

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Reconquering the Sudan

After the costly failure of the Gordon relief expedition, successive British governments retained only a small army of occupation in Egypt and withdrew forces from the southern frontier, the defence of which was left increasingly to the Egyptian Army. The latter was reformed and trained by a cadre of British officers and NCOs and was periodically supported by British units, notably a squadron of the 20th Hussars at the battle of Toski (13 August 1889) and in engagements with Osman Digna's forces near Suakin. British units were even more prominent in the Sudanese campaigns of the late 1890s; the 1/North Staffordshires served in the Dongola campaign of 1896 and another eight battalions, supported by the 21st Lancers, two batteries of artillery, a machine-gun battery and a flotilla of gunboats served in the Anglo-Egyptian army at Omdurman (2 September 1898). As all these campaigns involved protracted journeys and tedious days spent in barracks or under canvas, soldiers kept diaries, drew sketches, and took numerous photographs.<sup>1</sup> They were also prolific correspondents, and, in some cases, wrote campaign histories based partially on their first-hand experience.<sup>2</sup> They explained how the logistic problems of operating in the Sudan were overcome and how an Anglo-Egyptian army defeated the forces of the Khalifa. Some of these letters have been reproduced,<sup>3</sup> others have embellished well-known accounts of the campaign, particularly those commemorating the centenary of the battle of Omdurman;<sup>4</sup> but the surviving correspondence is even more voluminous than these sources suggest. Although most material derives from the 1898 campaign, the earlier letters and diaries provide a comparative context, indicating how the experience of soldiering in the Sudan evolved over a decade.

As most of the Gordon relief expedition began to depart, Private Francis Ferguson (20th Hussars) reconciled himself to a long tour of duty in Egypt. He anticipated another twelve months but would ulti-

mately spend the remainder of his five years with the colours in Egypt, where he liked 'the fighting if it were not for the cursed climate . . .'. He had already succumbed to dysentery and knew that his regiment, despite receiving regular drafts of men from England, had 'been weakened by a lot of men being invalided home with Dysentery & Enterick fever'.<sup>5</sup> Within two months of the battle of Ginnis he was again invalided down to Assouan from Wadi Halfa, which he regarded as 'the most unhealthy station' in Egypt with '3 or 4 funerals every day sometimes as many as 9'.<sup>6</sup> After returning to Wadi Halfa, where he remained until May 1886, Ferguson feared the risks of illness above anything else whenever the prospect of frontier service recurred. In April 1887 he noted reports of 'a good many of our men dying' at Assouan, and, after the battle of Toski, berated the medical authorities for failing to provide any water purification: 'the Nile is rising & we have to drink the water like mud as we have no means to clear it'. By now well acquainted with Sudanese conditions, he regarded the medical department as '[v]ery thoughtless . . . as they ought to know the state of the Nile at this time of the Year & I think that is the cause of all the sickness here at present'.<sup>7</sup>

Egyptian service had its attractions, nonetheless. Ferguson liked the barracks at Abbassiyeh, some 3 miles from Cairo, describing the rooms as 'large & lofty, each capable of holding over fifty bed cots and are very cool considering the climate'. He regarded the stables, about a mile from the barracks, as 'much better than English stables', with plenty of water and troughs 'about fifty feet long & six feet wide'. The troops enjoyed beer at 7d (3p) a quart in a 'very decent canteen with a stage' and could supplement their rations with plentiful supplies of cheap local produce. While the charms of Cairo were only a donkey ride away, a local bazaar had formed near Abbassiyeh 'kept by French people & girls & some Greek but no English'.<sup>8</sup> Periodically the temptations of the canteen proved too much, and there was a drunken Christmas brawl between the Shropshire Light Infantry and the 20th Hussars: 'Iron bed legs were flying about in all directions & one of our men is a lunatic in the hospital caused by a bayonet going through his head. Several more got bayonet wounds & 18 of the infantry are in with sword wounds but all is quiet now'.<sup>9</sup>

Ferguson, like many of his comrades, never formed a high opinion of the Egyptian soldiery (other than the black Sudanese). When the garrison at Wadi Halfa was handed over to the Egyptians, he remarked: 'It is nearly time they were able to shift for themselves' and, in departing for Suakin in December 1888, he recalled the debacle of Hicks Pasha's army, claiming that 'The Egyptians cannot be trusted as they run away if a few men chase them'.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the Egyptian Army had been

reformed and would fight effectively in the Sudan: at Gemaizah (20 December 1888) the Sudanese cleared the Mahdist trenches before the cavalry charge. Both Corporal Wakefield and Ferguson described the 'awful' crash of the two mounted forces as they charged each other over 'terribly rough ground'. Whereas Ferguson thought that we 'emptied about 30 saddles', Wakefield reckoned that most of the enemy dismounted to fight alongside 'hundreds of rebels on foot'. The 20th Hussars, he claimed, were handicapped by the quality of their sabres: in the first clash of arms, he saw one trooper killed and another slashed from shoulder to nearly his waist while at least three British sabres 'broke over the Arabs' spears'. He himself 'cut one man full on the head, but it had no effect on him'. After a couple of charges the troopers retired, dismounted 'and commenced firing, which ultimately made the enemy retire'.<sup>11</sup>

During the cavalry charge three troopers and trumpeter Newton were killed and mutilated, prompting not merely feelings of rage and vengeance but the reflections of Trooper E. P. Wedlake:

It was, indeed, a glorious charge, though marred with grief and pain,  
 For Newton, Thomas, Jordan, Howes, were numbered with the slain.  
 We bore them from the field of strife with tenderness and love,  
 And trusted that their souls had found a resting-place above.  
 Then our thoughts returned to Cairo's camp, with its mottoes and its  
 flowers,  
 With saddened recollections of its gay and festive bowers.  
 We wept for our gallant comrades, as still in death they lay,  
 And in the camp of our beaten foes we spent our Christmas Day.<sup>12</sup>

