CHAIN OF FIRE

ALSO BY PETER HART

Gallipoli

The Great War: 1914–1918

The Last Battle: Endgame on the Western Front, 1918

Voices from the Front: An Oral History of the Great War

At Close Range: Life and Death in an Artillery Regiment, 1939–45

Burning Steel: A Tank Regiment at War, 1939–45

Footsloggers: An Infantry Battalion at War, 1939–45

CHAIN OF FIRE

CAMPAIGNING IN EGYPT AND THE SUDAN, 1882–98

PETER HART

Profile Books

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
ECIA 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

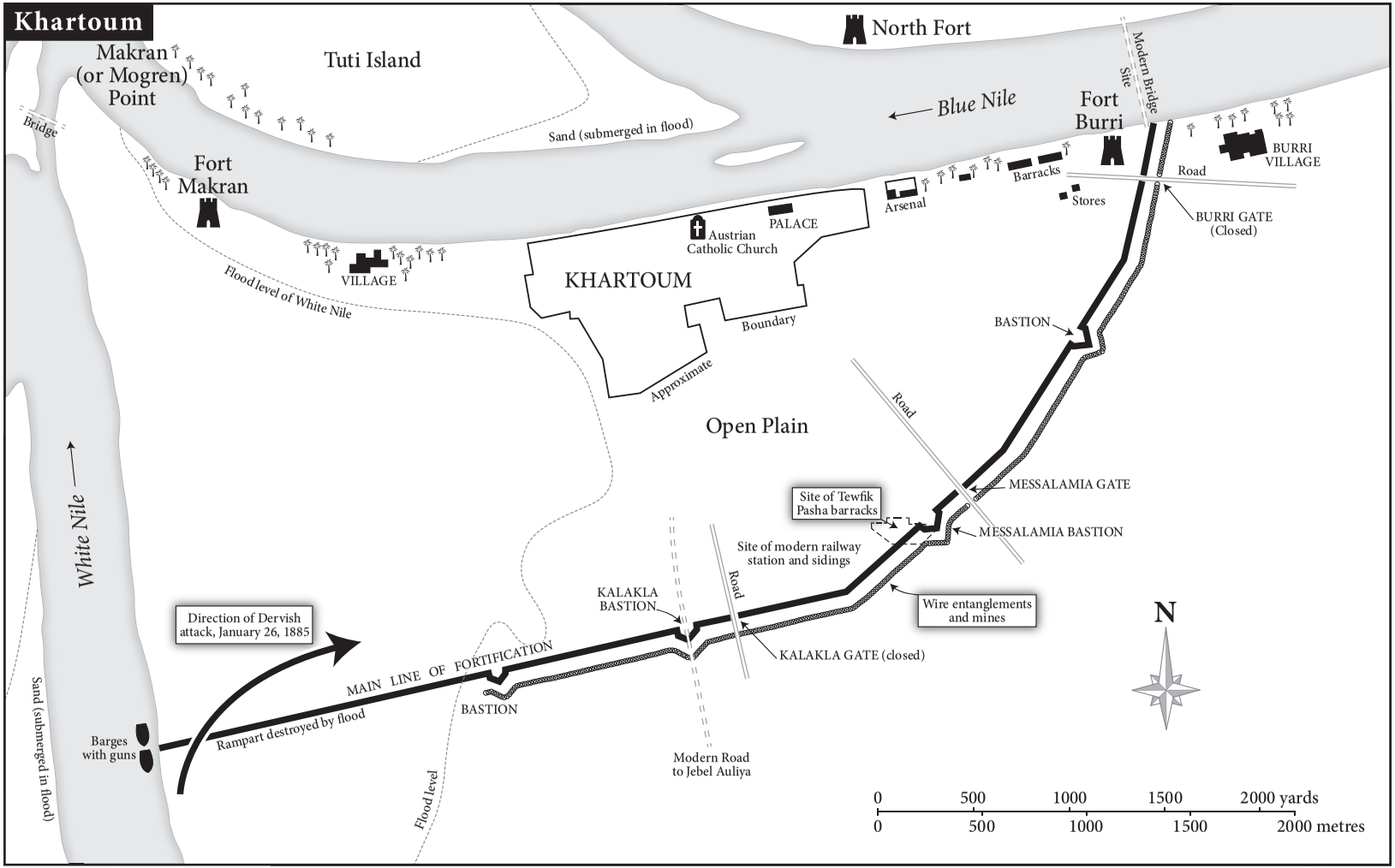
Typeset in Dante by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

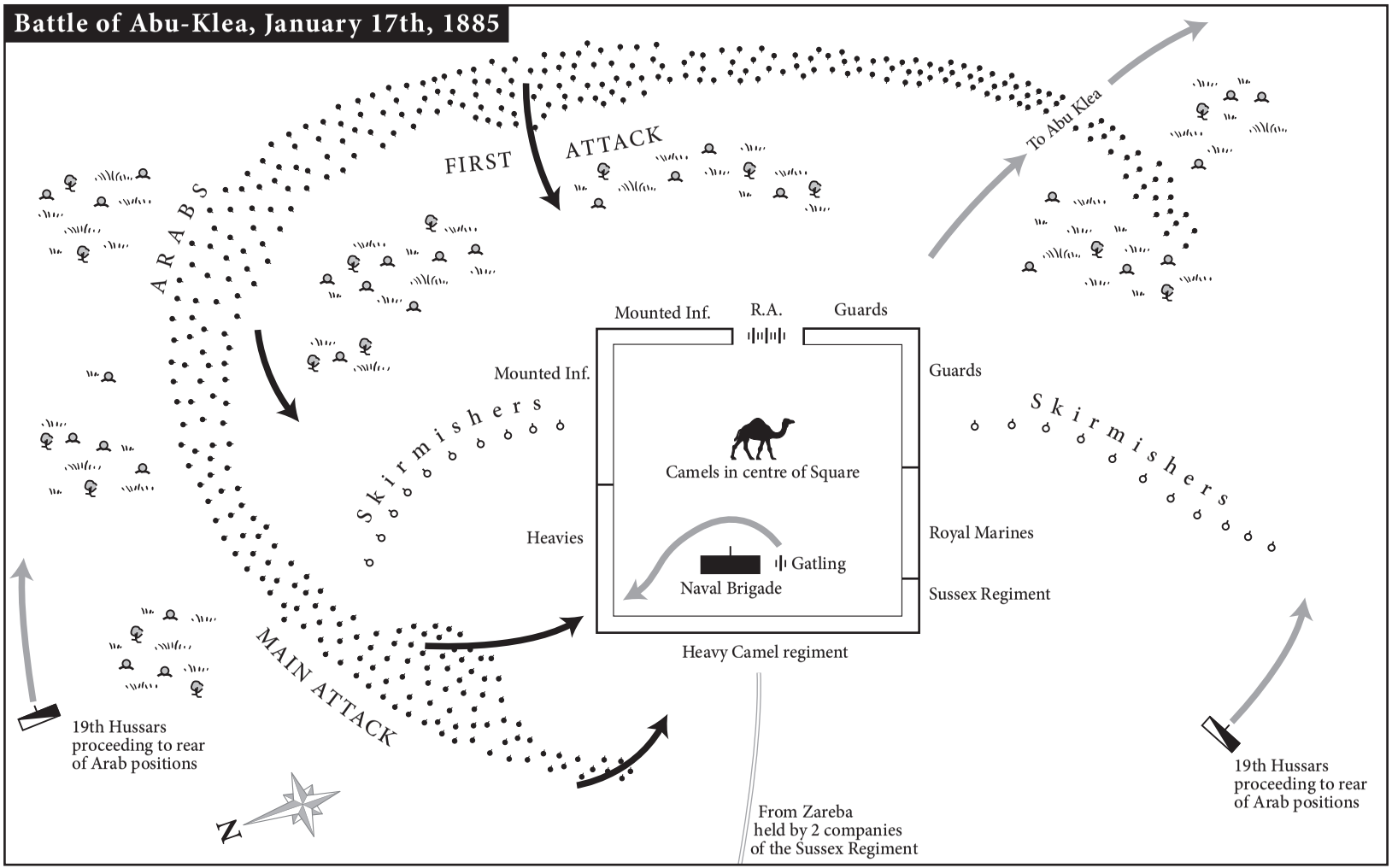
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

