

THE SANUSI CAMPAIGN

EGYPT ON THE OUTBREAK OF WAR 1916

On 6 November 1914, after three months of steadily worsening relations, France and Britain declared war on the Ottoman Empire. This state of affairs found Britain with no comprehensive plan for defending her interests in the Middle East, indeed the problems posed so suddenly by Germany's onslaught in Belgium and France found the Empire with few trained troops to use elsewhere. Within two months of Britain's entry to the war she had pulled her regular regiments out of Egypt, and replaced them largely with Indian troops, who were eventually to bear the brunt of much of the fighting in this theatre.¹ The defence of the Suez canal was of prime importance if the war effort of the British Empire was to be properly coordinated.

Egypt found herself in a complicated position in 1914; British troops had occupied her territory since the nineteenth century, and by reason of the 'Capitulations' and other constitutional bonds Egypt found herself dependent on the Great Powers, Britain in particular. For all this, in theory she was a province of the Ottoman Empire, though in practice independent of her suzerain in all but minor matters.² The importance of the Sultan of Turkey in Egyptian affairs was not limited to his traditional, if only nominal, overlordship, for the Sultan was also the acknowledged religious head of the greater part of the Moslem world.³ On 11 November this fact was brought home to the Allies, as the Sultan instructed the chief religious functionary at Constantinople, the Shaikh ul Islam, to issue a decree declaring a jihad, a holy war, against France and Britain. On 14 November the Sultan extended the jihad against all who took arms against the Central Powers.⁴

British military history in this part of the world had been dominated during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century by wars against Islamic fanatics and troubles with a discontented Moslem population, and although the violence of these struggles had not been repeated since, there remained the basic disaffection of the Egyptian population

which might be organized and inflamed by the Sultan's appeal. Indeed, the Egyptian government of Abbas Hilmi showed considerable alarm at the prospect of a war against their suzerain and Khalif, an alarm motivated not only by religious sensibilities but also by a fine awareness that the Central Powers might well prove victorious and oust Britain as the protecting power.⁵ Aware of the possible obstructions which might be presented by an unfriendly government, on 18 December Britain deposed the absent Khedive and declared Egypt a Protectorate, giving the Khedive's uncle, Prince Hussein Kemal Pasha, the title of Sultan. The British representative in Cairo took on the title of High Commissioner and the ties with Turkey were officially severed.

With many of the departments of the Egyptian Civil service already dominated by ex-officers of the British Army, local official cooperation could now be better relied upon.⁶

THE MOSLEM MENACE

The declaration of a jihad threatened terrible consequences for both the French and British Empires, both of which counted large numbers of Moslems among their populations. The Indian Army itself embodied many Moslem units, some of which were now involved in the defence of Egypt. With a collective memory which included the Mahdi and the Indian Mutiny, the British Army may be forgiven its rather sanguine fears about the consequences of the Sultan's call. In fact, only a handful of Indian troops deserted the Imperial forces as a result of this religious summons, and nowhere did a general Islamic rising occur.⁷

* The author would like to thank Mr P. Digby, Transvaal Scottish Museum, for most of the photographs used in this article.

1. Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command 1914-1918*, Vol 1, (London 1961), Pp. 223-224.

Sir George MacMunn and Cyril Falls, *Military Operations Egypt and Palestine*. Vol 1 (London, 1928), P. 1.

2. MacMunn and Falls, *op.cit.*, P. 7.

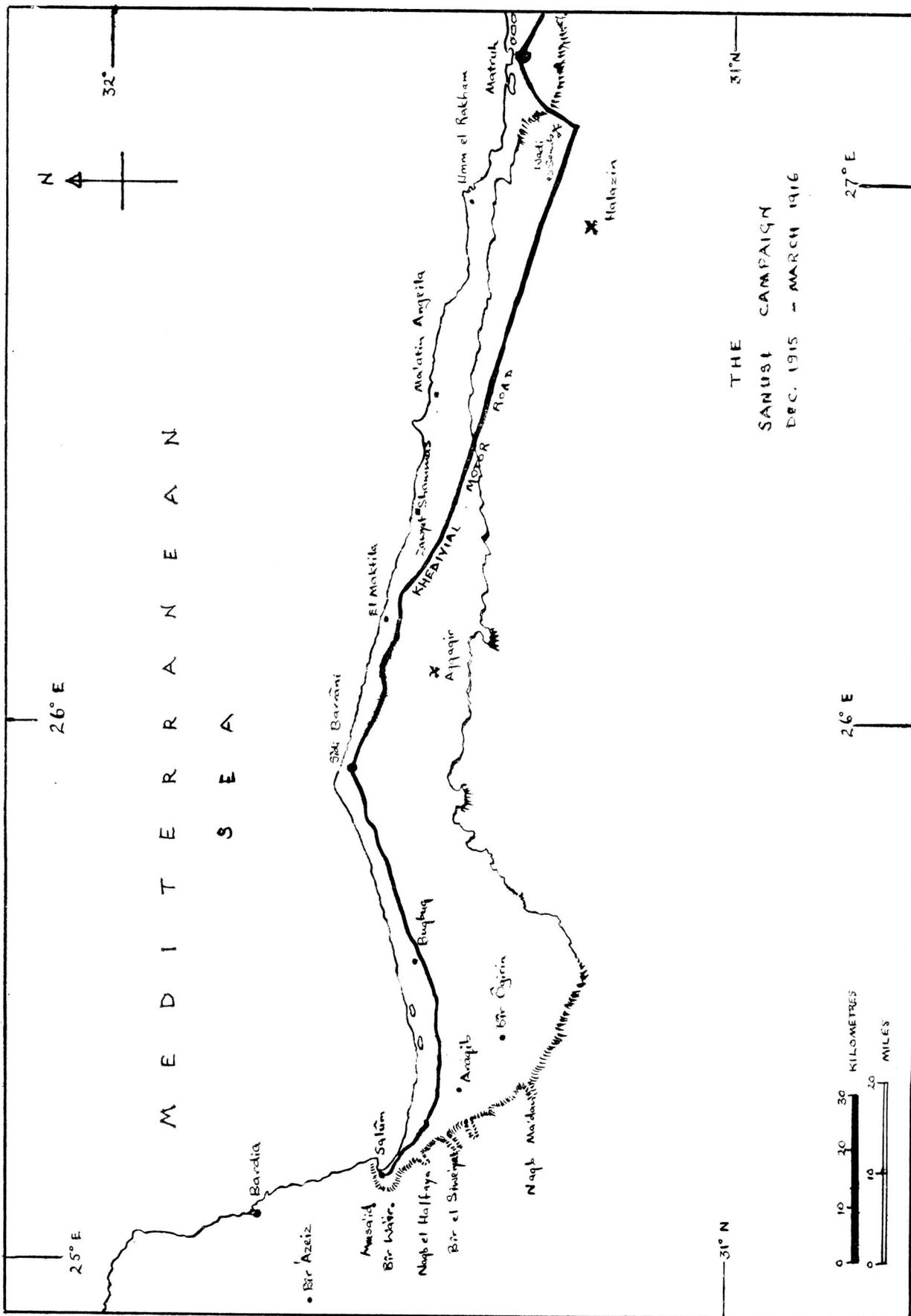
3. *ibid.*, P. 9.

4. *ibid.*, P. 18.

5. *ibid.*, P. 16.

6. *ibid.*, P. 18.

7. *ibid.*, P. 2., P. 101.



The only place where the call for a jihad was answered was in the Western Desert, where the Sanusi sent forces into Egypt. The Sanusi campaign was a small war from the point of view of the Allies, and even in relation to the Sanusi's fight against the Italians. It was for all that an interesting campaign, full of historical irony; troops from South Africa, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and India fought in the vicinity of Sidi Barrâni and Salûm, just as their sons were to do twenty-five years later; by fighting they made a contribution to the maintenance of the Italian Empire in North Africa, whose demise would be supervised by Dominion and Allied forces in a much larger conflict in the 1940's.

The Sanusi war did not come as a complete surprise to those who had expected a jihad, though it did come about in rather a different way than had been anticipated. With an Empire stretching around the world, and remote stations to be manned against its enemies, the Imperial service was never short of seers who anticipated danger from every possible, and sometimes impossible, quarter. Thus in 1900 an article appeared warning against Imperial preoccupation with South Africa and indicating the threat in the north with the rise of militant Mohammedanism.⁸

'There is indeed little doubt that Senussi's emissaries reside in every port along the Mediterranean, if not the leading capitals of Europe. Sworn enemies of European civilisation, those who come in contact with the Christians never give the slightest indication of their hostility, and the most innocent amongst them, when closely questioned, maintain a sullen silence.'⁹

A few years later this warning was repeated by an army captain, impressed by the amount of discontent among the population of Africa.¹⁰ The writer referred to the Somaliland expedition, disturbances in Egypt, the Zulu rebellion, troubles in the German colonies of South West Africa and East Africa, the Morocco question and French difficulties throughout North Africa. The reader was invited to contemplate the force which would spring into action given a common, uniting factor. This author too was extremely suspicious of the fact that so little was known about the Sanusi.

'Taking into consideration the fact that the Sanussi sect was founded in 1835, that its rise has been enormously rapid, and that its propaganda has been actively and diligently preached in British possessions for many years past, with scarcely one definite item of intelligence concerning it being known, it shows clearly that the motive power and organising intelligence must be something considerably above the average.'¹²

Turning from this remarkable piece of logic, it would perhaps be as well to take a more objective look at the Sanusiya and their history.

