CHAPTER SIX

The Gordon relief expedition

From the outset of Gordon’s mission doubts existed about whether it was an advisory or an executive role, about what Gordon could accomplish once appointed governor-general of the Sudan and about what would happen if his life became endangered. Whatever Gordon’s motives, he felt compelled to remain in Khartoum and the Government dared not order him to withdraw. As the Mahdist siege tightened, so the question of whether to relieve Gordon, an ‘icon of his age’, became a matter of press, parliamentary and cabinet debate. Gladstone still opposed any ‘forward’ policy from Egypt, described the Sudanese as ‘a people struggling to be free and they are struggling rightly to be free’, and dreaded the risks, costs and long-term implications of a relief expedition. Only at the beginning of August 1884 did he relent (primarily to avert resignations from his cabinet) and approve the moving of a vote of credit for a relief mission. Thereafter the Government endorsed the plans of Wolseley and his Red River veterans for an expedition up the Nile (1,650 miles) as a purportedly less expensive, less risky and less difficult option than constructing a railway from Suakin to Berber (over 280 miles), with another 200 miles upstream to Khartoum.

The ensuing expedition involved the despatch of 9,000 men and 40,000 tons of stores and munitions up the Nile. On 9 September Wolseley arrived in Cairo with plans to send his soldiers by train and steamer to Wadi Halfa, then south of the second cataract by specially designed whale-boats. By Christmas he had sufficient forces at Korti to send a desert column mounted on camels and horses across the Bayuda Desert and a river column in 200 whale-boats, supported by mounted troops, up the Nile. Despite failing to relieve Gordon, who was killed in the storming of Khartoum (26 January 1885), Wolseley’s forces remained in the Sudan until mid-summer, while Graham commanded another 13,000 soldiers in operations near Suakin (March–May 1885). After the withdrawal of both forces, residual units remained on the
Egyptian–Sudanese border, where they periodically engaged the Mahdists, notably at the battle of Ginnis (30 December 1885).

The protracted hostilities afforded many opportunities for letter-writing for the large number of soldiers involved. A ‘Camel Grenadier’ even wrote while riding on top of his camel as the ‘difficult feat’ prevented ‘drowsiness’ and distracted attention from saddle sores! Some
doubted that letters would evade the attacks on the mails,\(^6\) while Lieutenant-Colonel Philip H. Eyre [1/South Staffordshires], and perhaps others, saw little point in sending informative letters as ‘crowds’ of correspondents were present ‘and no doubt every move is reported’.\(^7\) Difficulties, though, bedevilled the despatch of all news from the front and so letters, if not too tardy, were generally welcome [and much more extensively reported than the seven cited by Emery].\(^8\)

The expeditionary force, including a Naval Brigade, travelled slowly up the Nile by rail and Thomas Cook steamers, either carried or towed by the latter, covering the 793 miles to Wadi Halfa in about three weeks. Soldiers had ample time to gaze at the fertile country alongside the river (and the barren rock and sand hills between Shellal and Wadi Halfa), to barter with villagers and Greek traders for supplements to their diet of hard biscuits and preserved meat, and to write diaries and letters [some – to girls in Cairo – which were clearly not for publication].\(^9\) They watched out for crocodiles, marvelled at the temples and ancient ruins, and some, like Telegrapher H. Emmerson, described the beauty of the Nile sunsets: ‘As the sun dies away behind the yellow sand hills, the sky seems broken up into a veritable rainbow, the colours blending together splendidly, and the effect, once seen, remains vividly impressed on anyone for a lifetime.’\(^10\)

Wadi Halfa, as Emmerson observed, became ‘the headquarters of the Ordnance and Commissariat, and all stores for the front are made up and despatched from here’,\(^11\) but the railway track and rolling stock along the 33 miles to Sarras were not fully serviceable until mid-November [when two trains completed the journey on a daily basis]. This slowed all movement, requiring boats to be hauled through the second cataract or carried round the rapids. The delays and damage suffered by so many boats [by 22 November sappers had overhauled 450 whalers\(^12\)] meant that the advance upstream did not commence until 2 November.

Soldiers were delighted to leave Sarras – ‘an awful place’ where, as a Royal West Kent officer recalled, ‘the duststorms and heat were fearful’.\(^13\) They travelled in 30-foot whalers, each of which could carry ten fully equipped soldiers and a crew of two, later reduced to eight soldiers and a Canadian voyageur.\(^14\) Each boat carried a prodigious weight in stores and rations – ‘a little under 7,000 lbs.’ in the first sapper boats to leave Sarras; ‘about two tons of provisions, besides personal baggage’ in boat No. 785 carrying Lance-Corporal W. Cook [2/Essex]; and ‘over 700 cases of provisions, varying in weight from 10 to 64 lbs’, besides rations for fifteen days, in a West Kent boat. The West Kent officer added: ‘The boat’s gunwale when loaded is within a foot – in some cases less – of [sic] the water.’\(^15\)
The boats travelled in groups of 4–5 and had to be hauled over various rapids (particularly the 7 major and many minor obstacles between the second and third cataracts). Cook recalled:

Whenever we came to the cataracts we had to unload our boats and carry the provisions about a mile, and sometimes more. Then we had to go back and pull our boats over. We had to unload and do this eight times altogether. To get the boats over the cataracts we had to use a very long rope, and it took as many as 50 men to pull one boat over. Sometimes each boat took an hour to get over.16

