

# *Black Powder*<sup>TM</sup>

# Blood on the Nile



Fighting the battles of the Mahdist Wars in the Sudan with model soldiers



[www.warlordgames.com](http://www.warlordgames.com)





MAHDISTS LOOKING FOR TROUBLE



THE 'NILE CIRCUS' PLODS ITS WAY FORWARDS



"FAITH IN ALLAH WILL KEEP US SAFE!"



# *Black Powder*<sup>TM</sup>

# Blood on the Nile

A wargames supplement for the *Black Powder* rules  
detailing the Mahdist Wars in the Sudan, 1882-1898

Written By:  
*Jim Graham & Neil Smith*

Cover Artwork:  
*Peter Dennis*

Photography by:  
*Frank Becker, Michael Perry & Nathan Vinson*

Miniatures Painted by:  
*Chris Adcock, Andres Amian, Frank Becker,  
Jim Bowen, Brian Buskell, Colin Dixon,  
Steve May, El Mercenario, Aly Morrison,  
Michael Perry, Scott Robertson, Leroy Simpson,  
Nathan Vinson & Dave Woodward*

Production:  
*Dylan Owen (River Horse Ltd)*

Editing:  
*Duncan Macfarlane, Rick Priestley & Paul Sawyer*

*Special thanks also to Michael Perry for  
providing photography of the comprehensive Sudan  
range available from Perry Miniatures.*

*Special thanks are also due to Colonel Mike Snook  
MBE PhD, the author of Go Strong into the Desert  
and Beyond the Reach of Empire, widely recognised  
as classic texts in their genre, who has been kind  
enough to provide much of the supporting artwork  
from his private library and photography of his  
wargames collection, much of which Mike is keen to  
say was painted by the late Jim Bowen.*

*Additional special thanks  
to John Stallard.*

*Black Powder rules by  
Rick Priestley & Jervis Johnson*

Copyright Warlord Games Ltd, 2016

ISBN: 978-1-911281-13-9

All rights reserved. no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored  
in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without  
the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any  
form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a  
similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



*www.warlordgames.com*



---

# Introduction

---



The year was 1884, forty-seven years since Queen Victoria ascended to the throne of the world's greatest empire on which the sun would never set. Eight years earlier, she became Empress of India having led her small island onto the global stage while the rest of the world danced to the British tune.

India was the jewel in the crown, but the hard-working, industrious types that proliferated in Victoria's empire dominated from Australia to Canada and persuaded the locals how beneficial all this was for them. Of course, empire building was not easy: the Americans didn't want anything to do with it, and French noses were all put out of joint over one thing or another. Then there were some natives who wouldn't do as they were told and stood in the way of progress until properly civilized. But by 1884, most of the world knew who was in charge and the rest didn't dare to take up their cudgels against the British.

Compare all that to the Egyptians. Thousands of years before they had an empire of their own and built the pyramids and things so the world wouldn't forget about it. Then others came and the Egyptian Empire disappeared into the sand. Until 1819 that is, when the ruler of Egypt, the Khedive, wanted a taste of Empire and took charge of the Sudan – the large seemingly empty space on the map to the south of Egypt. The Egyptians made a complete hash of running the Sudan, however, and rebellion was only a matter of time.

In 1881, a mystic came out of the Sudanese desert claiming he was the Mahdi, a new Mohammedan prophet. The Egyptians sent a token force to arrest him only to have it sent packing, as happened with every attempt afterwards. The following year, in an unconnected episode, the Egyptians thought they could do without European meddling in their affairs. Sir Garnet Wolseley and a few thousand of Britain's finest soldiers sorted that situation out quickly enough, and Britain had no choice but to offer advice to the Khedive from a much closer distance, so she moved in her civil servants to show him how to run things properly. That left the thorny problem of the Mahdist rebellion unsolved, but the British had little time or money to waste on such trivial matters and expected the Egyptians to take care of it.

The Egyptians continued to flounder in the Sudan. Even when British officers took command of Egyptian troops to give them some backbone, those that the Mahdi's men didn't kill or convert still ran away. Now you can't have British officers being defeated; it is bad for morale and upsets the politicians. And it displeased Her Majesty, and that would not do. Wolseley was itching for another fight, but Prime Minister Gladstone, that rather reluctant imperialist, wasn't for it. He sent 'Chinese' Gordon to Khartoum instead, which just about anyone could have told the Prime Minister was adding fuel to the fire. Gordon soon found himself surrounded in the Sudanese capital and none of the fellows doing the surrounding cared much for Gordon's brand of religion any more than he cared for theirs. Gladstone finally got the message and let Wolseley off the leash. In the meantime, British soldiers got down to business along the Red Sea ports to halt the Mahdist progress in that region. Once again the wheels of Victoria's Empire were in motion with only the Mahdi's fanatics standing in the way.



---

# Contents

---

|                                                                                                                          |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Prologue: Through the Back Door</b><br><i>Garnet Wolseley and the Battle of Tel-El-Kebir, 13 September 1882</i> ..... | 4  |
| <b>Anatomy of a Disaster</b><br><i>William Hicks and the Battle of Shaikan, 5 November 1883</i> .....                    | 16 |
| <b>The Victorian Lion</b><br><i>Charles Gordon and the Battle for Khartoum, 26 January 1884</i> .....                    | 28 |
| <b>Sundown at Suakin</b><br><i>Valentine Baker and the First Battle of El-Teb, 4 February 1884</i> .....                 | 38 |
| <b>Guts and Glory</b><br><i>Gerald Graham and the Second Battle of El-Teb, 29 February 1884</i> .....                    | 50 |
| <b>Dromedaries at Dawn</b><br><i>Sir Herbert Stewart and the Battle of Abu Klea, 17 January 1885</i> .....               | 62 |
| <b>Epilogue: Victorian Exorcism</b><br><i>Herbert Kitchener and the Battle of Omdurman, 2 September 1898</i> .....       | 74 |
| <b>Appendix I</b><br><i>The British Army in Egypt and the Sudan</i> .....                                                | 84 |
| <b>Appendix II</b><br><i>The Army of the Mahdi</i> .....                                                                 | 88 |
| <b>Further Reading</b> .....                                                                                             | 90 |



THE CAMEL CORPS GET TO GRIPS WITH THEIR SHIPS OF THE DESERT



# Prologue: Through the Back Door —



FIXED BAYONETS AND REDCOATS — “GIVE ’EM COLD STEEL LADS!”

There is nothing more annoying to a great empire than getting its tail tweaked by some upstart nation exerting its ‘rights’. Such was the case for Great Britain in the 1850s when the Egyptians sold a concession allowing some French developer to build a canal connecting the Red Sea to the Mediterranean — the Suez Canal. Whoever heard of such a thing? The first shovel hit the sand in 1859 and for the next decade Britain glowered and harrumphed at this threat to her trade monopolies, but there was nothing she could do to prevent the canal opening in 1869. The ever adaptable Victorians, however, soon fell back on their maxim of ‘if you can’t beat them, buy them, then beat them’. In 1875, therefore, Prime Minister Disraeli bought nearly fifty percent of the shares in the Canal from the Egyptians, content for the moment that the French owned the rest and they were not any real threat, and the Egyptian government no matter how corrupt wouldn’t spoil everything. Now, if everyone behaved themselves Britain could get back to the arduous task of running her empire. That wishful thinking lasted all of four years.

Buying shares in the Suez Canal was a major component of other British investment in Egypt throughout the 1870s. What they did not seem to realize was that Egypt was teetering on the edge of an economic abyss. The Egyptian leader Khedive Ismail Pasha’s quixotic pursuit of economic and territorial expansion created tremendous levels of debt, all but forcing the British and French to intervene and try to sort out the mess. In June 1879, they approached the Ottoman Sultan of Egypt and told him that Ismail had to go, and go he went, replaced by his eldest son Tewfik Pasha. Tewfik was amiable enough, at least to the Europeans, and, lacking ambition, he had no real interest in being the Khedive. That suited the Europeans too. The British and French were soon running the show, controlling the Civil Service and conducting business however they pleased. They even had their own court system separate from the Egyptians. Everything was cosy and neat, and as long as the Egyptians

knew their place in the grand scheme of things the future was assured. Unfortunately, the Egyptian army’s cadre of officers was unimpressed with this state of affairs and by September 1881 they were ripe for revolt.

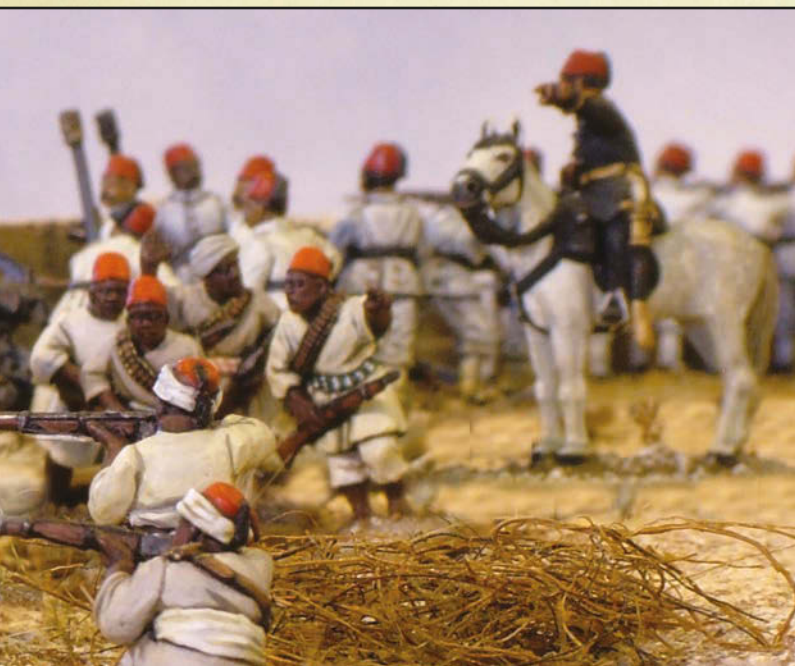
Serving as an officer in the Egyptian army in the early 1870s was quite a pleasant occupation. Yes, Turkish overlordship in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was annoying, but with an army nearly 100,000 strong there was still room for promotion and advancement. And what more fun could there be than the invasion of Ethiopia planned for 1875? Then everything went pear-shaped. The Ethiopians did not appreciate being fettered to the Egyptian yoke and handed the Egyptian army two devastating defeats, forcing a hasty rethink on that invasion thing. Then the financial crisis bit deep and the Khedive cut the army down to 35,000, throwing many officers out of their cushy billets and onto the streets. If only a leader could be found to step forward and galvanize the army and much of the rest of Egypt. He would come, but from an unlikely source.

## AHMED URABI

Ahmed Urabi was an unusual Egyptian officer in that he rose from the ranks of the fellahin, the peasant class. Not only that, but he was a lieutenant-colonel by the age of 20 and his skills as an orator and leader fostered his emergence as the spokesman for his economic class and much of the officer corps. Urabi’s political power also grew within the army during the turbulent 1870s until he helped organize the Egyptian Nationalist Party in 1879. All of that barely caused a rustle amongst the newspaper reading Victorians, but they spat their tea when the Egyptian army, led by Urabi, revolted in the Autumn of 1881. Tewfik Pasha had no option but to accommodate the nationalists, much to the chagrin of the British and French. The European powers wrote stern words to the Khedive, but that did not stop him appointing Urabi Minister of War, then giving him the title of Pasha in March



# *Garnet Wolseley and the Battle of Tel-El-Kebir, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1882*



1882. The British and French sent ships to scare the nationalists, although the French withdrew early, leaving the Royal Navy ships commanded by Admiral Sir Beauchamp Seymour circling the harbour of Alexandria in a most menacing fashion.

Urabi's followers were scared and feared invasion, but that did not lead to them behaving themselves; rather, in June 1882 they rioted through Alexandria, attacking any Europeans they caught in the open. The British harrumphed and spluttered for the next month, which only made Urabi all the bolder. He built up the shore defences at Alexandria and generally thumbed his nose at the British fleet. At 7am on 11 July, after a suitable ultimatum, the naval guns opened fire. They only stopped at 5:30pm without even a break for tea, and Alexandria's outer defences lay in ruins. The next morning, the British sailed into the inner harbour, commenced shelling again and followed up with landing parties. It was all over by lunchtime with the white flag of surrender flapping over Alexandria – that was that, or so the British thought.

But that wasn't that! While the British backslapped themselves silly, Urabi beavered away outside Alexandria getting his army ready and building more fortifications. More spitting of tea followed when Urabi declared "irreconcilable war!" The British press and public were aghast at this blatant exertion of national rights by someone else and considered it a patriotic duty to squash the Egyptian rebels. To that end, parliament authorized a military expedition to remind Urabi who was really in charge. Only about a quarter of the force came from Britain, however, with the rest sailing from Gibraltar, Cyprus, Aden, and India; the British already in Alexandria had to wait patiently for them all to arrive. In the meantime, Sir Archibald Alison advanced on Cairo from Alexandria with a small force only to be rendered harmless by Urabi's considerable defences. Not to worry, though, Lieutenant-General Sir Garnet Wolseley was about to take control of the situation and he had a cunning plan.

## **GARNET WOLSELEY**

By the 1880s, Wolseley had risen to become a national treasure and there were few Victorian military adventures in which he was not involved. Wolseley first saw action in the Crimea before moving on to India where, as a Captain, he made his name in the Siege of Lucknow. After a brief sojourn as an interested observer to the American Civil War, Wolseley found himself leading the highly successful 1870 Red River Expedition in Canada. His greatest claim to fame before his exploits in Egypt and the Sudan, however, was commanding the campaign against the feared Ashanti tribe in Africa in 1874. He destroyed their resistance inside two months and as a result became Queen Victoria's pre-eminent crusher of ungrateful natives. Now, in 1882, the Queen, along with the rest of Britain, expected him to make short work of the Egyptians; but these were not 'savages' and Wolseley knew he might have his work cut out for him.

## **WOLSELEY'S PLAN**

It did not take Wolseley two shakes of a camel's tail to work out that a direct assault on Cairo from Alexandria would be a costly endeavour. Indeed, while in London planning his mission, he had already decided that a much better option was to sail around the coast of Egypt to Ismailia, halfway down the Suez Canal. From there, the British would be in the rear of the Egyptians and could push along the Ismailia Canal to Cairo. Wolseley left a screening force in Alexandria to make a feint at the Egyptians, and loaded his main force onto the ships. Four days later, on 23 August, the British were ashore at Ismailia.

## **THE ROAD TO TEL-EL-KEBIR**

Wolseley's army swung into action the day after it landed when Major-General George Graham led a mounted expedition to secure the ground between Ismailia and the first strategic objective, the makeshift Egyptian dam at Magfar. The Egyptians, surprised as they might have been by Wolseley's landing, were not inclined to allow the British to promenade along the canal without opposition, but neither were they strong enough to halt the British progress altogether. So began an Egyptian fighting retreat designed to buy time for reinforcements to get to their main line of defences at Tel-el-Kebir. All day long on the 24<sup>th</sup> then again the next day, the British outflanked the Egyptians using mounted infantry and cavalry only to see the Egyptians scarpering over another ridge or hill, which the British then had to outflank, and so on. Finally, the pressurized Egyptians fled by train, leaving behind piles of equipment and ammunition.

The British followed steadily behind, moving into camp at the village of Tel-el-Maskhuta. There they waited for the troops still landing at Ismailia to arrive. As luck would have it, Ahmed Urabi's second-in-command missed the train, although he did not seem too concerned about it and freely told the British what lay ahead. As a result, on 26 August, Graham's force moved up to Kassassin Lock where the opposition was about to get much stiffer.

The Egyptians attacked Graham late in the afternoon of 28 August. This was a bothersome development for the British cavalry that had stood around all day in the blazing sun and were now, along with their horses, thoroughly knackered. Added to that was a lack of ammunition for the British field



guns. In the nick of time, as in all great adventures, fresh infantry came up and Graham ordered an immediate advance by echelon. Like all good British soldiers the infantry strode forward in manly fashion, stopping only to unleash volleys into the unhappy Egyptians. When night fell the British infantry stopped where they were. However, the British cavalry, arriving on the extreme right flank just as darkness descended, did not know what was going on away to their left; so being British cavalry they charged the enemy positions, scattering the startled Egyptians to the rear, but losing themselves in the dark. Nevertheless, having beaten back the impertinent Egyptian assault and imparted the necessary lessons the British cavalry joined the infantry and retired for the day.

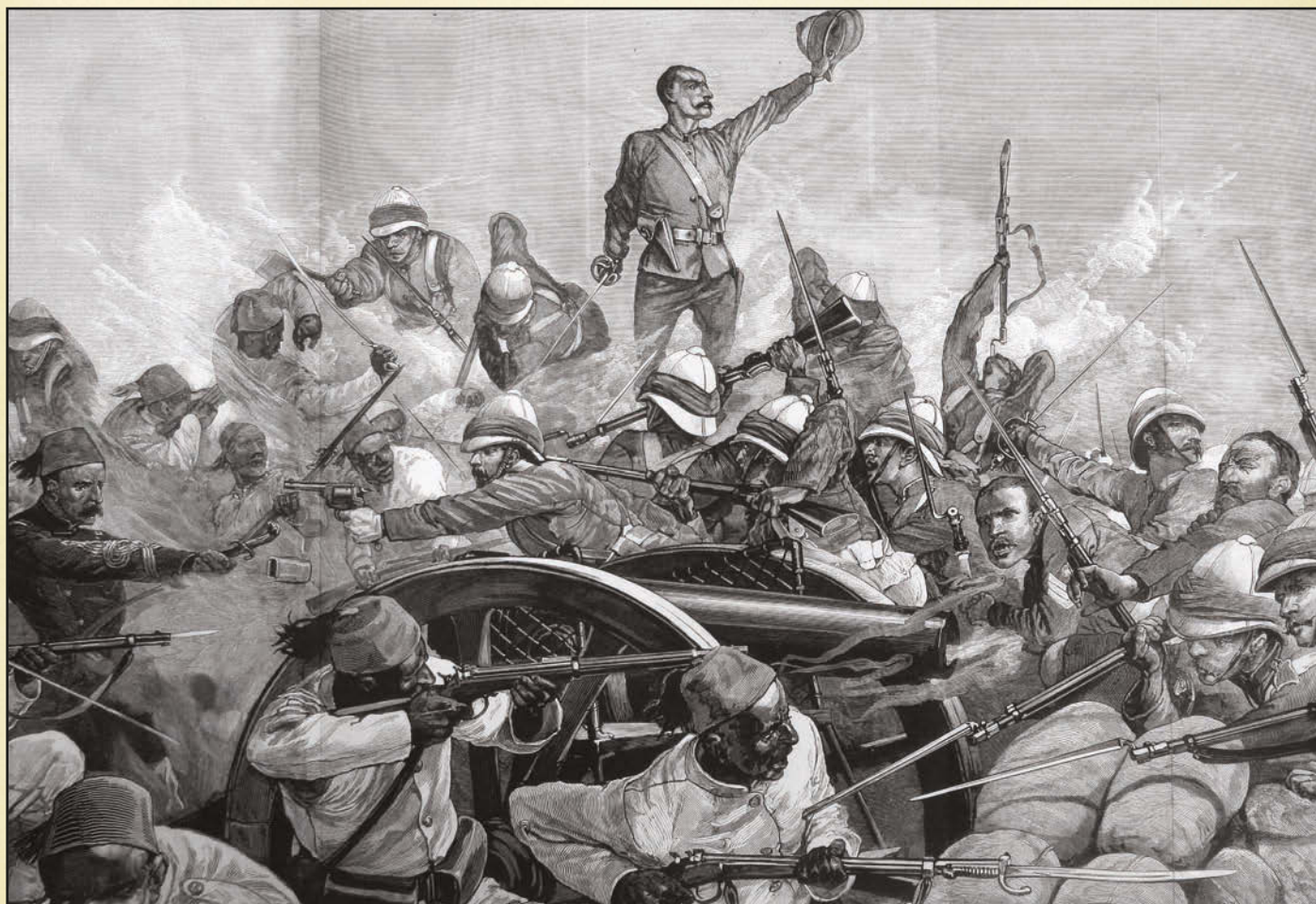
Wolseley spent the next ten days consolidating the British position against any more attacks, while building up supplies for the next stage of the advance and waiting for the last contingents of soldiers to arrive from the Empire. In the meantime, Urabi heard the British position was weak and isolated – no doubt from someone who thought this a great practical joke – and concentrated his forces for an attack on 9 September. Wolseley's attentive cavalry patrols spotted the Egyptian approach, however, and warned the camp with plenty of time to spare. The British infantry finished its breakfast and made ready to receive their Egyptian guests who soon came within range of the Royal Artillery. The field guns quickly barked out a deadly welcome. Wolseley next ordered the cavalry out onto the flank and the infantry to advance all along the front. The Egyptians could not stand against the sustained musketry volleys pouring out from the British ranks and fled to their line of strong defences at Tel-el-Kebir. There

they would finally make their stand, they hoped, and see off this seemingly relentless invader. The indefatigable British trudged along behind, halting 5,000 yards from the Egyptian lines to reconnoitre and gather strength for the final assault.

### THE BATTLE OF TEL-EL-KEBIR

The Egyptian defence of Tel-el-Kebir appeared formidable on first viewing. Urabi had built a line of trenches and parapets four miles long, interspersed with artillery redoubts. The right flank rested on the canal while the left extended out into the desert. Up to 20,000 men with 67 artillery pieces stretched out along the line with a few thousand in reserve. Clearly, anyone advancing against the Egyptian line from the front would come under terrible fire, and outflanking without frontal support would present a foolhardy risk. Wolseley had another ruse up his sleeve, however, formulated on the common knowledge that you can only shoot what you can see, and at night you can't see anything. With that in mind, Wolseley brought up 12,000 infantry, 3,000 cavalry, and 60 field-pieces, and deployed them six miles from the Egyptian lines; then he ordered a silent advance timed to hit the enemy just before dawn. At 1:30am, the British were in line perpendicular to the railway that would guide them home. With officers out in front to direct the march, the British army stepped off.

To make sure the attack would all go in together, Wolseley ordered the units nearest the railway to hang back to prevent them getting ahead and tipping off the enemy sentries. He also ordered the cavalry to swing round to the right and wait for the sound of the guns before riding into the flank and rear of the



*Wolseley's infantry overrun Arabi Pasha's line of defence at Tel-el-Kebir.*



ORDERS OF BATTLE

— BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE —

*12,000 infantry, 3,000 cavalry, 60 field guns*

ARMY COMMANDER: SIR GARNET WOLSELEY

First Division: Lt-Gen. G.H.S. Willis

**1<sup>st</sup> Brigade: Duke of Connaught**

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Grenadier Guards
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Coldstream Guards
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Scots Guards

**2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade: Maj-Gen. Gerald Graham**

- Royal Marine Light Infantry
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal West Kent Regt
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion York and Lancaster Regt
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers

**Divisional Troops**

- 2 squadrons 19<sup>th</sup> Hussars
- A & D Batteries 1 Brigade Royal Artillery
- 24<sup>th</sup> Company Royal Engineers

Second Division: Lt-Gen. Sir Edward Hamley

**1<sup>st</sup> Brigade: Maj-Gen. Sir Archibald Allison**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Highlanders
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Highland Light Infantry
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Gordon Highlanders
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Cameron Highlanders

**4<sup>th</sup> Brigade: Col. C. Ashburnham**

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps

**Divisional Troops**

- 2 squadrons 19<sup>th</sup> Hussars
- I & N Batteries 2 Brigade Royal Artillery
- 26<sup>th</sup> Company Royal Engineers

Cavalry Division: Maj-Gen. D.C. Drury-Lowe

**1<sup>st</sup> Brigade: Brig-Gen. Sir Baker Russell**

- 3 squadrons Household Cavalry, one each of 1<sup>st</sup> Life Guards, 2<sup>nd</sup> Life Guards and Royal Horse Guards
- 4<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards
- 5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards

**2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade: Brig-Gen. H.C. Wilkinson**

- 13<sup>th</sup> Bengal Lancers (Watson's Horse)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Bengal Cavalry (Gardner's Horse)
- 6<sup>th</sup> Bengal Cavalry (King Edward's Own)

**Divisional Troops**

- 1 Battery Royal Horse Artillery

**Artillery Corps**

- G Battery B Brigade Royal Horse Artillery
- C & T Battery 3 Brigade Royal Artillery
- F Battery 1 Brigade Royal Artillery

Indian Contingent: Maj-Gen. Sir Herbert MacPherson

**Infantry Brigade: Brig-Gen. O.V. Tanner**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Seaforth Highlanders
- 7<sup>th</sup> Bengal (Rajputs) Native Infantry
- 20<sup>th</sup> Bengal (Brownlow's) Native Infantry
- 29<sup>th</sup> Bombay (Baluchi) Native Infantry

**Artillery**

- H Battery I Brigade Royal Artillery
- 7<sup>th</sup> Battery I Brigade Northern Division Royal Artillery (Mountain Battery)

— EGYPTIAN ARMY —

*20,000 infantry, 67 field guns  
(conjectural organisation)*

ARMY COMMANDER: URABI PASHA

Occupying Defences at Tel-El-Kebir: Ali Rubi Pasha

- 10 Infantry Battalions
- 54 Field Guns

**Reserve:**

- 3 Infantry Battalions
- 5 Field Guns
- 1,700 Cavalry

**Rear Group:**

- 3 Infantry Battalions
- 6 Field Guns

Southern Force (4 miles south of Kassassin):

- 2 Infantry Battalions
- 2,000 Bedouin
- 300 Cavalry
- 2 Field Guns





enemy. The line would also halt every thousand yards or so to make sure of their dressing before continuing on their way. Finally, the British infantry advanced without bayonets fixed or rifles loaded. On into the darkness they marched.

The sky was just beginning to lighten when the British reached their final 1,000 yards. After a quick redressing of the ranks, the advance resumed. Despite all their precautions, however, the British line devolved quickly into an echelon formation with the Highland Brigade on the left moving more quickly than the troops further out in the desert. A rifle shot from the defenders shattered the silence with the British left at less than 300 yards from their target; then the whole Egyptian line erupted in firing. The concept of 'fight or flight' has one too many options for most Highlanders and so it proved here as the kilted warriors fixed bayonets, cheered a battle cry, and poured forward. The Egyptian defenders could hardly miss the red-coated soldiers, however, and the right and left flanks of the Highland Brigade struggled to make contact across the ditch and parapet. The Black Watch in particular struggled against the dense masses of Egyptians on the right until help arrived from the King's Royal Rifle Corps and turned the tide. Similarly, the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry rushed in to help on the left flank. The centre units fared much better unassisted, flowing over the barricade behind well-aimed volleys.

Out on the British right, English and Irish soldiers also rushed forward, and into a similarly intense fire. They were successful along their parts of the line, but the Egyptians withdrew in order, facing the British and still firing. The British cavalry was about to make its timely arrival, however, as they cantered round to the left-rear of the Egyptian line, threatening to cut off any line of retreat for the Egyptians. Moreover, the British artillery began to find positions in the centre from which they could assail the Egyptian defenders. It did not take long for the northern end of the Egyptian line to fold under that kind of pressure. The end of the line being assailed by the Highlanders finally broke under withering artillery fire and the weight of enemy reinforcements. The Egyptians had held their ground bravely, but there was little they could do against the resolute British: 3,000 defenders lay dead on the field to only 356 British, most of them from the hard-charging Highland regiments.

The Battle of Tel-el-Kebir broke the back of Egyptian resistance. After a couple of days, Wolsley took up his advance on Cairo. On reaching the city, Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Stewart, of whom we will hear much more in the Sudan fighting, went forward to accept the surrender of the city garrison and the defeated Urabi. Wolsley rode into Cairo on 15 September, ending the war in Egypt, but beginning the British involvement in Egypt's headache, the Sudan.



SCREW GUNS, BLUEJACKETS AND INDIAN TROOPS SHOW HOW MANY AND VARIED A VICTORIAN BRITISH ARMY COULD BE



STEADY AND WELL-DRILLED ARTILLERY RECEIVE THE ORDER TO OPEN FIRE BY BUGLE



## WARGAMING THE BATTLE OF TEL-EL-KEBIR

Tel-el-Kebir presents few difficulties for wargaming and acts as quite a gentle introduction to the *Black Powder* rules.

The Egyptians begin the game deployed in their defensive positions waiting for the British to show up. Their problem is that they do not know when this will happen and certainly do not expect a night advance.

For the British, they need to get as close to the Egyptian positions as possible before sunrise or they are likely to get caught in the open with their kilts round their ankles.

### Missions

- **Garnet Wolseley:**

Get your army into position to assault the Egyptian lines, then destroy as much of the enemy army as possible. Do not allow the Egyptians to run away and fight another day.

- **Urabi Pasha:** Be vigilant! The British are coming and when they do shoot them down like dogs in the dust. They must not pass.

### The Table

The 8' x 6' table is set up with the Egyptian lines running almost the full width just inside the Egyptian half of the table – this can be altered depending on how generous the Egyptian player or umpire is in allowing the British to approach.

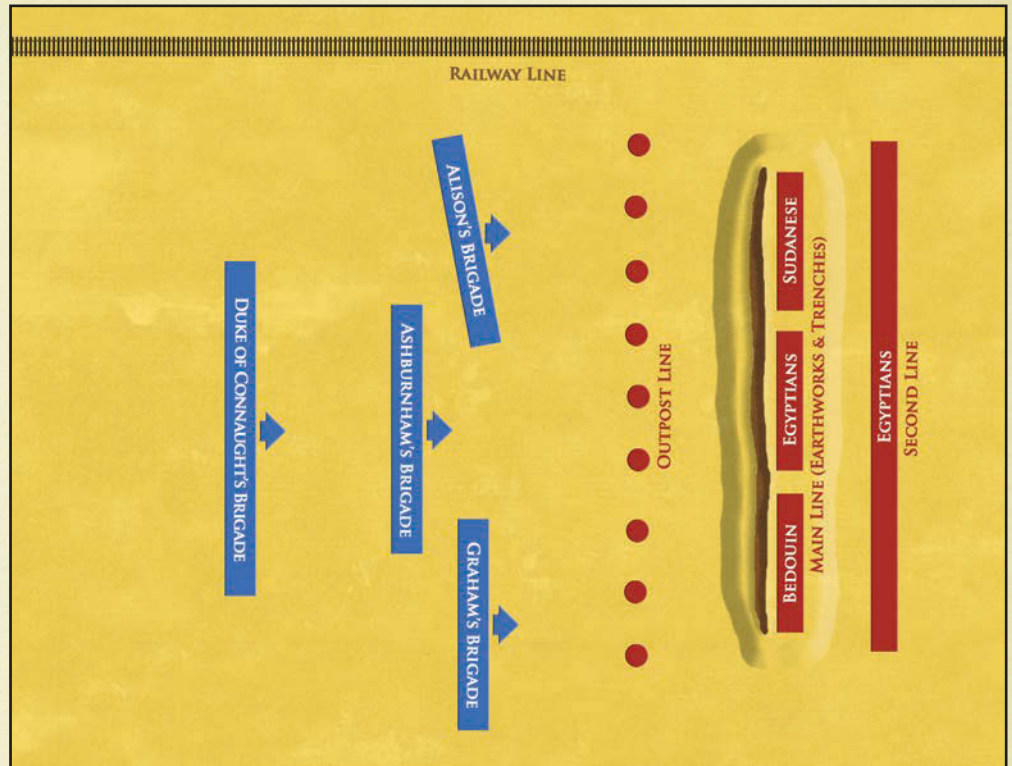
The left flank of the Egyptian line is open by about 12"-18".

The Egyptians can choose to dig a second line of defences up to 24" behind the front line, but they do not receive any more defenders when doing so.

A rail line runs along the length of the Egyptian right flank table edge.

The going underfoot is firm on the railway line edge to the mid-point of the table, and soft from the mid-point to the Egyptian left flank edge.

There are no other terrain features on the table.



### Deployment

The Egyptians opted for a strategy of defence in depth, with an outpost line, a main trench line, and reserves in a second defensive line about half a mile behind the first. The artillery was in the main defence line and would rely on the professionalism of its Turkish officers and crews to repel the attackers. The outposts and trenches had been built in fairly short order by local labourers, these were after all the successors to the pyramid builders, and while they would not provide much defence against Lieutenant Shrapnel's invention this mattered little as the British did not have very much artillery.

The earthworks were steeply sloped on the enemy side to create a ridge and well sited to give mutual support and covering fire. The outposts were manned by Sudanese troops as they were deemed the most reliable and Urabi Pasha had decided to fight the outpost line rather than use it as a tripwire.