Ferguson's letter largely chronicled his own exploits, particularly in protecting Private Knowles from an Arab wielding a double-edged sword. When copies of the *Evening News* containing this letter and an advertising placard were sent to him, soldiers posted the material on the stable door and ribbed him about his tale. Ferguson defended 'every word' by referring to various witnesses, including Private Knowles, memories of his blood-stained horse and the deep cut in his sword hilt, 'So they said no more to me about it'. He also explained to his parents that the hussars had spent the month after the battle constantly on parade and vedette duty, capturing the odd rebel and scouring hills near Tamai for the enemy. Ferguson was particularly impressed with Colonel H. Herbert Kitchener, whose linguistic gifts had enabled him to operate as a spy in Metemmeh during the Nile campaign: 'he is a very brave man & well liked by all Troops'.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Ferguson left his impressions of the battlefield at Toski where the 20th Hussars was the only British unit present and assisted in the final rout of Wad Nejumi's invading army. After all his previous

engagements, Ferguson was gratified that 'hardly any fighting men of the Rebels escaped', and that all the leaders, save one, were killed. In killing Nejumi, who he thought, erroneously, had killed Gordon and defeated King John of Abyssinia, they had disposed of 'the ablest & best leader & bravest of the Mahdi's Generals'. He had never seen 'so many Dead after a Battle, and so close together . . . They were in heaps as they were shot down', with more women, children and animals slain in the two camps, including a woman killed in the act of childbirth, 'a horrible sight'.<sup>14</sup> The last Mahdist invasion of Egypt had been repulsed.

Although Ferguson made scant reference to the role of the Egyptian Army at Toski, it had proved its worth in repelling a Mahdist assault and then in advancing to seize the enemy's camp. Some eighteen months later, in February 1891, Egyptian and Sudanese forces reoccupied Tokar without the assistance of any British troops (other than their British officers and NCOs). Nevertheless, in March 1896, the 1/North Staffordshires were sent forward in support of the Egyptian Army when the cabinet approved a limited incursion into the northern province of Dongola. This decision was a response to Italian pleas for a military diversion to ease the pressure on their garrison at Kassala (after the catastrophic defeat of the Italian forces at Adowa on 1 March). Cromer advised Lord Salisbury, then prime minister and foreign secretary, that it would 'be a serious business, from a military point of view, to get to Dongola'. He doubted 'whether it can be achieved without employing English troops'.<sup>15</sup>

At Abbassiyeh barracks the North Staffordshires greeted news of their impending action with 'wild excitement': 'officers and men', recalled Lieutenant (later Major) J. J. B. Farley, dashed 'about, throwing helmets in the air and shouting "Wady Halfa in a week"'.<sup>16</sup> After rigorous medical examinations in which 10 per cent of the strength were turned down, the battalion left Cairo by train on 22 March to a tremendous ovation from friends and well-wishers. On the next day the 912 men were crammed on to two steamers and completed a journey of 800 miles to Wadi Halfa in ten days. Thereafter they languished in barracks for several months as Kitchener concentrated on extending the railway and the telegraph south of Sarras while moving stores and supplies forward to the base at Akasheh.<sup>17</sup> Colonel Archibald Hunter (Egyptian Army) later explained that: 'More than two-thirds of the work is calculating the quantity of supplies required and where to have them and by what time. In fact, war is not fighting and patrolling and bullets and knocks; it is one constant worry about transport and forage and ammunition and seeing that no one is short of stuff'.<sup>18</sup>

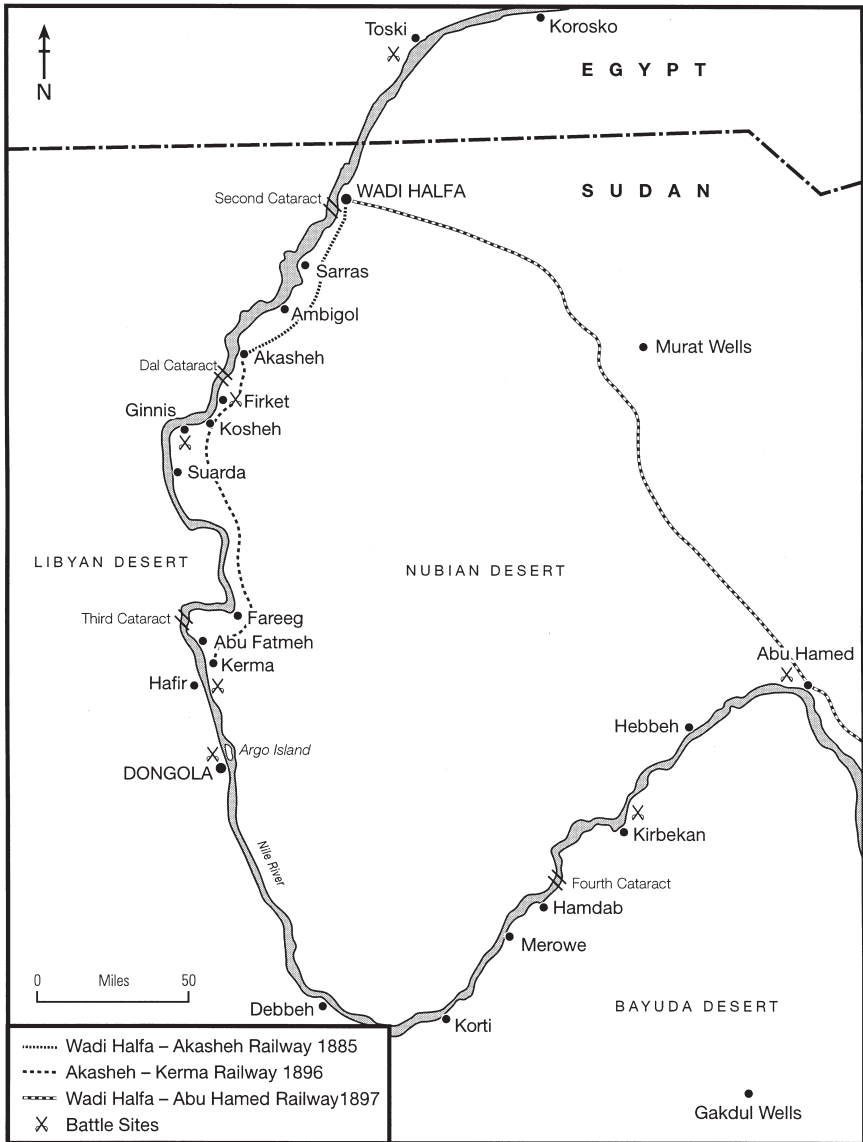
Although the North Staffordshires had come to Egypt from Malta in the previous October, they were not prepared for the heat, flies and