Many soldiers found the work exhausting even when assisted in the portage by West African Kroomen. They travelled quite quickly in their whalers over the long stretches of clear water (the first sapper boats covered the 42 miles south of Dongola in less than 48 hours), and companies raced each other, seeking the £100 prize offered by Wolseley for the fastest boat to Debbeh.17 Yet the stresses involved in hitting rocks, running aground or crossing rapids were all too memorable. After a day spent hauling his boat, Bandsman Barwood felt ‘quite exhausted, my hands cut and blistered, wet through all day, scarcely any clothes whole, and my feet and legs also cut’.18

The work was frustrating and dangerous, too. Quite apart from the riverine hazards of cataracts, rapids, rocks, sandbanks and unpredictable currents, ‘the boats’ seemed to one officer ‘absurdly unfit for their rough work and usage, being very fragile’.19 They suffered broken rudders and holes from rocks, some capsized, and a handful broke up – all adding to the strains, delays and dangers of the expedition. Although remarkably few were seriously damaged, and relatively few men drowned,20 the perception of danger was acute, particularly between the second and third cataracts. As a West Kent officer remarked: ‘It is a great responsibility feeling one’s way up a dangerous river, with little or no knowledge of it, and with men in the boat some of whom don’t know the stern from the bow.’21

The Camel Corps, comprising volunteers formed into Guards, Heavy, Light and Mounted Infantry Camel Regiments, represented the fastest means of reaching Khartoum. Most of these forces, inexperienced in camel-riding, had ridden their animals from Wadi Halfa to Dongola where they practised column formations, fighting dismounted in squares and making bivouacs with their camels. A ‘Camel Grenadier’ [almost certainly Lieutenant Count Gleichen] found the journey from Wadi Halfa ‘dismally monotonous’ and distinctly uncomfortable on saddles so broad that his legs formed an angle of 120 degrees when the camels were fully loaded. He learned about the terrain that was composed of hard, often gravelly, sand – ‘capital’ for walk-
ing but so undulating that guardsmen often ‘had to dismount’ to lead their animals. He also found that camels’ powers of endurance were distinctly limited (his own animal got ‘a sore back after four days’, needed water after ‘five consecutive days’, required ‘a vigorous application of the koorbash’ before it would run ‘more than 250 yards at a time’ and, in walking, never exceeded ‘two and a half miles per hour’).22

After an outbreak of smallpox at Dongola, Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stewart led his mounted forces on to Korti where they rendezvoused with other elements of the Camel Corps. The latter included the 1/Royal Sussex, which had been a leading unit throughout the expedition, building forts at Dongola and Debbeh, and now at Korti, which Captain Lionel Trafford characterised as a ‘hot dirty place’.23 Those soldiers who spent a memorable Christmas at Korti (where imaginative puddings were made from ground biscuit, goat’s milk and dates) soon found the location increasingly unhealthy. By 4 January a dragoon reckoned that 14–15 of the Camel Corps had already died at the base,24 and, after a month at Korti, Private F. Daykin (18th Hussars) wrote: ‘We are getting tired of this place, as it is very unhealthy, and the poor fellows are dying every day. It seems so sad to see such fine, strong fellows put under the sands of the desert in a blanket.’25 By arriving relatively late at Korti, the Naval Brigade avoided these concerns but sailors had barely a week (and in some cases only a couple of days) to practise their camel-riding.26

On 30 December Stewart marched with a convoy of 1,000 soldiers, 200 natives and 2,000 camels to establish a forward base at Gakdul Wells, halfway across the Bayuda Desert, and then returned with the camels to bring forward the remainder of the Camel Corps. The time-wasting double trip, necessitated by the failure of Wolseley’s staff to procure sufficient camels, left Corporal F. H. Middleton unimpressed: ‘we returned . . . to Korti’, he wrote, ‘marching 182 miles in 126 hours – very good marching for camels; not much time for sleeping, I can tell you’.27 Even worse was their first experience of the Bayuda Desert. Soldiers may have begun their marches ‘in the highest spirits’, buoyed by the novelty of riding camels and ‘the expectation of seeing some hard fighting’, as Trafford averred,28 but their accounts dwelt on the ‘appalling’ heat and ‘terrible’ sandstorms.29 During the marches to Gakdul Wells, a Bradford soldier recalled ‘suffering for four days for want of water’ (the allowance was 2 pints of water per day),30 while an officer noted that the salt meat became ‘very trying’ in these conditions: ‘it parches the lips and tongue. Some men’s lips are quite blue.’31

Once revived at Gakdul Wells, Stewart resumed his advance on 14 January with some 1,800 soldiers, 350 natives, 2,900 camels, 150 ponies and three 7-pounder guns. After two days, they encountered a
large *ansar* (Mahdist army) about 3 miles from Abu Klea Wells. Bivouacking within a zareba overnight, they endured an evening of long-range rifle-fire and enemy drumming. Although few men and animals were killed or wounded, the experience was remembered as ‘not very pleasant’, ‘very unpleasant’, even as ‘a night of terror’ by Private Harry Etherington (1/Royal Sussex).

At mid-morning on 17 January, Stewart left his baggage under guard in the zareba and advanced on Abu Klea. Trafford recalled how individual commanders, in the absence of any formal orders, had to send out skirmishers to protect their flanks and criticised the square as unbalanced and poorly aligned, with the rear face constantly broken by camels. Shortly after noon they reached the crest of a ridge and saw ‘a sea of standards’ as the *ansar* launched an assault on the left front, where the mounted infantry, once their skirmishers had retreated, responded with volley-firing. The Mahdists wheeled off to attack and penetrate the rear corner where the Heavy Cavalry had broken formation, a naval machine-gun became exposed (with the Gardner jamming) and only a mass of camels blocked the enemy. Middleton claimed that the ‘Cavalry on left face, Horse Guards, etc., made awkward infantry men’, and Gunner Dixon asserted that Colonel Burnaby, though ‘very brave and cool . . . exposed himself too much. If he had kept within the square he would not have been killed.’ The confusion became ‘terrible’, recalled Trafford, when the Heavy Cavalry ‘retreated back to their proper place & came on the top of our men with the Arabs on the top of them’, and the shooting of the ‘Heavies’ was ‘very wild’.

