

GENERAL EDITOR DAVID G. CHANDLER

OSPREY
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CAMPAIGN SERIES

29

OMDURMAN 1898



KITCHENER'S VICTORY IN THE SUDAN

DONALD FEATHERSTONE



The Sirdar (Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Army), General Sir Herbert Kitchener, who commanded the campaign to reconquer the Sudan in 1896–8.

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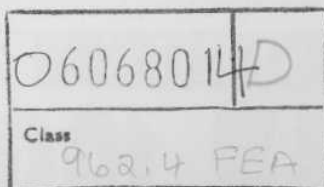
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DONALD FEATHERSTONE





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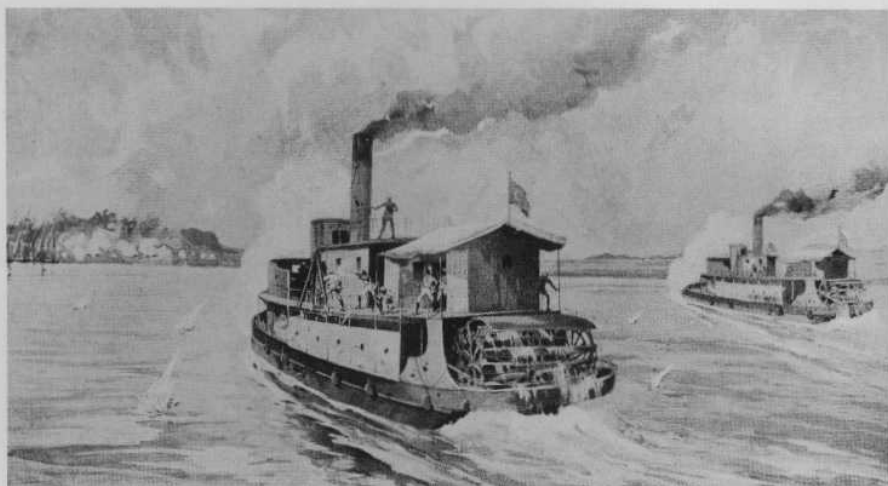
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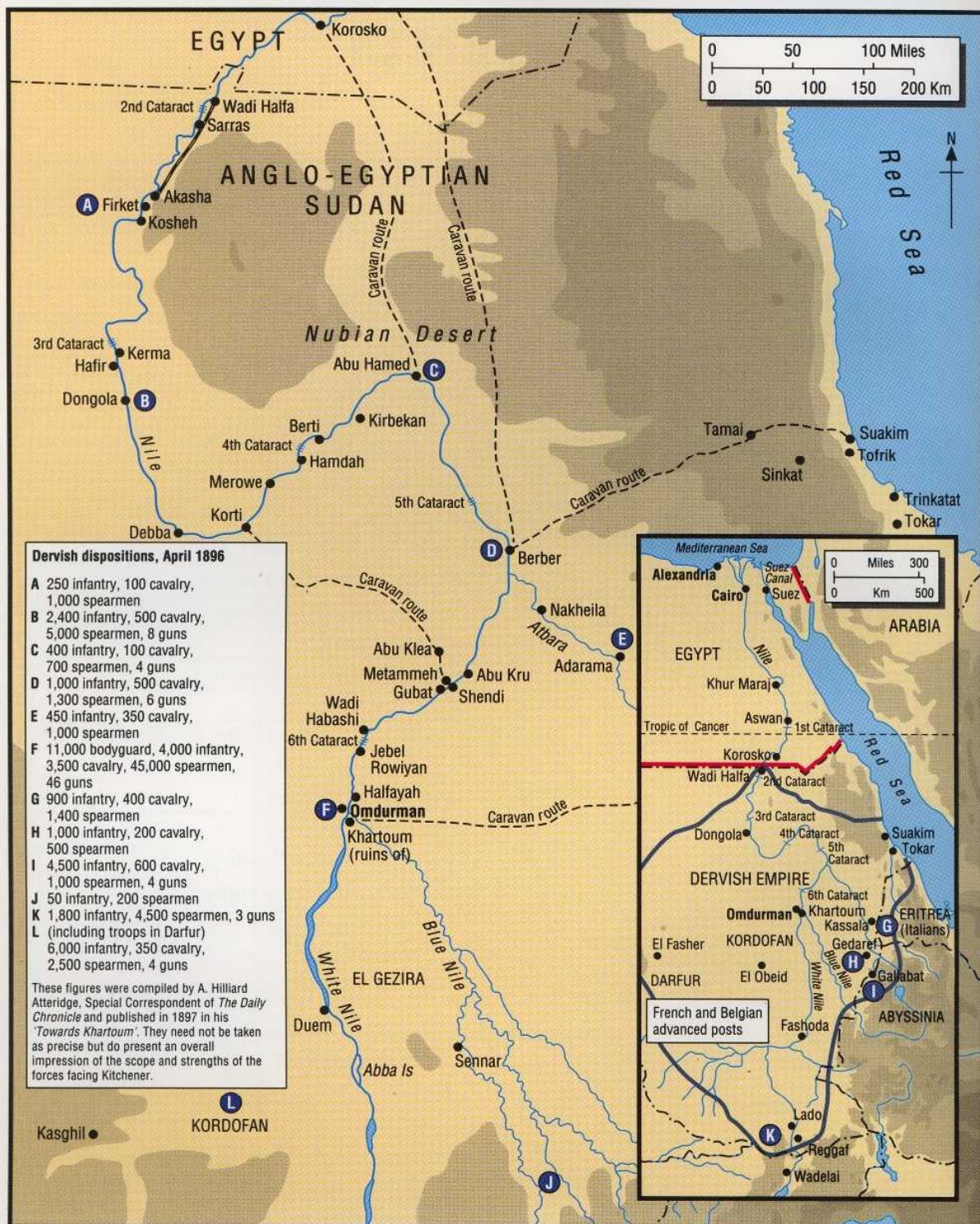
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Corps		Regiment		Cavalry	
Division		Battalion		Artillery	

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◀ *Top: Gunboats on the Nile, here bombarding Dongola in 1896. Below: Lieutenant-General Sir William Gatacre, in command of the British Infantry Division at Omdurman, giving orders inside the zareba. (Lower illustration ASKB)*

Sudan and the Dervish Empire, 1885-1896



THE SUDAN AFTER THE FALL OF KHARTOUM

The Mahdists had two further victories in 1885, when they captured Kassala and Sennar, but the first major military operations undertaken by the Khalifa was the war against Abyssinia in 1887/9. Both sides endured fluctuating fortunes, culminating in the final battle at Gallabat where, for perhaps the last time in history, large armies clashed with predominantly *melée*-weapons, when masses of men stood eyeball-to-eyeball and hacked, stabbed and slashed at each other.

From 1886 to 1889 the defence of the Egyptian Frontier and the Suakim area was entirely undertaken by the 'new' Egyptian Army, officered by British soldiers. In December 1888 Osman Digna's siege of Suakim was broken at Gamaiza by two brigades of Egyptian/Sudanese troops under Grenfell and Kitchener. In July 1889 the Mahdists invaded Egypt; on 3 August the Amir Wad al Najumi was completely defeated by the Egyptian

Army at Toski. Shocked and disheartened, the Mahdists withdrew to Suarda, 130 miles south of Wadi Halfa, the southernmost Egyptian garrison, in what was the beginning of the decline of the Mahdist State in the Sudan.

In 1889/90 there was famine in the Sudan. In 1891 a revolt against the Khalifa was crushed. In 1891 Osman Digna's forces again threatened Suakim, but were defeated on 19 February by an Egyptian force at Tokar. Another Mahdist defeat occurred in December 1893, when an Italian army beat Ahmad wad-Ali at Agordat. In July 1894 the Italians captured Kassala, the largest town in Eastern Sudan, but in 1896 they were heavily defeated by the Abyssinians at Adowa, which encouraged the victors to threaten the Upper Nile area again.

The Mahdist State had become beleaguered from all points of the compass – in the south the Belgians pressed on the Upper Nile from the Congo Free

► *The last rally of General de Bormida during the Italian defeat by the Abyssinians at Adowa in March 1896.*



State; in the west, French colonial ambitions caused them to threaten the Bahr-el-Ghazal. But the overwhelming fear preventing the Khalifa from committing forces to combat these threats came from the rebuilt Egyptian Army, with British assistance, pressing from the north.

In Britain, during the years following Gordon's death, the British public insistently demanded that he be avenged. With this in mind, the Egyptian Army was reinvigorated, the defence of the Suez Canal and British interests being left to the Royal Navy and British troops in Egypt. By 1895 the time was deemed ripe, and plans were made for the conquest of Dongola in the following year.

Coinciding with a personal decision by the Khedive to use his 'new' Egyptian Army to reconquer the Province of Dongola, and stimulated by a request from Italy, recently defeated by the Abyssinians at Adowa and now requiring a diversion to prevent the Mahdists taking Kassala, the British Government sanctioned a campaign of reconquest from Egypt. It was to be led by General Sir Herbert Kitchener, who had become Sirdar in 1892. Two new battalions for the Egyptian Army were raised from the Reserve, an Indian Contingent was sent to replace the garrison at Suakim, and the North Staffordshire Regiment moved south and took over frontier posts from the Egyptian Army.



Major-General Archibald Hunter, DSO, was promoted to this rank with Kitchener after the capture of Dongola. Hunter was in command of the Egyptian Division at Omdurman



Major-General Sir William Gatacre, CB, DSO, commander of the British Infantry Division during the Dongola Campaign, and in command of the British contingent at Omdurman.

► *The Sirdar and his staff crossing the desert.*

THE OPPOSING COMMANDERS

Leaders of the Anglo-Egyptian Army

The Commander-in-Chief was the Sirdar, 48-year-old Major-General Sir Herbert Kitchener, who had succeeded Sir Francis Grenfell as Sirdar in 1892. Of imposing physical appearance, standing well over six feet in height, Kitchener was a severe, ruthless and thorough commander who embarked upon no operation without 100 per cent preparation. Relatively humourless, he hated the Press, and would countenance no married officers in his army. Ambitious, and the very essence of parsimony, his personal harvest from Omdurman was to be £30,000 and a baronetcy.

It was said that, if Kitchener was the brain of the Anglo-Egyptian Army, then Major-General Archibald Hunter was its sword arm. He was a tough, fighting general who had been in the forefront of all the fighting in the Sudan for fourteen years. It

seemed that the Sirdar, knowing his worth, left the handling of the actual fighting to Hunter.

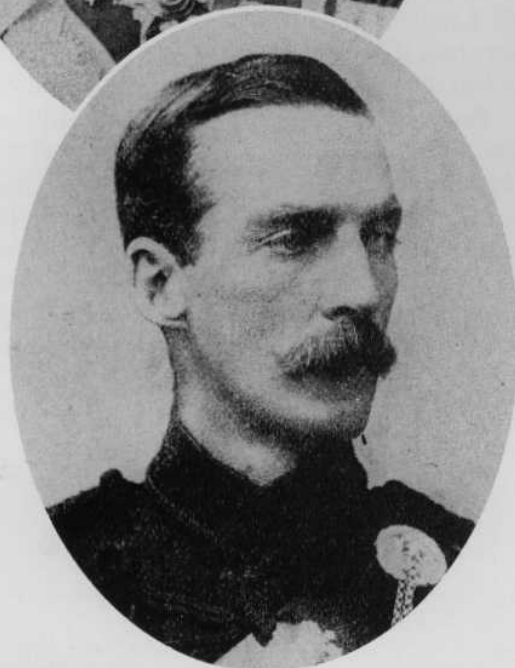
The Commander of the British Infantry Division, Lieutenant-General Sir William Gatacre, known to his men as 'Backacher', was a restless, energetic, tireless commander who drove his men very hard. His brigade commanders, Brigadier-General A. G. Wauchope and Brigadier-General N. G. Lyttelton, were both given a hard time, as Gatacre took it upon himself to decide even the slightest points of brigade and regimental administration.

Perhaps the most outstanding personality among the commanders was Lieutenant-Colonel Hector Archibald MacDonald, who had seen more and varied service than any other man in the army. Having risen from the ranks, he displayed a rare talent for getting the most from his Egyptian and Sudanese troops. Brave to the point of recklessness, he probably did more to ensure success at Omdurman than





▲ *Top: Brigadier-General Hector MacDonald, CB, DSO, who commanded the 1st Egyptian Brigade at Omdurman. Rising from the ranks, he served with distinction at Majuba in 1881, and in the South African War of 1899–1902. In 1903 he committed suicide in a Paris hotel after a homosexual scandal.*



▲ *Below: Major the Hon. E. J. Montagu Stuart-Wortley, commander of the 'Friendlies', the Arab Irregular Force with the Dongola Expedition.*

any other person. The other leaders of the Egyptian and Sudanese were Lieutenant-Colonel J. G. Maxwell, who had served with the Egyptian Army throughout all its successes, and Lieutenant-Colonel D. F. Lewis, a talented soldier with unbounded vitality.

The cavalry force was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel R. G. Broadwood, said to have been a quick-thinking and daring leader, the ideal cavalry general. The artillery arm was under Lieutenant-Colonel C. J. Long, a man with a passionate tenderness for guns and a knowledge of everything pertaining to them. The 'Friendlies' – a highly irregular force of 2,500 reputedly well-disposed Arabs – were commanded by Major the Hon. Edward Montagu Stuart-Wortley, a veteran of the abortive campaign to rescue Gordon, and an eccentric Arabist.

Mahdist Leaders

From 1885 the Mahdist Army was under the effectual control of the Khalifa Abdullahi, said to have been an able organiser of Army policy but, with the passing of time and the advent of superior military technology, an inadequate director of the Ansar's tactics.

Perhaps the most effective leader in the field was Osman Digna, a former slave-trader with a substantial following among the tribes in the Suakim region. He became senior Amir on the death of Abd al Rahman Mujumi, and remained prominent in the Mahdist hierarchy until Omdurman in 1898.

The Ansar commander at the Battle of the Atbara was the Khalifa Sharif Mahmud Ahmad, who was captured.

Possibly through traditional Arab nepotism, the Khalifa appointed his half-brother Yaqub to command the Black Flag, and his son Shaikh Uthman al-Din to command the Dark Green Flag (the Mulwazimiya); he was not considered to be a very adequate leader.

The major Ansar leaders and lesser Amirs are detailed, with their commands, in the Ansar order of battle on page 28.

THE OPPOSING ARMIES

THE ANGLO-EGYPTIAN ARMY

British infantry regiments were organised into two battalions of eight 120-man companies each; cavalry regiments had four 160-man squadrons each.

Egyptian infantry battalions each had six 150-man companies; cavalry squadrons each had 100 men. Artillery batteries generally had six guns with 113 men; horse batteries had 137 men. Camel Corps companies consisted of 152 men each. It was rare for units to be up to strength, particularly the Sudanese battalions, because they were perpetually on active service.

Dress of British Troops in the Sudan

All ranks wore the regulation khaki field uniform, with brown belts and white ammunition pouches. Sun helmets had khaki covers, with quilted neck-curtains. The only splashes of colour were the cotton patches and regimental badges worn on the khaki helmet-covers, usually bleached into a paler shade by the fierce sun. These distinguishing markings were as follows:

Rifle Brigade	Dark green patch
Lancashire Fusiliers	Square yellow patch
Northumberland Fusiliers	A diagonal red band around the helmet
Grenadier Guards	A red and blue rosette
Lincolnshire Regiment	Square white patch
Warwickshire Regiment	A red square patch
Seaforth Highlanders	A white plume
Cameron Highlanders	A blue square patch

The lately-arrived Rifle Brigade were equipped with blue sun veils and goggles.

The sole British cavalry unit, the 21st Lancers, wore the same regulation khaki tunics and helmets as the infantry; Bedford cord breeches, fawn-colour, reinforced on the inside leg with soft leather. Boots were black, with steel spurs.

British Orders of Battle, 1888-91

Gamaiza (Eastern Sudan), 20 December 1888 (Kitchener)

1st Brigade	9th, 10th, 12th Sudanese Battalions
2nd Brigade	4th Egyptian, 11th Sudanese Battalions

Argin/Toski (Egyptian Frontier), 28 June to 1 August 1889

Flying column (Col Woodhouse)	Argin 2 July
9th Sudanese Battalion	4 Companies
10th Sudanese Battalion	4 Companies
13th Sudanese Battalion	4 Companies
Camel Corps	2 Companies
Egyptian Cavalry	2 Squadrons
2nd Field Battery, Egyptian Artillery	6.6cm Krupps
3rd Garrison Battery, Egyptian Artillery	2.8cm Krupps

Toski, 3 August

1st Brigade (Woodhouse)	3rd, 5th, 7th Egyptian Battalions
2 Squadrons Cavalry	
1st & 2nd Batteries Field Artillery	6 guns
1 Battery Garrison Artillery	
Camel Corps	
2nd Brigade (Col Kitchener)	1st, 2nd Egyptian Battalions
1 Squadron Cavalry	
1 division each Horse Artillery, Field Artillery & Garrison Artillery	
1 Squadron of 20th Hussars also present, plus 4 stern-wheel gunboats	

Tokar (Eastern Sudan), 19 February 1891

1st Egyptian Battalion (a few companies)	
4th Egyptians	
11th and 12th Battalions Sudanese	
2 Squadrons Cavalry	
2 Krupp field guns, 2 mountain guns, 1 Maxim gun	

Throughout the campaign the British infantryman suffered badly from boots that fell to pieces as a result of the marches over the rough and stony ground of the Sudan. The resulting furore pene-



trated as far as the House of Commons, and the War Office issued a public statement to the effect that the boots were very good – but unsuitable for marches over rough ground!

Rifles

The campaigns of 1896–8 were fought by British infantry armed with the Lee-Metford rifle, a five-bullet-magazine weapon of .303 calibre, firing a higher velocity smokeless cordite bullet than the Martini-Henry and having greater firepower. The pencil-diameter Lee-Metford bullet, which could even drill a hole through bone, did not always stop or bring down the tough and courageous tribesman of the Sudan. Nevertheless, its effectiveness was more than demonstrated at Omdurman. Although the black-powder Martini-Henry rifle was a slower firing breechloader, in the hands of the Egyptian and Sudanese troops it was a harder-hitting and more vicious weapon at close quarters. Both weapons proved themselves in these campaigns, being far more than a match for the Ansar's Remington rifles.

Bayonets

In the fighting of the Sudanese campaigns of 1884/5, the British soldier undoubtedly felt let down by the bayonet with which he was issued, a case-hardened weapon, often imported. The British Bayonet Pattern '76 was the subject of many adverse reports from Egypt and the Sudan, and was replaced in 1886/7 by new pattern sword-bayonets with 18½in blades for the Martini-Henry rifle, and the sword-pattern bayonet '88 came in with the Lee-Metford rifle. This rifle was longer than the Martini-Henry, so its bayonet was shortened to only 12in without detracting from the effective length of the combined weapon.

◀ *British troops inside the zareba at Omdurman. Top: behind the British firing line. This photograph provides a good view of the uniform and accoutrements worn.*

◀ *Below: during a lull in the fighting. The 'litter' on the ground is paper in which cartridges were wrapped. (ASKB)*

The Cavalry Sword

The Campaigns of 1896/8 produced the usual spate of newspaper reports on the deficiencies in quality of the soldier's arms, particularly the cavalry sword, the blade of which was said to bend on impact. Following the Khartoum expedition came the Sword, Cavalry, Pattern '85, modified in 1889 so that its weight was increased by 3½oz, affecting the balance of the weapon. In 1890 the Sword, Cavalry, Pattern '90 was introduced and most unhappily received by cavalrymen, who recognised it as yet another blade-modification of previous unsatisfactory weapons. Its successor, introduced in 1899, was much modified, but proved inadequate, unpopular and quite useless in action, and was thoroughly disliked by British cavalry in the South African War.

Artillery

In 1885 British Horse and Field Artillery had been equipped with a 12pdr breech-loading 3in-calibre gun, drawn by six-horse team. When fully packed, the gun, carriage and limber weighed about 38cwt, which was too heavy for the RHA. In 1894 a new 12pdr breech-loading gun of 6cwt, with a simple and light carriage, was introduced. These guns, and the 15pdr, were in use in the Sudan during 1896–8, firing a new high-explosive shell having greater range and multi-splintered fragmentation.

Also in use were 5.5in howitzers firing lyddite, a new high explosive adopted for the bursting-charge of common shell for all nature of breech-loaders and howitzers over 4.7in calibre. Its awe-inspiring effect was first seen when it was fired by stubby little howitzers painted pea-soup colour, using 50lb shells at 3,000 yards range to tear huge holes in the dome of the Mahdi's tomb at Omdurman, enveloping the whole structure in a cloud of yellow fumes and dust.

Egyptian Army Artillery

The Egyptian Army still used the 6.5cm Krupp guns, carried on four mules or camels, but also with a shaft that could be attached to the gun-trail for draught purposes. In 1897 they began to be replaced by the Maxim-Nordenfolt 75mm quick-firer, throwing a 12½lb shell or an 18pdr double-shell. By the

▼ *Troopers of the 21st Lancers in Sudan uniform and equipment. Illustration by Michael Roffe.*

► *Opposite page: a contemporary depiction from the pages of The Illustrated London News.*





time of Omdurman all four Egyptian Field Batteries were equipped with them, although No.3 Battery retained two of its Krupp guns.

Egyptian Horse Batteries were armed with the antiquated 7.75cm Krupp gun, sometimes referred to as a 7pdr. Among its deficiencies were a slow rate of fire, worsened by poor-quality shells, and it lacked brakes. It was drawn by teams of six Syrian horses, and ammunition wagons accompanied the guns into battle.

Maxim Guns

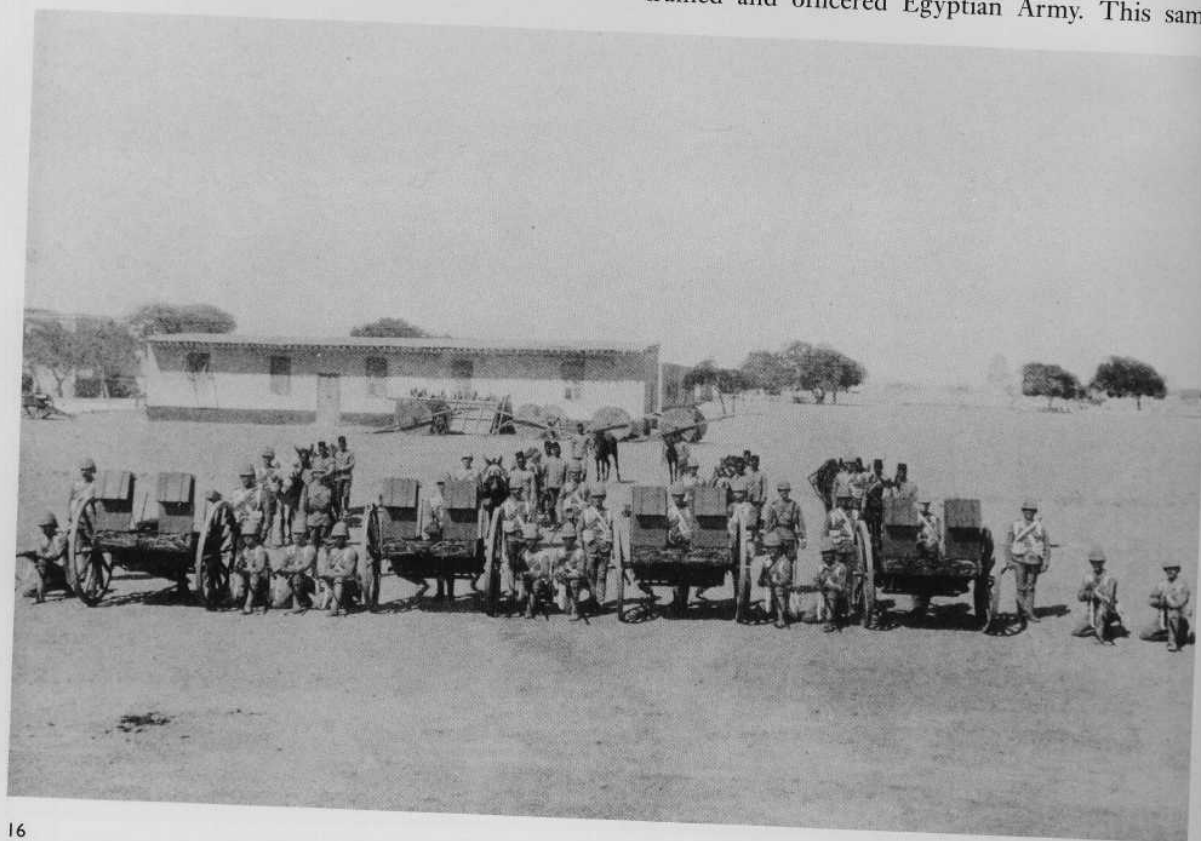
The American-invented Maxim machine-gun was revolutionary in that its recoil was employed to load, fire, and eject continuously while the trigger was held back. Cartridges were stored in a flexible belt, and the gun was cooled by a water-jacket round the barrel. Introduced into the British Army in 1891 and issued gradually to cavalry and infantry, but not to the Royal Artillery, it weighed only 40lb and fired 650 rounds a minute. A variety of carriages, nearly all without limbers, was introduced.

For the Omdurman Campaign, a Maxim battery of four Maxim guns was formed from the combined machine-gun sections of the North Staffordshire Regiment and the Connaught Rangers, to add to the firepower of Kitchener's infantry. The Maxim's rate of fire and its horizontal killing-sweep meant that a foeman could be hit four or five times before falling.

Until 1898, all machine-guns employed by the Egyptian Army were Maxims; their cavalry were equipped with a 'galloping Maxim' drawn by teams of six horses. Egyptian machine-gun batteries had four guns; cavalry batteries had six.

The Resurgence of the Egyptian Army

The defeat of Arabi's army in 1882 and the onslaught of the Mahdi's tribesmen during the next three years destroyed the Egyptian Army as a credible entity. It took some years for the Egyptian Army to become a potent force, although after 1885 the brunt of the fighting against the Mahdist State on the Egyptian borders was carried out by a British trained and officered Egyptian Army. This same



force began the Reconquest of the Sudan, and did most of the fighting until the last year of the war, when British troops were drafted in, in large numbers, for the last two battles of the Campaigns.

By then the Egyptian soldiers had learned self-reliance, and possessed boundless faith in their British officers who, step by step, converted them into a fighting machine as the battalions of fellahin

were stiffened by battalions of black warriors from the Sudan.

By Omdurman, the Egyptian Army was composed of nineteen battalions of infantry, ten squadrons of cavalry, one Horse and four Field Artillery Batteries and Maxim guns, plus a Camel Corps of eight companies – a total force of 20,000 men with more than 140 white officers.

► *General Sir Francis Grenfell (Kitchener's predecessor as Sirdar) reviews the Grenadier Guards in Cairo; they were en route from Gibraltar to reinforce the Anglo-Egyptian army in the Sudan. They arrived after the Battle of the Atbara, but in time for Omdurman. (Illustration by Caton Woodville)*

◄ *Maxim guns of the 2nd Brigade of the 87th Royal Irish Fusiliers. The officers are Captain Douglas Churcher (left) and Lieutenant Malcolm Wilson (right).*





Dress of the Egyptian Army

Standard uniform of khaki tunic and trousers, blue puttees, red fez with khaki cover and a neck cloth – Sudanese battalions were issued with a plaited straw fez cover. On active service, close-fitting jerseys were worn, brown for Egyptian troops and dark blue for Sudanese. Vari-coloured flashes on fez covers distinguished different battalions.

Each battalion carried into battle a plain green silk flag, about 100cm by 800cm, bearing the battalion's number in white Arabic numerals. Besides battalion flags, each company carried a small rectangular coloured cloth, attached to a spear shaft and borne in front of its company on the march, bearing the company's number in its centre.

Egyptian Flags

At this time the Egyptian National flag was that of Turkey, being red with a large white star and crescent in its centre. The Khedive's standard was red with three small stars and crescents on the half of the flag nearest the staff.

Sudanese Battalions in the Egyptian Army

Sudanese Blacks formed six battalions – 9th to 14th – and were generally regarded as the cream of the Army, usually being placed forward in the firing line, with Egyptian troops in support. Recruited from the negroes of the Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains, many were veterans of the Egyptian Army campaigns in Mexico and Turkey. Others had fought with the Mahdi's armies. After every major battle, recruits from *jihadiyya* (prisoners of war) joined the Egyptian Army, cheerfully agreeing to fight against their former masters. Thus, Sudanese battalions were able to recruit from veterans with considerable battle experience. Unlike the Egyptians, the Sudanese were recruited for life, remaining available for each successive campaign.

◀ Sudanese troops in the Anglo-Egyptian Army. Top: the 9th Sudanese Regiment hastens to Shellal to embark for the

front. Below: Sudanese troops manning part of the entrenched perimeter at Omdurman, awaiting the Ansar attack. (ASKB)



Captain, 21st Lancers, wearing Wolseley helmet, Sam Browne belt and braces and with the Heavy Cavalry Pattern sword, which was standard for cavalry officers from 1896. Illustration by Pierre Turner.