THE SANUSI

Islam is no more uniform in its philosophy or religious practices than any other world-scale faith. From its simple austere beginnings it acquired a wide variety of customs, secondary beliefs, artistic and cultural traditions and relics of previous faiths, differing according to the areas in which it became established. As in other religions, for the simple people the accretions of the ages tended to obscure the relationship between God and man. To bridge this psychological gap various devices have been employed.¹³

The Shi'ite form of Islam prevalent in Persia, for example, developed a priesthood of imams, and elsewhere recourse was made to cults of saints or marabouts and to mysticism or ritual. Sufi or Darwish orders sought their solution of the God-man duality by attempting to transcend the senses in order to attain complete identification of God and self. Originally quietists the Sufis came increasingly under Darwish influence, with their great exhibitionist appeal to unsophisticated people.¹⁴

The Sanusiya is an order of Sufis, a fraternity rather than a sect. It was founded in 1837 by an Algerian scholar, al-Sayyid Muhammed

8. T. R. Threlfall, 'Senussi and his Threatened Holy War, a Warning,' in *Nineteenth Century*, March 1900.

9. *ibid.*, P. 403.

10. H. A. Wilson, 'The Moslem Menace, One Aspect of Pan-Islamism.', in *Nineteenth Century and After*, September 1907.

11. *ibid.*, Pp. 378-379.

12. *ibid.*, P. 379.

13. Lothrop Stoddard, *The New World of Islam*. (London 1921), P. 5.

14. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusiya of Cyrenaica*, (Oxford, 1949), Pp. 1-5.



Bedouin family on the move

bin 'Ali al-Sanusi al-Khattabi al-Ildrisi al-Hasani, known, fortunately, as the Grand Sanusi. He and his successors disapproved of the external stimuli used by many Darwishes and rejected demonstration and exhibitionism. Opposing any attempt to substitute mysticism for orthodox faith and morals they advocated ascetism in order to attain the momentary union of the soul with God. One might almost call the Sanusiya reformist in their harking back to the first principles of Islam and in their desire to recreate the primitive Islamic society known to Mohammed. In 1856 Jaghbub became the centre of the Order, and a university was established there for the training of leaders for the organization. The local nomad and semi-nomad people, the Bedouin, were soon won over to the organization, attracted by its undemanding simplicity. It would be wrong to give the impression that their strong allegiance was based on a thorough acceptance of the philosophical tenets of the Order; they had a tradition of attachment to marabouts or holy men, and the Grand Sanusi appeared as one of these. Zawiyas or lodges were built for the Order, each serving as a local cult centre but linked to the head of the Order in a loose organization. This organization was only possible because the Bedouin tribal system already existed, with common sentiments, tradition and lineage structures transcending tribal feuds and enmities. What differentiated the Sanusiya from other Orders was the co-ordination of the lodges to the tribal struc-

ture, which raised it to the level of a theocracy, albeit a loosely controlled one.¹⁵

Any religious reformer who directs his attention to the common people will attract the anxious attention of the established heads of the religion. In Islam where secular rule could scarcely be separated from religious leadership this was particularly the case, and Constantinople can hardly be said to have approved of the Sanusiya's hold over the desert peoples of Cyrenaica.¹⁶ The area had first come under Turkish rule in 1517, had been ruled by the Karamanlis dynasty from 1711 until 1835 and had then reverted to Turkey.

The administration of the Ottoman Empire based its success on the formula of attention to some things and inattention to others. The Turkish rulers of Cyrenaica in the nineteenth century remained conscious of their inability to tax or administer the tribes of the interior without the active support of the Sanusiya. This co-operation and the acknowledged administrative responsibilities of the Order advanced the latter's prestige and power.¹⁷

THE SANUSI AND THE GREAT POWERS

The Grand Sanusi died in 1859 and was succeeded by his eldest son Sayyid el-Mahdi. Under his aegis the Order expanded throughout the Sahara and the Sudan. By the end

15. *ibid.*, Pp. 1-23, P. 69.

16. *ibid.*, Pp. 1-3.

17. *ibid.*, Pp. 90-99.

of the century this expansion brought the Sanusiya into contact and conflict with the first of the advancing European powers. As the French began their penetration in Algeria and the Sudan they destroyed the religious houses of the Order.¹⁸ If Constantinople looked askance at the political potential of the Sanusiya, then Rome was absolutely convinced of its sinister intentions.

As noted above, Western propagandists were delivering lurid sermons about the international dangers of militant Mohammedanism. For all this, the Sanusi had refused to aid the Turks against Russia in 1876, or Arabi Pasha in 1882 or the Mahdi in 1883. In fact the French assault found the Order in a state of organizational decline. The administrative machinery at the Order's disposal was insufficient to keep such a large territory under single direction. Sayyid el-Mahdi's death in 1902 added to the problem as personal rivalries arose over the succession within his family. It is arguable that European intervention prevented the complete breakup of the Sanusiya by rallying the Bedouin to its support;¹⁹ even so the war against the French was unsuccessful, for all political control over the French Sudan was lost.

At the same time the Order's relations with Turkey underwent some change when the Young Turks gained control in Constantinople in 1908. This made little difference to Cyrenaica, but the Young Turks' aim to replace the cosmopolitan empire of the Ottoman Khalifs with a pan-Ottoman empire under Turkish leadership implied cultural, political and religious change to the detriment of the Arab peoples of the empire. More particularly the Sanusiya took exception to the Young Turks' aim of destroying the Khalifate and the religious orders which made up its support.²⁰ Islam was less monolithic than its opponents allowed.

In September 1911 Italy invaded Turkey's North African possessions. Although the war had been declared with the minimum of provocation or warning it had been expected for some time. Italy had been pressing for facilities and concessions in Libya, where she had some historic claims to a sphere of influence and a modern strategic interest in the coast of Africa opposite her own shores.

Although Turkish resistance was surprisingly strong, Constantinople had also to cope with military operations in the Yemen and in Albania as well as a growing crisis in the Balkans. While Turkey was threatened with the loss of her African possessions, the threat to the Sanusi was even greater, the loss of their independence and the rule of the infidel. The Bedouin of the Sanusiya therefore came forward eagerly to Turkey's support.²¹ By October 1912 however, the Turks could no longer afford a formal war against Italy, and, unable to reinforce their garrison in Libya, were compelled to seek terms. The resultant treaty was a masterpiece of ambiguity; Italy appeared to gain political control while conceding the Khalif's religious authority over the population. The Italians failed to realize that the Khalif's authority could not be logically divorced from the Sultan's political authority, and the treaty complicated the issue of sovereignty beyond hope. In effect the Treaty made little difference to the situation in Cyrenaica. The Sanusiya now took up the resistance itself, proclaiming itself the government of a semi-autonomous state. Aided, trained and equipped by the Turks, the Sanusi went over to guerilla warfare in April 1913, and the war was still in progress when Italy joined the Allies in May 1915.²²

THE GREAT WAR AND THE SANUSI

When Turkey became embroiled in the Great War in 1914, she provided rather sturdier opposition to the Imperial forces than had been anticipated, and with the failure to gain decisive victories the possibility of disaffection increased. The western frontier of Egypt was not exactly defined at the outbreak of war, negotiations with Turkey having broken down with the Italian invasion of Tripolitania. It was generally accepted, however, that the frontier extended southwards from the coast just west of Salûm. Between here and the Nile stretched some 200,000 square miles of desert, dotted with oases and populated by

18. *ibid.*, Pp. 19-23.

19. *ibid.*, Pp. 26-27.

20. *ibid.*, P. 100-101. This was the beginning of Turkish policies which alienated the Arabs from their Turkish overlords and drove many of them into arms of the British side. — See T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, (London 1973), Pp. 42-47.

21. Evans-Pritchard, *op.cit.* Pp. 102-3; Pp. 108-111.

22. *ibid.*, Pp. 113-121.

Bedouin tribes, ostensibly under Egyptian administration. British Intelligence officers were worried that the Sanusi might find support among these Arabs and work them up to attack the Nile Valley. By the end of 1914 Sayyid Ahmad had a large encampment at Musá'id, just west of Salûm, among the tribesmen of the Aulad 'Ali. Britain was anxious to avoid any trouble with the Sanusi, especially as the Grand Sherif of Mecca was known to be lukewarm towards his Turkish masters, and negotiations would soon be opened to secure his aid in the Allied cause. Accordingly Lt Col C.L. Snow of the Egyptian Coastguards, at Salûm, was given the difficult task of maintaining good relations with Sayyid. The British were well aware that Sayyid's cousin, Sayyid Idris, was urging a pro-British line, and consequently encouraged his pretensions to the leadership of the Bedouin. Other counsels were also urged upon Sayyid Ahmad however, for in February 1915 Nuri Bey, brother of the Turkish Minister of Defence arrived, eventually to take over command of the Sanusi forces.

He was followed in April by an accomplished Baghdadi Arab, Ja'afir Bey el-'Askari, who brought arms and money. Their object was to embroil the Sanusi with the British in Egypt in order to relieve pressure against the Turkish assault on the canal.²³ In order to accomplish this the Turks were prepared to send considerable aid. Supplies were conveyed by submarine from Greece and landed at the myriad coves along the North African coast. By autumn of 1915 the Sanusi had a fairly impressive force of about 5000 men trained and strengthened by Turkish officers, with a few machine-guns and some 10-pdr mountain artillery which could be carried on camels.²⁴ Italian pressure on the Sanusi had relaxed considerably as the European war made its mark and in North Africa in Italian column had been routed at Qasr bu Hadi in April 1915, a setback which forced the Italians back to the Tripolitanian coastal towns and created a panic in Cyrenaica. Italy's entry to the Great War had another significant effect in that Britain felt constrained to aid her new ally by putting a blockade along the North African coast. This made the Sanusi supply problem acute, for the harvest had failed in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica for the two preceding years, and with local markets

in Italian hands Egypt had remained the only source of supply. The Sanusi now found themselves increasingly dependent upon what Turkish and German submarines could bring. Thus at a time when Italy was having to limit her military efforts in Africa, the Sanusi were being pushed by circumstances towards conflict with Britain. At first Sayyid Ahmed rejected the advice of Nuri Bey however, and thwarted a plot to raid Salûm in June 1915. In July Turkey was once again at war with Italy and Sayyid was officially nominated by the Sultan as Governor of Trypolitania and its dependent regions. As the Sultan's local representative Sayyid duly promulgated the jihad in his area, but it was difficult to see by what logic the British might be excluded from this proclamation, or how the Sultan's instruction to attack Egypt might be avoided.²⁵ On 15 August two British submarines off Salûm were fired on and one sailor killed. Sayyid apologised for the incident, which may have represented another attempt to force his hand. Nevertheless, intercepted messages from Sayyid to other Moslem leaders and journalists over India and Arabia showed that he was proclaiming the jihad. Still Lt Col Snow attempted to keep the peace, by meeting Sayyid and Ja'afir at the end of September. In November 1915, however, the armed steamer 'Tara'²⁶ and the transport 'Moorina' were sunk by submarine action and their crews landed at Port Suleiman in Cyrenaica for the Sanusi's safe-keeping.