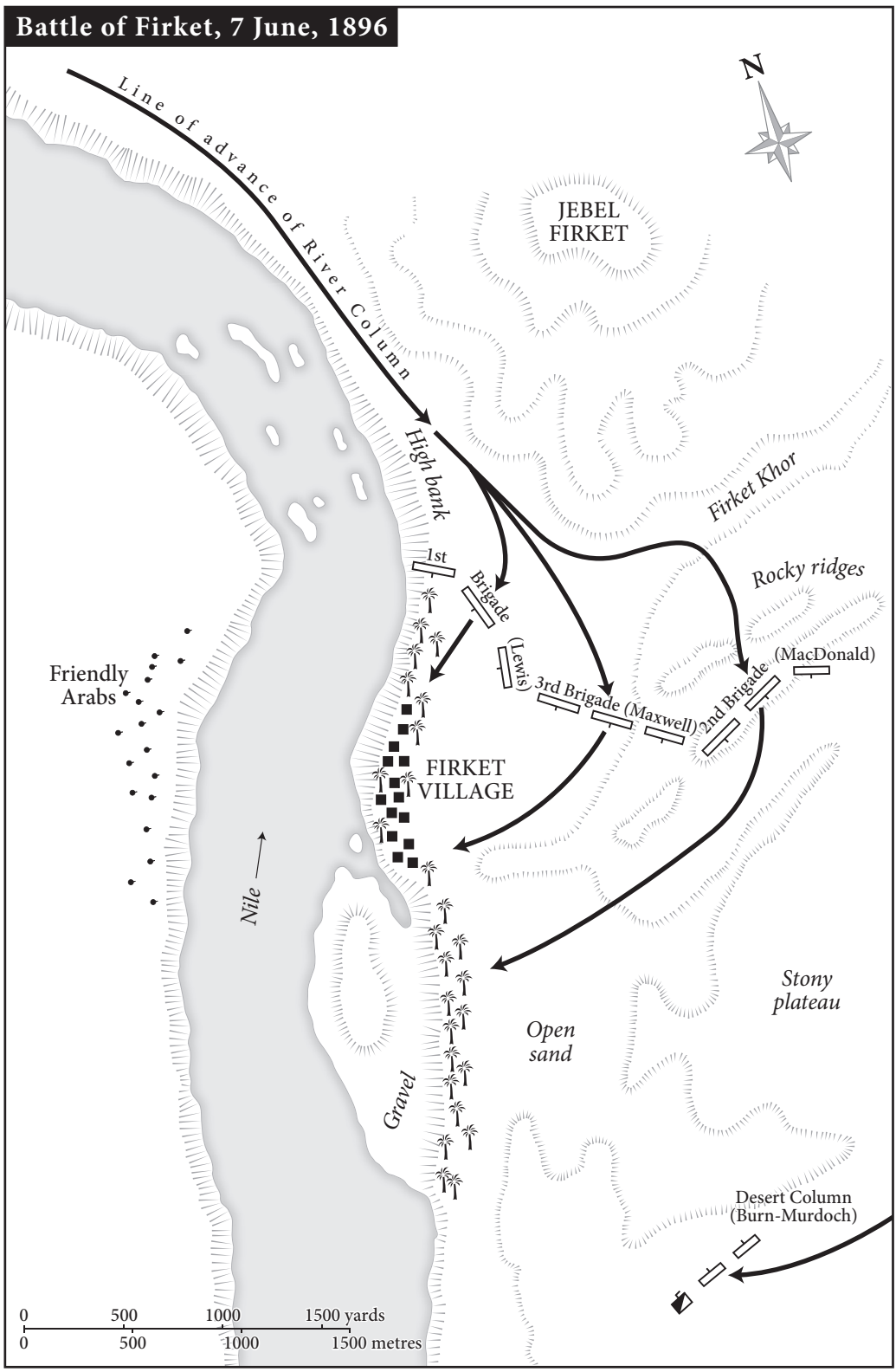
ISBN 978 1 80081 073 0
eISBN 978 1 80081 075 4