Yet the square reformed and discipline held as the rear ranks turned about: ‘For about ten minutes’, wrote Marling, ‘it was touch and go, but we beat them off & every nigger who got inside was killed. Our loss was very heavy, 9 officers and 66 men killed, 9 officers and 72 wounded.’ Trafford was mightily impressed by the ‘glorious sight’ of the Arab charge: ‘one thought they were charging to certain death yet they not only reached the square but punctuated it’. Even when forced to retire by superior fire-power, they retreated not by running but by ‘swaggering off’. Trafford was confident, nonetheless, that ‘Gordon was as good as saved’.

When soldiers reached the muddy water of the Abu Klea Wells, they spent an exhausting twenty-four hours, building defences, deepening wells, bringing forward the wounded and baggage, and filling water skins for the final advance to the Nile. Leaving another 100 Royal Sussex to guard the wounded, the march resumed at sunset, with many men sleeping in their saddles as they rode through the night. On the following morning confusion reigned: ‘those on quick camels’, noted Trafford, had ‘got to the front, while those on slow animals [were] in
the rear’. As cavalry scouts detected another *ansar* gathering ahead, Stewart halted the corps under enemy fire near the village of Abu Kru (Gubat). Middleton laconically observed: ‘Made a zareba, and stayed in it till two officers, one correspondent [Cameron], one conductor, and eight men were killed, and the general wounded [mortally]. Thought it was time to go out then.’

Sir Charles Wilson, RE, assuming command from Stewart, left the Hussars, Naval Brigade, Royal Artillery and half the ‘Heavies’ to guard the zareba, and ordered an advance towards the river (under the executive command of Lieutenant-Colonel the Hon. Edward Boscawen) in a slow, tight, square formation. When the *ansar* charged the front face it met, as Middleton described, ‘a beautiful little square this time; all infantry. Received charge without a wave in any flank. Enemy fell like rotten sheep. Glorious time. Fight over by sunset, 19th inst., no moon, marched on to river, about half a mile in the dark, rather dangerous proceedings, but had to be done.’ Half of the ‘Heavies’ had served in the rear face, but the engagement was over in five minutes and none of the Arabs got within 50 yards of the square.

There was immense relief at reaching the Nile after three days without a proper meal for the men, eight days without water for the camels and 56 hours without water for the ponies of the 19th Hussars. The remainder of the column was brought forward on 20 January; but the wounded, as Marling remarked, had ‘an awfully bad time of it, most of them lying on the ground without any covering at all’. Despite Wilson’s abortive attack on Metemmeh (21 January) – a ‘disgracefully mismanaged’ affair in Marling’s opinion – hopes revived with the appearance of four steamers, packed with soldiers, from Khartoum. To the delight of one soldier, they had brought a message from Gordon ‘saying he is quite well and can hold out till we get to him’.

Once two vessels, the *Bordein* and the *Talahawiye*, were made ready (24 January), Wilson commanded a relief force of 240 soldiers, mainly Gordon’s black Sudanese but including 24 Royal Sussex. Trafford noted that they followed Wolseley’s orders and wore red serge jackets, in keeping with his belief that a small body of British troops (albeit 1,500 in number) would overawe the *ansar* and raise the siege. Optimism persisted despite encountering rifle-fire within a couple of days, and then capturing an Arab who claimed that Khartoum had fallen and they would have to pass a fort with sixteen guns: ‘We only laughed at him’, recalled a sailor, ‘and thought he was trying to frighten us . . .’. However, on 28 January, spirits plummeted when Khartoum was sighted without an Egyptian flag flying, and, in the subsequent withdrawal under enemy fire, the *Talahawiye* foundered in the sixth cataract and the *Bordein* hit a rock, leaving Wilson’s force stranded on
an island. After a small boat, under Captain Gascoigne’s command, left
to seek assistance, a sailor commented: ‘You may picture our position –
twenty-three of us all told on an island, with two hundred niggers
whom we could not trust, and some of the Mahdi’s men on the main-
land on either side of us. Two or three times we abandoned hope.’ After
three days a crippled steamer appeared, under the command of Lord Charles Beresford, and, after repairing its boiler, carried Wilson’s
force to safety.

Meanwhile on 28 December advance elements of the river column
began their journey up the Nile to establish a base at Hamdab, 40 miles
from Korti. During the following month sappers built a fort and
resumed their boat-repairing duties as the remainder of the column
under the command of Major-General William Earle gradually fol-
lowed in boats, on foot, or by horse and camel. By 16 January Captain
J. E. Blackburn, RE, reported that the troops at Hamdab were ‘in first-
rate health and spirits’ as the daytime heat was tolerable, the nights
cool, and they had plentiful supplies of fresh meat, milk and Dhowra
meal which made ‘excellent porridge’. The camp was alive with
rumours, including one that the Naval Brigade had reached Khartoum:
‘I should not be the least surprised’, wrote Lieutenant-Colonel Coveny
(1/Black Watch), ‘to get the order to go back at any minute, because I
don’t think these people care to trifle with England’s power’.