The main defence line was manned on the right by Sudanese and on the left by Bedouin troops, with the Egyptians in the centre and in the support trenches. The main defences were along the crest of the ridge with the outposts on the forward slope. Urabi Pasha's Turkish adviser had recently attended a lecture in Constantinople on defence in depth given by one of the Sultan's Prussian advisers, but the newfangled 'barb-ed wire' mentioned therein was sadly not available.



THE DEVILS IN SKIRTS! A FEROCIOUS HIGHLAND CHARGE



BLACK POWDER FORCES

BRITISH

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF:  
GENERAL SIR GARNET WOLSELEY

Graham’s Brigade

- Commander: Brigadier General Gerald Graham RE
- Royal Marine Light Infantry – 16 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers – 16 figures
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> York and Lancaster Regiment – 16 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Regiment – 16 figures

Alison’s Brigade

- Commander: Major General Archibald Alison
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Highland Light Infantry – 16 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Cameron Highlanders – 16 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Gordon Highlanders – 16 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Black Watch – 16 figures

Ashburnham’s Brigade

- Commander: Major General Cromer Ashburnham
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry – 16 figures
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> Kings Royal Rifle Corps – 16 figures

Duke of Connaught’s Brigade

- Commander: His Grace, The Duke of Connaught
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Coldstream Guards – 16 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Scots Guards – 16 figures
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Grenadier Guards – 16 figures

*The British artillery are not on the table. Cavalry is off table to the right.*

EGYPTIANS

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF: URABI PASHA

Commander: Ali Maher

- 1<sup>st</sup> Sudanese Regiment
- 3 Battalions each of 16 figures
  - 4 Krupp 80mm field guns

Commander: Mohamed Morsy

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Sudanese Regiment
- 3 Battalions each of 16 figures

Commander: Ali Mubarek

- 3<sup>rd</sup> Sudanese Regiment
- 3 Battalions each of 16 figures

Commander: Salah Abu Ismail

- 1<sup>st</sup> Egyptian Regiment
- 3 Battalions each of 16 figures
  - 4 Krupp 80mm field guns

Commander: Yaqub ibn Killis

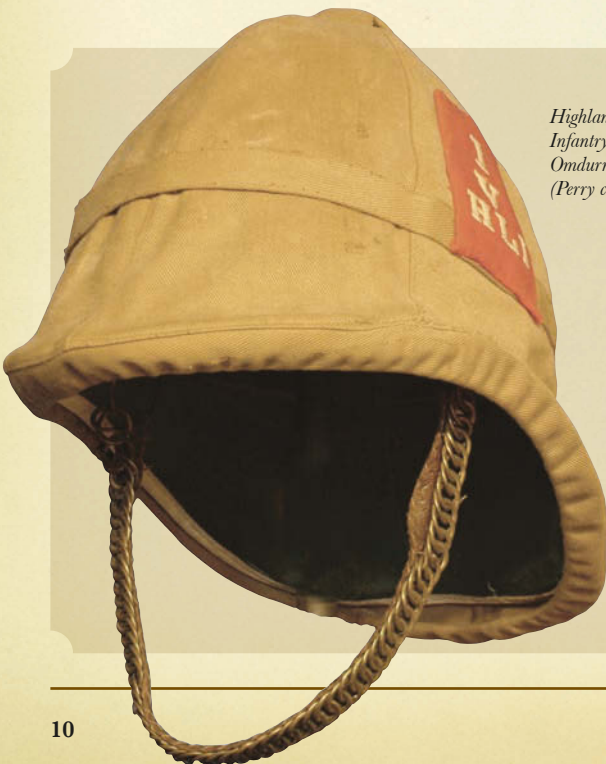
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Egyptian Regiment
- 3 Battalions each of 16 figures

Commander: Ahmed Labib

- 3<sup>rd</sup> Egyptian Regiment
- 3 Battalions each of 16 figures

Commander: Hakim Amer

- 4 Bedouin Battalions each of 16 figures
- 2 Krupp 80mm field guns



Highland Light  
Infantry helmet,  
Omdurman period  
(Perry collection)

*“My Dearest Father, – Here I am writing in Arabi’s own tent and on his note paper, after, I suppose the most complete and successful victory that has occurred for a long time. I had better begin at the beginning and tell you all I know of it.”*

Letter from Viscount Fielding to his father after the battle.





INDIAN LANCERS, EAGER FOR THE CHARGE

British Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit           | Type     | Armament             | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special                |
|----------------|----------|----------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|------------------------|
| Highlanders    | Infantry | Breech-loading rifle | 7            | 3        | 3+     | 3       | Steady, Tough Fighters |
| Line           | Infantry | Breech-loading rifle | 6            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | Steady                 |
| Guards         | Infantry | Breech-loading rifle | 6            | 3        | 3+     | 3       | Steady, Stubborn       |
| Light Infantry | Infantry | Breech-loading rifle | 4            | 4        | 4+     | 3       | Steady                 |

**Staff Ratings:** Wolseley has a staff rating of 10. Other British commanders have a staff rating of 9.

Special Rules

**Night-time Movement:** Each brigade throws a D6 each night turn. On a 3, 4, 5 or 6 they move in the desired direction. On a 1 they veer 22½ degrees left, and on a 2, 22½ degrees right. The umpire then rolls a D6 for speed: On a 1 movement is ¼ slower; on a 6 it is ¼ faster.

**Steady:** Automatically pass the first break test of the game.

**Stubborn:** Re-roll one failed morale save.

**Tough Fighters:** Re-roll one missed combat attack.

Egyptian Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit              | Type      | Armament             | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special |
|-------------------|-----------|----------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|---------|
| Egyptian Infantry | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle | 3            | 2        | 4+     | 3       | —       |
| Sudanese Infantry | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle | 3            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | —       |
| Arab Infantry     | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle | 3            | 3        | 5+     | 3       | —       |
| Artillery         | Artillery | —                    | 1            | 1-2-1    | 3+     | 2       | Steady  |

**Staff Ratings:** Urabi Pasha has a staff rating of 9. Other Egyptian commanders have a staff rating of 8. Note that Arab morale is poor due to their unwillingness to take part in the campaign.

Special Rules

**Steady:** Automatically pass the first break test of the game. The artillery is steady due to the quality of its Turkish officers. However, once the British close, the artillerymen start to panic, and this is represented by its low shooting score at close range.





## BATTLE REPORT

This game was fought on a Sunday so we took as our sermon the text ‘Camels are the ships of the desert’ and decided that the two commanders would be our two seafarers. As they were marooned away from our table in the Western Isles and the former Colonies respectively, they had to send their orders and deployments in advance and delegate power to those physically present. I was appointed by Dr Smith of the State of Virginia to represent Urabi Pasha and my attempts to pass this poisoned chalice on to my fellow procurator were countered with a wry “*Delegatus non potest delegare*” – a delegate cannot delegate. Captain Graham of Tobermory sent on his orders for the British to his selected representative who was somewhat taken aback having just declined command of the Egyptians, prompting a question over trusting the type of chap who passes up the opportunity to wear a fez simply for better quality troops.

The battle of Tel-el-Kebir presented the Victorian Army in Africa with a rare opportunity for tactical offensive action and the temptation to display the appropriate offensive spirit was likely to prove too strong for some, if not all. The British plan was straightforward, therefore, if slightly predictable. Having discussed and rejected the use of terms like ‘port quarter’ and ‘leeside’ as being beyond the average officer, the British elected to form up and ‘get stuck in’ – crossing the enemy’s ‘T’ would have been the preferred option, but going in with the bayonet was deemed an acceptable substitute.

The British also decided that a night advance was just the ticket; the prospect of unit drift or collision in the dark was preferable to a daylight advance because it would avoid having to cross open spaces in the face of modern weapons, particularly as the Royal Artillery, through no fault of their own, were a bit less *ubique* than promised by their branch motto. The British attack was timed to begin at dawn. When the sun rose over the horizon, therefore, the entire force would advance in line, sweeping the Egyptians before them. Outposts would be dealt with as they were encountered, but no special plans were made for them and no-one was to stop unless absolutely necessary. As there was little in the way of artillery support the whole line was to close with the enemy *jildi jildi*.

The British deployed on the table along historical lines with Graham’s Brigade on the right, Ashburnham’s in the centre,

and Alison’s Brigade on the left. The Guards were kept in reserve to be sent into the attack where required. The initial advance would be under cover of darkness and in complete silence, subject to the whims of the umpire’s dice. As soon as the Egyptians spotted the British and the game was up, pipers and buglers would give tongue, the walk would become a trot, then a canter, then a full blooded gallop. British officers were given the opportunity to view the battlefield, which unfortunately was entirely devoid of useful landmarks, and were then given a starting point and bearing to follow – reduced to wargames terms we used the special rule and D6s were deployed and the brigadiers tried to avoid throwing 1 or 2.

The Egyptian commander set out his stall and waited for the British attack, while the umpire threw various dice to decide the Egyptian state of preparedness and likelihood of sentries being awake, or even present. The British troops advanced through the pre-dawn darkness along their predetermined bearings. The umpire kept track of their movements and where the various units would arrive at dawn. The British reached the outpost line and found these mostly manned and ready, though several were more asleep than awake. When the defenders fired into the pre-dawn light the gig was up and the umpire set out the British units where their navigation had taken them. The sun was now rising and the Egyptian line immediately realised their peril and the artillery soon opened up on the exposed parts of the British line.

The Scots on the left had drifted leftwards in their advance, but kept up a brisk pace and contacted the Egyptians earliest. Meanwhile, Ashburnham’s Light Brigade in the centre lagged slightly behind, but stayed straight, while Graham’s Brigade drifted leftwards as well and found themselves slightly in front of Ashburnham. The Highland Light Infantry on the extreme left bypassed the end outpost and pressed on up the slope towards the main defences. The Camerons and Black Watch ran into their target outposts and hit Redoubts One and Two respectively: fierce fighting broke out against the Sudanese garrisons who were fully open for business and used closing fire against the chargers. The Gordons’ path took them between outposts and, following orders, they carried on in. The outposts in the Egyptian centre were largely undefended as the occupants were less than alert and Redoubt Three was left inviolate with the Royal Marines squaring up to Redoubt Four;





WELL-EMPLACED EGYPTIAN INFANTRY SUPPORTED BY ARTILLERY ARE A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK

the Royal Irish Fusiliers attacked Redoubt Five; and the Royal Irish Rifles Redoubt Six. The leftward drift had squeezed out the York and Lancs, so they now formed a reserve for the brigade about 200 yards back. The British did not attack Redoubts Seven and Eight because their drift had taken them away from those defences. Ashburnham's Lights remained behind Graham's Brigade, and the Guards were under Wolseley's hand about a mile to the rear. This compression in the centre caused some consternation to the British commander, particularly as the right flank was now up in the air, but he swiftly dispatched the Guards to that flank to cover the gap, rolling low and getting a double move.

The Turkish artillery was living up to its reputation and firing well and often, but the Egyptian troops were visibly unhappy and "worse than bints" in the words of Urabi Pasha. Meanwhile the Bedouin were casting longing glances at the open desert to their flank and worried glances at the British cavalry lurking along their potential line of retreat. In the Egyptian centre and left, the unengaged redoubts opened fire on the flanks of Graham's Brigade causing some hits, but return fire inflicted more on the defenders.

The status of the battle now was that Alison's Brigade was still in the van of the army with the Highland Light Infantry contesting the main trenches, which were stoutly defended by the Sudanese. The Camerons and Black Watch were at the same time trying to force their way into the redoubts, but a combination of the closing fire and steep sand slopes held them back. The Gordons were also advancing fast on Urabi's centre, which was held by Egyptians, but as yet they weren't in melee. The Marines were actually in their target redoubt, but the defenders were putting up a fairly rugged resistance having been caught partly unawares, and the Irish battalions were stalled in front of Redoubts Seven and Eight unable to gain traction to climb the sandy escarpment, but able to keep the defenders away from the parapet through sheer volume of fire.

All along the British line, junior officers were sacrificing themselves in true Victorian style to keep the men going; two of the officers from the Gordons, having seen a picture in the *Illustrated London News* from the Civil War in the Americas, carried their hats on their swords to the amusement of all. The advance continued with 'Thomas Atkins' showing his mettle, but the battle soon degenerated into a series of localised

actions with NCOs leading bayonet charges and forming defensive lines to repel Egyptian counter-attacks, which were made with a determination belying the Egyptian Army's reputation and Urabi Pasha's previous description. Seeing the Guards moving towards his right and the gap between his brigade and Alison's, Graham ordered the York and Lancs to the left flank to plug the gap and storm Redoubt Three.

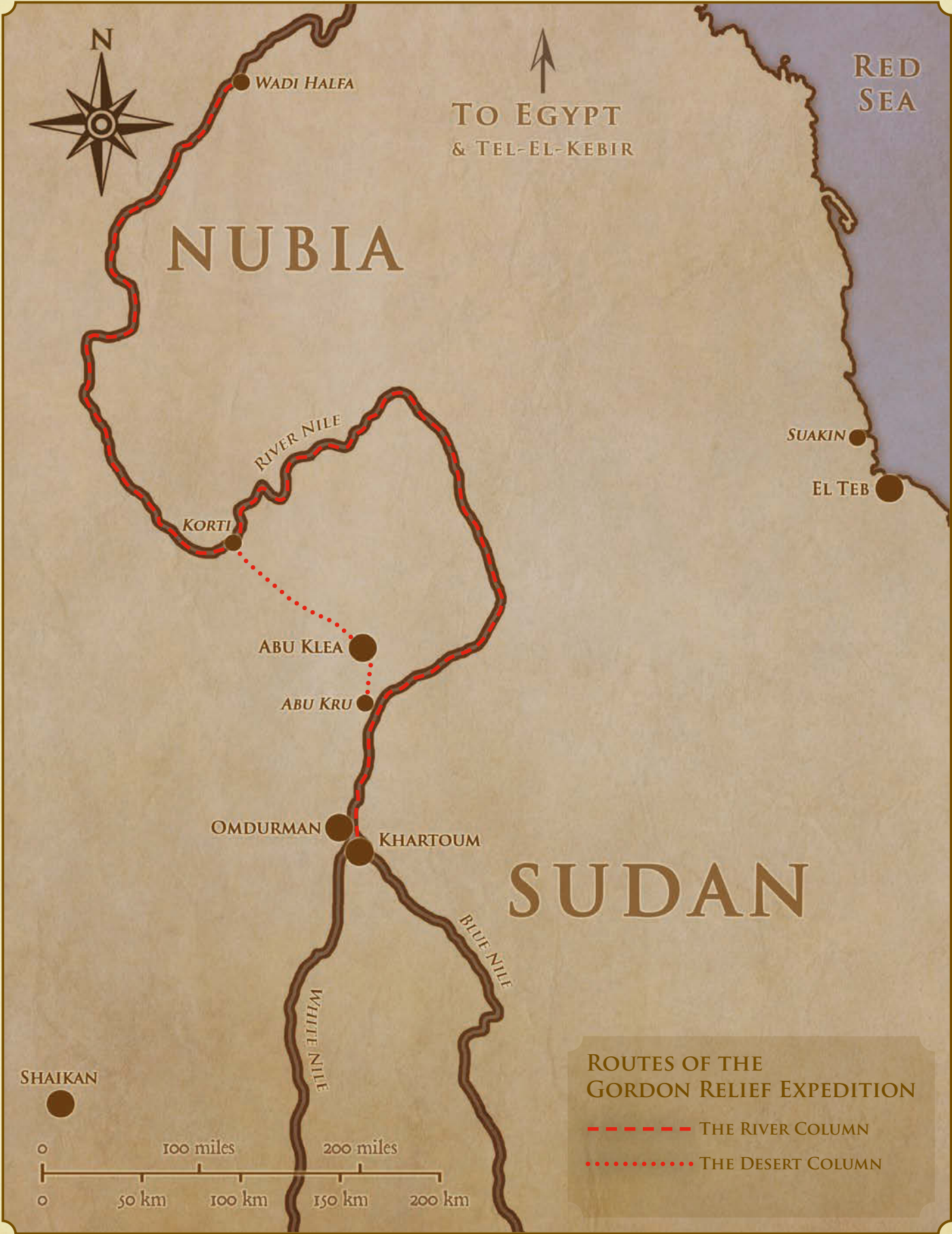
The British line was now comprehensively dislocated, but long service around the Empire had taught one and all self reliance and they simply fought whoever was in front of them, trusting their neighbours to do the same. On the other side of the table, the Sudanese showed great stubbornness in defence, but they were gradually overwhelmed. They took the required break tests, and while most units passed, throwing high enough, others did not and as the brigades broke a domino effect took hold. Urabi Pasha now called on the reserve line to "Follow me" and, cajoling it along, led it to the front, but even his popularity could not combat the growing Arab fatalism. Urabi's counter-attack faltered against the steady rifle fire of the British line and was soon halted. Seeing this, the British battalion commanders unilaterally ordered their men to press forward with renewed vigour. It was all finally too much for the Egyptian fellahin who turned and ran.

The weakness of the Egyptian deployment became clearer as the sun rose higher; the best troops were now largely overwhelmed or broken and the rest of the army were thinking long and hard about their situation. It was, and remains, Urabi's considered opinion that if the poorer troops had been in the outposts and redoubts the rout would have still happened, but it would have been more a question of the order of failure rather than magnitude. The rebuff of the Egyptian counter-attacks precipitated a retreat that became a rout: the bulk of the Egyptian army turned and ran for Cairo or headed for the desert where Drury-Lowe and the British cavalry waited eagerly.

It was all over by breakfast time on the table, suppertime in reality (or what passes for reality in these parts) so a repast was served. The victorious British officers took their chance and thoroughly debriefed their Egyptian counterparts, pumping them on the likelihood and advisability of incorporating the Egyptian troops into the British Army for any future fighting in the troubled Sudan.



# A Map of the Mahdist Wars





*“Why did the long-expected steamers with the English troops not come? Did their commanders not know Khartoum, and the lives of all in it, were hanging by a thread? In vain did I, and thousands of others, wait for the shrill whistle of the steamer, and for the booming of the guns announcing that the English had arrived...”*

R. Slatin Pasha, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*



FIERCE TRIBESMAN SLITHER FORWARD PRIOR TO A CHARGE



Rifle Brigade uniform,  
Omdurman period  
(Perry collection)

*“Mohammed Ahmed... was well aware that religion was the only possible means of uniting all these... widely diversifying tribes who were at continual feud with each other; he therefore declared himself the ‘Mahdi el Muntazer’, thus at once creating himself a personality which must be superior to all others, and hoping by this means to drive out of the country the hated Turks, Egyptians and Europeans.”*

R. Slatin Pasha, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*



MOHAMMED AHMAD, THE MAHDI



# Anatomy of a Disaster

Lieutenant General William Hicks Pasha, commanding the Egyptian forces of His Highness Muhammed Tewfik Pasha, was warned this moment would come. When he arrived in Khartoum on March 4<sup>th</sup> 1883, Colonel John D.H. Stewart of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars stood patiently by while Hicks observed the formalities, then let the new commander know in no uncertain terms that the Sudan was in ferment and the forces opposing Hicks were not to be underestimated. Stewart was also singularly unimpressed with the Egyptian troops around Khartoum who were demoralized almost to the point of complete uselessness. Now it was November 5<sup>th</sup>, Guy Fawkes Day back in England, and the furious Hicks stood in a dusty field 200 miles from any safety or support, with a sword in one hand and a revolver in the other, slashing and firing at the hordes of Mahdists around him who were closing in for the kill. This expedition to punish the Mahdi had been a total disaster.

## THE MAHDI

Trouble was already brewing along Egypt's southern frontiers in 1881, even as Britain prepared to intervene militarily in Egyptian affairs. The Egyptians had made a complete hash of their imperial foray into the Sudan and the region was rife with corruption and discontent; it was also ripe to explode given the right circumstances and a dynamic leader. On 29 June 1881, that moment arrived with the proclamation by Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah that he was the Mahdi, Islam's redeemer come to champion his religion and cleanse the Muslim world of heretics and the infidel. His movement, the Mahdiyya caught on like wildfire and burned through the Sudanese countryside, especially south and east of the capital of Khartoum.

The Mahdi was the son of a boat-builder raised to believe in his family's lineage from the prophet Muhammad. But joinery was not in the Mahdi's future and he opted instead for a life of religious asceticism. He studied with the most prominent religious leaders in the Sudan and by 1870 was considered one of them. That year, he built a mosque on Aba Island and settled down to teach, but his fundamentalism pushed him inexorably to his decision to declare himself the Mahdi. By then he already had a large following amongst the Sudan's disaffected whom the Mahdi called his Ansar. Not everyone accepted the Mahdi's claims, but the high-handed approach of the Egyptian government played into his hands. Their first attempt to arrest the Mahdi ended ignominiously and prompted him to call for jihad, holy war. Escalation into full-scale war soon followed.

*"Know that I am the Expected Messiah, the Successor of the Apostle of Allah. Thus, I have no need of the sultanate, nor of the Kingdom of Kordofan or elsewhere, nor of the wealth of the world and its vanity. I am, but the slave of Allah..."*

The Mahdi quoted in *Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, p139

Opinions differ on the Mahdi's generalship. He was slow to adopt rifles and guns on religious grounds, although pragmatism soon took over against a modern rifle-armed enemy. On the other hand, no effort to get rid of him even came close. The Mahdi was blessed with some very useful subordinates, most notably Osman Digna who caused more than a few headaches for the British and Egyptians around the Red Sea ports. Ultimately, though, the Mahdi relied mostly on the fanaticism and belief of his followers, who soon numbered in their tens of thousands. The more successful missions he could mount, moreover, the more tribes fell under his influence, and the more land and resources fell into his zone of control.

The year 1883 would prove pivotal for the Mahdiyya. First there was the smashing of an Egyptian army at El Obeid and subsequent siege of that town; then there was the uprising around the Red Sea port of Suakin that would finally awaken the British lion. Both of those events persuaded powerful tribes such as the Hadendowa to throw in their lot with the Mahdi. While all of this was going on, Colonel William Hicks Pasha arrived in Khartoum and the Mahdi prepared to meet him in battle.

## COLONEL WILLIAM HICKS

William Hicks joined the British army at 19 and became a career soldier, serving almost all of his time in India. He fought in the Indian Mutiny and in Abyssinia, but most of his service was spent in those tedious administrative duties so necessary for maintaining the Empire. He retired in 1880 at the age of 50, but soon returned to military service, this time for the Khedive in Egypt. Hicks was the stereotypical Victorian British officer in many ways; he was personally brave, believed wholeheartedly in discipline and loyalty – which didn't stop him from holding a particular dislike for Wolseley – and he was an effective administrator. Hicks also held the Victorian belief in getting to grips with disobedient natives in battle as soon as practicable and showing them exactly the distinction between the ruler and the ruled. Unfortunately for Hicks, all of those laudable attributes for Indian service would ultimately play a part in the disaster into which he would soon blunder.

## DISASTER LOOMS

Hicks arrived in Cairo in January 1883 full of optimism mixed with grandiose visions of personal advancement; a KCMG surely, and titles, Lord and Lady Hicks. How sweet that all sounded. His first review of his troops went well and the British administrators acted with due civility. Hicks took charge of a sizeable army that included Turks and Armenians, and he had a small cadre of British officers that he hoped would help get things organized. Hicks did not lack for firepower either and he was especially excited about his machine-gun and Krupp artillery batteries. This was all going to go rather well indeed! By the end of that month, however, reality was setting in and the tone for the coming campaign would be set.

The new commander, to his great discomfort, discovered rather quickly that his army was deeply depressed at the thought of being shuffled off to their slaughter in the Sudan. They had also not been paid in months, a situation Hicks tried to alleviate with little success. Moreover, militarily, they were next to useless, according to Hicks, when it came to firing their weapons or manning machine-guns and artillery. A distinct lack of cavalry and the Khedive's quartermaster's reluctance to spend money



## *William Hicks and the Battle of Shaikan, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1883*



THE MAHDI HATCHES A PLAN TO CONFOUND THE EGYPTIAN INVADERS

on decent horses did not help matters. One had to do one's duty however, so Hicks was soon on his way to Suakin where on his arrival it was coffee and sherbet all around! A quick advance down through the desert to Khartoum then it was on to victory. What could possibly go wrong? Hicks would soon find out.

It did not take too many days, if not hours, under the Sudanese desert sun for Hicks to grasp the enormity of his undertaking. It seems the baking heat quickly exhausted Hicks' patience and any sympathy he might have had for his army evaporated quicker than the sweat off his brow. In his letters to the future 'Lady' Hicks, the General pointed out his army's shortcomings; the Egyptians were hopeless and lacking patriotism, loyalty, and courage; there was not an ounce of discipline or honour among them and that included the officers; and Hicks thought most of them were a bunch of cowardly skunks! His Bashi-Bazooks, fierce Turkish irregulars in Egyptian service, liked fighting, so that was good, but they would soon prove they were also a bunch of thieves and murderers – Hicks would describe them as "ferrets in a rabbit warren". By the beginning of March, Hicks was already sick of being lied to and deceived. Then news arrived that el-Obeid had fallen with the loss of the 7,000 strong Egyptian garrison and all their weapons. This was all getting rather serious.

Hicks' troubles continued after he arrived in Khartoum. The Egyptian commander on the spot, Sulciman Pasha, was full of "flattery and humbug", but refused to carry out any of Hicks' orders while seemingly keen to do so. Hicks' English officers were also not shaping up as planned; for some reason one of them, Major Martin, a giant of over six feet tall, had taken a liking to thrashing the servants for no good reason Hicks could see; none of them had any staff experience; and all of them seemed prone to debilitating ailments. The single good thing Hicks could find in Khartoum was the seemingly ubiquitous donkey that provided the only effective form of transport in the city. A more serious problem was Hicks finding out how

badly the Egyptians had fared at the hands of the Mahdi since 1881 – they had lost 16,300 men, 17,700 rifles, 16 cannons, and 5 million rounds of ammunition. Faced with those difficulties, Hicks tried to resign more than once, foreseeing the disaster that was surely coming, but he was persuaded by Cairo to stay and complete the mission. He did finally manage to get rid of that "obstructive old fossil" Suleiman Pasha, but only after Hicks threatened to quit for good.

His Egyptians continued to endear themselves to Hicks. His letters home were full of his inner thoughts on his command: the Egyptians were dolts and fools, he wrote, a rabble, a flock of frightened sheep who took orders as suggestions and ignored those they didn't like; his English officers, who were supposed to be dishing out the orders, were as helpless as babies; they once managed to lose all their horses while sleeping, and whenever it rained they looked like "drowned rats". Even the newspaper reporters sent out to cover Hicks' triumph proved to be a nuisance, with O'Donovan of the *Daily News* a particular drunken handful. Nevertheless, Hicks was resolved to take this shambles out to battle and he got his wish on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April at Abu Zed. The only formation his Egyptians would fight in was the square, so that was how they were drawn up at dawn that day when the Mahdists attacked. Much to his surprise and immense relief, Hicks watched his army cut down the plucky tribesmen by the dozen until the assault melted away into the heat of the day. Maybe there was at least some hope for this command after all.

If Hicks could have taken on the Mahdi that Spring he might have stood a chance of winning, but the Mahdi had gone south and Hicks was stuck in Khartoum to wait out the Summer. He also calculated that he needed more cavalry, more reinforcements, and more supplies. The cavalry arrived in July, but only 300 of them and a rum lot they were too; those reinforcements that came did so bound in chains to stop them running away, although that didn't stop some of them; and



Hicks could never get enough supplies and in any case could not get the Egyptians to organize a decent system of resupply when the army was in the field. He continued to heap vitriol on his command through the hot Summer months: incompetence, imbecility, cowardice, and apathy were all virtues amongst them, Hicks wrote, and tellingly they looked upon him as an idiot. Still, one must hope for the best he mused on 21 July, but his situation would only get worse. In August, Hicks complained to Cairo that he had no money, no forage for his horses, no transport, no information, his garrisons were in a state of mutiny, and enemy agents swarmed around Khartoum. The news of the Mahdist uprising around Suakin also caused Hicks consternation. He had to get his army out to fight, but when?

Without seeing much improvement in conditions, Hicks resolved to begin his campaign in September. His objective was el-Obeid, 200 miles away, where he hoped to restore order and use the town as a base for further operations. He left Khartoum on the 8<sup>th</sup> with around 11,000 men and 5,000 camels and advanced painfully slowly down to Dueim. All along the way he muttered to himself in Arabic; “stand firm, aim low” as if his army would take that in by some form of desert osmosis! He also pondered the ‘minor’ issue of providing a safe haven for his camels inside a single square when the inevitable crunch came. The temperature hit 105 degrees, then 108, then 110, and his army could barely cover 10 miles in a day’s march, although a day in this heat meant just over four hours and was usually done by 10am. Everywhere around Hicks stupidity reigned. In one example, Hicks found his camel guards were tying their rifles directly onto the beasts without seemingly pausing to think what they would do if they stampeded. Then his Bashi-Bazooks, who were supposed to be out gathering intelligence about the proposed route, decided that looting villages and attacking women were more entertaining activities, and they were selling captured weapons back to the Arabs. Finally, Hicks almost broke down in despair when he found his Bazooks were eating the camels!

Nevertheless, Hicks’s expedition arrived in Dueim on 20 September where much to his surprise he found the garrison of 2,400 dressed resplendently in new white uniforms. Without much of a pause, Hicks added them to his army and they all set off into the desert to find the Mahdi and give him a damn good

thrashing. He couldn’t find the Mahdi, but the Mahdi had found him: within days of his departure Hicks realized his army was surrounded by Mahdist cavalry and another force of around 3,000 Mahdists were trailing along behind him. Water also eluded the Egyptians and by the beginning of October Hicks’ army was reduced to drinking rain water out of puddles. Moreover, it was clear his scouts were leading him further and further astray into unknown enemy territory while behind him the Mahdists moved to cut him off from any source of relief. On 4 October, Hicks’ little army came to a halt 16 miles from the town of Sarakhana. Hicks did not know what lay ahead and he did not know what to do next. He was never heard from again.

### THE BATTLE OF SHAIKAN

For a month after his final dispatch, Hicks’ army maintained some sort of progress towards el-Obeid. All the while, the Mahdi gathered his forces, waiting for the right place and moment to strike. In the meantime, his soldiers buzzed around, firing into the Egyptians day and night almost with impunity, adding to the torment of Hicks’ parched and exhausted troops. On 3 November, the Mahdist attacks intensified until finally, on a semi-wooded plain near el-Obeid, the Mahdi gave the signal for a major assault.

At the first sign of attack, Hicks drew his army into three squares to form a triangle where each could theoretically support the others. The baggage was probably in between the two rear squares and what little cavalry Hicks had he deployed on his flanks. More than 40,000 Mahdists poured in from three sides and the Egyptians, who had stood before against a Mahdist attack, crumbled under the overwhelming odds, Hicks’ exhortations to stand firm and fire low seemingly ignored. Chaos and confusion reigned; soldiers fired wildly into their own ranks as well as the enemy’s; others dropped to their knees begging for mercy that was not forthcoming. The cavalry along with Hicks and his mounted officers cut a path through the Mahdists, but were soon trapped and cut down to a man, Hicks shooting and slashing in the finest Victorian tradition until the very end. It was all over inside thirty minutes. Barely an Egyptian survived the slaughter; all their predictions of disaster having come tragically true.



APPEARING AS IF FROM THE CRUSADES, HICKS' ELITE BODYGUARD PREPARES FOR INSPECTION





The Egyptian Army struggled to cope with the ferocity of the Mahdist charge. It was widely recognised by Gordon and others that the pick of the khedival troops were the black Sudanese regular battalions.

ORDERS OF BATTLE

— EGYPTIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE —

ARMY COMMANDER:  
LIEUTENANT-GENERAL WILLIAM HICKS PASHA

Cavalry: Major Baron G.B. Seckendorff

- Hicks’ Bodyguard Turco-Circassian Heavy Cavalry (100)
- Bashi-bazook Irregular Horse (400)
- Egyptian Regular Cavalry (500)
- Arab Irregular Horse (50)

Infantry: [unknown]

- 1<sup>st</sup> Egyptian Infantry Regiment [1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions] (2,460)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Egyptian Infantry Regiment [1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions] (2,460)
- 4<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry Regiment [1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions] (2,460)
- Shaiqia Irregular Infantry (800)

Artillery: Colonel Abbas Bey Wahbi

- 4 Krupp 80mm Field Guns
- 6 Nordenfeldt machine-guns

Transport

- Baggage-Camels (5,000 animals)
- Horses (500 animals)
- Civilian Camp Followers (2,000)

MAHDIST ARMY

ARMY COMMANDER:  
MUHAMMAD AHMAD

Trailing Force

- Abd al-Halim Musad wad al-Hashmi
- Mahdist Infantry (3,000)

Main Body: Muhammad Ahmad

Mahdist Infantry (40,000)

- Divided amongst three sub-organizations:
- Black Flag
- Green Flag
- Red Flag





## WARGAMING THE BATTLE OF SHAIKAN

Taking the part of William Hicks Pasha is a daunting task for any *Black Powder* enthusiast. The men under your command have terrible morale; they are not the best trained soldiers in history; and they are far from home and deep in hostile territory. Nevertheless, you have considerable firepower at your disposal. If you can organize quickly, hold on, and deliver some blows to the Mahdists, the tide might quickly turn in your favour, but it will take all your skill to make that happen.

For Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi, this could be the easiest victory of your short military career, or the end of it. Does the Egyptian Khedive seriously believe that sending a few thousand soldiers can sweep away your historic Revolution? He will soon find out otherwise. But this English officer has field guns, machine-guns, and thousands of rifles: you will need to get in amongst the Egyptians quickly and deal the death blow, or it could be your bones bleaching in the sun rather than the infidels'.

### Missions:

- **Hicks Pasha:** You must break the back of the Mahdist Rebellion and that means defeating the Mahdi's army in the field. If the expedition turns badly, you must try and get out alive.
- **Muhammad Ahmad:** Destroy the invader, utterly and without mercy. The revolution depends on it.

### The Table:

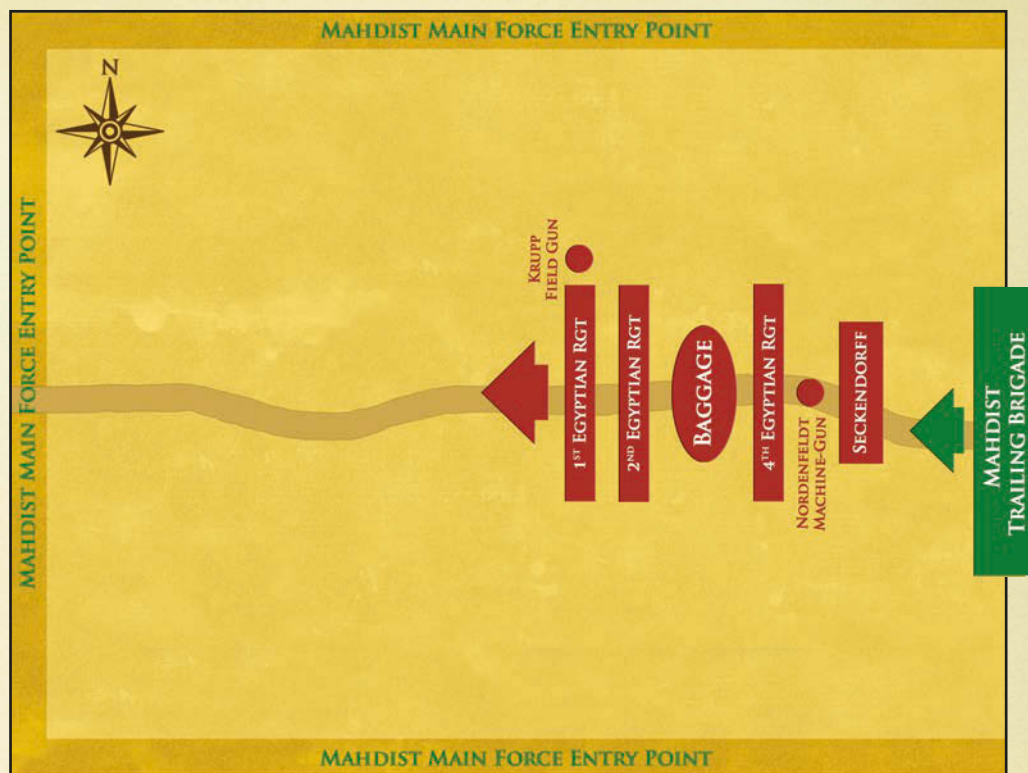
The landscape for the Battle of Shaikan is one of the easiest to reproduce. The long edges of the 8' x 6' table are set north and south. The landscape is flat desert interspersed with thickets of thorn-bushes liberally spread around, particularly near the table edges. To help with directional movement, place a narrow trail running east to west on the table.



MAHDIST INFANTRY

### Deployment:

The Egyptian force arrives on the table by order, marching from east to west. The Mahdists begin the game off-table, but ready to arrive on their next turn, except for the trailing force which is off-table to the east and can only arrive two turns after the Egyptian column is entirely on the table. The main Mahdist force can only enter the table from the northern, western and southern sides.







THE EGYPTIANS NOT ONLY HAD TO FACE SHARP SPEARS AND STEEL SWORDS. RIFLEMEN SPRING FROM COVER TO GIVE FIRE



REGULARS IN TROUBLE! FUZZIE WUZZIES CLOSE IN FOR THE KILL...





HICKS PASHA'S MEN MARCH DEEPER INTO FOREBODING ENEMY TERRITORY

## BLACK POWDER FORCES

### -HICKS PASHA'S EXPEDITIONARY FORCE-

#### COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF:

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL WILLIAM HICKS PASHA

#### Cavalry Brigade: Major Baron G.B. Seckendorff

- 1 unit of 5 Turco-Circassian Heavy Cavalry
- 1 unit of 8 Bashi-bazook Horse
- 1 unit of 8 Egyptian Regular Cavalry
- 1 unit of 5 Arab Horse

#### Infantry Brigade: Colonel Forsythe

##### Commander: Colonel Weir

- 3 units of 16 infantry – 1<sup>st</sup> Egyptian Infantry Regiment [1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions]

##### Commander: Colonel Moyes

- 3 units of 16 infantry – 2<sup>nd</sup> Egyptian Infantry Regiment [1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions]

##### Commander: Colonel Fenchurch

- 3 units of 16 infantry – 4<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry Regiment [1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions]
- 1 unit of 16 infantry – Shaiqia Infantry

#### Artillery (with Infantry Brigade): Colonel Abbas Bey Wahbi

- 1 Krupp 80mm Field Gun
- 1 Nordenfeldt machine-gun

### THE MAHDIST ARMY

#### COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF:

MUHAMMAD AHMAD, THE MAHDI

#### Trailing Brigade:

Commander: Abd al-Halim Musad wad al-Hashmi

- 3 units of 30 infantry – Mahdist Spearmen

#### Main Force: Muhammad Ahmad

##### Commander: Yehia El-Gamal

- Black Flag - 5 units of 30 infantry – Mahdist Spearmen

##### Commander: Mahmoud Abdel

- Green Flag - 5 units of 30 infantry – Mahdist Spearmen

##### Commander: Ahmed Habib

- Red Flag – 5 units of 30 infantry – Mahdist Spearmen

*“...the bulk of the force was naked humanity, mad with rage, and armed with the spear and the sword...”*

Rudyard Kipling, *The Light That Failed*



Egyptian Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit                           | Type      | Armament               | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special                                   |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-------------------------------------------|
| Turko-Circassian Heavy Cavalry | Cavalry   | Sabre                  | 6            | –        | 3+     | 2       | Heavy Cavalry +1, Ferocious Charge, Small |
| Bashi-bazook Horse             | Cavalry   | Breech-loading carbine | 4            | 2        | 4+     | 3       | Skirmish                                  |
| Egyptian Regular Cavalry       | Cavalry   | Breech-loading carbine | 6            | 2        | 4+     | 3       | Skirmish                                  |
| Arab Horse                     | Cavalry   | Breech-loading carbine | 4            | 2        | 5+     | 2       | Skirmish, Small                           |
| Egyptian Infantry              | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 3            | 2        | 4+     | 3       | –                                         |
| Shaiqia Infantry               | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 3            | 3        | 5+     | 3       | –                                         |
| Machine-gun Unit               | Infantry  | Nordenfelt machine-gun | 1            | Special  | 3+     | 1       | –                                         |
| Egyptian Field Gun             | Artillery | Field gun howitzer     | 1            | 3-2-1    | 4+     | 1       | –                                         |
| Field Gun & MG Handlers        | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 1            | 1        | 4+     | 1       | Tiny                                      |

**Staff Ratings:** Hicks Pasha has a staff rating of 9. Other European and Egyptian commanders on the expedition have a staff rating of 8.

All the Egyptian troops are armed with Remington rolling-block rifles. The cavalry are armed with the carbine version.

The Nordenfelt crew have high morale due to their faith in their new battle-winning weapon.

The Egyptian field guns are rifled field gun howitzers.

All Infantry units in the Egyptian force are allowed to form square against charging Mahdist spearmen as if charged by cavalry.

Special Rules

**Artillery:** Artillery pieces and machine-guns are allowed to move, limber, and unlimber as if they were horse artillery, but with 12" per move rather than 18". When not pulling the guns, excess crew form a tiny unit of Gendarmerie. The unit must remain within 3" of their gun if they are to continue to act as pullers in following moves. Failure to do so will result in the gun being reduced to manhandling only.

**Army Integrity:** Any troops not on the table within three moves of the arrival of the cavalry are deemed to be lost to the Mahdist trailing brigade. Also, if the Egyptians form squares, each square has to be moved separately and treated as an independent command.

**Cavalry Screen:** The Egyptian cavalry screen can be no more than three moves ahead of the infantry columns when they arrive on the table; i.e. when the cavalry arrives on table, the infantry must arrive within three turns of the cavalry no matter the tactical situation.

**Ferocious Charge:** Re-roll misses in combat following a charge.

**Heavy Cavalry +1:** Add 1 to the combat rolls.

Mahdist Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit             | Type               | Armament | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special           |
|------------------|--------------------|----------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-------------------|
| Mahdist Spearmen | Irregular Infantry | Spears   | 6            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Warband, Fanatics |

**Staff Ratings:** Muhammad Ahmad has a staff rating of 10. All other Mahdist commanders have a staff rating of 8.

The shooting factor is for thrown spears.

**Special Rules**

**Fanatics:** Re-roll misses in combat following a charge, and charged enemy must make a break test.





TRAMP... TRAMP... TRAMP...

## BATTLE REPORT

For our *Black Powder* Battle of Shaikan, we fought on the basis of Herioters -v- Dumfries Academy Old Boys. As it was an away fixture for the Edinburgh school they had choice of sides and decided to stiffen their upper lips and be the British. The country boys happily took on the role of the heathen tribesmen.

Hicks and his subordinate commander Seckendorff chose a very cautious plan; the Egyptians would advance in column, but change to square at the first sign of trouble – it was preferable they thought to form square unnecessarily rather than take a chance and leave it too late. Hicks had gambled that the Mahdists must attack his force so he ordered all the troops to arrive on-table as soon as possible and once they reached the centre set up camp. To that end, the Egyptian infantry planned to arrive echeloned from the right with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment in the lead, followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup>, then the 4<sup>th</sup>. The artillery would accompany the 1<sup>st</sup> with the machine-guns bringing up the rear of the 4<sup>th</sup>. Seckendorff and the cavalry would march behind the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment with the Bashi-Bazooks as Tail-end Charlie, keeping a weather eye on the Mahdist Trailing Force. Hicks wanted to keep a clear field of fire, so ordered that no cavalry was to wander in front of the foot at any time. If circumstances permitted, and the Mahdists allowed, Hicks planned to form one large square with the baggage in the centre: if they didn't then the baggage would be protected as best it could by the cavalry and the infantry forming individual squares.

Hicks was right to worry: the Mahdi had no option but to be aggressive and attack the Egyptians at the first opportunity. The Mahdi's plan called for his entire force to attack in a single block from the south, driving in the Egyptian squares and massacring them all. The Trailing Force would join in the main assault, attack the baggage, or draw off the cavalry – as long as they joined in the battle, the Mahdi was not overly concerned what they did. His fate lay with the three banners of tribesmen apparently deployed to come on the southern table edge from left to right, Green, Black, and Red.

The Mahdi's plan also relied on timing and bluff; therefore, this writer took on the role of umpire. We don't usually use umpires, so I also took command of the Egyptian baggage train to avoid putting Hicks on his guard over any potential subterfuge – such are the vagaries of fighting in the Sudan. The other commands were distributed on the basis of

preference or a coin toss, and for ease of identification the commander of the Egyptian Infantry Brigade was decreed to be Colonel Forsythe, formerly of the Indian Army. Hicks now trusted to science and the training of his men; the Mahdi to the Will of Allah and Dervish cunning.

The bulk of the Egyptian force entered the table on Turn One, with the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the machine-guns following on in Turn Two. The Mahdist trailing force came hard on their heels, not harrying as such, but simply being a nuisance; Abd al-Halim Musad wad al-Hashmi was taking his responsibilities seriously and shaped to take the first opportunity to attack as he knew that his spiritual leader with the main body was now close to hand. The Egyptian force advanced deeper onto the table. Hicks, Seckendorff and Forsythe, never men plagued by the jim-jams, remained confident, but the foot, shaky to begin with, stayed twitchy.

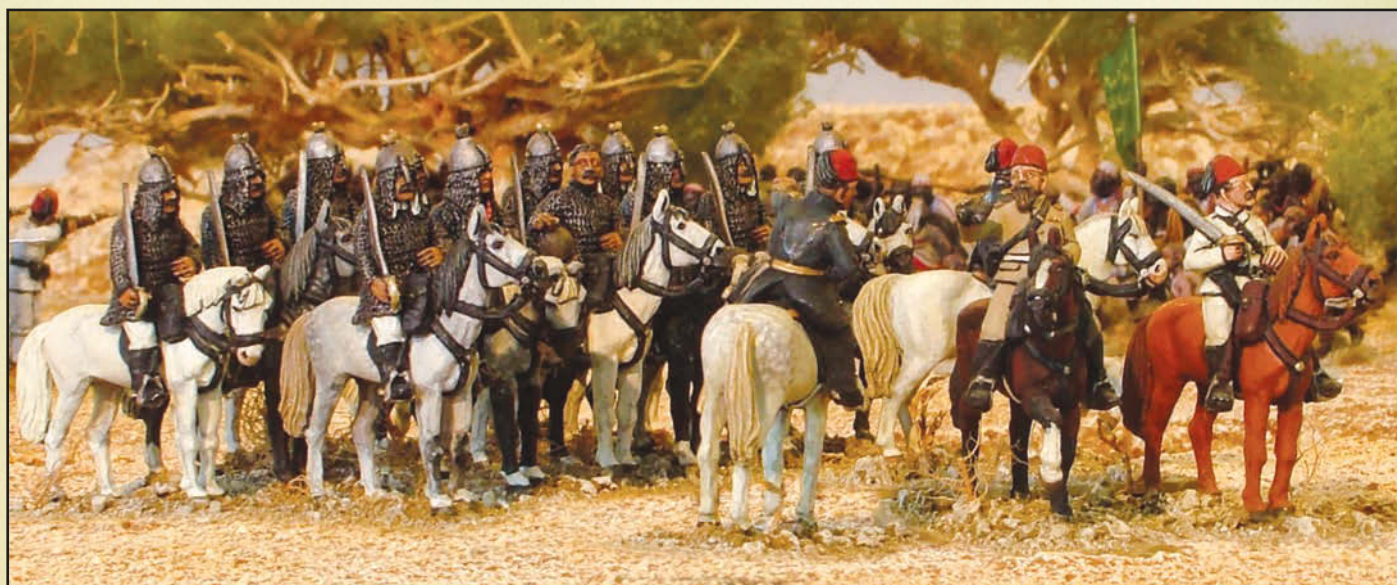
The southern table edge erupted on Turn Three when the Mahdist banners came on table in a cloud of dust, trumpets, and ululation. The Mahdists immediately stormed towards the slightly startled Egyptian 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry. They tested to form square and passed despite the Mahdist 'Fanatical charge', placing the machine-guns in the corners of the square while the infantrymen dressed their ranks along the sides. Hicks ordered his remaining regiments to form into a single square, a time consuming manoeuvre but – now that he was sure he knew where the Mahdists were – a better defensive formation. The artillery was ordered to form up in the corners and fire canister when ready. Abd al-Halim with the trailing force took this as his cue for action and pushed towards the rear of the Egyptian force. The vigilant Seckendorff intercepted him with the Circassian and Regular cavalry however, and a vigorous melee ensued. The baggage, meanwhile, fled for the safety of the main square which was under the command of Forsythe, although Hicks was present. Throughout Turn Three, this writer rolled the occasional dice and studied tables in the *Black Powder* rulebook that had little to do with this particular fight, all the while muttering about the problems caused by camels shedding loads. If any nods and winks passed between him and the Mahdi, the British missed them.

Just then, the Mahdist foot to the south came under seemingly galling fire and the vast majority of the figures were removed from the table, but not as casualties; they were in fact a thin line of bannermen, trumpeters, and goatherds dragging





A HASTY CONFERENCE BEFORE THE CLASH



"TIME FOR A CHARGE, GENTLEMEN"



HARD PRESSED REGULARS ABOUT TO BE OUTFLANKED



branches that stirred up enough dust to give the impression of an attacking army. Seckendorff muttered that if he had sailed under false colours in this manner he would have a rather awkward interview next time he visited his club. The Mahdi simply shrugged and suggested he change clubs.

The actual Mahdist attack promptly came from the north behind the real banners and bore down on the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment that was still forming up on that side of the square. The Mahdi chose to command rather than lead and took up position on a nearby rise to observe. Unaware as yet of the ruse to the south, and all too aware that there now appeared to be twice as many Mahdists as before, the Egyptian 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment (barely) held their nerve, letting fly with a ragged volley. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, meanwhile, was still being cajoled into position, but it looked like it would win the race. Some of the baggage made it in too, albeit pursued by Mahdists, while the rest were either cut down or driven off into the desert. Hicks's regular cavalry was engaged with the Trailing Force while all this was going on, and the Bashi-Bazooks claimed they were rounding up the stray camels, though to the uninformed observer it looked suspiciously like looting.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, by now in splendid isolation, began the slow march in square towards Forsythe and the brigade square, unimpeded by the Mahdist screen to their south. Things began to take a turn for the worse for Seckendorff when his cavalry ran out of steam, resulting in their being swamped by the larger numbers of Mahdists – not for the last time, the Egyptians learned you can't disorder a unit which doesn't understand the concept. The unfortunate Seckendorff was cut down around this time, his matched pistols proving insufficient against dozens of Sons of Africa with shovel-headed spears and long swords.

The fate of the battle now rested with Forsythe and Hicks in the brigade square currently being assailed on three sides by angry Mahdists. When a small number of tribesmen broke in the Egyptians started to panic and lose order. The artillery for its part cut swathes through the Mahdist ranks, but the assault continued undaunted and the Egyptian foot could not fire fast enough to stop the storm. When the Mahdists emerged from among the camels like the Greeks at Troy, the first battalion of Egyptian foot broke and ran. Like collapsing dominoes, the battalions to either side were over-run or broke and the rout was on as that broken brigade was simply the first. Forsythe tried to personally lead a battalion in the centre of the square and was last seen wrestling hand-to-hand with a giant blackamoor before he was taken to ground.

Hicks tried to cut his way out to the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, but could not get out of the swirling melee. The Egyptian cavalry did manage to cut their way out and halted a short distance away to weigh up their options. The Circassians, on heavier horses and wearing armour, struggled to outdistance the Mahdist tribesmen, but just managed to do so by a length or so.

At this point the game was all but over for the Egyptians. Darkness was still an hour away, but while the 4<sup>th</sup> stood firm, they did so like Horatius on the bridge. The cavalry sought only to save themselves and the infantry's brigade mates were either dead or in flight. The battle was declared a convincing Mahdist victory therefore, as the only Egyptian unit still on table was the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment whose options were all rather unappealing and along the lines of being slaughtered either in darkness or at first light. It was not a bloodless victory though; the Mahdists had taken about 40% casualties, almost all to firepower, as once in melee they usually prevailed in fairly short order.



"SELL YOUR LIVES DEARLY!" ONE OF MANY GALLANT LAST STANDS



Rather than prolong their agony we drew stumps and repaired to the library for a convivial nightcap. Seckendorff, who had of course had nothing else to do for several turns, had been testing the quality of this writer's cellar, and continued to complain about the Mahdists' ruse. He was finally silenced by the Mahdi's surprisingly classical "*Necessitas non habet legem*" – necessity has no rules!

*"Perhaps the worst army that has ever marched to war."*

Winston Churchill  
on the Hicks Expedition



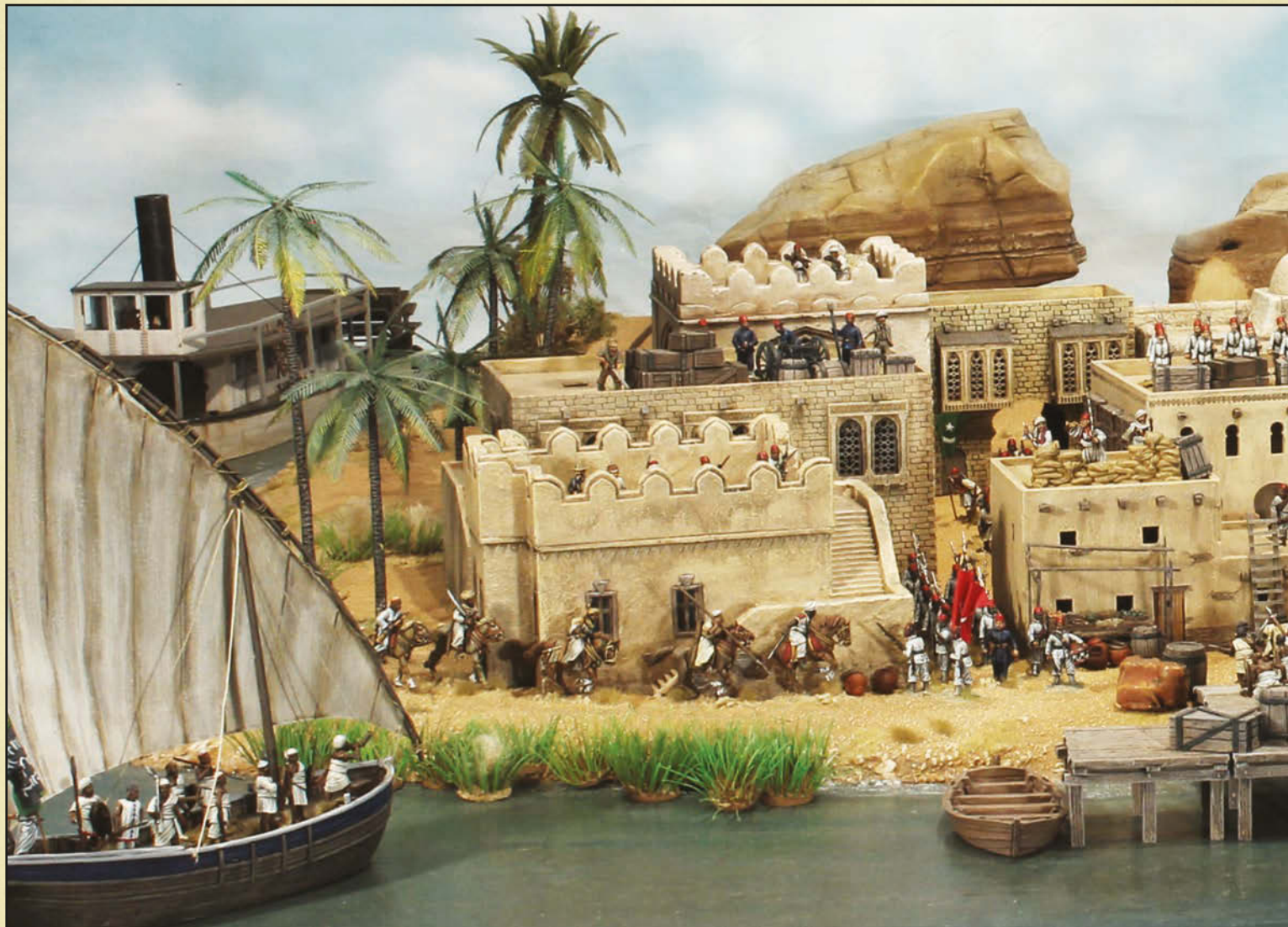
WITH FLUTTERING BANNERS THE AVENGING MAHDISTS SWARM FORWARD



HICKS MEETS HIS END SURROUNDED BY THE FOE



# The Victorian Lion



‘CHINESE’ GORDON SURVEYS HIS FORTIFIED POSITIONS

In the midst of the clouds of war covering the Sudan between 1881 and 1885 stood two men locked in an epic contest of wills. One was the Mahdi, the embodiment of charismatic religious fanaticism and everything the Victorians feared and loathed. The other was Charles Gordon, the archetypal Victorian hero who, at five-foot-five-inches tall, towered over all others. The site of their struggle was the Sudanese capital of Khartoum on the confluence of the two Nile rivers, White and Blue. Gordon arrived there in 1884, just in time to watch the Mahdi's followers surround and smother the city, but he held out, hoping and praying for a relieving force that would never arrive. The siege of Khartoum, though outwardly successful, also led to the death of the Mahdi and ultimately the end of his Revolution: it did not pay to incur the wrath of the Victorians, who never forgot a slight or left an insult unattended.

## THE MAHDI

By March 1884 most of the Sudan was under the Mahdi's authority, but full control eluded him; for that, he needed to capture Khartoum. And to do that, the Mahdi needed to

overcome the stout resistance of the Khartoum garrison sustained by the indomitable spirit of Gordon.

## ‘CHINESE’ GORDON

A fiction writer would be hard-pressed to invent a more perfect Victorian than Charles Gordon. He was by all accounts indefatigable and indomitable, and wore an often indefinable expression behind a most startling pair of piercing light-blue eyes. Gordon believed himself an instrument of his God as much as any Mahdi, which made him an extreme determinist and imbued him with a single-minded certainty of purpose – while in Africa he refused to catch malaria, and didn't. He was also a classic Victorian paternalist who took the role of father figure to the tribal peoples among whom he worked in China, India, and Africa. He reserved his legendary temper and impatience for subordinates who routinely failed to live up to Gordon's expectations. He was a distinguished soldier, of course, and an engineer ideally suited for building an empire. Throw in a passion for drinking tea and smoking cigarettes and a host of eccentricities and quirks and this sketch of a Victorian legend is just about complete.



## *Charles Gordon and the Battle for Khartoum, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1884*



ARAB DHOWS MAKE ADMIRABLE ASSAULT CRAFT

Gordon made his reputation in China during the Taiping Rebellion of the 1860s. He took command over the 'Ever Victorious Army' on the death of its American commander and led it to a series of stunning victories for which the Emperor awarded him the coveted imperial yellow jacket. The British Army promoted Gordon to Lieutenant-Colonel and he was made a Companion of the Bath, cementing his status in the imperial hierarchy. He impressed the press and common people too and they soon referred to him as 'Chinese' Gordon. After China, Gordon poked around in England and the Crimea before the Khedive of Egypt called on him to perform a little service if he could; just a little matter of sorting out the Sudan, and while there snuff out the slave trade if you please. Gordon accepted and was Egypt bound early in 1874.

After a brief sojourn in Cairo, no doubt including many cups of tea, Gordon was off up the Nile. Fast forward two years and Gordon was on his way home again, having done much to establish links throughout the Sudan and on to Uganda and damaging the slave trade in the process. But the Khedive's governor in Sudan and Gordon did not get along, so Gordon

upped sticks and left and he would only go back if he could be Governor-General. The Khedive agreed and Gordon was back in the Sudan before he had time to clean the sand out of his shoes from his first trip. Through 1877 and the following year, Gordon worked his diplomatic magic with the tribes in the region and the King of Abyssinia, but there was only so much even Gordon could do and by 1880 he was an exhausted man in need of a rest.

Britain's pocket dynamo could not stay out of action for long and in 1880 the King of Belgium offered Gordon the governorship of the Congo. While pondering that offer, Gordon travelled to China to avert war with Russia before returning home to Britain. Then he was off again, to Mauritius, South Africa, and Palestine.

When the King of Belgium asked Gordon a second time to go to the Congo, Gordon agreed, but a crisis had sprung up in the Sudan while he was in London and the British Government asked him to oversee the evacuation of the Egyptian province. In January 1884, Gordon was once more on his travels, this time to Cairo, Khartoum, and destiny.

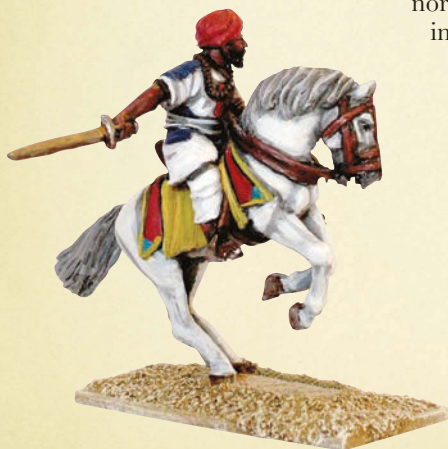


## THE SIEGE OF KHARTOUM

It was not the case that by going back to the Sudan Gordon walked into a gunpowder room with a lit match; the region had already exploded by the time the little legend arrived. The Mahdi was running riot south and east of Khartoum and one of his lieutenants, Osman Digna, was laying waste the land between Berber on the Nile and the Red Sea ports. Already at least one major Egyptian expedition led by a British officer lay scattered across the desert for the vultures, and Gordon did not help himself by telling potential allied tribal chiefs that he was here to evacuate the place, not save it. Gordon was therefore isolated even before he arrived in Khartoum and realized the extent of his peril. Nevertheless, the energetic Englishman succeeded in getting out a few thousand women and children before the dark Mahdist clouds enveloped the Sudanese capital. Gordon had no choice, but to dig in and await the relief force that would surely be sent soon by the British government. What he had not reckoned on was the British government's refusal to come to the aid of a subordinate who acted contrary to orders at every turn; Gordon, they argued, was not in the Sudan to fight the Mahdi, but to get everyone and himself out. When Gordon called for British troops to bolster his garrison, Gladstone's government were unimpressed: Gordon had made his bed, he could jolly well lie in it!

Taking stock of his defences, however, Gordon surmised that he was not in that bad a position: Khartoum was eminently defensible, sitting at the confluence of two great rivers. Gordon also used his engineering acumen to build strong defences in a six-mile semi-circle south of the town across the sector between the rivers. Thus, the capital was defended adequately on three sides as long as the rivers did not dry up. Moreover, Gordon had about 10,000 Sudanese and Egyptian troops at his disposal, who, although of shaky quality, needed no reminder of their fate if the Mahdists should get their hands on them. Finally, Gordon commandeered a small flotilla of river boats that he turned into armoured gunboats ready to rush to support any endangered areas. All of that preparation, however, did not stop Gordon from firing off acrimonious telegrams excoriating the Government for abandoning the Sudanese garrisons and demanding a relief force be sent forthwith.

The siege of Khartoum began in earnest on 13 March 1884 and within a month the Mahdists had cut Gordon's communications by telegraph and river. It was also becoming obvious that the Mahdi had tens of thousands of tribesmen at his disposal, making large forays increasingly dangerous. Indeed, Gordon attempted such a sortie from the defences soon after the city was isolated, but lost over 200 men. Moreover, the tribes north of Khartoum came out in support of the Mahdi, making it potentially more difficult for relief to get through or for a



successful breakout to work. Gordon's penchant for diplomacy also failed him because the Mahdi was not a tribal chief to be bargained with, but a messianic leader who intended to clear heresy out of the Islamic world and squash anyone getting in his way, including Gordon. The Mahdi's position was that Gordon could always convert to Islam and avoid the bloodshed that was coming. Gordon's answer is not recorded.

A man of such energy and restlessness as Gordon was not going to settle down and wait for help. Rather, he hit the Mahdists every chance he could get with small, well planned attacks. Gordon also oversaw rationing inside the city, and went so far as to print and sign his own Khartoum currency and distribute home-made medals; all of that to keep morale high while he stood on his Governor's palace roof and scanned the horizon for signs his country would not let him down. Across the way, the Mahdists continued to nibble away at the defences. An attack on the east bank of the White Nile on 3 July, for example, killed 300 of the besieged troops sent out to meet it. Then on 9 July, fortunes suddenly changed when Gordon launched a wildly successful raid that killed 1,200 Mahdists for the loss of only two men. Another victory followed for Gordon at the end of July and by the last days of Summer it appeared that this stoic little Englishman might be able to lift the siege through his own efforts. But Gordon knew temporary successes would not be enough; there were just too many Mahdists.

On 23 August, an increasingly desperate Gordon smuggled a message out begging for relief. By the time it got to England, Wolseley was already on his way, but events in Khartoum continued to worsen. In early September, a major diversionary attack against the Mahdists walked into a trap and 800 men vital to the city's defence were lost. The morale effect was much worse than the physical loss, however, and for the first time the Capital fell into despair, leaving even the ever-stoic Gordon in tears – Gordon would never have the upper hand against the Mahdi again. A second disaster befell Gordon when his trusted staff officer, Colonel J.D. Hammill Stewart of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars, was murdered trying to get a message through enemy lines. Then the Mahdi himself arrived outside Khartoum on 21 October, heralding a new escalation of the siege and bolstering morale among his troops.