Kitchener's Naval Arm

To achieve success, Kitchener knew he had to have complete command of the River Nile, and he achieved this through his fleet of lumbering, armour-plated gunboats, each carrying sufficient armament to demolish any Arab fort encountered. Commanded by young Royal Navy officers seconded to the Sudan because they were known to be capable of working singly on their own initiative, the flotilla was under the overall command of Commander Colin Keppel RN. When his first command, the *Zafir*, blew up, he transferred to the *Sultan*, one of the new twin-screwed gunboats. So far as can be ascertained, the various boats and their commanders were as follows:

<i>Zafir</i>	Commander C. Keppell, RN
<i>Sultan</i>	Lieutenant Cowan, RN (Commander Keppell, RN)
<i>Sheikh</i>	Lieutenant Sparks, RN
<i>Melik</i>	Major Gordon, RE
<i>Fateh</i>	Lieutenant Beatty, RN
<i>Nazir</i>	Lieutenant the Hon. Hood, RN
<i>El Hafir (El Teb)</i>	Lieutenant Staveley, RN
<i>Tamai</i>	Lieutenant Talbot, RN
<i>Metemma</i>	Lieutenant Stevenson, RN
<i>Abu Klea</i>	Captain Newcombe, RN

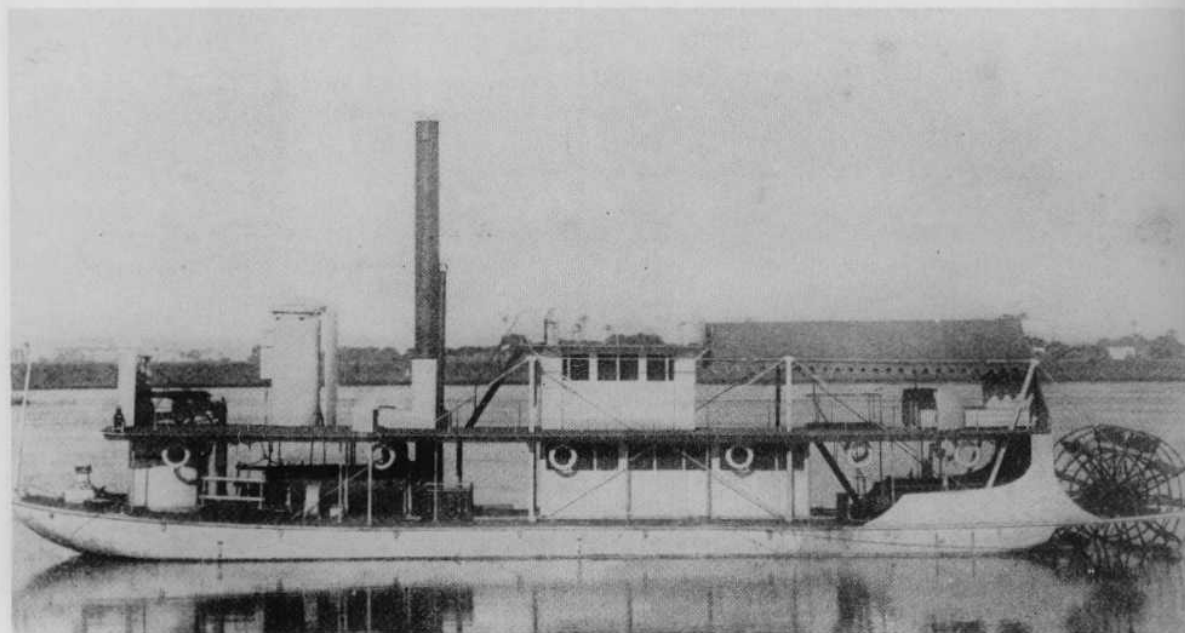
Each gunboat was equipped with a mixture of Kitchener's available artillery and rapid-firing weapons, including the deadly Maxim and Nordenfelt quick-firers, plus 6pdr guns and quick-firing 12pdrs.

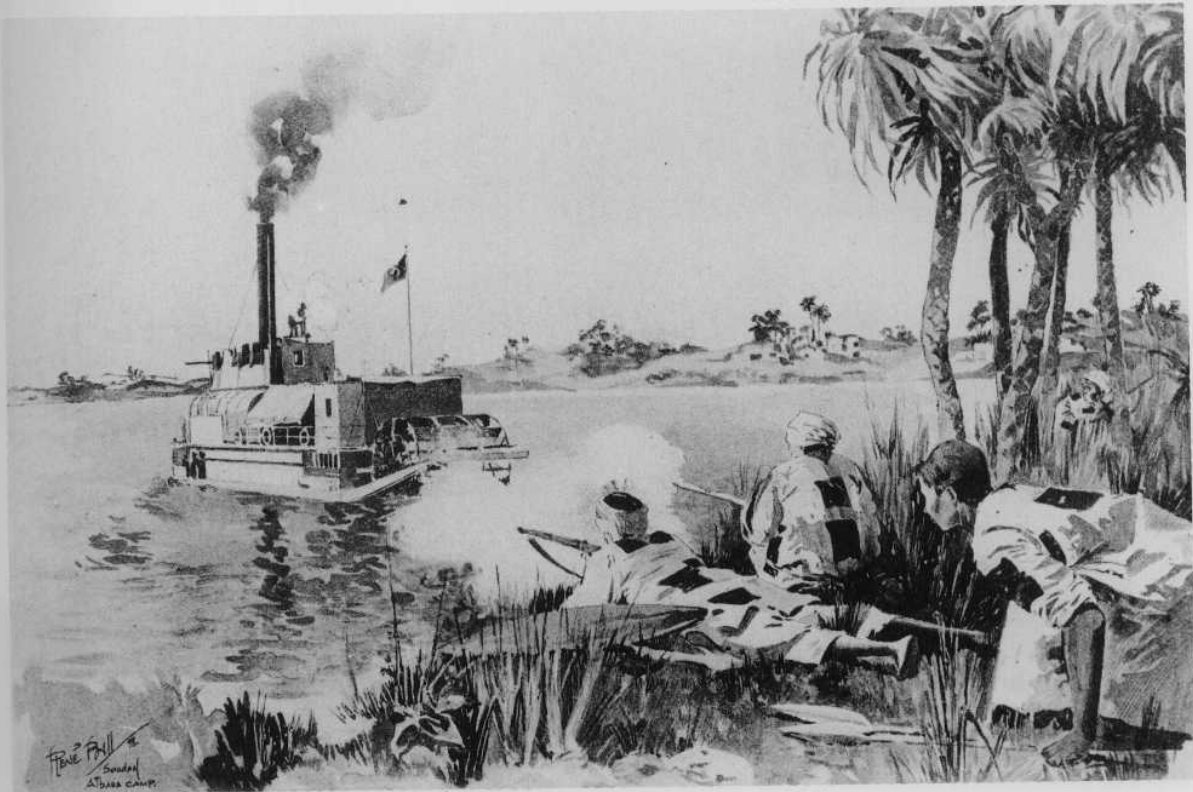
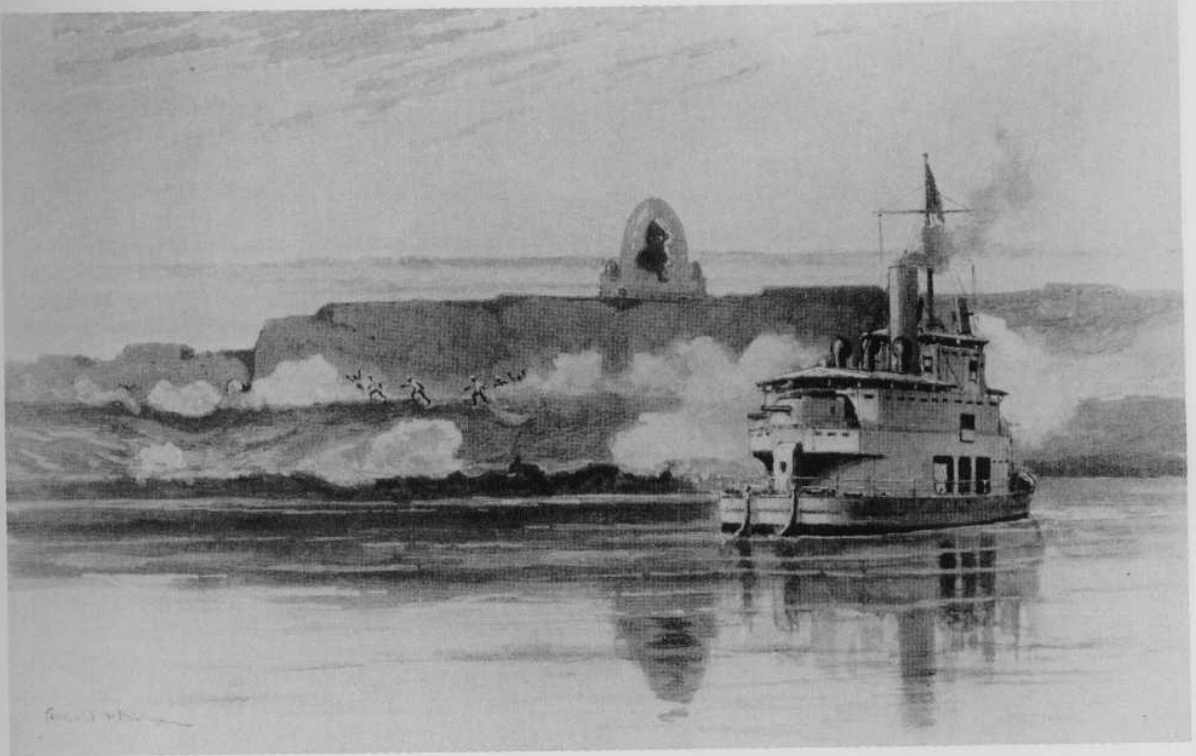
In the London *Times* of 15 August 1917, a War Correspondent wrote: 'David Beatty and Colin Keppel were two comrades of the Army in the Sudan, and very highly we valued them. It is the same David Beatty that I met on the quarter-deck of his flagship, with his cap ... still tilted at impossible angles. The frail little gunboat of Nile days has been replaced by this majestic fleet which he now commands, but we remember how well he and Keppel fought and handled their little craft on a falling and a rising Nile, and how Beatty at the Atbara helped

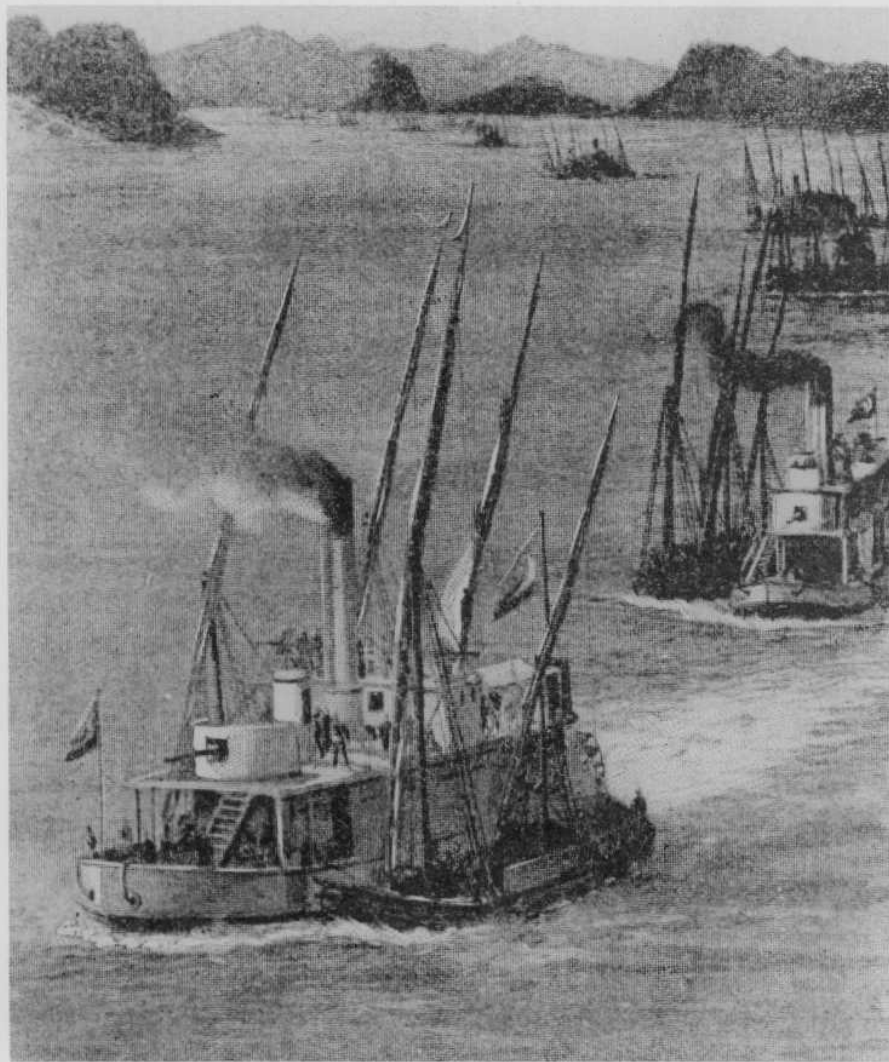
▼ *Below: The new stern paddle-wheel gunboat Abu Klea.*

► *Above right: Fateh uses her Maxims to clear resistance at Omdurman, after the battle, as the Anglo-Egyptian army enters the Dervish capital. Behind the city walls is the tomb of the Mahdi, damaged by a previous bombardment.*

► *Below right: During the advance upstream, Dervish riflemen fire on Fateh, commanded by Lieutenant David Beatty, RN (later to achieve renown on a wider stage, as commander of the British Battlecruiser Squadrons at Jutland).*







◀ *The Sirdar's Nile flotilla makes its way upstream, here with dhows lashed to the sides, thus providing mechanized transport as well as mobile firepower. The three gunboats built for the Dongola expedition represented a triumph of naval engineering. The boats were constructed in London, dis-assembled and shipped to Alexandria and Port Said; then moved by river and rail to Kosheh, south of Firket, for reassembly. Trans-shipped seven times, they arrived without the loss of a single major piece – and more than a fortnight early (on a schedule of only eight weeks for construction).*

us with his rocket battery, and then went in with the first ardent spirits at the head of the stormers.'

Lieutenant the Hon. H. L. A. Hood, who commanded the *Nazir*, became an admiral and lost his life when commanding the 3rd Battle Cruiser Squadron at Jutland on 31 May 1916.

THE ANSAR – THE MAHDIST ARMY

When the Reconquest of the Sudan began in 1896, the Mahdist Army was organised around three main units based in Omdurman, by far the most powerful area of Mahdist strength. The Muluazimiya were commanded by Shaikh Uthman al-Din, the Khalifa's eldest son. They were composed of 18 *rubs*,

about 10-12,000 strong, recruited from former *jihadiyya* (riflemen) Western Arabs, and the Nuba mountains and the south. They were mostly armed with Remington breech-loading rifles.

The Black Flag was commanded by the Khalifa's brother, Yaqub. Poorly armed, it became the recruiting base for irregulars from all tribes, formed into tactical units rather than *rubs*, each of the strength that an Amir could gather to fight for him. Between 1897/8, after the fall of Dongola, tribal levies and regional forces were called into Omdurman, placed under Baggara commanders and attached to the Black Flag. They were mostly swordsmen and spearmen, although a few were armed with Remingtons.



Dervish warriors typical of the Ansar. Left, jihadiyya from southern Sudan. Centre, typical shock-trooper with short stabbing spear. Right, member of the Khalifa's bodyguard, armed with heavy elephant gun.
Illustrations by Richard Scollins.

The Green Flag (bright green, not the darker green of the personal flag of Uthman al-Din) was a residual unit which had absorbed the Red Flag of the Khalifa al-Sharif. Poorly armed, it was recruited on a tribal basis in the White Nile area, from the more sedentary tribes.

Organization of the Ansar

Throughout the life of the Dervish Empire, the forces making up each Flag were organised into 'Rubs' (literally 'quarters'), usually of between 800 and 1,200 men, but of no standard size, and divided into three combat units and an administrative unit. The first combat unit was formed of spearmen, divided into 'standards' made up of tribes or sections of tribes; then came the *jihadiyya* (these later became the *Muluazimayya*), riflemen formed into standards of 100 men. Finally there was the cavalry unit, usually *Baggara*, armed with long spears and swords but given rifles when on reconnaissance or frontier raids.

Each standard was subdivided into 'hundreds' under a '*ra's mi'a*' – head of a hundred, a centurion – and again divided into *muqaddamiyya* of 25 men, commanded by a *muqaddam*. Amirs led the larger bodies, and the smaller sub-units were commanded by *muqaddamen*, or local sheiks.

In addition, there were garrisons of long-serving regulars, usually African riflemen and spear-carrying Arabs, who lived in barracks, plus volunteer recruits from outlying areas. These formations were also organised and subdivided in the same way as the 'Flags'.

Mahdist Flags

Subdivisions with the Ansar were recognisable through their flags, each Amir having his own, forming a mustering-point for his command. Within that command, the lesser Amirs and *ra's Mi'a's* (heads of a 100) also had their own flags. Banners and flags were rectangular and about four feet by three feet. They were manufactured in Omdurman and stored in the Arsenal there when not in use. Decorated on one side only, flags were embroidered with religious texts, usually four lines, on a white background with coloured borders.

There were flags of solid colours – blue, red, or green – with lettering in red, blue, black, green or white. Staffs were embellished with brass balls, flat-topped globes, or crescents. Some bore additional decoration, such as horses' tails.

The Deterioration of the Ansar

From its peak, in the mid-1880s, the Ansar progressively declined until its final defeat in 1898, although during that period it was one of the most powerful of African armies, having defeated the Abyssinians in 1888–9, who themselves defeated an Italian Army in 1896. The reasons for the downhill slide were numerous, not the least being a total underestimation of the rejuvenated Egyptian Army, and the modern military technology at Kitchener's disposal. To these must be added a steady deterioration in the quality of their firearms and ammunition, diminishing numbers of trained riflemen and



▲ Typical Ansar double-edged, cross-hilted sword, geometrically patched jibbah and round shield

(the latter less in evidence during the 1890s than during the Khartoum campaign).

gunners, the loss of some of their most gifted and experienced commanders, and an understandable lack of an effective supply system.

The Dress of the Ansar

From the earliest days of the march of Mahdism, it was decreed that the soldiers of the Ansar should wear the *jibbah*, the short, loose cotton shirt worn by the poor and humble of 19th-century Sudan. Hanging down to the knees, and with sleeves ending just below the elbow, it was patched, originally as a necessity but later for decoration, with symmetrical patches of identical pattern on front and back. In the period up to 1885 these patches were usually red and dark blue; later, on the standard style of *jibbah*, they could be black, blue, red, tan, green, or occasionally brown. By the time of the Dongola campaign they had become very 'professionally' made, with geometrical patches stitched to front, back and arms, and coloured material edging the neck, sleeves and garment bottom.

With it were worn close-fitting cotton drawers or white trousers (*siraval*), sandals (*sayidan*), a girdle of straw (*karaba*), a skull-cap (*taggia*), a turban (*imma*) with a tail (*aziba*) hanging free behind the left ear, and beads (*sibba*).

Strictly forbidden, the fez was never worn. Some important Amirs wore a red turban (*imma*), and the style of wearing it was just as much a badge of Mahdism as the *jibbah*. It was wrapped round the skull-cap, one end being allowed to hang loose under the folds of the *imma* behind the left ear, and the rest being wrapped so that its successive folds formed an inverted 'V' in front, not unlike a Sikh's turban.

The Beja, the Bisharin and many Baggara wore ankle-length white cotton trousers or loin cloths, worn 'dhoti-fashion' around the waist. Invariably, they were stained by the dust and grime of long usage to drab shades of grey, tan, or brick-red. In the early days of the Ansar, they occasionally showed allegiance to the Mahdi by sewing a patch or two of red or blue on to their clothing. They wore their hair long and in elaborate styles, frizzed and stiffened so that it stood out six or eight inches from either side of the head, then parted over each ear and around to the back of the head, the hair below

the parting being brushed downwards and outwards, and that above the parting upwards. A long wooden pin or stick was then run through the top part of the hair. When the Beja took to wearing the *jibbah* (in later campaigns) they gave up their usual costume, shaved their heads and wore skull caps. There is no record of any distinct tribal hair styles, or manner of dress, to distinguish the various sections of the Beja. The Hadendowah and other 'Fuzzy-Wuzzies' in Eastern Sudan did not shave their heads, nor wear the *jibbah*.

The Weapons of the Ansar

In the early days of Mahdism, in the 1880s, before the Khartoum campaign and victories over ill-trained and low-morale Egyptian forces, the increasing numbers of followers of the Mahdi Mohammed Ahmed were ill-fed and ill-equipped. Victories brought more affluent followers and rations improved, while captured Remington rifles supplemented spears, swords and daggers. Most of the Ansar were armed with a ten-foot-long, broad-bladed spear, three shorter throwing spears, and a straight, double-edged cross-hilted sword usually carried in a red leather scabbard hung from the left shoulder under the armpit, close to the body. Most warriors had short daggers, curved or straight, worn in red leather sheaths on the left upper arm. The Beja and the Bisharin sometimes carried wicked hooked knives, the blade broadening towards the tip, and hooked wooden throwing-sticks for throwing at the legs of horses and camels, to bring them down. Shields were seldom carried, except by the Beja. They were round with a large conical central boss. Made from rhinoceros, crocodile or elephant hide, they were said to be capable of deflecting a bullet. When used by other tribes, shields were the Baggara type, elliptical with a raised centre boss; on occasions, oblong shields of wickerwork were seen. Chain mail was not worn in battle.

It was said that as many as 21,000 rifles were captured from defeated Egyptian forces, along with ammunition. These mostly comprised the outdated Remington breech-loader, but this was still a revolutionary weapon for its day in 1865, when it was produced. The Egyptian Army adopted it in 1870. Its rolling-block breech was as simple, strong and fool-

proof as it could be. The breech was opened by cocking the hammer and rolling the solid breechblock back with the thumb so that a cartridge could be inserted. Then the block was rolled back up, while the hammer was held cocked by a locking lever, then locked the breech closed. When the gun was fired, the hammer struck the firing pin mounted in the breechblock and added its weight to the breech at the moment of explosion. The greater the recoil, the more closely the parts of the gun interlocked, being so designed that pressure from the chamber forced them more tightly together. It was claimed that the Remington could fire seventeen times a minute, but its accuracy was greatly affected by the Dervish habit of firing high and shortening the barrel.

A few percussion muzzle-loaders were in use, and some Martini-Henrys which had found their way into the Sudan. If a Dervish warrior had a rifle, then he had a bandolier, sometimes two. These were mostly locally made in coloured, stamped leather, but some were captured Egyptian issue. They were

worn around the waist or over the shoulder. Firearms were restricted to riflemen, although occasionally cavalry on reconnaissance or raiding duties were issued with rifles.

The Ansar's heavy equipment was limited to that captured from the Egyptians. It is believed the Arabs acquired 4,000 Remington rifles, five Krupp field guns, two Gatling-guns, two rocket tubes and an abundance of ammunition from them in the Suakim region in 1884. In other engagements they captured some aged brass mountain howitzers mounted on small carriages towed by camels, more Krupp guns and some multi-barrelled Nordenfelt machine-guns, plus some other crank-operated quickfirers. There was also a handful of old and dilapidated river steamers.

The Ansar's Artillery Arm

At the time of Omdurman, the Ansar possessed eleven batteries of six guns each, manned by 156 artillerymen, mostly trained in Egyptian service.



Named commanders of Ansar artillery were Muhammad Abd al-Rahman (Egyptian), Ali Masri (Sudanese), Abd al-Aal Ahmed, and Abd al-Rahman Ramah. All were under the supreme command of Yaqub.

Stored at Omdurman or located in mud forts along the Nile, there were 63 guns in all – 35 brass mountain guns; eight Krupp guns; seven machine-guns of various types, mainly Nordenfelts with one Remington; and thirteen guns of other types listed under exotic but unfamiliar names – five 'Sherkba'; two 'Ordi'; two 'Abyssinian'; three 'Kuba' and one 'French'.

Two of the Ansar's three river steamers were armed with a mountain gun each.

Only five guns were used by the Ansar in the battle of Omdurman. These were under the command of the Muluazimiya and the Black Flag, and were placed on a hill overlooking the battlefield. Apparently their achievements were negligible. Twelve mountain guns and two machine-guns were found on the road to the battlefield.

Battle Tactics of the Ansar

The prime factors in Ansar tactics were surprise and shock, often based on encirclement and assaults from two directions, or a surprise attack along the enemy's line of march, sometimes trying to overwhelm their opponents by superior numbers. It was known for riflemen, working themselves into position close to the enemy, to screen swordsmen and spearmen while softening up the enemy for the final charge. The great asset of speed allowed the assault warriors to make maximum use of cover in getting close to the enemy before launching the savage attack. The terrain in the areas of operations often allowed the bulk of the warriors to lay undetected in the bush, so that the final charge was the first indication of their presence. Using a natural formation requiring neither drilling nor organisation, simply because the bravest moved fastest and arrived first at the front, their attacks usually came in wedge formation which auto-

matically enlarged a breach once its point had penetrated the defence. It was their practice to place the best men in front, with some in reserve to hit the enemy once they were broken.

On more than one occasion a great host of warriors would suddenly and dramatically rise into view from the scrub or a depression in the ground, moving forward in a black cloud and covering the ground at an incredible pace, seemingly reaching the speed of galloping horses. Apparently well drilled, they moved in large phalanxes, each headed by a superbly mounted Amir, attended by his standard-bearer and attendants. As the host jogged forward, their momentum kept time with the incessant drums beating in their rear. Standing in the stir-



◀ *An abandoned Dervish gun and its dead gunners seen after the Battle of Omdurman. (ASKB)*

▶ *Dervish infantryman. Illustration by Michael Roffe.*

rupts, the Amirs waved them on, boosting their fervour with shouted Islamic slogans and prayers. Signals were given by drums and horns.

At the end of 1895 the Mahdist Army was mainly concentrated at Omdurman, where there were thought to be 15,000 riflemen, 45,000 spear- and swordsmen, 3,500 cavalry and 46 guns. The actual size of the Dervish Army at Omdurman on 1/2

September 1898 is a matter of speculation. The first cavalry reconnaissances estimated 30,000; Kitchener himself at first thought 35,000, and then amended it to between 40,000 and 50,000. After the battle, Sudan Intelligence Report No. 60 gave the official figures as:

Amirs – 86, sub-Amirs – 376, men – 51,423, horses – 5,495, rifles – 14,296. Total 51,885.

Dispositions of the Ansar

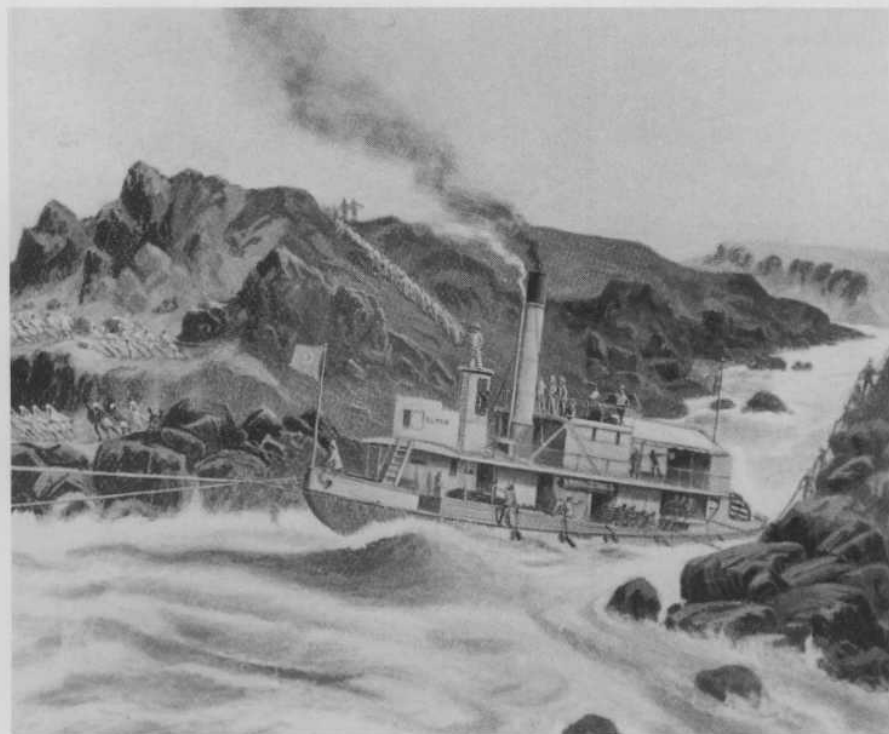
Dongola and the Egyptian Frontier	4,600 riflemen, 8,000 swords- and spearmen, 1,200 cavalry, and eighteen guns.
Eastern Sudan	6,900 riflemen, 1,100 swords- and spearmen, 2,150 cavalry and four guns.
Western Sudan	6,000 riflemen, 2,500 swords- and spearmen, 350 cavalry and four guns.
Southern Sudan	1,800 riflemen, 4,500 swords- and spearmen and three guns.

Estimates of dispersion of the Ansar after the Battle of Firket on 7 June 1896 but before the reconquest of Dongola, taken from Sudan Intelligence Reports, are as follows. In the northernmost frontier district facing the Anglo-Egyptian Army there were perhaps 1,700 riflemen, formed of trained African and Arab jihadiyya; about 3,000 swords- and spear-

men; 650 cavalry; 500 camelmen; eight mountain guns and 1 Nordenfelt machine-gun. These were roughly apportioned to areas:

Abu Hamed	460 riflemen; 1,500 swords- and spearmen, including 300 horsemen; two guns.
Dongola	1,400 riflemen, 300 Baggara horsemen, 1,500 swords- and spearmen, six guns.
Hafir	320 riflemen, 1,100 swords- and spearmen, 80 Baggara horsemen.
Kerma	250 riflemen, 100 swords- and spearmen, 150 Baggara horsemen, one Nordenfelt machine-gun.
Amri Post:	30 riflemen.

Later reinforced from Omdurman and Debba by 1,000 riflemen and 1,000 swords- and spearmen.



◀ The advance to Dongola. Hauling the gunboat El Teb up the Second Cataract, through the 'Big Gate'. The vessel has been completely stripped of weight, only her coal supply being left on board. Great hawsers are fastened to a wire rope which, in turn, is secured around the vessel's strake. Some 500 soldiers are engaged on the east bank in pulling at the attached hawsers, and on board the gunboat men are regulating her course with fenders and pushing-off poles. Commander Robertson stands on the conning tower, communicating with the men on the bank by signal because of the roar of the rushing water.