general discomfort of serving on the Sudanese frontier. 'We are growing weary', wrote Captain Somerset Astell, 'horrible rumours come in that the Dervishes are starving, their allies deserting, so they may cave in & then we shall have borne the burden & heat of the day for nought.'<sup>19</sup> They endured a daily routine of early morning drill, including attack and square formations, and musketry practice before spending most of the day in barracks. In the extreme heat water fatigues were particularly arduous, and the medical staff tried to prevent their thermometers from bursting. Officers sought to occupy bored men, sometimes by reading aloud to their companies. As Astell recalled: 'Slatin's Fire & Sword in the Soudan held the Palm & was a veritable gold mine to us, both as instruction and interest to men & officers.'<sup>20</sup> In the late afternoon soldiers played football or, like the officers, bathed in the Nile and attended concerts or smoking concerts at night. Officers, finding little scope for riding or shooting, experimented at fishing, while some sailed on the river, and most enjoyed the company of the hard-drinking and garrulous war correspondents. Everyone appreciated the receipt of mail from home.<sup>21</sup>

None of the regiment apart from Captain Goldfinch's Maxim battery took part in the major battle of the campaign at Firket (7 June 1896). They learned at second hand of the night march by the three brigades of the Egyptian Army, the co-ordinated strike on the village, and the house-to-house fighting before the Mahdists retired. 'The plan', reckoned Astell, was 'as ably thought out, as it was brilliantly executed.'<sup>22</sup> Farley agreed: 'The whole operation was a perfect example of careful planning on the part of the Sirdar and Colonels Rundle and Hunter and it was brilliantly carried out by the troops.'<sup>23</sup> Hunter, who commanded one of the Egyptian brigades, attributed the success to the element of surprise after the 'silence' of the night march. He doubted that they could achieve another surprise and expected 'a great fight at Dongola'. Despite being critical of his soldiers for their 'wild, badly aimed' shooting, he was glad they had seized this 'chance to belie the croakings of their detractors'.<sup>24</sup>

Of more immediate concern was the typhoid fever and cholera that began to sweep through English and Egyptian ranks from mid-June onwards. Lieutenant-Colonel Beale, Lieutenant Hutchinson and several North Staffordshires were invalided to Cairo, and, on 1 July, the battalion moved camp to Gemai. Within a day of their arrival another man was struck down and over the next six weeks cholera took a heavy toll of officers and other ranks. Astell grimly noted: 'Funerals, for obvious reasons took place as quietly as possible, generally at night.'<sup>25</sup> While officers praised the efforts of the medical staff, Farley noted how the latter had struggled without water filters and wood for boiling

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water.<sup>26</sup> The battalion was now dispersed into three locations, with the sick being treated in a separate hospital from Gemai and an increasing number being invalided to Cairo. The two local Methodist preachers, Conductor Linnington (Ordnance Service Corps) and Sergeant Forde (North Staffordshires) conceded that they could no longer hold reli-

gious gatherings; but Forde consoled himself: 'Not a single abstainer has been attacked, and there is not a single abstainer in hospital up here. This speaks for itself.'<sup>27</sup>

Fortunately the cholera abated by mid-August but a massive storm and flooding ruined a section of the railway on 25 August, so many of the available soldiers were sent to Sarras to repair the track. Although the railway work 'was very hard', Astell claimed that the men 'rejoiced' at anything that gave them some relief from 'the utter stagnation' they had endured for 'so long'. He observed, too, that 'the Soudanese & our men were always great friends' but 'one never saw any mingling of the white & Egyptian troops'.<sup>28</sup> Officers and other ranks were even more pleased when the orders came to move forward by train to Kosheh. The North Staffordshires were now somewhat depleted as 44 had died, 120 had been invalided to Cairo, and, at Kosheh, another 150 had to be left behind as the steamer *Zafir* burst its cylinder.

At Hafir (19 September) they were largely spectators as the gunboats and a brigade of artillery under Colonel C. Parsons bombarded the enemy's defences. 'The Dervishes', wrote Farley, 'certainly deserved and obtained our highest admiration for the way they stuck to their position.'<sup>29</sup> When the Mahdists eventually withdrew, the North Staffordshires marched on without any food, rations or water, covering the next 23 miles 'on empty stomachs' and losing only one man on the line of march. On 23 September the battalion marched on Dongola in the centre of the front line of the 15,000-man army, with gunboats providing fire support. Once again the bulk of the Mahdist forces withdrew, although Baggara horsemen and a few individuals proffered token resistance. By 11.30 a.m. the town had fallen without any casualties among the English soldiers.<sup>30</sup> While soldiers appreciated Kitchener's words of praise on the following day, and the opportunity to acquire 'dervish loot', this was scant comfort for their state of health: when the North Staffordshires returned to Cairo on 9 October, another seventy-six men entered hospital, of whom twenty, including Captain J. Rose, died.<sup>31</sup>

In a subsequent interview Kitchener admitted his 'great surprise' that the enemy had bolted from Dongola 'in utter rout'. He attributed this collapse of morale to the stories from Firket, the presence of gunboats and the overwhelming numbers of the Anglo-Egyptian army, but warned against underestimating the power of the Khalifa.<sup>32</sup> Hunter agreed, claiming that the Egyptian Army had only overwhelmed the enemy's positions at Toski, Tokar and Firket because it had English officers and 'we were always in superior numbers. We have never asked him to do anything that was not within the easy compass of attain-

ment'.<sup>33</sup> Such reasoning would ensure that once the Sudan Military Railway (SMR) was built from Wadi Halfa across the Nubian desert, British forces would again be required for the advance on Omdurman. Despite appalling climatic conditions, construction of the railway began on 1 January 1897, involving gangs of native labourers under the energetic direction of Lieutenant E. P. C. Girouard, RE, and his staff. On 7 August 1897, Hunter in command of a flying column secured the terminus for the 230-mile railway at Abu Hamed,<sup>34</sup> and then pressed on to establish a forward base at Berber. The railway, completed on 4 November 1897, was rightly regarded by Hunter as 'the all important factor of this expedition'. It shortened the journey to Abu Hamed from eighteen days by camel and steamer to twenty-four hours (depending on the serviceability of the engines) and enabled Kitchener to move his forces and gunboats into the heart of the Sudan independently of season or the height of the Nile. As Hunter added: 'That Railway from Halfa to Abu Hamed is a monument of the skill & resources of the Sirdar. It is his idea & his only.'<sup>35</sup>