Once Earle had a reasonably balanced force at Hamdab (24 January),
he ordered the boats to tackle the fourth cataract, assisted by 400
Egyptian fellahin on the bank, and with a squadron of the 19th Hussars
and the Egyptian Camel Corps scouting ahead. Day after day of excru-
ciating effort followed as men hauled their boats over the rocks, rarely
rowing for more than a mile at a time. ‘For the most part’, wrote Black-
burn, ‘it was the same monotonous grind, walking over slippery and
sharp-pointed rocks or through deep sand, hauling on ropes, wading in
the water to get boats off the rocks, and, on getting into bivouac,
zeriba-making and cutting pathways and ramps up the steep banks to
allow of horses and camels getting down to the water’. The rate of
progress ‘was very slow – for some time not more than three miles a
day, due to the long column of boats and the necessity of getting all
into the same bivouac by nightfall – so that the head of the column
often halted about noon, the rear not reaching the same spot till night-
fall’.

News of the desert column’s two actions hardly inspired confidence:
‘the loss’, asserted Denne, ‘is enormous over 21 per cent in the 2
actions and though a junction has been effected with Gordon’s steamer,
the desert force is practically shut up on the banks of the Nile’. He
regarded the loss of officers as ‘utterly disproportionate’ and suspected
that ‘the British Public will begin to appreciate that it is not a mere picnic’.51

After the leading boats reached the oasis of Berti, they halted unexpectedly (4–7 February) as Earle was informed of Khartoum’s fall. He kept the news from his men but was subsequently ordered to resume his advance. In seeking to save time, he despatched the 1/South Staffordshires, 1/Black Watch and 19th Hussars across the desert towards Abu Hamed, where their path was blocked by some 1,500 Mahdists, armed with Remington rifles and deployed on hills near the village of Kirbekan. On 10 February Earle feigned a frontal assault with two companies of the South Staffordshires and a couple of guns, while the remainder of the battalion, dressed in red jackets, and six companies of Black Watch, in their kilts, and the Hussars moved round the ridge to its rear. ‘As we neared the enemy’s stronghold’, recalled Corporal W. Walton (South Staffordshires), ‘bullets were showered amongst us, and a lot of our men were killed or wounded before we could return a single shot.’52 As the cavalry attacked the Mahdist camp, the Black Watch seized a knoll from which it enfiladed the enemy and covered any retreat to the river. The South Staffordshires, facing the highest ridge, sent D company forward advancing by sections in extended order with covering fire from other companies. When the latter followed as reinforcements, we ‘charged the hill with a cheer’, wrote Walton; ‘a hand-to-hand conflict ensued’, blood ran down the hill in streams, ‘enough to sicken the heart of any man’, and it was ‘blow for blow, and stab for stab . . . They were brave men we fought with.’53 An officer of the Black Watch described how his men marched across open ground ‘as steadily as if on parade, notwithstanding the heavy fire’, and then attacked the enemy’s flanks before the Mahdists launched a charge: ‘nearly all were shot dead and the others were shot as they tried to swim the river’. The Black Watch, with pipes playing, fought on from rock to rock ‘against a most determined enemy’,54 and, after six hours, the position was secured.

In the only action fought by the river column, the Mahdists suffered between 200 and 700 dead whereas the column lost 3 British officers and 9 men killed, with 4 officers and 44 men wounded.55 Once again senior officers – Earle, Coveny and Eyre – were slain in battle. Brackenbury assumed command and moved the column on to a point 26 miles from Abu Hamed before being ordered to return downstream. Soldiers greeted the order with ‘woeful disappointment’ as the men had recently learned of Gordon’s death and were bent on revenge. They rightly sensed that the dilapidated condition of the desert column had confounded Wolseley’s hopes of moving on to Khartoum,56 and they remained depressed despite the quicker journey down river. On 13
March Private Robertson (Black Watch) asserted that ‘This has been an awful sickener of a job . . . It is a great pity General Gordon being killed, and so many fine officers. I suppose it would cause a great consterna-
tion at home. I don’t see what benefit is to be derived from this coun-
try. We all wish they would withdraw the troops from it altogether.’

Feelings were as intense at Gubat when men received news of Kartoum’s fall and Gordon’s death. In a censored report Burleigh asserted: ‘On all sides, among officers and men, there was universal dismay and indignation at the catastrophe’, and, less plausibly, that there ‘was no question of politics about the state of feeling’. In fact, condemnation of Gladstone and his Government was widespread from Wolseley downwards, but, unlike Wolseley, the desert column could not dwell on recriminations. It spent a month at Gubat, strengthening defences, mounting raids, and periodically attacking Mahdist positions down-
river from a steamer. All these activities, as an officer of the 19th Hus-
sars wrote, were undertaken in ‘a state of glorious uncertainty’, bereft of any mail from Korti or information from spies as the ‘country all around is hostile’. Having ‘anxiously awaited’ Major-General Buller, the desert column’s spirits revived with his arrival on 11 February and his prompt decision to withdraw in the face of a resurgent enemy. Chronically short of camels, he had to order the jettisoning of many stores into the river and allow the commissariat to distribute portable ‘luxuries such as cocoa, condensed milk, brandy, soups, an innumer-
able other things’ to the troops.