Strong protests were recorded and even sums of money offered to induce Sayyid to dismiss his Turkish advisers. On 6 November a U-boat sunk the Egyptian coastguard vessel "Abbas" and damaged another, and this continuing success of German and Turkish submarines strengthened the hand of the anti-British party. On 17 November a party of Sanusi fired on the Egyptian camp at Salûm, friendly Bedouin were attacked and the coastal telegraph was cut. Next day the

23. *ibid.*, Pp. 121-126. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 102-104. John Buchan, *The History of South African forces in France (London 1920)*, P. 24.

24. Maj Genl Sir M. G. E. Bowman-Manifold, *An Outline of the Egyptian and Palestine Campaign, 1914 to 1918*, (8th ed. London 1932), Pp. 15-16.

25. Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, Pp. 121-126.

26. The 'Tara' met her fate in strange waters, she was in fact a steamer belonging to the London and North Western Railway Company, and operated in peacetime between Holyhead and Kingston, see C. T. Massey, *The Desert Campaign*, (London 1918), P. 135.

Sanusi lodge at Barrâni, some 50 miles inside Egypt, was occupied by 300 Sanusi troops, and attacks were made on Egyptian barracks. Britain was reluctantly forced to recognise that a state of war had arisen, though whether Sayyid Ahmad intended a full scale conflict is not clear.²⁷ He was a vain and headstrong man and his recent success against the Italians may have led him to cast himself in the heroic mould urged by his Turkish advisers. It is probable that he was deceived into thinking that the Aulad 'Ali tribe of Egypt would come to his support, especially with the promise of loot from a concerted attack on the Nile. The Aulad 'Ali had indeed provided him with supplies at Musâ'id, and were largely followers of the Sanusi, but they were not a warlike people and were mostly persuaded by the British to remain quiet.²⁸

More important than Sayyid's attitude however was that of his people, for the leader of irregular troops must often be led by them. The failure of the harvests and the closing of coastal supply routes had left the Sanusi in a parlous condition, indeed the Bedouin were reduced to desperation by famine. This provided a most eloquent argument for an invasion of Egypt, which offered the only immediate solution to the problem of hunger.²⁹

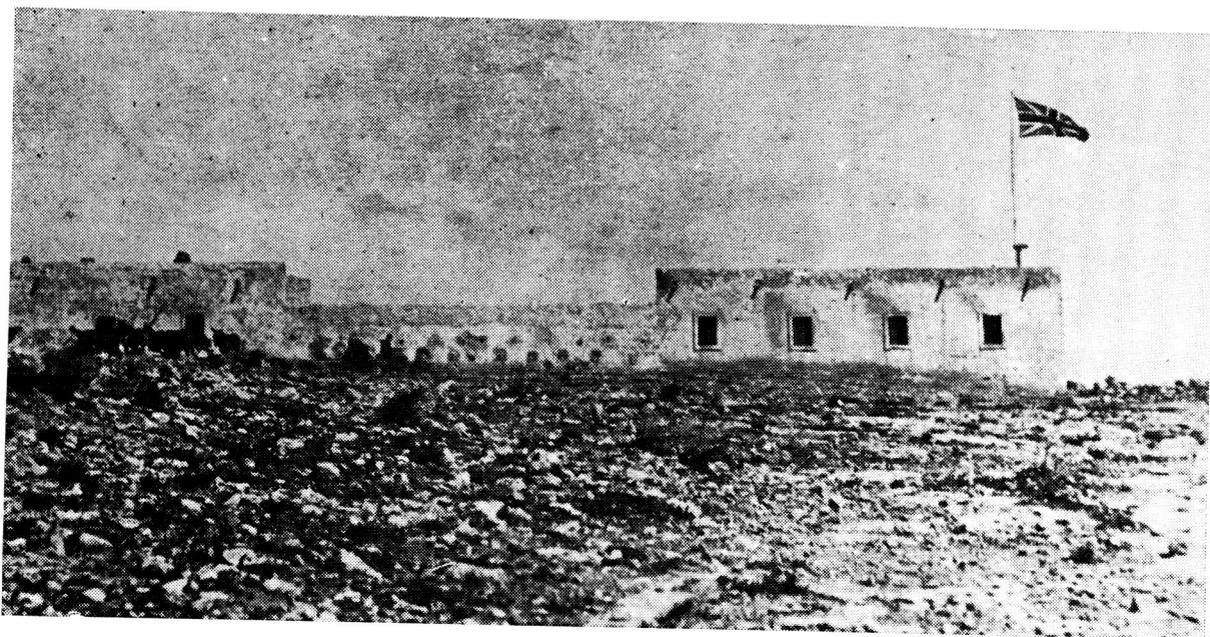
THE SANUSI INVASION

Although the external danger posed by the Sanusi was quite small there was a chance that any untoward military reverses would have an unsettling effect in Alexandria and might cause some civil commotion. It was not only important to defeat the Sanusi, but to do so after careful moves so that no initial reverses were suffered. British generals were only too familiar with the disasters which courted careless men who underestimated their task. Conditions were not easy, Salûm, the border post and coastguard station, was nearly 300 miles from Alexandria and therefore too distant to serve as a suitable base. The harbour at Salûm was open to U-boat attack, as had been proved, and the navy had insufficient forces to provide fast armed escorts. For an operational base then, the British decided on Matrûh, some 120 miles inside the frontier, with a good harbour and adequate water supply. On 20 November orders were issued for the Western Frontier Force to concentrate at Matrûh, under Maj Genl A. Wallace. Salûm, Barrâni and Buqbuq were all evacuated of troops, the Egyptian forces being sent well to the rear, for the Coast-

27. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 104-107.

28. Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, Pp. 126-127.

29. *ibid.*



The fort at Sidi Barrâni

guards at Salûm had proved unreliable and some 140 of their number had joined the enemy.³⁰

The country appeared to provide most problems for the British forces. Reinforcements to Matrûh would be brought either by trawler in small detachments or overland via el Dab'a. There was a standard gauge railway from Alexandria to Dab'a, but from the rail-head over the next 75 miles to Matrûh there was merely a cleared track with the somewhat grandiose title of the Khedivial Motor Road. Along the coast was a strip of land sparsely cultivated by the Bedouin. Water generally had to be obtained by digging, for wells and cisterns many of them dating from Roman times, were uncertain sources, and were often great distances apart. In summer the soil was dusty but in the wet season, from December to March, rain was plentiful and the ground became gluey.³¹

South of the coastal plain is a plateau of bare limestone hills, extending 50 and 150 miles before the desert proper is reached. In the northern fringe of this desert, 160 miles south of Salûm lies Siwa Oasis, one of the chief centres of the Sanusi's influence, boasting of several lodges. Siwa is the gateway to a series of oases, Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhla and Khargha, extending from north to south about 100 miles west of the Nile Valley to over 500 miles south of the Mediterranean coast. The valley was thus exposed to raids from Bedouin camelry over about 500 miles

of its length. British troops were therefore dispatched to patrol the Moghara oasis, the Faiyum area and Wadi Natrum in order to dissuade any attempts at disorder.³²

THE FIRST BRITISH COUNTER-STROKES

The forces at Wallace's disposal were far from ideal for the task in hand; his staff had been hastily collected, his infantry force had not yet completed its training and his mounted troops were a composite group of yeomanry, made up of about twenty different regiments. Nevertheless it seemed important to strike a blow at the Sanusi as soon as possible, so as to damage their prestige before they were joined by forces from Cyrenaica or by the local population. On 11 December Wallace sent a force under Lt Col J. L. R. Gordon to disperse a body of Sanusi reported at Duwwar Hussein, about 16 miles west of Matrûh. About 300 enemy were eventually encountered and driven out of Wadi Senab with heavy loss. British losses were slight but included Lt Col Snow, the leading Intelligence officer attached to Wallace's force.³³

30. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 106-108.

31. *ibid.*, P. 109.

Bowman — Manifold, *op. cit.*, P. 15.

32. Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, P. 73.

MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 108-9, P. 135.

Bowman-Manifold, *op. cit.*, P. 15.

Lt Genl Sir A. P. Wavell, *The Palestine Campaign*, (3rd ed. London 1941), Pp. 34-36.

33. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 110-111. British losses were 1 officer and 15 men killed, 2 officers and 15 men wounded. The Sanusi force lost about 80 dead.