Railway construction continued during 1898. By February, when the railway from Cairo reached Assouan, Colonel A. O. Green (RE) reckoned that even with a delay the boat and rail journey to Wadi Halfa took only six days; by August, when the SMR reached Atbara – 385 miles from Wadi Halfa – Sergeant-Major Clement Riding (Royal Army Medical Corps – RAMC), claimed that it took only seven days to reach Atbara from Cairo.<sup>36</sup> Soldiers sometimes erred in recalling the length and duration of journeys – Corporal George Skinner (RAMC) added 120 miles to the rail journey from Wadi Halfa to Abu Hamed<sup>37</sup> – and the travelling experiences often varied from unit to unit. Of the four battalions of the First British Brigade (the 1st Battalions of the Lincolns, Royal Warwicks, Cameron Highlanders and Seaforth Highlanders) only the late-arriving Seaforths and some drafts for the other units, including Private H. Matthews (Lincolns), experienced the delights of riding through the night on camels to their camp site. 'After this camel ride', grumbled Matthews, 'we could hardly walk', and the experience was even less agreeable in a kilt: as Sergeant Roderick Morrison complained, 'It was by far the worst journey I ever undertook.'<sup>38</sup>

Travel was only one of several new experiences for the short-service soldiers, many of whom had never served in Egypt and the Sudan before.<sup>39</sup> Coming from Malta, Lance-Sergeant Colin Grieve (Seaforths) was franker than most in his description of Cairo as 'one of the finest cities in the world to look at, but the wickedest place on God's earth . . . As far as I can see the majority of the people in these Eastern Countries live on Villany [*sic*] & their wits, and immorality is looked on as quite a respectable trade.'<sup>40</sup> Many recalled the enthusiastic crowds that



had greeted their departures and the cheering from passing steamers, the experience of being 'packed like herrings in a box' on Nile vessels, the spectacle of the ancient ruins at Luxor, and the first sight of the Sudan Military Railway as its 'shimmering rails disappeared into the mirage'.<sup>41</sup> Yet battalions were shocked as the strain of the logistic arrangements took its toll, with two elderly quartermasters committing suicide: a Cameron Highlander 'blew out his brains', reportedly 'through a choking off that the Colonel gave him';<sup>42</sup> and Quartermaster Sergeant Haines of the Lincolns cut his own throat. Another Lincolnshire sergeant explained: 'He had had a lot of work to do of late, and was not in good health, nor had he been used to a life such as this'.<sup>43</sup>

Any gloom over these suicides soon dissipated once soldiers completed their journeys, pitched camp near the railhead 22 miles south of Abu Hamed, and began a hectic round of daily fatigues and training. The arrival of their commanding officer, Major-General William F. Gatacre, a 55-year old martinet from India, ensured that they would not languish in camp as the North Staffords had done.<sup>44</sup> A Lincolnshire sergeant wrote:

Our daily routine [is] as follows: Running drill to the Nile and back, bathing parade, battalion drill in fighting formation, attack and defence, outpost duty by night and day, camp fatigues, wood and water fatigues, unloading railway trucks of stores, and pitching and striking camp; also marching drill during the warm part of the day.<sup>45</sup>

Gatacre added to these labours by insisting that everyone wore their full kit, boots and ammunition, by night and day: 'what little sleep we got for fully a month', wrote Private Matthews, 'was with our boots and clothes on'.<sup>46</sup> If officers were more sceptical of Gatacre's excessive precautions, hectoring speeches and constant interference – 'He is one of the fussiest men going', claimed Lieutenant William Stewart (Camerons)<sup>47</sup> – the men appeared more tolerant of 'Old Back-acher', as they described him, other than his proscription of beer. Occasional tots of rum were scant comfort: 'the men began to moan', noted Skinner, 'especially when it was known that the officers were getting as much as they wanted'.<sup>48</sup> 'As regards rations', Matthews admitted, 'we cannot grumble. We each get 2lbs. of bread each day, and if we do not get bread we get a pound of biscuits and a pound of meat. We also have to drink tea four times a day'.<sup>49</sup> Soldiers appreciated, too, that some of Gatacre's additional fatigues would enhance their prospects in battle, particularly filing the tips off their bullets to make them similar to Dum Dum ammunition: by 19 February, a Cameron Highlander could report: 'we have just finished the last box to-day; so that is 300 boxes of Dum Dums for Fuzzy Wuzzy to stomach'.<sup>50</sup>

Officers and men were less impressed when Gatacre ordered them to undertake a forced march to Berber and thence to Darmali, some 122 miles in 5 days with a day's rest (25 February–2 March), reputedly to save the advance units of the Egyptian Army from Mahdist attack. Whether marching at night or early morning, the soldiers struggled through deep sand and then over hard rocky desert. The latter, wrote Sergeant Murphy (Lincolns), 'was very trying. It hurt the men's feet badly, the stones were so sharp. We marched 32 miles on this day with only the water in our bottle . . . I never saw one tree on this march; nothing met the eye except now and again the bleached bones of a camel. After this long march we received a ration of rum.'<sup>51</sup> 'What made the marching worse', added Private D. MacDonald (Camerons), 'was that most of it was done on our bare feet, as we had no shoes or sox [*sic*] on.'<sup>52</sup> Lieutenant Ronald F. Meiklejohn (Warwicks) agreed that 'some had no soles on their boots: many had the skin off their feet: & others were worn out. We left about 150 men & two officers (Caldecott & Christie): the Lincolns left 180: the Camerons 200: and these waited for two gunboats to arrive & bring them on.' He was even more incensed when the battalions reached Berber to an enthusiastic reception and the realisation that they had not been expected for a week at least. 'Our confidence [in Gatacre]', wrote Meiklejohn, 'is shaken. He has the reputation of wearing out his troops unnecessarily.'<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, soldiers were pleased with the issue of fresh boots from the Egyptian Army and a more varied diet from Berber (including bacon, rice and other vegetables). While the Seaforths joined the Camerons at Kunour on 16 March, the Lincolns and Warwicks encamped in the village of Darmali, some 15 miles south of Berber. Cordial relations were again forged between the British and Sudanese soldiers, with the 10th Sudanese greeting the Lincolns with cheers and cups of tea, its band playing a rendition of the 'Lincolnshire Poacher', and soldiers shouting in broken English: 'You, 10th Inglesey, we 10th Soudanese.'<sup>54</sup> The Sudanese even found a mess table for the Warwickshire officers, whereupon the latter were able to host a dinner for Gatacre, involving 'soup, stewed beef, rice and green peas, asparagus, rice pudding, and damsons, coffee, champagne and port', all the produce being acquired in Berber.<sup>55</sup>

