truce at Mora in 1914**

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## Von Raben's Letter

### New evidence for a Christmas truce at Mora in 1914

The volume of the official British history of the Great War which covers the West African theatre, written by Brigadier-General F. J. Moberly, gives a basic outline of events in the campaign by British and French forces directed against the German position at Mora in northern Kamerun. However, Moberly's account is concerned purely with military operations and it is only by turning to the German account of Fritz Damis that it becomes possible to illuminate some of the incidents and human interactions which lie behind the story. In particular Damis refers to a Christmas truce in 1914 which does not appear in the British source.

Damis' account, running from the months of July and August 1914 through to the surrender of the Mora garrison on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1916, is dedicated to the memory of Hauptmann Ernst von Raben, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company of Schutztruppe (the German colonial defence force) stationed at Mora.



Von Raben was the local German Resident for the northern part of the German province as well as being commander of the regional Schutztruppe; he appears to have taken a paternal interest in the local peoples, learning their language and recording some of their lives in a series of excellent photographs which survive in the Picture Library at Frankfurt (<http://www.ub.bildarchiv-dkg.uni-frankfurt.de/>). Damis had served under von Raben as a Feldwebel during the Mora campaign and he was therefore an eye-witness of the events he describes.

In the first weeks of the war the British and French quickly moved across the border into the German colony of Kamerun and closed in on von Raben's headquarters in Mora town. Once aware of the strength of the enemy ranged against him he came to the conclusion that his position in the town would be indefensible with the small forces at his disposal; he consequently withdrew to the heights of the Mora Mountain to the south of the town. During the remainder of 1914 a number of attempts were made by the Allies to dislodge him, attempts which were poorly planned and poorly executed, and which all failed. An early attack took place on 27<sup>th</sup> August when a British force tried to seize a dominant position on an adjacent hill to the German camp. A series of mistakes and mishaps led to a retreating British party being taken off-guard in the mist by a group of German *askaris*, who were mistaken for similarly uniformed French troops. In the ensuing melee Dr P.T. Frazer was killed and a Sergeant Taylor was captured. This incident is described in both the British and German sources.

However, for what follows we are reliant on Damis alone. He records (see pages 63-64) the defenders' high spirits four months later when a white flag was raised on the British position facing the Mora Mountain on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1914 – a sight which led the Germans to believe that the war in Europe was over. Although with hindsight this seems laughably optimistic, their hopes had already been raised by earlier reports that the Germans had taken Paris and had landed in England - without radio the defenders of Mora were increasingly cut off from what was happening in the outside world. Damis next says:

*After we had also shown the white flag a messenger left the English position and delivered a note. We were overwhelmed with disappointment when its contents became known to us. There was nothing in it about peace. The English asked to be allowed to send a Christmas box to the Sergeant Taylor we had captured, a request which was accepted by Captain von Raben. Along with the box the English sent newspapers with dates up to the 17th November 1914 for their captive comrade. The news deviated substantially from what had come from Garua, but still it was clear that our troops were maintaining themselves well and pressing forward in all theatres of the war.*

*Captain von Raben was also presented with a small Christmas package. In July 1914, during a tour through British territory he had been a guest of Captain Fox, the leader of the English troops across the border from us in Maiduguri. Mrs Fox had remembered her guest, and her husband allowed her to send the parcel which contained a Christmas tree with candles as well as various other little gifts. The English must really have been in the Christmas mood, because they even suggested that we should let our weapons remain silent on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day. We had no problem with this suggestion, particularly as we only rarely answered their daily gunfire in order to save our ammunition. On the basis of these arrangements the English weapons were quiet on the 24th and 25th December 1914. The French did not go along with this arrangement - they peppered us with a dense artillery fire on both days.....*

There is no mention of this Christmas truce in the British account. The extraordinary story of an amiable relationship between von Raben and his British adversary Captain Fox, formed in peacetime and continuing after hostilities had begun, is reminiscent of an earlier, more gentlemanly form of warfare. Indeed Damis says later that the French took exception to this cosy relationship and made successful representations to have Fox removed; they were given further ammunition against him when he arranged a meeting with von Raben on 1st January 1915 to wish the German commander a Happy New Year. It would be tempting to dismiss much of this story as fanciful embroidery, written in the revisionist world of post-war Germany (Damis was writing in the late 1920s) and seeking to contrast the behaviour of the equally civilised British and Germans against that of the ruthless French. However, corroboration of the substance of Damis' account has been provided by the recent discovery of a hitherto unknown letter by von Raben himself.