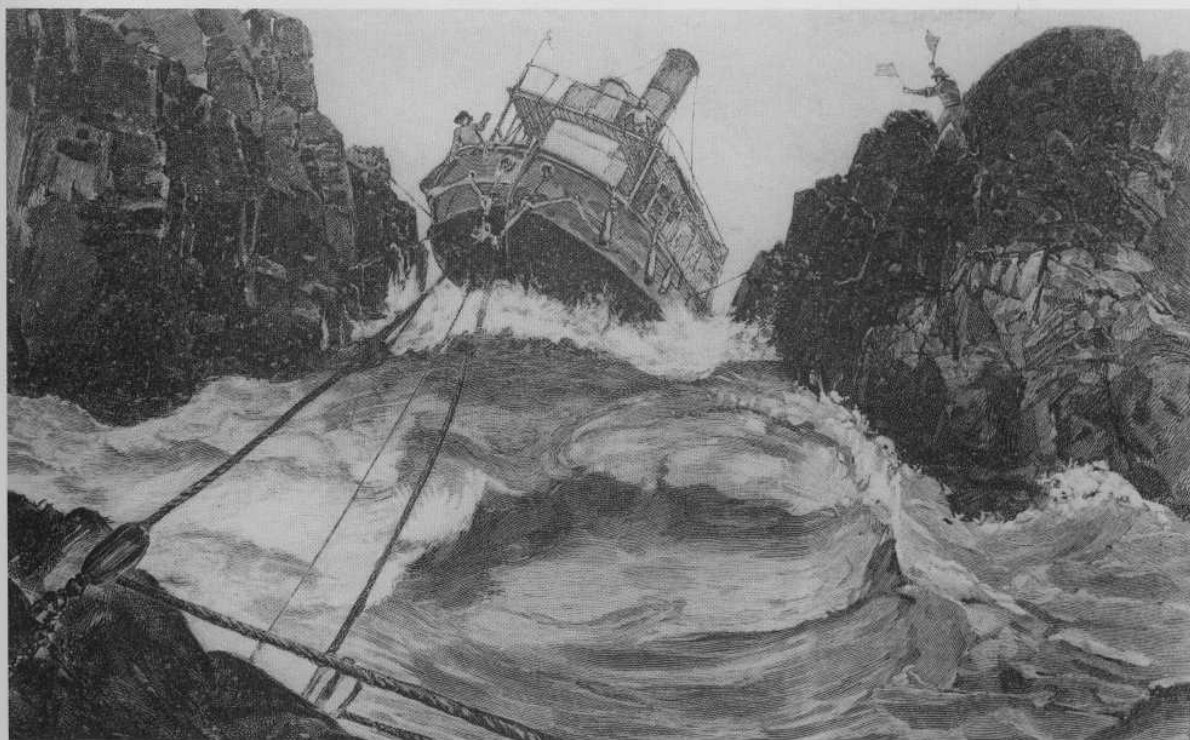
THE DONGOLA-BERBER CAMPAIGN

The campaign began on 16 March 1896, when several Egyptian battalions were hurried up the Nile by rail and in the river steamers of Thomas Cook & Sons. Unopposed, the force reached Akasha on 20 March, the Mahdists choosing to fortify themselves at Firket, sixteen miles further south. A fortified camp was established at Akasha to cover construction of a railway and to provide a dump for supplies brought up by camels following the river route, with other supplies and reinforcements coming up the Nile.

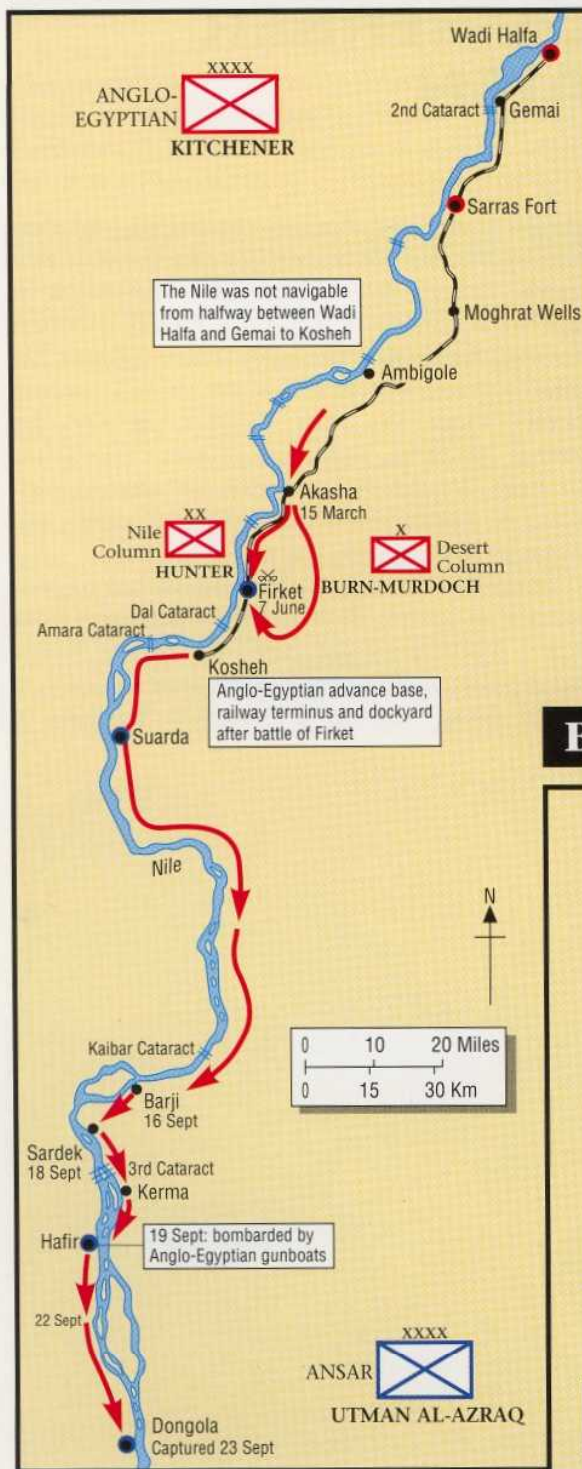
Kitchener meticulously plotted every detail of his campaign and its cost (he was well known for his parsimony), giving the greatest attention to supplying his force on their ever-extending line of communication. He planned to take every advantage of river

transport and to extend the railway as he progressed, besides employing the traditional use of camels. From Cairo to Saras (55 miles north of Akasha), a distance of 827 miles, railway transport was used for the first 350 miles. There followed 230 miles by river steamers, a short six-mile railway journey round the First Cataract, steamers for another 208 miles, and a narrow-gauge railway for the final 33 miles. After that, camel convoys protected by fortified encampments would supply the troops while the railway was extended.

Using these means, the Sirdar intended to concentrate his striking force and drive the enemy from Firket. Then, when the Nile rose, reserve troops and supplies accumulated at Firket were to be carried in sailing boats up to Dongola in the wake of



The Dongola Campaign, March to September 1896



the Army. Simultaneously, the shallow-draught gunboats were to assist and guard the river traffic, and take part in the battles when possible.

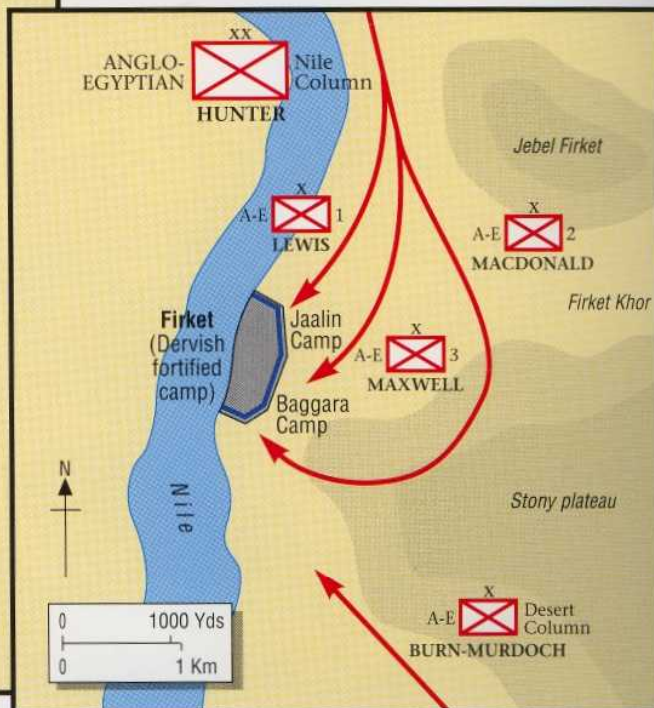
Throughout April and May 1896, Kitchener consolidated his position at Akasha, bringing up troops and improving his communications. By the end of May the railway line stretched 64 miles from Wadi Halfa and was only 25 miles from Akasha.

In Omdurman, the Khalifa was kept informed of all that was going on, so that he was aware of the rapid movement of the Egyptian Army and the occupation of Akasha. Subsequently, the amir Ham-muda, with a substantial force, began massing at Firket and other places to the south.

The Battle of Firket, 7 June 1896

During the night of 6/7 June, Kitchener sent an army of 9,000 Egyptian and Sudanese troops, supported by British Maxim-gun teams, by river and desert routes to pounce on Utman al-Azraq and his

Battle of Firket, 7 June 1896



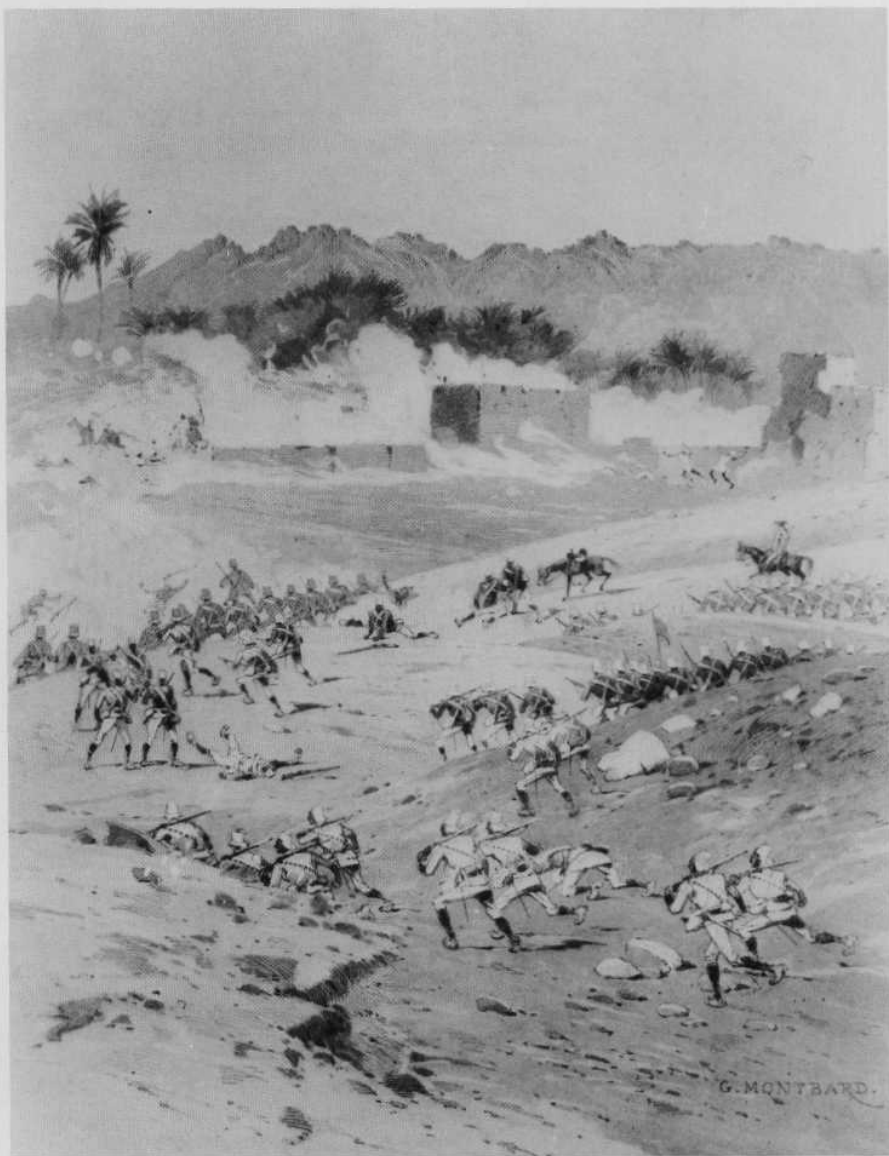
3,000 tribesmen at Firket, sixteen miles upstream from Akasha. A Desert column of cavalry and camel-corps, under Burn-Murdoch, marched inland to cut off the Mahdist escape route; the bulk of the army, some 7,000 men, under Hunter, advanced along the Nile. (For the composition of these forces, see British orders of battle.)

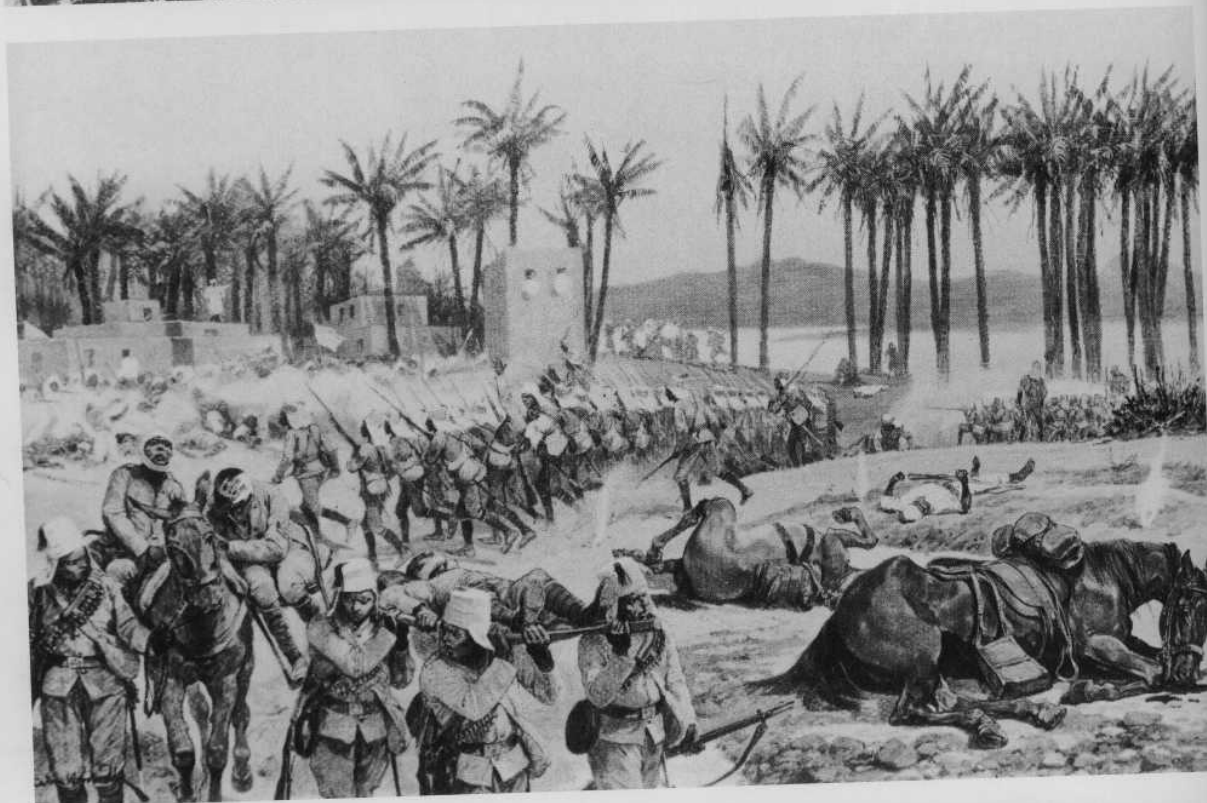
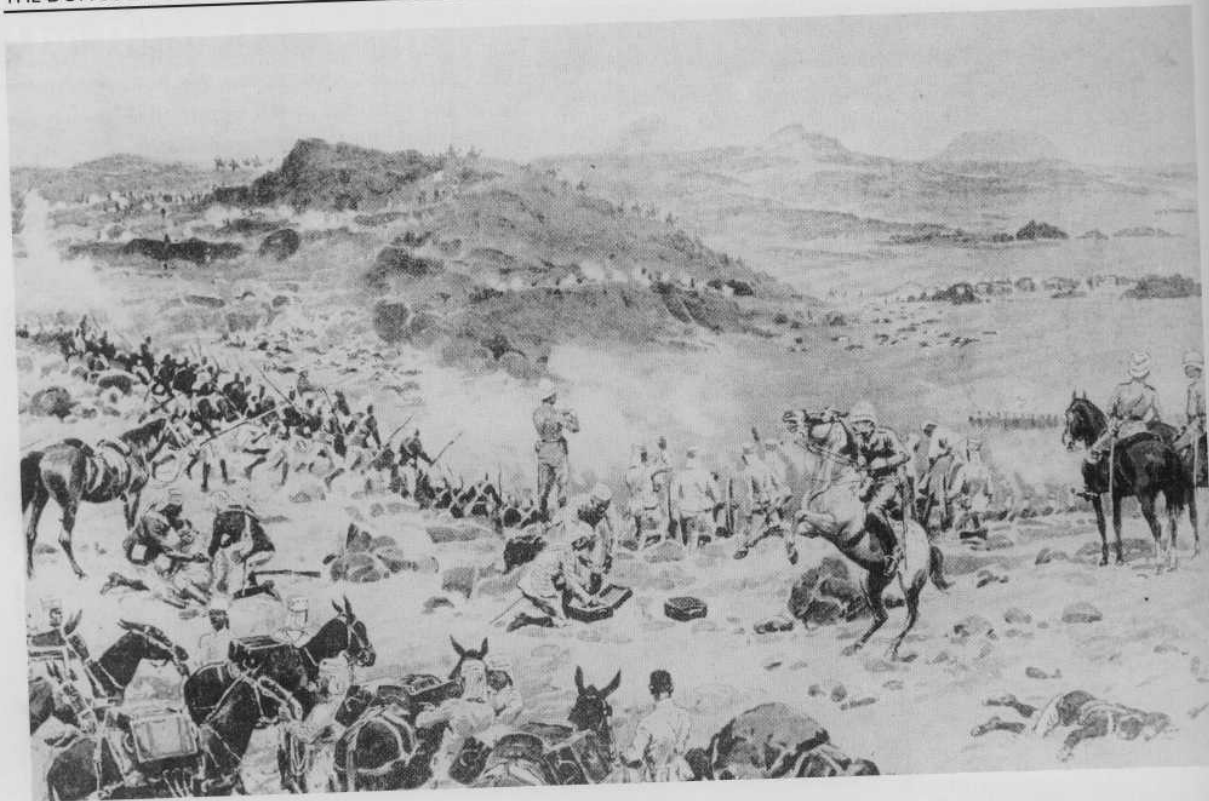
In silence, and with secrecy and perfect timing, they surprised the Mahdists at 0500 and, after some heavy fighting, had completely routed the Mahdists by 0730, killing and wounding more than 1,000 and taking 600 prisoners. Utman al-Azraq and his shat-

tered survivors retreated further south. It was an operation carried out almost entirely by three Egyptian/Sudanese brigades with mounted support, for a loss of 22 killed and 91 wounded.

This confirmation of the steady progress of the new Egyptian Army impressed *The Times*' correspondent, who wrote: 'I had already noted in the course of the action, that the Egyptians were perfectly steady under fire, and they have always had the reputation for being so, but few gave them credit for possessing the dash they displayed on this occasion'.

► *Lewis's 1st Egyptian Brigade clears the river bank and storms the outposts of the Jahalin camp during the Battle of Firket.*





◀ Egyptian infantry attack the right of the Mahdist position during the Battle of Firket, 7 June 1896.

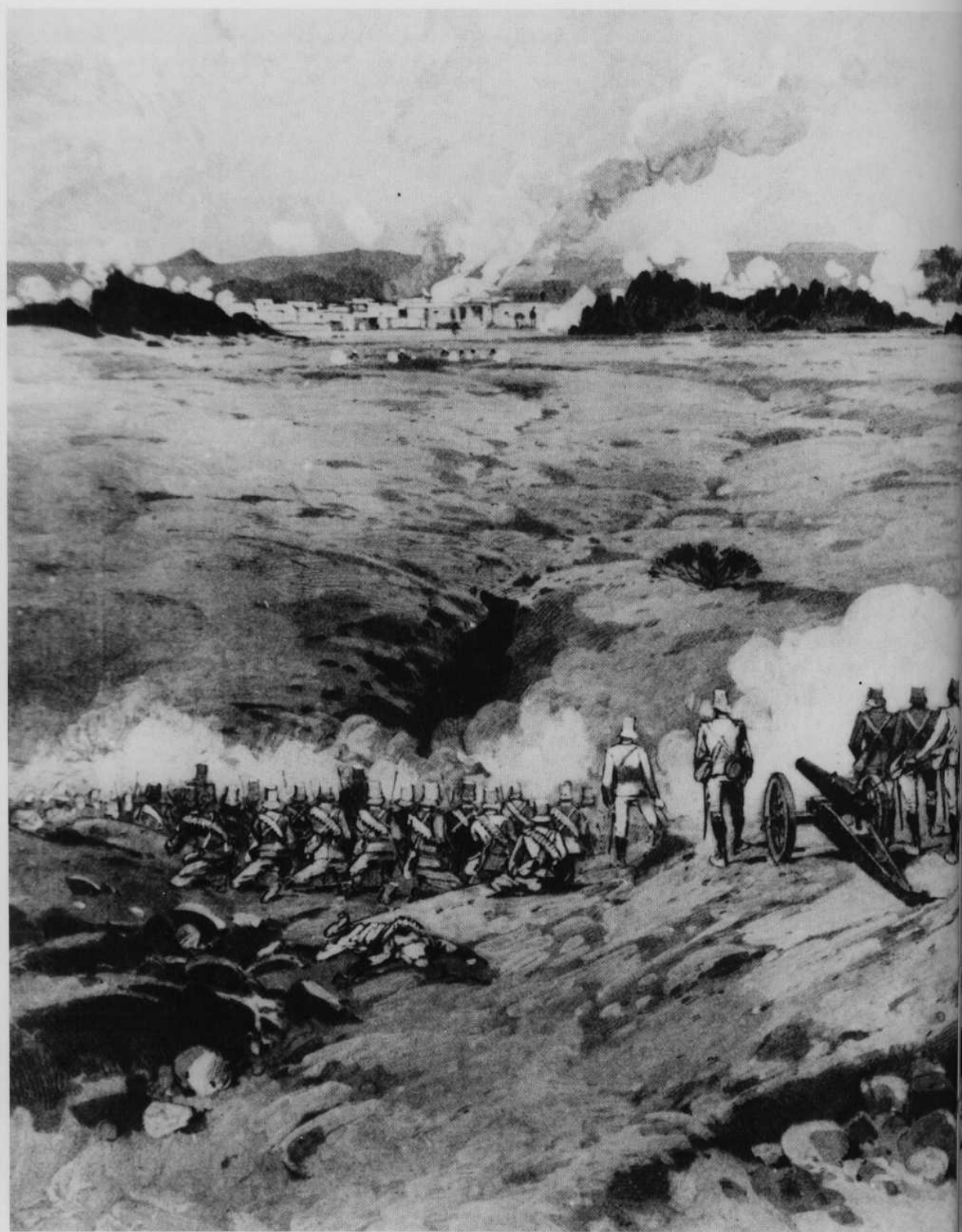
British Order of Battle at Firket, 7 June 1896

The River Column (Hunter) 7,000 men		1/2 Bn North Staffordshire Regiment, and 1 Maxim Battery of the Connaught Rangers were also present
1st Brigade (Lewis)	3rd, 4th Egyptians 9th, 10th Sudanese	
2nd Brigade (MacDonald)	11th, 12th, 13th Sudanese	The Desert Column (Burn-Murdoch) 2,700 men 6 Companies Camel Corps 8 Squadrons Cavalry 12th Sudanese (mounted on camels) 1 Battery Horse Artillery (six 6cm Krupp guns) Two Maxim guns
3rd Brigade (Maxwell)	2nd, 7th, 8th Egyptians	
4th Brigade (David)	1st, 5th, 15th Egyptians (after Firket)	
2nd & 3rd Egyptian Field Batteries		
2 gunboats, 3 armed steamers		

◀ Lewis's 1st Egyptian Brigade storms the Jahalin camp at Firket.

▶ An incident at Firket as illustrated by Caton Woodville after a sketch by The Illustrated London News special artist, H. C. Seppings Wright: Captain Fitton has his horse shot under him.





Maxwell's 3rd Sudanese Brigade fires on the village of Firket as the three brigades converge upon the houses where the Mahdists made their last stand.



G. MONTBARD.

The Advance to Dongola

Awaiting further reinforcements and the gunboat flotilla, Kitchener paused for three months, a period marked by storms, floods and cholera. By early September the Dongola Expeditionary Force, reinforced by the North Staffordshire Regiment and totalling about 13,000 men with 22 guns and four gunboats, was ready to advance southwards in



A particularly interesting participant in the events of the 1880s and 1890s in Egypt and the Sudan was Rudolf Slatin Pasha, an Austrian and former Governor of Darfur during Gordon's presence at Khartoum, when he was captured by the Mahdists. He escaped in 1895, having been a prisoner for more than ten years, and became a high-ranking officer in the Egyptian Army. He was Assistant Director to Wingate on the Dongola Expedition and afterwards. Right: After the Battle of Firket, Slatin finds among the dead the body of an old friend, the Amir Hammuda, one of the Mahdist commanders during the conflict.





brigade formation along the desert route and river bank, some units in river steamers protected by gunboats.

Opposing them was Muhammed-wad-Bushara with 5,000 men and six mountain guns. On 18 September this force entrenched themselves at Hafir, across the Nile from the village of Kerma, thus obliging the Egyptian Army to cross the Nile at some point to take Dongola, on the opposite bank to Kitchener's force.

Not wishing to leave such a large enemy force in his rear, Kitchener tried to blast the Mahdists out of their position by weight of fire from his artillery and the gunboats. Watched by Egyptian troops sitting on the hot sand, a three-hour ineffectual bombardment ensued, until the gunboats were ordered to steam past the Mahdist defences and on to Dongola. Fearful of an attack in their rear by the Egyptian Army crossing further upstream, the Khalifa's troops abandoned Hafir during the night of 19/20 September. Dongola fell without a fight on 23 September.

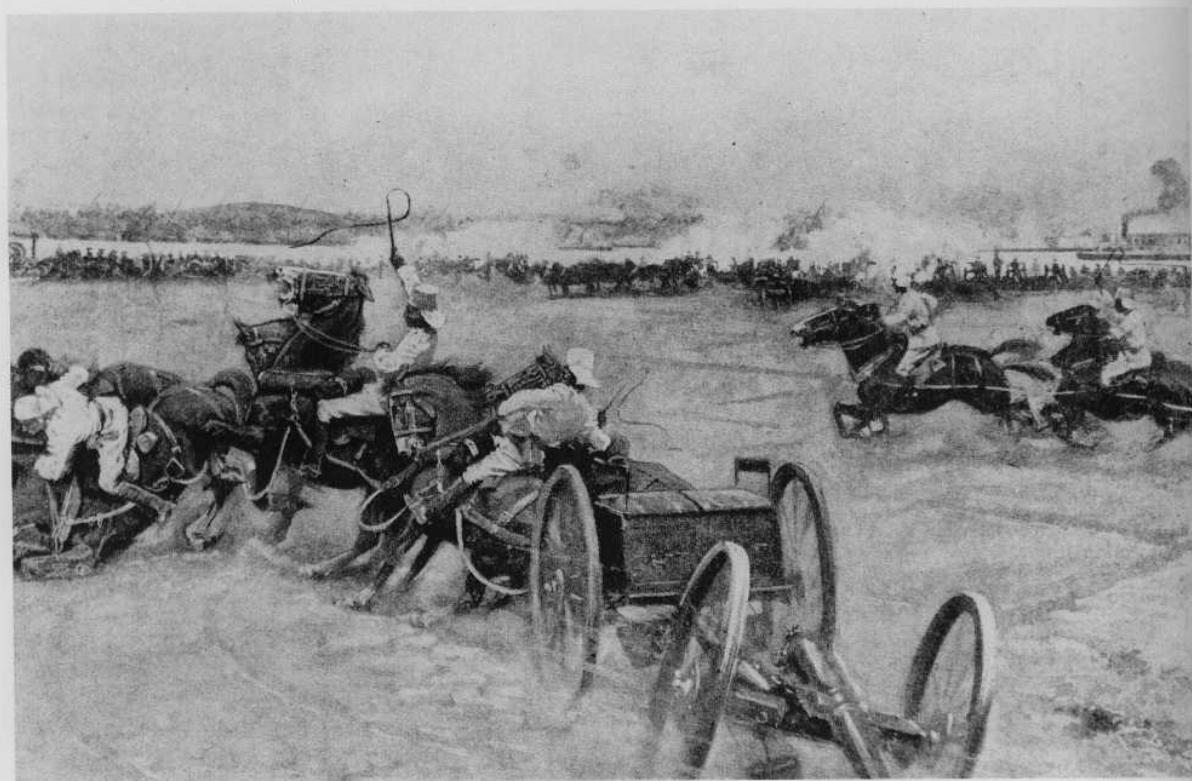
Kitchener, the Khedive and the British Government were delighted and impressed by the capture

▲ *Burn-Murdoch's Egyptian cavalry pursue the fleeing enemy towards Sudda late in the Battle of Firket.*

of over 450 miles of the Nile at relatively little financial cost, and with fewer than 170 casualties. The Mahdists had been outmanoeuvred and defeated, forced into disordered retreat towards Metammeh, Berber and Atbara – steps on the road back to Omdurman and the Khalifa.