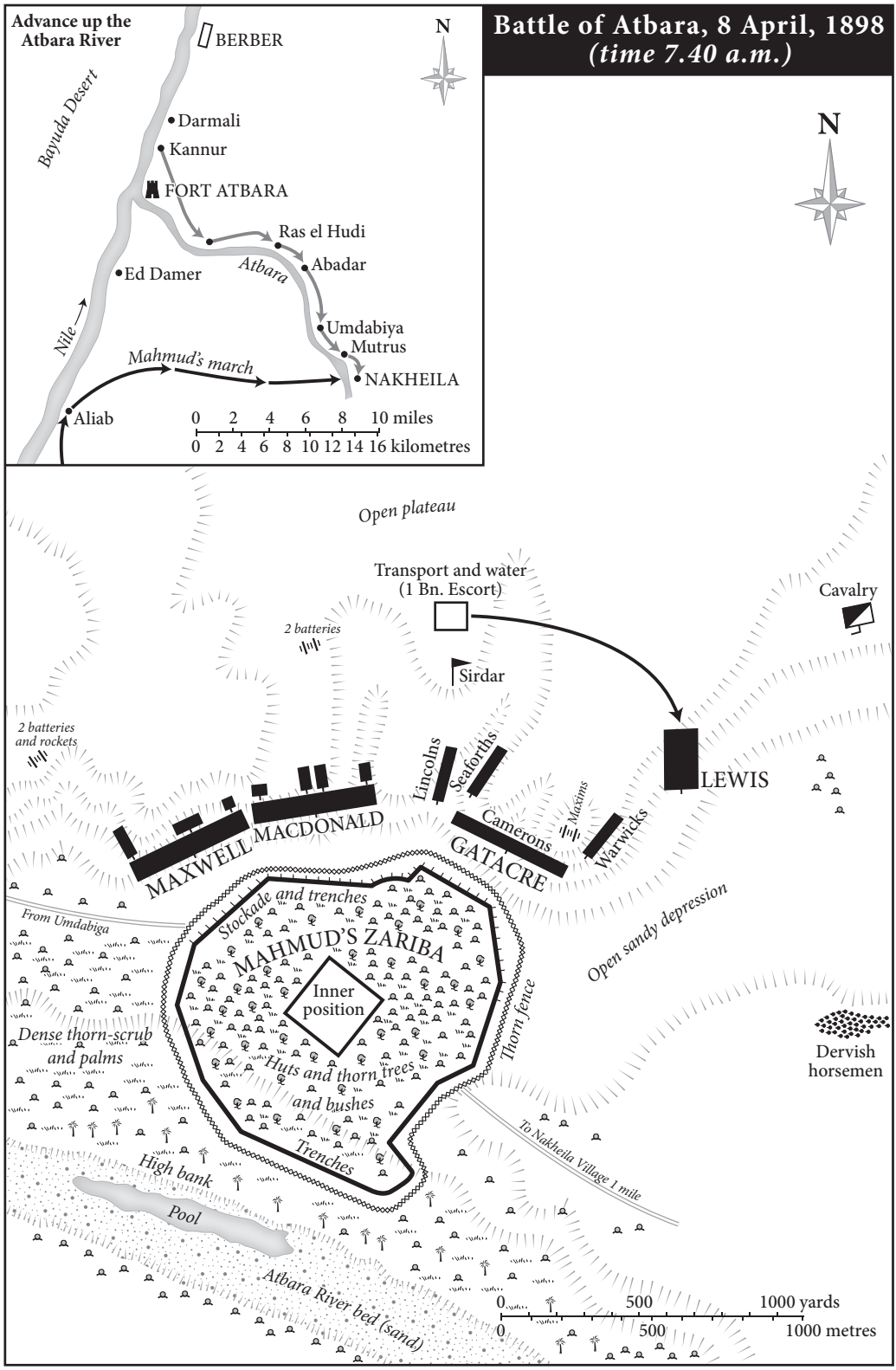
Contents

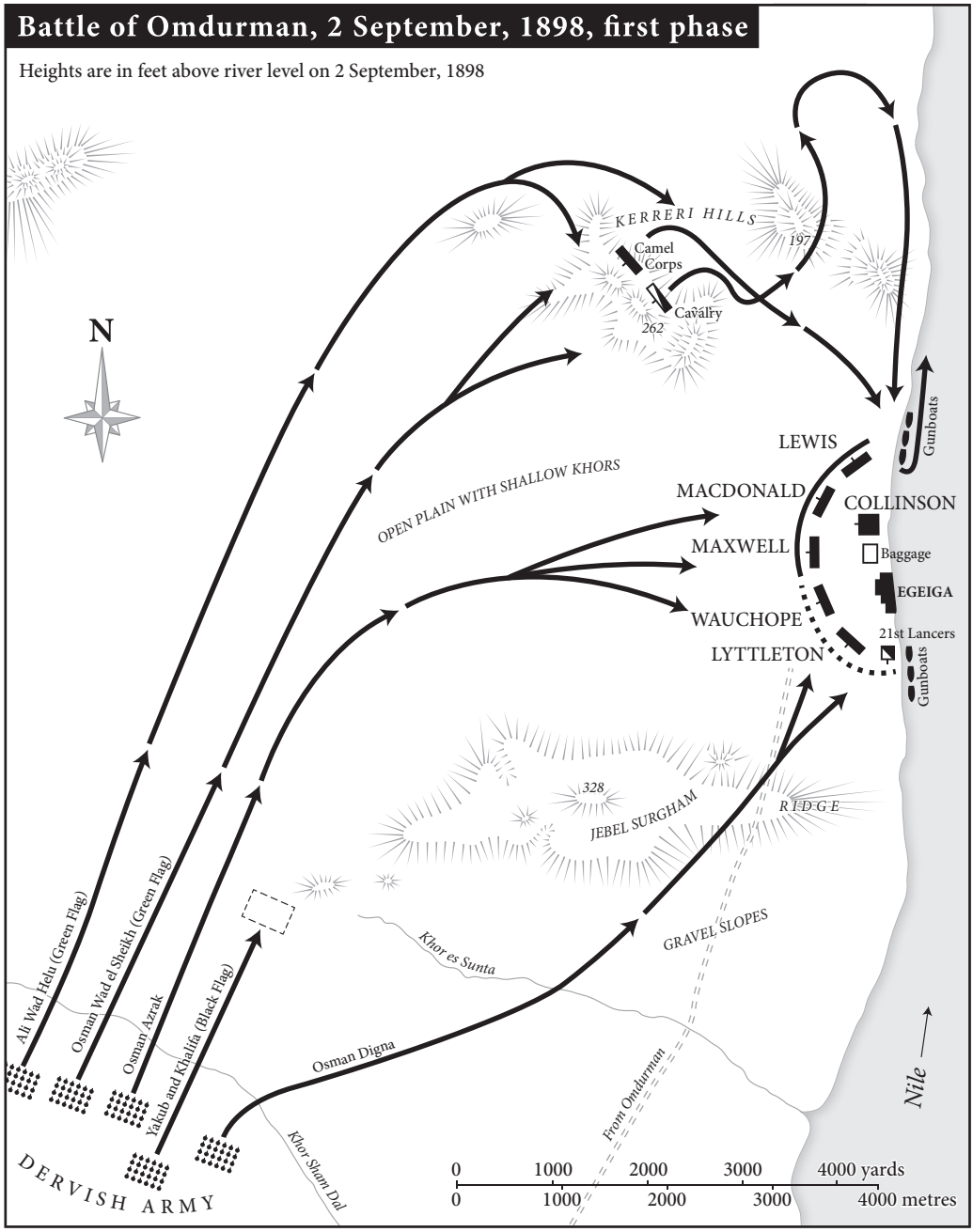
MAPS


Khartoum
North Fort
Makran (or Mogren) Point
Tuti Island
Blue Nile
Fort Burri
Modern Bridge Site
Bridge
Sand (submerged in flood)
Fort Makran
BURRI VILLAGE
Road
Barracks
Arsenal
Stores
BURRI GATE (Closed)
Austrian Catholic Church
PALACE
VILLAGE
KHARTOUM
Flood level of White Nile
Boundary
Approximate
BASTION
Road
Open Plain
MESSALAMIA GATE
Site of Tewfik Pasha barracks
MESSALAMIA BASTION
Site of modern railway station and sidings
Road
KALAKLA BASTION
Wire entanglements and mines
White Nile
Direction of Dervish attack, January 26, 1885
MAIN LINE OF FORTIFICATION
KALAKLA GATE (closed)
BASTION
Rampart destroyed by flood
Barges with guns
Sand (submerged in flood)
Flood level
Modern Road to Jebel Auliya
N
0 500 1000 1500 2000 yards
0 500 1000 1500 2000 metres


Battle of Abu-Klea, January 17th, 1885
ARABS
FIRST ATTACK
To Abu Klea
Mounted Inf.
R.A.
Guards
Mounted Inf.
Guards
Skirmishers
Skirmishers
Camels in centre of Square
Heavies
Royal Marines
Gatling
Naval Brigade
Sussex Regiment
Heavy Camel regiment
MAIN ATTACK
19th Hussars proceeding to rear of Arab positions
19th Hussars proceeding to rear of Arab positions
From Zareba held by 2 companies of the Sussex Regiment
N

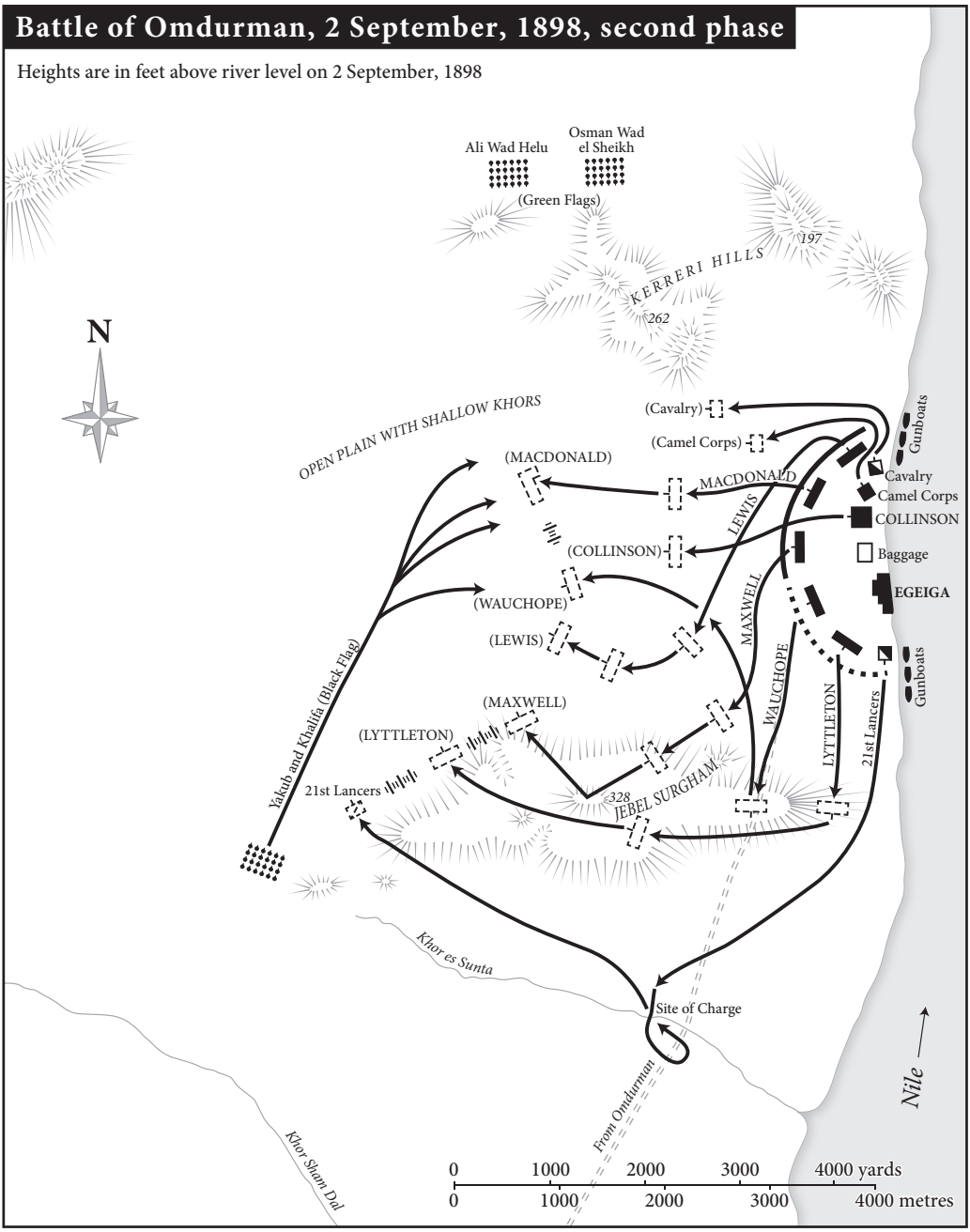

Battle of Firket, 7 June, 1896
Line of advance of River Column
N
JEBEL FIRKET
High bank
Firket Khor
Rocky ridges
1st Brigade
(Lewis)
3rd Brigade (Maxwell)
2nd Brigade
(MacDonald)
Friendly Arabs
FIRKET VILLAGE
Nile
Stony plateau
Open sand
Gravel
Desert Column (Burn-Murdoch)
0 500 1000 1500 yards
0 500 1000 1500 metres


Battle of Atbara, 8 April, 1898
(time 7.40 a.m.)
Advance up the Atbara River
BERBER
N
Bayuda Desert
Darmali
Kannur
FORT ATBARA
Ras el Hudi
Abadar
Atbara
Ed Damer
Nile
Umdabiya
Mutrus
Mahmud's march
NAKHEILA
Aliab
0 2 4 6 8 10 miles
0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 kilometres
Open plateau
Transport and water
(1 Bn. Escort)
Cavalry
2 batteries
Sirdar
2 batteries
and rockets
Lincolns
Seaforths
LEWIS
MACDONALD
MAXWELL
Camerons
Maxims
Warwicks
GATACRE
Stockade and trenches
From Umdabiga
MAHMUD'S ZARIBA
Inner
position
Open sandy depression
Thorn fence
Dervish
horsemen
Dense thorn-scrub
and palms
Huts and thorn trees
and bushes
Trenches
To Nakheila Village 1 mile
High bank
Pool
Atbara River bed (sand)
0 500 1000 yards
0 500 1000 metres


Battle of Omdurman, 2 September, 1898, first phase
Heights are in feet above river level on 2 September, 1898
N
KERRERI HILLS
197
Camel Corps
Cavalry
262
LEWIS
Gunboats
MACDONALD
COLLINSON
OPEN PLAIN WITH SHALLOW KHORS
MAXWELL
Baggage
EGEIGA
WAUCHOPE
21st Lancers
LYTTLETON
Gunboats
328
JEBEL SURGHAM
RIDGE
GRAVEL SLOPES
Khor es Sunta
Ali Wad Helu (Green Flag)
Osman Wad el Sheikh (Green Flag)
Osman Azrak
Yakub and Khalifa (Black Flag)
Osman Digna
From Omdurman
Khor Sham Dal
Nile
DERVISH ARMY
0 1000 2000 3000 4000 yards
0 1000 2000 3000 4000 metres