More importantly British, Egyptian and Sudanese battalions were now able to practise combined movements, forming squares and completing other manoeuvres under Kitchener's observation. When news arrived that Emir Mahmud was leading an *ansar* of 16,000 men towards the River Atbara, Kitchener ordered his entire army to advance on the Atbara (20 March). Within two days the army reached Ras-el-Hudi, where Sergeant Murphy described the scene: 'We are lying

close on the Atbara river which is teeming with fish, gazelle are plentiful in the woods, while quail, geese, wild ducks, and pigeons, hares, rabbits, etc., are in abundance . . . Palm and mimosa trees are thick here, and milk trees are in abundance.<sup>156</sup>

Having waited in vain for a Mahdist attack, Kitchener eventually resolved to advance on Mahmud's zareba. After a series of cautious marches his army deployed some 600 yards from Mahmud's stronghold (6 a.m. on 8 April), whereupon the Egyptian artillery began pounding the enemy's position for three-quarters of an hour. Thereafter three brigades walked towards the zareba, with the Camerons deployed in line at the front of the British Brigade, followed by the Seaforths, Warwicks and Lincolns in column. As the units advanced firing volleys, many remembered the Sirdar's final exhortation: 'Remember Gordon.'<sup>157</sup> Private H. Pexton (Lincolns) recalled: 'The bullets from the Dervishes were like hailstones flying about', while Private J. Turnbull (Camerons) admitted: 'It felt a bit funny at first hearing the bullets whistling round a fellow's ears, and seeing a chum drop beside a fellow, and never having time to think when your own time was coming'. A comrade added that once the Camerons ripped open gaps in the zareba, they never waited for 'orders to charge, but went for them for all we were worth like devils'.<sup>58</sup>

Sergeant Morrison was 'astonished' by 'the heavy and continuous fire kept up by the enemy, but it all went high, and a good job too'.<sup>59</sup> They found the Mahdists fighting from a maze of deep trenches and a central stockade, with many slaves, as observed by Private Arthur Hipkin (Lincolns), 'unable to retreat because they were chained by the ankles'.<sup>60</sup> 'They are a very tough lot of men', claimed Sergeant Murphy, not least those who survived multiple wounds from Gatacre's bullets before succumbing to the bayonet. However, their shamming of death or injury before shooting or stabbing passing soldiers provoked fierce retribution: 'After that', wrote Drum-Major David Nelson (Seaforths), 'they got no mercy. They got bayoneted every time.'<sup>61</sup>

British soldiers praised the Sudanese for their zeal in close-quarter fighting, if not always the accuracy of their shooting, and for capturing Mahmud: Private George Young (Lincolns) even 'pitied the Dervishes that showed any signs of life, as the Soudanese soon put an end to their misery'.<sup>62</sup> Another Lincoln, Corporal D. W. Anderson, deplored the 'slaughter' of the battle:

[I]t was a horrible sight to see those trenches full of dead and dying Dervishes, and as we drove them to the river they were properly butchered, and hundreds of them were fairly blown to pieces . . . The smell was awful, for the huts, which were made of large palm leaves, were burning (from the shells and rockets) and it was horrible to see lots of Dervishes burning in these fires.<sup>63</sup>

Compounding the stench of battle were the odours of a camp bereft of sanitary arrangements: 'The Dervishers [*sic*]', asserted Hipkin, 'are a dirty tribe',<sup>64</sup> but the dangers of the battlefield, especially from 'ammunition constantly exploding' in the fires, prompted a withdrawal of the victorious units and their wounded. They had to bivouac in the desert with 'absolutely no shade', burying their dead and remaining until 5 p.m. whereupon they could march back to camp. 'If it was bad for us', wrote one Seaforth officer, 'it was a thousand times worse for the wounded, who suffered much.'<sup>65</sup>

The sufferings of the wounded, many of whom had injuries from explosive bullets, were a source of continuing anxiety. Corporal Skinner explained that the under-staffed and ill-equipped medical team 'had plenty of work' with ninety-four patients (there were a few less seriously injured). They lost 5 of their patients after the battle (adding to the 19 killed outright) and another 3 in the coming weeks. Even transporting the wounded on litters and stretchers by night, with the less serious cases on camels, was a 'very trying' experience – 'the worst march of the whole lot', in Skinner's opinion.<sup>66</sup> Lincolns praised their 'brave old colonel', T. E. Verner, who was shot through the jaw 'but led us on to the finish',<sup>67</sup> while several Seaforths lauded officers either killed or mortally wounded when leading from the front. Bandsman P. Learmonth grieved for 'one poor young officer, Lieutenant Gore', who died with 'a smile on his face', and Private Thomas R. Clarke composed a poem about 'our brave young captain', Alan Baillie, who died after an amputation. The poem testified to the strength of officer–man relations, ending

We'll march no more together,  
We'll miss his kindly care,  
Until we meet our captain  
In yonder land so fair.<sup>68</sup>

If good officer–man relations underpinned regimental *esprit de corps*, rivalry between the battalions added a competitive dimension. As the Scots incurred most of the casualties, with Camerons suffering the bulk of the fatalities and nearly half of the wounded, they joined war correspondents in extolling their own achievements. Even Lance-Sergeant Grieve, who was not present at the battle, concluded that 'the Lincolns & Warwicks had scarcely any wounded as the Jocks were in the trenches first'.<sup>69</sup> A Warwickshire soldier was not alone in complaining that 'according to one paper, anyone would think the Warwicks and Lincolns had not taken part in the affair – but we have, and we did our duty'.<sup>70</sup>