Encampment at Mersa Matrûh

On 13 December Gordon's force was attached near Wadi Hasheifat. Although the enemy were again driven off with heavy losses the attack was notable for the excellent handling of the Sanusi machine-guns. British losses were quite high, and the column then made its way, considerably worn out, to Matrûh.³⁴ Soon after this a larger enemy concentration was reported only 6 miles south-west of Matrûh. The Sanusi force was estimated at about 5 000 men, with machine- and mountain-guns. Wallace decided to try a surprise night advance on the 25 December. Partial surprise was achieved at Wadi Majib, but confusion over signals led to the failure of the cavalry to follow up the enemy's retreat. The Sanusi suffered heavily at Wadi Majib and decisive action by the cavalry might have destroyed the nucleus of their forces.³⁵ As it was there was no chance of chasing the Sanusi off into the interior for large numbers of Bedouin were gathering between Matrûh and Dab'a. A column was sent under Brig Genl the Earl of Lucan to deal with this threat. The Bedouin dispersed before they could be brought to action and the column had to be satisfied with seizing livestock and destroying tents and grain.³⁶

On the 12 and 15 January 1916 a mixed column under Brig Genl Tyndale-Biscoe made another sweep in an attempt to engage concentrations spotted by aerial reconnaissance. Only smaller camps were found and destroyed however, and the main Sanusi force evaded the searchers, who returned tired to Matrûh.³⁷

THE FORMATION OF THE SA EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

It was at this point that the South Africans made their appearance in the Western Desert, and some brief account of the formation of the South African Infantry Brigade is obviously called for.

Until the southern forces involved in German South West Africa could be safely demobilized it was out of the question for the Union to provide a unit for service outside Africa. In April 1915 however, the Botha government began discussions with the Imperial authorities about the nature of assistance which South Africa might provide. Finally, in July 1915 the British War Office gratefully accepted the Union's offer of troops and recruiting began, primarily among those who

had already seen service in South West Africa.

As a matter of policy it was decided to make the infantry portion of the contingent as representative as possible and the Brigade was accordingly divided into four regiments designated and affiliated as follows:—

- 1 SA Infantry (Cape of Good Hope Regiment).
- 2 SA Infantry (Natal and Orange Free State Regiment).
- 3 SA Infantry (Transvaal and Rhodesia Regiment).
- 4 SA Infantry (South African Scottish Regiment).³⁸

After enlistment recruits were sent to Potchefstroom training camp where drilling began, the regiments were kitted up and periodic inspections made. At this stage the troops themselves were still ignorant of their destination. On 2 September 'A' and 'C' companies of 3 Regiment were paraded and informed that they were to be the first detachment of the Brigade to embark for England. On 4 September they boarded the 'Dunvegan Castle' at Cape Town, to be followed by further detachments until by 17 October 1915 the last of the 160 officers and 5 648 men of 1 SA Infantry Brigade were en route for Europe.³⁹ The command of the Brigade was offered to, and accepted by, Brig Genl H. T. Lukin.⁴⁰

34. *ibid.*, Pp. 111-113. The British inflicted casualties of over 100, losing 9 dead and 56 wounded.

35. *ibid.*, Pp. 113-118. At a cost of 13 dead and 51 wounded, the British estimated they inflicted losses of over 300 dead.

36. *ibid.*, P. 118.

37. *ibid.*, Pp. 119-120.

38. SADF Archive, Series DC., Box 298, File G14/31106, "Memorandum relating to the raising of the S.A. Overseas Expeditionary Force."

39. *ibid.*

Ernest Solomon, Potchefstroom to Delville Wood, together with some Experiences as a Prisoner of War in Germany, (Johannesburg, no date), Pp. 9-11.

Pte E. H. Solomon No 706 3 SA Infantry. A solicitor in civilian life, his war record shows that he had seen previous service in the Anglo Boer War in the Kimberley Town Guard and with the Rand Rifles in GSWA. 1914-15.

40. Later Maj Genl Sir H. T. Lukin. KCB, CMG, DSO, Personal File P1/560. A. 17879. Born London 1860. Officer Native Contingent Zulu War 1879 battle of Ulundi; Cape Mtd Rifles 1881, Basutoland operations; Adj Bechuanaland Fld Force, Langeberg campaign 1896-7; CRA Colonial Division, Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902; Lt Col as OC CMR 1900; OC Colonel Forces Eastern Cape 1901; Cdt Genl Cape Colonial Forces 1904; Inspector Genl PF UDF as Brig Gen 1912; GSWA campaign 1914-15, including OC SAMR Bde May-July 1915; Egypt and France 1915-18. OC 1 SA Inf Bde; Maj Genl Nov. 1916 — March 1918; OC 9 (Scottish) Div at Arras and Ypres; OC 64 (Highland) Div March 1918; Ret'd UDF Jan 1919; Member Council of Defence July 1924; died Dec 1925.



Brig Genl H. T. Lukin

The first South African infantry detachment arrived in England on 23 September and was immediately installed at a camp in Buckinghamshire, but after about a fortnight the Brigade began to reassemble at Bordon camp. Here the next three months were spent, in cold, rain and mud, with hard days of drilling, route marches, weapons practice and parades. Towards the end of November came the news that the Brigade was to leave for France on 16 December to join 16 (Irish) Division.⁴¹ A few days later these orders were cancelled, and the destination changed; the South Africans would return to their own continent, to Egypt. On 27 December new kit was issued and on 29 December 1, 2 and 3 Regiments embarked on H.M.T. 'Saxonia', sailing the next day from Devonport.⁴²

THE SA INFANTRY BRIGADE IN EGYPT

On 10 January 1916 the first three-quarters of the Brigade arrived at Alexandria, and made its way to a camp on the city's outskirts, at Mex. Every night about a tenth of the force was allowed into the town and some were fortunate enough to obtain 48 hours

leave in Cairo. Drilling, route marches and field exercises continued; interestingly enough one of the exercises taught to the South Africans was the forming of squares, as if another Omdurman was anticipated.⁴³ Nevertheless, for 2 Regiment the order soon came for a further move.

On 19 January an aircraft piloted by Capt L. V. Royle of the Egyptian Coastguard had spotted the main Sanusi camp at Halazin, 22 miles south-west of Mersa Matrûh and 10 miles west of Bîr Shola. The encampment consisted of 300 tents, including that of the Sanusi himself and Wallace decided to make his attack as soon as his South African reinforcements arrived.⁴⁵

41. Solomon, *op. cit.*, Pp. 13-19.

42. *ibid.*, Pp. 20-21.

43. *ibid.*, Pp. 26-30.

SADF Archive, Series WWI Box 125, H. Harris, various letters published in S. Paul's Parish Magazine, Durban 1915-16.

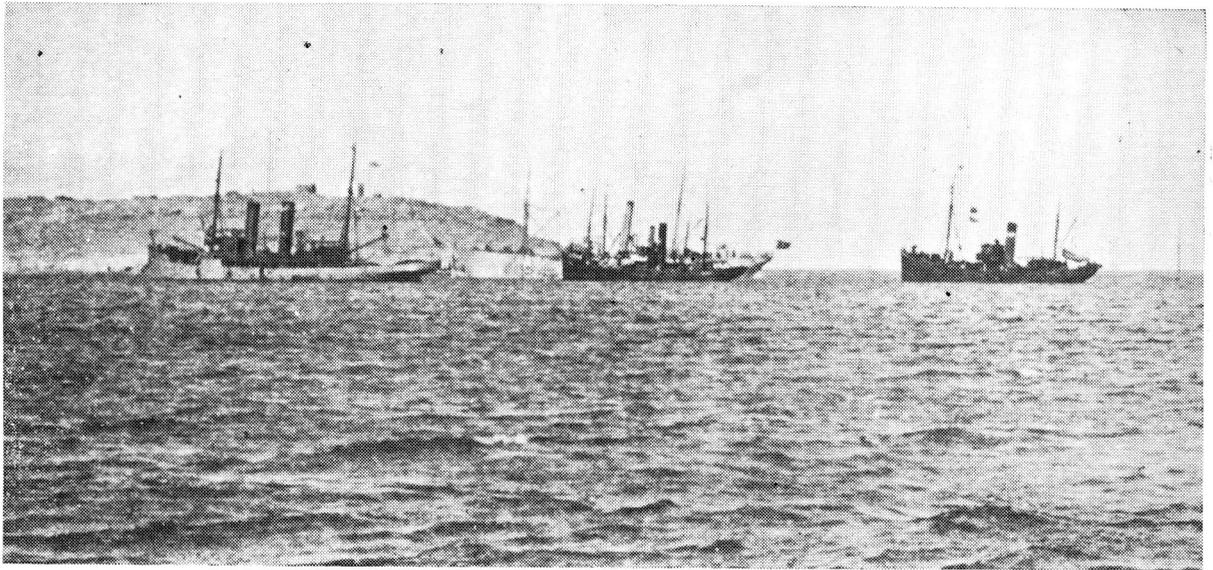
45. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 120-121.

SADF Archives, Series WOID, Box 4, File 'Eyewitness report on 1916 operations in Egypt,' henceforth referred to as 'Eyewitness I.'

On the same day orders were received by the SA Brigade to send two companies by sea to Mersa Matrûh. 2 Regiment was selected to go, commanded by Lt Col W. E. C. Tanner,⁴⁶ and the first two companies were packed on to the H.T. 'Noor el Bahr' and H.T. 'Borulos.'

These vessels could accommodate only 12 officers and 200 men apiece, even with the

decks packed, and provided no cooking facilities for passengers. Lack of rolling-stock made it impossible to send the regiment by rail to Dab'a, and the next day the remaining companies sailed in the H.T. 'Abdul Moneim' and three trawlers.⁴⁷ The regiment was fairly exhausted after this dreadful voyage, which was followed by the usual problems of settling in to a new camp.⁴⁸



Troop transports

THE BATTLE OF HALAZIN

The South Africans were given little enough time to recover from their nautical experience for they were marched out of Matrûh with the rest of Wallace's column at 1500 hrs on 22 January. Each man carried a day's ration, while two day's supply followed in the train transport accompanying the column. By 2200 hrs that night the column had covered 17 miles of difficult country, for the desert, always heavy going, had been made much worse by recent rains and was extremely muddy in places.