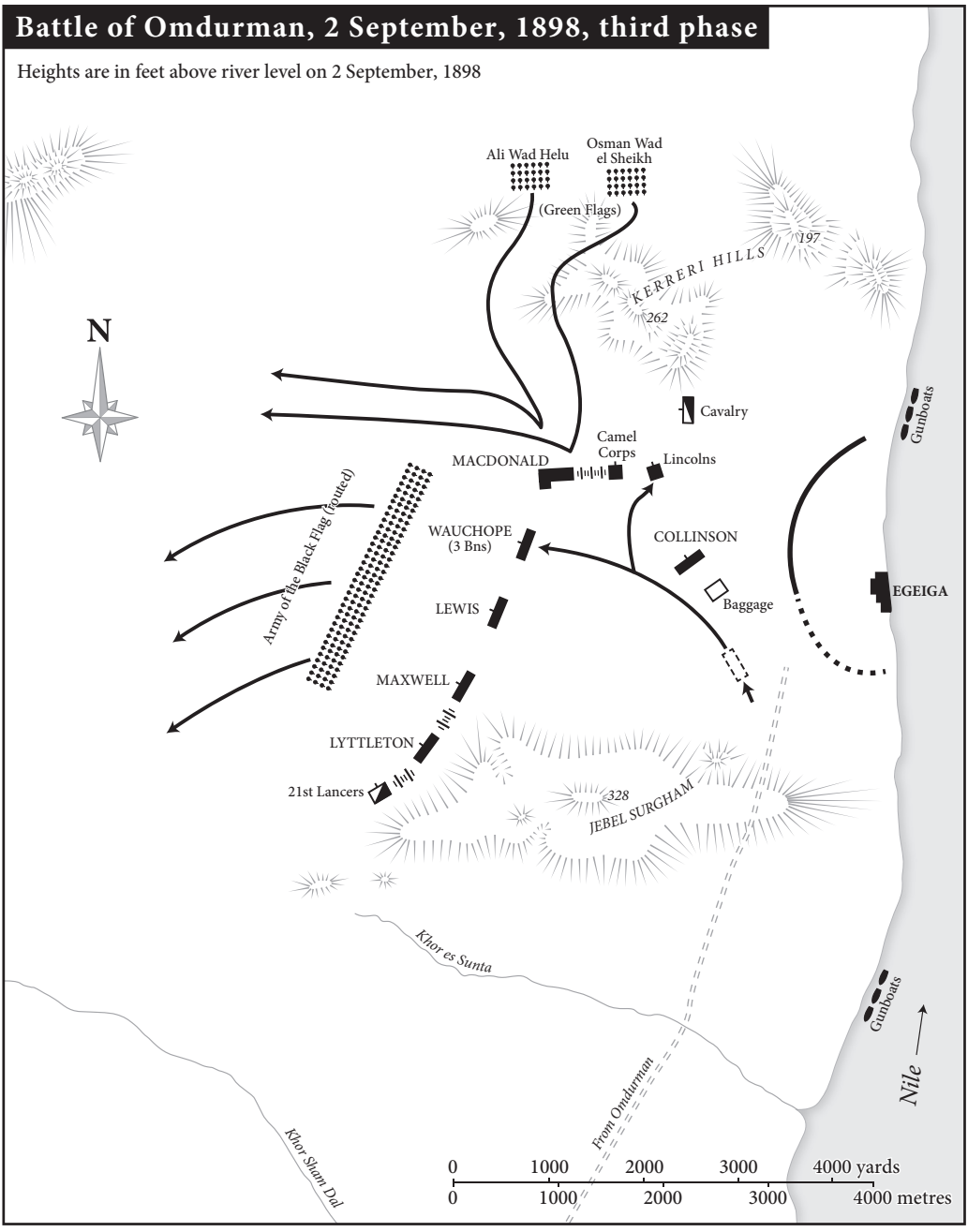
Battle of Omdurman, 2 September, 1898, second phase

Heights are in feet above river level on 2 September, 1898



Battle of Omdurman, 2 September, 1898, third phase

Heights are in feet above river level on 2 September, 1898



PREFACE

My fascination is with the thoughts and words of the men who face the trials of armed conflict at its worst. The Egyptian and Sudan campaigns of 1882–98 feature some of the most gripping accounts I have ever encountered. The terrain is spectacular, with its backdrop of wild deserts and the Nile River winding in and out of our story. I have made a particular effort to use the voices of officers who attained high rank in the Great War just sixteen years later – some of whom are obvious, like Winston Churchill and Herbert Kitchener, but also those such as David Beatty, Douglas Haig, Ian Hamilton, Henry Rawlinson, Horace Smith-Dorrien and Charles Townshend. These senior officers were not born old in 1914; they too had been young men, strong and virile, but often showing the military qualities that marked them out for future greatness. We now know who won each nerve-jangling battle. At the time the participants of course did not, and they often feared for their lives.

I think it unlikely that certain incidents, not fully understood or contentious at the time, can ever now be understood. All we can do is to suggest what probably happened. Men were lost in the chaos of battle, with smoke all around, their view blocked by comrades, camels and assailants, the last of which, not unnaturally, demanded most of their attention. It is not surprising that their stories sometimes differ in detail. In the years covered here there were too many battles, so I have tried to bring out different perspectives and to concentrate on those that drive forward our narrative. The political background – a complex subject that has filled hundreds of pages in too many books – is only sketched in.

I have throughout used the most common of the – many – British versions of Egyptian and Sudanese placenames. I have also, after a period of inner wrangling, decided for the most part to use the term 'Dervishes' for the brave men of the Mahdist armies. I am aware that 'Ansar' would be a more appropriate collective term, and that Dervish is a misnomer. Yet this is the term almost universally used in contemporaneous accounts, so I have opted for simplicity. Nor have I censored – and hence softened – some of the terrible racist terms occasionally used within quoted accounts. We should not 'wash it away' by pretending it never happened. Finally, I have dropped British honorifics such as 'Sir', unless within quotes, as they add nothing to our understanding.

There is no doubt that combatants on both sides behaved reprehensibly on the battlefields of 1882–98. But as many readers of this book will be British, this book may well provoke the question: are we the baddies? I do not intend to throw mud at men who for the most part were acting according to the prevalent belief systems of the time, but only to point out when their attitudes and actions might be seen as unacceptable from our perspective. In a sense, this is nothing more than a sop to our feelings, as we read sometimes chastening accounts of British imperialism, arrogance, racist bigotry, brutality and downright murder. Although in a sense we must accept that such behaviour is wrong, at the same time we need to try to understand that this occurred more than a hundred years ago when the world was a very different place. Or was it? Humankind is still riven by nationalism, imperialism and religious extremism around the world – especially in the Sudan – one of the most dangerous places on the earth.

1

THE REASON WHY

> 'When Allah made the Sudan,' say the Arabs, 'he laughed!' You can almost hear the fiendish echo of it crackling over the fiery sand.[1]
>
> George Steevens, *Daily Mail*

EGYPT WAS AN ANOMALY WITHIN THE BRITISH EMPIRE, a land of desert sands, soaked with the blood of past conflicts, full of history, but with few apparent economic resources to be harvested. The irony was that originally the British had no wish to take on Egypt as a fully fledged colony, preferring to leave it to be controlled by the local ruler – the Khedive – under the vague suzerainty of the Turkish Sultan. Unfortunately, in his efforts to modernise Egypt, not wishing to be left behind other nation states, the then Khedive, Ismail Pasha, borrowed copious amounts of money from abroad, particularly from the British and French governments. Much of the money was spent on infrastructure projects – such as railways, bridges, canals, harbours, docks, telegraph communications, the sugar refining industry – but a fair amount was also squandered on the purchase of estates and the building of extravagant palaces. Soon the Egyptians found themselves in a spiralling circle of debt, with minimal prospect of the modernisations paying for themselves any time soon.

By 1875, ruin beckoned, and in desperation Ismail Pasha sold off perhaps his greatest asset, the shares held in the Suez Canal, conceived and constructed as a joint venture between the Egyptian Government and the French-led Suez Canal Company.

Now, for just over £4 million, the British gained nearly 50 per cent of the shares, and the preservation of the route through the canal became an absolute priority of British foreign policy. For the Khedive the money raised was but a drop in the ocean of debt. His financial troubles resulted in the establishment of the *Caisse de la Dette Publique* in 1876. This committee represented the direct intervention by creditor European nations to investigate the Egyptian economy from top to bottom, including debt consolidation or restructuring, with the overall intent of creating an achievable repayment programme for the international debts. Although other countries were involved, the committee was dominated by British and French interests, with Evelyn Baring appointed as the British controller. The Khedive soon found his every move hedged in by this system of 'Dual Control'.