The veterans of Atbara returned to their respective camps – the Camerons and Seaforths to Darmali, the Lincolns and Warwicks to Es Sillem – gratified by the Khedive's promise of a medal and clasp, and pleased by the improvements in food and accommodation, and by the delivery of mail.<sup>71</sup> For four months the brigade languished in its 'summer quarters', with officers and men trying to occupy themselves with hunting, fishing, smoking concerts and sports, including an Atbara 'Derby' in June. Marches and drills were largely confined to the early morning as daytime temperatures soared above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Dysentery became prevalent from late April onwards and later typhoid fever took an increasing toll (leaving fifty dead at Darmali and probably more among those who had to be evacuated). Lance-Sergeant W. Briggs (Seaforths) was almost certainly trying to reassure relatives when he claimed: 'All the troops at Darmali are in good health'; others were more candid about the state of the camps.<sup>72</sup>

By early August reinforcements began to arrive, notably the 2nd British Brigade (1/Grenadier Guards, 1/Northumberland Fusiliers, 2/Rifle Brigade and 2/Lancashire Fusiliers), the 32nd and 37th field batteries RA, a battery of Maxim machine-guns manned by Royal Irish Fusiliers, 16th company Royal Garrison Artillery, and ultimately the 21st Lancers who joined the army on 23 August. Given the rapidity of their travel from Cairo, the forces struggled to acclimatise and to practise their drills and fighting formations: as Private Walter Pickup observed, 'the sweat rolls out of you if you walk only about half a dozen yards out of your tent', but fellow Grenadier Lance-Sergeant George Shirley insisted that spirits were high and that all were 'very anxious to get a fight'.<sup>73</sup> Kitchener was keen to oblige and had sent the Sudanese ahead, followed by the 1st British Brigade to establish a vast camp at Wad Hamed, just above the sixth cataract. When the Warwicks arrived on 16 August after a three-day journey, one of their officers remarked: 'From this date campaigning started again in real earnest, sleeping in our boots, and patrols going all night.'<sup>74</sup> On this part of the advance the Lancers, following the caravan trail south from Fort Atbara in a succession of early morning rides, had several cases of sunstroke and exhaustion, including two fatalities and the loss of 18 horses.<sup>75</sup> They arrived after Kitchener's review of 23,000 soldiers at Wad Hamed but in time to screen the ensuing march over the remaining 60 miles to Omdurman.

Even seasoned soldiers from the Egyptian Army and the 1st Brigade struggled in the daily marches which, though short, were extremely slow on account of the number of soldiers involved. Conducted over undulating terrain and through patches of deep sand and scrub, the marches were, according to Lance-Corporal Whiting (Lincolns), 'worse'

than the pre-Atbara march, 'for instead of sandstorms we had a thunderstorm about every other night'.<sup>76</sup> If a 'great many men fell out', as Lance-Corporal A. Unsworth (Seaforths) recalled, most fell out from the 2nd Brigade, where grumbling persisted about the lack of food and water. Unsworth reckoned that most bore their discomforts 'cheerfully, and with resignation . . . resolved to make the Khalifa pay dearly' for them; others testified to the inspirational support of the regimental bands and Reverend Watson's sermon on the Sunday before Omdurman, in which he likened their mission to a crusade to avenge the death of Gordon.<sup>77</sup> Sergeant W. G. Moody (Lincolns) expressed confidence in Kitchener and fatalism about the battle to come: 'There was nothing left to chance by the Sirdar, and he will carry this through all right. Of course, we shall probably leave a good few behind us, but that can't be helped, and everyone stands the same chance of getting through all right.'<sup>78</sup>

On reaching the village of Egeiga (1 September), soldiers were impressed by the Sirdar's preparations for battle. While gunboats and howitzers travelled upriver to pound the defences of Omdurman and the Mahdi's tomb, Lancers posted signallers on Jebel Surgham, a hill about two miles away, to report on the movements of the Khalifa's army. The remainder of the Anglo-Egyptian army formed a horseshoe-like formation with its back to the Nile, and, as a Warwickshire officer explained, this semi-circle stretched for 4,000 yards and each front-line battalion deployed six companies in the firing line, with two in reserve. The British constructed a zareba (unlike the shallow shelter trench and parapet built by the Egyptian troops), placed range-markers out to 2,000 yards, and, after the cavalry withdrew, sent out spies to check on the Khalifa's movements.<sup>79</sup> After an anxious night in which an alert sounded, and the men stood to arms from 3.30 a.m. onwards, Lance-Corporal J. Gibson (Lancashire Fusiliers) claimed: 'I was glad when morning came, as I wanted to have a rub at the dervishes.'<sup>80</sup>

Once the dawn patrols of cavalry and horse artillery returned to the zareba, they heard the 'awful noise' of the advancing army<sup>81</sup> and then saw, as Grenadier Drill-Sergeant Morgan described,

the sight of countless black men clad in white – an enormous host with spears and swords that glittered in the early sun, and hundreds of coloured banners. The big drums boomed – the small ones gave a peculiar liquid tone. The sight and sounds seemed to create a queer feeling among the younger chaps, but they immediately stiffened up and remembered they were Britons.

This was an organised foe, he recalled, 'in five lines, in good formation, and they were led by chiefs mounted on splendid horses'.<sup>82</sup> As they

charged across open ground, Guardsman Percy Thompson recalled how 'a murmur of admiration ran through British ranks'.<sup>83</sup> 'We waited with breathless intensity', wrote Corporal Fred Monks (Rifle Brigade), 'for the first shot, which we knew would be delivered by the artillery.' First the gunners 'with their coats off for some hot work',<sup>84</sup> then some infantry firing long-range volleys at 2,000 yards, the Maxims and the remaining infantry at about 1,500 yards, sustained a fusillade of gun and rifle fire all along the line for at least an hour-and-a-half. 'We knew', claimed Private Lison (Cameron), 'that we were all right so long as we kept them at a distance', and none of the enemy reached the zareba.<sup>85</sup>

Most praised the bravery and tenacity of the Mahdists, particularly the leader of the Baggara horsemen, whom Unsworth thought bore a 'charmed life' as he charged on alone after all his comrades had fallen before being killed.<sup>86</sup> 'It was a fearful slaughter', wrote Drum-Major Cordial (Northumberland Fusiliers), 'more like a butcher's killing house than anything else. Although the Dervishes are very brave men, our magazine fire was too much for them, and the Maxims and big guns actually mowed them down.'<sup>87</sup> Morgan agreed: 'The slaughter was dreadful. I thought it was like murder. Men fell in heaps, and corpses were piled up.'<sup>88</sup>