Amongst the personal papers of the late Mrs Brenda Cicely Lees of Hinstock Court in Shropshire the author has discovered a small reused envelope on which she had written "Von Raben's letter to Arthur". "Arthur" was her husband Major ACLD Lees (1887-1961) who served as a lieutenant under Fox in Nigeria and then on campaign in Kamerun until April 1915. The letter inside the envelope is written in blue/purple

pencil on a very thin sheet of cream/white paper measuring approximately 210 x 130mm. The writing is very faint but with computer enhancement can be read as follows:

(outer face)

To Lt Leeds [*Leeds crossed out*]  
Lees

[*then, added in pencil by Arthur Lees himself*]

Passed on from Evans  
25.12.1914 AL

(inner face)

25 December

Dear Lieutenant!

Many thanks for the cigarets  
you have sent me. I will  
smoke them in remembrance  
of the time we have met  
I have received the blankets  
and have given them for  
Sergeant Taylor.  
If anything for him will  
arrive, you may send them  
under the flag of truth.  
Wishing you and your  
camerads a good Christmas  
I am yours sincerely

V Raben  
Hauptmann

Please send the enclosed  
letters to Capt Fox  
v.R.

Von Raben's letter provides proof that Damis' Christmas truce did take in fact place, and clearly indicates that Lieutenant Lees was closely involved with it. Further evidence is provided by Lees' own diary (published elsewhere with Mandaras Publishing) in which he recorded his time in Nigeria and Kamerun. Because von Raben was not entirely fluent in English, it would be unwise to place too much weight on his individual words or phrases but some attempt at reconstructing what happened can now be made, using his letter in conjunction with Lees' diary entries and Damis' story.

Damis records that someone came over from the English lines with a note to prepare the grounds for the delivery of Sgt Taylor's present on 24th December. This person may just possibly have been Lees himself: it does however seem certain that it was he who delivered the box later in the day (see below). Someone else delivered the blankets and cigarettes (note that von Raben says of the cigarettes "...sent me", not

“.....given me”). The blankets for Sgt Taylor are also referred to in Lees’ diary for the 24<sup>th</sup> December:

*Carriers forgot blankets had to send them in morning.*

Lees was ill from 22<sup>nd</sup> December onwards, and by his own admission not able to give a cogent account of events. This may be the explanation for “*had to send (the blankets) in the morning*” supposedly written by him on the 24<sup>th</sup> but presumably referring to the morning of Christmas Day, i.e. he had written the diary entry for the 24<sup>th</sup> retrospectively.

For the same day (24<sup>th</sup>) Lees says in his diary:

*Had truce in afternoon to enable Christmas box to be sent to Sgt Taylor.  
Saw Sgt Studly Vincent & Evans at post A & B (British forward positions)  
and gave box myself.*

So the sequence of events may have been as follows. Early in the afternoon of 24<sup>th</sup> December the British raised the white flag and sent a messenger, possibly Lees, over to the German lines with their note. Von Raben agreed to the request to send gifts to Sgt Taylor - he presumably would have sent a note back to this effect. Perhaps the British were not really expecting a positive answer and were caught unprepared; for whatever reason there was some confusion and the blankets for Sgt Taylor (probably the most important gift from his point of view!) were forgotten when Lees delivered the box later on the afternoon of the 24<sup>th</sup>. We know more about what the box contained from Damis’ account, although we should have expected there to have been a number of boxes, not just one, for there were presents not only for Sgt Taylor but also Mrs Fox’s gifts to von Raben. Either Lees was writing loosely or all the gifts were packed in a single large box. The mistake of the forgotten blankets was rectified on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> and von Raben wrote his letter back more or less immediately to acknowledge that he had received them. That he wrote to Lees not Fox shows that von Raben considered the former to be in charge of the exchange.