Ismail chafed under the restrictions imposed on his rule, and was soon intriguing to create trouble that would 'prove' the failure of 'Dual Control'. In 1879, after a period of turmoil, Ismail was deposed and replaced as Khedive by his son, the far more pliable Mehmet Tewfik. Yet more serious problems were bubbling beneath the surface in Egypt as the masses struggled with endemic poverty, exacerbated by a punitive tax system. All this encouraged a burgeoning Egyptian nationalistic consciousness, with unrest directed at both the Khedive and the Europeans.

One of the most influential figures in this movement was Colonel Ahmed Arabi, who, although routinely denigrated in contemporary British accounts, possessed a strength of purpose that channelled the widespread popular unrest into an effective military-led revolt against Tewfik on 9 September 1881. Unable for the moment to withstand the nationalist demands, Tewfik was forced to concede the establishment of a new chamber of deputies including several of the nationalist sympathisers. Ominously, from a certain perspective, work started on strengthening the Egyptian Army and coastal defences. The portents were obvious – this could be a threat to the control of the Suez Canal. Britain would never officially condone espionage, but in January 1882, Major Alexander Tulloch decided to investigate

on his own account, combining a bit of freelance spying with shooting game. The Egyptians proved to be charming hosts, tolerant to a fault of his covert activities, which, as even Tulloch admitted, were certainly close to the knuckle.

> On one occasion I thought the chief of the staff was lifting the curtain rather too high, so I said to him plainly, 'You must not tell me too much! You and I may be on opposite platforms before long!' He laughed, saying, 'When I am abroad, I keep my eyes open, and I guess you do the same!' To sum up: I was able in my report to give not only a full detailed account of everything connected with the army – its guns, arms, stores, magazines, factories, what was on order in Europe, and what their scheme of defence was: I was also able to examine and give an account of the state of the forts at Alexandria, and along the coast, with the nature and number of their guns, etc. I managed to get an excellent French map of the Delta, which was of great use to me in reporting on the military value of the railways, the Cairo, Ismailia, and Suez fresh-water canal.[2]
>
> Major Alexander Tulloch, Welsh Regiment

The growing threats to the authority of the Khedive became too much for the British and French, who most of all craved stability and security for their investments in Egypt. On 8 January 1882 they sent a joint diplomatic note, which not only asserted the overall power of the Khedive but pledged to support him against all his enemies. This was a slap in the face and direct warning to the new parliamentarians and certainly to Arabi, who rejected the whole idea of foreign intervention. As the warnings were not immediately backed up by force, this merely triggered a new even more nationalistically flavoured line-up of politicians, including the appointment of Arabi as minister of war in May 1882. The first Anglo-French actions were tokenistic as they sent warships, that staple of imperial diplomacy, to take up position in Alexandria harbour and to cruise off the Egyptian coast. By

this time both the Khedive and Arabi were appealing for support from the nominal ruler of Egypt, Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The response could have been predicted: the Sultan rejected the idea of deploying troops against fellow Muslims who, after all, were merely opposing the sanctions of foreign – and nominally Christian – governments; but he also hesitated to depose the Khedive who was so clearly supported by the British and French. Here was a man with little to gain and a lot to lose, whichever side he took.

That summer, the streets of Alexandria were filled with rumours of a 'reckoning' and threats of slaughter in the streets for the European population. On the afternoon of 11 June 1882 the situation exploded into a vicious riot. Soon there were massed crowds numbered in thousands rampaging through the streets. All the smouldering grievances burst to the surface in an orgy of violence and destruction. Maltese- and Greek-owned businesses were targeted, with crowds reported to be chanting, 'Death to the Christians!' European consulates were attacked and the British consul was badly wounded, only just escaping with his life. The Egyptian police and soldiers did little or nothing to intervene, some even joining in, and overall it was evident where their sympathies lay. An estimated fifty Europeans were killed, with great damage to property and businesses across the city.

Admiral Beauchamp Seymour, the commander in chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, did not land his men to intervene directly ashore, doubtless aware of the underlying hesitations of the Prime Minister William Gladstone's Liberal government, which wanted to avoid a war with Egypt. Although the riots died down by nightfall, after the belated intervention of a regiment of Arabi's soldiers, they had caused panic among the surviving Europeans who feared a resumption at any moment.

As a matter of urgency, Tulloch had been attached as a military liaison officer to Seymour's staff aboard the temporary flagship *Invincible*; indeed, after the riots his earlier reports were printed as a War Office memorandum. Tulloch had a first-hand

view of the prevarications of the Gladstone government and a low-key first encounter with Herbert Kitchener, a man who will be central to our story. Although definitely not considering himself to be Irish, Kitchener, the son of army officer, was born in County Kerry on 24 June 1850. He volunteered to serve with a French field ambulance unit during the Franco-Prussian War, before being commissioned into the Royal Engineers in 1871. He had carried out notable surveying and mapping work with the Palestine Exploration Fund, during which period he had become fluent in Arabic. More mapping and survey work followed in Cyprus before he saw the opportunity for action.

> All this time our politicals and the admiral were in constant telegraphic communication with the government at home, whose motto seemed to be, 'Peace at any price!' We saw clearly enough what it would all end in, but the government were apparently of the same mind as the proverbial ostrich. One morning when I was engaged writing on board the *Invincible*, a tall thin subaltern of engineers named Kitchener came to see me: he had got a few days' leave from his general at Cyprus, and as he could speak Arabic, had come to see if he could be of any use to me. 'Certainly!' I replied.[3]
>
> Major Alexander Tulloch, HMS *Invincible*

From the ships they could see the Egyptians making further preparations – or from their point of view, precautions – in case of war. It was soon evident that the now *de facto* head of government, Arabi, was well aware of Tulloch's previous activities as an amateur spy.

> Arabi's preparations in mounting more guns and adding to the parapets of his batteries could not be allowed to go on, so he got a letter from the admiral that the preparations against us must cease. To this he replied he was really not aware more guns were being mounted, &c., and would

> stop it at once; that he was not well acquainted with the armaments of the forts, but if the admiral wished for information about them, he should ask Major Tulloch, because Major Tulloch really knew far more about the forts than he, Arabi, did.[4]
>
> Major Alexander Tulloch, HMS *Invincible*

Tulloch was evidently pleased at such a professional compliment from his adversary.

Back in England, there was an outcry at the attacks on British civilians under the very guns of the fleet. Gladstone's government had decided to postpone demands for reparations until the bulk of the vulnerable European civilians had been evacuated. The politicians in London were still pondering their exact course of action, but the threat to the Suez Canal proved impossible for them to ignore. There was also the question of the safety of British commercial investments in the region. It was almost impossible to secure the safety of the canal without taking Cairo, as the Egyptians could not be left in control of the Ismailia canal or railways. Furthermore, if the nationalists were not toppled in one swift, crunching blow, then the British government would have to finance a permanent Suez defence force at doubtless vast expense. From a military point of view, it was necessary to prepare for a military expedition to 'restore order'. Hence the recently appointed adjutant general, Lieutenant General Garnet Wolseley, as the designated commander in chief of any future expedition, was busy undertaking the practical preparations for the despatch of an army corps of two divisions to Egypt, totalling some 24,000 men with the associated transport.

Wolseley was acclaimed as the greatest soldier of the age; he was born in Dublin on 4 June 1833 to a military family and was commissioned into the 12th Foot in 1852. He transferred to the 80th Foot and had early service in the Second Anglo-Burmese War where he was wounded in 1853. He was again wounded – twice – in the Crimean War in 1855, including losing an eye,

before serving during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. A series of important postings followed and as he was promoted to major general in 1877, he had become to the British public 'the very model of a modern major general' as immortalised in song by Gilbert and Sullivan's 1879 comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance*. There was even a popular expression 'Everything's all Sir Garnet!' meaning, 'All is in order!'

Now Wolseley was pondering the various tactical options open to him in the event of war. One approach was to land near Alexandria and advance from there via the Nile to Cairo and he therefore signalled to Tulloch asking him to investigate the feasibility of this route. As a result of his prior investigations, Tulloch himself favoured a landing at Ismailia near the mouth of the Suez Canal for the advance to Cairo, but he felt honour bound to check out the Alexandria route as requested, using the railway which was still open. It would prove a dangerous mission, as Tulloch was a marked man.

> I decided to go up the line in disguise. The admiral did not at all like the risk of my doing so, but I said I considered it a matter of duty, so arranged to slip into the Suez train with the mail passengers next afternoon, got up as a Levantine official. I did not like cutting off my naval beard, and rather amused Kitchener by saying, as I brushed it out before clipping it for shaving, 'Well, "K", I wonder if this also' – pointing to my throat – 'will be cut today!' When a reconnaissance has to be made, there should always be at least two, to give a chance of one getting back with the required information; so 'K' went with me in the same train. He, like the rest of the passengers, was safe enough, but I knew that if recognised I should not get far. Arrived at Kaffir Zyat, I made out that I was suddenly so overcome with a painful complaint I must return for special medical advice to Alexandria; but when 'K', who remained to help the invalid, inquired about the exact time our train would leave, it was decidedly unpleasant to find that our expected

> return train had been taken off, and that there was but one more train to come that evening. It was the last run by the European administration and brought the few remaining English from Cairo. I thought it advisable to keep out of sight as much as possible until the train arrived and got a couch in a room in the station-master's house. Having plenty of cigarettes, I was comfortable enough. When the train came in, I saw one of the Europeans recognised me, but a quick sign was sufficient. The invalid and his companion had a carriage to themselves. Arabi's people soon heard about my little trip. Seven days afterwards a fair-complexioned Syrian was noticed in the train at Kaffir Zyat: he was taken out of the train under the impression that he was a European doing my work, and his throat cut on the platform. I doubt if Sir Garnet ever knew the risk I ran to get and wire him the information he required.[5]
>
> Major Alexander Tulloch, HMS *Invincible*

Wolseley came up with a far-seeing plan for the campaign even before the formal outbreak of hostilities. He resolved to advance from Ismailia, using the railway lines to ease his transport requirements.