The march was carried out in heavy rain and about 90 men were unable to keep up with the main body of the regiment, struggling into camp later. The exhausted force bivouaced and spent a miserably wet night at Bir Shola, camping in a rectangular formation, with strong pickets thrown out to guard each front. Bir Shola took its name from a small well, which had to be opened up by the field engineers accompanying the advance

guard, and the water supply was then extracted by using pumps and canvas troughs.⁴⁹

46. Brig Genl W. E. C. Tanner CB, CMG, DSO, psc. born Cape 1875 Tpr Natal Carbineers 1893; Lt 1899; Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 including Laings Nek and Ladysmith; Capt Natal Militha 1903; Secretary Natal Defence Committee 1905; served Zulu Rebellion 1906; Militia Staff 1907-1912; Staff Officer UDF 1912-14; Lt Col and GSO Brig Genl McKenzie's HQ in GSWA campaign 1914-15; OC 2 Regt SAI Egypt and France 1915-17; OC 8 Inf Bde 1917-18; OC SA Inf Bde 1918-19. Disso Cape Town 1919. Adj Genl 1919; OC Roberts Heights 1920. OC Garrison Cape Town 1921-25; Adj Genl 1925-33 Ret'd 1933.

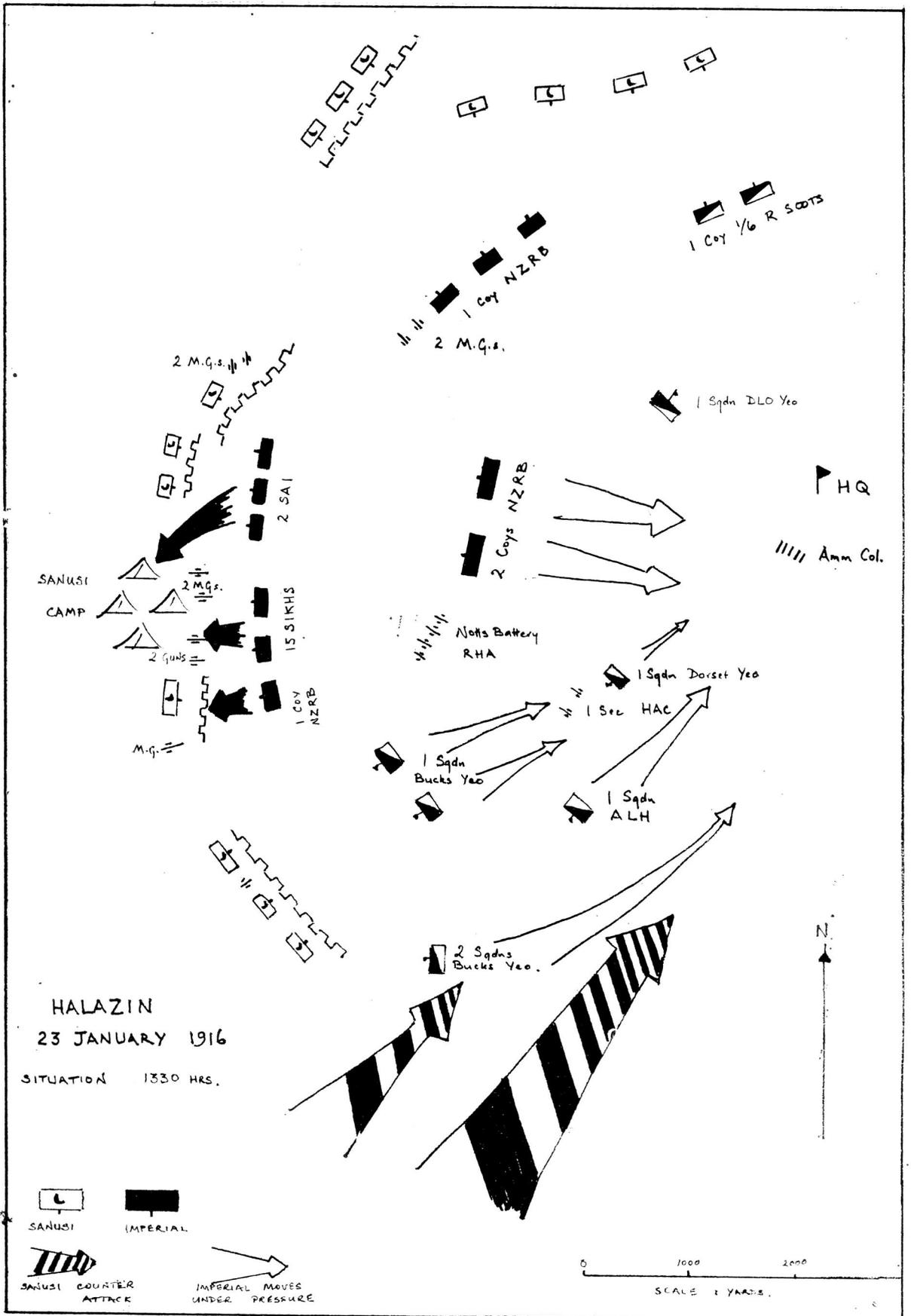
47. SADF Archives, Seres WOI, Box 10, File, 'Marching out states, orders, intelligence reports, moves. Egypt 1916' henceforth referred to as Box 10. Telegraphic Order, dd 19 January 1916, Letter Lt Col. W. Tanner to Brig Genl M. T. Lukin dd Mersa Matrûh 26 January 1916.

SADF Archives Series WWI, Box 128, War Diary, SA Infantry Brigade, Jan. 1916 — June 1916. Henceforth referred to as War Diary. Buchan, op. cit., P. 27.

48. H. Harris, op. cit., letter dated 2 February 1916. Eyewitness I, op. cit.

49. Eyewitness I, op. cit. MacMunn and Falls, op. cit., P. 121. H. Harris, op. cit., letter of 2 February 1916. Letter W. Tanner to Brig Genl Lukin dd 26 Jan 1916, op. cit.

Many of the place names in North Africa provide information about the physical features, Bir=well, Naqb=pass, Wadi=watercourse or valley. For a more comprehensive list of equivalents see MacMunn and Falls Pp. 430-431.



Wallace's troops resumed their march towards Halazin at 0600 hrs the next day, although some of the infantry were already exhausted by their previous exertions.

'We had to leave some men at the well, their feet had gone in, and their stomachs, too, in some cases.'⁵⁰

It was a fair certainty that others would have to fall out on the next day if the advance had to continue. The force was divided into two columns. On the right, under Lt Col J. L. R. Gordon, was a mixed force of infantry and cavalry consisting of one squadron of the Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry; the Notts Battery; 15 Sikhs; 1 NZ Rifle Brigade and 2 Regiment SA Infantry. Small mixed detachments formed the advance and right flank guards for this column, the former in touch with the left column under Brig Genl J. D. T. Tyndale-Biscoe. The latter column was made up of cavalry: the Bucks Hussars; one squadron each of the Herts and Dorset Yeomanry and Australian Light Horse; two troops of Surrey Yeomanry; a machine-gun section; and 'A' Battery of the Honourable Artillery Company. Half a mile to the rear of Gordon's column followed the Reserve, comprising two troops of Herts Yeomanry and the 6 Royal Scots, less two companies. Finally there was the baggage train, with its escort of the 2/8 Middlesex Regiment less two companies.⁵¹

The country was now a mass of mud, which tired the horses and infantry even before the enemy was encountered.⁵² The train had been even worse affected by the conditions, and it was found almost impossible to move it across the wet and sloping ground. Wallace was forced therefore to leave his baggage train and field ambulance parked outside Bir Shola, and this hampered his range of movement and led to some discomfort for his forces later. He was also compelled to abandon his detachment of armoured cars from the Royal Naval Armoured Car Division. The cars were sent back to Matrûh as it seemed likely that the heavy vehicles would find it impossible to return along a track already cut up by the passage of the infantry and cavalry; this decision too, unavoidable as it was, made its impression on the outcome of the battle.

At 0825 hrs, after a march of seven or eight miles, the advance screen of mounted troops, well in front of the main body, reported parties of enemy two miles to its front. An hour later the enemy opened long range fire with machine-guns and 9 pdrs. The desert mirage prevented accurate observation of the enemy's deployment, but it appeared that their forces were defending their camp along a frontage of about two miles. They had dug in in a semi-circle behind a long low ridge presenting a concave position with the flanks thrown well forward so that any attack directed at the centre of their force would face flanking fire from both sides.

Despite this unattractive prospect Wallace decided to bring his infantry in to attack the centre while his mounted troops engaged the enemy's flank. Accordingly, at 1000 hrs, 15 Sikhs advanced in open order, with 2 Regiment SA Infantry and 1 NZ Rifle Brigade in support, covered by the Notts Battery. Despite the fact that the Sanusi were still firing at very long range casualties started with the infantry's advance, as there was a wide area of exposed, dead level country, with no cover at all, to be crossed before the enemy lines were reached. The Sanusi handled their machine-guns well, augmenting them with heavy rifle fire from positions which the steadily advancing infantry found difficult to locate. As the enemy fell back slowly on prepared positions in front of their encampment, covered by the accurate fire of their gunners, they drew the infantry further into their encircling troops.

Now, with the infantry advance already in progress, a body of the enemy suddenly appeared on the right, and at 1145 hrs Lt Col Gordon moved two companies of South Africans to cover the right flank of the Sikhs. Soon after this another party of Sanusi appeared to the left, while the right flank guard reported that it was being driven in by a strong detachment armed with machine-guns. The new threat to the right was contained by a company of New Zealanders with machine-guns, but although the enemy was

50. H. Harris, op. cit., letter 2 February 1916.

51. The bulk of this account of the advance and battle of Halazin is taken from MacMunn and Falls, op. cit., Pp. 121-123 and Eyewitness I, op. cit.