Gordon woke at 3am on 12 November to the sound of heavy gunfire: the important garrison fort at Omdurman across the river was under severe attack and would surely fall. The gallant little fort held out for a while under intense siege, but the Mahdists were perceptibly tightening the noose around Khartoum. Within days, artillery and rifle fire began to play a melody on Gordon's palace compound and surrounding areas, but Gordon would not desert his post. Gordon's bravery was typical of him, but he knew the game was up. On 14 December, he wrote his last letter to his sister, informing her that the city could only hold out for ten more days. A second message he got out to Wolseley, but the great General was misled into believing he still had adequate time to relieve Khartoum when in reality he had none.

The Mahdi received news of the Mahdist defeat at Abu Klea on 21 January 1885 and, understanding the potential danger, prepared a final assault on Khartoum. He was helped by the receding Nile River that left a small gap in the southwest corner of Khartoum's defences. Just before dawn on 26 January, the Mahdi launched 40,000 men at the critical juncture and they forced their way through. The massacre of Khartoum began after 320 days of siege, its most notable victim the Victorian lion who went down sword in one hand, a revolver in the other, and defiant to the last.



ORDERS OF BATTLE

KHARTOUM GARRISON

ARMY COMMANDER: CHARLES GORDON

- Egyptian 1<sup>st</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> Regular Infantry (1,400)
- Black Sudanese Regular Infantry (2,300)
- Bashi-Bazooks (2,300)
- Citizen Levy (700)
- Artillery: 7-pounder Mountain Guns (12)
- Artillery: 20-pounder Krupp (2)
- Machine-guns (3)

MAHDIST ARMY (Conjectural)

ARMY COMMANDER:

MUHAMMAD AHMAD, THE MAHDI

- Three contingents of 10,000 under the Blue, Black and Red Flags
- Contingent under direct Mahdi control (20,000)



KHARTOUM ENVELOPED



BLACK SUDANESE MUSTER TO THE DEFENCE OF THE CITY



## WARGAMING KHARTOUM

As a game the storming of Khartoum is unlikely to be a competitive event. For the British player, there is little in the way of manoeuvre, and the only fun he is likely to have is selecting targets for his artillery.

We decided, therefore, that all the players would command Mahdist contingents competing to impress the Mahdi by capturing the city's defences and sending Gordon to his maker – no, not Perry Miniatures!

Although everyone was technically on the same side there were no obvious reasons why we could not introduce elements of competition and backstabbing, perhaps even outright treachery, so we did.

## Missions

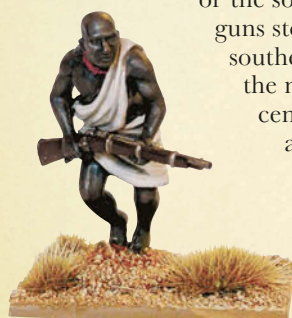
Each commander is allotted a zone in the Khartoum siegeworks. Their missions are to accumulate points through seizing certain objectives and, of course, to get Gordon – preferably before anyone else does.

## The Table

On our 8' x 6' table, we assembled as many buildings and as much 'clutter' as we could for the game and set this up in a rough triangle of the city with Gordon's villa in the centre next to some gardens, surrounded by rings of barricades and other defences. We represented the fort on the other bank of the Blue Nile using trenches and emplacements

## Deployment

The only forces on the table at the start of the game belong to the Khartoum garrison. The hapless defenders were set out as follows: A company of the Egyptian 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment occupied the fort on the other bank of the Blue Nile. The rest of that regiment manned the defences along the Blue Nile riverbank. The southern defences were manned by the 1<sup>st</sup> Sudanese on the western end, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sudanese in the middle and the 5<sup>th</sup> Egyptian to the east. The Bashi-Bazooks defended the White Nile and the Citizen Levy lounged around in reserve near Gordon's villa. Each regiment kept one company as a local reserve. The 20-pdr gun and the mountain gun took up residence in the centre of the southern defences, while the other guns stood watch at each corner of the southern defences and in the fort. Finally the machine-gun was placed in the centre of the western defences. As we all played Mahdists, decisions regarding the defenders' movement would be made by debate or acclaim.



## Special Rules

Certain *Black Powder* rules amendments have been created for this game:

- Victory points are awarded per faction if they achieve the following:
  - 50 for capturing Gordon
  - 30 for killing Gordon
  - 10 for capturing the fort
  - 10 for each field gun or machine-gun captured
  - 1 for each figure 'resurrected'
  - 10 for a commander not leading his faction – the *Risk to General* rules are to be strictly enforced.
- The defenders' morale is reasonably high to stiffen their resistance and make it more of a contest.
- The defenders' movement and reactions are controlled by a consensus of players not directly involved in that section of action. For example, if the Blue Flag Mahdist commander takes an action in his sector, two of the other players can agree to act as the defenders in that sector for that turn.
- Because of the numbers involved, units are resurrected as needed, but at a cost to that faction commander's victory points. If any Mahdist commander thinks he is running out of troops, he can resurrect units that have fallen casualty 12 inches behind his front line.
- The reserve defenders counter-attack at a time chosen by the players not facing them. This should be done at the moment least convenient for the attacking player, but this is so obvious I am embarrassed to point this out.
- The river counts as rough going and is crossed at half speed.



BLACK POWDER FORCES

GORDON’S DEFENDERS

- COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF: HUSSEIN SABET**
- 1<sup>st</sup> Egyptian Infantry – 4 companies each of 4 figures
- Commander: Saad el Shazly**
- 5<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry – 4 companies each of 4 figures
- Commander: Mounir Suleiman**
- 1<sup>st</sup> Sudanese Infantry – 4 companies each of 4 figures
- Commander: Omar Munim**
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Sudanese Infantry – 4 companies each of 4 figures
- Commander: Sami ibn Hafez**
- Bashi-Bazooks – 6 companies each of 4 figures
- Commander: Abu Seif-Eldeen**
- Citizen Levy – 2 companies each of 4 figures
  - Artillery – 1 20-pdr, 1 mountain gun, 3 field guns, 1 machine-gun

THE MAHDI’S BESIEGERS

- COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF: THE MAHDI**
- Green Banner ‘Houris’ Nether Regions’ – 120 figures
- Commander: Faisal al Saud**
- Red Banner ‘Allah’s Chosen Ones’ – 60 figures
- Commander Auda abn Tayl**
- Blue Banner ‘Sons of Camels’ – 60 figures
- Commander Ali ibn el Tarish**
- Black Banner ‘Accursed Dogs’ – 60 figures

For this game we have divided the defenders into company sized units of only four models each; however, we’ll give each of these units stats as if they were larger sized formations to represent the desperate do or die battle in which they are about to engage !

Khartoum Garrison: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit                | Type      | Armament             | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special                             |
|---------------------|-----------|----------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-------------------------------------|
| Sudanese            | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle | 3            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Steady                              |
| Egyptians           | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle | 3            | 2        | 5+     | 3       | Steady                              |
| Bashi-bazooks       | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle | 3            | 2        | 5+     | 2       | –                                   |
| Citizen Levy        | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle | 3            | 3        | 5+     | 2       | –                                   |
| Gardner Machine-Gun | Artillery | Gardner Gun          | 1            | Special  | 3+     | 1       | See <i>Black Powder</i> pages 82-83 |
| Artillery           | Artillery | Field Gun            | 1            | 1-2-1    | 3+     | 1       | Steady                              |

The 20-pdr gun, mountain gun and field guns all use the Artillery stats. The artillery only have a shooting score of 1 at close range to represent the indiscipline of the artillerymen and the fact that they abandoned their posts quite quickly during the battle. Captured artillery pieces may not be used against the defenders and are considered abandoned.

Special Rules

**Steady:** Automatically pass the first break test of the game.

Mahdist Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit             | Type     | Armament | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special           |
|------------------|----------|----------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-------------------|
| Mahdist Spearmen | Infantry | Spears   | 6            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Warband, Fanatics |

**Staff Ratings:** The Mahdi has a staff rating of 10. All other Mahdist commanders have a staff rating of 8.  
The shooting factor is for thrown spears.

Special Rules

**Fanatics:** Re-roll misses in combat following a charge, and charged enemy must make a break test.





*Gordon's flotilla of river steamers were vital assets in the long sustained defence of Khartoum. Fitted with improvised timber cladding and 'turrets', under the supervision of Gordon's chief of staff, Lt Col J D H Stewart, 11th Hussars, they nonetheless remained extremely vulnerable to artillery strikes on their hulls.*

## BATTLE REPORT

And so by the Will of Allah it came to pass that the infidel 'Chinese' Gordon was trapped in the noble city of Khartoum, his overarching ambition bringing him low. Like many Englishmen he had a hunger for desolate places and I fear he hungered for the Sudan. Gordon's countrymen and their Egyptian heretic lackeys were too timid to venture south to save him and he had been abandoned to his fate. With the Nile falling, Gordon's defences were exposed and his time had come. The Mahdi was poised to remove this blot from the Holy Lands as a precursor to removing them from all the world . . . And so ended the sermon given to the army of the righteous assembled for this *Black Powder* steeplechase.

As we had four players we split the available Mahdists into four forces, identified by banner colour – while this was justifiable on historical grounds we quickly descended into the only vaguely Arabic knowledge we have. This is neither contemporary nor geographically accurate, but sometimes when one is far from Damascus one must make do. We drew our commands by lot, this humble scribe receiving the Red Banner and attacking along the bank of the Blue Nile, which, though picturesque, promised not to be a picnic. The most sought after, the Green Banner, the colour of the Prophet, also had the honour of attacking the strongest defences, a form of noblesse oblige if you will; while the Black Banner attacked along the White Nile. The Blue Banner was to attack across the Blue Nile, having a tougher job of it, but facing the weakest defences. Auda's language was most unbecoming of a man of his piety, though ibn el-Tarish did find out that his mother had apparently mated with a scorpion.

We also didn't reduce the defenders' morale as far we should have, to stiffen their resistance and make it more of a contest. The defenders' movement and reactions would be controlled by our occasional co-conspirator Hubert Dice-Rolls when required. The figure scale was something of a conundrum too, so we

settled on using as many defenders as could just about cover the perimeter with an unlimited supply of storming troops. To conform to the challenge of everyone playing on the Mahdist side, we had to make certain cultural changes from our usual practices; the drinks cabinet was locked, the tea urn charged, and various pastries and other comestibles were arrayed for our delectation. These were of a strictly vegetarian nature; sheep's eyeballs and the like were not thought conducive to civilized play.

The game began after rousing speeches, although "I scatter, I burn my enemies' tents, I take away their flocks and herds" goes down quite well in most circumstances, it slightly loses its edge when the enemy is starving and devoid of livestock, but no matter. After a swift blessing from the *buzurqs* we were off at a canter under our banners, with trumpets blaring and drums thumping. As we rushed towards the barricades Gordon's artillery opened fire, but it was a very ragged fusillade and caused few casualties. When we came into range the defenders let fly with everything they had, but again with more enthusiasm than skill and no harm was caused to the various Banners.

Arriving at the barricades the noble Red Banner strove manfully to overcome the stout resistance of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sudanese, but the defenders made good use of their plus two and held the Chosen Ones at bay. The Houris' Nether Regions of the Green Banner, meanwhile, fought competently well against the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sudanese in the centre. The Sudanese infantry, knowing their fate if they surrendered to the Mahdi, fought like demons; that and the canister fire of the two artillery pieces helped to stall the charge. Nevertheless, the Green Banner made it to contact and carnage ensued with the Sudanese falling like hibiscus petals. To their left, the 5<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Regiment tested to stand, but rolled snake-eyes and folded like a badly erected tent before the Black Banner. The Accursed Dogs pursued them into the city, establishing a healthy lead in the Khartoum Steeplechase. The Blue Banner met with



problems, however, because they had to wade the river while under fire from the lone machine-gun, but they made it across more or less intact. The 1<sup>st</sup> Egyptians brought up the support company, and the fort brought enfilade fire to bear, but the Sons of Camels pressed on regardless. The defenders' closing fire checked them momentarily, but the Blue Banner girded their loins and charged again. The defenders tried to use their melee advantage at the barricades, but numbers eventually told and the Egyptian heretics were pushed back into the city.

The situation now was that the Sons of Camels were running out of steam (and men), but turned their attentions to the fort, and having got behind it, attacked from the rear. Allah's Chosen Ones had finally broken the stubborn enemy before them and drove off the counter-attack by the reserve company. The Green Banner, successful only because of their superior numbers, pressed on through the warren of streets towards the prize. The Black Banner, however, maintained its lead, closing in on Gordon's villa despite waging a running battle with fleeing Egyptians and Sudanese.

Seeing the way things were going – badly, very badly – Gordon looked round for the Citizen Levy, but most decided by means of a miserable dice roll that they preferred being the former to the latter and melted away to their homes to take their chances in the aftermath. A pathetic trail of discarded rifles and the odd fez was all that marked their passing. As the Flag bearers ploughed on, fighting the garrison rearguards through the kitchen gardens and orchards of Khartoum, thoughts turned to the vanished gardens of Cordoba and vows were renewed to make the infidels pay for their perfidy.

Gordon, the only voluntarily sober man, stood his ground outside his villa as the majority of his ragbag force streamed past him in rout. Fortified only by his beliefs, he faced his fate armed with his trusty revolver and sword. Refusing calls to surrender Gordon was cut down by heroic Ansars of the Black Banner

faction, who decided that while mercy is merely good manners, rudeness was the order of the day. Gordon's final words were muffled by the throng, but sounded vaguely like "Get your hands off me, you damned dirty..." Thus ended Gordon's life and campaign in the Sudan; he had offended and alienated many, but, as they say, *nil nisi bonum* – don't speak ill of the dead.

With the banners of Allah flying in place of the Butcher's Apron above Gordon's villa the Bashi-Bazooks decided that while the desert is an ocean in which no oar is dipped, it was still a better option than remaining in Khartoum and they were off across the sand 'toot sweet'. The victorious tribesmen were too busy exploring the wonders of the city to pursue, though after the siege (and possibly before) the charms of Khartoum were fairly threadbare to the more cosmopolitan observers.

The result of the game was never really in doubt, but it was an interesting diversion to all play one side of the battle. There were some complaints about the impartiality of this report, abn Tayl going as far as calling this humble scribe a 'clown', but then we can't all be lion tamers.

The final score was:

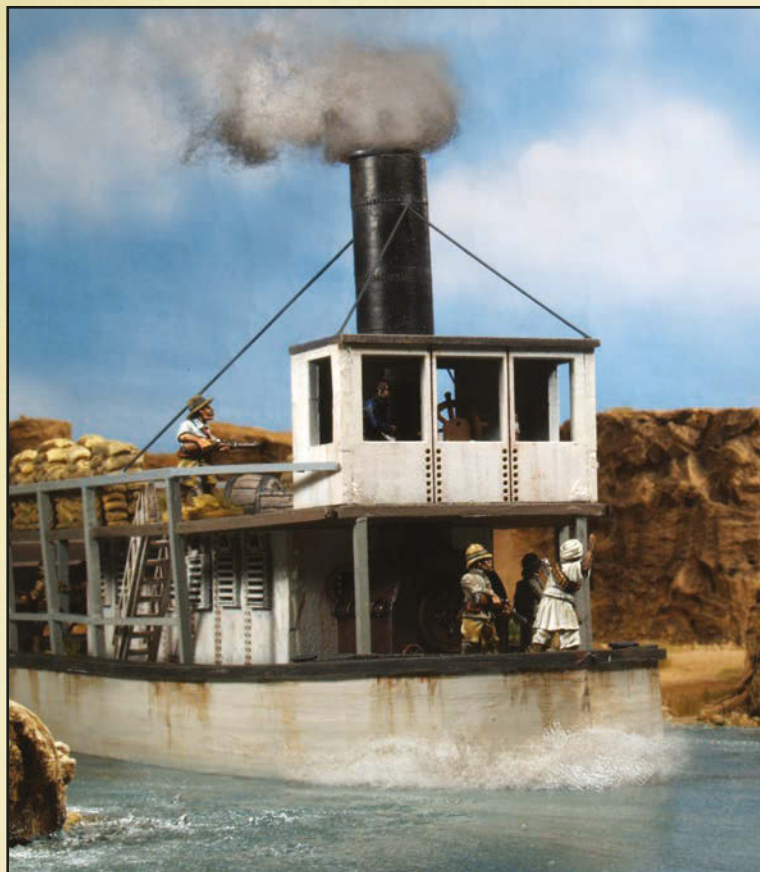
- Black Banner, killed Gordon, captured one gun, 40 points
- Blue Banner, captured the fort, one gun and the machine-gun, 30 points
- Green Banner, captured two guns 20 points, less 10 for the Mahdi failing to lead his men in person. 10 points. The Mahdi's excuse that He was the Revolt may be true, but it was also deemed rather expedient.
- Red Banner, captured one gun, 10 points. Obviously Allah's Chosen Ones are being kept for another purpose...

On being declared the winner Ali ibn el Tarish's response was "Anyone fancy a pint?"



THE BANNERS SURGE FORWARD AS THE MAHDISTS BREAK THROUGH THE OVEREXTENDED DEFENCES OF KHARTOUM





STEAMERS ATTEMPT A PASSAGE TO OBTAIN HELP



CASE SHOT AT 25 PAGES!

*"Dec 14 ...and I have done my best for the honour of our country. Goodbye."*

Gordon's last diary entry



MORE FRENZIED TRIBESMEN CUT OFF ALL HOPE OF ESCAPE FOR THE GARRISON





THE MAHDI SURVEYS THE DOOMED CITY



"VICTORY TO US! THE INFIDEL IS DEFEATED!"



THE LAST FEW SHOTS, THEN OBLIVION.

*"The cruelties and atrocities perpetrated in the terrible massacre which followed Gordon's death are beyond description. Male and female slaves, and young good-looking women of the free tribes, alone were spared; and if some succeeded in escaping, they had only to thank a lucky chance which saved them from the merciless bloodshed of that awful day."*

R. Slatin Pasha, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*



GORDON BRAVELY STANDS HIS GROUND, ACCEPTING HIS FATE



# Sundown at Suakin

As long as the Mahdi aired his grievances in the middle of nowhere, the British administrators in Cairo barely took notice. By the tail end of 1883, however, the revolt had spread to the ports along the Red Sea coast and the name Osman Digna provoked whispered mutterings over morning cups of tea. Still, no need to panic old boy, not yet, and the Egyptians could surely take care of their own.

The first significant Egyptian attempt to restore order left the port of Suakin on 4 November, accompanied by Commander Lynedoch-Needham Moncrieff, RN. He didn't come back; few of the expedition did. A second Egyptian effort met the same fate. By December, the Mahdists had achieved almost all of their goals in the east of the country; the Suakin to Berber route was cut and almost every town in the area was captured or under siege. The Egyptian governor at Suakin appealed desperately to Cairo for help.

This was all becoming a bit tiresome back in the Capital, newspapers were folded and the occasional "harrumph" interrupted the waft of punkahs. Still, no need to send Her Majesty's finest to sort out a little local difficulty: a British officer could surely take a small force down there and show the natives the error of their ways. If only there was someone suitable to send...

## BAKER PASHA

Valentine Baker Pasha must have wondered how it had come to this. After all, he had been a confidante of the Prince of Wales; commanded the Turkish army in the face of the Russian hordes; and he wrote the book on light cavalry tactics. He should have been one of Queen Victoria's intrepid soldier heroes like Wolseley, or a distinguished administrator like his brother, Sir Samuel Baker. But he'd been disgraced by a false accusation he refused to even acknowledge and politics took care of the rest.

For a decade, the ever more morose looking Baker wandered around seeking glory and a way back into society, but the best he could do was take the offer from the Egyptian Khedive to assume command of the Gendarmerie, the Egyptian internal security police – he was originally offered the army, but the

British government balked at the idea of a commander who was not considered a gentleman. Baker's new command was a rum bunch and ill-suited for any military purposes – one Canadian officer described them as a "rubbishy lot of worthless ex-soldiers." When Baker began to whip them into some sort of shape for the coming campaign, the wretches grumbled at having to serve outside of Egypt and many took French leave. It was therefore a shaky force indeed that set out to take on Osman Digna's warriors.

## OSMAN DIGNA

Osman Digna minded his own business for most of his life, but his business was transporting slaves across the Red Sea and he was good at it. That brought him to the attention of the British authorities when they took full control of the Suez Canal region. The British frowned on slave trading and that was bad for Osman Digna's business. Before long, Osman Digna was out of business, and feeling very aggrieved about it.

An angry man with a cause usually proves to be a dangerous mix for imperial administrations; thus the British should not have been surprised when Osman Digna's journey to visit the Mahdi in 1882 lit the fuse under the powder-keg Suakin region. The Mahdi recognized in Osman Digna a potential leader for expanding his rebellion east of Khartoum, so Digna was soon on his way back to Suakin, carrying the Mahdi's proclamation of holy war against the hated imperialists. All he had to do was persuade the local tribes to get in on the action.

Digna was one of those irritatingly successful guerilla leaders that annoy Empires and attract locals with an axe, or spear, to grind. His biggest capture was the loyalty of the Hadendowa tribe, soon to be famous as the notorious Fuzzy-Wuzzies in Kipling's poem after their wild hairstyles and savage conduct of war. Osman Digna sent over a thousand of these nightmares, under the command of his lieutenant Abdullah ibn Ahmed, to wipe out any miserable army the Egyptians sent against them. With many a thumb testing wicked dagger points, Ahmed's force set off into the haze.



EGYPTIAN GENDARMERIE DRAW THEIR CARBINES



## *Valentine Baker and the First Battle of el-Teb, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1889*

*"Mohammed Ahmed was a powerfully built man, of dark-brown complexion and carefully kept skin; he had a pleasant smile, which showed to advantage the curious slit between his front teeth. ... He wore a dirty jibbeh, on which parti-coloured strips of cotton had been sewn; on his head the white skull cap or 'takia', round which a broad white turban was bound; he also wore a pair of loose drawers and sandals."*

*Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp*  
by Father Joseph Ohrwalder



MAHDIST CAMELRY SCOUT AHEAD



*Attacked by a numerically inferior force of Bija rebels at El Teb, Baker Pasha's infantry failed to develop an effective fire and folded within minutes, leading to rout and slaughter.*





BAKER STUDIES HIS OPPONENTS' MANOEUVRES

and exchanged shots with the tribesmen. On seeing this, Baker ordered a field gun forward to open fire on the ridge. In the meantime, Baker's cavalry screen had set off in pursuit of a contingent of Arab camelry, but their rashness was rewarded by running into the main body of the Hadendowa. Adding to the cavalry troopers' discomfort was the suicidal charge of just three Arabs who rode their camels straight at the Egyptian cavalry who were so shocked that some of them were killed without lifting a finger. It was left to Burnaby, trailing behind the cavalry screen, to shoot down the foremost camel-rider and stop the attack. Back over the ridge, the Hadendowa tribesmen rose up and charged.

## THE FIRST BATTLE OF EL-TEB

Baker arrived in Suakin with his able lieutenant Major-General George Sartorius on 23 December 1883. Notable Victorian soldier-hero Fred Burnaby, on leave from the Life Guards, came along for the ride. It took another month for the Gendarmerie to arrive by sea, but some able black Sudanese troops came too, much to the relief of Baker. Soon the men were all in camp and Baker busied himself getting his force ready to fight, not that they ever would be.

February 4<sup>th</sup> was a misty, miserable morning, but it was time to get going, so Baker sent out his mounted Gendarmerie and bashi-bazook Irregular Horse to form a screen about a mile in front of the main force and the advance began. Of course, the wily locals knew every movement of Baker's expedition and reported back to Ahmed, who could now choose his time and place of attack.

The Egyptian infantry advanced in two parallel columns. The left column consisted of the Senhit and Turkish battalions and the bazingers; the Massowah Sudanese, Cairo, and Alexandria battalions constituted the right column. The plan was that if attacked the battalions could move smoothly into a four battalion square flanked in echelon by two single battalion squares made up of Sudanese and Turks, Baker's most reliable units. The artillery, machine-guns, and a rocket troop marched in the middle under the protection of a European mounted police unit, most of whom were Italians, and two companies of the Alexandria Gendarmerie. The main body was commanded by Sartorius, while Baker rode on his magnificent white horse between the cavalry screen and the infantry. Baker Pasha could hardly have been inspired by the sight of his men "tramping along like a mere armed mob" as one newspaper correspondent described them. Nevertheless, he must have hoped his cavalry would give ample warning of the enemy and he could pull his men into square and repel any attack. He would not have long to wait before the test came.

The Hadendowa were waiting behind a low ridge near the site of Moncrieff's death. Over a thousand sword and spear wielding warriors checked their weapons; some also carried Remington rifles captured from the spoils of previous expeditions. Soon enough the Egyptian cavalry screen arrived

The first Baker Pasha knew of the coming assault was the sight of his cavalry fleeing in panic straight back towards his unprepared infantry. They in turn fired a loose ragged volley that did nothing but add plumes of powder smoke to the mist and create noise to mask Baker's orders to form square. The retreating cavalry soon mixed with the front ranks of the Gendarmerie, the Hadendowa on their heels. Three sides of the square shuffled into position, but alas the square could not form in time. Despite the disapproval later heaped on the entire Egyptian force and its officers, it was down to two companies of the Alexandria Regiment who left the 'door open' and let the Hadendowa into the square. Once the Hadendowa were inside, Egyptian resistance all but collapsed; many ran, some fought, others became immobilized by fear and sat or lay down, throwing themselves on the mercy of men who were merciless. Hacking and slashing ensued,





# ORDERS OF BATTLE

## BAKER PASHA'S EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

### ARMY COMMANDER: BAKER PASHA

#### Cavalry

- Egyptian Mounted Gendarmerie (300)
- Bashi-bazook Horse (150)
- European Mounted Police (47)

#### Infantry

- Alexandria Gendarmerie (560)
- Cairo Gendarmerie (560)
- Massowah Black Sudanese (450)
- Senhit Black Sudanese (421)
- Turkish Battalion (429)
- Zubair's Bazingers (678)

#### Artillery

- Egyptian Army Artillery (2 Gatling guns, 2 rocket-troughs, 4 Krupp 80mm field guns) (128)

#### Transport

- 300 camels

## MAHDIST ARMY (Conjectural)

### ARMY COMMANDER:

#### MUHAMMAD AHMAD, THE MAHDI

- Hadendowa Spearmen (1,200 -1,500 warriors)
- Arab Camelry (300)



covered by the sound of ragged volleys from increasingly frantic pockets of resistance. Baker and his officers struggled in vain to pull their units together, shouting orders and firing their revolvers into the mass of *jibbeh* clad soldiers seeking to pull them off their horses. It was no good, the battle, if battle is the right word, was lost. With his Gendarmerie running in all directions, there was little Baker Pasha and the Europeans could do, but save their own lives while hundreds all around were losing theirs.

Of the 3656 Egyptians who marched that fatal morning, 2362 of them lay dead at el-Teb. The Hadendowa stripped their bodies of anything valuable and left them for the vultures. Out in the desert, the town of Tokar fell to the Mahdists, and a desperate bid for safety by the garrison of Sinkat ended with their bones bleaching in the desert too. Baker made it back to Suakin where he took charge organizing the town defences against an attack he thought was sure to come. The garrison would not cooperate, however, having had their fill of the British.



MOUNTED SKIRMISHERS GO OUT TO BLOCK THE MAHDIST SCOUTS



## WARGAMING THE FIRST BATTLE OF EL-TEB

At first glance, Baker Pasha's massacre has little to offer the wargamer – this was as one-sided an affair as you could find. But there are a number of variables to play with and factors to account for that could easily have changed the outcome.

The disparity in troop quality was an obvious problem. Baker Pasha's men resented being sent abroad to fight, and feared their enemy. They had every right to do so given the massacres of Egyptian soldiers that had already taken place around Suakin and elsewhere in the Sudan. Nevertheless, Baker's reputation as a commander was excellent and his troops had been trained intensively for many weeks. It is unlikely also that Baker believed he was on a suicide mission, so he must have had some faith his troops would stand and fight. It is clear from the narrative, moreover, that most of the Egyptian soldiers made it into square formation and that the inaction of only two companies precipitated the disaster. If you, as Baker Pasha, can get your miniature men into square, things might be different.

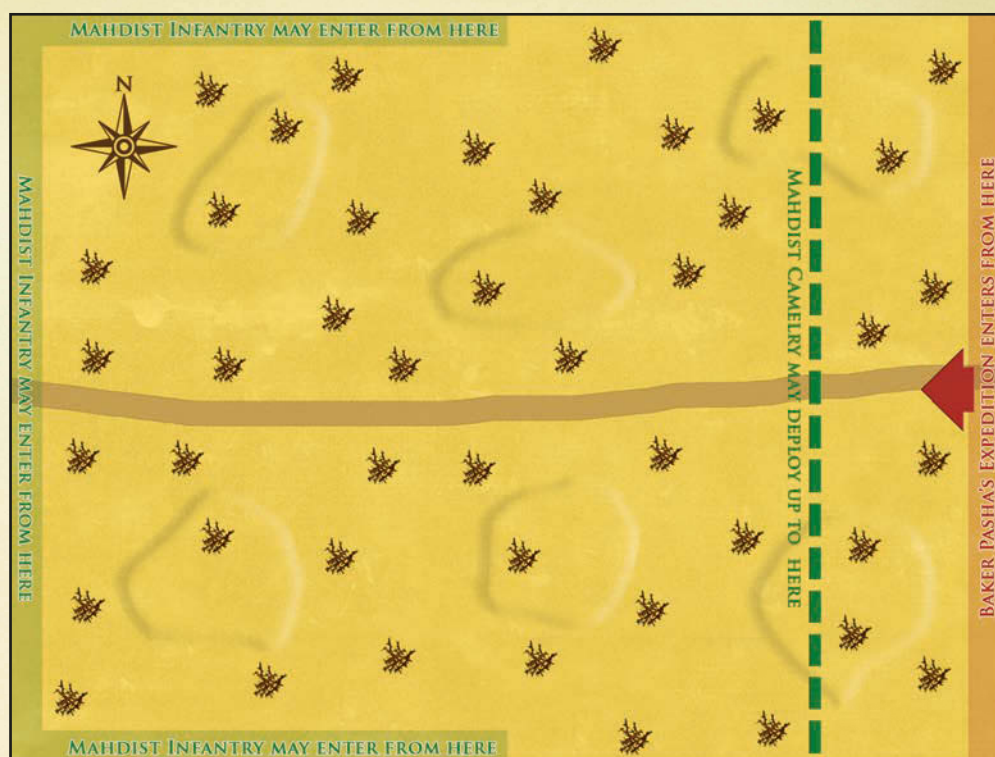
A second disparity also existed, but this one cut the other way: the Egyptians outnumbered the Mahdists almost 3:1. Baker Pasha could not have known that at the time, especially since his cavalry screen did not hang around long enough to do a head-count. But you, playing Baker, do know this and it might be that a different formation might work on the table to defeat the Mahdist assault, or conversely it might be even worse – the Mahdist player also knows he is outnumbered. An alternative arrangement might be to vary the size of the Mahdist force so that the Egyptian player does not know how many he faces.

### The Missions

- **Baker Pasha:** Traverse the table, keeping your expeditionary force intact and repelling any assaults made against you.
- **Abdullah ibn Ahmed:** Osman Digna expects you to destroy utterly any force attempting to relieve Tokar. They must not get through.

*"No greater contrast can be conceived than that between the everyday surroundings of our English life, and the conditions under which the English force had to advance to the encounter in the Egyptian desert."*

*The Standard* 13 March 1884,  
in William Galloway, *The Battle of Tofrek* (1887)



### The Table

If your image of desert is one of golden sands sculpted by winds into magnificent dunes under deep blue skies then the desert around Suakin will disappoint. Rather, picture a flat sand and rock landscape riven by dry river-beds and interspersed by isolated foothills and ridges that offer commanding views and ideal hiding places for hostile tribesmen. Now add thousands of thorn-bushes reaching heights of up to eight feet that rip uniforms and flesh and can tear the pack off a passing camel.

The densely packed bushes are also alive with shadow and light, teasing the mind into believing that fleet-footed warriors are everywhere waiting to leap out, kill, then disappear as if they had never been. In short, picture the perfect terrain for conducting guerilla warfare.

The long edges of the 8 foot x 6 foot table are set north and south. The landscape is rocky desert interspersed with thorn-bushes, but not enough in this case to impede unit movement. The flatness of the landscape can be broken by small hills and dried river beds, but the game will play just as well on a flat surface. The table edges represent the banks of dried up river beds. To help with directional movement, place a narrow trail running east to west on the table.

