



Geoffrey Basil Spicer Simson was born in Hobart, Tasmania, on 15 January 1876. He entered the Royal Navy in 1889 at the age of fourteen. He was appointed a midshipman on 14 June 1892. His naval career got off to a good start as he was advanced seven months in seniority for results that allowed him to pass out of Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. However, he lost a month of this additional seniority for leaving his ship despite having his leave stopped in 1894. He was promoted to acting sub-lieutenant on 19 February 1896, and he was confirmed in the rank of sub-lieutenant on 20 January 1897, back-dated to the original acting promotion. He was promoted to lieutenant on 30 September 1898.

From that time he began to specialise in surveying, and served on the North Borneo Boundary Commission in 1901, helping in the construction of several maps and the definition of boundaries. His most important position was in command of a destroyer, which he permitted to collide with a liberty boat, resulting in his being posted to dockside watch-keeping jobs. He then went to China and made the first triangulated survey of the Yangtze River from 1905-1908. After China, he was posted to Africa, and from 1911-1914 was in command of a survey ship on the Gambia river. In 1912 he married Amy Elizabeth, daughter of Edmund and Phoebe Baynes-Reed of Victoria, British Columbia.

He returned to Britain from Africa just a few days before Britain officially joined World War I on 4 August 1914. He had a brief tour on a contraband control vessel, but two weeks after taking command

one of his gunboats was torpedoed in broad daylight. He was then given an office job in the Admiralty in the department in charge of transferring Merchant sailors to the War Navy.

Spicer-Simson had experience in Africa and was fluent in French and German, so the Admiralty overlooked his undistinguished record and selected him to lead the expedition to Lake Tanganyika. His commanders saw nothing to lose in sending him to what was considered a sideshow to the events in Europe.

For the action against the *Hedwig*, Spicer-Simson was awarded the Distinguished Service Order on 1 May 1916. Over the course of the expedition, three of his officers were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and twelve of his men were awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

After its initial success, Spicer-Simson's command ended in controversy. He refused to send his ships to aid the British Colonial and Belgian Army force in the capture of Mpulungu in present day Zambia. After falling ill and retreating to his private quarters, he was sent to England for medical and mental recovery. He was also appointed a Commander of the Belgian Order of the Crown.

Spicer-Simson was known for his idiosyncrasies. In Britain he had originally suggested that *Mimi* and *Toutou* be named *Cat* and *Dog*, but the names were rejected by the Admiralty. After *Mimi* and *Toutou* were accepted as alternatives, he explained that these meant "Miaow" and "Bow-wow" in French. While in command on Lake Tanganyika, Spicer-Simson often wore a khaki drill kilt, and he insisted that an Admiral's flag be flown outside his hut. He smoke monogrammed cigarettes and had a number of "macabre tattoos" acquired during his time in Asia

He was later Assistant Director of Naval Intelligence, with the rank of acting captain, and a naval delegate and French translator at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. After acting as Secretary and official interpreter to the First International Hydrographic Conference, London, 1919 he was elected the first Secretary-General of The International Hydrographic Bureau. He served in that role from 1921 to 1937.

His later years were spent in British Columbia. He gave a series of lectures on his command in Lake Tanganyika and helped write a National Geographic article on his transportation of the two boats through the jungles of the Congo. He died on 29 January 1947.

His exploits on Lake Tanganyika inspired the novel, and film, *The African Queen*.