A convoy of the sick and wounded preceded the main body of 1,700 men, mostly on foot, in the slow, hazardous march across the desert. Harassed by skirmishers, the column struggled on to Abu Klea and Gakdul Wells, with several of the wounded, including Stewart, dying en route. At Gakdul they formed another ‘sick convoy’ for the last 104 miles, with the two doctors bringing a ‘spade, pick, and shovel as part of their hospital gear’. The commanding officer had 20 dismounted hussars and 300 native auxiliaries to convey 26 stretcher cases, mainly amputees, and another 20–30 officers, ‘more or less seedy, riding camels’. He described how the auxiliaries sometimes ‘flatly refused to carry the wounded when they considered they had done enough; they were always shouting out for water . . . and the row they made carrying the wounded, which were all the worst cases, was just about calculated to finish most of them off. They dropped two poor fellows out of the stretchers.’ Yet the convoy suffered only a single fatality and reached Korti after seven days. By 16 March the main column arrived in a miserable state. A Scots Guardsman recalled:

Every man had bad boots; some had no tops to them, while most had soles worn through; some marching with their feet outside their boots,
while others . . . contrived to make a pair of sandals . . . Our trousers were almost as bad, all patched over with red and yellow leather.\(^{63}\)

Soldiers sent many letters thereafter, chronicling their exploits in the field, alluding to promotions for gallant conduct (Middleton was raised from corporal to lance-sergeant), and comforting the families of fallen comrades. Sergeant G. Baker (5th Lancers) wrote a poignant letter to Mrs Lovell about her son:

[H]e and I joined the regiment about the same time, and ever since we have been chums. We drilled together, and were made corporals together; in fact, we have been close friends since he joined till the day of his death. He was next to me all the battle till he was struck, and I can assure you there was no one who felt his death so much as I did. I lost a true friend and comrade.\(^{64}\)

Meanwhile General Graham received instructions to destroy the forces of Osman Digna near Suakin and facilitate the construction of the Suakin–Berber railway line. He was given a substantial and well-balanced force of 13,000 men, with battalions at full strength, a cavalry brigade, balloon section and colonial contingents from India and New South Wales. He had equally impressive support – hospital ships, vessels able to condense 85,000 gallons of water daily, and 6,000 baggage and 500 riding-camels. Camp sites had to be found for this multitude outside the cramped and unhealthy confines of Suakin. ‘Sanitary arrangements’, as Surgeon Porter noted in his journal, ‘governed the siting of the regimental camps, on dry sandy ridges’ running out from Suakin. They were sufficiently elevated to benefit from the fresh sea breezes and to avoid both marsh fever near the coast and sandstorms in the desert; but ‘these positions were inadequate for defence against incursions of a bold and predatory enemy’.\(^{65}\)

Night after night Osman Digna’s forces, in small groups, attacked the scattered camps, by-passing the guards and arc lamps to hack and kill soldiers asleep in their tents. Newly arrived units were particularly vulnerable (the Australians suffered on their arrival in late March just as the 1/Berkshires had done in early February) and the attacks had a demoralising effect. One soldier recalled being awakened by forty Sudanese rushing through the camp: their yell ‘was something terrible – fairly froze the blood in one’s veins. As our other tents faced us, we could not fire on them, so stood back to back with fixed swords . . .’. Later he had to treat the victims: ‘one had his arm almost cut off’ and later died; another ‘had his stomach laid open, and half his head dragged off’.\(^{66}\) Fortifying the camps with ditches, earthworks and bastions helped, but alerts frequently occurred and, amidst the confusion, crossfire was a recurrent hazard. By mid-March an officer recognised

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that the camps, though ‘too far apart for mutual protection’, were ‘near enough to cause reciprocal damage’. He reckoned that 2,000 men ‘were on guard every night, and what with fatigue duties all day we are nearly worked off our legs. The thermometer is eighty-seven degrees in the tents at night’.67

Even before Graham arrived in Suakin British forces had responded to the nightly raids, by reconnaissance actions and the burning of rebel villages. In scattering the bands of tribesmen, Private Charles Williams (1/Berkshires) boasted: ‘We will make the Soudanese rue the day they killed poor Gordon’.68 Graham planned to engage the main body of Osman Digna’s army, located in the area of Tamai and Hashin, advancing towards the latter on 20 March where he bivouacked overnight. On the following morning the Beja tribesmen mounted a series of attacks from the surrounding hills. They inflicted significant losses on the Bengal Lancers: ‘as the horsemen rode lance in rest’, noted Porter, ‘the Arab would suddenly fall prone, and as the lance missed would as suddenly spring up, hamstring the horse, and bring down the rider. In such a case it was sudden death to our men’69 However, the main squares of Guards, Indian Native Infantry, Sikhs and Marines stood firm: ‘We shot them [the arabs] down like dogs’, claimed a Coldstream Guardsman.70

In skirmishes lasting about nine-and-a-half hours, fire-power both kept the tribesmen at a distance and dispersed them from their vantage points overlooking the wells. Corporal Fred Bennett, (RE), described how the gunners pounded the enemy from two hillside redoubts, ‘every shot except the first telling; and we could see the rebels leap into the air and fall never to rise again’.71 Corporal R. Haslam (Medical Staff) saw the ‘British rifle’ wreak ‘fearful havoc in that day’, and praised the Berkshires, who worked with the Marines, to clear tribesmen from ridge after ridge.72 The 5th Royal Irish Lancers dispersed some Arabs, claiming thirty-two kills and prompting Private Francis Ferguson (20th Hussars) to observe that ‘Lances are the best to charge with. A sword is not the least bit of good with these fellows’.73 Soldiers lauded the bravery of the enemy and their use of the bush, but not their marksmanship. The Berkshires had seized their summit, claimed one of their officers, despite ‘a sharp fire’ from the enemy, ‘but luckily they are bad shots . . . our casualties were only two wounded’.74 Ultimately Graham’s force returned to its prepared zarebas, having lost 22 officers and men killed (and 43 wounded) compared with estimates of enemy losses ranging from 250 to 1,000 dead.75

On 22 March Major-General Sir John McNeill, VC, led two large square formations from Suakin to create an advance depot for supplies and water some 8 miles towards Tamai. Within one square he enclosed some 1,400 transport animals laden with food, water and ammunition,
numerous water-carts, and litters for the sick and wounded. This cum-
bersome baggage train struggled through the thick and prickly bush,
repeatedly breaking down and requiring frequent halts to reload the
pack animals. ‘Owing to the excessively rugged nature of the terrain’,
claimed Porter, ‘the thick sand cloud always round the column and the
mass of material to be covered, progress was necessarily slow.’76 Having
covered only 6 miles by noon, McNeill decided to halt and build a zareba
before dusk, planning three separate squares of mimosa bush, placed
diagonally like squares on a chess-board. The strategy would consume a
large amount of space and time in hostile country, involving the cre-
ation of a large central square to hold the stores, animals and water,
flanked by two squares to hold the fighting troops and machine-guns.