### Deployment

Baker Pasha's expedition advances onto the table by order in two columns from the eastern edge. A cavalry screen is advisable, but not mandatory.

If your table contains terrain features, the Mahdist player may conceal infantry on the table at the beginning of the game if there is enough room for them to be completely hidden. Otherwise, the Mahdists begin the game off-table and may enter after the second turn from any point on the western half of the table. The Arab camelry, however, begin the game on-table at any point, but no less than 18" from the eastern edge.





A CLASSIC ENCOUNTER, A TRIBAL ATTACK AND A STEADY SQUARE. WHO WILL BLINK FIRST?



THE MAHDISTS HIT HOME, AND NOW THERE IS A SWIRLING MÊLÉE



THE GENDARMERIE, THEIR JOB DONE, RETIRE AS FAST AS THEY CAN





Mahdist daggers on display at the Citadel Military Museum, Cairo.  
(Col Mike Snook collection, photographed by kind permission of the museum's commandant).

BLACK POWDER FORCES

BAKER PASHA’S EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF:  
LIEUTENANT-GENERAL VALENTINE BAKER PASHA

- 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade (Cavalry): Major G.D. Giles**
- Egyptian Mounted Gendarmerie – 2 units of 8 cavalry
  - Bashi-bazook Horse – 1 unit of 8 cavalry
  - European Mounted Police – 1 unit of 8 cavalry
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade (Infantry): Lieutenant Ahmad Kamal Bey**
- Alexandria Gendarmerie – 1 unit of 30 infantry
  - Cairo Gendarmerie – 1 unit of 30 infantry
  - Zubair’s Bazingers – 1 unit of 30 infantry
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade (Infantry) Lieutenant Mahmoud Boussa**
- Massowah Black Sudanese – 1 unit of 24 infantry
  - Senhit Black Sudanese – 1 unit of 24 infantry
  - Turkish Battalion – 1 unit of 24 infantry
  - Egyptian Field Gun – 1 field gun
  - Field gun handlers

THE MAHDIST ARMY

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF:  
ABDULLAH IBN AHMED

- 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade (Infantry): Abu Benissa**
- Hadendowa Spearmen – 3 units of 24 infantry
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade (Infantry): Ali bin Abi Tarib**
- Hadendowa Spearmen– 2 units of 24 infantry
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade (Camelry): Umad Affan**
- Arab Camelry – 3 units of 6 camelry

*“No civilised troops in the world could  
have endured the hell through which  
they came...”*

Rudyard Kipling, *The Light That Failed*



GENERAL AHMED AND HIS FOLLOWERS SURVEY THEIR WORK



Egyptian Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit                     | Type      | Armament               | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special         |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-----------------|
| Egyptian Mtd Gendarmerie | Cavalry   | Breech-loading carbine | 4            | 2        | 4+     | 2       | Small, Untested |
| Bashi-bazook Horse       | Cavalry   | Breech-loading carbine | 4            | 2        | 4+     | 2       | Small, Skirmish |
| European Mounted Police  | Cavalry   | Breech-loading carbine | 4            | 2        | 4+     | 2       | Small, Steady   |
| Alexandria Gendarmerie   | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 3            | 3        | 4+     | —       | Untested        |
| Cairo Gendarmerie        | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 3            | 3        | 4+     | —       | Untested        |
| Massowah Black Sudanese  | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 4            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | Steady          |
| Senhit Black Sudanese    | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 4            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | Steady          |
| Turkish Battalion        | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 3            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | Steady          |
| Zubair's Bazingers       | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 3            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | Steady          |
| Egyptian Field Gun       | Artillery | Field gun howitzer     | 1            | 3-2-1    | 4+     | —       | Untested        |
| Field Gun Handlers       | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle   | 1            | 1        | 4+     | 1       | Tiny            |

**Staff Ratings:** General Baker has a staff rating of 9. The staff rating for Major Giles is 8 and the Egyptians have 7. Egyptian troops are armed with Remington rolling-block rifles, cavalry with the carbine version. The field gun is a rifled field gun howitzer.

Special Rules

**Artillery:** Artillery pieces are allowed to move, limber, and unlimber as if they were horse artillery, but with 12" per move rather than 18". When not pulling the guns, excess crew form a tiny unit of Gendarmerie. The unit must remain within 3" of their gun if they are to continue to act as pullers in following moves. Failure to do so will result in the gun being reduced to manhandling only.

**Cavalry Screen:** The Egyptian cavalry screen can be no more than three moves ahead of the infantry columns when they arrive on the table; i.e. when the cavalry arrives on table, the infantry must also arrive within three turns of the cavalry no matter the tactical situation.

**Forming Square:** The Egyptians cannot attempt to form square until the Mahdist infantry begin to arrive on the table. If they do try to form square, the Egyptian units must attempt to do so separately.

**Steady:** Automatically pass the first break test of the game.

**Untested:** Randomise stamina when you take your first casualty. 1 or less=1; 2-3=2; 4-6=3. Note they can't be better than 3! In the case of artillery, deduct 2 from the roll.

Mahdist Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit               | Type     | Armament | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special           |
|--------------------|----------|----------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-------------------|
| Hadendowa Spearmen | Infantry | Spears   | 6            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Warband, Fanatics |
| Arab Camelry       | Cavalry  | Spears   | 6            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Skirmish          |

**Staff Ratings:** Abdullah ibn Ahmed has a staff rating of 9. The other Mahdist commanders have a staff rating of 8. The shooting factor is for thrown spears.

Special Rules

**Fanatics:** Re-roll misses in combat following a charge, and charged enemy must make a break test.

**Ill-Disciplined:** An additional test has been added for the tribesmen to see if they can hold their discipline and positions or attack prematurely. On the first turn that the Mahdists sight the British main body they roll a dice. On a 1 they charge uncontrollably towards them, on the second and subsequent turns a 1 or 2 will have that result. Tests continue until the Mahdists are ordered forwards.



## BATTLE REPORT

We fought this battle with two players a side, the Men of Letters and the Men of Numbers, but Gentlemen all, so no umpire was required. After a swift stiffener and a small wager or two it was decided that the Men of Letters would play the Mahdists and the Men of Numbers would be the Egyptians. This writer was happy to draw the un-named Mahdist camelry commander in the expectation that one way or the other my on-table role would be brief and I could then repair to the corner to take notes and dispense drinks.

Baker decided to stay true to his writings and put the cavalry screen as far forward as possible to try and flush out the Mahdists and trigger any ambushes, so off they trotted at three move rate and well ahead of the main body. He kept the European Mounted Police under his hand (with 'follow me' orders) to use as needed and took his position between the cavalry screen and the foot. Baker trusted his Turkish troops, having learned while commanding them against the Russians that they were resolute in defence. He also had some regard for the Sudanese and thought they would stay true to their salt against their co-religionists. When it came to the fighting, Baker intended to put the Turks and Sudanese in the front rank with the shakier troops behind them in a second rank. If outnumbered, Baker planned to use his most reliable troops in squares at the end of the line with the other battalions in line facing in both directions. Thus, the front rank deployed with the Turks on the right, the Sehnit Sudanese in the centre, and the Massowah on the left. The second rank comprised the Alexandria Gendarmerie, then the Cairo men, then the bazingers. The artillery rolled along with the front rank to deploy as soon as required with the Handlers offering close protection.

Abdullah ibn Ahmed, being unsure of the Egyptian numbers, planned a policy of 'hurry up and wait'. The camelry were to draw the Egyptian cavalry forward and detach them from their infantry support. When the two became separated, he would launch an attack against the flanks of the infantry and crush them. Abdullah therefore deployed the camelry well forward in a wadi, with the infantry off-table close to the mid-point on the northern edge. Once the Egyptian deployment and strength were known, he would pick the moment for the tribesmen to sweep in with their spears and swords, not stopping to fire.

The game began with Baker despatching Major Giles and his Egyptian cavalry onto the table, muttering cheerfully about his preference for his beloved 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars or even "God forbid, a few squadrons of the Kaiser's Uhlans." As they approached the wadi, the camelry launched into a headlong and reckless charge. To the surprise of everyone involved, all units cheerfully threw themselves into melee. The Egyptian cavalry, being used to camels, remained calm and forced the camelry backwards, initially on the flanks, but eventually all along the line. The camelry, and it must be said, their commander, fought heroically, but soon broke and were removed.

Baker tried to recall the Gendarmerie and Bashi-bazooks, but they were either overcome with enthusiasm or prudent enough to realize they had stumbled on their best chance of survival and headed off west, and the apoplectic Major Giles was heard cursing his men in the most intemperate of language. They ignored him and swept past Abdullah's position. He secretly rolled for the reaction of his troops: all passed. There was some muttering from Kamal Bey that a steward's enquiry was required at such an apparent stroke of luck, but Abdullah's player representative stood on his honour as one of Her Majesty's Senior Civil Servants. The matter was quickly dropped.



The Egyptian foot was now on table and marching resolutely westwards, but deep down wondering anxiously where the Mahdists might be lurking. Meanwhile, Abdullah was haranguing his men to sweep the infidels and their treacherous allies from the desert, but not until he gave the word. The Egyptians reached the mid-point of the table, Abdullah raised his standard, and the Hadendowa hurled themselves out of cover towards the rather startled Turks and Sudanese.

The fight resumed with the Hadendowa bounding in like 'injin rubber fools on a spree' just as the history books describe them. The Turks tested to stand and form square, as if the enemy were cavalry, failed, and were caught unformed. The result was almost too painful to watch as the Fuzzy-Wuzzies gave no quarter to their Sunni co-religionists.

Next in line stood the Sehnit Sudanese who had slightly more warning and managed to form square even as the Hadendowa flowed round them. Behind them, the Massowah Sudanese managed to turn to face without managing to form square and were promptly disordered by the Hadendowa. The Sudanese formation held, quite remarkably really, and all hell broke loose as the Sudanese in Egyptian employ fought their southern neighbours on religious duty. Baker's artillerymen also deployed and fought their guns to some effect, using canister to tear holes in the Mahdist ranks before being overrun when their horses were cut down around them and the Handlers swamped.

Having seen the fate that befell the Turks, Baker looked round for a way to rescue his force. Spotting Abdullah, he gave a cry of "View halloo!" and led his motley collection of Italians and





BAYONETS VERSUS SPEARS, SWORDS AND RHINOCEROS HIDE SHIELDS!

wild colonials in a desperate charge towards the Mahdist leader. Abdullah, not being a gentleman after all, took refuge behind a unit of spearmen. Baker ploughed into the flank of the spearmen leaving that unit in some disarray, but not having any order to begin with, the spearmen quickly recovered and cut down the Mounted Police. Baker now had to choose whether to fight it out or to fall back. Trusting to fate, he rolled 'even' and decided fighting another day was the preferable option.

The second rank of Egyptians, meanwhile, watched on appalled as the Mahdists crossed their front and broke the Turks. The Alexandrian Gendarmerie, having never wanted to leave their homeland in the first place and wanting no part of this conflict, ran. The Cairo Gendarmerie for their part were cajoled into square by fear and the profanity of their NCOs, but it was a raggedy, loose order thing and barely held together. Zubair's bazingers, despite being furthest from the Mahdists, didn't hang around and took a healthy lead in the el-Teb steeplechase; in the process earning a healthy profit for the un-named man of numbers who drew them in the sweepstake.

At this point we might sum up the position this way: this writer's camelry had long since departed the table, followed by the Egyptian cavalry despite the best efforts of Major Giles to halt them. The Turks had been broken before they had the chance to fight, the Massowah Sudanese were in a fight to the death with the Mahdists, though for the moment the Mahdists had fallen back to regroup, and the Schnit Sudanese were now

in square watching, waiting, and wondering. In the second rank, the bazingers led by several lengths from the Alexandrian Gendarmerie (who claimed they preferred going that was softer) while the Cairo Gendarmerie more or less stood their ground and would continue to do so as long as they were unthreatened. Baker's Mounted Police were a spent force and he himself was lurking near the Schnit Sudanese, silently debating whether to enter their square and command the force or make a mockery of the handicapper and set off after the bazingers. The artillery was unfortunately no longer on the army list, but would be on a memorial one day. On the Mahdist side, the Hadendowa were largely a spent force; two units were following up the retiring foot, two were shattered by fire, and the last was staring down the Massowah who were girding their loins for further combat. Mahdist casualties were, as usual, quite heavy.

Lacking cavalry under his direct control, Baker signaled for the three units still holding together to fall back eastwards. The Mahdists watched them go, unable to pursue for the moment. A draw was declared because although the Egyptians did not get through, they weren't destroyed, and the cavalry could return at some point.

The various players happily retired to the library to discuss the evening's events and to debate the relative merits of colonial forces and their native enemies, and whether science was superior to pluck. The Men of Letters used their debating skills to claim victory, while the Men of Numbers deployed arcane calculations to press their case.





SMART LOOKING REGULARS MARCH OUT OF THEIR BARRACKS

*“As for the religious Sheikhs, this movement was one which held out the highest prospects of promotion for them. They prided themselves that one of their number had successfully dared to proclaim himself a Mahdi, and they looked to the time when he or his sons should drive out the hated Turk.”*

R. Slatin Pasha, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*

*“So 'ere's to you,  
Fuzzy-Wuzzy, at your  
'ome in the Soudan;  
You're a pore benighted  
'eathen but a first-class  
fightin' man.”*

Rudyard Kipling, *Fuzzy Wuzzy*



MAHDIST CAMELRY OUTSCOUT BAKER'S HAPLESS FORCE



A VULNERABLE GUN BOMBARDS THE ONCOMING HORDE





EGYPTIAN REGULARS REDEPLOY AFTER REFRESHMENT FROM THE VITAL WATER CARTS



*"The wretched peasant, with that filthy cloth, which you see is a determined warrior, who can undergo thirst and privation, who no more cares for death than if he were stone."*

General Gordon's journals, 24 September 1884, quoted in William Galloway, *The Battle of Tofrek* (1887)

THE GREEN FLAGS AND THROBBING DRUMS MUST HAVE BEEN AN ARRESTING ASSAULT ON THE SENSES



"FIRE LOW BOYS, FIRE LOW!"



# Guts and Glory

---

Victorians frowned upon a British officer losing a battle against spear-wielding ‘savages’; when the calamity was repeated, that would just simply not do. Even if the losing officer was one whose reputation lay in tatters before his defeat, like Valentine Baker, such a stain on the Empire’s reputation could not go unanswered – action was required! The redoubtable Victorians, led by Sir Garnet Wolseley, also reasoned that only a British officer leading British soldiers could provide the salutary lesson. The man chosen to dish punishment out to the upstart Mahdists was Major-General Gerald Graham.

## SIR GERALD GRAHAM

Born seven years before Victoria became Queen, Gerald Graham graduated from the School of Engineering at the perfect age to become an Empire builder. His soldierly qualities came to the fore in the Crimean War when as a young 23-year-old lieutenant he led a ladder party during the assault on Sebastopol where his bravery under fire earned him the Victoria Cross. Graham again exhibited his trademark fearlessness in the assault on the Taku forts during the Second Anglo-Chinese War in 1860. He was seriously wounded in the latter effort, however, and spent the next sixteen years commanding engineers in England and Canada, very much out of harm’s way, but rising steadily through the ranks.

It was as a Brigadier-General that Graham next saw action, this time with Wolseley’s Egyptian Campaign in 1882. Graham commanded the advanced guard of Wolseley’s forces and first encountered the Egyptians at el-Magfar. He brushed

them aside with ease and advanced to Kassassin where the Egyptians launched a significant attack. Graham called for reinforcements and the Household Cavalry arrived in time to launch a magnificent night charge that dispersed the Egyptians into the desert. Wolseley’s army marched on to Tel-el-Kebir where Graham’s brigade led the right wing on its night march up to the Egyptian trenches. The resultant battle destroyed the Egyptian nationalist uprising and cemented Graham’s reputation as a first-class commander – if a somewhat unimaginative one. That was exactly what Britain needed to execute a by-the-book, methodical take down of Osman Digna.

## A TALE OF TWO CAMPS

Suakin was a worried little town in the wake of the Baker Pasha fiasco. The Royal Navy was Johnny-on-the-spot, however, and immediately landed a force to protect the entrances to the town, and if that wasn’t a deterrent the two ships in the harbour would be. It was not long anyway before Graham was on the scene, pulling together contingents from the British army in Egypt, reinforced by the 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars and the Royal Irish Regiment from India. In addition to his superior troops, Graham brought along a cadre of upstanding British officers who also happened to be part of Wolseley’s clique of fire-breathers known in no doubt envious circles as his ‘Ashanti ring’. They were men who were already or would become synonymous with the Victorian Army; Valentine Baker we have already met; Sir Redvers Buller won his Victoria Cross against the Zulus, but was later vilified for not beating the stubborn Boers; Colonel Burnaby was a Victorian



FERCE WARRIORS USE THEIR SPEED AND SKILL IN USING THE LAND TO THEIR ADVANTAGE



## *Gerald Graham and the Second Battle of el-Teb, 29<sup>th</sup> February 1889*

adventurer of some note and we will meet him again at Abu Klea. With those officers and an army of stalwart British soldiers, Graham was certain to defeat the Mahdists if they attacked Suakin, or he would go out and find them and give them a damned good thrashing.

The Mahdists had no intention of attacking Suakin, at least not yet. They had celebrated their crushing victory over Baker Pasha by marching on the small town of Tokar and capturing it without much resistance from the small Egyptian garrison. The Mahdists then returned to el-Teb where they dug in to await whoever was foolish enough to try their hand at winking them out. To that end, they occupied a flat-topped ridge, running northeast to southwest, near el-Teb. The ridge was lozenge-shaped, about 1,800 yards long and 600 wide and narrowing to a point at both ends. They strengthened the end nearest to Suakin by digging hundreds of rifle-pits, and a rough cemetery gave them extra cover. This was the expected direction of anyone venturing out from Suakin along the track connecting the port to el-Teb. Further back on the ridge, the Mahdists constructed a large earthwork and placed the bulk of their artillery in it, along with their Gatling gun. They also used a nearby ruined sugar refinery for defensive support. At the bottom end of the ridge, the Mahdists built a small earthwork to protect their flank and deployed two artillery pieces. Most of their force was deployed in and around the rifle-pits, but a significant reserve was maintained behind the ridge on the southwestern end. All the Mahdists needed now was for the enemy to trundle along the track connecting the ridge to Suakin; they could then cut them down in much the same place as they had Baker Pasha's pathetic force.

### **FLAWED ASSUMPTIONS**

The Second Battle of el-Teb was remarkable for the number of false assumptions made on both sides. The Mahdists deploying for an expected attack down the Suakin trail was only the first, but it would have serious consequences. So would their assumption that whoever came against them was likely to be as spineless and inept as those that came before. Graham would make his fair share of mistakes too, but he was a sight more fortunate.

Graham had his force up and ready to go by 8am on the morning of 29 February. He sent out the Hussars under Brigadier-General Herbert Stewart to form a reconnaissance screen at 1,000 yards. Graham then aligned the rest of his force into the apparently mandatory square formation needed for sojourns into the desert against tribesmen who often appeared as if from nowhere. The 1<sup>st</sup> Gordon Highlanders formed the front wall of the square and the 1<sup>st</sup> Black Watch the rear. The 1<sup>st</sup> York and Lancaster and the Royal Marines lined up along the left face and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers and 3<sup>rd</sup> King's Royal Rifle Corps moved into position on the right. The artillery pieces and machine-guns took up positions on the corners. Once deployed, the British marched in columns and companies so arranged that they could turn into square formation at a moment's notice. The problem was that the square was incredibly compact, almost solid, which would be fine against spear wielding maniacs, but might present a fat, juicy target to an enemy armed with artillery and rifles. It did not seem to occur to Graham that the Mahdists might have taken the rifles from Baker Pasha's defeated force, or supplied themselves with artillery from the captured garrison at Tokar.



GRAHAM'S MEN, SURPRISED BY ENEMY RIFLE FIRE, SHAKE OUT INTO LINE AND SQUARE



Off the gallant little force went into the desert scrub with no real idea of where they were going or the location of their enemy, despite the presence of Baker as Graham's intelligence officer. It was to Graham's good fortune, perhaps, that he decided to avoid the site of Baker Pasha's disaster by skirting round it on the right rather than the left – that would have taken him down the track into the teeth of the Mahdist defences. So it was by a somewhat circuitous route that the British square advanced three miles, arriving off the left flank of the heavily defended Mahdist ridge much to the surprise of both sides – although one suspects the first sight of kilted Gordon Highlanders would surprise most people no matter the occasion. Graham called a conference with his officers about what to do next while the men rested. His advisers agreed that the advance should continue down the enemy left, so with bagpipes wailing the British dusted themselves off and resumed their march. Just as they did, the Mahdist artillery opened fire.

### THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL-TEB

Fortune smiled again on Graham when the Mahdist artillery began firing: instead of causing massive casualties and havoc in the British square, the guns fired at too great a range using short-range canister ammunition. The British got off light, only twenty or so wounded, but one of them was Baker Pasha who took a ball to the cheek for his troubles – how he must have loathed the Sudan by this time! One reason for the Mahdist artillery failure was probably chaining captured Egyptian gun crews to the guns in the expectation that by doing so the artillerymen would fight willingly to win the battle. Graham ordered his infantry down and his artillery to deploy to the front – the former left face of the square – and bring down some thunder on the Mahdist guns. The motivational difference between the gun crews could not have been made starker as the British artillery laid down a debilitating barrage on their Mahdist opponents. When the Mahdist guns inevitably fell silent, Graham ordered the York and Lancasters and Royal Marines to attack.

The British assault began in textbook fashion; the soldiers advanced, halted, fired by volley, and advanced again. For their part, the Mahdists provided rich targets with up to 2,000 of them rushing into the path of British bullets in penny-packets or individual suicidal charges. The result was carnage with only a brief pause when the relentless British infantry line got too far ahead of its support and recoiled forty yards in the face of sheer numbers. That was only a momentary lapse, however, and the Mahdist tide soon receded. Then came one of those breathtakingly foolish, or glorious, moments for which Victorian British officers were renowned the world over. Seeing the hitch in the British stride, Colonel Burnaby rushed forward onto the Mahdist rampart and blazed away with his double-barreled shotgun. The use of such a weapon provoked cries of lack of sportsmanship from anti-heroic liberals back in Britain when they heard the news, but they missed the point: as happened so often in Victorian battles, what was later written up as a heroic individual saving the army was actually a case of the army saving a borderline suicidal idiot. In Burnaby's case, the momentarily dumbstruck Mahdists were just about to turn him into a kebab when the 'ordinary' soldiers of the York and Lancasters rolled past the Colonel and into the earthwork.

Burnaby was not the only British officer to lose the plot that day: back to the right-rear of the British square, Herbert Stewart itched to get his cavalry into the fight. Sitting atop his mount, Stewart could see the infantry success at the southwest end of the enemy ridge, and he could see bands of Mahdists milling around off the end of the ridge. He reasoned they must be fleeing and that was all the consideration he needed to launch his Hussars

forward in three waves. Stewart had not quite taken into account the fact that what he saw and what was actually in front of him were two different things, actually four thousand different things! The Mahdists were not retreating, but working their way around the British flank. Moreover, the Mahdists had a new tactic to deal with cavalry; they lay down and waited for the horses to pass harmlessly over before leaping up and hamstringing the poor beasts. Nevertheless, Stewart's undaunted Hussars charged into the mass of the Mahdists three times before resistance was seemingly broken and the real pursuit could begin. The first two lines were consequently almost two miles into the scrub before it became apparent that the third line, which had charged at right angles to the first two, was deeply involved in a potentially losing battle. Stewart hastily turned his other lines around and they galloped back to the rescue. Even then, the Mahdists swarmed round the British horses like angry wasps, forcing Stewart to back off, trusting to the carbine to do what sabres and good old-fashioned pluck could not. The volleys of bullets stalled the Mahdist attacks until Stewart armed some of his men as lancers using captured Mahdist spears to close and deliver the killing blow. That seemed to do the trick, averting the disaster that loomed in the wake of Stewart's foolish decision.

Back on the ridge, the battle tilted towards the British. The captured Mahdist artillery in the southwest earthwork was quickly turned against the Mahdists elsewhere on the ridge, but stiff resistance continued at the northeastern end. With the square halted, soldiers trying to get into the fight from the left and right faces started to bunch up. If the Mahdists unleashed an all-out assault now, the square was in danger of getting in the way of itself and triumph could yet turn to disaster. Graham relieved the pressure by ordering the right flank extended. Then he ordered the Black Watch to move out onto the left flank and clear the refinery. In one of the few eminently sensible decisions of the day, the Scottish soldiers balked at charging the refinery, preferring to stand back and shoot the Mahdists down in relative safety. The weight of firepower proved effective, but Graham stewed at the insubordination, later criticizing the Black Watch in despatches, much to their annoyance. By then, however, the battle was all but won and all across the ridge Mahdists streamed away in the direction of el-Teb village and beyond. The British soldiers began the arduous task of clearing away the enemy wounded, usually with the bayonet or a well-placed bullet, such was the price for the Mahdist tactic of feigning death only to leap up and attack the unsuspecting British soldiers. All in all, it was a messy end to a messy battle that could have easily gone either way before discipline and firepower took its toll.

### AFTERMATH

The British followed up their success at el-Teb with a second hard-fought victory at Tamai on 13 March 1884. On that occasion, the still offended Black Watch unleashed a reckless charge on a well-defended Mahdist position, probably to regain their reputation. They nearly lost the battle for the British army and many gave up their lives in the attempt. The campaign achieved its purpose, however, and the accompanying press corps reported the legend, not the mistakes that could have led to calamity, such was the way with the Victorian media. All that mattered for the British was that they had broken the Mahdist rebellion under Osman Digna around Suakin. Graham wanted to push on to Berber and perhaps down to Khartoum to save Gordon, but Gladstone's government saw to it that the army in the field did not have the monopoly on bad decisions and called Graham and his little army home, thereby leaving Gordon to his fate. The war in the Sudan would continue into 1885, but this time in a different direction, up the Nile where Wolseley would seek his glory.



ORDERS OF BATTLE

— BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE —

ARMY COMMANDER:  
MAJOR-GENERAL GERALD GRAHAM

Independent Officers:

- Rear-Admiral Sir William Hewett
- Lieutenant-General Valentine Baker Pasha
- Colonel F.G. Burnaby

Cavalry: Brigadier-General Herbert Stewart

- 10<sup>th</sup> (Prince of Wales' Own Royal) Hussars (3 Squadrons, 250)
- 19<sup>th</sup> Hussars (4 Squadrons, 315)
- Mounted Infantry Company (4 Sections, 120)

1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade:

- Brigadier-General Sir Redvers Bullers VC
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps (320)
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Gordon Highlanders (700)
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Princess Victoria's Regiment (400)

2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade: Major-General J. Davis

- Royal Marines (380)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Black Watch (750)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The York and Lancaster Regiment (470)

Independent Commands

- Naval Brigade (3 Gatling and 3 Gardner machine-guns, 125)
- 6<sup>th</sup> Battery, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade Scottish Division (8 7-pdr RMLs, 120)
- 26<sup>th</sup> Field Company Royal Engineers (91)

— MAHDIST ARMY —

ARMY COMMANDERS: THE AMIRS MADANI IBN ALI & ABD ALLAH IBN HAMID

Tribes (6,000 – 8,000)

- Hassanab
- Arteiga
- Gemilab
- Hadendowa
- Demilab

Artillery

- 4 Krupp 80mm field guns
- 3 Brass howitzers
- 1 Gatling machine-gun
- 2 Rocket-troughs

*"I have been in a good many actions now, but it was one of the hottest I've seen... I must say they are the pluckiest fellows I've ever seen."*

Percival Scrope Marling (60<sup>th</sup> Rifles)  
quoted in *Marching Over Africa*, p133



RHINO HIDE SHIELD OR NOT, AT TWO PACES A SERVICE REVOLVER WILL DO ITS JOB





COLONEL FRED BURNABY,  
THE TRUE BLUE VICTORIAN HERO

*"I have, unfortunately  
for my own interests,  
from my earlier childhood  
had what my old nurse  
used to call a most  
'contradictorious' spirit."*

Fred Burnaby

### WARGAMING THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL-TEB

Refighting the Second Battle of el-Teb offers a number of curious possibilities for the adventurous wargamer. The British begin in their by now customary and somewhat sensible square formation, but the key will almost certainly be how they deploy into combat to take on the always numerous and bloodthirsty Mahdists. If they do not get it quite right, a severe thrashing is on the cards. But neither can the British stand around and hope to devastate the Mahdists with superior firepower. That could backfire quite easily and

literally if the Mahdists throw some decent dice against a potentially very juicy target. Moreover, if the Mahdists attack with any sense of cohesion the British might find the desert a truly inhospitable place indeed.

For even more fun and frolics, the intrepid Victorian wargamer might add flavour by having some of the British officers conduct acts of derring-do, translated as suicidal stupidity for the modern dictionary, and include some appropriate morale effects for the success or failure of such insanity. No mention of Victorian madness would be complete without including the always dashing British Light Cavalry. It would be a simple, and no doubt exhilarating exercise to start playing around with the stats for the Hussars, though making them even more volatile than their historical counterparts will be a challenge for even the best rules-tinkers. For our battle, we opted for a straightforward fight more-or-less, but the results were anything but.

### Missions

The mission for both commanders is simply to destroy the enemy: Graham to avenge the earlier defeat and ibn Ahmed to keep the British out of the Sudan.

### The Table

The battle was fought lengthways along an 8' x 6' table with a low hill running along one end. The rest of the table was



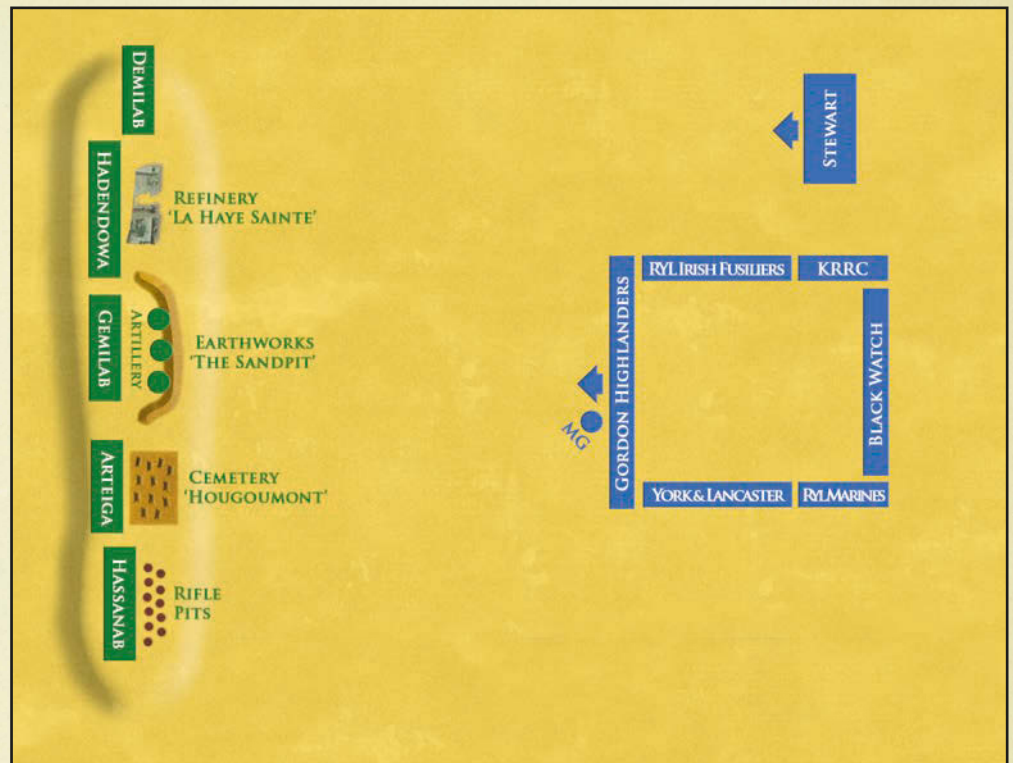
A THORN ZARIBA SCREENS THE HIGHLANDERS AND THE BLUE JACKETS IN THEIR GRIM TASK OF VOLLEY FIRING.



open desert with the odd patch of scrub or rocky outcrop for show.

### Deployment

- The Mahdists deploy along the length of the low hill. They decided to follow their historical counterparts for the most part, dug in around the hill, but with a more even deployment than the offset defences used historically.
- The British chose to adopt the historical deployment – the Gordon Highlanders along the front face, York and Lancasters on the left face etc. Stewart and the Hussars trotted along in close support to the right rear of the square because expectations were for an infantry battle with cavalry not required until the inevitable pursuit.