Hunter Takes Abu Hamed

To maintain the successful momentum of the Dongola expedition, Kitchener planned to build a railway across the unchartered and waterless Nubian Desert, from Wadi Halfa to Abu Hamed, and the first sleepers were laid on 1 January 1897. By mid-July it had reached halfway, and a force was sent to eject the enemy from Abu Hamed. Setting out from Merowe on 29 July, General Hunter led a flying column of 3,600 men across a miserable wilderness of



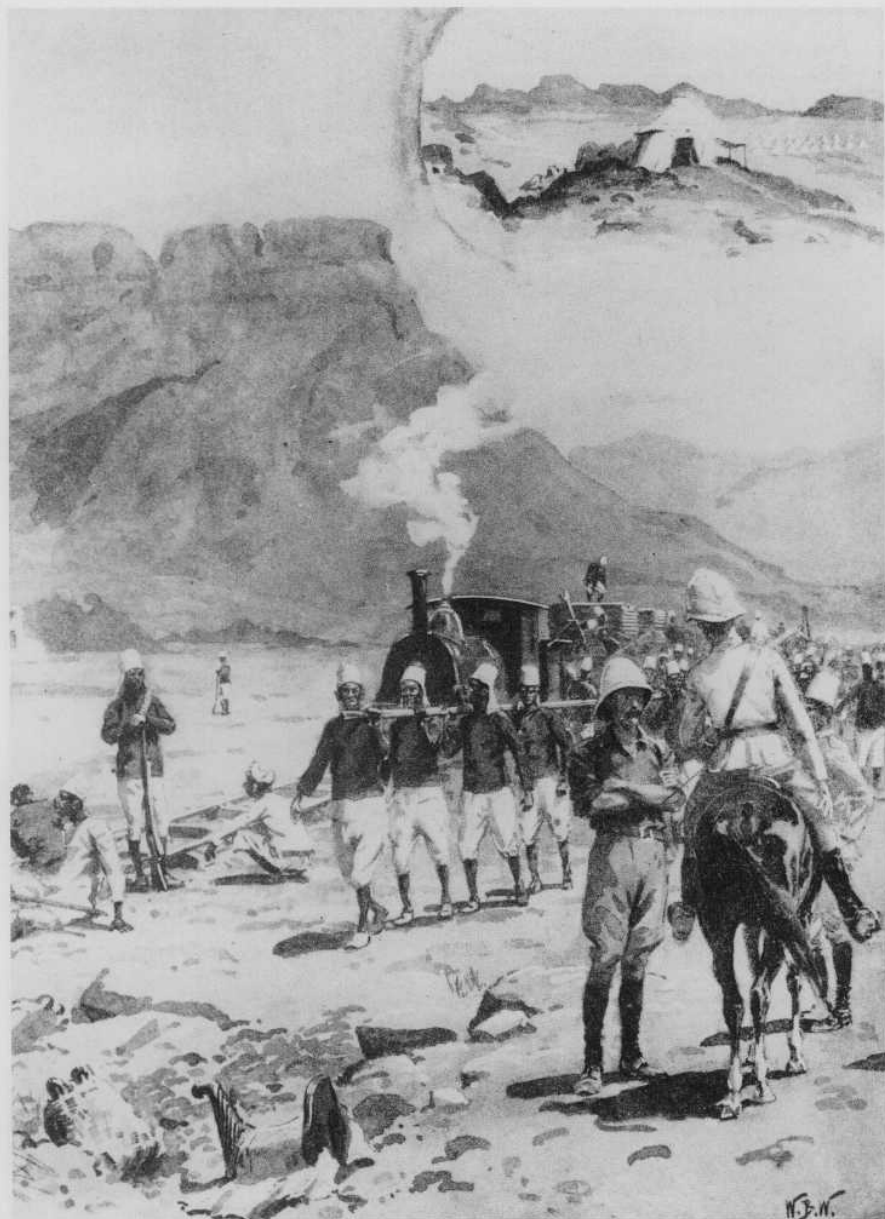
◀ Egyptian artillery shelling the Dervish force at Hafir in September 1896.

Dervish infantryman with spear and cross-hilted sword. The patches on his jibbah were the nearest the Ansar came to a uniform. Illustration by Michael Roffe.

◀ The Battle of Hafir. Egyptian artillery comes to the support of the Nile steamers.



Jaidia rifleman with captured Remington; fortunately for the British, the Ansar were far from competent marksmen. Illustration by Michael Roffe.



◀ *The advance to Dongola. Laying the railway through the area of the Battle of Firket.*

▶ *Egyptian Camel Corps resting in the rocks near Abu Hamed.*

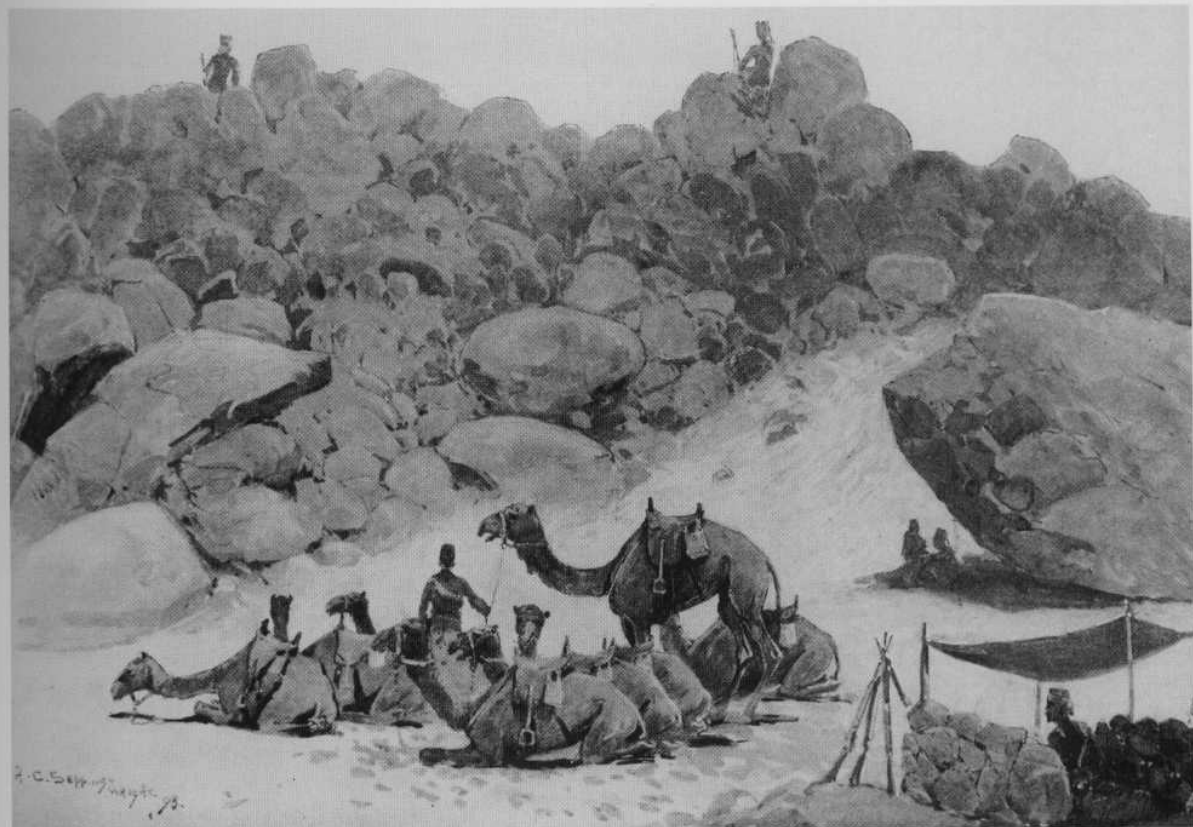
▶ *The charge of the Sudanese infantry at the Battle of Abu Hamed.*

rock and ankle-deep white sand, covering 118 miles in 7½ days at the hottest time of the year. Completely surprised, the Mahdist garrison of 700 refused to surrender, so Hunter sent in his Sudanese infantry with bayonets fixed; the natives fought to the last, leaving 250 dead on the ground. Hunter had the bodies thrown into the river, so that Kitchener knew a battle had been won when he saw numerous Arab corpses floating downstream two days later at Merowe.

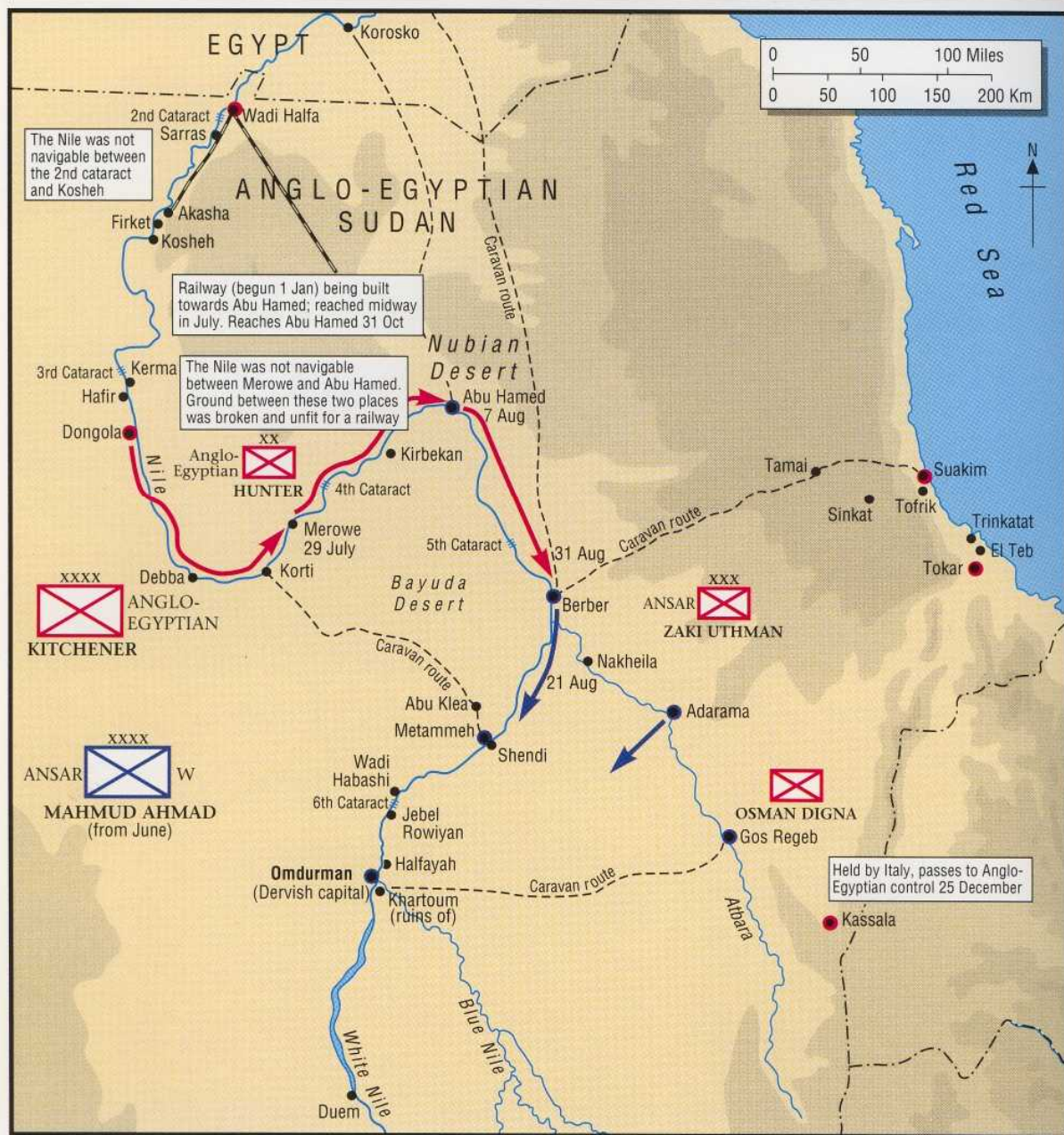
The gunboat flotilla was laboriously hauled over the Fourth Cataract and, by 29 August, the five ves-

British Order of Battle at Abu Hamed, 7 August 1896

(General Hunter)
3rd Egyptians; 9th, 10th, 11th Sudanese
A Battery of Field Artillery.
Two Maxim Guns
Troop of Cavalry



The Advance to Berber, 1897

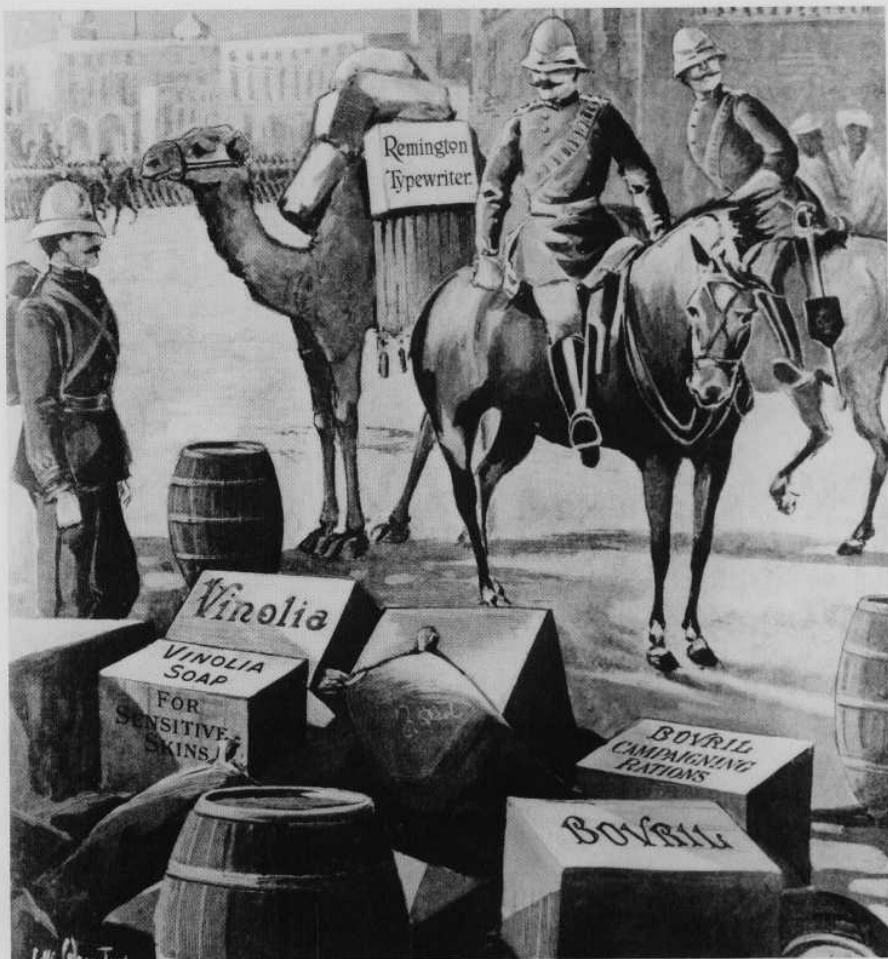


sels reached Abu Hamed to help protect the future railroad.

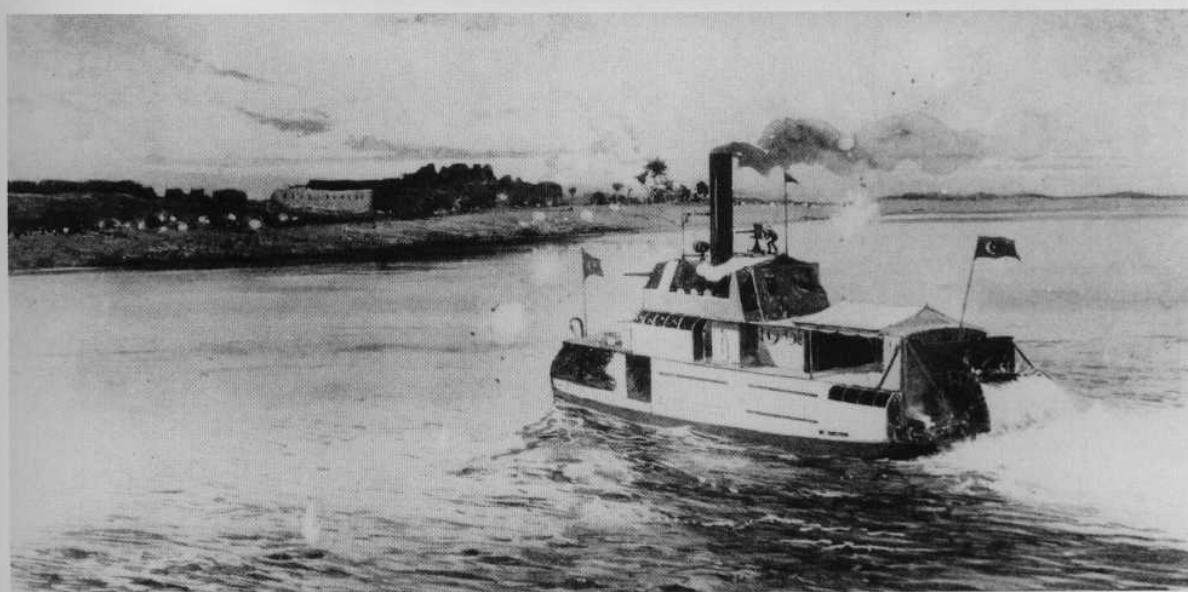
The fall of Abu Hamed alarmed Zaki Uthman, the Khalifa's commander at Berber. Promised reinforcements did not arrive and, with his troops in a mutinous state, on 24 August he evacuated Berber

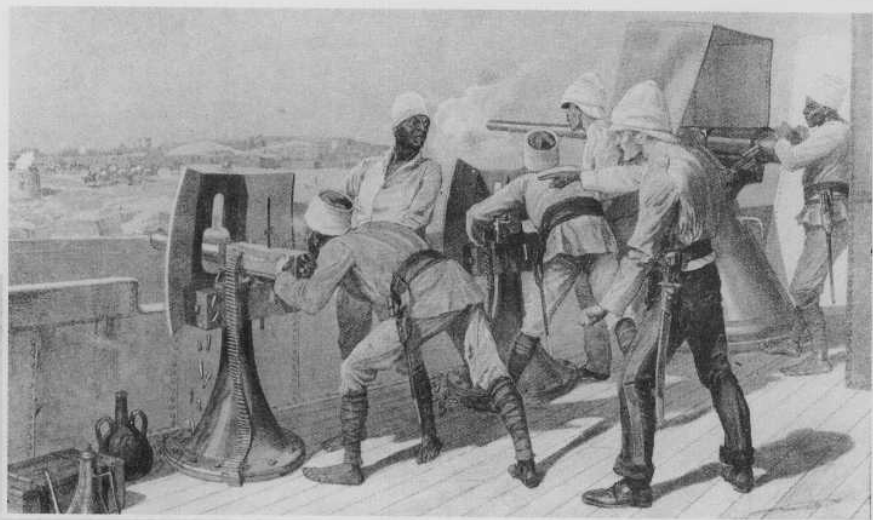
and fell back to Shendi, south of the River Atbara. Hearing rumours of this, Hunter sent 40 irregular camelmenn to investigate, and they occupied the town on 31 August. Thus the most vital strategic point between Wadi Halfa and Omdurman fell into Kitchener's hands without a fight.

► Trade follows the flag...
*'Sir Herbert Kitchener
 inspecting the newly-
 arrived stores after Morn-
 ing Parade' at Dongola;*
 from the pages of *The
 Illustrated London
 Times*.



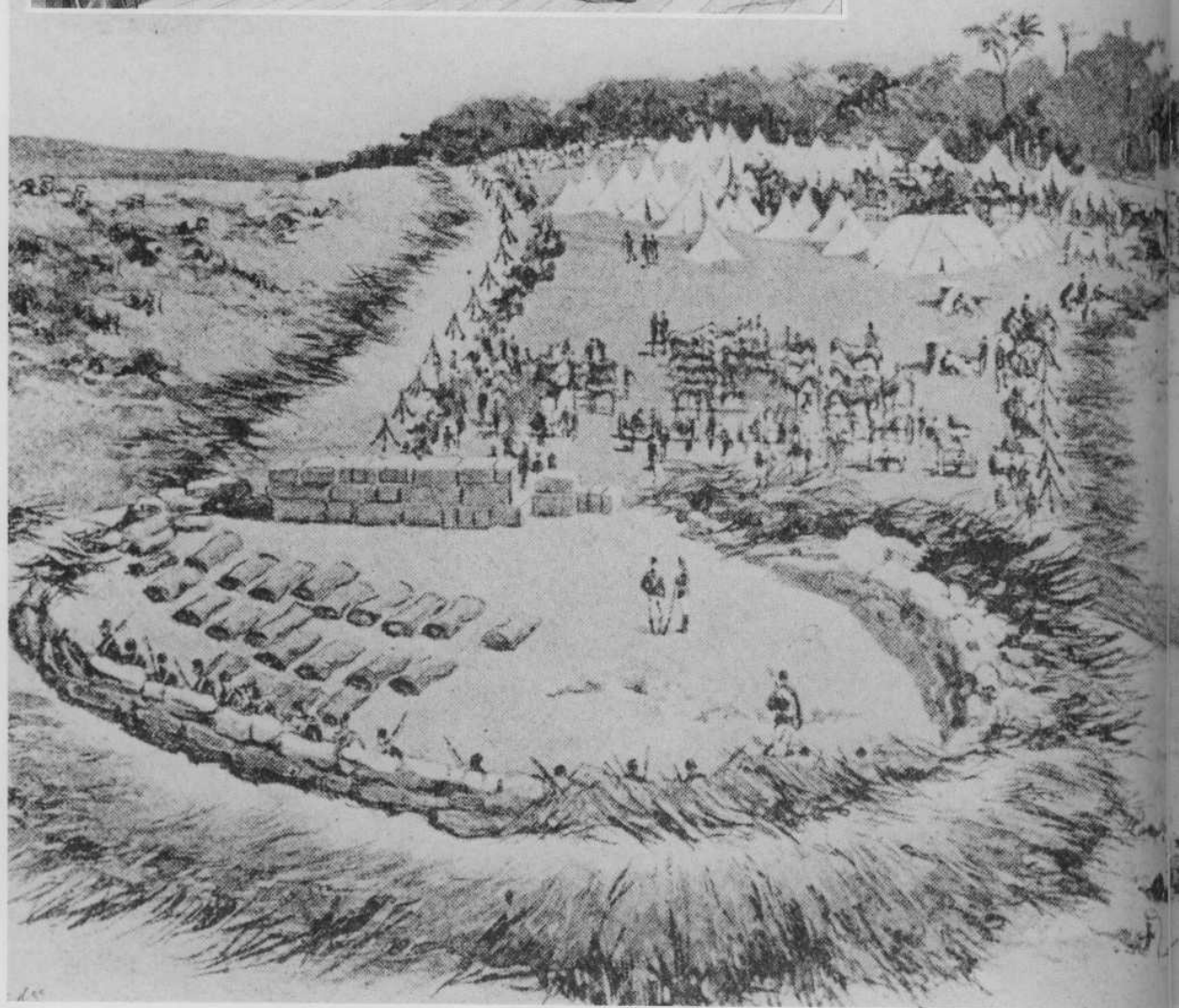
▼ *Zafir, the gunboat of
 Commander the Hon. C.
 Keppel, commander of the
 flotilla, reconnoitring
 Osman Digna's position
 at Shendi. When Zafir's
 boiler burst, Commander
 Keppel transferred his
 flag to Sultan.*





◀ After the bombardment of Metammeh, a Royal Marine Artillery sergeant directs fire from a gunboat at hostile Baggara horsemen on the riverbank.

▼ The British camp on the Atbara river.



THE ATBARA CAMPAIGN



Osman Digna, between two Egyptian forces at Berber and Suakim, abandoned his headquarters at Adarama and moved south, allowing Kitchener to reopen the old caravan route between the two places and to accumulate supplies at Berber.

In mid-October the three latest and biggest gunboats reached the town and began scouting operations against Mahdist leader Mahmud at Metemma. On 31 October the railway finally reached Abu Hamed, making it much easier to maintain the Berber garrison. Kitchener, to facilitate working his gunboats on the falling Nile, established a major fortified camp, Fort Atbara, at the confluence of the Nile and the Atbara.

Late in the year the Egyptian Army took over Kassala from the Italians, who were eager to leave after their Adowa defeat. Arrangements were made with the Abyssinians to remain neutral.

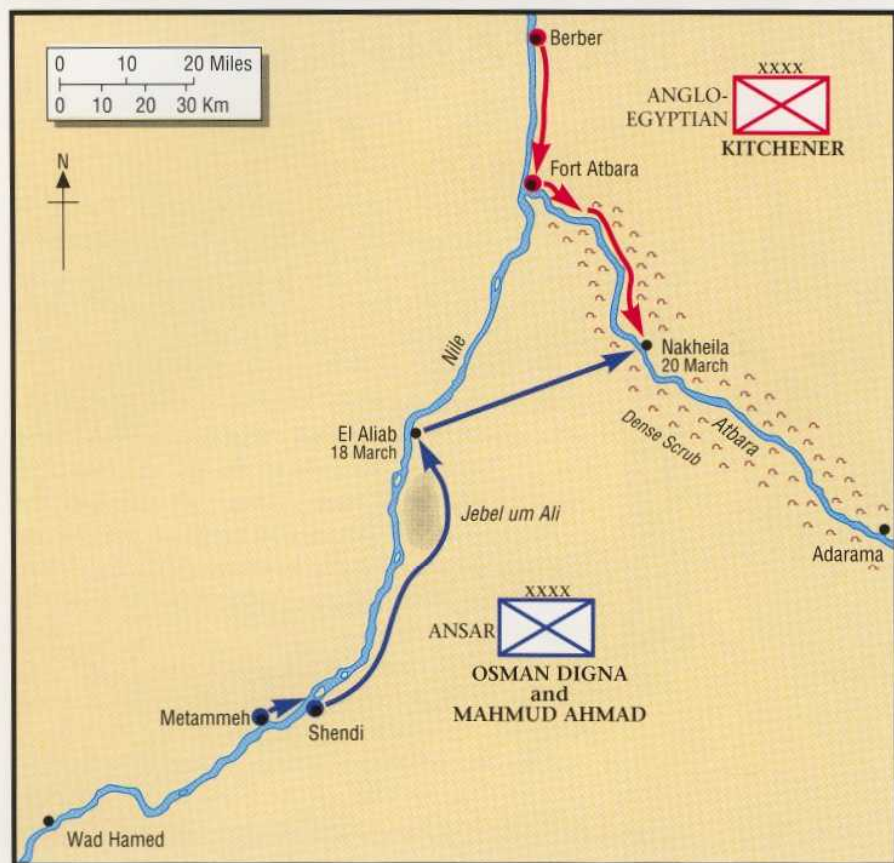
On 2 January 1898, 1st Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment and the Cameron Highlanders proceeded from Cairo to Wadi Halfa. 1st Battalion Seaforth Highlanders came from Malta, and with the 1st Battalion 10th Lincolns they formed a British Brigade under Gatacre.

By the end of January the Egyptian Army of three infantry brigades, eight cavalry squadrons and four batteries of artillery held the Nile from Fort Atbara to Abu Hamed. Gatacre's British Brigade was in camp 30 miles south of Abu Hamed, but when Mahmud entrenched himself on the Atbara they moved up to within 10 miles of the British Atbara Fort.

The Reactions of the Khalifa

Furious at losing Dongola without a fight, in June the Khalifa had ordered the Amir Mahmud Ahmad and his 10,000-strong army of the West to Metemeh, where they were entrenched by 1 July 1887. By the end of 1887 the main Dervish army, 40,000

The Atbara Campaign, Feb to April 1898



► *Top: A bird's-eye view of the advance at Atbara on 8 April 1898*

► *Below: The Cameron Highlanders attack the Mahdist zareba at the Atbara.*

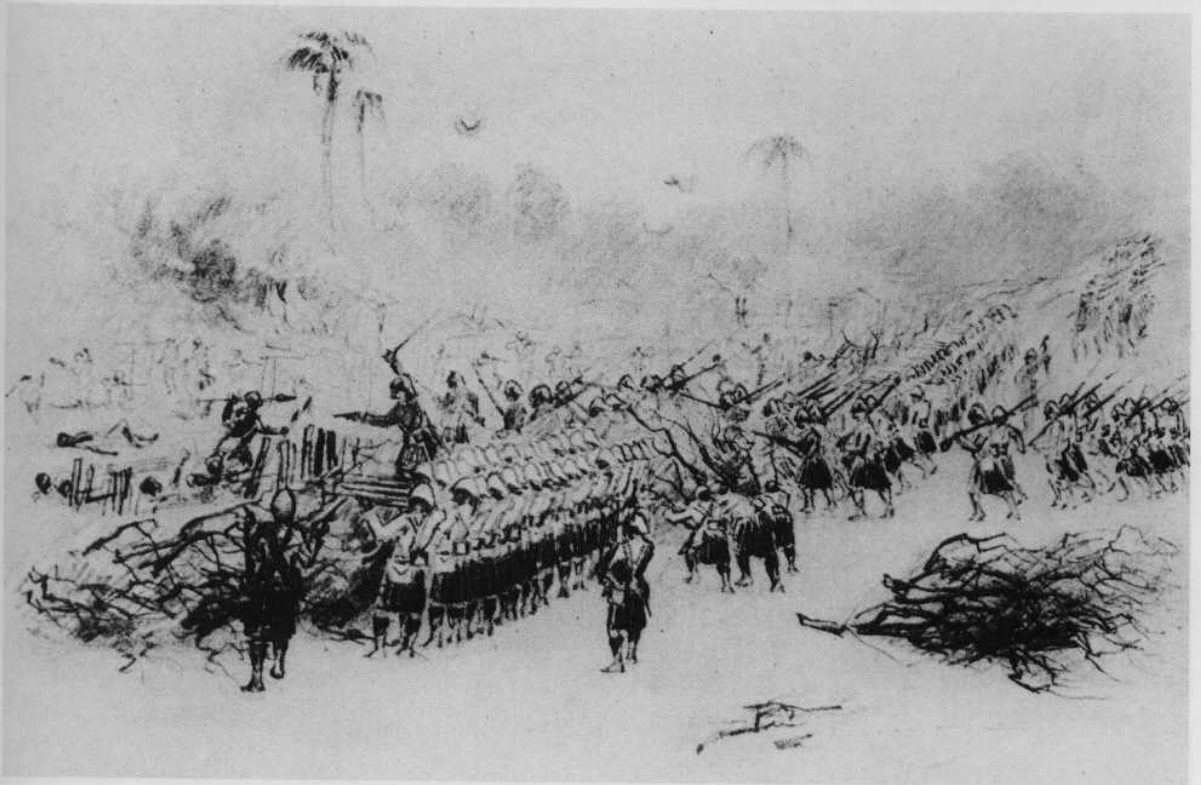
strong, was with the Khalifa at Omdurman, and a further 20,000 under Mahmud and Osman Digna were at Metammeh.