Meanwhile the Egyptians covertly intensified their attempts to strengthen the defences of Alexandria against the threat posed by the Anglo-French squadrons. They brought in more guns, built up the battery parapets and earthworks, and prepared measures to block the entrance of the harbour. In negotiations with Admiral Seymour, they promised to comply with his demands to desist, but every night, under cover of darkness, they resumed the works. Finally, Seymour had had enough of being ignored and on 10 July he issued a 24-hour ultimatum.

> As hostile preparations, evidently directed against the squadron under my command, were in progress during yesterday at Forts Isali, Pharos, and Silsileh, I shall carry out the intention expressed to you in my letter of the

> 6th instant, at sunrise to-morrow, the 11th instant, unless previous to that hour you shall have temporarily surrendered to me, for the purpose of disarming, the batteries on the isthmus of Ras el Tin and the southern shore of the harbour of Alexandria. [6]
>
> Admiral Beauchamp Seymour, Mediterranean Fleet

In the topsy-turvy world of nineteenth-century imperialism, preparing to defend one's port from a possible foreign invasion was clearly an aggressive act. The reply Seymour received offered to suspend the mounting of any further guns, but this was rejected out of hand. The forts *must* be disarmed. Now it came to the crunch, the Anglo-French accord fractured, as the French government ordered Admiral Conrad, commanding the French squadron, not to cooperate with the British fleet in the event of force being used to prevent the work on the batteries. The French squadron withdrew to take up station off Port Said. It would be war, but the Royal Navy would fight alone.

2

THE BOMBARDMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

> It is not often one gets a chance of such a perfect view of an engagement without any risk. I thought the Egyptians showed a great deal of pluck. Until their heavy guns were actually capsized or disabled, they made a very good fight of it. They had, in reality, no chance of success from the very commencement, as only a few of their guns could penetrate the armour-plates of the ironclads, even under the most favourable circumstances, and all of these were very soon disabled.[1]
>
> Captain Arthur Wilson, HMS *Hecla*

THIS WAS NOT A FAIR FIGHT. The Egyptian defences, so condemned by Admiral Beauchamp Seymour in his reports to the Admiralty, were no real threat to the massed guns of the Royal Navy. Alexandria was on a strip of land between the Mediterranean and Lake Mariût, with its old eastern port divided into an inner and outer harbour, and a new western port. Defending it were a string of forts, based on French fortifications, which were by this time somewhat dilapidated and, being constructed of soft limestone, could not withstand modern artillery fire. The parapets were often just sand covered with a veneer of cement, while the gun emplacements had no overhead cover, leaving the gun detachments vulnerable to shellfire. The guns were a mixture of a few relatively modern muzzle-loaded rifled Armstrong guns varying from 7- to 10-inch, less effective old smoothbore guns from 6.5- to 15-inch and a number of heavy mortars.

The British squadron that would assail them on 11 July 1882 was

composed of the battleships *Alexandra*, *Superb*, *Sultan*, *Téméraire*, *Inflexible*, *Monarch*, *Invincible* and *Penelope*. They were accompanied by a torpedo boat, the *Hecla*, a despatch boat, the *Helicon*, the gun vessels *Condor* and *Bittern* and the gunboats *Beacon*, *Cygnet* and *Decoy*. To an eye more accustomed to Nelson's 'wooden walls', typified by the *Victory*, or the dreadnoughts of the Great War, the ironclads looked somewhat eccentric, with their mixture of central batteries and large turrets, reflecting the turmoil in warship design at that period. But they were armed with batteries of powerful modern guns and defended by thick armour, which was all but impervious to the Egyptian shells. Ships can sink, whereas forts cannot, but the Egyptians would be reliant on lucky shots to cause any real damage. The Royal Navy had the capacity to hit hard with relative impunity, barring misfortune. But then, nothing in war is ever certain.

For the attack, Seymour divided his forces into two: at 09.40, the *Sultan*, *Superb*, *Téméraire* and *Inflexible* would take up station outside the breakwater, taking on the defences of the Ras el Tin peninsula, especially the Lighthouse Fort which covered the entrance to the inner harbour. Once this had been achieved, *Sultan*, *Superb* and *Alexandria* were to assail Forts Pharos and Silsileh covering the new eastern harbour, while the *Téméraire* engaged Fort Marabout. Meanwhile the *Invincible*, *Monarch* and *Penelope* would move inside the outer harbour to batter Fort Mex.

> That night, as soon as it was dark, we put out all lights, and we – that is, the *Invincible*, the *Monarch*, and *Penelope* – steamed quietly down past the shore batteries and took up our prearranged positions opposite Fort Mex. This was the enemy's strongest fort: the thick sand parapet well covered the heavy armament, consisting of, to the best of my recollection, two Armstrong 18-ton guns, three 12-ton Armstrongs, six heavy 9-inch (100 lb.) smooth-bores, and several smooth-bore 36-pounders; there were also three heavy mortars. The magazine of the fort was well covered,

> and in rear, on a slight rise, was a massive masonry citadel, with smaller (40-pounder) Armstrong and smooth-bores (36-pounders). Along the front of the fort was a rocky foreshore, and behind one flank a small-boat harbour.[2]
> Major Alexander Tulloch, HMS *Invincible*

During the battle Tulloch took station in the maintop alongside a 1-inch Nordenfelt, where he had an outstanding view of the action as it unfolded. He was impressed by the way the Egyptian garrison stuck to their guns despite the torrent of fire pouring into their positions.

> The enemy's gunners, considering the tremendous fire we poured into the Mex Fort, made uncommonly good shooting, our waterline being apparently their special target. Placed as I was, I could see their projectiles strike the water some yards off, and then shoot along under the surface; but by the time they touched the ship their force was gone. Having abnormally good sight, I often noticed the enemy's shot coming towards us, just like cricket-balls. My companion in the top, Hardy, not having been under fire before, bobbed occasionally when the shot came close. I began chaffing him – when a thing like a railway train rushed past! He had then the laugh on his side. I could not help staggering back: it must have been a shell from one of the 18-ton guns, and very close to us, as it cut the signal-halliards.[3]
> Major Alexander Tulloch, HMS *Invincible*

Although the thick armour plate protected the ships' vitals, the unarmoured sections suffered damage. Yet the Egyptian forts were being pounded. A couple of fort magazines were detonated, some of the heavy rifled guns were dismounted and rendered useless. But still the Egyptians fought on.

Charles Beresford had been promoted to captain a few days earlier. Here his role commanding the *Condor*, a gun vessel armed with just one 7-inch gun and two 40-pounder guns, was

to act as a 'repeating ship' to pass on signals between the ships during the action. However, he was soon called into action to assist the *Téméraire*, which had run aground. As he did so, he became very concerned at the flanking fire at the inshore squadron emanating from the two 10-inch rifled guns based at Fort Marabout.

> I ran down to her and towed her off and while doing so, saw Fort Marabout giving pepper to *Monarch*, *Invincible* and *Penelope*. Not one of these ships could be spared, as they were getting it hot and could not spare a gun for Marabout from the forts they were engaging. Seeing the difficulty, directly I had got the *Téméraire* afloat I steamed down at full speed and engaged Fort Marabout, on the principle that according to orders 'an opportunity' had occurred. I thought we should have a real rough time of it, as I knew of the heavy guns, and I knew that one shot fairly placed must sink us. But I hoped to be able to dodge the shoals, of which there were many, and get close in, when I was quite sure they would fire over us. That is exactly what occurred. I got in close and manoeuvred the ship on the angle of the fort, so that the heavy guns could hardly bear on me, if I was very careful. The smooth bores rained on us, but only two shots hit, the rest went short or over. One heavy shot struck the water about 6 feet from the ship, wetting everyone on the upper deck with spray, and bounded over us in a ricochet. I did not fire on the smoothbores at all until I had silenced the heavy guns which were annoying *Invincible*, *Monarch*, and *Penelope*. The men fired splendidly. I put all down to the lectures I have given them at target practice, telling them never to throw a shot away, but always to wait until they got the sights on. The admiral, instead of making, 'Recall *Condor*!' made, 'Well done, *Condor*!' at the suggestion of Hedworth Lambton, the flag-lieutenant. We then remained there 2½ hours, and had silenced the fort all except one gun, when the signal was made to all

> the other small craft to assist *Condor*, and down they came and pegged away. I was not sorry, as the men were getting a bit beat.[4]
>
> Captain Charles Beresford, HMS *Condor*

At about 14.00 the Egyptians were forced to abandon the lower western battery of Fort Mex to shelter in the nearby citadel. However, the guns themselves seemed intact and there were fears that the garrison could return and reopen fire. Seymour decided to send a volunteer shore party from the *Invincible* under the command of Lieutenant Barton Bradford and Lieutenant Hedworth Lambton to spike the guns. Accompanying the party was the ubiquitous Tulloch. As they approached the shore, they were covered by Nordenfelt fire from the gunboats.