BLACK POWDER FORCES

— BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE — — THE MAHDIST ARMY —

ARMY COMMANDER:  
MAJOR-GENERAL GERALD GRAHAM

- Independent Officers:
- Rear-Admiral Sir William Hewett
  - Lieutenant-General Valentine Baker Pasha
  - Colonel F.G. Burnaby

- Cavalry
- Commander: Brigadier-General Herbert Stewart
- 10<sup>th</sup> (Prince of Wales' Own Royal) Hussars – 8 figures
  - 19<sup>th</sup> Hussars – 8 figures
  - Mounted Infantry Company – 6 figures

- 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade
- Commander: Brigadier-General Sir Redvers Buller VC
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps – 16 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Gordon Highlanders – 20 figures
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers – 16 figures

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade
- Commander: Major-General J. Davis
- Royal Marines – 16 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Black Watch – 20 figures
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The York and Lancaster Regiment – 16 figures
  - Gatling or Gardner machine-gun

ARMY COMMANDERS:  
AMIRS MADANI IBN ALI & ABD ALLAH IBN HAMID

- Tribes (all independent brigades)
- Hassanab – 2 units of 24 figures
  - Arteiga – 2 units of 24 figures
  - Gemilab – 2 units of 24 figures
  - Hadendowa – 2 units of 24 figures
  - Demilab – 2 units of 24 figures

- Artillery Brigade
- 2 Krupp 80mm field guns
  - Gatling machine-gun

*“If we have to fight in the Sudan, we must expect to meet an enemy far outnumbering us, and who may at first charge recklessly home, apparently regardless of the intense fire we bring to bear upon him.”*

A memorandum signed by Redvers Buller



Second El Teb. Facsimile of the original sketch by Melton Prior, representing the Illustrated London News, of 1st Bn the Black Watch fighting through the Mahdist defensive position in line.



British Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit                   | Type      | Armament                      | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special       |
|------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|---------------|
| Hussars                | Cavalry   | Sabre. Breech-loading carbine | 9            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | –             |
| Mounted Infantry       | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle          | 4            | 2        | 5+     | 2       | Small, Steady |
| Highlanders            | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle          | 7            | 4        | 4+     | 3       | Steady        |
| Line                   | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle          | 6            | 4        | 4+     | 3       | Steady        |
| Gatling or Gardner Gun | Artillery | Gardner Gun                   | 1            | Special  | 3+     | 1       | –             |

**Staff Ratings:** Baker has a staff rating of 10. Graham has a staff rating of 9. Other British commanders have a staff rating of 8.

Special Rules

**Mounted Infantry:** Mounted infantry take one turn to dismount or remount and form up.

**Steady:** Automatically pass the first break test of the game.

**Valentine Baker/Burnaby Roll:** Once in the game the British can deploy one of the independent officers to join a unit and lead it with a ‘follow me’ order as if a commander.

Roll one D6 in the first turn of each melee:

- 1: Killed, -1 to melee factor for melee
- 2: Killed, -1 to melee factor for that turn
- 3-4: No effect
- 5: Heroic inspiration, +1 to melee factor for that turn
- 6: Heroic inspiration, +1 to melee factor for the melee.



Mahdist Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit                | Type      | Armament             | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special           |
|---------------------|-----------|----------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-------------------|
| Mahdist Spearmen    | Infantry  | Spears               | 6            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Warband, Fanatics |
| Mahdist Skirmishers | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle | 6            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | Warband, Fanatics |
| Mahdist Artillery   | Artillery | Field Gun            | 1            | 1-2-0    | 5+     | 1       | –                 |
| Gatling Gun         | Artillery | Gatling Gun          | 1            | Special  | 5+     | 1       | –                 |

**Staff Ratings:** All Mahdist commanders have a staff rating of 8.

The shooting factor for the Mahdist Spearmen is for thrown spears.

Mahdist artillery factors are reduced to 0 at long range due to canister being used.

Special Rules

**Fanatics:** Re-roll misses in combat following a charge, and charged enemy must make a break test.

**Mahdist Control Roll:** Mahdists operate as small units not tribes. To replicate the independent charges by small units, Mahdist control rolls are done by stand.







"JAMMED YOU SAY? DASHED INCONVENIENT!"

## BATTLE REPORT

As this was in some ways a re-run of the earlier el-Teb, we returned to our Men of Letters -v- Men of Numbers pairings; though we swapped sides so the numerate played the Mahdists and the literate the British. This meant we had a 'new' Valentine Baker with the 'old' Baker now a follower of Allah, though that does sound a bit like something out of one of Mr. Conan Doyle's novellas.

Graham chose a cautious offensive strategy. The Mahdists, he reasoned, would be given no opportunity to close or to turn any British unit's flank, so he gave orders that stressed mutually supporting formations; everybody was to march closed up in a column with the field guns and machine-guns close to hand. The advance would be conducted calmly, relying on firepower rather than the bayonet, although of course cold steel would be used if necessary. Our Graham also had the advantage of several local pundits who gave him a detailed description of the Mahdist deployment, though several officers were dispatched to have a shufti to confirm this.

The Mahdists intended to avoid fighting in the open – "For the love of Allah we're not charging a square again" was overheard from the Mahdist's brief pre-game durbar. Rather, the Mahdists planned to use artillery to break up the British square when it arrived, then concentrate rifle fire to halt any British advancing up the ridge. The cemetery and sugar refinery were therefore promptly dubbed Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte respectively. The Mahdists had everyone 'up' with no reserves. They deployed a number of skirmishers forward, however, though they were expected to be a nuisance rather than a battle winner. Ibn Ali took his place in the centre of the entrenchments, or 'The Sandpit' as it quickly became known. Around him the Hassanab took up positions on the left, and the Artiega, Gemilab, Hadendowa and Demilab dug in on the right. The Mahdist plan, however, relied heavily on the Mahdist foot being controllable by their commanders and not rushing out to fight the British hand-to-hand. The Ansars were apparently prepared to do this due to their high number of firearms, but their rating of 'fanatic' was not considered a boon in that regard. Amir ibn Ali placed his artillery in the front line along with their crews from the Tokar garrison, both to encourage the tribesmen

and to reduce problems of spotting and indirect fire. The gunners, having 'chosen' God over Mammon, were viewed as trustworthy, at least for the moment, but their neighbours kept a wary eye on them.

The British advanced in orderly fashion with units closed up for speed despite the Krupp 'whizz-bangs' now passing overhead and exploding nearby. Graham declined to pause, unlike his historical counterpart, but pressed on after calling forward the Royal Artillery. An artillery duel ensued with the British quickly finding their range. The press-ganged fellahs in the trenches could not rise to the challenge, however, and the British gunners' swift actions knocked out the Mahdist guns and put the British advance back on track.

The Mahdist skirmishers did their bit to annoy the British, but their subsequent charge failed miserably and they were quickly driven off or bayoneted. Graham now came to the conclusion that all the Mahdists were in the defences and started to deploy out of the square and into line, echeloned out from the centre because the Gordons did not want to hang about under fire. As befits old India hands the pipers started playing the Black Bear and the Scots got a *jildi* on towards the village. Once in range the Gordons stopped to volley the defenders, and were soon joined by the Royal Irish Fusiliers and York and Lancs with a bracing firefight ensuing. The British line presented a far better target than the Mahdists in the rifle pits, but the British were far better and faster shots. Soon enough, the defenders' fire slackened as they were killed or forced to ground.

By now the Mahdists were feeling the pressure; their artillery was destroyed or suppressed, and British guns and rifle fire began taking a heavy toll. The Mahdist foot now faced the classic dilemma of staying put and losing, or charging the British and putting their fate in Allah's hands. They had passed all their control rolls to this point and opted to keep holding on. This was no longer necessarily what the situation demanded, however, and ibn Ali and ibn Hamid began a vigorous debate on freewill against the will of Allah; whether to trust to control rolls or to take a decision, and whether everything is indeed written. This animated philosophical exchange left the British players better informed, but no wiser.

The result of the Mahdist command discussion was that 'it was written' that the Mahdists would charge the British foot, so off they went with the usual quotas of flags, bugles, and drums. By now the Royal Marines had formed up on the left of the British line and the Rifle Corps on the right. The Black Watch remained in reserve, but seemed not overly happy about it – with much muttering about having to watch while the men at the front had all the fun. Regardless, on came the Mahdists with their usual fanatical charge. The British line let drive with rolling volleys in response, and many a fellahin caught a terrible crumpler at an unfairly short range. The Royal Artillery kept up a vigorous barrage too, on both the trenches and targets of opportunity presented by clumps of charging tribesmen.



Meanwhile, the York and Lancs kept the Artiega at bay with steady volleys, but the Gordons were less successful with their closing fire in preventing the Gemilab from making it into a melee. Elsewhere, the Hadendowa crashed into the Royal Irish Fusiliers, forcing them to use the bayonet. On the Mahdist right, the Hassanab tried to outflank the York and Lancs, but were themselves flanked by the Royal Marines whose fire, aided by that of the guns, drove the Mahdists back into the defences, though odd parties did reach the British firing lines.

At this point in the fighting, Stewart decided to get involved and work round the Mahdists' flank with a view to cutting them off from any escape. This movement consisted of a wide sweep with the 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars in the van, followed by the 19<sup>th</sup>, with the Mounted Infantry bringing up the rear. That would have been an ideal manoeuvre, except Stewart ran into the extreme left end of the Mahdist trenches occupied by the Demilab tribesmen. The Hussars ploughed in with sabres slashing, but they proved ineffective against the Mahdists who were at or below ground level. The second wave of Hussars, taking heed, charged in with their carbines. The 10<sup>th</sup> also switched to firepower, but the Mahdists were already swarming over them making life very difficult. Stewart decided not to send in the third wave mounted, but to dismount them and use the bayonet. That helped ease the pressure, but the Mahdists continued to press the British cavalry back.

A vulture's eye survey of the battlefield at this crisis point showed the British cavalry bogged down with the Demilab in the trenches where both had taken heavy losses, but fought on regardless. The Royal Irish Fusiliers had made their numbers tell and, having driven the Hadendowa back, were embroiled in a fight to the death within the defences, the Hadendowa living (and dying) up to their reputation as the most fanatical of the tribesmen.

The Gordons had finally driven off the Gemilab, but a combination of disorder and the heat had done them in; the Gemilab suffered too, but not badly, and still threatened. The Black Watch were advancing to pass through the Gordons and

finish the job, though not without the usual mocking banter. The York and Lancs, suffering only light casualties, continued to keep the Artiega at bay with rifle fire, though hits and an inability to close the final 50 yards forced the latter to go to ground in front of the defences. The Marines were in pursuit of the Hassanab into and through the defences and had the badly shaken tribesmen on the run.

Now was the moment the British played the Burnaby card, attached him to the Rifles, and launched them both in support of the cavalry. The charge of the Rifles (and Burnaby rolling a 5) allowed the badly mauled cavalry and mounted rifles to withdraw. Moreover, the Londoners' momentum took them into and through the defences, driving the Demilab out into the plain. The Irish had come unglued, however, and the Mahdists drove them back out of the defences; they too were now worn out though, and could not pursue. The Black Watch pipers took up the call, prompting the Highlanders to charge. The Gemilab broke despite the intervention of ibn Ali who was promptly bayoneted. The York and Lancs kept pace with the Black Watch, taking on the Artiega who were certainly inclined to have a romp. The Royal Marines held their position in the former Mahdist defences, but the fire had gone out of the Hassanab who were done for the day. The Artiega and Hadendowa could see how the land lay, and having been under heavy fire for most of the battle melted away into the heat haze and dust. The Hussars and Mounted Infantry were in no condition to pursue.

Mahdist casualties were, as always, bracing, but not as bad as on other occasions. On the British side, the mounted element was ruined; the Gordons had suffered heavily; and all the other units had taken considerable casualties. Again, vigorous debate and arcane formulae were deployed, but the consensus was that the Mahdists had had the best of it, but it was a close run thing. This was one of the few times that the British attacked the Mahdists with the bayonet and it is illuminating to compare Corporal Jones's oft stated "They don't like it up 'em" with Kipling's "an 'appy day with Fuzzy on the rush will last an 'ealthy Tommy for a year" – the latter would appear to be closer to the mark.



SURELY AFRICA'S BRAVEST WARRIORS, MAHDISTS ADVANCE DESPITE DREADFUL CASUALTIES.





A GENTLEMAN ALWAYS KEEPS HIS COOL, DESPITE THE MANY SETBACKS AND EXCITEMENTS HE MAY COME ACROSS

*“As the troops closed on the enemy’s Krupp battery the Arabs charged out on the corner of the square and on the detachment who were dragging the Gardner gun. Captain Wilson then sprang to the front and engaged in single combat with some of the enemy, thus protecting his detachment till some men of the York and Lancaster Regiment came to his assistance...”*

Captain Arthur Knyvet Wilson’s VC citation, *London Gazette*, 1884



BRITISH VOLLEY FIRE WAS TOO DEADLY TO PENETRATE, BUT THOUSANDS TRIED IT REGARDLESS



*“The real reason for our adopting square formations was the dense impenetrable character of the belts of bush in the desert, which paralyzed cavalry action while allowing the fearless active Arabs, who move with all the rapidity of cavalry, to approach unseen.”*

General Graham on infantry fire tactics,  
quoted in William Galloway,  
*The Battle of Tofrek* (1887)



JOLLY JACK TARS CAN TURN THEIR HAND TO ANYTHING, IN THIS CASE THE DEADLY GATLING GUN



COWED ARTILLERY MEN SERVE THEIR GUNS UNDER DISTRUSTFUL EYES

*“Then General Graham addressed his men,  
And said, ‘If they won’t attack us, we must attack them,  
So start to your feet, my lads, and never fear,  
And strike up your bagpipes, and give a loud cheer.’”*

William McGonogall,  
*The Battle Of El-Teb*



“CHARGE, CHARGE, HURRAH!”



# *Dromedaries at Dawn*

---



THE CAMEL CORPS ON THE MARCH. "JOIN THE ARMY THEY SAID. SEE THE WORLD..."

Whether it was right or wrong to send Gordon to Khartoum became irrelevant on 12 March 1884 when the telegraph lines were cut between the Sudanese capital and Cairo. Gordon was clearly in trouble and the British press and public clamoured for Gladstone's government to do something about it. Gladstone and his cabinet were underwhelmed, however, even ignoring a plea from Her Majesty. They believed that Gordon was disobeying his orders to evacuate the territory and was grandstanding as usual. Nevertheless, Victoria's premier soldier Sir Garnet Wolseley was already on the case, planning the relief mission if one should prove necessary.

Of course, Wolseley was supposed to get Gordon out alive – it would be bad form not to – so his choice of route to Khartoum caused some consternation in London. The shortest route lay overland from Suakin on the Red Sea to Berber, but the last hundred miles promised almost nothing but desert. The other route followed the Nile River, but that was much longer and full of cataracts. One other idea promoted the construction of a railway along the Suakin route, but Gladstone's government harrumphed at the thought. Wolseley had already made up his mind for the Nile passage when news came in that Berber had fallen to the Mahdi on 19 May, rendering all other plans obsolete. That news received more harrumphs in London, and the harrumphing continued into July without any decisions being made. The cabinet finally voted to send help only after receiving messages from Gordon explaining the trouble he was in and asking the whereabouts of his relief force; that, and the intense public and royal clamour to uphold Britain's reputation.

Worseley feigned surprise when given command of the expedition to relieve Gordon, but assured his wife that he would be shaking the little hero's hand by January 1885 and back in time for tea. Parliament forked over some money in August and Wolseley swung into action. He issued the requisite orders and purchasing and hiring began, most notably that of

the Canadian boatmen who helped make Wolseley's Red River Campaign a success. Wolseley also asked Evelyn Wood, Britain's man in Cairo, to provide 1,200 camels for transportation purposes. And with that, Wolseley set sail once again to Egypt.

## **WANNA BUY A CAMEL?**

The camel, that peculiar assemblage of animal parts that constituted the 'ship of the desert', would prove the necessary ingredient for saving Gordon – or so thought Wolseley. He arrived in Cairo on 9 September and immediately issued a proposal to create a Camel Corps to cut across the desert at Korti where the Nile swung east into a huge loop before running up to Khartoum. The Camel Corps would drive south to link up with Gordon's forces and hold until Wolseley and the rest of his army got there. That left only three problems; who would ride the camels, where would Wolseley get them, and who would command?

Worseley assumed on leaving England that Egypt abounded with high quality camels and you couldn't leave your hotel without falling over one. That was not quite the case, however, and the local camel dealers knew it. As soon as it became news that the British were coming, the price for even the mangiest of camels went through the roof. The next problem was, who would ride the beasts? Wolseley was adamant that only the best would do and asked for hand-picked men from the Guards and Heavy Cavalry. Thus, some of the best men from the Dragoon Guards, Life Guards, and Scots Greys found themselves face to face with some very strange 'horses' indeed, with neither species quite knowing what to make of the other. Finally, Wolseley appointed Sir Herbert Stewart to take command of the Camel Corps. The rest of the army was quickly drawn together from across the Empire; supplies, boats, and men, and mangy beasts, all assembled, and off the whole shebang set for Khartoum and glory.



# — Sir Herbert Stewart and the Battle of Abu Klea, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1885

## THE GREAT PLOD

Far from being a triumphal procession up the Nile, Wolseley's expedition stumbled along, shackled by presumptuous planning and incompetent management. The expedition's boats proved to be a perennial problem too, as was the lack of cooperation between the British and Egyptian authorities. It was the accompanying camels, however, who most continued to disappoint. It did not need pointing out to their riders that camels were not horses, but it still must have come as something of a surprise to the experienced cavalymen that camels were not easy to ride. Even Wolseley was amused by witnessing a parade of his Camel Corps reduced to farce by the simple command, 'trot' – the camels duly trotted, their riders duly fell off. The camels also proved somewhat less of a beast of burden than expected, wearing out after only a few days on the road. Buying cheap Egyptian saddles for them did not help the cause either. Befitting their camels' ships of the desert status, the cavalymen took to plugging the holes in the camels' backs with oakum, but without the same results. And there were no replacement camels, so that by the time the expedition reached Korti Wolseley had changed the original plan for the Camel Corps to account for its inability to act as a completely self-sufficient force. By then, though, if Gordon was to be saved, time was increasingly of the essence and the Camel Corps had to get going.

## A LEAP IN THE DARK

On the penultimate day of 1884, Stewart took leave of his commander and prepared his 1,100 men to strike out into the desert – the race to rescue Gordon was finally on. The lack of fresh camels, however, dictated the mission would now require two stages. The first leg stretched across the Bayuda Desert to the oasis at Jakdul Wells, approximately 100 miles from Korti. There Stewart planned to set up a supply depot then return to Korti, load up more supplies, then back to Jakdul Wells. From Jakdul Wells, the Corps would march to Abu Klea where a second oasis lay. After all that, a straight run down to Metemmeh awaited where Stewart hoped to meet up with Gordon's forces. The Mahdists would have no clue where the British were, of course, and even if they did would they dare to stand against Victoria's finest? The Camel Corps, wearing their grey tunics, ochre breeches, blue goggles, and with fetching solar topees protecting their fair, British heads from the sun, mounted once more on their dilapidated dromedaries and set off in a grand column.

## SIR HERBERT STEWART

Two equally heroic, but very different Englishmen rode at the head of the Camel Corps. Sir Herbert Stewart, son of a clergyman and damned fine cricketer, commanded. He joined the army in 1863 and served in India for a decade before returning home to join the staff college. He returned to colonial service when the ungrateful Zulus rebelled in 1878 and stayed on in South Africa to help deal with the equally ungrateful Boers. The following year found Stewart in Egypt in charge of the Cavalry Division where he was mentioned in despatches and promoted to Colonel. He first fought the Mahdists in January 1884 around the town of Suakin and received further honours for that service. He returned to Britain in April that year a firm favourite of the Queen and Wolseley, so it was no surprise that he was recalled to the desert by Wolseley to take command of the Camel Corps.

## COLONEL FREDERICK GUSTAVUS BURNABY

The rider alongside Stewart took a very different path to the Sudan: Colonel Frederick Gustavus Burnaby turned up in Cairo uninvited, telling Wolseley he was ready to fight and where did he need him? Burnaby was almost the same age as Stewart, 42, and also the son of a clergyman, but not so good at cricket. Not to worry, Burnaby was almost a cliché of the Victorian officer-adventurer and he would barely have found time to play mundane games. He joined the army in 1859, but there was no fighting to be had, so he became an aeronaut in balloons and a newspaper correspondent for *The Times*. He first travelled to the Sudan in 1874 to report on Gordon's early activities in the region, but he was soon home again, then off again, this time to ride through the bits of Asia the Russians considered belonged to them – such impertinence! Burnaby's book of that ride made him a household name in Britain. After another horseback exploit, Burnaby returned to England, married, and entered politics, which would prove to be his only failure. After flying across the English Channel in a balloon, Burnaby sought further adventures and arrived in the Sudan just in the nick of time to fight with Valentine Baker at Suakin. He was wounded at First el-Teb, but a mere scratch wasn't going to deter Burnaby from this latest great escapade up the Nile.

## Vitai Lampada (They Pass On The Torch of Life)

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night –  
Ten to make and the match to win –  
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,  
An hour to play and the last man in.  
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,  
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,  
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote –  
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

The sand of the desert is sodden red, –  
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; –  
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead  
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.  
The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
And England's far, and Honour a name,  
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

This is the word that year by year,  
While in her place the School is set,  
Every one of her sons must hear,  
And none that hears it dare forget.  
This they all with a joyful mind  
Bear through life like a torch in flame,  
And falling fling to the host behind –  
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

*Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938)*



*Lee Metford bayonet,  
Omdurman period  
(Perry collection)*



## THE BATTLE OF ABU KLEA

Burnaby, Stewart, and the rest of the Camel Corps, rattled along, arriving at Jakdul Wells in just four days. They hustled back and forward with the supplies for a few more days, then it was back in the saddle and off to Abu Klea. Two days and forty miles later, on 16 January 1885, Stewart raised his hand to halt the column: Abu Klea was in sight, but it was increasingly clear from the scouting reports that the Mahdists knew the British were there, and that there were a lot of them.

On approaching Abu Klea, Stewart ordered the column to build a zariba – a form of protection around a settlement using a dense thicket of thorny branches – bolstered by rocks and biscuit box barricades. The Camel Corps retreated inside to wait for morning. Some of the more intrepid Mahdists took this fine opportunity to fire into the British camp and did so all through the night. They were remarkably ineffective, however, and apparently could not have hit a camel while holding its tail! It was a bleary, but intact British force, therefore, that turned out before dawn on the 17<sup>th</sup> ready for whatever the devilish dervishes could throw at them. All that did was provide the appreciative Mahdists better targets and in daylight too: if Stewart wanted a fight, he had better come to them.

Having fought the Mahdists before, Stewart knew that they could appear seemingly out of the ether and once they did they would close as fast as Hussars to the pub on payday. The undulating terrain between him and Abu Klea also offered great concealment for the Mahdists, but Stewart argued it was now or never. He gave orders for a contingent to remain behind in the zariba to protect the baggage and ordered the rest of his little army into square. The front edge of the square where the attack was most likely to come was given to the Guards Camel Regiment and the Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment. Their ranks also extended to the left and right flanks where they were supplemented by the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Lancers on the left. The Scots Greys, 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Dragoon Guards, the Royal Horse Guards, The Bays, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Life Guards, and the Royal Marines lined up to complete the right face and part of the rear. The Sussex Regiment completed the square at the rear. Three seven-pounder screw-guns took up positions on the corners and the Naval Brigade drew their Gardner Gun into position on the front left corner. Finally, a hundred or so camels that might prove

tactically useful were hobbled and placed in the centre, the rest were left in the zariba. With everyone in place, the advance began.

The initial destination for the little square was directly to the front where a line of Mahdist flags stretched across a low ridge, but it was soon clear that this would not be a parade-ground exercise – the camels were seemingly unclear on their role in an orderly advance. When the square moved forwards, the disdainful dromedaries wouldn't budge without coercion, or milled around as camels do. Their inactivity forced a bulge in the rear of the square and gaps began to appear, so much so that Stewart had to eventually call a halt on the slope of a long incline to redress the ranks. The Mahdists seized this opportune moment to rise up from behind the ridgeline and charge.

Thousands of Mahdists poured forward, seemingly oblivious to the first volleys from the alert British soldiers. On they came to within 100 yards, but the hail of lead was too much, forcing the Mahdists to veer down the left face of the square where the Gardner Gun waited to chew them up and spit them out. The machine-gun responded to the unwritten law of all machines, however, and decided this was the moment to stop working. The exultant Mahdists saw the gap opening in the square where sailors feverishly attempted to unjam the blasted weapon, and rushed forward with renewed vigour. Disaster loomed for the Camel Corps in its first trial, which might prove difficult to explain if any of them survived.

Cometh the moment, cometh the man! Colonel Burnaby saw the danger too and spurred his horse around the outside of the square to lend a hand to the frantic machine-gunners. Burnaby's heroism stemmed the tide for a moment and bought some time, but at the cost of his own life – he was last seen dismounted, thrashing around with his sword before falling under a wave of white-clad berserkers. The Mahdists bounded into the square where their commander planted his flag next to the mass of no doubt bemused and apprehensive camels. Unfortunately for the Mahdists, the distressed dromedaries became allies of the British (at last!) and in their inactivity provided a barrier against the Dervish assault inside the square. The rear British ranks turned quickly to face inwards and using their advantage of standing on the upper slope fired with devastating effect into the Mahdists who in turn looked for exits as fast as their legs could carry them. The square soon closed behind the survivors and mopping up began. The whole affair had taken less than 15 minutes, but that was time enough for 1,000 Mahdists to die along with 81 men from the square; another 120 British were wounded in the fierce, but mercifully short fight.

## ON TO KHARTOUM, OR NOT

Stewart's Camel Corps continued its march down through Abu Klea, then on to Abu Kru where the Mahdists attacked again with similar results. This time, though, they killed their second Victorian hero by mortally wounding Stewart who died a month later. The overly-cautious Sir Charles Wilson took command of the Camel Corps, bringing progress to a crawl. By the time the desert column came within reconnaissance distance of Khartoum, Gordon's grisly fate was already sealed. On 26 January 1885, the Mahdi launched a full-scale assault on Khartoum and Gordon died, reducing the number of living Victorian heroes by one more. Wolseley subsequently wanted to reunite his Camel Corps and river column at Berber. Wilson had already fallen back to Abu Klea, however, with a shadow of the force that left Korti just a few short weeks before. The expedition to relieve Gordon and add to the glory of the Empire was over.

*"Generally speaking, the camel gets up just as the man gets his foot in the stirrup, and the results are curious. Woe betide if you try to throw your right leg over before the beast is up; you will infallibly come a hideous cropper."*

Officer of the Grenadier Guards  
quoted in *Marching Over Africa*, p141





ORDERS OF BATTLE

BRITISH ARMY

ARMY COMMANDER:  
BRIGADIER GENERAL SIR HERBERT STEWART

- Guards Camel Regiment (384)
- Heavy Camel Regiment (400)
- Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment (334)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Sussex Regiment (130)
- Artillery: Three 7-pounder screw-guns
- Naval Brigade: 1 Gardner machine-gun
- Baggage: 150 camels and 50 native drivers
- Flank Skirmishers: Two ½ squadrons of Hussars (95 & 31)

MAHDIST ARMY

ARMY COMMANDER:  
THE AMIR MUSA WAD HILU

- Main Body:**
- Kordofani tribesmen (4,000-6,000)
  - Arab riflemen (400)
  - Arab spearmen (600)
- Berber Contingent:**
- Cavalry (250)
  - Infantry (1,750)
- Metemmeh Contingent:**
- Spearmen (2,000)



MAHDISTS ON THE PROWL



“GET OFF THAT BLOODY CAMEL AND FORM LINE, SIR!”

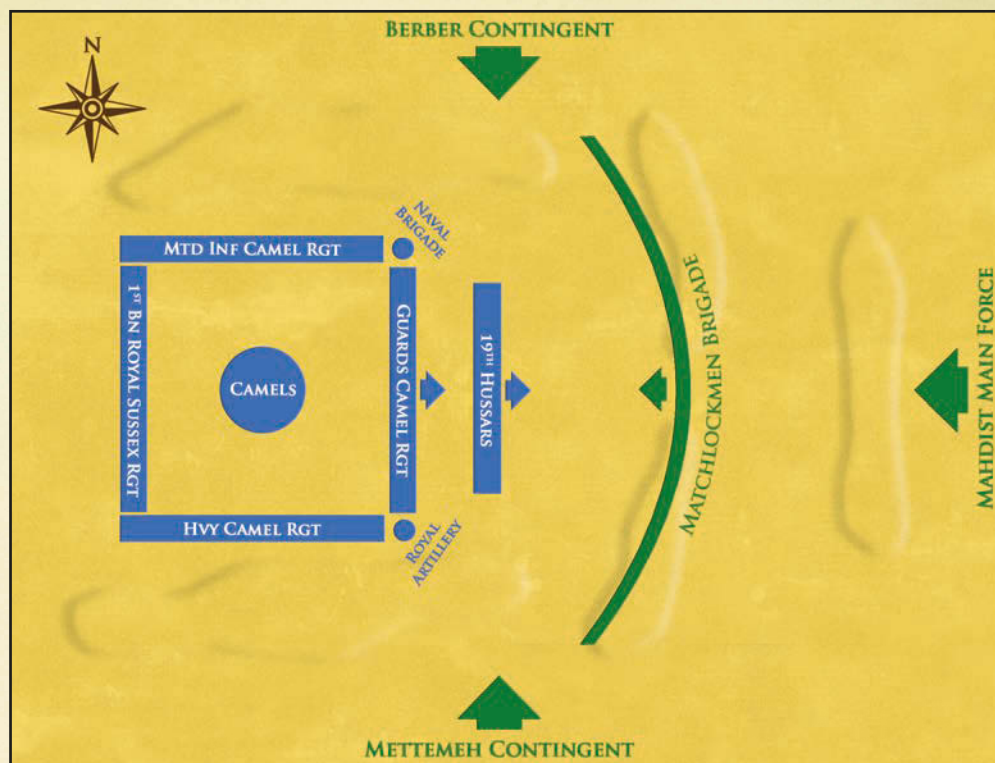


## WARGAMING THE BATTLE OF ABU KLEA

The Battle of Abu Klea presents the challenges of non-cooperative camels for the British *Black Powder* commander. He will have to keep his square intact and traverse the table while the Mahdists will no doubt be running around the sides hoping to exploit that one moment of weakness in the square that will surely come.

### Missions

- **Sir Herbert Stewart:** traverse the table, keeping your expeditionary force intact and repelling any assaults made against you.
- **The Amir Musa wad Hilu:** Demonstrate the foolishness of trying to save Pasha Gordon by exterminating the British desert column. Leave no survivors.



### The Table

The table for this game is 8' x 6' arranged with the long edges north and south. The landscape undulates and consists of mostly rocky desert, but not enough to affect movement. Some of the undulations should be high enough to hide a considerable amount of Mahdists – think rocky, sandy hills. A line of Mahdist flags is placed on the eastern edge of the table.

### Deployment

Without wishing to foreshadow events, the scenario was 'rigged' to give the Mahdists every chance to do better on table than their historical results. The terrain was designated as rolling with much broken ground, therefore, to allow the Mahdists to hide and 'rise up from the earth'. We didn't want to fight on a billiard table, a metaphorical billiard table obviously, because Henderson would sulk terribly if we used the real thing.

The Mahdist commanders in their various wargaming incarnations had long since learned that a straight charge at the British was unproductive and set out accordingly to disrupt the square before attacking. The main body, therefore, was held off table to the east, but parties of spearmen and riflemen, which we Mahdists insisted on calling 'snipers', were deployed in folds of ground to hinder and dislocate the British.

### Special Rules for Baggage Camels

- Each turn the player controlling the baggage camels rolls a D6, on a 1 they do not move, 2, 3 4 or 5 they move normally and on a 6 they double move.
- Figures attempting to move through the area occupied by baggage camels move at half speed.
- Figures attempting to fire into or through the area occupied by the baggage camels throw a D6 which is the distance they can see, in inches.



Royal Welch Fusiliers jacket,  
Omdurman period (Perry collection)





WILD MAHDIST CAVALRY ENDEAVOUR TO BREAK THE GREY BRITISH LINES – ALL PRAISE TO THE MAHDI!