Soldiers were delighted when the first phase of the battle was over. 'My arms were aching', recalled Lison, and the barrel was 'too hot . . . to hold'; he welcomed the rest, a biscuit and water as ammunition pouches were refilled (the Seaforths had fired 56 volleys, the Warwicks between 60 and 70 rounds per man).<sup>89</sup> When the British moved forward at about 9 a.m., they 'got orders', as Colour-Sergeant Eastwood (Rifle Brigade) observed, 'to bayonet and shoot everyone we saw': this was 'horrible' if 'absolutely necessary' work in the opinion of some – a foretaste of the controversy that would later rage in the press – but it was a task relished by others, like Gibson, who killed 'about twenty-five, I think, and every shot I fired I said "Another one for Gordon"'.<sup>90</sup> Thompson found it 'a peculiar sensation bayonetting a man. I shut my eyes the first one I struck, but I got used to it by the time I reached the next one.'<sup>91</sup>

The 21st Lancers advanced under orders to harass the enemy on their flank and head them off from Omdurman. The regiment, as Captain F. H. Eadon admitted, was 'keen to make some mark in history in this our first campaign',<sup>92</sup> and after encountering some 150 riflemen guarding the Khalifa's line of retreat and coming under fire, Colonel Roland Martin wheeled his four squadrons into line and ordered a charge. He subsequently claimed that patrols had given 'correct information' about the enemy's numbers, that the khor over which they jumped was not as deep as 'represented in some quarters', and that 'We

charged because it was our duty to do so'.<sup>93</sup> Trooper Fred Swarbrick, however, whose patrol had initially sighted the enemy, confirmed that the reconnaissance had been minimal: 'I pointed with my lance towards them, and immediately afterwards they opened fire. The regiment wheeled into line.'<sup>94</sup>

As they galloped forward, Lieutenant Frederick Wormald realised that they had been lured into a trap (prepared by Osman Digna), and 'that instead of a mere handful of men there were about 1,500, armed with rifles and swords'.<sup>95</sup> Trooper Thomas Abbot described the ensuing clash:

Wild with excitement, we galloped for all we were worth, lances down at the 'Engage'. Shots were flying in all directions and you could see nothing else but a mass of black heads appearing from the ground. We charged with all our might right to the hilt of our steel. After we had finished our first man the lance was only in the way, and we had to draw our swords, and then I completely lost my senses in the midst of them. It was a dreadful fight for about ten minutes – a fair hand to hand.<sup>96</sup>

The 'horrors of those moments', as Trooper Clifford Thompson recollected, varied in intensity and duration from troop to troop, with the bulk of the fighting falling upon the central B and D squadrons: Eadon's squadron had 'eleven killed and thirteen wounded' out of total casualties of 21 killed and 50 wounded.<sup>97</sup> Lancers reflected upon their own luck, deeds of great gallantry (three VCs were won), the misfortunes of wounded comrades (Sergeant Freeman was unrecognisable with his nose cut off and face covered in blood), and the mutilation of fallen comrades. When they dismounted and opened fire with carbines, 'we had the pleasure', as Trooper M. Bryne observed, 'of seeing the enemy flying out of the trench', but afterwards it was a 'ghastly sight' gathering up the dead.<sup>98</sup> Few dwelt on the futility of a charge that left the regiment with 119 horses killed or wounded and thereby incapable of harassing the enemy.

On the main battlefield Hector Macdonald's brigade of Sudanese and Egyptian soldiers (and the Camel Corps) fought off the final attacks from the Khalifa's reserve forces. Compelled to change front in dealing with the separate attacks, 'our men behaved splendidly', wrote Major Nason; they moved 'quickly . . . and without the slightest confusion', virtually completing the fighting by the time the 1st British Brigade arrived: 'Our Brigadier has been given, I am glad to say, great credit for it.'<sup>99</sup> With the enemy scattered, the Anglo-Egyptian army pressed on to Omdurman, a city whose size impressed the victors but not the rows of mud huts nor the stench from a multitude of dead and decomposing bodies, both animal and human. 'What a sickening march', recalled



Guardsman Thompson, 'through five miles of dirty, foul, smelling streets, and us dead beat, too', but there was a welcome, especially from the women who 'ran out and kissed the officers' hands and sword scabbards'.<sup>100</sup>

After a night bivouacked outside or near the edge of the city, British units moved to more sanitary camp sites and buried their dead. On the following day, soldiers from each unit attended 'an imposing little ceremony' in Khartoum where flags were raised, and Kitchener wept as laments were played, a service conducted and guns fired in memory of Gordon.<sup>101</sup> Meanwhile, each battalion sent an officer and sixteen men to count the dervish dead: as a Warwickshire officer remarked, this was 'not a pleasant occupation', especially as they counted 10,800 corpses. They also carried biscuits and water for the enemy wounded and marvelled at their resilience despite some horrendous wounds: 'it is wonderful the way they hang on'.<sup>102</sup>

For the vast majority of the British soldiers the campaign was now over, but 'E' Company of the Cameron Highlanders was chosen with the 11th and 13th Sudanese battalions to accompany Kitchener in three gunboats up the White Nile to confront Major Marchand's force at Fashoda. Although they were all sworn to secrecy, several officers, kept diaries and the account of Captain the Hon. Andrew Murray was used by Bennett Burleigh in his famous 'scoop' on the expedition. As Murray recorded, they had 'a very miserable journey' south, for it rained heavily every night as they travelled through tropical country, with heavily forested river banks. They used all their Maxims and guns to disperse a Mahdist camp at Renk and disable an enemy vessel before the fateful meeting between Marchand and Kitchener on board the *Dal*. The Camerons then had the honour of providing an escort ashore, whereupon the Khedive's flag was raised and his anthem played before they marched back to the tune of the 'Cameron Men'. Sudanese troops were left to provide garrisons at Fashoda and Sobat, but Murray doubted they 'cared much to be back in their native country'. The Camerons returned directly to Omdurman and thence to Cairo.<sup>103</sup>