In mid-February, Mahmud and his army moved north from Metemma, crossing the Nile to Shendi. On 18 March the force marched across the desert between the Nile and the Atbara, planning to cross the almost-dry Atbara and move north before turning back to the Nile, thus bypassing Kitchener's Fort Atbara. On 20 March the Mahdists reached Nakheila on the Atbara, where Mahmud realised he had got them into a position from which they could not withdraw, except by giving battle. The Mahdists constructed a fortified camp, ringed by a thorn-bush zareba, with a low stockade of palm logs and three lines of trenches. Within the camp itself, intermingled with native huts, were innumerable rifle pits and small trench systems.

The Battle of the Atbara, 8 April 1898

Kitchener hesitated to attack the entrenched Ansar, apprehensive because his army was 1,200 miles from its main supply base and had tenuous lines of communication. At last, on 4 April 1898, when it was evident that Mahmud did not intend to come out and give battle, four days of cautious marches began which, on the night of 7/8 April, brought them to a position overlooking the enemy position at Nakheila.

On 8 April 1898, under the light of a bright moon, Kitchener's force, in four great brigade squares, trudged silently across the desert until 0400, when they deployed into attack formation. Moving forward through scattered bush and scrub, they reached open ground overlooking the shallow, crater-like depression where, less than half-a-mile



distant, lay Mahmud's fortifications. The first gun fired on the zareba at 0620, to be followed by a heavy bombardment of shells and rockets which sent earth and stones flying and set fire to trees, bushes and straw huts, causing a pall of smoke to lay over the position. It aroused no signs of life, save when a large body of cavalry galloped out to be hotly engaged on the Egyptian left front by cavalry and machine-guns.

▼ *The storming of the zareba during the Battle of the Atbara. Left: The Seaforth Highlanders.*

Right: The Cameron Highlanders – a painting by Stanley Berkeley. (ASKB)



British Forces at the Atbara, 8 April 1898

British Brigade (Gatacre)

1st Battalion 6th Royal Warwickshire Regiment
1st Battalion 10th Lincolnshire Regiment
1st Battalion 72nd Seaforth Highlanders
1st Battalion 79th Cameron Highlanders

Egyptian Division (Hunter)

1st Brigade (MacDonald) 2nd Egyptians
9th, 10th, 11th Sudanese
2nd Brigade (Maxwell) 8th Egyptians
12th, 13th, 14th Sudanese
3rd Brigade (Lewis) 3rd, 4th, 7th Egyptians

Cavalry (Broadwood) 8 Squadrons; 2 Maxim guns
Horse Artillery Battery (Young) 6 Krupp guns
Long's Division of 3 Batteries, each of 6 Maxim-Nordenfolt quick-firing guns
Detachment Egyptian gunners with 24lb rocket tube (Beatty)

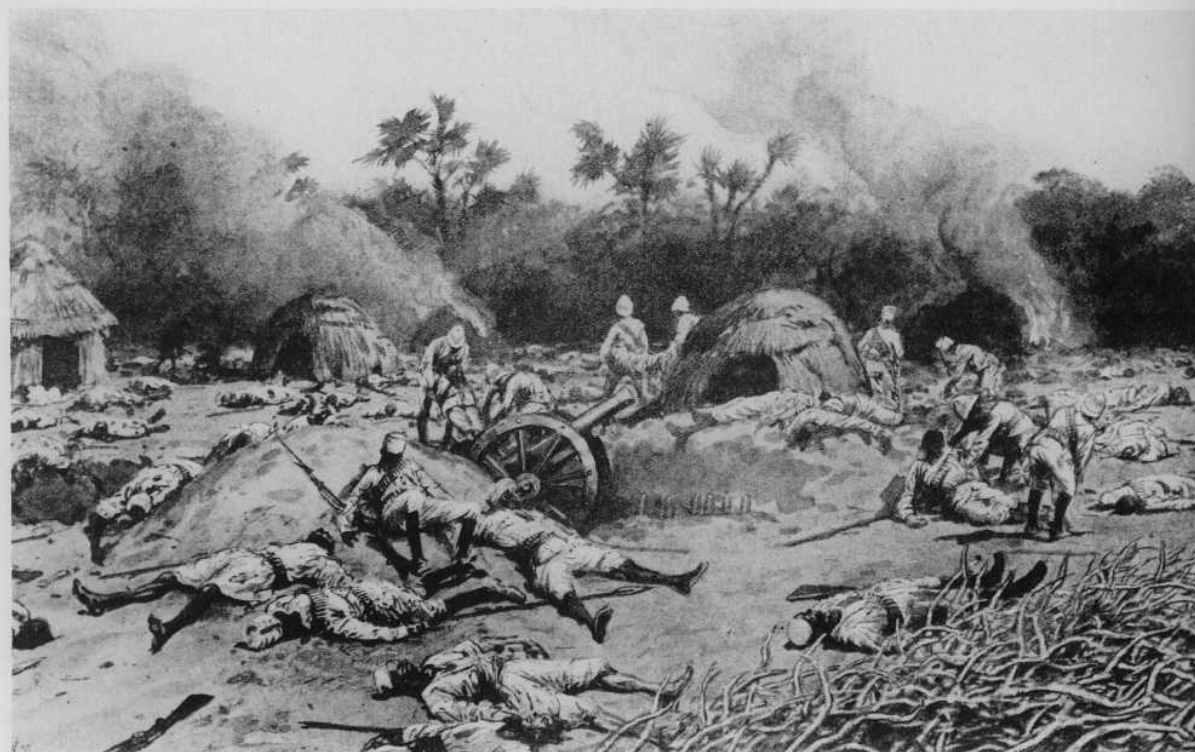


After an hour the bombardment ceased and the General Advance was heard, causing lines and columns of infantry to bear down on the Dervish zareba. Bands played, pipes skirled and from all sides arose cries of 'Remember Gordon!'. The Cameron Highlanders were in line along the whole front; then, in columns of their eight companies, the Lincolns on the right, the Seaforths in the centre and the Warwicks on the left; bugles controlled regular halts to volley-fire by sections.

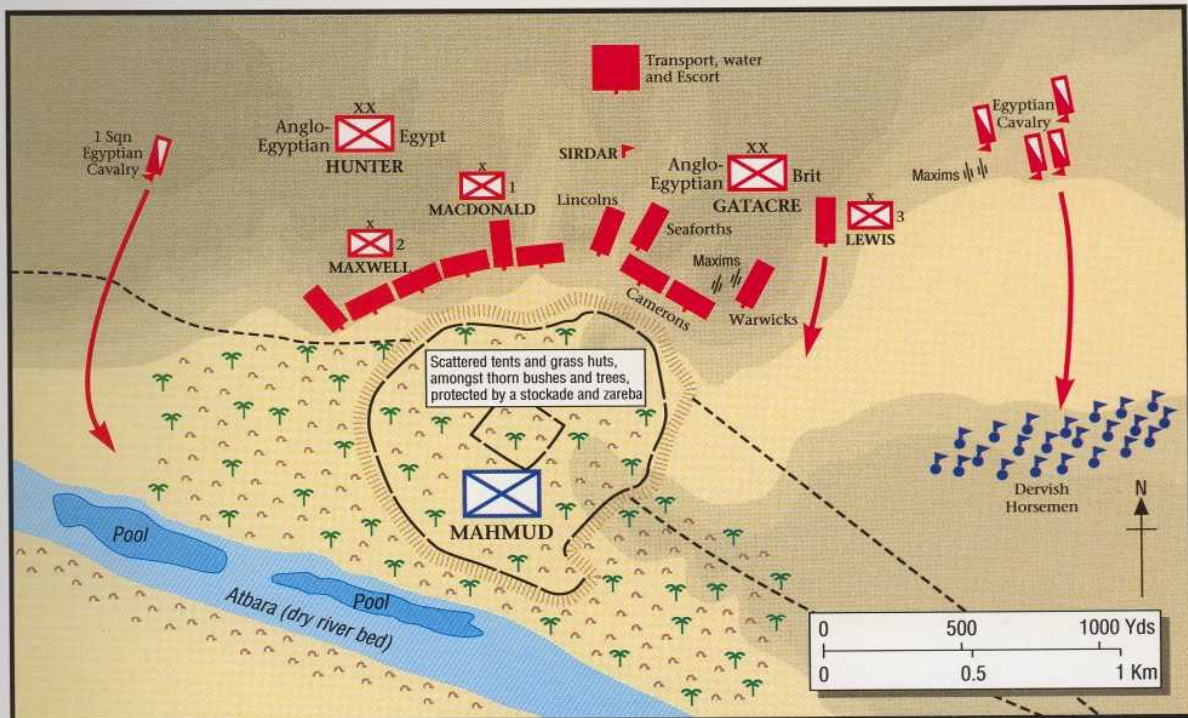
To the relief of the kilted Camerons, the dense and prickly thorn hedge they feared turned out to be but a loose and low barrier of camel-thorn, easily

tugged away. Beyond lay a stockade and triple trench line. Concealed among thick bush of palm stem, mimosa thorn and scrub grass was a honey-comb of foxholes and rifle pits. At first, no enemy could be seen in the swirling smoke and dust, then suddenly from the earth erupted dusty black warriors – running, leaping and shooting as they fell back before the doggedly advancing infantry. Leaving heaps of dead tribesmen dotting the ground behind them the Camerons, Seaforths, Lincolns and Warwicks deployed right and left to sweep straight across the zareba area to the rear entrenchments, and through thick undergrowth to the river beyond.





Battle of the Atbara, 8 April 1898: assault, 0740



◀ *Top: British and Egyptian troops make the final charge on Mahmud's zareba during the Battle of the Atbara.*

◀ *Left: The scene inside the captured zareba at the end of the battle.*

▶ *Bringing in a prisoner after the battle.*





▲ Mahmud, the Mahdist leader, guarded by the 10th Sudanese after the Battle of the Atbara. The inscription is Mahmud's signature on the original photograph.

▼ Godfrey Giles' painting After the Battle of Atbara: The Emir Mahmud brought prisoner to Sir Herbert Kitchener. (ASKB)





Here they lined the banks, firing crashing volleys into the natives fleeing across the open quarter-mile of dry sandbed, which became spotted with black shapes. Eventually, and with some difficulty, the troops were restrained from firing; the sudden silence was broken by loud bursts of cheering.

The 45min battle was over, but it was an expensive victory for the Anglo/Egyptian Army, which had more than 550 casualties; the British losses were:

1st Bn. Royal Warwickshire	2 killed 12 wounded
regiment	
1st Bn. 10th Lincolns	1 killed 16 wounded
72nd Seaforth Highlanders	7 killed 26 wounded
79th Cameron Highlanders	16 killed 45 wounded

The three Egyptian Brigades lost 57 men killed and 386 wounded, including ten British officers.

Mahmud's army was destroyed, estimated casualties being 40 Amirs and 1,000 tribesmen killed, and many captured, including Mahmud himself. The

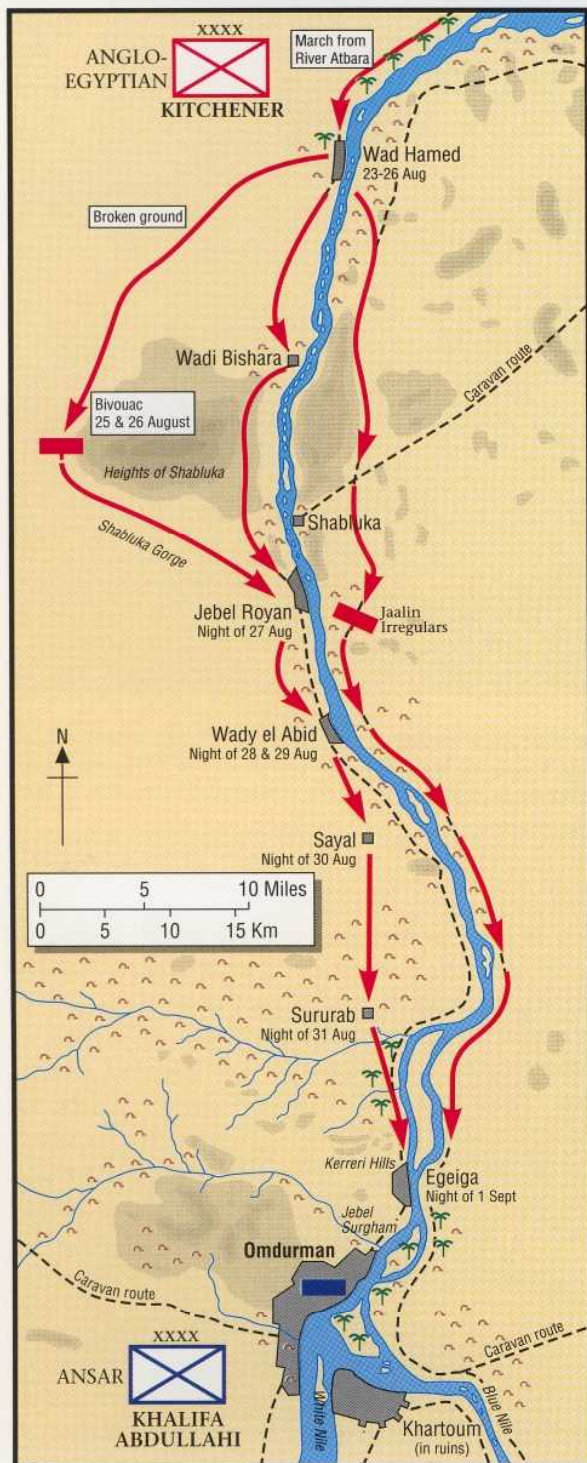
▲ *Sudanese troops cheer the Sirdar in April 1898, following the Battle of the Atbara.*

rest of the army scattered into the desert, ceasing to be an effective part of the Khalifa's army. Osman Digna managed to retain control of about 4,000 men, who made a reasonably organised retreat to Gedaref before rejoining the main army at Omdurman. The captured Ansar commander Mahmud spat vengeance at his captors: 'You will pay for all this at Omdurman ... compared with the Khalifa I am but a leaf!'

The Sirdar Prepares for the Final Battle

Kitchener's victorious force marched northwards, to go into summer quarters at Fort Atbara and along the Nile, where they sat peacefully for four months, awaiting reinforcements and the rising of the river.

The Advance to Omdurman, 24 August to 1 September 1898



*Sergeant-Major of
the 21st Lancers.
Illustration by
Michael Roffe.*



*Officer of the
Lincolnshire
Regiment, wearing
uniform typical of
the campaign; his
sword is the
Pattern 1895 or
1897 infantry
sword. Illustration
by Michael Roffe.*

THE ADVANCE TO OMDURMAN

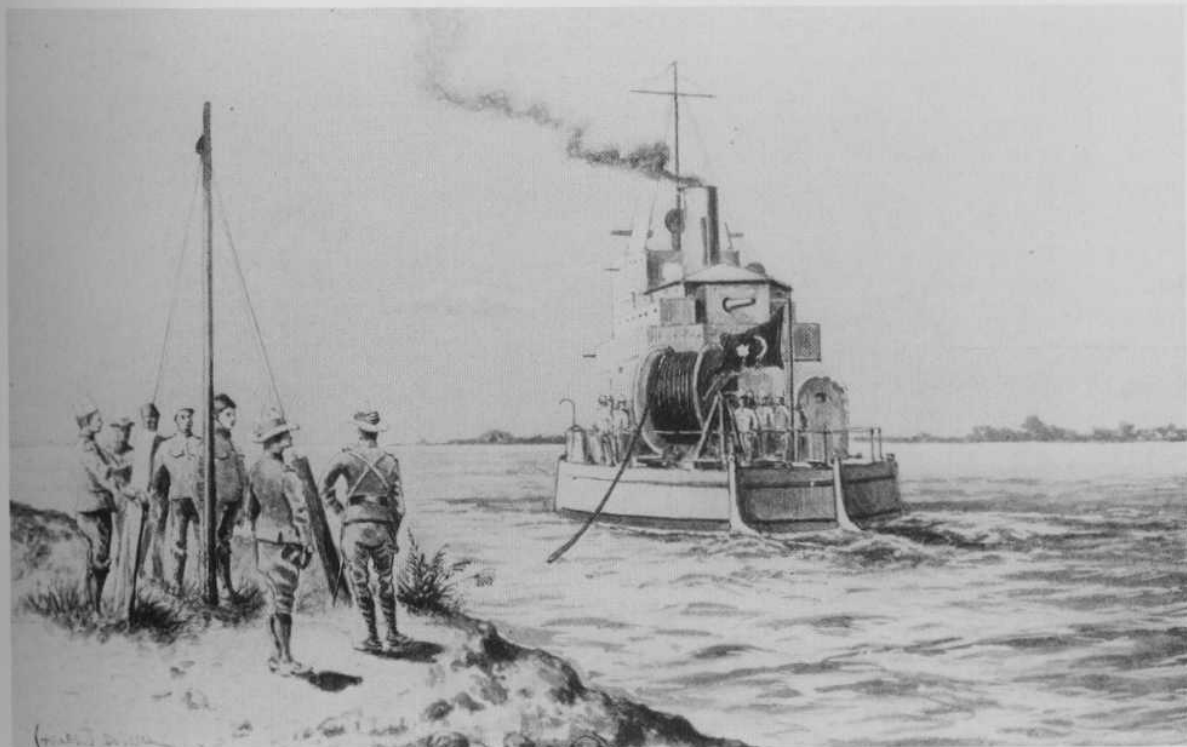
By mid-August, Kitchener's Army was concentrated at the North End of the Sixth Cataract, with an advanced supply depot at Nasri Island, close at hand. Here, during July and August, they had been strengthened by a new British brigade, formed of 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards (from Gibraltar), 1st Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers and 2nd Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers from Cairo, and 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade from Malta; the 21st Lancers were also sent up from Egypt. In addition, there was more artillery. Thus, Kitchener's total

strength at this time was about 22,000 men, 44 guns, 20 Maxim guns, and a fleet of gunboats, ten of them armoured.

On 24 August, in successive divisions, preceded by the cavalry and camel corps, marching on a two-brigade front in a formation well suited for repelling sudden attack, the force moved out. The encampments of march were:

24 August	Wad Hamed
25 August	Jebel Royan
28 August	Wady el Abid
30 August	Sayal
31 August	Sururab (6 miles north of the Kerreri Ridges)
1 September	Egeiga

▼ *A Nile gunboat laying
a cable across the river
after the Battle of Atbara
had cleared the way.*



On the 31st they came to a hill-top from which they could see, lying to their front, the city of Omdurman – an extensive area of mud houses with the Mahdi's tomb rising above them.

From 28 August the cavalry and camel corps reconnoitred well out on the right of the march, while the gunboats on the Nile secured the left. Clearing Mahdist pockets of resistance as they encountered them, the Ja'alin 'friendlies', led by Major Stuart-Wortley, marched on the east bank, capturing two villages with the assistance of the gunboats.

On 1 September they camped around the village of Egeiga, 6½ miles from the Mahdist capital, in a

large oblong area said to be 720 x 560 yards, half a mile from the Nile, with animals and transport in the centre.

The Khalifa's army was soon located by cavalry scouts, west of Omdurman and moving north towards the Kerreri hills towards Egeiga; but by mid-afternoon the Ansar halted, showing no signs of attacking at that stage. However, Kitchener quickly began to strengthen his position.

The details which follow are taken from General Kitchener's Official Despatch, dated 5 September 1898:

'Sir, It having been decided that an expeditionary force of British and Egyptian troops should be sent



against the Khalifa's army in Omdurman, I have the honour to inform you that the following troops were concentrated at the North End of the Sixth Cataract, in close proximity to which an advanced supply depot had been previously formed at Nasri Island.

'British Troops – 21st Lancers; 32nd Field Battery, Royal Artillery; 37th Howitzer Battery, Royal Artillery; 2 40-prs., Royal Artillery. Infantry Division – 1st Brigade: 1st Battalion Warwickshire Regiment, 1st Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment, 1st Battalion Seaforth Highlanders, 1st Battalion Cameron Highlanders, 6 Maxims, Detachment Royal Engineers. 2nd Brigade: 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards,

1st Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers, 2nd Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers, 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade, 4 Maxims, Detachment Royal Engineers.

'Egyptian Troops – 9 Squadrons, Cavalry; 1 Battery, Horse Artillery; 4 Field Batteries; 10 Maxims; 8 Companies, Camel Corps. 1st Brigade: 2nd Egyptian Battalion; 9th, 10th, and 11th Soudanese Battalions. 2nd Brigade: 8th Egyptian Battalion; 12th, 13th, and 14th Soudanese Battalions. 3rd Brigade: 3rd, 4th, 7th, and 15th Egyptian Battalions. 4th Brigade: 1st, 5th, 17th, and 18th Egyptian Battalions. Camel Transport.

'On 24th August the troops began moving by successive divisions to Jebel Royan, where a depot of supplies and a British communication hospital of two hundred beds were established.

'On 28th August, the army marched to Wadi el Abid, and on the following day proceeded to Sayal, from whence I despatched a letter to the Khalifa, warning him to remove his women and children, as I intended to bombard Omdurman unless he surrendered.

'Next day the army marched to Sururab, and on September 1 reached the village of Egeiga, two miles south of the Kerreri hills, and within six miles of Omdurman. Patrols of the enemy's horsemen were frequently seen during the march falling back before our cavalry, and their outposts being driven in beyond Egeiga, our advanced scouts came in full view of Omdurman, from which large bodies of the enemy were seen streaming out and marching north.

'At noon, from the slopes of Jebel Surgham, I saw the entire Dervish army some three miles off advancing towards us, the Khalifa's black flag surrounded by his Mulazimin (bodyguard) being plainly discernible. I estimated their numbers at 35,000 men, though, from subsequent investigation, this figure was probably under-estimated, their actual strength being between forty and fifty thousand. From information received, I gather that it was the Khalifa's intention to have met us with this force at Kerreri, but our rapid advance surprised him.'

(Before the city, noticeable at first only because of their banners, was a solid wall of motionless warriors, drawn up in five immense masses on a three-mile front, eight or ten deep.)

'The troops were at once disposed around the village of Egeiga, which formed an excellent position

◀ *A panoramic view of the last phase of the grand advance towards Omdurman. On the river, some of the stern-wheel gunboats have transports and dhows lashed to their sides, while at bottom right is the Sirdar's boat. In the distance, on the far side, the army advances majestically across the desert.*



Hademdownah warrior, armed with cross-hilted sword and shield, and (mounted) Taashi warrior of the Baggara tribe. Illustration by Michael Roffe.



with a clear field of fire in every direction, and shelter-trenches and zarebas were prepared.

'At 2 p.m. our vedettes reported that the enemy had halted, and later on it was observed that they were preparing bivouacs and lighting fires. Information was received that the Khalifa contemplated a night attack on our position, and preparations to repel this were made, at the same time the Egeiga villagers were sent out to obtain information in the direction of the enemy's camp with the idea that we intended a night attack, and, this coming to the Khalifa's knowledge, he decided to remain in his position; consequently, we passed an undisturbed night in the zareba.

'Meanwhile the gunboats, under Commander Keppel, which had shelled the Dervish advanced camp near Kerreri on 31st August, proceeded at daylight on 1st September, towing the Howitzer Battery to the right bank, whence, in conjunction with the Irregulars under Major Stuart-Wortley, their advance south was continued. After two forts had been destroyed and the villages gallantly cleared by the Irregulars, the Howitzers were landed in a

good position on the right bank, from whence an effective fire was opened on Omdurman, and, after a few rounds, the conspicuous dome over the Mahdi's tomb was partially demolished, whilst the gunboats, steaming past the town, also effectually bombarded the forts, which replied with a heavy, but ill-directed fire.'

The night of 1/2 September 1896 is graphically described by Bennet Burleigh, War Correspondent of the London *Daily Telegraph*, in his report to that newspaper:

'Storm and cloud had passed. The moon rose early on the night of 1st September. It shone brightly over and around our bivouac, south of Kerreri village, or near Umm Matragan, according to the cartographers. The north end of our camp lines

▼ *Inside the zareba at Egeiga during the night before the Battle of Omdurman. This shows one of the Egyptian-held sectors of the perimeter*

where the defensive line has been fashioned with a hedge of cut mimosa.



approached the river just 500 yards south of the ruined dervish redoubt of Kerreri. Sentinels were posted along the irregular-shaped triangle, or, shall I call it, broken semi-circle, within which the army lay. The sentries had a fair range of view to their front. Men on the lookout also occupied the roofs of the few native mud-huts at the south-western corner of the camp. Four Jaalin scouts were sent forward to Surgham Hill to listen, and to apprise the troops of any movement on the part of the Khalifa's army. Other friendlies lay about outside, harkening and watching, to warn us of any attempt of the enemy to surprise the zareba. The sentries were bid to shoot at any man rushing singly upon him, and to fire upon large bodies advancing at the double. Men running in, however, in pairs, were either to be challenged or allowed to come in without being fired on. Such was the simple yet ample arrangement. To anticipate somewhat, it so happened that about midnight there was some firing, and the four Jaalin 'smellers of danger and dervishes' upon Jebel Surgham came sprinting in, a four-in-hand, and cleared the broad cut mimosa hedge that was piled before the lines of Gatacre's division, at a bound. The time they made broke all records.

'From the north to the south end along the river the camp was about one mile in length, and its greatest width about 1,200 yards. There were a few mud-huts within the space enclosed by mimosa and the double line of shallow shelter-trenches. The cut bushes were piled in front of the British troops, who were facing Omdurman and the south; the trenches covered the approach from the west and north where the Khedival troops stood on guard. Neither extremity of the lines of defence, zareba or trench, quite extended to the river. Openings of about thirty to fifty yards were left. Besides these there were other small passage-ways left open during daylight, but closed at night. Near the river facing south the ground was rough, and there were several huts, so that the security of the camp was not imperilled by the failure to carry the hedge or trenches to the Nile's brink. Lyttelton's brigade were placed upon the left south front. Wauchope's men continued the line to the right. In the south gap were three companies of the 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade, their left resting on the river. On their immediate right were three batteries – the 32nd

Field Battery of English 15-pounders, under Major Williams; two Maxim-Nordenfelt mountain batteries, 12½-pounders, respectively under Captains Stewart and de Rougemont; and six Maxims under Captain Smeaton. Later on these guns and Maxims during the first stage of the battle – for the action resolved itself into a double event ere the combat ceased – were wheeled out until they were firing almost at right angles to the zareba line. On the right of the guns, in succession, were the remainder of the Rifles, the Lancashire Fusiliers, the Northumberland Fusiliers, and the Grenadier Guards. In the interval between General Lyttelton's brigade and General Wauchope's, which stood next to it, were two Maxims. Then came the Warwicks, Camerons, Seaforths, and Lincolns. To the Lincolns' right, where the trenches began and the line faced nearly west, was Colonel Maxwell's brigade. Between Wauchope's and Maxwell's brigades were two Maxims, and, I think, for a time during the first attack made by the dervishes, the two-gun mule battery of six-centimetre Krupp guns. To complete the tale of the guns placed for defending the camp, there was Major Lawrie's battery of Maxim-Nordenfelts on the right of Maxwell's brigade next MacDonald's, and on the north side, near the right of the position facing west, Major Peake's battery of Maxim-Nordenfelts. These guns had done so well at the Atbara, that the Sirdar promptly increased his artillery by adding three batteries of that class. Maxwell's brigade was composed of three Soudanese and one Egyptian battalion, viz., 8th Egyptian, and 12th, 13th, and 14th Soudanese. Farther north, to the right of Colonel Maxwell's men, was Lewis Bey's brigade of Egyptian troops – the 3rd, 4th, 7th, and 15th Battalions. The 15th Battalion was a fine lot, mostly reservists. Upon the farthest west and northern face of the protected camp was Colonel MacDonald's oft-tried and famous fighting brigade, made up of the 9th, 10th, and 11th Soudanese, with the true-as-steel 2nd Egyptians. Within the wall of hedge, trenches, and armed infantry, in reserve, was another brigade, the 4th Khedival, commanded by Major Collinson. It was made up of the 1st, 5th, 17th, and 18th Egyptian battalions. The two last-named were relatively newly-raised regiments, but were composed of fine soldierly-looking fellaheen.'

THE BATTLE OF OMDURMAN

Dawn, 2 September 1898

Kitchener's Official Despatch takes up the story:

'At dawn on the following morning [2nd September], our mounted patrols reported the enemy advancing to attack, and by 6.30 a.m. the Egyptian Cavalry, which had been driven in, took up a position with the Horse Artillery, Camel Corps, and four Maxims on the Kerreri ridge on our right flank.

'At 6.40 a.m. the shouts of the advancing dervish army became audible, and a few minutes later their flags appeared over the rising ground, forming a semi-circle round our left and front faces.'

From the report of a War correspondent: 'At first a few flags appeared over the crest, to be followed by

solid masses of spearmen and riflemen, led by mounted Amirs. The muffled roar of a vast multitude reached the ears of the waiting Anglo-Egyptian Army as the Dervishes spread themselves in a gigantic semi-circle around the front and left of the position.'