THE CAMEL CORPS STANDS FIRM UNDER INTENSE PRESSURE



BLACK POWDER FORCES

THE DESERT COLUMN

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF: SIR HERBERT STEWART

Guards Brigade

Commander: Colonel The Honourable C P Bigham

- Guards Camel Regiment – 20 foot figures (Dismounted)
- Heavy Camel Regiment – 20 foot figures (Dismounted)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment – 12 figures
- Royal Artillery – 1 gun model and crew

Mounted Brigade

Commander: Colonel D H Haslet

- Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment – 20 foot figures
- 19<sup>th</sup> Hussars (2 mounted squadrons) – 8 cavalry figures
- Naval Brigade (Gardner gun) – 1 gun model and crew
- Camels with handlers and staff, as available, but ideally enough to cover the same area as two foot units.

*“The man was not worth the camels.”*

Redvers Buller on Gordon

MAHDISTS

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF: THE AMIR MUSA WAD HILU

Berber Contingent

Commander Ali ibn Mussa

- Cavalry – 1 unit of 15 figures
- Tribesmen – 2 units of 40 figures

Mettemeh Contingent

Commander Yusuf Atilla

- 3 units of 30 figures

Matchlockmen Brigade

Commander Mata ibn Said

- 6 units of 6 riflemen and 12 spearmen

Mahdist Main Force

Brigade 1: Commander Abdallah Banda

- 3 units of 40 figures

Brigade 2: Commander Saleh Mohammed

- 2 units of 40 figures



MARTINI-HENRY'S SPIT DEATH AS THE MAHDISTS SWEEP FORWARD





BRITISH WOUNDED BEGIN THEIR JOURNEY HOME

British Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit        | Type      | Armament                      | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special |
|-------------|-----------|-------------------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|---------|
| Guards      | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle          | 6            | 4        | 4+     | 3       | Steady  |
| Foot        | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle          | 6            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | Steady  |
| Hussars     | Cavalry   | Sabre. Breech-loading carbine | 9            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Steady  |
| Gardner Gun | Artillery | Gardner Gun                   | 1            | Special  | 4+     | 1       | Steady  |
| Artillery   | Artillery | Field Gun                     | 1            | 3-2-1    | 4+     | 1       | Steady  |

**Staff Ratings:** Stewart’s staff rating is 9. All other British command have a staff rating of 8.

Special Rules

**Uneven Ground:** The uneven nature of the ground is replicated by the British players throwing two six sided dice each turn for each unit to ascertain how far the troops can see, measured in inches.

**Machine-gun Movement:** The machine-gun can be moved by the crew as horse artillery, but at 12".

**The ‘Burnaby’ Effect:** The ‘Burnaby’ effect is replicated by allowing the British to re-throw any roll of the dice after combat begins. This can only be done once.

Mahdist Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit              | Type     | Armament             | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special           |
|-------------------|----------|----------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-------------------|
| Mahdist Tribesmen | Infantry | Spear                | 6            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Warband, Fanatics |
| Mahdist Riflemen  | Infantry | Breech-loading rifle | 6            | 2        | 4+     | 3       | Fanatics          |
| Mahdist Horse     | Cavalry  | Spear                | 6            | —        | 4+     | 2       | Warband           |

**Staff Ratings:** Mahdist commanders have a staff rating of 8.

The shooting factor for the Mahdist Tribesmen is for thrown spears.



## BATTLE REPORT

As this was Abu Klea we decided that Sir Henry Newbold's stirring poem *Vitai Lampada* would be our motto for the evening. We therefore split along the lines of Cricketers -v- Rugby players. Having played and been soundly beaten at most of the famous old Borders rugby grounds, I laid claim to command of the Mahdists, while the British commander is about to embark on his thirtieth year of competitive cricket and was therefore appointed on the very Victorian grounds of seniority. Timings and availability of tables made this a home fixture for the Cricketers, so it was declared a day/night game with tea after the first innings and regular drinks breaks. As this game also involved some subterfuge an umpire was required, but because this writer was not in a position to officiate that task fell to another.

The British had started to hone their tactics by this point in the campaign, as in real life, and were determined not to be tempted out of their square. They planned to play everything with a straight bat and put no real faith in their Gardner Gun, relying instead on good old Thomas Atkins and his Martini-Henry rifle. To simulate that speed was of the essence, Stewart decided that units would move independently and 'brace up' when required. The British were conscious of the need to keep moving and secure the oasis so they could bring relief to their wounded fellows left behind in the zariba.

The Mahdists stood between the British and the oasis, however, and had less reason than usual to attack, preparing instead to play the long game and pick their moment. The Mahdist plan was to isolate one or more of the constituent parts of the square and sweep through the gap and destroy it from within. The Mahdists, though untrained soldiers, seem to have been expert outdoorsmen and able to make maximum use of cover, so we gave them an extra +1 for cover. The Mahdist commander mapped the deployment of his advance parties and passed it to the umpire; this was essentially a semi-circle round the predicted route of the British across the table. The main Mahdist body lay to the east of the table, with the Berbers to the north and the residue of the Mettemeh to the south. That dispersal would reduce the punch of the massed charge, but increase the ability to take advantage of any opportunity the over-confident British might offer. The tactical plan was for the spearmen to align behind the firearm troops so that they were completely hidden. The Mettemeh provided the Mahdist advanced force, consisting of six matchlock-men groups accompanied by twelve spearmen. Their purpose was to lure the British cavalry out to ride down the 'snipers' then confront them with a wicked collection of spears.

The British units advanced onto the table in a loose formation, but retaining brigade integrity: the Guards took up the front face of the square; the Heavy Cameleers marched on the right flank, the Mounted Infantry on the left; and the Royal Sussex brought up the rear. The Royal Artillery claimed their due and occupied the right front corner, and the Gardner Gun rumbled along on the left front corner. The cavalry roamed out front as Stewart's eyes and ears, or as an expendable tripwire depending on one's viewpoint. The baggage camels gathered in the middle of the formation, trying to keep something armed between them and the hostile world outside.

It wasn't long before the Hussars came under fire from the matchlock armed snipers\* and they set off at the trot – like all British cavalry regiments, their commander knew they would 'go', but he wasn't sure exactly where or to what effect. The 19<sup>th</sup> thus headed off at a decent pace towards the source of the rifle fire and on trying to winkle out the matchlockmen ran into the spearmen as the wily Musa wad Hilu had planned. After the

initial charge, however, the cavalry used their mobility to avoid getting caught up in melee with the tribesmen, but it was a chastening experience nonetheless. Their job done, the Hussars retired past the square with a cry of "Cave!" and were helped on their way by a chorus of jeers from their infantry counterparts. The main column, hardly a square at this point, was now coming under increasing if ineffectual fire.

The Berbers and Mettemeh slowly advanced from the flanks, making maximum use of cover, so only appeared on-table as small parties on which the British kept a weather eye. The Main Force to the east helped by raising their standards to draw British attention. Poor going and the truculence of the camels, hindered the British, making their formation not as pristine as it might have been. Indeed, the Guards commander grew ever more deeply unimpressed with the inability of his colleague's troops to maintain perfectly straight lines at all times. That led to a brief, but heated, discussion of the terms 'square', 'quadrilateral', and 'squarish'.

The British square slowed to a crawl, knowing the enemy was near, and closed up the units as best they could. To the north, the Berber foot worked their way forward then suddenly came on with a rush directly at the square. As they did, the umpire replaced the small parties of tribesmen that the British were aware of with the whole Berber horde, causing great consternation to the men of this composite unit fighting under strange officers and NCOs and this would certainly qualify as a 'bumping pitch and a blinding light'. The Mounted Infantry quickly changed from column to line, and prepared to receive the Berber charge. The infantrymen stood their ground, but at the halt, creating a gap at the front, which the rest of the column failed to notice in time. The camels took this moment to emulate their real life counterparts, resolutely refusing to throw anything sensible on their D6s, and sticking mainly to 1s and 6s. The subsequent dislocation prompted the Berber cavalry into a hasty charge because they thought they could make it into the gap. The Woodentops reacted quickly too, demonstrating that well handled Martini-Henrys can cover gaps as effectively as a line of infantry and causing the Berber Horse to reconsider their impetuosity.

At the southern end of the square, the Mettemeh also advanced into charge range and made their move. But the Heavy Camel Regiment was either more alert to the possibility of a full-scale attack, or just better at rolling sixes, because they anticipated the charge while it was still a long way out. Having re-ordered and steadied themselves, they took a good stride down the wicket and showed the maker's name – or, if you prefer, they waited until the Mahdists were at a hundred yards range and let drive, bringing tribesmen down by the score and piling up casualty markers. No amount of saving throws was going to help the hapless Mahdists, especially when the British repeated the treatment at regular intervals.

The action on the flanks of the square meant it was time for Musa wad Hilu to signal the main force forwards. They now closed in on the Guards at the front of the square and the crisis point of the battle was at hand.

At this point the bails were removed for tea and our hostess put on a fabulous spread; she's a wonderful example of Victorian womanhood, but with some queer old ideas about universal suffrage. Still, she makes an excellent sponge-cake, which may be why her husband retains a soft spot for her.

Suitably fortified we reconvened and examined the position. The Mahdist Main Force was bearing down on the front face of the square where the Guards stood ready to receive them;



the Heavy Camel Regiment continued to hold the Mettemeh at bay, while the Berbers put the Mounted Infantry under real pressure; the Sussex Men were as yet untroubled at the rear of the square; and the Hussars, having rallied nearby, faced down the Berber cavalry still chastened by their earlier rebuff.

The action resumed with the Guards watching the Mahdists all the way in before opening fire at about a hundred yards with predictable results. The Mahdists pressed home their attack as best they could, but even as steady volleys gave way to individual fire they made little headway and went to ground. The Mettemeh began to rely more and more on their matchlockmen, while the spearmen again lurked in folds of the ground waiting for another opportunity. The Mahdists' chance came on the north face of the British formation. The Berbers were pressing their case and expanding along their front when they came to the gap between the Mounted Infantry and the Guards that was covered only by the sailors and the Gardner Gun, which defying all predictions was resolutely refusing to jam. The opportunistic Berbers seized on the limited cone of fire offered by the Gardner to exploit the gap and rushed in to engage the Senior Service in hand-to-hand combat. The sailors used their cutlass bayonets to good effect, but the sheer number of Berbers proved overwhelming.

It was now 'Newbolt o'clock' for the square – the denouement was at hand. At least one colonel was dead, and although the Gardner wasn't jammed it was out of action and it would take more than the voices of several schoolboys shouting "play up!" to rally the square with the Berbers loose among the baggage camels. The rear ranks of the foot units turned to face inwards and began to fire on the Berbers, but that had the effect of slackening the fire to the outside – with a mighty cheer the forces

of Allah came on again in a rush. Desperate times call for desperate measures, so our host poured some desperate measures and we carried on. The firepower of the British caused great suffering amongst the Berbers, yet they were enveloping the Mounted Infantry and worrying the Guards' left flank. The Mahdist Main Force was also now in contact with the Guards in some places, while still being fended off elsewhere.

The choice for the British was to try and save the intact units of Heavy Camels and the Sussex Regiment or go all in; after a brief durbar they chose the latter course. The Sussex Regiment turned inwards and charged, accompanied by the Heavy Camel Regiment's rear rank. While this brought more British numbers to bear on the internal situation it also played into the hands of the Mahdists because it essentially turned the battle into one giant melee. The Mettemeh charged in too, and the Mahdists closed to contact all along the Guards' front. The resultant fracas became far too complex to chronicle in this simple tale, but the net effect of the affair at Abu Klea was that the British succumbed to the numbers and ferocity of the attack; Mahdist standards replaced Regimental Colours; and the "sand was sodden red with the wreck of the broken square."

Parties of British managed to make their escape, covered by the cavalry, with the Berber Horse declining to further trouble the scorer. The Mahdist casualties were viewed by all as being somewhere between 'largish' and 'oh dearie me', but it was still an emphatic victory for the Mahdi and conclusively proved the superiority of 'chase the egg' over cricket.

\* The Alan Gruber Award for cracking the old joke "Are these your figures? So you painted matchlockmen and matchlock cats and dogs..." went, once again, to A Waddie of this parish.



*Melton Prior's sketch of the furious hand-to-hand fighting at Abu Klea. In fact Prior was back at the British zariba position and was not an intimate eyewitness to this scene. The officers with decorative puggarees are from the Heavy Camel Regiment (HCR).*



*"But the worst o' your foes is  
the sun over'ead:*

*You must wear your 'elmet for  
all that is said:*

*If 'e finds you uncovered 'e'll  
knock you down dead,*

*An' you'll die like a fool of  
a soldier."*

Rudyard Kipling,  
*The Young British Soldier*



THE HELIOGRAPH IN ACTION, A MOST USEFUL TOOL IN THE RIGHT HANDS



WEARY TOMMIES RETURN TO THEIR CAMP

*"Ye sons of Mars, come join with me,  
And sing in praise of Sir Herbert Stewart's little army,  
That made ten thousand Arabs flee  
At the charge of the bayonet at Abu Klea."*

William McGonogall, *The Battle of Abu Klea*



*The Camel Corps caused enormous interest and commentary in England as nothing quite like it had been seen before. One officer described it as “London Society on camels.”*



MAHDIST HORSEMEN GALLOP ONTO THE BATTLEFIELD



VENGEFUL BRITISH MOUNTED UNITS SALLY OUT TO FOLLOW UP THE RETREATING FOE

*The Camel Corps was dubbed the ‘Nile Circus’, not helped by Wolseley ordering 1,000 large white umbrellas for his men. The regimental march, ‘The Campbells are coming’ was quickly changed to ‘The camels are coming’.*



A SAVAGE DOGFIGHT IN THE DESERT



# Epilogue: Victorian Exorcism



*The Charge of the 21st Lancers at Omdurman. The absence of the sun shades known to have been fitted to the regiment's helmets is a notable inaccuracy, while the combat was rather less one-sided than Stanley Berkeley's portrayal would suggest. Famously Winston Churchill rode in the charge.*

The death of Gordon and the collapse of Wolseley's relief campaign halted British operations in the Sudan, but did not end them: fighting continued around Suakin for a while longer in 1885, and there were sporadic engagements with the Mahdists for the rest of the decade. However, the full force of the British would not return until 1896, this time under the command of Herbert Kitchener, Sirdar of the Egyptian Army.

## KITCHENER

Herbert Kitchener was a pillar of the Victorian establishment long before he glowered out of WWI posters behind his famous moustache, reminding lily-livered Englishmen of their duty to join up. However, like so many Victorian military

adventurers, Kitchener took a circuitous route to the top; he was Irish born, Swiss educated, a young Francophile, but English bred. Too young for the Crimea, Kitchener first saw action as an ambulance driver in the Franco-Prussian War before accepting a commission in the Royal Engineers in 1871. He was quickly packed off to the Middle-East as a surveyor and stayed out there drawing maps until 1875 before being appointed as vice-consul to Anatolia. His role in the Gordon relief expedition was as an intelligence officer and he gained vital experience of fighting Mahdists at Abu Klea. When Wolseley left, Kitchener was made Governor of the Suakin region on the Red Sea and he took part in the victory over the Mahdists at the Battle of Toski in 1889. Three years later Kitchener replaced Sir Francis Grenfell in command of the Egyptian army as its Sirdar and was promoted to Major-General in the British Army. It was in his capacity as Sirdar that he was given the task of putting an end to the Mahdist state in the Sudan once and for all. Kitchener relished the opportunity and set to work.

## INVASION

Kitchener was aware of the limitations of the Nile as a conveyance from watching Wolseley contend with the various cataracts on his failed mission. This time, Kitchener was determined to build a railway in conjunction with river craft to transport his comparatively small army. The campaign began on 16 March 1896 and within days Kitchener's force had reached the town of Akasha. Kitchener dallied for two months, preparing Akasha as his

*"...although the banners  
were now gathering  
under the Kerreri  
Hills, Ali and Osman  
were too late..."*

Winston Churchill – *The River War*





# Herbert Kitchener and the Battle of Omdurman, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1898

major supply base and communications centre, safe in the knowledge that the nearest Mahdist force was fortifying itself at Firket sixteen miles further up river. In early June, Kitchener made his move, taking a force of Sudanese and Egyptians to evict the Mahdists at Firket; it took less than three hours and only 22 losses for that to happen. Kitchener waited again for British reinforcements to arrive before resuming his advance in September. The Mahdists took up positions at Hafir, but Kitchener shelled them from the river, then skirted past them en-route to the town of Dongola. The Mahdist retreat continued.

The New Year brought new railway building, this time away from the Nile at Wadi Haifa across the desert to Abu Hamed. Sleeper by sleeper the railway began to stretch into the desert until the midpoint was reached at the end of June. In July, Kitchener sent Major-General Archibald Hunter to oust the Mahdist garrison at Abu Hamed; the intrepid Hunter went at them with bayonets fixed, then tossed the dead Mahdists into the river for Kitchener to know of his victory. The next stop was Berber where the Mahdist garrison was perhaps unsurprisingly in a state of mutiny and the town had to be abandoned. In October, the railway reached Abu Hamed and more British troops arrived over the next couple of months to bolster Kitchener's command – this was all going rather well!

The year 1898 brought some proper fighting at last. The Mahdist Khalifa had been busy consolidating the army at the end of 1897, and 40,000 tribesmen were on their way to wipe out Kitchener, or at least that was the plan. On 20 March, the Mahdists made it to Nakheila on the River Atbara where they built a strongly fortified zariba, replete with trenches, rifle-pits,

*"It looked as if the whole of Africa was coming at us, for their front extended for miles."*

Tom Christian, Seaforth Highlanders  
quoted in *Marching Over Africa*, p166



and lots of thorny bushes. On 8 April, four British brigades and an Egyptian Division supported by a number of field and machine-guns, advanced on the zariba behind the skirl of the bagpipes of the Seaforths and Gordon Highlanders. Whether it was the music or the intense firepower, we may never know, but the Mahdists did not stand for long and ran like rabbits into the desert, only 4,000 returning to serve in the Mahdist army at Omdurman. Kitchener was delighted with this turn of events and took his victorious army into summer quarters at the confluence of the Nile and Atbara rivers. In the meantime, more British soldiers arrived, bringing Kitchener's army to 22,000 men, 44 field guns, 20 machine-guns, and 10 gunboats. By the last week in August, the whole shebang was ready for the last leg of this great adventure.



THE THIN GREY LINE – THE BRITISH ADVANCE AGAINST THE MAHDIST ENEMY





MASSED ARTILLERY AND MAGAZINE RIFLES VERSUS FLESH AND FAITH

## THE BATTLE OF OMDURMAN

The British did not have too far to go now: they advanced up the banks of the Nile and on 1 September they camped at Egeiga just six miles out from Omdurman, now the Mahdist capital after the abandonment of Khartoum. Then reports flowed in to Kitchener that up to 50,000 Mahdists were streaming north to wipe out his puny little force. He quickly ordered his force to construct defences around the village and sent the gunboats to bombard Omdurman. The British camp was a mile long, but narrow, their backs to the river. In front, they dug two lines of shallow trenches and built a wall of thorn bushes in a semi-circle facing the enemy. At 6:30am on 2 September 1898, the Mahdists began their advance.

Kitchener's semi-circle of raw firepower and naked steel stood behind their defences and waited for the Mahdists to close. Within ten minutes of the warning, the sound of 50,000 men advancing was unmistakable, then through the heat haze, flags emerged, black, bright and dark green, white, and under them soon enough the Dervish warriors slowly emerged. Now was the time to be steady, boys! The British artillery and gunboats opened fire at 2,800 yards, causing brief holes in the Mahdist ranks that were soon closed up. On the Dervishes came, rushing into growling machine-gun fire, then rippling rifle volleys. The plain in front of the British position was quickly covered in the dead and dying, but still the rush continued. Finally, around 8am, the storm broke and the Mahdists retired out of range. Only on the extreme right was any British force imperiled when a Dervish assault threatened to cut off the Egyptian cavalry that had remained outside the main defences. Some well-aimed shots from a gunboat ended that little episode. Now it was Kitchener's turn to drive home his apparent victory, or so it seemed.

Kitchener wanted to make sure that the Mahdists could not get back to their capital, at least not unmolested. To that end, he dispatched his Lancers out onto the left flank, nearest the town.

Those excitable cavalry types could not believe their luck when they saw a band of Dervishes seemingly taking cover in a depression. The Lancers charged, as they are wont to do, but in a moment when bad non-Victorian words might have been used, they realised that between them and their target was a ravine full of Dervishes, about 4,000 of them! So the British kept on charging, straight into the Mahdists and through the other side, although more than a few were left dismounted in the midst of the enemy, much to their consternation no doubt. The remainder used their carbines to great effect on the Mahdists, who had not enjoyed their day in the slightest. They promptly beat a hasty retreat, leaving the cavalry to the field, slightly wiser and most of them still alive.

The British infantry advanced out behind the cavalry, pushing forward onto the ridges from which the Mahdists had launched their attacks. Kitchener was intent on mopping up any continued resistance before cutting off the Mahdist escape route to the south and Omdurman. On the right of the British line was the Egyptian-Sudanese Brigade commanded by Brigadier-General Hector MacDonald. The Brigade under Lieutenant-Colonel D.F. Lewis stood on MacDonald's left when 17,000 decidedly grumpy Dervishes under the Black Flag suddenly appeared from behind the hill and started to close in fast. MacDonald poured volley fire into them, while Lewis assailed the Mahdist left flank with a similar storm of bullets. The Dervishes could not forge their way through the hail of lead and broke for the rear. MacDonald's men raised a cheer because surely the battle was now over.

Then, from behind the hill to MacDonald's right, an almighty roar went up and 12,000 more Dervishes of the Green Flag poured down on MacDonald's exposed flank. Quickly, MacDonald restored order and formed his Brigade into an arrowhead formation to receive the charge. Again the volleys roared out from his tired troops, but the Dervishes kept on coming. Much to MacDonald's relief, he turned to see the 1<sup>st</sup> British Brigade under Brigadier-General A.G. Wauchope progressing rapidly to his assistance across the gap between MacDonald and the rest of the army, fanning left and right to bolster the line, and firing steadily into the white-clad mass. Behind Wauchope, Kitchener's Egyptian cavalry moved up and into line. When the Mahdists faltered, the cavalrymen spurred their horses into the charge, sweeping the Dervishes before them, and ending the crisis.

Kitchener's victorious army advanced, driving the Dervish survivors out into the desert, before turning to occupy Omdurman. When the British force marched in, the Mahdists fled out the other side, under fire from Kitchener's gunboats and harried by Egyptian cavalry and camelry. The British pursuit ended after thirty miles, but friendly tribes continued the chase out into the Kordofan. Over 10,000 Mahdists lay dead on the field and Kitchener would later face criticism for killing a considerable number of the wounded, remembering perhaps the fate that befell British soldiers in earlier battles who offered assistance to seemingly wounded Dervishes that rose up and killed them. Kitchener's losses at Omdurman were a mere 47 dead and 380 wounded, belying the closeness of the battle, particularly around MacDonald's isolated Brigade.

Kitchener followed his successful campaign in 1899 by sending a force into Kordofan to root out the Mahdists who had made their last stand at Umm Diwaykarat. That battle was a massacre and the last Khalifa of the Mahdist revolution lay dead. Nevertheless, it was the Battle of Omdurman that shattered the Mahdist state, and for the British in the dying embers of Queen Victoria's reign, Gordon was avenged at last.



## ORDERS OF BATTLE

### BRITISH ARMY

*The British force consisted of 8,200 British and 17,600 Egyptian and Sudanese, with 44 field guns and 20 machine-guns. The River Force was equipped with a further 36 artillery pieces and 24 machine-guns.*

#### ARMY COMMANDER:

**GENERAL SIR HERBERT KITCHENER**

#### British Infantry Division

**Commander: Major-General Sir William Gatacre**

##### 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade (Wauchope)

- 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Warwickshire Regiment
- 1<sup>st</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment
- 1<sup>st</sup> Seaforth Highlanders
- 1<sup>st</sup> Cameron Highlanders
- 6 Maxim Machine-guns

##### 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade (Lyttelton)

- 1<sup>st</sup> Grenadier Guards
- 1<sup>st</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade
- 4 Maxim Machine-guns

#### Egyptian Division

**Commander: Major-General Archibald Hunter**

##### 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Egyptian Infantry
- 9<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry
- 10<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry
- 11<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry

##### 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade

- 8<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry
- 12<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry
- 13<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry
- 14<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry

##### 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade

- 3<sup>rd</sup> Egyptian Infantry
- 4<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry
- 7<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry
- 15<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry

##### 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade

- 1<sup>st</sup> Egyptian Infantry
- 5<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry
- 17<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry
- 18<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry

#### Cavalry

- 21<sup>st</sup> Lancers – 4 squadrons
- Egyptian Cavalry – 9 squadrons
- Camel Corps – 8 companies

#### Artillery

- 32<sup>nd</sup> Field Battery Royal Artillery – 8 guns
- 37<sup>th</sup> Field Battery Royal Artillery – 6 x 5-inch howitzers
- 1<sup>st</sup> Egyptian Horse Battery – 6 Krupp 6cm, 2 Maxim machine-guns
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Egyptian field battery – 6 Maxim-Nordenfelt guns, 2 Maxim machine-guns
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Egyptian Field Battery – 6 Maxim-Nordenfelt guns, 2 Maxim machine-guns
- 4<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Field Battery – 6 Maxim-Nordenfelt guns, 2 Maxim machine-guns
- 5<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Field Battery – 6 Maxim-Nordenfelt guns, 2 Maxim machine-guns

### MAHDIST ARMY

**ARMY COMMANDER: ABDULLAH AL-TAAISHA**

#### Dark Green Flag (Uthman al-Din)

- 28,378 infantry, including 12,872 with rifles
- 2,925 cavalry
- 3 artillery pieces

#### Black Flag (Yaqub)

- 14,128 infantry, including 1,053 with rifles
- 1,588 cavalry
- 2 artillery pieces

#### Green Flag (Khalifa Ali wad Ullu)

- 5,394 infantry
- 794 cavalry

#### No Flag (Osman Digna)

- 3,371 infantry, including 365 with rifles
- 187 cavalry



*Mahdist jibbeh taken as a trophy by British Staff after the Battle of Omdurman 1898 (Perry Collection)*



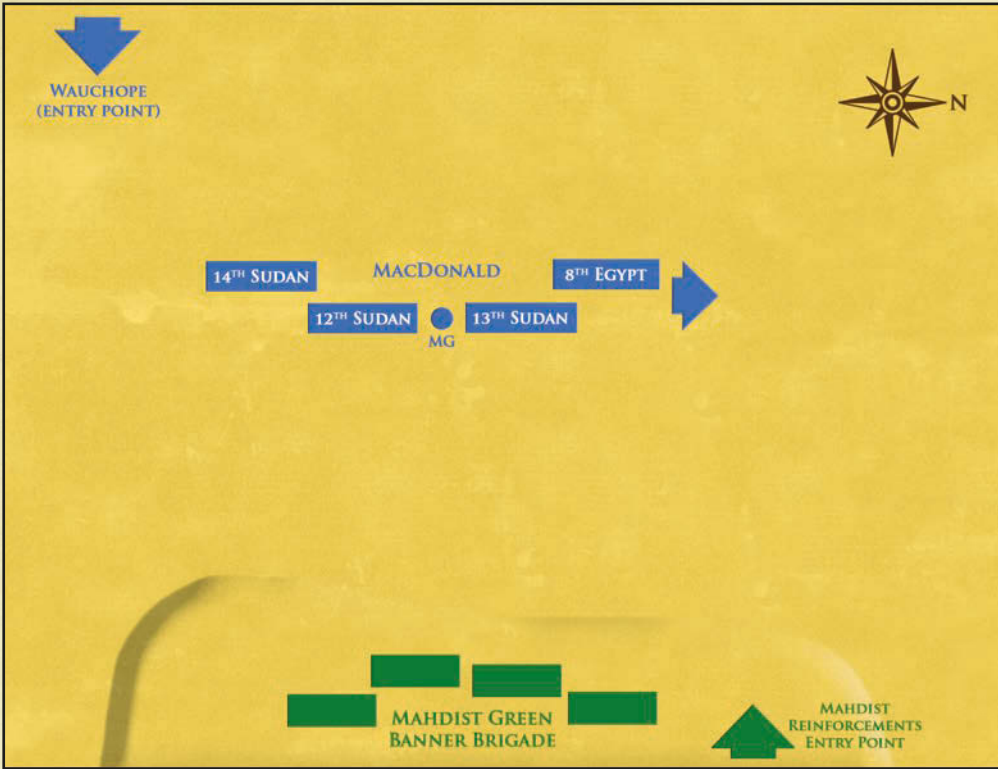


FANATICAL TRIBESMEN MAKE A DOOMED ASSAULT AGAINST KITCHENER'S TROOPS



TRUSTING IN THEIR SUPERIOR FIREPOWER, BRITISH AND EGYPTIANS FACE THE FULL ONSLAUGHT OF THE MAHDIST HORDE





WARGAMING THE BATTLE OF OMDURMAN

Omdurman was one of the most lopsided battles of the colonial era with the Anglo-Egyptian army standing in line pouring volley after volley into the charging Mahdists. On the face of it, therefore, Omdurman does not make a great wargame. However, towards the end of the battle when Kitchener began what he thought was his mopping-up operation, one of his commanders, MacDonald found his brigade isolated just as a fresh wave of Mahdists flowed out from behind a nearby hill. Our wargame puts the *Black Powder* commanders in that moment when victory could easily have turned to disaster.



Missions

- MacDonald is to hold his position and protect the flank of Kitchener’s Army until relieved.
- The Mahdists are to overrun MacDonald’s force and divert Kitchener from his advance.

The Table

The table was the by now customary 8' x 6' with a range of hills running along one long edge belonging to the Mahdists. The rest of the table was flat with no terrain features, but the usual aesthetic dressing.

Deployment

MacDonald was a pretty slim customer, though apparently not without talent, and set out his stall to defend where he stood, approximately in the centre of the table, until help arrived. He deployed his brigade with the Egyptians on the left (north), the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Sudanese in the centre, and the 14<sup>th</sup> on the right (south). MacDonald decided to go ‘all in’ as a reserve was likely to be redundant if the first line was over-run. The flank battalions were slightly refused to prevent the line being outflanked. MacDonald’s obvious fondness for native troops meant he had more faith in them than some of his colleagues, so he was happy to stand proud behind them. The Mahdists were deployed behind the range of hills to MacDonald’s right, initially with four units available and with the other four following on as set out below.

Reinforcement Table

- From turn two onwards both sides roll two D6:
  - For each Mahdist roll of a 5 or 6, two units of reinforcements enter onto the table
  - For the British, a combined score of 9 or over will see Wauchope’s Brigade arrive in march column, one unit per turn.



BLACK POWDER FORCES

THE BRITISH ARMY

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF:  
BRIGADIER-GENERAL HECTOR MACDONALD

MacDonald's Brigade

- 8<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Infantry – 24 figures
- 12<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry – 24 figures
- 13<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry – 24 figures
- 14<sup>th</sup> Sudanese Infantry – 24 figures
- 1 Maxim machine-gun

Wauchope's 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade

Commander: General Andrew Wauchope

- 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Warwickshire Regt – 24 figures
- 1<sup>st</sup> Lincolnshire Regt – 24 figures
- 1<sup>st</sup> Seaforth Highlanders – 24 figures
- 1<sup>st</sup> Cameron Highlanders – 24 figures
- 1 Maxim machine-gun

LANCERS SIDESHOW

21<sup>st</sup> Lancers

Commander: Colonel R H Martin  
• 4 squadrons of 8 figures designated A to D

Wadi Mahdists

Commander: Al Haj Younis Abakar  
• 4 units of 24 figures

THE MAHDIST ARMY

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF:  
UTHMAN AL-DIN

Mahdist Green Banner

Brigade Commander: Yagoub Baasi  
• 4 units of 36 figures

Mahdist Green Banner Reserve

Brigade Commander: Abdelwahid al-Nur  
• 4 units of 36 figures

*"It was the last day of Mahdism, and the greatest. They could never get near; and yet they refused to hold back. By now the ground before us was all white with dead men's drapery. Rifles grew red hot; the soldiers seized them by the slings and dragged them back for cool ones. It was not a battle, but an execution."*

G.W. Steevens quoted in  
*Eminent Victorian Soldiers*, p283



VICTORY OR MARTYRDOM! DESPITE HORRIFIC CASUALTIES, MAHDISTS SWEEP TOWARDS THE ENEMY





BRITISH RIFLEMEN HOLD FIRM, BUOYED BY THE PRESENCE OF THE TRUSTY MAXIM

British-Egyptian Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit          | Type      | Armament                      | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special          |
|---------------|-----------|-------------------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|------------------|
| Egyptian Foot | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle          | 6            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | —                |
| British Foot  | Infantry  | Breech-loading rifle          | 6            | 3        | 4+     | 3       | Steady, Stubborn |
| Maxim         | Artillery | Gardner Gun                   | 1            | Special  | 4+     | 1       | Steady           |
| Lancers       | Cavalry   | Lance. Breech-loading carbine | 7            | 2        | 3+     | 3       | Steady           |

**Staff Ratings:** MacDonald has a staff rating of 10. Wauchope has a staff rating of 8.

Special Rules

**Reinforcements:** From turn two onwards both sides roll two D6:

- For each Mahdist score of 5 or 6, two units of reinforcements enter onto the table.
- For the British, a combined score of 9 or more will see Wauchope’s Brigade arrive in march column, one unit per turn.