52. W. T. Massey, op. cit., P. 142.

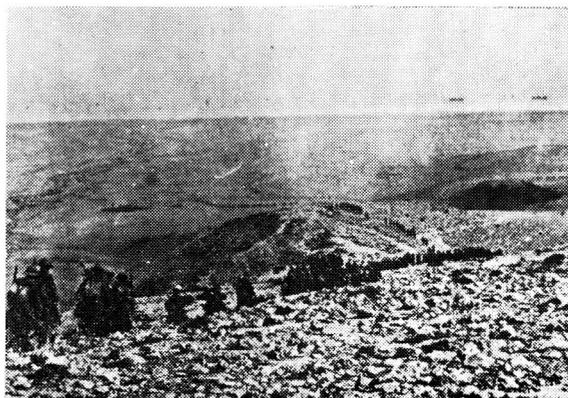
checked, yet another body outflanked the attacking force, and a company of Royal Scots had to be called up to deal with this new pressure. On the left the Sanusi attempted a stronger and more persistent encirclement, holding up the advance of the left column at 1330 hrs and driving it in despite reinforcement for the Reserve. Two companies of New Zealanders were now sent to this flank for the cavalry were now nearly 1 000 yards behind the infantry and only with their help was the enemy advance halted.

Despite the Sanusi counter attacks to his flanks Wallace had determined to retain the initiative provided by his infantry assault in the centre, and to exploit the steadiness of his advancing troops. As a result the forces engaged emerged in the most peculiar configuration as flanking and counter-attacks overlapped to right and left. Both forces now were engaged in an extended semi-circle, but by 1445 hrs Wallace's decision had paid off, as the Sikhs, South Africans and one company of New Zealanders reached the enemy entrenchments, and the Sanusi streamed off into the desert, deserting their camp. With their centre broken, the enemy's flanking groups withdrew, keeping up a desultory fire.⁵³

Now, with the Sanusi disunited and retreating across open country, Wallace would have liked to give pursuit in order to destroy his enemy's fighting strength. His yeomanry however, were completely incapable of giving chase, for their horses had had no water all day and were exhausted by the march which had proceeded the battle and by their efforts to avoid encirclement. The armoured cars would have been invaluable, had not they too fallen victim to the terrain and the weather. So, in the absence of any force capable of giving chase, the Sanusi, though beaten, were able to escape to fight another day.

The infantry had done extremely well, and their keanness under fire drew comment. Rev Harris provides evidence of the eagerness with which 2 Regiment went into action.

'Men who fell out on Sunday morning through blistered feet, footed it into the firing line in stockinged feet, others limping up an hour or so late got into action with another regiment.'⁵⁴



South African infantry on the march

Casualties were the highest in the campaign so far. Wallace's force lost 1 officer and 20 other ranks killed, while 13 officers and 278 other ranks were wounded; of these the South Africans had sustained heavy losses, one officer and seven others killed, and 5 officers and 100 other-ranks wounded. The Sanusi casualties were estimated at 200 killed and 500 wounded, although this seems somewhat sanguine in the light of Ja'afir's later claims that they had only 800 riflemen at the battle.⁵⁵ Wallace decided to bivouac his exhausted troops only two miles east of the captured position, and his force spent a wet and uncomfortable night without coats or blankets and in most cases without food and water, for these were marooned near Bîr Shola with the baggage train. The plight of the wounded was far worse as only two ambulance carts had managed to reach the force and these were despatched to Mersa Matrûh with the most serious cases. The remainder of the wounded had to spend the night in the open and in the morning were moved on stretchers and limber wagons with the column when it started back for Bîr Shola. By now the mud was worse than ever and those vehicles with the column had to be dragged along by the exhausted troops until the baggage train was met 3 miles out of Bîr Shola. The next night was fortunately more pleasant as supplies and tents had been sent to meet the force and the march back to Mersa Matrûh was completed in fine weather.

53. Kearsley, *op. cit.*, Pp. 104-105.
MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, P. 122.
Eyewitness No. 1, *op. cit.*

54. Harris, *op. cit.*, letter of 2 February 1916.

55. SADF Archive, Series WO1 Box 10, 'Daily Intelligence Report dd 3 March 1916.'

SA BRIGADE MOVES UP TO MATRÛH

After Halazin the Western Frontier Force changed its composition once again. The Headquarters and remaining units of 2 Mounted Brigade now joined the Force. The RNAS armoured cars had been found to be too heavy for desert warfare in the rainy season, and were replaced on 27 January by the 17 light armoured cars and 21 motor-cycles of the Cavalry Corps Motor Machine-gun Battery. On 28 January 15 Sikhs, who had started as the Force's only trained unit and had consequently seen much action, began their withdrawal for India. The Sikhs were to be relieved by the remainder of the South African Brigade.⁵⁶

On 29 January Brigade Headquarters and 1 SA Infantry Regiment were ordered up to Mersa Matrûh. That day 7 officers and 401 other ranks packed aboard the H.T. 'Noor-el-Bahr' and 'Abdul Moneim', to be followed next day by another 8 officers and 249 men on the H.T. 'Borulus', and by 10 officers and 261 men on 1 February aboard H.T. 'Abdul Moneim' and the trawler 'Gonzala'. At 1700 hrs on 3 February the Brig Genl Lukin's Headquarters staff and signals section, 6 officers and 33 other ranks, sailed on H.T. 'Missir' for Mersa Matrûh arriving at 0830 hrs next day.⁵⁷

Sir J. Maxwell and his CGS, Brig Genl N. Malcolm, visited Matrûh on 1 February, in order to study the problem of the re-occupation of Salûm.⁵⁸ His information was that the Sanusi's main force was near Barrâni and that a smaller group was encamped at Bîr Wa'ir just outside Salûm.

Broadly speaking there was a choice between two main alternatives. The first plan was to make an advance on Barrâni along the coast accompanied by a simultaneous landing at Salûm. The difficulties with this idea were that Salûm Bay is commanded by heights and that the harbour mouth was mined. The landing of troops would therefore be a slow business, with surprise out of the question, and the terrain would make a contested landing a very expensive affair. The alternative was to move the whole force by land to seize Barrâni as a supply base so that the force could move on while supplied as far as possible from the sea. This plan was not without its difficulties, for the route from Barrâni to Salûm was known to have few

wells. The second plan would probably involve less than the first, and would carry less risk of setbacks, and was adopted therefore. Nevertheless the taking of Barrâni would probably involve a fairly heavy engagement and would present all those problems connected with supply and the maintenance of fairly long lines of communications for substantial numbers of troops.

The operation was only made feasible by the allocation of 2 000 camels to the Western Frontier Force, for this made it completely mobile for the first time and enabled the troops to operate at a considerable distance from their established base at Matrûh for longer periods.

It was at this juncture that Maj Genl Maxwell, troubled by an old wound and uncertain of his ability to withstand the stress of a protracted desert campaign, tendered his resignation as commander of the Western Frontier Force. Maxwell appointed Maj Genl W. E. Peyton of the 2 Mounted Brigade to succeed him, although the latter had not yet arrived, and from 6 February Brig Genl Lukin assumed temporary command on instructions from Cairo.⁵⁹

Matrûh and Barrâni are 80 miles apart as the crow flies, 90 miles by the march route. Before moving his force up to Barrâni therefore, Peyton had to open an intermediate depot from which to supply it. For this purpose he chose Angeila, which was satisfactory as being about half-way to Barrâni and having adequate wells. On 13 February Lt Col H. T. Fulton, 1 NZ Rifles was sent up to Angeila with the initial convoy of 800 camels, which carried 28 days mobile rations for 1 400 men, for 200 horses and for the camels themselves. Fulton's column arrived three days later without incident. On 14 February they were followed by the 22 officers and 888 men of 1 Regiment SA Infantry who escorted a wheeled convoy.⁶⁰ The South Africans were to relieve Fulton's New Zealanders, who then returned to Matrûh.⁶¹

56. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 123-124.

57. War Diary, *op. cit.*

58. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, P. 123.

59. *ibid.*

War Diary, *op. cit.*

60. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 124-125.

War Diary, *op. cit.*

61. SADF Archives, Series WO1, Box 10, C.R. 446. Orders to GOC 1 SA Brigade, dd Mersa Matrûh 13 February 1916.



Issuing water to the camel drivers

One of the advantages of camel transport was that it increased the carrying capacity of a column; camels could carry 800 lbs of equipment and supplies, while pack horses could take only 200 lbs and pack mules 160 lbs. In addition camels could drink water unfit for human consumption and were less dependent than other livestock on regular halts. The addition of a camel train to Peyton's force was therefore a significant one.⁶² While Peyton was establishing his intermediate base on the road to Sidi Barrâni, further detachments of South Africans were arriving at Mersa Matrûh to complete the formation of the SA Infantry Brigade. On 15-18 February 3 Regiment SA Infantry arrived at Matrûh, under the command of Lt Col Thackeray⁶³ to begin route marches and some rudimentary training in those details of military life peculiar to the desert campaign.⁶⁴ They were followed by 4 Regiment SA Infantry on 19 February.

On 18 February 2 Regiment SA Infantry under Lt Col Tanner moved out of Matrûh as escort to another convoy to Angeila, to make the return march to Matrûh on 20 February.⁶⁵

THE ADVANCE ON BARRÂNI

Peyton was now ready to despatch his main force towards Barrâni, under the command of Brig Gen Lukin. The advance of Lukin's force was covered by rumours in Cairo that the British were about to withdraw from Matrûh, by this ruse Maxwell hoped to deceive the Sanusi into leaving their forces where they were, fearing that otherwise the enemy might simply evade Lukin and disappear into the desert.⁶⁶

62. SADF Archives, Series WOI, Box 10, C.R. 3761, Instructions regarding camel and other transport, dd HQ, WFF, Mersa Matrûh 6 February 1916.