> When we got to some of the outlying rocks we stopped steaming, and then, as the day was very hot and the water looked inviting, I thought a swim would be very pleasant, so, sword in hand, slung myself overboard. I was rather out of breath on getting ashore, but managed to scuttle up a small breach made by our fire. When half-way up I put my foot in a shell-hole and came on my nose: the squadron, looking on, thought I was shot. I got to the crest of the parapet, when, instead of black fellows, whom I hoped to frighten into fits by a ferocious display of the regulation sword exercise, I found the fort was empty. If there were any men in the citadel, they thought that with the gunboats so close in they had better lie low. A guncotton charge was put into the muzzle of one of the 18-ton guns, a wire attached, and we all scrambled over the parapet, lying down outside. The guncotton did not injure the gun, so another method was tried. A charge was put between the cheeks of the carriage; then we took shelter as before. The carriage was found to be destroyed, and the gun dismounted. The commander of one of the gunboats told me afterwards that bits of the gun carriage had gone out over

> our heads to sea and cut his rigging. Whilst Bradford was attending to the other big gun, Lambton, the gunner, and I raced off with the hammer and bag of nails to spike the great smoothbores, which we did. I found one man had taken shelter under the first great gun I went for, but as he did not show signs of fight, we left him alone where he was. All this work was rapidly done, and then we decided that the sooner we were on board our cutter again the better![5]
>
> Major Alexander Tulloch, HMS *Invincible*

Together they had destroyed two 10-inch rifled guns and six smoothbore guns.

One by one the forts fell silent, and at 17.15 Seymour ordered his ships to 'cease firing'. Although the fleet was running short of ammunition, the shells had done their work. The British casualties were negligible, estimated at five killed and twenty-eight wounded. Egyptian losses were doubtless severe – and several of the British shells had crashed into the city, causing serious damage and numerous civilian casualties. It was not quite the end. Next day, some of the batteries were seen to be still active and a partial bombardment was ordered before a truce was eventually established. By this time the European quarter of the city was ablaze, from either the shelling or arson, with widespread looting and rioting. It was unclear at first whether Arabi's forces had evacuated the city or had just fallen back to the outskirts.

The problem for Seymour was that he lacked the personnel to form an effective landing force, capable of restoring order and withstanding hostile forces, without crippling the fighting power of his ships. Still, he had to do what he could. At 10.30 on 13 July he despatched ashore an initial force of some 400 men under the overall command of Commander Tynte Hammill of the *Monarch*, who managed to rescue the Khedive from Ras el Tin palace. Following this, Captain John Fisher of the *Inflexible* took ashore a landing party to secure the outer defences of the city as a security against an attack from Arabi's forces, who had retreated several miles but who could return at any moment.

As Fisher occupied the lines around the city, he discovered the disadvantage of having a zone of total anarchy behind him. He requested assistance to calm the situation and Captain Charles Beresford landed on 14 July, accompanied by a motley party of bluejackets, some marines and a few Egyptian cavalry, collectively charged with the onerous responsibility of restoring law and order as soon as possible.

> I never saw anything so awful as the town on that Friday; streets, square, and blocks of buildings all on fire, roaring and crackling and tumbling about like a hell, let loose. Arabs murdering each other for loot under my nose, wretches running about with fire-balls and torches to light up new places, all the main thoroughfares impassable from burning fallen houses, streets with many corpses in them, mostly murdered by the Arab soldiers for loot – these corpses were Arabs murdered by each other – in fact, a pandemonium of hell and its devils. I took a chart with me and arranged the different parts of the town where I should make depots and police stations. I had only 140 men to patrol the town, to stop the looting, to stop the 'fresh burning' of houses, to bury the corpses, and to protect the lives of those who had come on shore. By quickly sending the men about in parties in different parts of the town, and by employing Arabs to inform me when and where certain houses might be burnt, I often managed to get a patrol there just in time to stop it, and the people thought there were 600 police in the town instead of 140. Neither myself nor my men slept one wink, as at 12 o'clock on two occasions an alarm was sounded that Arabi was attacking the lines, and all of us had to peg away to the front, where we had to remain until daylight, expecting attack every moment. These alarms lost many houses, as the mob set them alight while we were at the front; however, it was unavoidable.[6]
>
> Captain Charles Beresford, HMS *Condor*

He introduced a draconian system of military law, which to his own mind worked well.

> On Saturday night, I had the whole town proclaimed in Arabic, stating that persons caught firing houses would be shot, persons caught looting twice would be shot; all persons to return to their homes, etc., with confidence, and anyone wanting to get information or to lodge complaints to repair instantly to the chief of police.[7]
>
> Captain Charles Beresford, HMS *Condor*

Lieutenant Percival Marling landed and was billeted at the railway station on 18 July. Of course, military law didn't apply to a British officer.

> The heat and flies and dirt were awful. Looted all sorts of things for my room. My servant has made me a first-class tub out of a baking trough. There was an alarm in the middle of the night, and we all had to turn out and stand to our arms for half an hour. The whole city is in ruins, and lots of the houses still burning. Furniture, pianos, mattresses, chairs, and tables, and every imaginable thing are lying about the streets. Charlie Beresford, Provost Marshal, has shot and flogged about fifty or sixty Arab looters. We took seventeen watches, twenty-one rings, and twelve bracelets off one fellow, and eleven brooches and nine rings off another, and fourteen rings off a woman, who squealed like blazes![8]
>
> Lieutenant Percival Marling, 3rd King's Royal Rifle Corps

By 19 July a semblance of order had been achieved, with the fires dowsed and the corpses buried. Meanwhile several officers went ashore to investigate the gun batteries.

> I went round the batteries near Ras el Tin. Some of the sights were decidedly gruesome. I heard afterwards on

> perfectly reliable authority that the casualties amongst the blacks, garrison gunners, and infantry reserves in rear, had been over 800. Cartloads of dead were taken out of the battery during the action, but there were at last, so many that a huge pit at Ras el Tin was dug, and they were thrown into it and earth over them; the top layer of bodies was visible in several places. The parapet had fallen over some, which could not in consequence be moved from where they had been killed. Under one gun, which had been capsized by a shell, lay the bodies of the Egyptian officer and five or six of his gallant crew. Few men could have tried to do their duty better than those who actually manned the batteries.[9]
>
> Major Alexander Tulloch, HMS *Invincible*

One of the officers sent ashore was Captain Arthur Wilson, whose task was to make sure that the forts no longer posed any kind of a military threat. Many questioned the destruction of perfectly good guns, but orders were orders.

> We have had a period of almost incessant hard work since the bombardment, but no fighting. My work has been, first, spiking or disabling all the guns in the outlying forts, which cover an extent of 8 or 9 miles, and afterwards searching for magazines and destroying ammunition. I suppose the admiral thinks I have a good nose for explosives. There is an enormous store of ammunition in the principal magazine that I have been working a whole week to get rid of, but I am not allowed to blow it up, and have to carry it half a mile to throw it into the sea. Before order was re-established in Alexandria, I managed to get a large quantity of it carried down by the Arabs simply by sitting down in the middle of the high road with three or four bags of biscuits and a few bluejackets to show what I wanted and bribing the passersby with biscuit to carry it down for me.[10]
>
> Captain Arthur Wilson, HMS *Hecla*

Once the town was quiescent, Beresford was made responsible for the defence of the Mex lines and citadel, which defended the south-western boundary of Alexandria, blocking as it did the strip of land between the sea and Lake Mareotis. Meanwhile, there had also been a move to secure the village of Ramleh, about 5 miles towards Aboukir Bay, which harboured an important pumping station. With the destruction of the forts, the pacification of Alexandria and the establishment of basic defensive positions to hold back Arabi's regiments, all the sailors had to do now was wait for the arrival of the army. It would not be that long, but some observers pondered the wisdom of launching the naval attack before the army had arrived, allowing the almost complete destruction of Alexandria, and giving Arabi the chance to organise his forces.

***

ON 17 JULY, GENERAL ARCHIBALD ALISON arrived to take command of the first British battalions bolstering the Alexandria garrison – which brought the total troops available to around 5,000 including marines and naval shore parties. For the moment, Colonel Ahmed Arabi had withdrawn the bulk of his forces some 16 miles along the railway leading to Cairo to establish strong earthwork defensive positions at Kafr Dowar. Here his army was growing as more and more nationalists flocked to his banner. Some of the newly arrived British infantry found themselves assigned to picket duty outside Ramleh. Soldiers never complain but they do 'observe' a lot.