**Steady:** Automatically pass the first break test of the game.

**Stubborn:** Re-roll one failed morale save.



Mahdist Forces: Stats and Special Rules

| Unit              | Type     | Armament             | Hand-to-Hand | Shooting | Morale | Stamina | Special           |
|-------------------|----------|----------------------|--------------|----------|--------|---------|-------------------|
| Mahdist Tribesmen | Infantry | Spear                | 6            | 1        | 4+     | 3       | Warband, Fanatics |
| Mahdist Riflemen  | Infantry | Breech-loading rifle | 6            | 2        | 4+     | 3       | Warband, Fanatics |

**Staff Ratings:** Mahdist commanders have a staff rating of 8.

The shooting factor for the Mahdist Tribesmen is for thrown spears.

Special Rules

**Fanatics:** Re-roll misses in combat following a charge, and charged enemy must make a break test.



## BATTLE REPORT

Omdurman was the final battle of our Sudan campaign and both sides had honed their tactics by this point, it was no longer simply the noble savage against the scientific Europeans as even the most 'pore benighted heathen' could, by this point, slaughter his enemies like a civilized man. That conundrum inspired us to split along the lines of those whose degrees were vocational against those with post-graduate research qualifications. As this was to be a straightforward battle no umpire was thought necessary and both sides' reinforcement schedules were known to all. The fact that we may be gentlemen does not prevent bickering and taunting, however, and there would be plenty of that.

The battle as a whole is not much of a challenge for the British as they simply dress ranks and give the Mahdists five rounds rapid, rinse and repeat. The decision was therefore made to fight the final action where the Mahdist Green Banner tribesmen attempted to overwhelm MacDonald's Brigade and to have reinforcements rushing to both sides' aid from off-table. Note that although predominantly Sudanese, MacDonald's Brigade will be referred to as 'Egyptian' as it was co-opted from the Egyptian Army.

MacDonald's plan was straightforward, he would stand his ground come what may; if help arrived, well and good, otherwise he would trust to God and rapid fire; his God obviously, not that of his men. Uthman al-Din's plan was also straightforward; charge and overwhelm the Egyptians before their help arrived. Not the most cunning stratagem, but time was of the essence, any delay and the chance would be lost. The Mahdists still retained enough contempt for their northern neighbours that they were prepared to take the gamble that a frontal assault would succeed, a tactic they would not have contemplated against British troops.

The game started with the usual ballyhoo of drums, trumpets and banners accompanying the Mahdist Ansars cantering over the crest of the hill, the first two units in line abreast with two following on, but drifting out to the flanks, with the remainder off-table for the moment. It was slightly surprising for MacDonald to find the Mahdists on his flank, but he wheeled his force to face them, keeping the same order and forming up in lines to maximize firepower.

On came the Mahdists, but the Egyptians proved the Mahdists' wager ill-judged by standing their ground despite the fanatic charge and letting drive at close range. Their *Black Powder* morale rating of 4 may seem generous, but in the actual battle they were resolute and by this point the mystique of the Mahdists had gone. Using the closing fire factors (and rolling an abundance of automatic hit 6s) took some of the starch out of the Mahdists, disordering them.

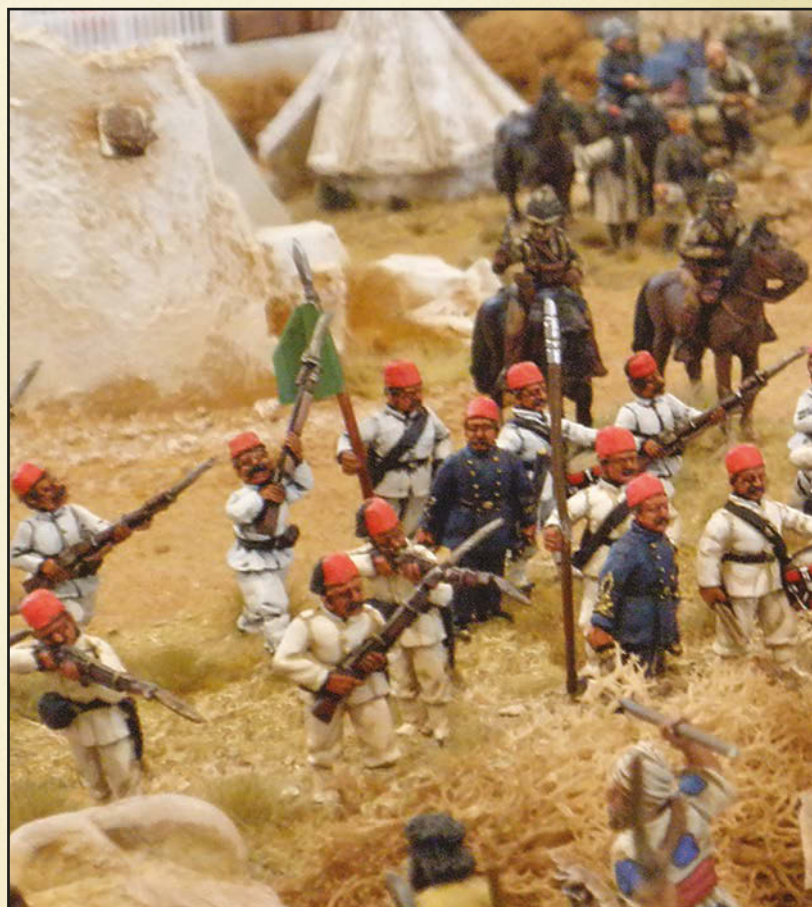
The next turn saw the arrival of the Reserve Brigade of the Green Banner as Uthman al-Din rolled 'boxcars' and with a whoop of glee brought on his troops. Wauchope was as yet nowhere to be seen because a 2 and a 3 proved insufficient, he was however much more stoic than his excitable opponent.

The Egyptian and Sudanese troops held their nerve and kept firing, a testament to their training and the stream of invective and encouragement coming their way in English, Gaelic, and Hindi from MacDonald. The flank battalions were holding their ground too, but in real danger of being enveloped. As the forces ranged against MacDonald mounted he became increasingly agitated about his need for urgent assistance. Seeing this, Wauchope gave a despairing cry of "Rolling a six

here Boss" and did just that, along with a four. The Warwicks consequently appeared to the British rear, followed by the 'Yellowbellies', the Seaforths, and Camerons. Wauchope decided that the situation was so grave that MacDonald couldn't wait for his assistance to come on in drill-book fashion; so he formed his battalions into line and they unleashed volley fire as soon as they had targets – the minuses for this were a small price to pay for the additional firepower and the diversion of attention from the beleaguered Egyptian Brigade.

The steam was starting to go out of the Mahdist charge by this battle and they apparently lacked the enthusiasm of their predecessors. After the Egyptian and British fire began to take effect the Mahdists came on more reluctantly and seeing this Uthman gave the cry "Follow me!" and led the Ansars on once more. A rather unseemly debate ensued about whether a gentleman would 'machine-gun' an enemy commander or not; fortunately good sense prevailed. Hiram Maxim's invention was put to good use in other ways, however, and swathes of Mahdists fell before them, piling up bodies and casualty markers. Unfortunately for Uthman, using the 'Risk to General' rule he rolled a six and became *hors de combat*. Witnessing the loss of their leader, the Mahdists failed to close to contact and became sitting, or rather prone, targets for MacDonald's Brigade. The rapidly arriving British Brigade fired as they advanced and were soon almost level with the Egyptian line.

Leaderless and under relentless fire the Mahdists drifted back into the dust and heat haze, their power broken for ever and the way to Khartoum, or the northern table edge, lay open. MacDonald dressed his ranks and gathered his wounded, and gave thanks to his God.





## AN AMUSING DIVERSION

The charge of the 21<sup>st</sup> Lancers is one of the iconic moments of the Omdurman campaign, so it was unilaterally decided that their engagement would be included on one flank of the action as a temporal anomaly – that and the traditionally powerful argument of “But I painted the figures and I want to use them...” This combat was played out as a separate action on the British left flank, isolated by a wadi and the agreement that neither side would intervene in the main action. A different figure scale was used to provide a decent number of cavalry figures and because the Mahdist numbers were such that they were not going to run out under any circumstances.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Lancers were duly despatched to ensure the way to Khartoum was clear and, if not, to flush their quarry. That noted ‘thruster’ Winston Churchill was with them and persistently drew attention to himself like a boulevardier of the most vulgar stripe. The Lancers were deployed in squadrons with the outer two as ‘skirters’ and the central two to follow on to cover the maximum ground, but all close enough to be mutually supporting.

On went the Lancers and to the surprise of no one they ran straight into the Mahdist-filled wadi where mayhem ensued when what had simply been a lark became a fight to the death. B and C Squadrons in the centre drove in the tribesmen to their front, momentum carrying the cavalry deep into the mass, which closed up round them. On the left, A Squadron tested to charge, but flinched, sweeping round the Mahdist right flank, pursued by angry and slightly disappointed Mahdists. On the British right, D Squadron turned inwards and charged onto the flank of their fellows and became quickly embroiled in the melee.

B Squadron’s momentum was such that they broke their opponents and joined A Squadron reforming to the Mahdists’ rear. C and D were less fortunate and were stuck fighting for their lives in the wadi. Having gained the charging lancer bonus, lances were quickly abandoned in favour of pistols, carbines, and swords. The cavalry then attempted to cut their way through the tribesmen, but the Mahdists fought back with spear and swords and the fight quickly became a stalemate until numbers began to tell and the cavalry momentum was lost. Due to the future fame of Churchill we decided to use the ‘Risk to General’ rule for him and, while it made no difference to the battle, he was last seen being unhorsed and swamped by a wave of blackamoor spearmen despite the valiant efforts of his men to rescue him.

Having rallied, A and B Squadrons promptly charged back into the fight. With A Squadron conscious of their failure to ‘go’ on the previous occasion they led the way into the wadi and the chargers quickly linked up with their stationary colleagues. The added mass allowed the beleaguered regiment to cut its way out of the wadi and exit stage left, pursued by Ansars.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> reformed back near British lines the roll call showed that they had taken about 50% casualties including a large number of officers. Fortunately they would not be required further as the Mahdists were streaming off into the desert pursued by the British for the push on to Khartoum.

As the danger for MacDonald had passed and the battle was a clear British victory, we repaired to the drawing-room where the Mahdists attempted to claim a draw on the basis of roundly defeating the 21<sup>st</sup> Lancers, but this was sharply pooh-poohed by the British.



THE MAHDIST CHARGE FALTERS AS IT MEETS COLD BRITISH STEEL



# Appendix 1

The British Army that fought in Egypt and the Sudan was very different from that which had fought at Waterloo in 1815 or even the more recent adventures in India and the Crimea. That was evident not only in organizational changes, but in personnel and the way it dressed and fought.

Edward Cardwell, Prime Minister Gladstone's Secretary of War, was the man most responsible for transforming the Victorian British Army. He took office in 1868 and two years later introduced a series of fundamental reforms that were subsequently named after him. It was Cardwell who created the now familiar regimental system based on territory so that units formerly designated by numbers gained geographic monikers, although many retained their numbers alongside their new titles until 1881 when the new Secretary of War Hugh Childers instituted more reforms. Thus, for example, the 65<sup>th</sup> and 84<sup>th</sup> Regiments of Foot became the York and Lancaster Regiment in 1881, just in time to be shipped to Egypt. Cardwell also split the regiments into two active battalions with a third reserve battalion created from the old and now abandoned militia system. From then on, one battalion would be out serving the Empire while the other would stay at home at regimental headquarters. Soldiering was also different after Cardwell. Gone were the days of Wellington's famous "scum of the earth" that beat Napoleon's conscripts: they served for life while Cardwell's reforms required just twelve years of service with six of those in reserve. Taken together, the Cardwell and Childers reforms created a more professional army in the field with a sufficient reserve at home that could respond rapidly to the problems inherent in running a large empire.

The standard organization for British infantry regiments was eight companies of 120 men. The artillery contained six guns in each battery, accompanied by a complement of 113 men, and an extra 24 for horse-artillery. Four squadrons of 160 men made up the cavalry regiments. A novel idea for the Sudan was the creation of camel regiments and a mounted infantry regiment. Four infantry regiments supplied 30 men for the mounted infantry, although the lack of decent mounts hampered their usefulness. The Camel regiments were organized along traditional cavalry lines with volunteers joining from the Guards (319), the Heavy Cavalry (461), and the Light Cavalry (409). The Camelry dressed in distinctive style too, wearing red serge tunics, yellow-ochre cord breeches, dark blue puttees, a pith helmet, and brown boots. A brown leather belt and bandolier for ammunition completed the ensemble.

Regular infantry uniforms underwent a significant transition in the early 1880s. The Battle of Tel-el-Kebir in 1882 was the last time British infantry dressed in red for a major



BENGAL  
CAVALRY

engagement, but already some units newly arrived from India wore khaki. Khaki was, however, a euphemistic description for a uniform colour that shaded everything from brown to grey. Other units, such as the Royal Marines, wore their own distinctive uniforms, and the Highland regiments of course wore kilts. Veteran British soldiers who had previously fought in bright, sunlit environments were quick to stain their stark white helmets and webbing with tea or tobacco to reduce their obvious visibility, and the less experienced soon followed suit.

The standard British weapon throughout the late Victorian era was the Martini-Henry .45 Rifle, and how tribal people across the Empire grew to fear it. The heavy bullet could stop a man at 1,000 yards, although the British usually opened volley fire at around 600 or 800 depending on conditions – at that range and less, to be hit anywhere would probably prove fatal either then or later, such was the nature of the wound. In the unusual circumstance of a spearman getting close enough to engage in hand-to-hand combat, the Martini-Henry with bayonet attached made for an effective thrusting weapon at nearly six-feet long. In addition, the British employed Gardner and Gatling machine-guns that rattled out up to 120 .45 rounds every minute when the gunner cranked the handle. The sandy, hot conditions in the Sudan, however, made machine-guns prone to jamming. For longer range work, the British deployed 7-pounder and 9-pounder field guns, but it was their trained Royal Artillery crews that resulted in their Mahdist counterparts being overmatched when the two sides met.

Contrary to popular myth, the battlegrounds in the Sudan were rarely just flat desert; the landscape was often rocky or interspersed with thorny bushes. That made cavalry operations difficult, as did the Mahdist tactics of lying down and slashing the horses as they passed. Therefore, the best use of cavalry was in reconnaissance duties or dismounted using carbines when required to fight.

Ironically, perhaps, the Sudan saw the last great iconic British cavalry charge, that of the 21<sup>st</sup> Lancers at Omdurman. By then though, the glory days of cavalry were past and even the panache of the cavalryman's uniform was absent, replaced by the same khaki field uniform worn by the infantry. Khaki was by now regulation for all British troops, including the khaki helmet covers that made uniform the previous ad-hoc arrangement. The helmet covers did contain the only colour on the uniforms, however, patches used to designate regiments.

The principal infantry weapon had also changed by the time Kitchener took his army into the Sudan to avenge Gordon's death. British soldiers now carried the Lee-Metford .303 calibre rifle. The weapon carried a slimmer, smokeless bullet than the Henry-Martini, but was every bit as lethal. A new more reliable bayonet completed the weapon ensemble. The artillery too came equipped with new weapons. In particular, the 12-pounder breech-loading 3-inch field gun was deployed to great effect, firing high-explosive shells that fragmented on impact. The new 5.5-inch howitzer also proved effective against the poorly protected Mahdists. Finally, it is worth noting that the Egyptian army benefitted from the British equipment upgrade. By now, the better trained and disciplined Egyptian and Sudanese regiments, a result of over a decade of British tutelage, came armed with much of the infantry and artillery firepower that devastated Mahdist ranks in the 1880s. They would do so again in the final battle at Omdurman.



## *The British Army in Egypt and the Sudan*



CHARGE AND COUNTER-CHARGE IN THE DESERT



SOLID TOMMIES ON THE MARCH

The Indian Army contingent despatched to the Sudan was sent for the usual reason – they were the best available troops. The Indian Army of the 1880s was, however, a very different beast to the pre-Mutiny East India Company Army. Now they came under the direct command of Horse Guards like the rest of the British Army, although they were still technically a separate entity. The units were British officered, with the rank and file coming from the martial races of India, usually from the mountainous north and west. Sikhs and Gurkhas were to the fore, though most of those sent out to the Sudan were from the traditional recruiting grounds of Oudh Province. Each brigade usually contained three or four Indian battalions and a battalion from the British Army nominally as support, but in practice to police it. Other than mountain guns, which were regarded as the elite of the army, the Indian army had no artillery of its own – their role in the Mutiny had put paid to that.

For the expedition to the Sudan, the Indian Army provided the Second Brigade of cavalry, comprising the 13<sup>th</sup> Bengal Lancers, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bengal Cavalry, the 6<sup>th</sup> Bengal Cavalry; and an Infantry Brigade, consisting of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Seaforth

Highlanders, the 7<sup>th</sup> Bengal Native Infantry, the 20<sup>th</sup> Bengal (Punjab) Native Infantry, and 29<sup>th</sup> (2 Baluchi) Native Infantry. They were armed and equipped in much the same manner as the British Army with the exception of the artillery. The main difference was in the colour of their uniforms because the Indian Army had adopted khaki ('dust' in Hindi) uniforms earlier than the British as a result of repeated excursions on the North West Frontier. This was a cause of some dismay to the more aesthetically inclined Queen's officers!

The Indian troops were perhaps surprisingly loyal to the Raj given the fact it was barely a generation since the Mutiny. There were grumblings about loss of caste crossing the 'Black Water' to Africa, but that was less of an issue in the 1880s because Brahmins and high caste Hindus were now actively discouraged from joining the Army, though dietary and religious restrictions would still lead to problems. Whatever had happened in the past was in the past and although the Indian troops were given little chance to show their mettle in Egypt and the Sudan, they would stay true to their salt.



## Appendix 2

The revolutionary army of the Mahdi, known as the Ansar, resembled less a snowball gathering support than an avalanche pouring downhill bringing everything with it. The Mahdi began his revolt with just over 300 men, but within a year he commanded 8,000. By the time of the capture of Khartoum in early 1885 the Mahdi controlled tens of thousands of warriors assembled into a complex organization encompassing contingents from all over the Sudan.

In the beginning, the Mahdi's small band of followers needed little organization and they easily saw off the penny-packet units of government troops sent to deal with them. As the Mahdi's reputation grew, some tribes came over, but remained in their tribal groups. When el-Obeid fell in January 1883, however, the rebellion grew exponentially with tens of thousands of disaffected Sudanese joining in the fight. Moreover, El-Obeid provided the rebellion with a massive arsenal of 7,000 rifles, 18 field guns, and half-a-million rounds of ammunition. The massacre of Hicks Pasha's column in November that year added to the Mahdi's stockpile. The Mahdi finally had a 'real' army combining various arms and specializations, and he controlled almost all of the Sudan outside of the capital, Khartoum. But what would he do with it all?

Working from the top down, the Mahdi was the commander-in-chief; under him served three Khalifas from the most significant regions. The Khalifas each had different coloured flags, black, red, and green, under which they organized their men into 'rubs' of between 800 and 1,200 men. The rubs were further broken down into standards of approximately 100 men, which were further deconstructed into 25-man *muqaddamiyya*. Those basic building blocks allowed the creation of units by specialty and function, but the vast majority of the Mahdi's army consisted of common foot soldiers. The army's structure also allowed the Mahdi to diffuse tribal groupings to some extent and his regulations on dress fostered the sense of unity he desired.

From the fall of el-Obeid onwards, the Mahdi proclaimed that the main component of the 'uniform' for his army was to be

the *jibbeh*, a white cotton shirt with coloured patches. The soldiers were also to wear *takia* (skull-caps) and a turban with its tail hanging down behind the left ear. Sandals, a waistband, and pearls worn round the neck made up the ensemble. However, it appears from the sources and contemporary pictures that the Mahdi's uniform was more of an ideal than standard dress; most tribal groups retained the dress they came in, which was usually little more than a breech cloth or robe. Even where the soldiers wore *jibbehs*, the variations in style and decoration were distinctive and regionalized.

Whatever the Mahdi's soldiers wore, they came to the ball armed to the teeth. The first weapon a Mahdist enemy probably noticed was the 10 foot long, leaf-bladed spear being carried by his assailant. The Mahdist soldier also usually carried three throwing-spears, but it was the straight, double-edged sword hanging in a red leather scabbard under his armpit that he liked to use most to get up close and personal. Finally, if he lost all that, there was always the wicked looking dagger in a sheath on his left arm. Other weapons included captured rifles, various knives, and sometimes big sticks that were useful for bringing down horses. Some Mahdists carried shields of rhino, elephant, or hippo hide, though it appears they were rarely carried into battle.

It follows that the default Mahdist tactic was to close with the enemy as fast as possible and start slashing; this was a warrior culture where status depended to a great extent on personal courage, and the Mahdists did not possess the technology or undergo the training needed to form cohesive firing units. Mahdist success, then, required effective scouting by their excellent light cavalry and camelry, and deployment usually in hidden ground to bring the enemy in as close as possible before launching a rapid charge from, hopefully, two or more directions simultaneously. Only a well-trained and disciplined force could hope to avoid the shock and awe of a concerted Mahdist attack, as the Egyptians all too often discovered to their cost.



THE ANSAR TAKE CASUALTIES FROM LONG-RANGE FIRE



## *The Army of the Mahdi*



LIGHT CAVALRY IN WHITE FLOWING ROBES DASH FORWARD



ANSAR INFANTRY WITH THEIR OBLIGATORY LARGE GREEN DEVOTIONAL BANNER



IT WAS NOT ALL SWORD AND SPEAR IN THE MAHDIST ARMIES. ARTILLERY AND RIFLEMEN WERE ALSO FOUND IN LARGE NUMBERS





*Facsimile of W. B. Wollen's oil of the Battle of Abu Klea. The original painting is housed in the National Army Museum. The only patterned puggarees worn in Stewart's force were those of the HCR officers, while Wollen's Mahdists look more like Bija warriors than Kordofanis.*



ANSAR OFFICERS LEAD ON THEIR FOLLOWERS



*Mahdist amir in the custody of Sudanese soldiers.*



'E rushes at the smoke when we  
 let drive,  
 An', before we know, 'e's 'ackin' at  
 our 'ead;  
 'E's all 'ot sand an' ginger when alive,  
 An' 'e's generally shammin' when  
 'e's dead.  
 'E's a daisy, 'e's a ducky, 'e's a lamb!  
 'E's a injia-rubber idiot on the spree,  
 'E's the on'y thing that doesn't give  
 a damn  
 For a Regiment o' British Infantee!

Rudyard Kipling, *Fuzzy Wuzzy*



The Mahdist movement's last great charge beneath the Kerrerri Hills. Now a major suburb of the Sudanese capital, Omdurman lies directly across the White Nile from old Khartoum.



A TERRIFYING SIGHT FOR THE AVERAGE BRITISH SOLDIER!



# Further Reading

---

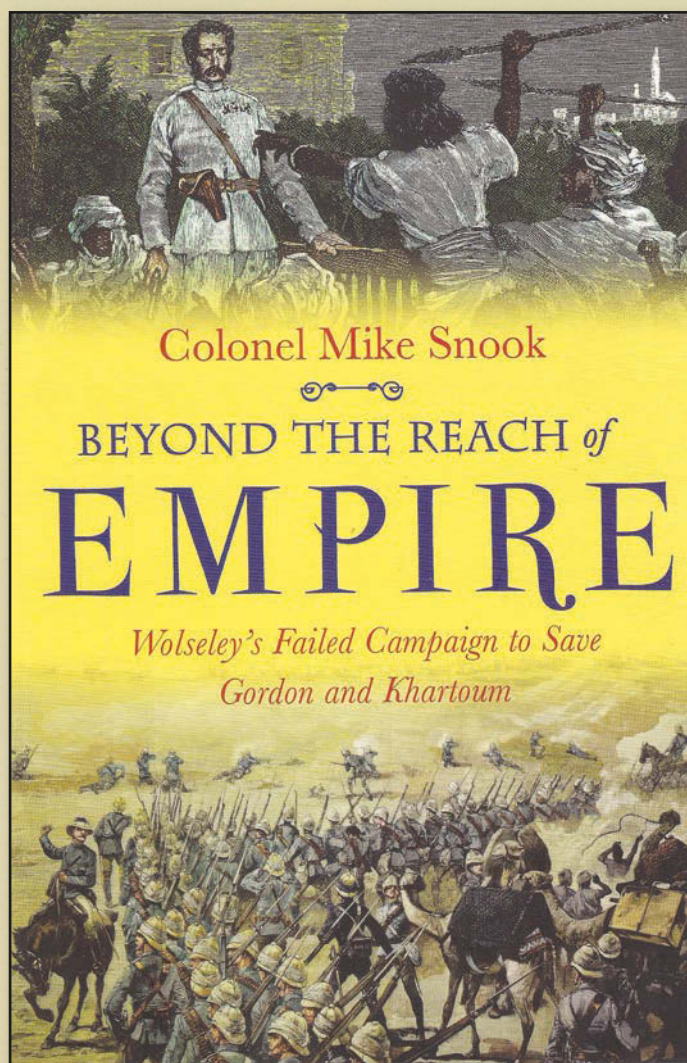
The following texts are highly recommended if you want to explore the campaigns of the Mahdist Wars further, and were invaluable in our research for this supplement. The orders of battle featured in this book are based on the research of a number of authors, predominantly that of Mike Snook for his book *Go Strong into the Desert*.

|                      |                                                                          |                     |                                                                            |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Michael Asher        | <i>Khartoum: The Ultimate Imperial Adventure</i> (Penguin, 2008)         | Henry Keown-Boyd    | <i>A Good Dusting</i> (Secker & Warburg, 1986)                             |
| Valentine Baker      | <i>Organization and Employment of Cavalry</i> (Pallas Armata, 1873/1995) | Halik Kochanski     | <i>Sir Garnet Wolseley: Victorian Hero</i> (The Hambledon Press, 1999)     |
| Michael Barthorp     | <i>Blood-Red Desert Sand</i> (Cassell Military, 2002)                    | Fergus Nicoll       | <i>Sword of the Prophet</i> (The History Press, 2004)                      |
| Frank Emery          | <i>Marching Over Africa</i> (Hodder and Stoughton, 1986)                 | Adrian Preston      | <i>In Relief of Gordon</i> (Hutchinson & Co., 1987)                        |
| Byron Farwell        | <i>Mr. Kipling's Army</i> (W.W. Norton, 1981)                            | John Pollock        | <i>Gordon: The Man Behind the Legend</i> (Constable, 1993)                 |
| Byron Farwell        | <i>Eminent Victorian Soldiers</i> (W. W. Norton & Co. 1985)              | John Pollock        | <i>Kitchener</i> (Constable, 2001)                                         |
| Donald Featherstone  | <i>Khartoum 1885</i> (Osprey, 1993)                                      | Colonel Mike Snook  | <i>Go Strong into the Desert</i> (Perry Miniatures, 2010)                  |
| Donald Featherstone  | <i>Omdurman 1898</i> (Osprey, 1993)                                      | Colonel Mike Snook  | <i>Beyond the Reach of Empire</i> (Frontline Books, 2013)                  |
| Donald Featherstone  | <i>Tel El-Kebir, 1882</i> (Osprey, 1993)                                 | Edward Spiers       | <i>The Victorian Soldier in Africa</i> (Manchester University Press, 2005) |
| William Galloway ed. | <i>The Battle of Tofrek</i> (Kessinger, 1887/2008)                       | Brian Thompson      | <i>Imperial Vanities</i> (Harper Collins, 2003)                            |
| Lord Edward Gleichen | <i>With the Camel Corps Up the Nile</i> (Nabu Press, 1923/2010)          | John Waller         | <i>Gordon of Khartoum</i> (Atheneum, 1988)                                 |
| Dominic Green        | <i>Three Empires on the Nile</i> (Free Press, 2011)                      | R. Wilkinson-Latham | <i>The Sudan Campaigns 1881-98</i> (Osprey, 1976)                          |



ANSAR WARRIORS CRASH INTO A BRITISH SQUARE





# Beyond the Reach of Empire

Wolseley's Failed Campaign to Save Gordon and Khartoum

by Colonel Mike Snook MBE PhD

A classic text of Victorian Military History by one of the most incisive modern-day writers in the genre.

Featured at the Hay Literary Festival 2014. 5-star graded by both UK and USA Amazon readers.

578 pages, illustrations, maps, much new material and revelations which serve to overturn the received history of the Nile Campaign. Underpinned by the author's extensive fieldwork in the Sudan. The Battles of Abu Klea and Abu Kru featured in unprecedented detail.

Frontline Books, London, Dec 2013. ISBN: 9781848326019

**Available from Amazon sites across the world, in hardback and Kindle editions.**

*'Mike Snook brings to his story the understanding of a fighting soldier, cutting through the jingoism and bombast of earlier accounts, laying bare the reasons for the campaign's failure.'* Mark Urban

Also by Mike Snook:

*How Can Man Die Better: The Secrets of Isandlwana Revealed*

*Like Wolves on the Fold: The Defence of Rorke's Drift*

*Into the Jaws of Death: British Military Blunders 1879-1900*

*Go Strong into the Desert: the Mahdist Uprising in Sudan 1881-5*



# GO STRONG INTO THE DESERT

THE MAHDIST UPRISING IN SUDAN 1881-85



BY LT. COL. MIKE SNOOK

## Go Strong into the Desert

The Mahdist Uprising in  
the Sudan 1881-1885

A military history  
and uniform guide

By Lt. Col. Mike Snook

Cover art by Karl Kopinski.  
Internal plates by Michael Perry.

216 pages packed full of  
contemporary images both  
colour and black and white.

*'Combining as it does extensive field work, scrupulous research and the author's characteristically entertaining style of writing, Go Strong into the Desert is packed with military detail and is certain to enthral anyone with an interest in Queen Victoria's wars.'* Ian Knight

*'This is an essential work for the understanding of campaigns more than a century ago in distant lands that still yield many valuable lessons for today. Lt. Col. Snook's book combines sound scholarship with visits to the battlefields and love of Victorian military life with all its colourful characters.'* Mark Urban

A Perry Miniatures Publication  
[www.perry-miniatures.com](http://www.perry-miniatures.com)



## Sudan 1881- 1885

28mm metal and plastic miniatures range

Designed by Michael Perry

This extensive range of figures covers British, Egyptian  
and Sudanese forces involved in the campaigns, photos  
of which you will find throughout this volume.

Go to our website to see the entire range in metal and Beja infantry in plastic.



PO Box 6512,  
Nottingham, UK,  
NG7 1UJ







BASHI-BAZOOK IRREGULARS 'COMMANDEERING' SUPPLIES AT A KHARTOUM SOUK



SAVAGE LOOKING MEN, ON SAVAGE LOOKING BEASTS



A BRITISH 7-PDR IN THE THICK OF ACTION AT ABU KLEA



*Black Powder™*

# Blood on the Nile

Fighting the battles of the Mahdist Wars in the Sudan with model soldiers



They charged out of the shimmering desert, thousands of fanatical warriors dressed in white, brandishing fearsome weapons. These were the Mahdi's men and a British soldier's worst nightmare. The Mahdi had emerged from the wilderness to lead a rebellion against the Egyptian government in Sudan. His armies overwhelmed the Egyptians and trapped Governor Gordon in Khartoum. The British launched a relief expedition, but it arrived too late. Such an insult to the Empire could not go unpunished, and the British returned to crush the Mahdists. Sudan then came under British Imperial control, but, like shifting sands, history could have turned out very differently.

Using this *Black Powder* supplement, you can take charge of the British army fighting in the desert, or assume command of the Mahdi's forces in their struggle against the world's greatest military power. Along the way, learn about the battles and campaigns of the Mahdist Wars, and the soldiers who served in them.

**A copy of the *Black Powder* rulebook is required to use this supplement.**



Warlord Games, the Warlord Games logo, Black Powder and the Black Powder logo are trademarks of Warlord Games Ltd. The exclusive copyright in the contents of this package is the property of Warlord Games Ltd. © 2014. All rights reserved.

Made in the E.U.  
ISBN 978-1-911281-13-9