The defences were still incomplete, with groups of men either
having their dinner or collecting brush wood, when the Mahdists
launched their attack just after 2.30 p.m. As Captain C. Mackenzie
Edwards (Berkshires) recalled: ‘The whole rush was so sudden and
everything so quick that it was a miracle how any of us got together;
the cavalry videttes galloped through us with the enemy alongside.’77
While the picket lines held firm to the north and west, they crumbled
in the south: Lieutenant-Colonel H. W. L. Holman (Royal Marines)
asserted that the dervishes, who followed the 5th Lancers through the
lines of the 17th Bengal Native Infantry, ‘outnumbered and outflanked
the unfortunate Bengalis, who, firing wildly in the air, bolted’.78 With
camels, mules and horses stampeding amid clouds of dust, the tribes-
men penetrated the incomplete zarebas. Soldiers rallied in separate
squares, ‘more like a mass of men in any shape’, claimed Edwards, and
four companies of the Berkshires fought as a group outside the zare-
bas.79 ‘Steady and incessant fire’ prevailed, as Private Harold D.
Smithies (Royal Marines) observed, but not before many men and
camels were caught in the crossfire.80

In a battle lasting twenty minutes some 1,000 tribesmen died as
well as over 130 British and Indian soldiers and 150 drivers. Particular
groups suffered severely: sailors in the unfinished southern zareba,
who were attacked before their Gardner guns were ready;81 engineers,
who had piled their arms while cutting bush, and were either caught in
the open or found their arms taken by others;82 and unarmed drivers
and bearers who had tried running back to Suakin. On the following
day an officer rode along the route, observing the ‘sickening’ sight and
the smell of their corpses: it was ‘a heavy butcher’s bill truly’, he
added.83 Osman Digna’s forces had paid an even heavier price and pro-
ffered scant resistance when Graham’s army subsequently occupied and
destroyed the village of Tamai. The rebels, noted Smithies, ‘are begin-
ning to hang back . . . finding the British are too good for them’.84
Nevertheless, some soldiers joined the critics of the Tofrik battle. ‘The small skirmish at Hasheen was nothing compared to this’, wrote Edwards. ‘Of course someone blundered or it could never have happened . . . the surprise should never have occurred.’ Surgeon E. H. Finn hoped that Wolseley would see

what a disgracefully ignorant lot of Generals we have and withdraw us. No expedition was ever commanded so badly or so many gross errors made – the attack on the Zereba on the 22nd was entirely due to General McNeil’s [sic] swaggering ignorance . . . General Graham is also a gigantic failure & everybody is thoroughly disgusted.

Others defended McNeill, implying that the under-strength cavalry vedettes should have eschewed their drill book and fired warning shots while on horseback.

Soldiers continued their dreary round of convoy duty (sometimes, if the wind was favourable, with a reconnaissance balloon above), sinking wells and felling trees for the railway line. As temperatures rose, morale sagged: Lieutenant Francis Lloyd (Grenadier Guards) regarded the long march to an evacuated Tamai as a ‘fiasco’ and reported widespread scepticism that the railway to Berber would ever be completed. Those who had hoped to come ‘home smothered in glory’ were disabused; instead convoys regularly passed and repassed the ‘sickening scene’ near McNeill’s zareba, where hundreds of kites and vultures fed on the ‘festering bodies of camels and mules’, and hands and feet lay thick on the ground, ‘dragged from their graves’ by hyenas.

The arrival of the New South Wales contingent in its first imperial campaign aroused great interest. While most recognised the potential significance of the deployment, and some described the contingent as ‘a fine body of men’, Lloyd rated its soldiers as ‘worse than any Volunteer regiment and [they] swagger more’. He deprecated their limited musketry skills and general indolence. When not on duty, soldiers sampled the dubious delights of Suakin, dubbed by Corporal Haslam, as ‘about the dirtiest place in existence’. In the bazaar, a long narrow street, ‘all kinds of vendors’ could be found, ‘most of them indulging in opium smoking, the smell of which is enough to make one sick. Beer is “only” 1s 5p a quart, while wines and spirits are very “cheap”, and quite as “nasty”.’ Fortunately British soldiers were soon spared these temptations: on 2 May, Wolseley arrived in Suakin to warn Graham that the Government was now more concerned with events in Afghanistan. On 17 May, Graham and his staff left Suakin and the withdrawal from the Sudan was underway.