After the declaration of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, Sir F. Reginald Wingate was left with the task of pacifying the country and suppressing the last embers of Mahdism. This would involve several fruitless expeditions in attempts to apprehend the Khalifa before encountering his remaining forces at Um Dibaykarat (24 November 1899). Egyptian fire-power duly overwhelmed the enemy, leaving the Khalifa dead with his emirs alongside him. One of Wingate's staff regarded it as 'a truly touching sight, and one could not but feel that, however great a beast he and they had been in their lifetime, their end was truly grand'.<sup>104</sup>

Notes

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- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4; SAD, 304/2/5, /7, /10, Farley, 'Some Recollections'.
- 22 SRM, Astell, 'Diary', ch. 3, p. 4.
- 23 SAD, 304/2/13, Farley, 'Some Recollections'.
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- 28 SRM, Astell, 'Diary', pp. 17–18.
- 29 SAD, 304/2/23, Farley, 'Some Recollections'; see also Alford and Sword, *Egyptian Soudan*, pp. 110, 122–33. Alford stated that another eighty men were 'weeded out' at Hafir and Sadek but Farley claimed that all but one of these men rejoined the battalion, so 599 marched on Dongola: SAD, 304/2/28, Farley, 'Some Recollections'.
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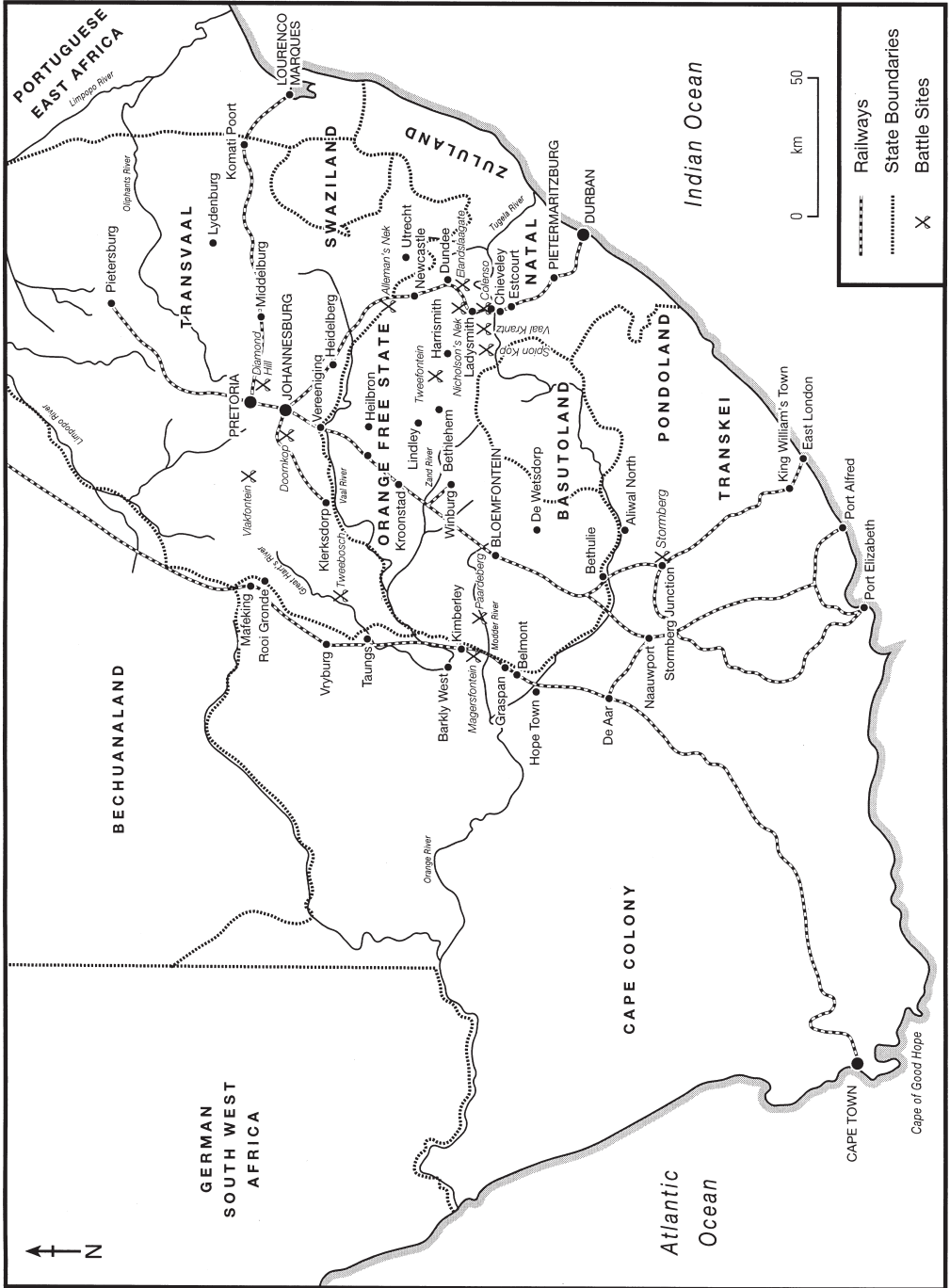
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- 98 'A Berwick Trooper in the Lancers' Charge', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 14 October 1898, p. 2; see also 'Omdurman Charge', p. 3; 'Gallantry of One of the 21st', *Sussex Daily News*, 12 October 1898, p. 5; 'Charge of the Lancers', p. 6.
- 99 'Great Battle in the Soudan', p. 2.
- 100 'Fight at Omdurman', p. 4; see also 'A Letter from Omdurman to Alnwick', p. 8; 'A Derbyshire Soldier at Omdurman', p. 3; 'Letters from the Soudan', p. 6.
- 101 'Great Battle in the Soudan', p. 2.
- 102 'A Southampton Officer in the Soudan Campaign'. p. 7.
- 103 Although Murray's account broadly confirms the particulars in Lt R. L. Aldecron's diary, there are discrepancies about dates: compare 'Full Account of the Sirdar's Expedition to Fashoda', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 October 1898, p. 7, with R. L. A., 'A Diary of the Fashoda Expedition', *The 79th News*, 42 (1 March 1899), 8–10.
- 104 'The Khalifa's Last Stand', *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 16 December 1899, p. 6.



8 Bechuanaland and the South African War, 1899–1902