The Official Despatch describes the first attack:

'[The] guns of the 32nd Field Battery opened fire at 6.45 a.m. at a range of two thousand eight hundred yards, and the dervishes, continuing to advance rapidly, delivered their attack with all their accustomed dash and intrepidity. In a short time the troops and Maxims on the left and front were hotly engaged, whilst the enemy's riflemen, taking up positions on the slopes of Jebel Surgham, brought a long-range fire to bear on the zareba, causing some

British Forces at Omdurman, 1/2 Sept 1898

BRITISH INFANTRY DIVISION (Gatacre)

1st Brigade (Wauchope) 1st Royal Warwickshire Regt. (Col Jones)

1st Lincolnshire Regiment (Lt Col Louth); 1st Seaforth Highlanders (Col Murray)

1st Cameron Highlanders (CO not known)

Six Maxim guns manned by 16 Company Eastern Division Royal Artillery

1 Detachment Royal Engineers

2nd Brigade (Lyttelton) 1st Grenadier Guards (Col Hatton), 1st (5th) Northumberland Fusiliers (Lt Col Money), 2nd (20th) Lancashire Fusiliers (Lt Col Collinwood), 2nd Rifle Brigade (Col Hayward)

4 Maxim guns manned by Royal Irish Fusiliers

1 Detachment Royal Engineers

EGYPTIAN DIVISION (Hunter)

1st Brigade (MacDonald) 2nd Egyptians (Pink)

9th Sudanese (Walter), 10th Sudanese (Nason), 11th Sudanese (Jackson)

2nd Brigade (Maxwell) 8th Egyptians (Kiloussi Bey)

12th Sudanese (Townshend), 13th (Collinson Smith-Dorrien), 14th (Shekleton)

3rd Brigade (Lewis) 3rd Egyptian (Sillern), 4th (Sparkes), 7th (Fathy Bey), 15th (Hickman) (all Egyptian regts)

4th Brigade (Collinson) Egyptian 1st (Doran), 5th (Burhan

Bey), 17th (Bunbery), 18th (Matchett), Cavalry (Burn-Murdoch)

21st Lancers 4 Squadrons (Martin)

Egyptian Cavalry 9 Squadrons (Broadwood)

Camel Corps 8 Companies (Tudway)

ARTILLERY (Long)

32nd Field Battery, Royal Artillery (8 guns)

37th Field Battery, Royal Artillery (6 5in howitzers)

1st Egyptian Horse Battery (6 6cm Krupp guns; 2 Maxims)

2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th Egyptian Field Batteries (each 6 Maxim-Nordenfelts, 2 Maxims)

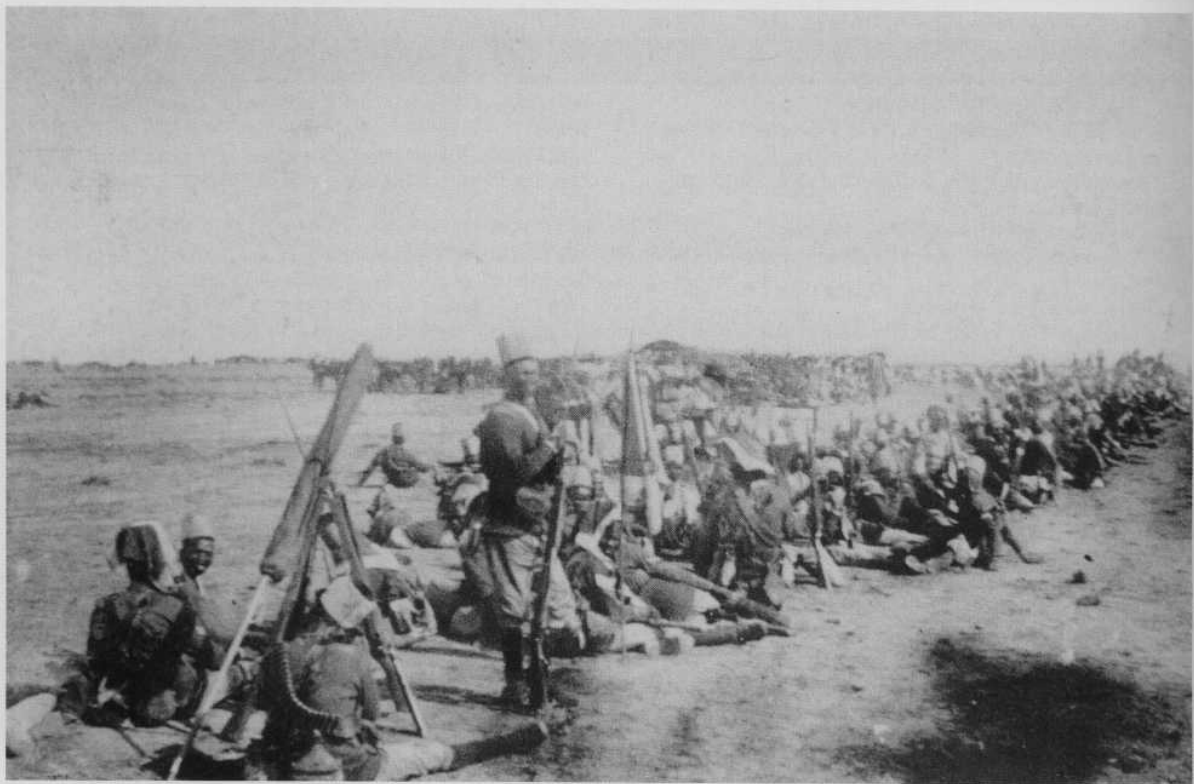
NAVAL FORCES

Three 1889-class armoured screw gunboats (each with 2 Nordenfelt guns, 1 q/f 12pdr, 1 howitzer, 4 Maxim guns)

Three 1896 armoured sternwheel gunboats (each with 1 q/f 12pdr, two 6pdrs, 4 Maxim guns)

Four old-class armoured sternwheel gunboats (each with one 12pdr, two Maxim-Nordenfelts)

Total Strength of Force	8,200 British 17,600 Egyptian/Sudanese.
On land	44 guns, 20 Maxims;
On river	36 guns, 24 Maxims.



casualties, and their spearmen, continually reinforced from the rear, made attempt after attempt to reach our lines.'

At 6.50 a.m. the artillery opened fire ... next the gunboats on the southern flank opened up, and the Grenadier Guards fired section-volleys at 2,000

◀ *The Anglo-Egyptian Army awaiting attack inside the zareba. The bottom photograph shows MacDonald's 1st Egyptian Brigade awaiting orders. (ASKB)*

yards. As the Dervishes came within range, the Highlanders, the Lincolns, and the Egyptian brigades took up the firing, standing in double-rank behind their low zareba, shooting as fast as they could load and pull the trigger, until the rifles became so hot that men had to change them for others taken from the supports. As the guns bellowed, shrapnel whistled and Maxims growled savagely, the Dervishes advanced in a well-defined line, divided into masses of about 4,000 men, covering the whole plain between the hills and all the ridge from Jebel Surgham to the river.

The Ansar at Omdurman

Appendix 13 of Intelligence Report No.60, dated Cairo, January 1899, gives the following breakdown:

Muluazimayya (Dark Green Flag) commanded by Uthman al-Din

	Men	Horse	Rifles
Khalifa's Bodyguard	1,486	112	900
Shaikh al-Din's bodyguard	2,474	276	1,803

Plus 16 *rubs* commanded by nine Ta'aisha Amirs, two Abyssinian Amirs, and five other Amirs. Average size of each *rub*: 1,300 150 500

The largest *rubs* and their Amirs were:

Jabr Fadl	2,100	215	—
Rabch (Abyssinian)	1,920	195	—
Abdullah Adam	1,900	110	—
al-Arifi al-Rabi	1,850	270	1,236
al-Tahir Ali	1,780	150	540
Ibrahim al-Khalil Ahmad	1,600	135	730

Total: 28,378 men, 2,925 horse, 12,872 rifles, three artillery pieces (one 'French' gun, one mountain gun, one Remington machine-gun). Note: this force was made up of black Africans and Western Arabs, with no tribal levies.

Black Flag (Al-Rayya Al-Zarqa), commanded by Yaqub

'Favoured Tribes' - Baggara - Ta'aisha	1,410 men
Habbaniya	513
Humr	2,036
Rizauqat	611
Bani Halba	283
non-Baggara Zaiyadya	768

These groups provided 1,167 of the total cavalry force of 1,588 of the Black Flag.

Other tribes included

Kababish	697
Danaqla	287
Ja'aliyin	430

The Amirs leading the largest forces were:

Muslim Isa of the Humr	1,610
Othman wad al-Dikaim (Ta'asisha)	1,396

Neither of these two forces possessed rifles.

Berti of Darfur (non-Baggara) led the force best equipped with firearms, under command of Amirs Namar-al-Din,

Masallat Hajam Abu Bakr, and al-Wajj Abu Bakr, who had under command 985 men with 400 rifles.

Total: 14,128 men, 1,588 horse, 1,053 rifles, two guns (one Krupp, one Nordenfolt). All under 51 Amirs and 269 Sub-Amirs (ra's Mi'a and muqaddam).

At Omdurman, the Black Flag was composed of small basic tribal units, ranging from as few as 12 to 1,600 men; the bulk were Baggara and Riverrain Arabs.

Green Flag (Al-Rayya Al-Khadra) commanded by Khalifa Ali wad Ullu.

Three *rubs* under Amirs:

Digham	3,165 men	504 horse
al-Lihawin	1,538	140
Kinana	696	150

Total: 5,394 men, 794 horses. Under nine Amirs and 103 muqaddams. Numbers of firearms unknown. These were White Nile tribes.

Osman Digna (who had no Flag, his own having been captured at Tamai in 1884). Nine 'Rubs' under nine Amirs, each ranging from 20 to 1,000 men.

	Spearmen	Horse	Rifles
Muhammad Musa			
Ali Digna	1,000 Beja	62	22
(Nephew and Wakil to Osman Digna)			
Ibrahim Sa'id	800 Hadendowah	40	31
Ali Abu Shabib	500 Bisharin	25	50
Shaikh Muhammad al-			
Tahir wad al-Majdhub	500 Ja'aliyin	25	50
al-Shayab Ahmad	135 Danagla	10	50
Sharaf Hamad al-Nil	306 Ashraf	21	50

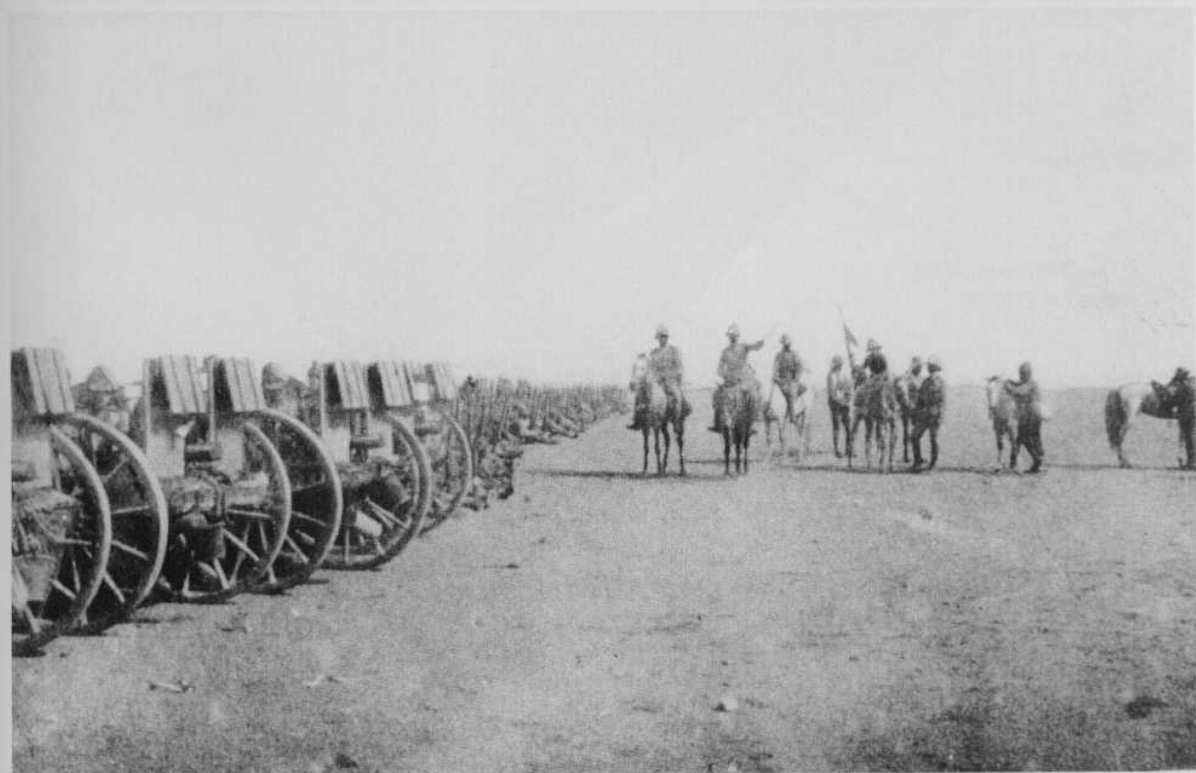
Plus some small units of 20-50 men, commanded by various nephews of Osman Digna, and a 30-man bodyguard with rifles. Total: 3,371 men, 187 horse, 365 rifles, under nine Amirs.

Red Flag (Al-Rayya Al-Hamra) Khalifa al-Sharif - 81 men.

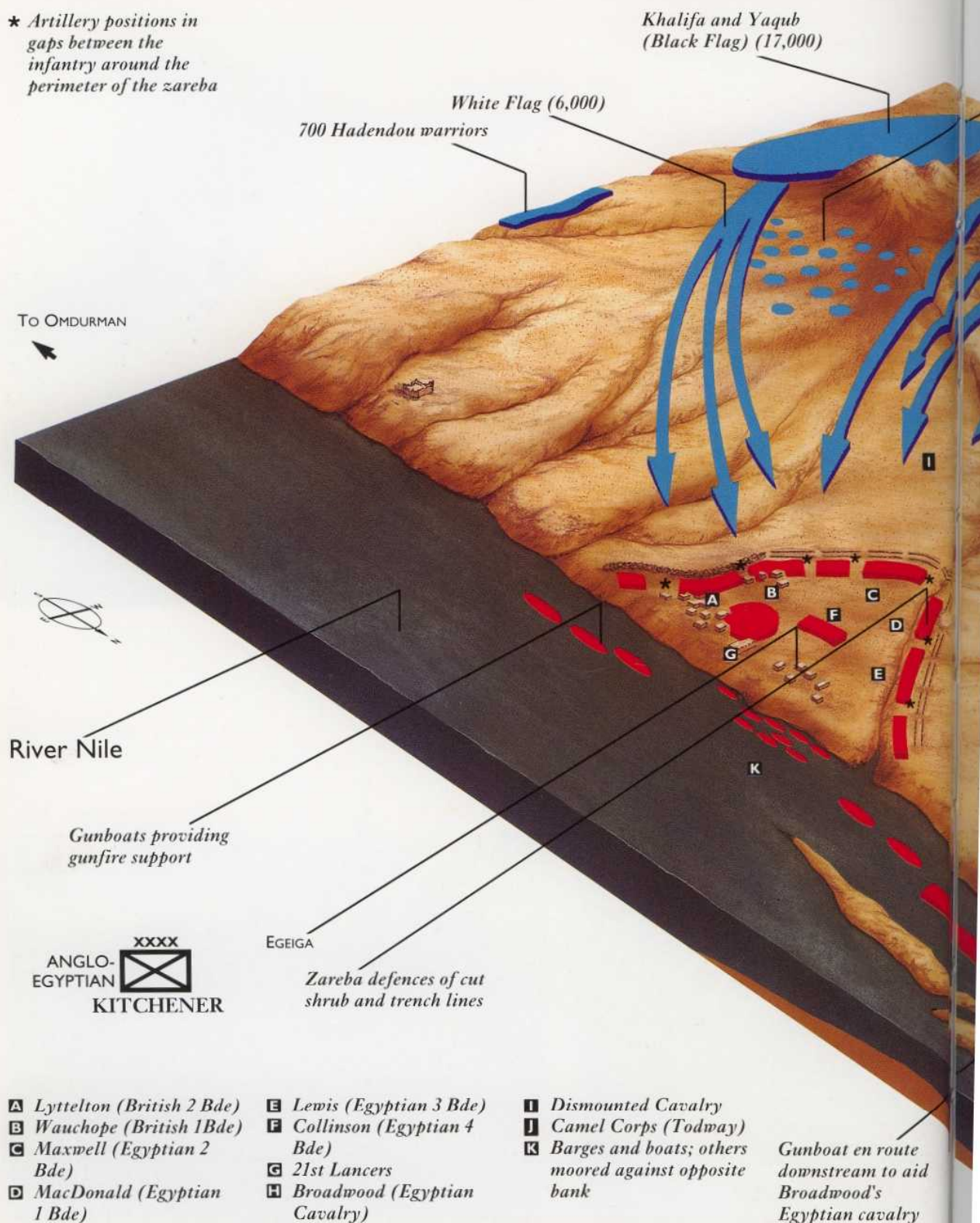
Amir Othman Azraq personal bodyguard of 71 men. (Killed during battle.)

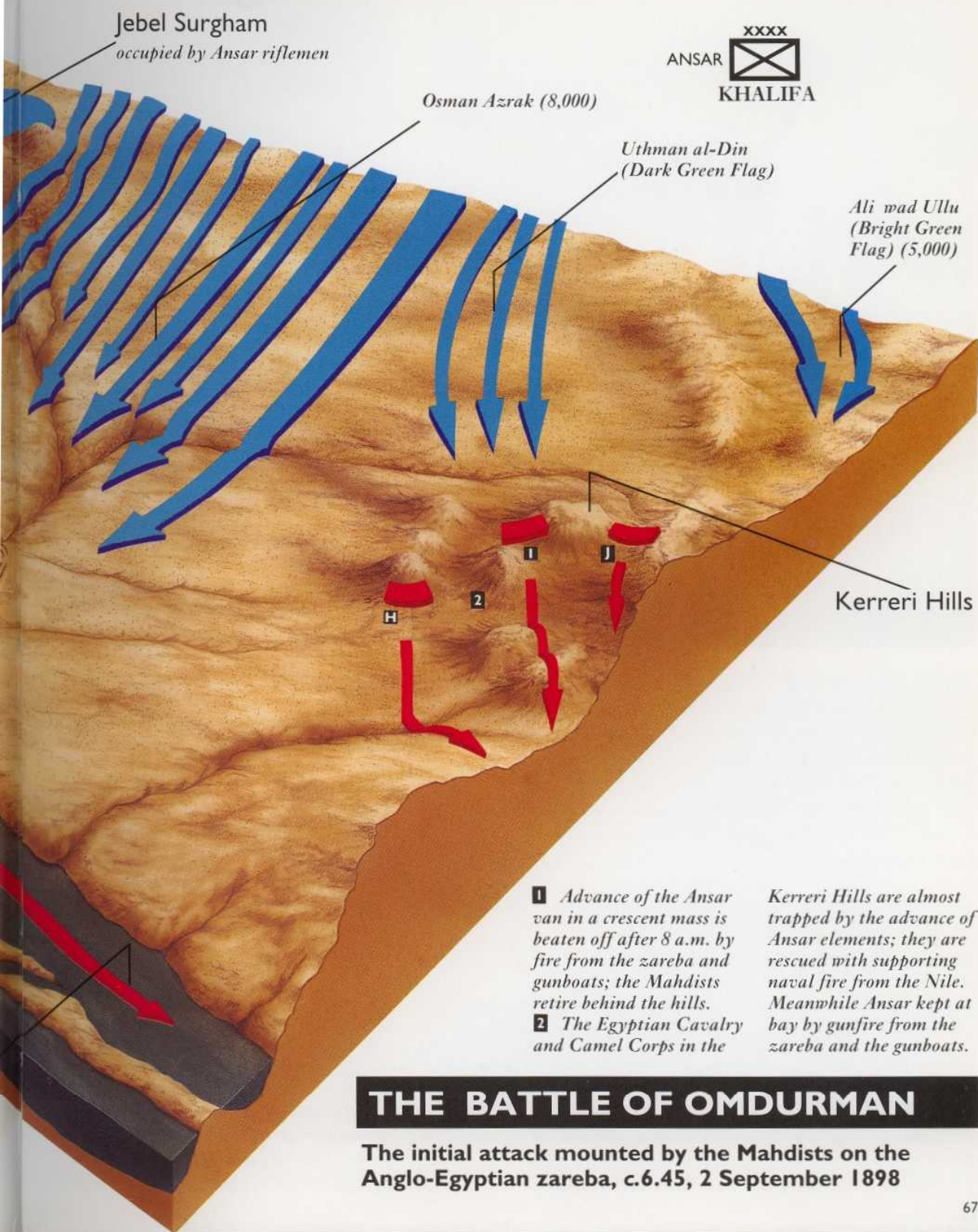


Inside the zareba, awaiting the Dervish onslaught. The photograph at top right shows the Maxim guns positioned between British and Egyptian brigades. Right: General Gatacre, commanding the British Infantry Division, issues final instructions. (ASKB)



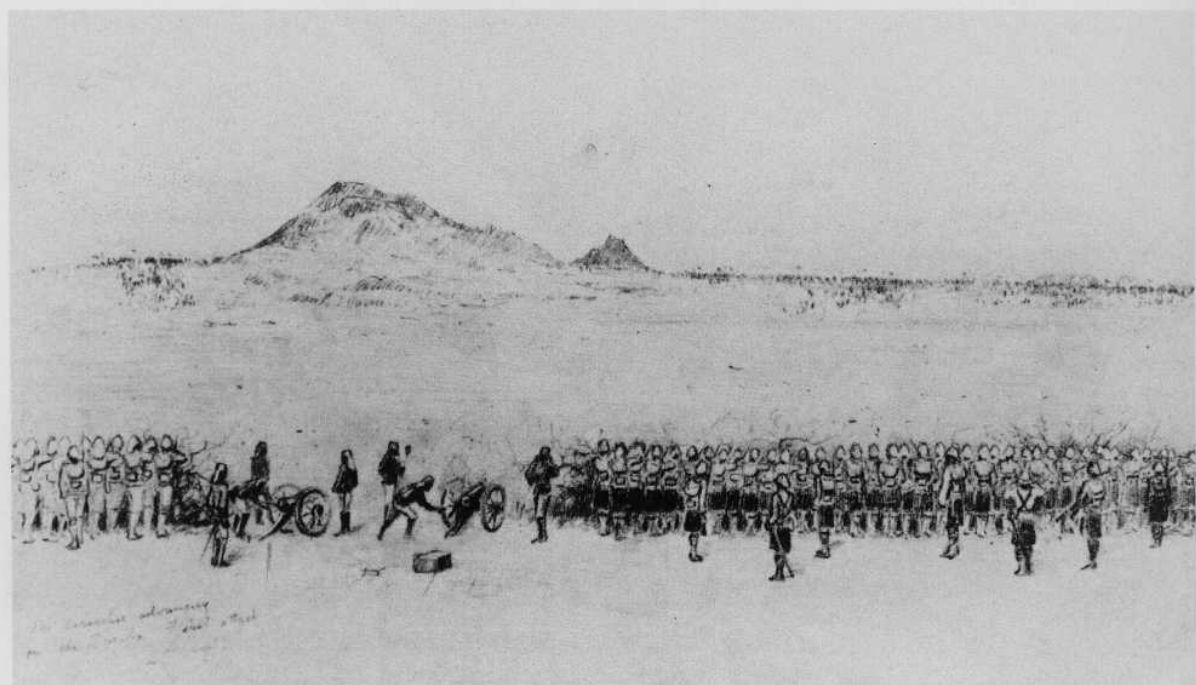
* *Artillery positions in gaps between the infantry around the perimeter of the zareba*

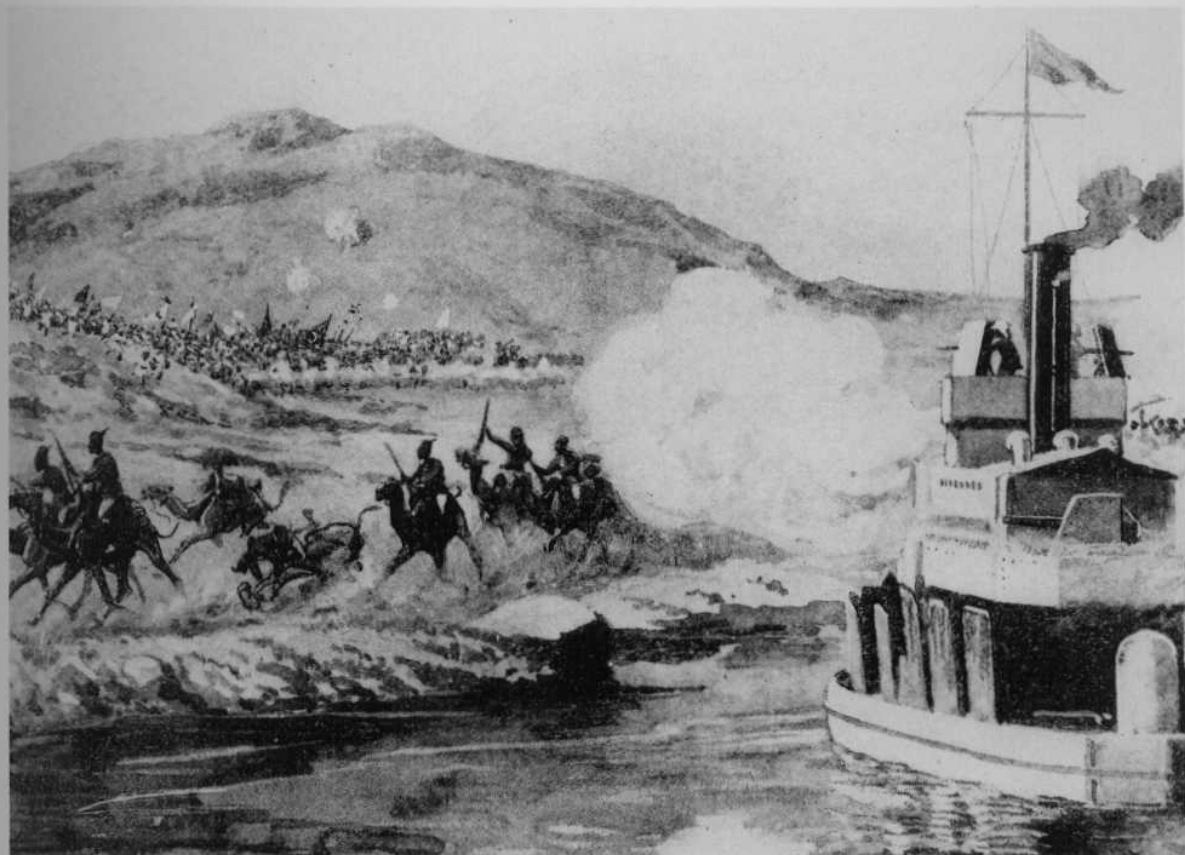




THE BATTLE OF OMDURMAN

The initial attack mounted by the Mahdists on the Anglo-Egyptian zareba, c.6.45, 2 September 1898





◀ *Top left: A mounted Amir leads his men into battle in the first Dervish charge at Omdurman.*

◀ *Left: The Mahdist's first attack on the zareba at Omdurman: facsimile of a sketch by Corporal Farquharson of the Seaforth Highlanders.*

▲ *The Egyptian Camel Corps, closely pursued by onrushing Dervishes on the Kerreri Hills at Omdurman, are saved by fire from the gunboat Melik on the river.*

had been disposed to protect the river flanks at once proceeded down stream to afford assistance to the somewhat hardly-pressed mounted troops, and coming within close range of the dervishes inflicted heavy loss on them, upwards of 450 men being killed in a comparatively circumscribed area. The Artillery and Maxims on the left face of the zareba also co-operated, and the enemy was forced to retire again under cover of the hills.'

The cavalry and the Camel Corps had taken up a position on the Kerreri Hills, to the right of the Anglo-Egyptian position, but became outflanked by vastly superior numbers of the enemy and were in great difficulty. The Camel Corps in particular proved to be quite unable to contend with the mobile enemy in rocky ground. The Dervishes pressed the attack, capturing two guns and nearly succeeding in isolating the Camel Corps. At a critical moment a gunboat appeared from upstream and, assisted by the fire of land artillery, drove the Ansar pursuers back with very heavy losses.