As the process in northern Sudan was phased over several months, soldiers were none too sure when they would leave. ‘The summer
occupation’, claimed a DCLI officer, ‘is very unpopular; all the troops hate the prospect of it.’ Soldiers and sailors complained about the monotony of camp life, the misery of sheltering in bell tents when the temperature soared to 120 degrees Fahrenheit, and the mounting toll of sickness and death. Within five weeks of forming a camp at Kurot, an officer reported 7 deaths from typhoid fever and 150 men sick. ‘It is a disgrace’, he affirmed,

to keep us in such a fiendish country. Nothing can excuse it. The food is bad, and we are still in rags . . . For God’s sake write about it, and get other correspondents to take it up. They are generally the best friends the troops have; and now they have gone, everything is concealed, and there is no one to say a word for the soldiers.93

Even when soldiers returned to Cairo, they still grumbled: ‘For the last two campaigns’, wrote Barwood, ‘the men have received no decorations, and the bitter feeling among the men is something awful. They have simply put two honours on one bar, what a mean thing to do . . .’.94

Despite all these complaints, when the soldiers faced lengthy encampments, as the Cameron Highlanders did, they made the best of it. Based at Korosko for ten months, the Highlanders spent the summer building mud huts, playing games of cricket and football, and rowing on the river. They enjoyed fresh bread and fresh meat ‘in abundance’, formed their own theatrical company and enjoyed cordial relations with the natives, many of whom liked the bagpipes, even if soldiers were banned from entering any native village.95 In October 1885 the battalion was sent upriver to occupy the small fort of Kosheh, the most southerly frontier post protecting the 87-mile railway from Wadi Halfa to Akasheh.

As Khalifa ‘Abdullah, the Mahdi’s successor, had resolved to expel this infidel presence and invade Egypt, he sent a large ansar [possibly 6,000 strong] northwards to invest Kosheh and a flying column to cut the vulnerable railway. Hitherto the Camerons had patrolled the river in a stern wheeler, the Lotus, but, by early December, Kosheh and the other frontier posts came under sporadic attack. Parts of the rail track were destroyed, the telegraph cut and villages like Firket briefly occupied, prompting the despatch of flying columns from Akasheh to disperse the tribesmen. Meanwhile as the Kosheh fort was effectively besieged, the Camerons engaged enemy snipers, mounted sorties to dislodge their marksmen (notably on 16 December), gathered intelligence from spies and deserters, and supported counter-battery fire from artillery and machine-guns.96 By 19 December, the enemy came so close that officers ‘distinctly heard the dervish cry – weirdly it sounded in the stillness of night – summoning the faithful to prayer’. By Christ-
mas the battalion had lost three killed and nineteen wounded out of the fort’s casualties of eight dead and twenty-five more or less severely wounded.97

The Camerons had bought sufficient time for General Sir Frederick Stephenson and Brigadier William Butler to bring two brigades, with mounted support, into action. In a pre-dawn advance (30 December 1885) their forces extended round the Mahdist positions at Ginnis and Kosheh before launching a massive bombardment. Ferguson, whose 20th Hussars protected the left flank and assisted the Egyptian Camel Corps, recalled ‘the rattle of the Gatling & the volleys of the Infantry & the Artillery & us firing’, it was ‘terrific at one time’.98 Six companies of Camerons [about 450 men], flanked by 150 Sudanese blacks, launched the frontal attack on the village of Kosheh. One of the Cameron officers recounted their delight at ending their ‘imprisonment’ and their desire to advance ‘at the double’ in a ‘thin red line’ [this was the final action fought by British soldiers wearing red]:

When the order was given to fix bayonets, the ready click and the fierce determined look of the men unmistakably told of pent-up revengeful passion about to find an outburst. The thought of comrades killed and wounded like rabbits in a warren during all those harassing days in the fort worked with revengeful fierceness in the mind of each . . . I had seen the same set teeth, flushed cheeks, and wild glare in the eyes of the men on the 16th December when they shot, bayonetted, and madly re-bayonetted the marksmen and others on the Rock.

The officer felt thwarted when the enemy retreated to the houses: ‘there was now nothing for it but attack the houses from loop-holes . . . It was nasty work. There was a good many inside, and it was a desperation stand with them.’99 The Sudanese blacks cleared ‘the Rock’ and cover close to the river, and so: ‘When we met in the rear of the houses, and had captured the enemy’s guns, we gave them a cheer to which they lustily responded. It was a strange but hearty comradeship in arms.’100

Overwhelming fire-power, and Butler’s adroit manoeuvring of the brigades and camel corps, had produced a decisive outcome. After three hours the ansar was in full retreat, leaving 500 dead and 300 wounded compared with British losses of 7 killed and 30 wounded. The victors, all of whom were entitled to the Egyptian medal and the Khedive’s star, had thwarted the immediate threat of invasion and so facilitated the final withdrawal from the Sudan.101 This process took several months until the fortification of Wadi Halfa, the new frontier outpost, was completed. Meanwhile British soldiers felt immensely frustrated about the outcome of the relief expedition. If they were less critical of Wolseley’s planning and staff system than some historians have been,102
many felt that their mission had begun too late, and that they had struggled up the Nile and defeated the Mahdi’s forces in several battles to little effect. These frustrations were felt most keenly by those left on the frontier. By 24 January, when over 200 men were in hospital with dysentery and typhoid fever, at least one officer, uncertain about the future, complained:

Alas, alas, it looks like another summer in Halfa with its accompanying plagues of dust, heat, flies, and smells. After near a year and a half one gets very sick at the thought of a further prolonged residence . . . Oh, why did we ever meddle in Arabi? Oh, that the bondholders had been left to burn their fingers. As for danger to the Suez Canal there never was aught to be apprehended.\(^{[13]}\)