63. Col E. F. Thackeray CMG, DSO. Personal File P1/3595. A. 7428. Born England 1870; Lt, East Surrey Regt 1890-91; Sgt, 11 Hussars 1891-95, served Chitral 1895, Sq Sgt-Maj, Matabeleland Relief Force 1896; Tpr, Rhodesian Regt 1899-1900, Lt and Capt, Kitchener's Fighting Scouts 1901-2; Lt and Capt, SAC 1902-5. Adj, Wits Rifles 1905-12; Capt PF Staff 1912; Disso 1914; CSO Eastern Force GSWA 1915, OC 3 SA Infantry 1915-18, Egypt, France, Belgium; Disso Johannesburg 1919; SA Staff Corps 1923; Ret'd 1926; Died 1956.

64. Solomon, *op. cit.*, P. 31. War Diary, *op. cit.*

65. SADF Archives, Series WOI, Box 10, Orders to GOC SA Brigade dd HQ WFF Mersa Matrûh 17 February 1916.

66. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, Pp. 124-125.



Camel train

At this stage it would be as well to see exactly what sort of information Peyton had about the whereabouts of the Sanusi forces. Aerial reconnaissances had been made regularly since before Halazin, and these, together with intelligence from deserters and spies, supplied a steady flow of information to Force HQ.⁶⁷ Peyton's most recent intelligence was certainly encouraging. Although there was a force of nearly 2 000 Sanusi said to be at Siwa, no enemy formations seemed to be moving yet against the southern oases en route for the Nile. The main Sanusi group within striking distance was encamped at 'Aqqâqîr, about 10 miles south-east of Barrâni, evidently under the command of Ja'afir. This camp was spotted from the air on 15 February, and the observer calculated that Ja'afir's force comprised up to 400 men. Other information from refugees indicated that Ja'afir's force might number as many as 600, with about 15 Turkish officers. Morale was said to be low as food was short, and the Aulad 'Ali were allegedly being held against their will. A coastguard Secret Service officer reported that

. . . 'The Awlad Aly Bedouins fighting with the Senusi are now feeling the pinch of hunger, and they are absolutely in a state a destitution. Several of them have died of hunger and many are only too anxious to come to the provinces to obtain support for their families' . . .

The jihad certainly seemed to have failed to influence the Egyptian Bedouin, for many headmen were now warning their tribes to

stay clear of the Sanusi forces, while others were coming into Matrûh, asking permission to move east, away from the troubled areas.⁶⁸ On 20 February, at 0830 hrs, Lukin's column left Matrûh in a raging dust storm. His column consisted of HQ SA Infantry Brigade; 1/1 Notts Battery R.H.A. (less one section); Dorset Yeomanry; 3 SA Infantry; 1/6 Royal Scots; a detachment of Egyptian RE; Notts and Derby Field Ambulance; Midland Field Ambulance; supply column and train. After an inspection by Peyton the column finally got under way on its march alongside the telegraph line to Umm el Rakham, 13 miles distant. The force made halts of 10 minutes every hour, but arrived at Umm el Rakham at 1415 hrs, and mounted outpost guards were set out.⁶⁹

Next day the march was continued to Bîr Abdih where the Camel Corps transport were to catch up with the column. On 22 February Lukin's troops covered the final 18 miles to Angeila. Peyton's had ordered that the advance on Barrâni should take place as soon

67. SADF Archives, Series WOI, Box 10 contains a small file of daily intelligence reports covering the period 10 February — 6 March 1916.

68. *ibid.*

69. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, P. 125.

SADF Archive, Series WOJD, Box 4, 'Despatch No. 1. By Brig-Gen H. T. Lukin, CMG, DSO, commanding mobile column operating west of Mersa Matrûh. Dated 1 March 1916.' Henceforth referred to as Lukin's Despatch No. 1. War Diary, *op. cit.*

SADF Archives, Series WWI, Box 125, Brigade Major's Diary, 19 February — 15 March 1916. Henceforth referred to as Bde Major's Diary.

Operational Orders Nos. 1 and 2.

Solomon, *op. cit.*, P. 32.



Escorting refugees into camp

as possible, in order to avoid dependence on the presently extended line of communications any longer than was necessary; it was also important that the force should arrive in the vicinity of the enemy before its strength became known.⁷⁰

For the march from Angeila Lukin retained only 300 of the 1/6 Royal Scots, leaving the remainder with Fulton's NZ Rifles to guard the supply depot. On 23 February Lukin's force moved on having collected the remainder of 1/1 Notts Battery RHA and all of 1 Regiment SA Infantry. The march was continued to Shammâs, a distance of 14 miles, and the next day another 14 miles to Wadi el Maktila. The force was to be allowed a day's rest here as the enemy was known to be in the proximity.⁷¹

Nevertheless, the brief period of relaxation did not indicate that the discipline of the force was to be impaired, strict control was required, particularly with regard to the water supply. In addition Lukin took special precautions to disguise the strength of his column from the enemy by keeping his men

off the sky line at the perimeter of the camp, and by forbidding fires during the hours of darkness, or the smoking of cigarettes in the picket lines.⁷²

The troops had now been on the march for three days and many of the infantry had been badly affected by the stoney and uneven ground. The halt at Maktila provided a welcome change, and lifted morale as Dawson, commanding 1 Regiment explained.

'We are bivouacking on the beach in a very pretty little bay, where there is an excellent bathing place. Everyone is happy and contented. It has taken the majority of them nineteen months to get

70. Lukin's Despatch No 1, *op. cit.*
War Diary, *op. cit.*

71. *ibid.*

72. Bde Major's Diary, *op. cit.*, Operation Order No. 6.

73. SADF Archives, Series WOID, Box 4, File 'Egypt 1916 Extracts from General Dawson's letters'. Letter dd 25 February 1916. Brig Genl F. S. Dawson, CMG DSO Personal File P1/14936 A.10648. Born Sussex 1873; Northumberland Fusiliers 1892; served India 1893-97; Robert's Horse, Anglo-Boer War 1900; SAC 1901-8; Inspector ORC Police 1908-13; Lt Col SAMR 1913, OC 4 SAMR 1914-15; OC 1 Regt SAI 1916-18; Died 1920.

near an enemy — they think they are really going to have a show at last, especially as there is now a little shooting going on at the outposts, and the Senussi put a few shots among our men drawing water just now.⁷³

Lukin had taken some pains to avoid frightening off the enemy from their position at 'Aqqâqîr. Before leaving Matrûh he had arranged that the small force of armoured cars which was to join his column should do so near Maktila on the night of the 24-25 February, after travelling past any small settlements at night. He had also organized an aerial reconnaissance at daylight on the 25th, so that he should have an accurate idea of the enemy's dispositions and his own position in relation to the Sanusi encampment.⁷⁴

THE BATTLE OF 'AQQÂQÎR

At 1120 hrs on the 25 February, a BE2c reconnaissance aircraft dropped a map of the enemy position for transmission to Lukin. It was immediately copied for use by his commanders.⁷⁵

To supplement this information Lukin also had his Brigade Major, J. Mitchell-Baker, draw up a sketch of the enemy position and the main features on the column's approach.⁷⁶ Reconnaissance had revealed the enemy still encamped at 'Aqqâqîr, about 8 miles to the south west of Lukin's force. As Lukin's objective was to find the enemy in order to destroy his concentrations this was a piece of good fortune. At 1520 hrs he issued orders to his commanders for a night approach starting at 1900 hrs, to culminate in an attack on the encampment at dawn next day. So far things were going according to the schedule anticipated as far back as Matrûh.⁷⁷ The Sanusi were not leaving the initiative exclusively in Lukin's hands however and at 1730 hrs they moved up two 10-pdrs to a point just south of the Khedivial road, and brought these into action against the encampment. Dawson describes the affair quite graphically.

'We were in a confined space and it was very unpleasant while it lasted. One shell fell in the middle of a company of mine who were drawn up close to the hillside four deep. It burst, knocking over four

men, only one of whom was touched, and he was killed. I was within ten yards of the spot at the time.'⁷⁸

Machine-guns also opened fire from close range and for a while it appeared that the camp might be attacked. Lukin's gunners replied quickly however, and he moved his detachment of Royal Scots forward on the right while 1 SA Infantry moved up on the left, with 3 SA Infantry in reserve. The enemy withdrew after 30 minutes having fired about 24 shells, half of which landed in the sea, the only losses being 1 killed and 1 wounded among the troops bivouaced on the beach. The effect of the Sanusi fire had not been limited to these casualties, for some confusion had been created, and the 1 SA Infantry had moved forward about two miles to counter the threat. As darkness set in Lukin decided to cancel his orders for a night march and to make his entire move at daybreak.⁷⁹ On the morning of 26 February Lukin's infantry prepared to advance on the enemy position, and his cavalry, under Lt Col H. M. W. Souter of the Dorset Yeomanry, were ordered out at 0610 hrs to seize the high ground 3 or 4 miles to the south of the camp. En route they were to take a mound 1 mile south west of the camp, and this was shortly occupied unopposed, and held by a detachment of Yeomanry until the infantry's arrival. As yet no enemy had been seen, nor any firing heard.⁸⁰

Detaching one squadron to hold the position until the infantry came up, Souter's main force moved southwards and by 0700 hrs was in possession of a strong position 4 miles south of its starting point.

74. SADF Archives, Series WO1, Box 10, H. T. Lukin to HQ WFF dd Mersa Matrûh 18 February 1916.

75. SADF Archives, Series WW1, Box 127, Appendices to War Diary Original maps, (See Illustration).

76. SADF Archives, Series WW1, Box 127, Appendices to War Diary Bde Major's sketch. See illustration. Unfortunately the sketch, with its bearings, does not tally with maps of the area, particularly the relative positions of Wadi el Maktila and 'Aqqâqîr. The map in MacMunn and Falls op. cit., opposite P. 125 is faulty in many respects, however, not least in its placing of the Khedivial Road, which should run only two miles south of Lukin's camp.