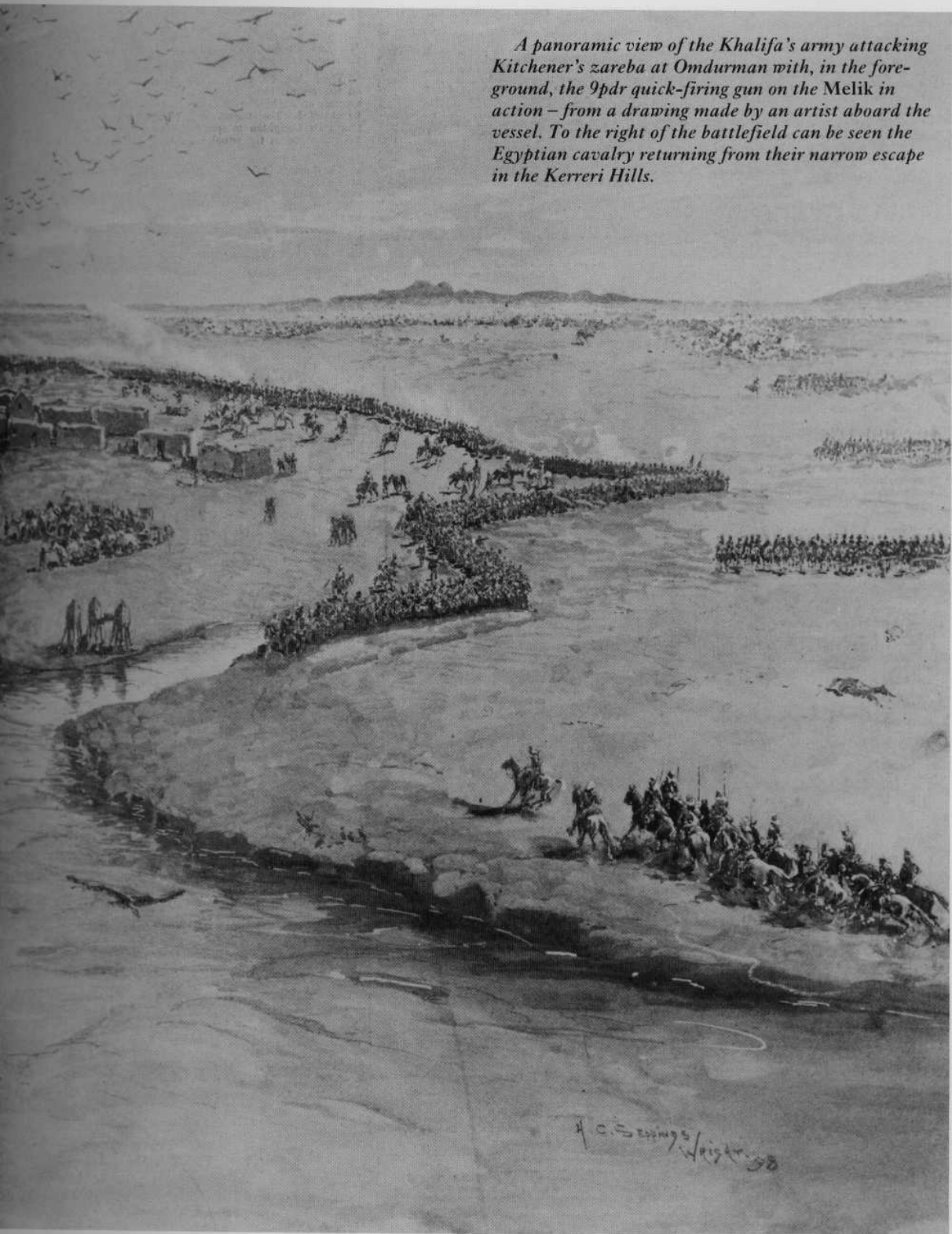
Gunboat Fire Rescues the Camel Corps

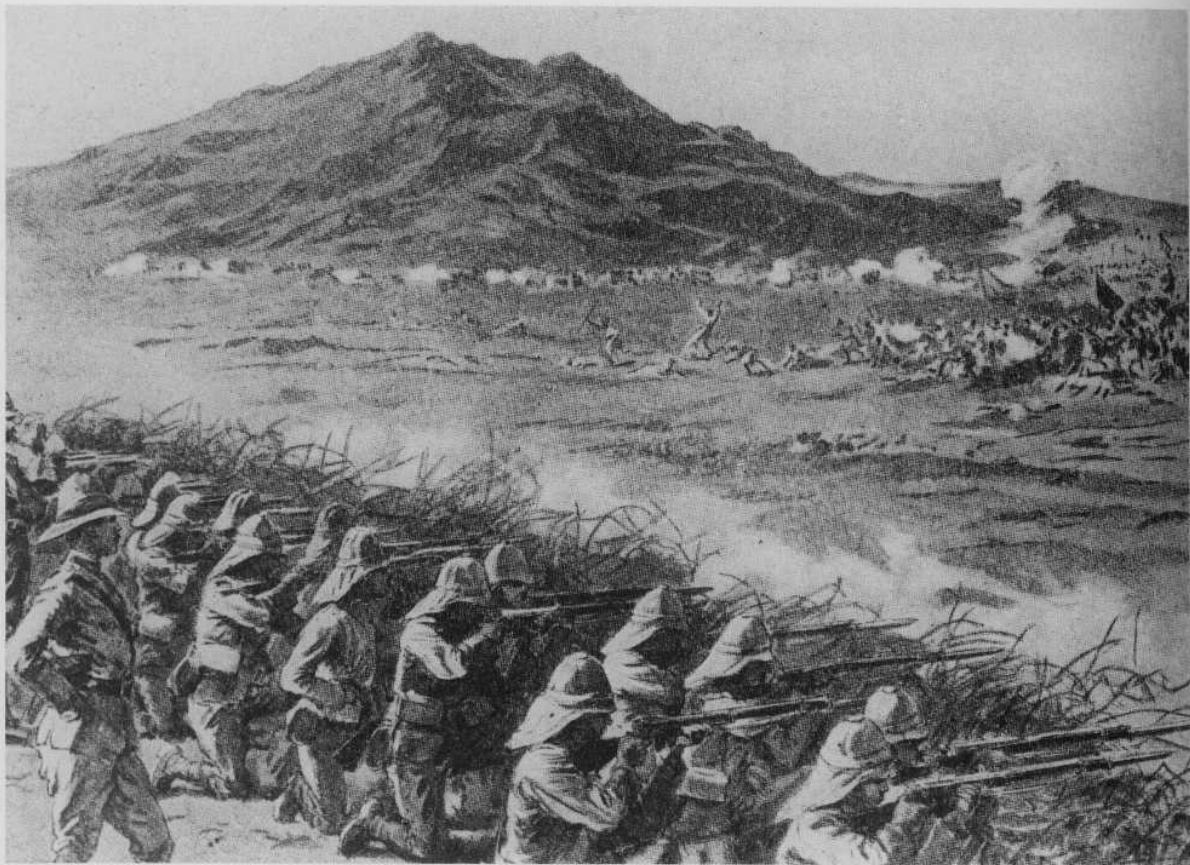
Kitchener takes up the story in his Despatch:

'Shortly after 8.0 a.m. the enemy's main attack was repulsed. At this period a large and compact body of dervishes was observed attempting to march round our right, and advancing with great rapidity they soon became engaged with our mounted troops on the Kerreri ridge. One of the gunboats which



A panoramic view of the Khalifa's army attacking Kitchener's zareba at Omdurman with, in the foreground, the 9pdr quick-firing gun on the Melik in action – from a drawing made by an artist aboard the vessel. To the right of the battlefield can be seen the Egyptian cavalry returning from their narrow escape in the Kerrerri Hills.





▲ *British infantry, probably the Lincolnshire Regiment, in action in the zareba at Omdurman.*

◀ *Major Williams' battery in action. (ASKB)*

▶ *Above right: The 21st Lancers, charging at Omdurman, hit the Dervish-held ravine. Men were thrown from their horses by the impact and had to fight for their lives on foot.*





The Charge of the 21st Lancers

From the Official Despatch:

'All attacks on our position having failed, and the enemy having retired out of range, I sent out the 21st Lancers to clear the ground on our left front and head off any retreating dervishes from the direction of Omdurman. After crossing the slopes of Jebel Surgham they came upon a body of dervishes concealed in a depression of the ground; these they gallantly charged, but finding, too late to withdraw, that a much larger body of the enemy lay hidden, the charge was pressed home through them, and, after rallying on the other side, they rode back, driving off the dervishes, and remaining in possession of the ground. Considerable loss was inflicted on the enemy; but I regret to say that here fell Lieutenant R. Grenfell (12th Lancers) and twenty men.'

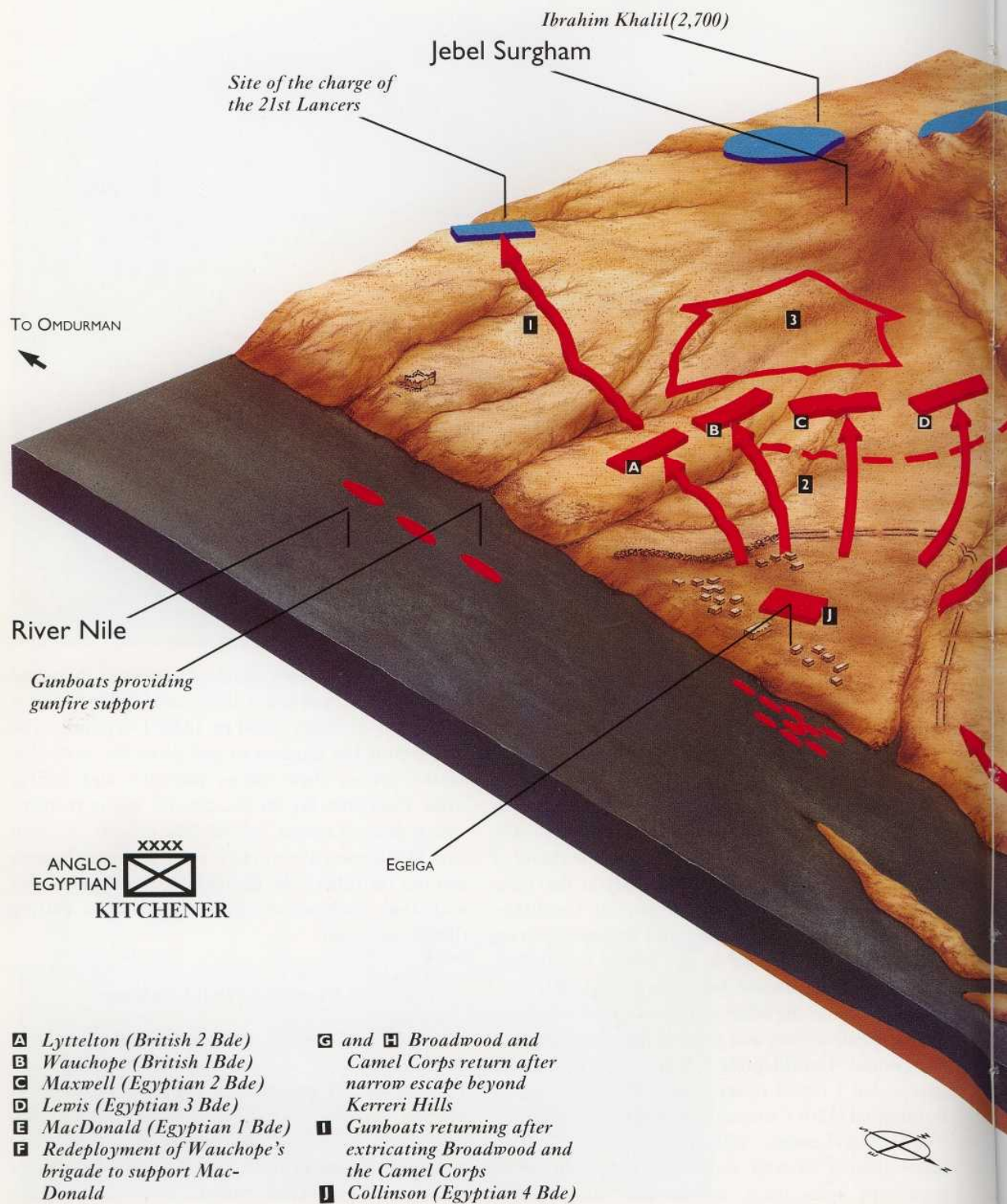
The 21st Lancers, with four squadrons in line, came upon a force of about 300 Dervishes on an apparently open plain, and swung into the first

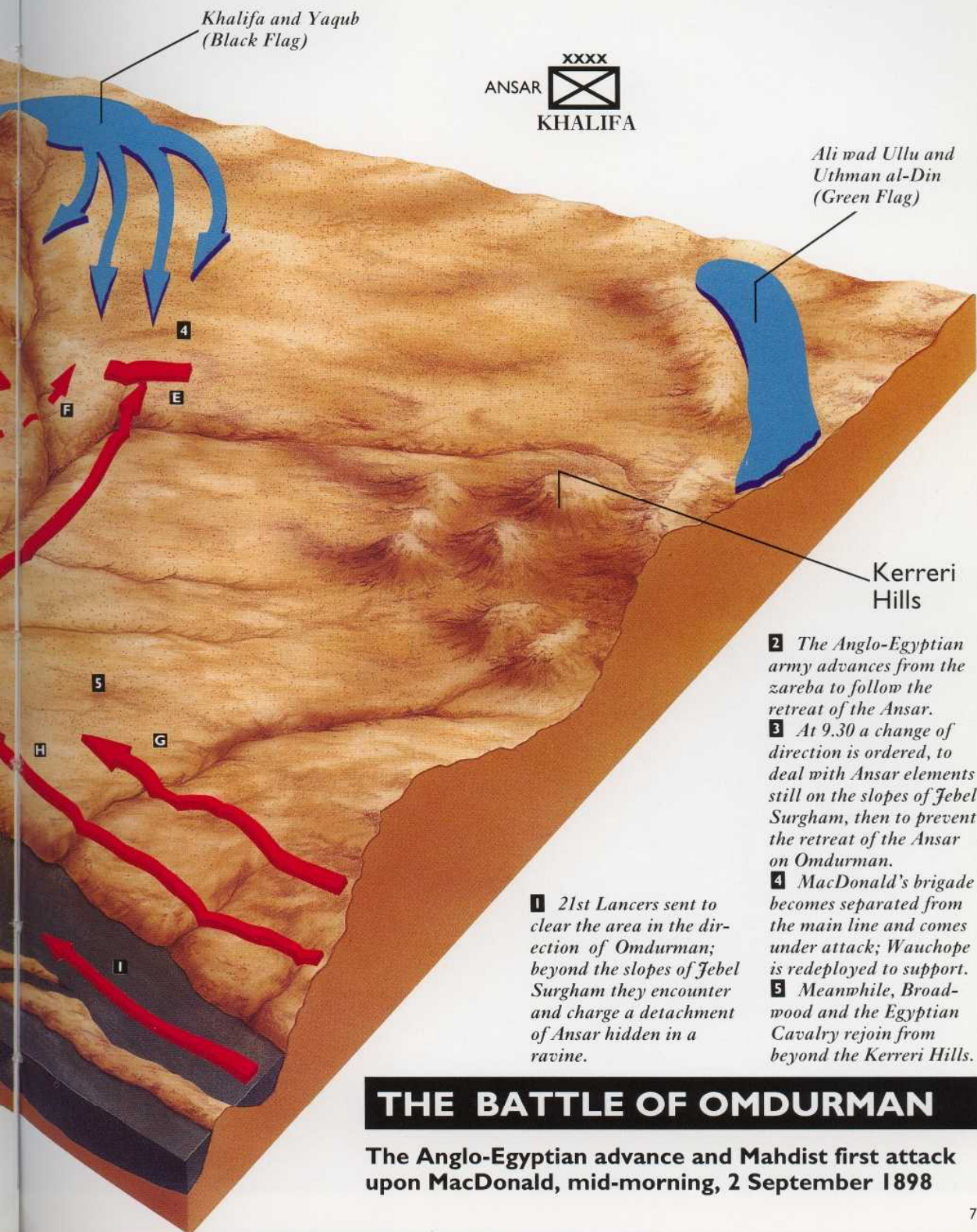
charge of their history. Suddenly, between them and the Dervishes yawned a deep ravine filled with a solid mass of about 3,000 or 4,000 Dervishes.. Too late to stop, the Lancers surged down the steep side of the ravine, their horses plunging and falling, while Dervishes lay on the ground trying to hamstring them. Leaving behind five officers, 65 men and 119 horses, the cavalry went straight through and out the other side, dismounted, and opened fire with their carbines at short range before getting themselves clear.

The Khalifa's Final Challenge

Continuing the story in his Official Despatch, Kitchener wrote:

'Meanwhile I had ordered the army to follow in échelon of brigades from the left. At 9.30 a.m. the front brigades having reached the sand ridge running from the west end of Jebel Surgham towards the river, a halt was ordered to enable the rear





THE BATTLE OF OMDURMAN

The Anglo-Egyptian advance and Mahdist first attack upon MacDonald, mid-morning, 2 September 1898



STANLEY BERKELEY

The charge of the 21st Lancers at Omdurman, by Stanley Berkeley. (ASKB)





brigades to get into position, and I then received information that the Khalifa was still present in force on the left slopes of Surgham; a change of front half-right of the three leading brigades was, therefore, ordered, and it was during this movement that MacDonald's brigade became hotly engaged, whilst taking up position on the right of the échelon.

'Learning from General Hunter, who was with MacDonald's brigade, that he might require support, I despatched Wauchope's brigade to reinforce him, and ordered the remaining brigades to make a further change half-right.'

It is possible that Kitchener was unaware that, on his right front, hidden behind Jebel Surgham, lay the Army of the Black Flag under the Khalifa himself, 17,000 strong.

Movement was slow as the 2nd British Brigade led along the River, the 1st British Brigade on their right rear; then came the Egyptian Brigades of Maxwell, Lewis and MacDonald, with Collinson in support. Wauchope's 1st British Brigade tried to overtake Lyttelton's 2nd British Brigade, with the

result that Maxwell's 2nd Egyptian Brigade was out-distanced. Maxwell tried to close the widening gap between him and Wauchope, while Lewis hurried to reduce the interval between his force and Maxwell's. This left MacDonald, having completed his move westward towards the flank, nearly a mile from Lewis.

The Official Despatch tells what happened next:

'No sooner had MacDonald repelled the dervish onslaught than the force, which had retired behind the Kerreri hills, emerged again into the plain and rapidly advanced to attack him, necessitating a further complete change of front of his brigade to the right. This movement was admirably executed, and now, supported by a portion of Wauchope's brigade on the right and by Lewis's brigade enfilading the attack on the left, he completely crushed this second most determined dervish charge.

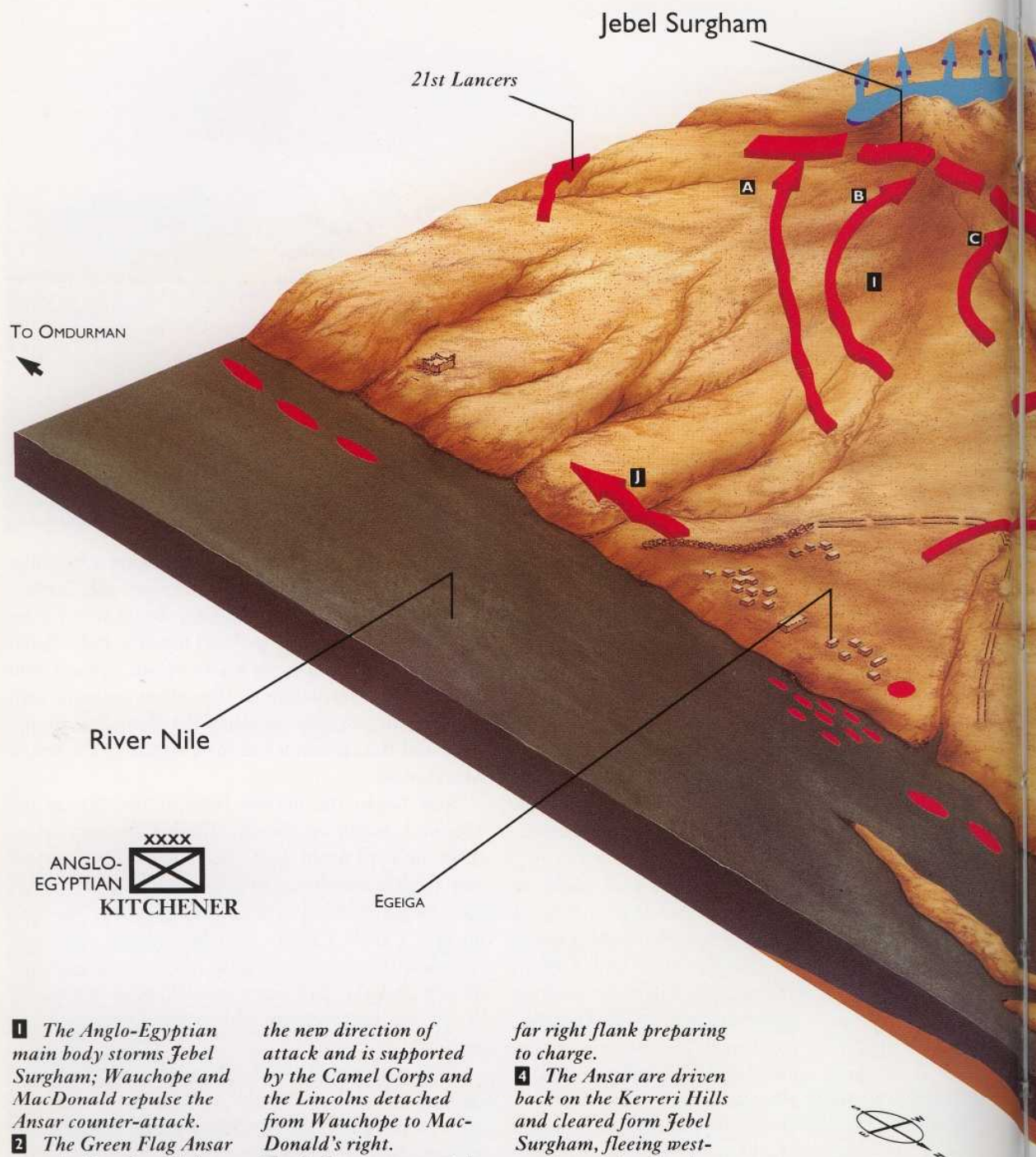
'Meantime Maxwell's and Lyttelton's brigades had been pushed on over the slopes of Jebel Surgham, and driving before them the Dervish forces under the Khalifa's son, Usman Shaikh al-Din, they established themselves in a position which

◀ *The Sirdar directs the attack at Omdurman (ASKB)*



► *Top: Drummer, 1 Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment. His only weapon is the 1895 Pattern Drummer's sword. Illustration by Pierre Turner.*

► *Below: Private, 1 Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders; he wears the Slade-Wallace equipment. Illustration by Pierre Turner.*



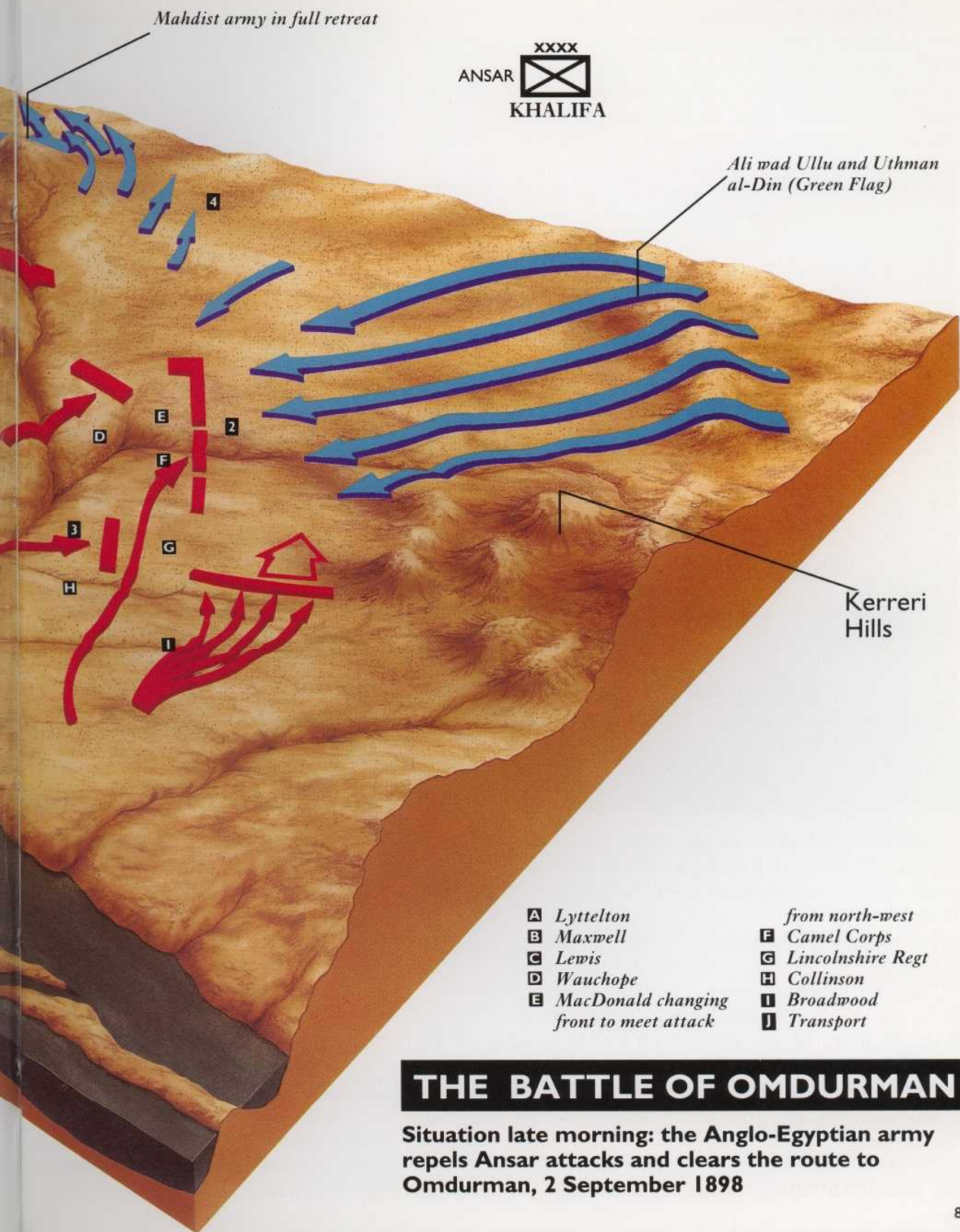
- 1** The Anglo-Egyptian main body storms Jebel Surgham; Wauchope and MacDonald repulse the Ansar counter-attack.
- 2** The Green Flag Ansar attacks MacDonald from the Kerreri Hills. MacDonald redeploys to meet

the new direction of attack and is supported by the Camel Corps and the Lincolns detached from Wauchope to MacDonald's right.

3 Collinson comes up in support of MacDonald with Broadwood on the

far right flank preparing to charge.

4 The Ansar are driven back on the Kerreri Hills and cleared from Jebel Surgham, fleeing westwards and thus leaving Kitchener's route to Omdurman clear.



THE BATTLE OF OMDURMAN

Situation late morning: the Anglo-Egyptian army repels Ansar attacks and clears the route to Omdurman, 2 September 1898





These three remarkable photographs show MacDonald's 1st Egyptian Brigade advancing, then forming up and going into action. In the picture at

top right, the Brigade resists the Dervish attack as the Green Flag Army rushes down from the Kerreri Hills. (ASKB)

cut off the retreat on Omdurman of the bulk of the Dervish army, who were soon seen streaming in a disorganised mass towards the high hills many miles to the west, closely pursued by the mounted troops, who cleared the right front and flanks of all hesitating and detached parties of the enemy.'

As Kitchener ordered Maxwell's Brigade to storm Jebel Surgham, with the 2nd British Brigade on his left, the Army of the Black Flag rushed out to launch a fierce attack MacDonald's and Lewis's Egyptian Brigades. Immediately, Kitchener sent the 1st British Brigade hurrying back to MacDonald's assistance. By these movements the Army was now made to face west, with its right flank drawn back to the river. The Black Flag Army attacking MacDonald were taken in flank by the fire of Lewis's Brigade, and also by MacDonald's Brigade, who had captured the Jebel, causing the Dervishes to waver and drift back.

Suddenly, from out of the blue, came a howling, screeching storm of 12,000 unbroken and fearless native warriors – the Green Flag Army, down from the Kerreri Hills – on to MacDonald's right flank. This forced him to form his Egyptian Brigade into an arrowhead formation as Wauchope came up with his Brigade, rapidly sending the Lincolns to the right and the remainder of the Brigade to the left of MacDonald.

Now began the fiercest fight of the day, as the Khalifa brought up his own Black Flag warriors to surge forward again with the Green Flag Army. It was a grave moment, because if MacDonald went, then Lewis on his left, with Collinson and the supporting Camel Corps, and the cavalry who had returned from a charge must all go too. The 2nd British and the 2nd Egyptian Brigades, advancing by the left up Surgham Hill, were too far away to help.

The attacked British, Egyptian and Sudanese infantry poured volley after volley into the assaulting Dervishes. Then MacDonald and his staunch infantry Brigade drove the Army of the Green Flag back towards the hills. A charge by the Egyptian cavalry transformed their retreat into a rout.



Now, in an imposing array of artillery, cavalry and camels, the whole of Kitchener's Army advanced westwards, driving the enemy before them, into the desert.

Let the triumphant Sirdar's Despatch round off the story:

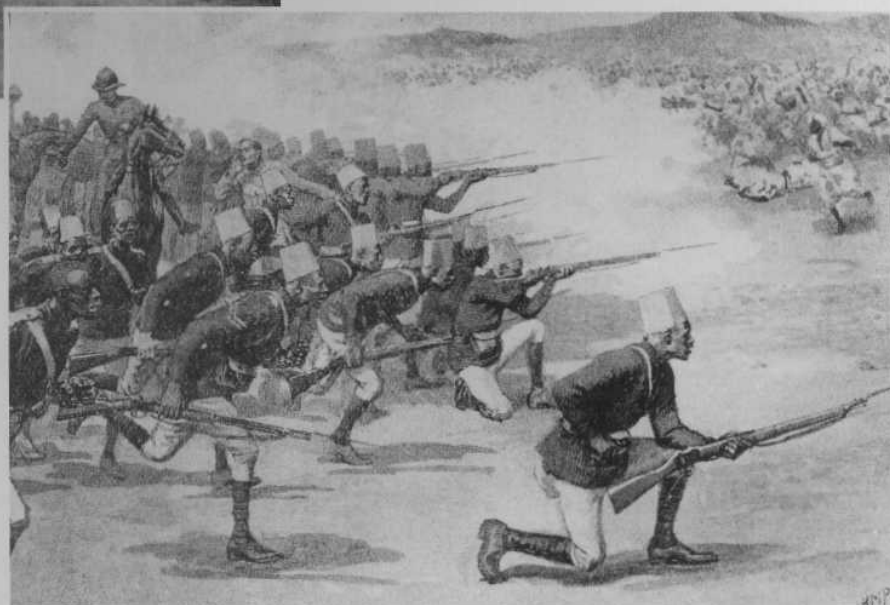
'The battle was now practically over, and Lyttelton's and Maxwell's brigades marched down to Khor Shambat, in the direction of Omdurman, which was reached at 12.30 p.m., and here the troops rested and watered. The remainder of Hunter's division and Wauchope's brigade reached the same place at 3 p.m.

'At 2 p.m. I advanced with Maxwell's brigade and the 32nd Field Battery through the suburbs of

Omdurman to the great wall of the Khalifa's enclosure, and, leaving two guns and three battalions to guard the approaches, the 13th Soudanese Battalion and four guns (32nd Field Battery) were pushed down by the north side of the wall to the river, and, accompanied by three gunboats which had been previously ordered to be ready for this movement, these troops penetrated the breaches in the wall made by the howitzers, marched south along the line of forts, and turning in at the main gateway found a straight road leading to the Khalifa's house and Mahdi's tomb; these were speedily occupied, the Khalifa having quitted the town only a short time before our entry, after a vain effort to collect his men for further resistance.



MacDonald's Egyptian Brigade in action at Omdurman. Above, a photograph showing the Brigade fully deployed and pouring fire at the Green Flag attackers (ASKB); right, as depicted in the pages of The Illustrated London News.



'The gunboats continued up the river clearing the streets of dervishes, and, having returned to the remainder of the brigade left at the corner of the wall, these were pushed forward, and occupied all the main portions of the town. Guards were at once mounted over the principal buildings and Khalifa's stores, and after visiting the prison and releasing the European prisoners, the troops bivouacked at 7 p.m. around the town, after a long and trying day, throughout which all ranks displayed qualities of high courage, discipline, and endurance.