### Notes

5. ‘The Khartoum Expedition’, *Army and Navy Gazette*, 20 December 1884, p. 949.
9. BWA, 0203/1, Barwood, diary, 30 October 1884, pp. 90, 93–4, 97–8; GHM, PB 173, McRae to his mother, 2 December 1884.
12. ‘Diary of an Officer with the Khartoum Expedition’, *REJ*, 15 (1 January 1885), 13–14; Sandes, *Royal Engineers*, p. 102.
14. These boatmen were hired in Canada but bore little resemblance to the voyageurs who had served with the Red River expedition, Preston, *In Relief of Gordon*, p. xxxiii; Symons, *England’s Pride*, pp. 106–8.
18. BWA, 0230/1, Barwood, diary, 30 November 1884, p. 121.
22 ‘Khartoum Expedition’, p. 949; compare with Count Gleichen, With the Camel Corps Up the Nile [London: Chapman & Hall, 1888], chs 2 and 3.
24 ‘A Soldier’s Letter from Korti’, Dover Express, 30 January 1885, p. 5.
32 PRO, WO 33/44, ‘Diary of the Suakin Operation, 1885’, no. 297, Wolseley to secretary of state for war, 26 January 1885, enclosing Stewart’s despatch on Abu Klea.
33 ‘Naval Brigade in the Soudan’, p. 5; ‘A Soldier’s Letter’, p. 5; Etherington, ‘Sent to Save Gordon’, p. 201.
36 WSRO, RSR, MS 1/85, Trafford, ‘A Diary of the Sudan Campaign’, p. 16.
37 GRO, D873/C110, Marling to his father, 28 January 1885.
38 WSRO, RSR, MS 1/85, Trafford, ‘A Diary of the Sudan campaign’, pp. 17–19.
39 Ibid., p. 19.
40 ‘A Soldier’s Letter’, p. 5.
41 Ibid.
42 GRO, D873/C110, Marling to his father, 28 January 1885.
43 Ibid.
45 WSRO, RSR MS 1/85, Trafford, ‘A Diary of the Sudan Campaign’, p. 22; Preston [ed.], In Relief of Gordon, pp. 90 and 103.
46 ‘Naval Brigade in the Sudan’, p. 5.
47 Ibid.
48 Capt. J. E. Blackburn, ‘From Debbbeh to Hamdab with the “Nile Column”’, REJ, 15 (2 March 1885), 50–2.
51 GHM, PB 64/8, Denne to his father, 26 January 1885.
52 ‘The Battle of Kirbekan’, Midland Counties Express, 11 April 1885, p. 8.
54 ‘The Battle of Kirbekan’, Daily Telegraph, 10 March 1885, p. 3.
55 Ibid.; PRO, WO 33/44, Brig.-Gen. Brackenbury to Wolseley, 10 February 1885; Symons, England’s Pride, p. 256.
58 He bypassed the censor by sending this part of his report by letter: ‘Press Censorship at Korti’, *Western Morning News*, 27 March 1885, p. 8.


60 ‘The Campaign in the Soudan: Letters from a Local Officer’, *Newcastle Courant*, 20 March 1885, p. 5.

61 *Ibid*.


66 ‘A Letter from the Soudan’, *Surrey News*, 18 May 1885, p. 6; ‘Letter from a Sailor’, *Scotsman*, 3 April 1885, p. 5; and ‘A Taunton Volunteer with the Australian Contingent’, *Somerset County Gazette*, 2 May 1885, p. 11.


68 ‘Characteristic Letter from a Welsh Soldier’, *Western Mail*, 13 March 1885, p. 3; ‘Berkshire Regiment at Suakim’, p. 4.


70 ‘Letter from a Soldier’, *Scotsman*, 16 April 1885, p. 6.


72 ‘Letter from a Birkenhead Soldier at Suakin’, *Birkenhead and Chester Advertiser*, 16 May 1885, p. 6.

73 NAM, Acc. No. 6807/269, Ferguson MSS, Pte F. Ferguson to his parents, 21 March 1885.


75 Featherstone, *Khartoum 1885*, p. 86.


77 RGBWM, R 4659, Capt. C. Mackenzie Edwards to ‘Colonel’, 16 April 1885.


83 ‘Letter from an Officer at Suakim’, *Oswestry Advertiser*, 22 April 1885, p. 5; see also ‘A Private on the Soudan Campaign’, *Uttoxeter New Era*, 22 July 1885, p. 5.

84 ‘A Sheffield Marine’s Account of Recent Fighting’, p. 5.

85 RGBWM, R 4659, Edwards to ‘Colonel’, 16 April 1885.

86 RGBWM, 004/24, Surgeon E. H. Finn, letter, 7 April 1885; see also NAM, Acc. No. 7709/43, Lloyd MSS, Lt F. Lloyd to his wife, 24 March and 25 April 1885.


88 NAM, Acc. No. 7709/43, Lloyd to his wife, 5, 6, 17 and 23 April 1885; see also ‘A Taunton Volunteer with the Australian Contingent’, p. 11; ‘Suakin, 1885, Field Operations’, 99–100.
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89 NAM, Acc. No. 7709/43, Lloyd to his wife, 1 May 1885; ‘Letters from the Soudan’, p. 3.
91 ‘A Cornish Officer’s Experiences’, Western Morning News, 2 April 1885, p. 8.
92 ‘Our Soldiers in the Soudan’, Auckland Times and Herald, 7 May 1885, p. 3; see also ‘Letter from a Naval Officer’, Western Morning News, 11 April 1885, p. 8, and ‘A Cornish Officer’s Experience’ ibid., 13 May 1885, p. 8.
93 BWA, 0203/1, Barwood, diary, 1 July 1885, p. 142.
97 ‘Egypt and the Soudan’, p. 5.
98 NAM, Acc. No. 6807/269, Ferguson to his parents, 18 January 1886.
100 Ibid.
103 ‘In the Soudan’, Surrey News, 15 February 1886, p. 3; Sandes, Royal Engineers, p. 119.