Although it is easiest to take Lees’ words ‘...*and gave box myself*’ as referring to a meeting between him and von Raben, they might mean no more than that he passed the box over to an unknown emissary from the German lines. However, von Raben’s letter with its “*remembrance of the time we have met*” suggests that the former interpretation is true. No mention is made by Lees or von Raben of the Christmas gifts from Mrs Fox; this may be a tactful omission or a sign of disapproval on Lees’ part. It is of course possible that he did not know of the contents of the box, thinking that it contained only gifts for Sgt Taylor. However, the add-on message in the bottom left-hand corner of von Raben’s letter (“*Please send the enclosed letters to Capt Fox v.R.*”) can best be explained by the insight which Damis gives us into von Raben’s peacetime relationship with Fox and his wife; one of the letters must surely have been von Raben saying his thank-you to Mrs Fox for the Christmas tree, for otherwise what reason could there have been for him to write more than one letter to Fox?

It is worth posing the question “why would Lees send von Raben a gift of cigarettes?” The obvious conclusion is that it was a friendly act following their meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> December, but the relationship between the two men may have been of longer standing. The clue lies in another document which once belonged to Lees’ wife, this time her diary. In September 1913 2Lt Lees had been promoted to lieutenant and newspaper notices recorded that “Lt ACLD Lees 1<sup>st</sup> Shropshire Light Infantry has

been appointed for duty with the Northern Nigerian Regiment.” Brenda (*née* Brenda Cicely Loder of High Beeches in West Sussex) and Arthur Lees became engaged in October of that year and shortly afterwards he set sail for West Africa. In July 1914 she records in her diary, “My Arthur ought to be at Maidugeri now after six weeks journey from Lokosa.” The significance of this is, of course, that Damis says that von Raben was visiting Fox in Maiduguri in July. Since Lees was Fox’s adjutant, it is highly likely that he would have met von Raben socially then – but only if he had reached Maiduguri on time, which is unfortunately not known to us. If such a meeting did take place then, a gift of cigarettes from Lees at Christmas could indeed have been appropriate as a “*remembrance of the time we have met*”, referring to a meeting back in July. This theory does not prevent Lees from meeting von Raben again on 24<sup>th</sup> December - it merely indicates that he need not have done so and that another explanation for von Raben’s thanks for the cigarettes is possible.

As a postscript, Arthur Lees’ diary makes no mention of the meeting between Fox and von Raben on 1<sup>st</sup> January which so enraged the French. However he does say that he himself met von Raben again - without explaining it further - on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1915, although this does not appear in the German sources. Depending on how we assess the evidence there could therefore have been a minimum of two meetings between von Raben and Lees, on one unknown occasion reflected by “*remembrance of the time we have met*” and on 11<sup>th</sup> January; or a maximum of four, at Maidugeri, twice on 24<sup>th</sup> December, and on 11<sup>th</sup> January. From what little we know it is difficult to gauge what was the true relationship between these three men, von Raben, Fox, and Lees. Damis suggests Fox and von Raben were on good terms while Lees makes it fairly obvious elsewhere in his diary that he disapproved of Fox, but infuriatingly makes no mention of the von Raben connection, either with Fox or himself. However, von Raben’s letter shows that relations between the two were cordial enough for Lees to send him a Christmas gift. The crucial source for understanding what really happened between them would have been von Raben’s own diary, which must have been extant after the war because it is referred to several times by Moberly. Sadly it appears that there are no longer any copies in existence. If any reader knows differently, we at Mandaras Publishing would be delighted to hear from you.

Dan Robinson  
Newcastle-under-Lyme  
England  
April 2010

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**Electronic reproduction of Hauptmann von Raben's letter**

(outer face)



(inner face)

25 December

Dear Lieutenant

Many thanks for the cigars  
you have sent me. I will  
smoke them in remembrance  
of the time we have met.  
I have received the blankets  
and have given them to  
Sergeant Taylor.

If anything for him will  
arrive, you may send them  
under the flag of Huth.

Wishing you and your  
sacraments a good Christmas,

I am yours sincerely

P. Raven  
Hampton

Please send the enclosed  
letters to Capt. M.  
P.