'The gunboats and Egyptian Cavalry and Camel Corps at once started in pursuit south; but owing to the exhausted condition of the animals and the flooded state of the country, which prevented them from communicating with the gunboat carrying their forage and rations, they were reluctantly obliged to abandon the pursuit after following up the flying Khalifa for 30 miles through marshy ground. The gunboats continued south for 90 miles, but were unable to come in touch with the Khalifa, who left the river and fled westward towards Kordofan, followed by the armed friendly tribes who took up the pursuit on the return of the mounted troops.

'Large stores of ammunition, powder, some sixty guns of various sorts, besides vast quantities of rifles, swords, spears, banners, drums, and other war materials, were captured on the battle-field and in Omdurman.

'The result of this battle is the practical annihilation of the Khalifa's army, the consequent extinction of Mahdism in the Soudan, and the submission of the whole country formerly ruled under Egyptian authority. This has re-opened vast territories to the benefits of peace, civilisation, and good government.

'On 4th September the British and Egyptian flags were hoisted with due ceremony on the walls of the ruined Palace of Khartoum, close to the spot where General Gordon fell, and this event is looked upon by the rejoicing populations as marking the commencement of a new era of peace and prosperity for their unfortunate country.'

This Official Despatch of the Sirdar was forwarded to Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Grenfell, Commander-in-Chief in Egypt, who forwarded it to Britain, accompanied by a fulsome Despatch of his own:

'Headquarters, Cairo, September 16, 1898.

'Sir, - I. I have the honour to forward a despatch from Major-General Sir H. Kitchener, KCB, Sirdar, describing the later phases of the Soudan Campaign, and the final action on 2nd September.

'2. The Sirdar, in this despatch, recounts in brief, simple terms the events of the closing phase of one of the most successful campaigns ever conducted by a British General against a savage foe, resulting in the capture of Omdurman, the destruction of the

dervish power in the Soudan, and the reopening of the waterway to the Equatorial Provinces.

'3. The concentration of the army on the Atbara was carried out to the hour, and the arrangements for the transport of the force to the vicinity of the battle-field were made by the Sirdar and his staff with consummate ability. All difficulties were foreseen and provided for, and, from the start of the campaign to its close at Omdurman, operations have been conducted with a precision and completeness which have been beyond all praise; while the skill shown in the advance was equalled by the ability with which the army was commanded in the field.

'The Sirdar's admirable disposition of the force, the accurate fire of the artillery and Maxims, and the steady fire discipline of the infantry, assisted by the gunboats, enabled him to destroy his enemy at long range before the bulk of the British and Egyptian force came under any severe rifle fire, and to this cause may be attributed the comparatively small list of casualties. Never were greater results achieved at such a trifling cost.

'4. The heavy loss in killed and wounded in the 21st Lancers is to be deeply regretted. But the charge itself, against an overwhelming force of sword and spear men over difficult ground, and under unfavourable conditions, was worthy of the best traditions of British cavalry.

'5. As regards the force employed, I can say with truth that never, in the course of my service, have I seen a finer body of troops than the British contingent of cavalry, artillery, engineers, and infantry placed at the disposal of the Sirdar, as regards physique, smartness and soldierlike bearing. The appearance of the men speaks well for the present recruiting department, and was a source of pride to every Englishman who saw them.

'I am sending this despatch home by my *Aide-de-camp*, Lieutenant H. Grenfell, 1st Life Guards, who acted as Orderly Officer to Brigadier-General Honourable N.G. Lyttelton, C.B., commanding Second British Brigade in the Soudan. - I have, &c.,

'Francis Grenfell, Lieutenant-General, Commanding in Egypt.'

Estimated casualties on the Mahdist side were 10,000 killed, 15,000 wounded and 5,000 prisoners; many Mahdists died later from neglect of wounds.

Anglo-Egyptian Casualties at Omdurman

	Killed		Wounded	
	Officers	Men	Officers	Men
21st Lancers	1	20	4	46
1st Bn. Grenadier Guards	nil		1	4
1st Bn. 5th Northumberland Fusiliers	nil			2
1st Bn. 6th Royal Warwicks	1	1	1	6
1st Bn. 10th Lincolns			1	17
2nd Bn. 20th Lancashire Fus.				6
72nd Seaforth Highlanders			1	17
79th Cameron Highlanders		2	2	27
2nd Bn. Rifle Bde.				8
Egyptian Army	2	18	8	273
Totals: British Regiments	2	23	10	133
Total Casualties:	12	156		
Egyptian and Sudanese Regiments				
	2	18	8	273
Total Casualties:	20 Officers & 271 men			

GORDON AVENGED

Although the military strategy, tactics, and the GOC were British, it would be a distortion to claim the Battle of Omdurman to be a British victory, because the Egyptian and Sudanese battalions could be said to have borne the brunt of the fighting.

The initial Mahdist charge, directed principally at the British brigades, finished before Maxwell's Egyptian/Sudanese brigade. The main attack, first by the Black Flag then by the two Green Flags, was directed at the Egyptian battalions and particularly at MacDonald's Egyptian/Sudanese brigade. This formation was largely responsible for checking them, with superficial support from the Lincolns.

The Egyptian cavalry, the Camel Corps, the Horse Battery, and the 'Gallop Maxims' carried out all the reconnaissance, and were most effective

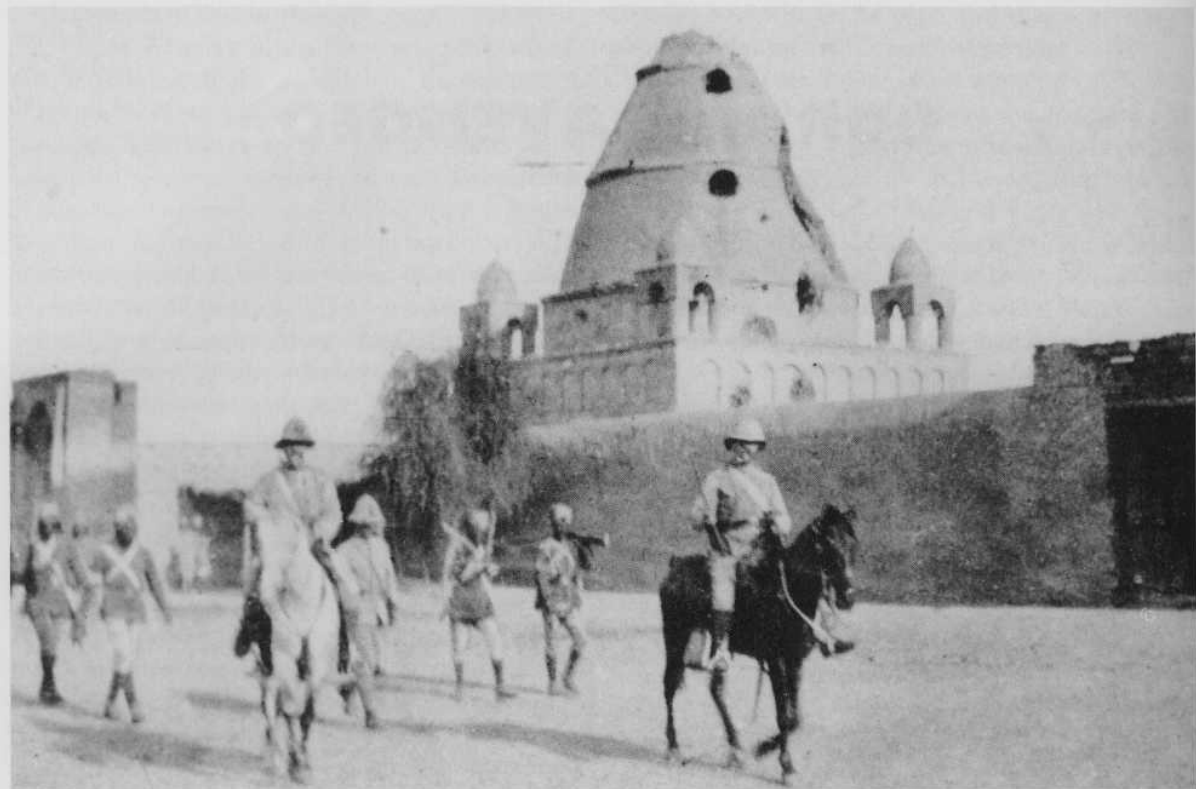
at Omdurman in 'soaking-off' the forces of Shaikh al-Din and Ali wad Ullu. Admittedly, the slower-moving Camel Corps nearly came to grief in the face of the Ansar's superior mobility, and it is not unreasonable to say that the entire mounted arm might have been overwhelmed but for the intervention of the gunboats. However, at the conclusion of the battle the Egyptian cavalry and Camel Corps were still able to attempt the pursuit of the fleeing Khalifa.

This pursuit, or the prevention of the Khalifa's escape, was a role allocated to the 21st Lancers, but their unnecessary charge rendered them unfit for any further operations on the day. Not coming out from Cairo until the month before the battle, the 21st Lancers would appear to have been a totally superfluous unit.

It has been claimed, with hindsight (by author A. B. Theobald in *The Mahadiya*, published in London in 1951), that: 'Kitchener's line of defence of

▼ *The Guards enter the city of Omdurman after the battle. (ASKB)*





the Egeiga position was risky; his order to Broadwood shortsighted; his advance to Omdurman premature; his line of march too widespread; and his appreciation of MacDonald's position too slow.'

However, Kitchener's appreciation of the overwhelming firepower at his disposal justified his tactics of forming his regiments in a close-order line formation with front rank kneeling, rear rank standing, leading to a clinical massacre of opponents who obligingly hurried forward into the killing zone. It has been truthfully said that the British infantryman who fought at Waterloo in 1815 would have felt perfectly at home at Omdurman.

The Khalifa's Military Blunders

Even with hindsight, it is academic to question the Sirdar's tactics because, by his gravest error of underestimating the modern application of firepower, the Khalifa ensured the success of Kitchener's plan. The Mahdist leader's sad underrating of the military technology of the day can be said to be understandable in the light of his territorial remoteness, his personal lack of action since 1885, and his lack of tried and experienced subordinate commanders.

The Khalifa's errors and omissions began long before the Battle of Omdurman, and were many and varied. His victories over the Abyssinians were Pyrrhic, his unsupported abortive invasion of Egypt in 1889 cost an outstanding leader and many men besides tribal support, leaving minor garrisons along the Nile was a useless and unnecessary dissipation of strength, and, finally, he should never have permitted the systematic build-up of Kitchener's lines of supply via the railway, without conducting harassing operations against them.

He could have withdrawn to his homeland in the west, thus making Kitchener come to him over a parched waste, away from the Nile and at the end of an almost impossible line of supply. However, this would have meant abandoning the city of Omdurman, his capital.

Fortifying and holding the Shabluka Gorge, midway between Metammeh and Omdurman, where the Nile narrowed to only 100 yards and its torrent became so strong as to almost halt the gunboats, would have made it very difficult to force the gorge. In fact, the Khalifa began fortifying and arming this area, but abandoned the idea.

He could have refused to attack the Anglo-Egyptian Army in their strong defensive position, and awaited Kitchener's enforced march out from the zareba towards Omdurman. With his large force posted on the Kerreri Hills and the opposite heights of Jebel Surgham, he could have made a massive pincer assault on Kitchener's column.

However, having decided upon an all-out assault, the Khalifa could have done it in the manner most dreaded by Kitchener – by night. His leading generals, Ibrahim Khalil, Osman Azrak, and Osman Digna all pressed for an attack under cover of darkness, the first-named having personally scouted the ground. Instead, the Khalifa listened to the advice of his son, the Shaikh al-Din, who claimed that a night attack would not allow his men to fight at best advantage.

And the Result?

The best that can be said is that the Ansar fought and died well. Mowed down by a terrifying array of firepower, they pressed forward in an undaunted and determined manner over the heaped bodies of their comrades until there were none left to take the fight any further.

On 4 September 1898, two days after the Battle of Omdurman, representatives of every Regiment and Corps paraded on the left bank of the Blue Nile, in front of the ruins of Gordon's Palace. The national Anthems of Britain and Egypt were played by Regimental bands, a 21-gun salute was fired, and a Religious Service held, ending with Gordon's favourite hymn, 'Abide With Me'.

Mopping-Up Operations after Omdurman

The Campaign over, British troops left the Sudan; the 21st Lancers and the Grenadier Guards returning home to march through streets lined by cheering crowds.

◀ *Top: The Mahdi's Tomb in Omdurman, showing the effect upon it of lyddite shells. (ASKB)*

◀ *Below left: A bird's-eye view of the city of Omdurman and the surrounding country.*

The Egyptian Army continued the hunt for the Khalifa and his remaining Amirs, including Ahmed Fedil, who was at Gedaref with 6,000 men at the time of Omdurman. In an effort to rejoin the Khalifa he attempted to cross the Nile, leaving a garrison at Gedaref, which was promptly attacked from Kassala by Lieutenant Colonel Parsons and his 1,350 men.

On 7 September, Parsons marched out at the head of the 16th Egyptian Battalion, the Kassala Irregular Battalion, a small Camel Corps and about 370 Arab Irregulars. Taking six days to cross the swollen Atbara river in wood and canvas boats, they came upon about 3,500 Dervishes positioned on a ridge. After beating-off their attack and inflicting several hundred casualties for the loss of 100 men, Parson's force moved into Gedaref, where he was besieged by the returning Fedil.

General Rundle, with 1,100 reinforcements, arrived on 22 October and Fedil's force melted away in the direction of Rosaires on the Nile. Kitchener sent Colonel Lewis in the gunboat *Nazir* with Egyptian troops, who caught Fedil in the course of crossing the river on Christmas Day 1898. Next day a weakened 10th Sudanese Battalion attacked the enemy, well entrenched on the grassy slopes of an island, losing nine officers and 151 men in their bayonet charge but taking the position. The Dervishes suffered some 2,000 casualties and the remainder surrendered later to a gunboat on the river. Fedil himself escaped and managed to join the Khalifa in Kordofan.

The Hunt for the Khalifa

Immediately after the fall of Omdurman a flying column led by Slatin Pasha, and two gunboats, set off in pursuit of the Khalifa, but had to abandon the pursuit. Later it was learned that the fugitives were heading for the interior of Kordofan. For more than a year the Khalifa, Osman Digna, Shaikh al-Din, ali wad Ullu and a small band of loyal followers made their way through south-west Sudan, foraging for food, attacked by local tribes, and with men steadily deserting.

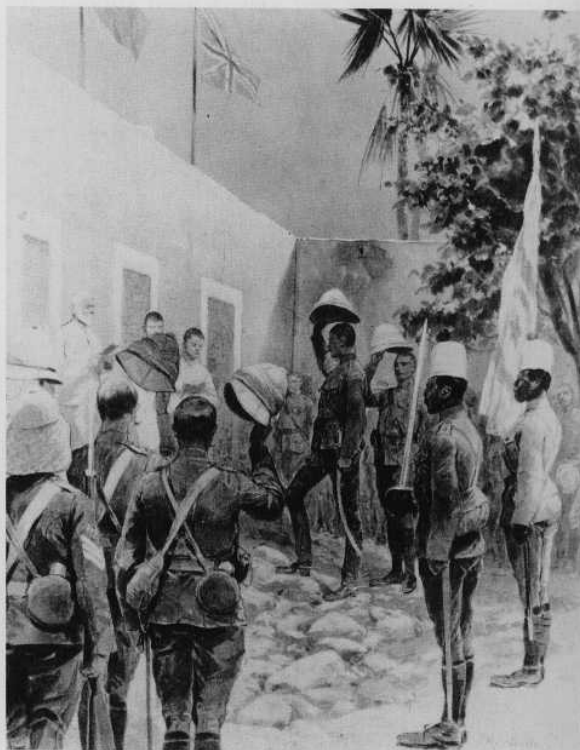
After a strong field force under Kitchener's brother had been forced to give up the chase through lack of water, a much stronger expedition

numbering about 3,700 men, led by colonel Wingate, discovered and defeated Ahmed Fedil's force in November 1899. With his force and Fedil's survivors, the Khalifa decided to make a stand at the wells of Um Dibaykarat; witnessing the carnage of his army, the Khalifa and his Amirs sat on prayer mats facing Mecca and awaited the storm of bullets which destroyed them. Only Osman Digna escaped, to be captured a month or so later. Confined in Egyptian prisons, he survived until 1924. Hundreds of prisoners died of sickness while held in Rosetta Prison, among them Shaikh al-Din, who succumbed to gangrene of a wound received at Um Dibaykarat.

British Battle Honours for the Campaign

The Battle Honour *KHARTOUM 1898*, in recognition of the services rendered by the Army commanded by Sir Herbert Kitchener in the Campaign of 1898, was granted to:

The 21st Lancers	The Grenadier Guards
The Northumberland Fusiliers	The Royal Warwickshire Regiment
The Lincolnshire Regiment	The Lancashire Fusiliers
The Seaforth Highlanders	The Cameron Highlanders

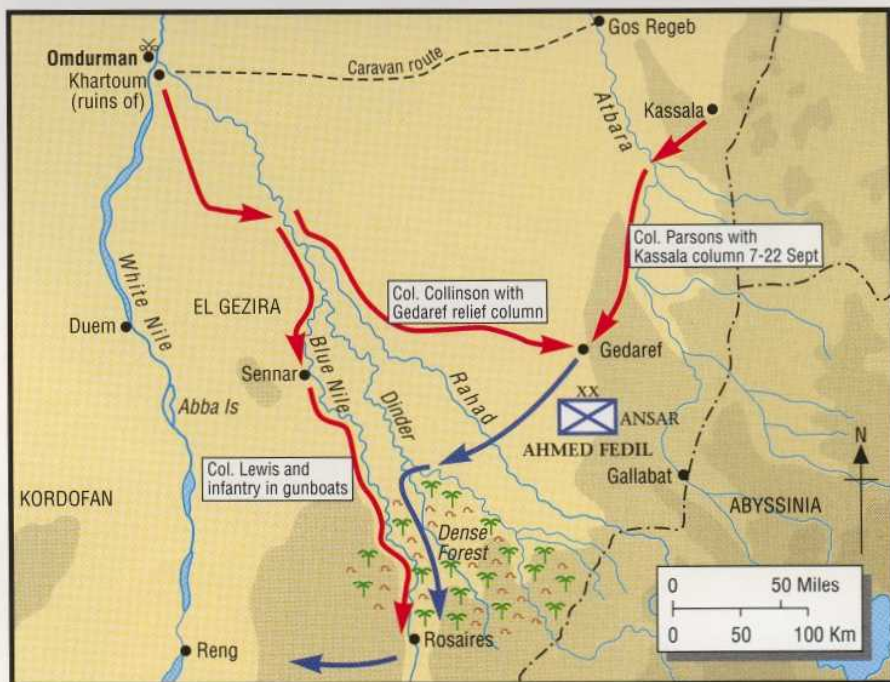




▲ *The death of the Khalifa as illustrated by Andrew Carrick Gow (ASKB)*

◀ *Gordon avenged. The British and Egyptian flags are hoisted over the Palace as the Sirdar and his staff pay their respects. The windows were bricked up by Gordon as part of his defences.*

Mopping-up Operations, Sept to Dec 1898



THE BATTLEFIELD TODAY

After nearly a century, what remains? There is still a rolling plain of barren sand, striped with the occasional watercourse, dotted with mimosa-clumps and scattered rocky outcrops, basically flat and featureless, and awe-inspiring in its desolation. Now a designated defence area, its military installations bar it from tourists or inquisitive military historians. By the River Nile, near Egeiga, where Kitchener had his zareba, there is a military airfield. The field over which the Black Flag attacked bears an antiquated AA Position, and Jebel Surgham has a Russian-built radar installation on it. This solitary elevation rears abruptly from the desert about three-quarters of a

mile from the Nile, halfway between the Kerreri Hills and Omdurman city. From the Jebel a sandy ridge runs northwest into the desert, concealing from onlookers on the Kerreri Hills the large area of ground between Jebel Surgham and Omdurman. Keying it all in, the broad and grey Nile unrolls majestically on the left of the panorama.

It cannot be considered a place of pilgrimage, other than for those who might read books such as this, although Kitchener and Khalifa would recognise it immediately.

(The author is indebted to Douglas Johnson for this information.)



◀ *Epilogue: Kitchener's force arrives to confront the French at Fashoda, some 400 miles south of Omdurman, where Major Marchand's expeditionary force had penetrated dangerously near to the head waters of the Nile. As a result, the spheres of influence of the two powers were defined and agreed – narrowly averting war.*

CHRONOLOGY

- 1885
26 January Fall of Khartoum. Gordon killed
 Mahdists take Kassala and Sennar
31 December Battle of Ginnis
 1887 Mahdist War with Abyssinia begins
 1888
20 December Grenfell defeats Osman Digna at Gamaiza and ends siege of Suakim
 1889 Famine throughout year
July Mahdist Invasion of Egypt
3 August Mahdists defeated at Battle of Toski
 1891
19 February Egyptian Forces defeat Mahdists at Tokar
 Revolt against Khalifa crushed
 1892
February Grenfell resigns as Sirdar
March Kitchener appointed Sirdar
 1893
December Italians defeat Mahdist force under Ahmad wad-Ali at Agordat
 1894
July Italians capture Kassala
 1895 Slatin Pasha escapes from Khalifa
 1896
1 March Abyssinians defeat Italians at Adowa
15 Hunter occupies Akasha
7 June Battle of Firket
19 September River bombardment of Hafir
23 Anglo/Egyptian Army enters Dongola
 1897
1 January First sleepers laid for railway from Wadi Halfa to Abu Hamed
June Khalifa sends Mahmud and Army of the West to Metammeh
7 August Hunter's Force storms Abu Hamed
21 Mahdists abandon Berber after garrison mutiny
31 Kitchener occupies Berber
31 October Railway reaches Abu Hamed
25 December Kassala handed over to Egyptian Army by Italians
31 Sirdar asks for reinforcements of British troops
 1898
26 February British Brigade starts for front from Abu Dis
3 March British Brigade reaches Dibeika, beyond Berber
15 Sirdar leaves Berber
16 Concentration at Kenur
20 Army moves up the Atbara
21 First contact with Dervish cavalry
27 Shendi raided and destroyed
30 General Hunter reconnoitres Mahmud's zareba
4 April Second reconnaissance: cavalry action before Mahmud's zareba
8 Battle of the Atbara
11 Sirdar's triumphal entry into Berber
18 Railhead reaches Abeidieh: construction of new gunboats begun
Middle June Railhead reaches Fort Atbara
Early July Lewis's Brigade leaves Atbara for south
3-17 August Second British brigade arrives at Atbara
13 Sirdar leaves Atbara for front
18 Last troops leave Atbara
28 Final concentration at Jebel Royan
29 March from Jebel Royan to Wady Abid (eight miles)
30 March from Wady el Abid to Sayal (ten miles)
31 March from Sayal to Sururab (eight miles)
31 Kerreri reconnoitred and shelled
1 September March to Egeiga (six miles); Omdurman reconnoitred and forts silenced
2 Battle and capture of Omdurman
4 Funeral of Gordon
9 Sirdar starts for Fashoda
22 Battle of Gedaref
24 Sirdar returns from Fashoda

A GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

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WARGAMING THE CAMPAIGNS OF 1896-8 IN THE SUDAN

It has to be admitted that the major battles of this campaign – Firket, Abu Hamed, the Atbara and Omdurman – do not readily lend themselves to satisfactory wargaming, being too one-sided through their vast disparities in military technology. However, there are numerous compelling alternatives to occupy British and Egyptian troops, camels and river-steamers against the warriors of the Muluazamiya and Jihadiyya under their vari-hued standards.

The frontier fights on the southern border of Egypt, after Ginnis in 1885 and up to the conquest of Dongola, offer a wide variety of engagements, such as cavalry reconnaissances or attacks – by both sides – on occupied villages, or on blockhouses occupied by Egyptian troops. The area around Suakim was dotted with redoubts, forts and blockhouses, and these mini-actions can be arranged to involve a few companies, up to a battalion. There were numerous Mahdist attacks on straggling columns and isolated bodies, with the Ansar endeavouring to hit the Anglo-Egyptian army before it was fully concentrated.

This type of wargaming requires rules tailored to the cardinal aspects of warfare between trained and well-armed forces and fanatical, ill-armed and untrained natural warriors fighting on their own familiar terrain, with emphasis placed upon balancing the numerical superiority of the latter against the superior military technology of the much smaller force. Attempted in a spirit of historical authenticity, the devastating effects of the superior weaponry must be reflected and made possible in practice within the scope of the rules. It might not be enjoyable for the wargamer commanding the native foe to take three times as many casualties as his opponent, but he has to accept that it is balanced by being able to place a force three times as large as his enemy upon the table. In this way ‘balanced wargaming’ is achieved, and enjoyable games are played using completely different types of armies.

The end result of combat, throughout the ages, be it through fire-fights or hand-to-hand combat, is to superimpose your will upon the enemy and sap his ability to resist. The dictionary defines it as ‘the mental attitude or bearing of a person or group as regards confidence, discipline etc.’, and the single word that covers this is **MORALE** – that nebulous quality which, in real life, determines whether a man or a regiment stands firm when others around them are breaking. And, in our world of wargaming, that factor, grafted upon our inanimate armies by means of rules and their effects, gives smaller and more disciplined forces the ability to withstand the onslaughts of enemies far more numerous than themselves. Unlike humans, our little model soldiers do not possess this quality, which has to be bestowed upon them through the rules controlling the game.

In some varieties of Colonial warfare, the trained soldier’s higher morale, driven into him by discipline and drill, allied to his superior weaponry, is adequately countered by the native enemy displaying fanatical – sometimes almost incredible – courage when defending his homeland or religion. This situation was persistently revealed during the Dongola and Omdurman campaigns (and indeed throughout all the campaigns fought in the Sudan from 1884 onwards) when the warriors of the Ansar persisted in courageous but suicidal attacks. When wargaming these actions, the rules must make provision for uncontrolled charges by the native armies, thus simulating the innate impetuosity that caused them to hurl themselves into wild attacks at tactically unsound moments and without being ordered to do so. At Omdurman, although the major assaults were ordered and controlled by their leaders, disaster was frequently compounded by the courageous warriors persistently pressing forward when all hope of success had long since gone, and their leaders would no doubt have preferred them to withdraw and regroup.

There were occasions, undoubtedly, when the death of a leader, seen by all, caused the morale of a group to plummet so that they broke and fled. Such eventualities must be considered when formulating rules for colonial warfare.

At the battles of the Atbara and Omdurman, the wargaming simulation of numerical balance, to ensure that both sides have a reasonable chance of winning, is difficult if not impossible. This is because the overwhelming technological superiority of Kitchener's smaller force is immensely difficult to counter through conventional rule-plays such as natives being given a longer move-distance than the British/Egyptians, or 'weighted' values being given to natives in hand-to-hand fighting (*mêlées*) to represent their natural fanaticism, ferocity and physical attributes. So far as the latter aspect is concerned, whatever superior value is bestowed upon them in *mêlées* is more than offset by the volume of fire they must first surmount before even making contact with the formed ranks of disciplined soldiers.

There was but one instance at Omdurman where this situation did not prevail – the charge of the 21st Lancers into unexpected numbers of warriors hidden in a gully, who more than held their own in the close-quarters combat that ensued.

In most colonial wars the native foes hated the formed cavalry sent against them, particularly the lancers. However, it is clear from accounts of Anglo/Egyptian cavalry charges in the campaigns of 1884 onwards, and particularly of the 21st Lancers' charge at Omdurman, that the Ansar had every confidence in their ability to handle the horsemen, so that the cavalry (and their horses) took relatively heavy casualties when engaging the natives.

Rules compiled to control this campaign should give the Ansar warriors parity with the cavalry at hand-to-hand fighting.

The almost contemptuous bravery shown by the native warriors at Omdurman could give an impression of them taking artillery and machine-gun fire in their stride. However, it cannot be overlooked that the deadly explosive missiles of the noisy belching guns and the cascades of bullets thrown by Kitchener's Maxims represented something completely alien to them.

Rules should reflect this by causing natives such fire perhaps to be diverted, to 'angle' the collective movement away from the bursting m and even forcing them to break more easily than they would under musketry fire.

The Ansar had experienced the possibly sp fire of Gatlings, Gardners, and Nordenfelt machine guns at earlier stages in the Sudan campaign. The Maxim guns with which Kitchener's army was equipped were a different story, being far more reliable and rapid in their rate of fire. Rules governing their operation should include a proviso that they force the advancing enemy to come forward more slowly, or would against a torrential monsoon – at a slower, more hesitant rate. That semi-comic rule beloved of Colonial wargamers, of throwing a dice each time for each Gatling to see if it has jammed, can be discarded aside when handling the Maxim gun.

Having said that native warriors should be able to move more easily in the face of artillery and machine-gun fire, the wargamer has to consider that the Ansar certainly at Omdurman, tended *not* to break and stop in their stride only when dead or severely wounded to move. So handle this aspect of the rules with a certain degree of circumspection.

It is convenient to equate a machine-gun with the firepower of an infantry battalion on the wargaming table. This is not entirely accurate from the point of view of weight of fire, but includes the rapid destroying effect of the relentless rain of bullets.

When attempting Colonial wargames, it is remembered that not all native foes were untrained and undisciplined. Some, such as the Zulu and other martial races who moved collectively in regular order under the control of revered and respected leaders. The Ansar were certainly of that type. This is indicated by 'Ismat Hasan Zulfo in his book *Karai*, the Sudanese account of the Battle of Omdurman, when he describes in detail the advances of the various coloured Standards.

By reflecting that aspect in your rules, you are honouring a brave foe who persistently pressed forward over heaps of dead comrades. It has been said 'were they Madmen? Heroes? Fanatics?'. That is a choice, but ensure that your rules include factors reflecting this aspect.

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CAMPAIGN

OMDURMAN 1898



British Camel Corps in the area of Suarda, 130 miles south of Wadi Halfa, the area to which the Mahdists retreated on 3 August 1889 after being defeated by the Egyptian Army at Toski.

OMDURMAN 1898

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