> Now we had to undertake that dreariest of all duties connected with war, viz., outpost duty, and that too in the very teeth of the enemy. This night I was placed, with six men under my charge, on the side of a belt of trees in front of the line of sentries. Between this wood and the main body of the picket was a sandy plain about 400 yards wide, while in front of it extended a tract of level green fields, which,

> from our position – by the aid of an occasional flash of the electric light from our naval sentry in the bay – could be seen for a long way. Our duty was to watch, and if we saw any sign of living men in front, retire back on the main body with the intelligence. Two men were continually on the lookout, while the remainder of us reclined amongst the trees.[11]
>
> Corporal John Philip, 2nd Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

All was quiet until about midnight, when suddenly the silence was broken.

> Without the least warning, a sharp volley of musketry rang from the picket behind us, and the bullets crashed against the tree-tops over our head. The readers must keep in mind that this was our first angry shot, and they must bear with us patiently if we showed a little trepidation. Another and another volley followed, and now the yells of the Arabs were heard between us and the pickets. Crossing to the edge of the trees, we saw a large body of horsemen galloping madly hither and thither, within 100 yards of us. They were evidently as much surprised and frightened as we were, for they were calling loudly, 'Allah! Allah!' We crawled close to the fence skirting the wood, and, with beating hearts, waited for the crisis. Again, the rifles of the picket spoke, but the trees above got most of the bullets. We had our rifles loaded, and ammunition ready for action, but I gave instructions not to fire as we did not want those wild Bedouins to know our whereabouts and very soon, they galloped away to the left, firing a retaliating shot occasionally before they swept out of sight.[12]
>
> Corporal John Philip, 2nd Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

Meanwhile, a great deal of ingenuity was demonstrated by two naval officers, Captains John Fisher of the *Inflexible* and Arthur Wilson of the *Hecla* in constructing an armoured train.

> Fisher and I had put our heads together and supplied the general with an ironclad truck armed with Gatlings, which he was much taken with, and this led up to the idea of mounting a heavy gun in the same way. I had some trouble in persuading the admiral to let me try, as of course, as in duty bound, he foresaw all sorts of dangers and difficulties. I first arranged it so that I could hoist the gun out and fire it on the ground alongside the railway, but that took more than half an hour, and in case of a reverse there was every chance of being cut off. So I determined to try mounting it on the truck, so that it could be fired there. When I had got it ready yesterday afternoon, the general came out with me to see it fired, and as soon as he saw it he said, 'Oh, it is sure to smash the truck all to pieces!' We fired two rounds, and nothing happened, so he quite altered his opinion and went away delighted.[13]
>
> Captain Arthur Wilson, HMS *Hecla*

The armoured train was protected by sandbags reinforced by iron rails. As a wise precaution it was equipped with a full set of tools and materials in case they had to repair the track. It was used to some good effect in a first reconnaissance in strength launched by Alison on 5 August 1882. Wilson was pleased with the results obtained by his brainchild that day.

> Today my gun was put in front of the train which took him out to fight, and I think on the whole did good service; at all events, nothing went wrong with the gun. As Arabi had pulled the rails up, and we had not time to lay them down again, I could not get nearer than 2,300 yards, and the enemy kept so well under cover that it was very difficult to tell what effect the shot had. I was firing nearly the whole time over the heads of our own men, so it was rather nervous work. My heart was in my mouth once when one of the shots stripped and I heard it turning head over heels in [the] air as it went along. Fortunately, it fell just beyond

> our men and hurt no one. I don't know in the least what the result of our afternoon's work has been. It has certainly shown that Arabi has a very strong position and means to hold it – I don't think we can drive him out of it with our present force. I thought the marines who were in front of me behaved exceedingly well; nothing could have been steadier than they were. The artillery fire opposed to us was very weak, only one shell pitched close to us, and then just as we thought they had found our range they left off firing, and I don't know what became of them.[14]
>
> Captain Arthur Wilson, HMS *Hecla*

It was an inconclusive engagement, but after all it was only a reconnaissance. It had cost some three dead and twenty-three wounded, as against the optimistic estimates of Egyptian losses that ranged up to 300. From the interrogation of prisoners, it was thought that Arabi's strength at Kafr Dowar consisted of some four regiments of infantry, one regiment of cavalry, one regiment of artillery, and around 5,000 Bedouins – in total about 16,000 men.

***

THE MIGHT OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE was gathering at Alexandria, all awaiting the arrival of Lieutenant General Garnet Wolseley, who had been slightly delayed by illness. Lieutenant General Edward Hamley had arrived to command the 2nd Division of Wolseley's army corps. As we have seen, Wolseley had already decided to attack Cairo from the direction of Ismailia on the Suez Canal, eschewing any approach from Alexandria. He would take with him the 1st Division of some 6,000 men commanded by Lieutenant General George Willis. But all this remained a closely guarded secret – although Wolseley reveals all in a letter to his wife on 18 August.

> We start from here to-morrow at noon for Aboukir Bay,

> where the fleet and all the transports carrying the first Division will anchor at 4 p.m. tomorrow to pretend landing there during the night to attack Arabi's position in front of this place on Tuesday morning. Everyone here believes we intend doing so: only about three people amongst the soldiers are in the secret, and I have completely befoozled the 'press gang', who have, I know, telegraphed home that we mean to land at Aboukir. I suppose they will be furious when they find how they have been taken in, but if I can take them in, I may take in Arabi also. On Sunday evening I hope to be at Ismailia.[15]
>
> Lieutenant General Garnet Wolseley, Headquarters

Wolseley had no love of journalists, and fooling the press was fair game, but one distinguished military personage also deceived was the unforgiving figure of Hamley whose division was to be left behind to hold Alexandria. Hamley had not the slightest idea of Wolseley's real intentions.

> He led me to believe that I was to cooperate from Ramleh in a combined attack on the Egyptian position, Sir G. Wolseley with the rest of the troops advancing from Aboukir Bay on the strip of land between the Lakes Aboukir and Edkee. I observed, alluding to our conversation on the 15th, that I expected he might choose this point to advance from, and mentioned the order in which in that case I should advance, so as to give him a hand, which he approved. He then instructed me to make demonstrations this evening and Sunday, to induce the enemy to expect I should attack him. I was warned not to be surprised if I should hear firing at Aboukir on Saturday evening.[16]
>
> Lieutenant General Edward Hamley, Headquarters, 2nd Division

On the afternoon of 18 August, eight warships and the transports carrying the 1st Division left Alexandria. Alfred Male, brought out as a military chaplain to the forces and attached

to Wolseley's headquarters staff, was one of those bemused by events.

> The general impression among the staff men was that we were to bombard the strong forts in Aboukir Bay next day, land under fire, and storm the entrenchments. And, as if to carry out this idea, we steamed away from Alexandria, some eighteen transports in all, convoyed by ironclads and accompanied by the *Salamis*, with Wolseley himself aboard. When Aboukir Bay was reached we lay off, and line of battle was at once assumed. We could see plainly the batteries ashore crowded with men; and as our warships struck their topmasts, as if in preparation for a fight, the Egyptian gunners could be seen standing to their guns, evidently determined, if possible, to repel the anticipated attack. Thus, we lay from three o'clock in the afternoon till evening. No lights were to be shown by our ships, so that when the evening shadows fell, we were completely hidden from the sight of the men ashore. Then, just as the crescent moon was beginning to peep out from a bank of clouds, suddenly signals flashed in quick succession from the *Salamis* and in obedience to the signals we silently moved away, stealing off under cover of the darkness in single line, led by the 'old fighting *Temeraire*' or rather by her descendant and namesake. In the morning when the dawn broke the amazement of the vigilant Egyptians could be imagined as they swept the sea and found no hostile warship in sight. This was Wolseley's ruse – a feint on the batteries in Aboukir Bay – a real and rapid advance northward to seize the Suez Canal.[17]
>
> Reverend Alfred Male

Now it was game on – at a new 'playing field'. The question was: would Wolseley's masterplan work?

3

THE ADVANCE TO QASSASIN

> Get lazily out of bed and hear we are to start at once. The old story of an attack at the front, hear that the enemy is within 2 miles, hope so, don't believe it. Advance a mile and a half and halt, no signs of the enemy. I thought not! On again, sand feels like London pavement in the hottest part of the season only soft, reflects the glare of the sun, like the heat of an oven, feel as if I was being fried when I lie down to rest at the halts.[1]
>
> Lieutenant Charles Balfour, 1st Scots Guards, 1st Brigade

WOLSELEY'S DIMINUTIVE ARMADA swept through the night and appeared at dawn off Port Said to totally surprise the Egyptians. There was merit in maintaining surprise, for Colonel Ahmed Arabi could have ordered the blocking of the Suez Canal, or the defence of Port Said. But the canal was open, and Port Said lay naked before them. Wolseley had achieved his initial objective and his ships sailed up the canal, taking El Kantara and making their base at the town of Ismailia, halfway down the canal. This was the focal point of the railways to Cairo and Port Suez, but also of the Sweetwater canal which supplied drinking water taken from the Nile at Cairo. Wolseley realised that it was essential that he advance as quickly as possible to avoid Arabi's forces draining the canal and destroying the railway. As a first step, Major General Gerald Graham's 2nd Brigade advance guard moved the couple of miles to the west to seize the key rail junction at Nifisha without opposition. Behind them the main force began to disembark in force on 21 August. Ismailia was soon