77. Bde Major's Diary op. cit., Operational Order No. 7. War Diary, op. cit.

Lukin's Dispatch No. 1 op. cit.

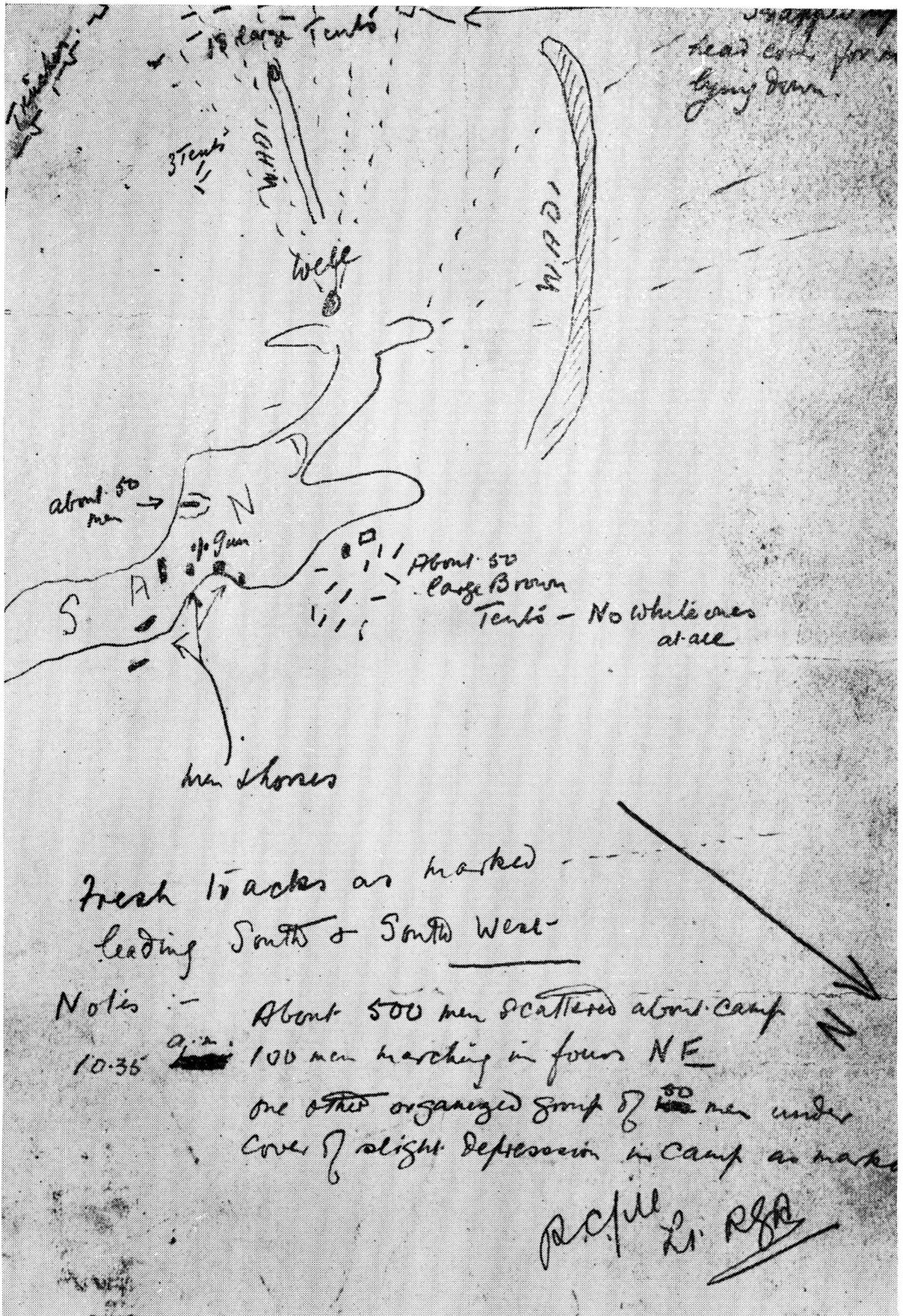
78. Dawson, op. cit., letter of 27 February 1916.

79. War Diary, op. cit.

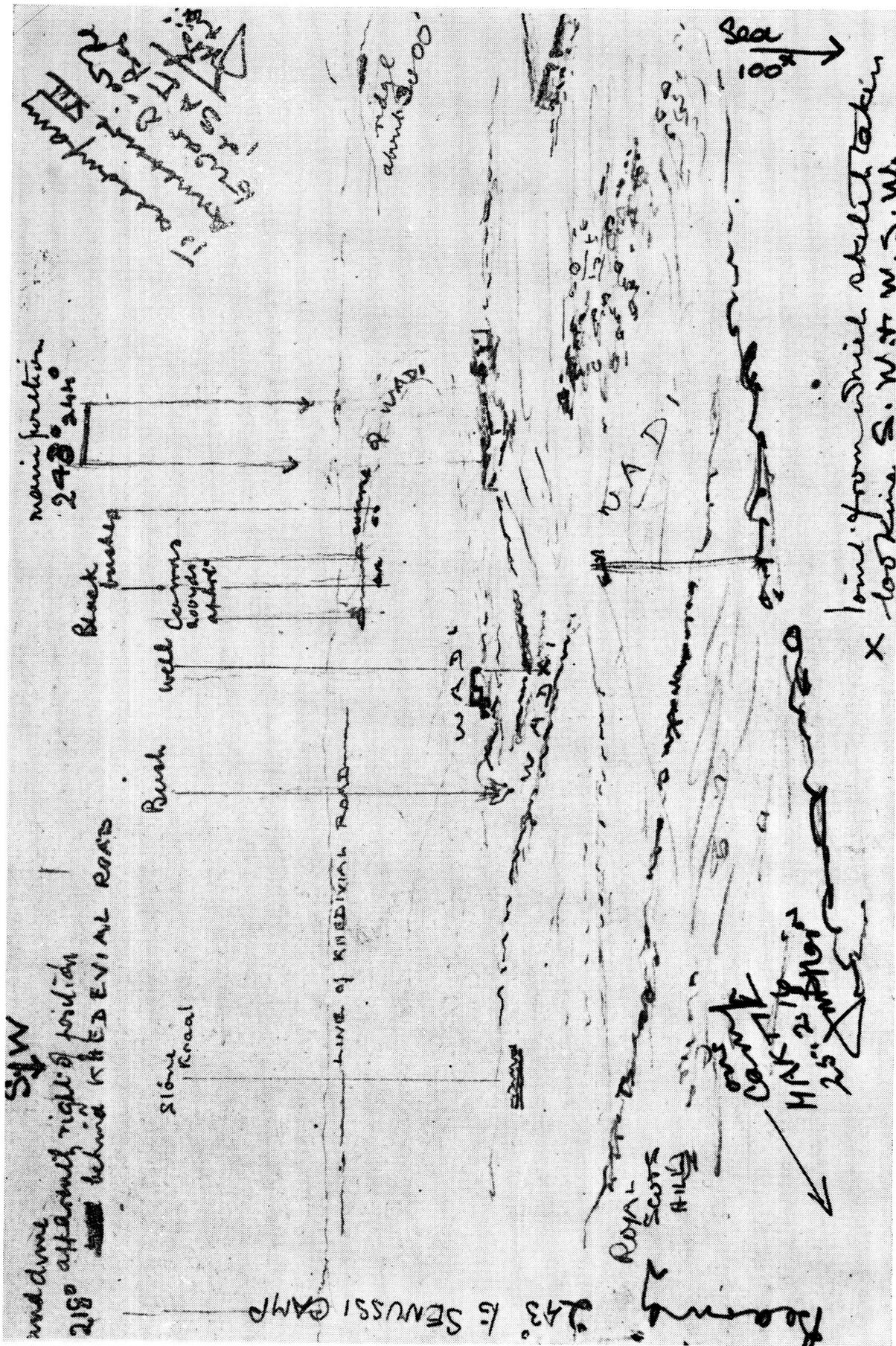
Lukin's Despatch No. 1, op. cit.

MacMunn and Falls op. cit., P. 126.

80. SADF Archives, Series WW1, Box 127, Annexures to War Diary Souter's narrative; annexure I report dd 0645 hrs, 26 February 1916.



Aerial reconnaissance sketch dropped to Brig Genl Lukin on 25 February 1916



Major Mitchell-Baker's sketch near Wadi el Maktila 25 February 1916

At 0800 hrs Souter, in compliance with Lukin's instructions, sent out two officer's patrols to reconnoitre the enemy position as shown by the aerial sketch-maps. Shortly afterwards he saw a small enemy group some two miles to the south-south-west, and half an hour later continuous firing was reported to the south west, although Souter was still unable to see anything. By 0900 hrs the officer's patrols had returned with their reports confirming the Sanusi's position, having seen upwards of 300 men.⁸¹

At 0930 hrs Lukin's infantry left Wadi Maktila, leaving the 300 Royal Scots to guard the camp along with such of his infantry as were unfit to march the eight miles to 'Aqqâqîr, Lukin's troops were accompanied by four of the armoured cars which had joined at Maktila, under the command of Major the Duke of Westminster.⁸²

About three-quarters of an hour later the Yeomanry moved forward to seize a small hill just over two miles from the enemy's main position, Lukin rode up and personally surveyed the Sanusi dispositions. As his infantry moved up Lukin ordered the detached squadron to their left along with two armoured cars, to cover the flank. The main body of horsemen was ordered towards the enemy's left flank, to prevent the Sanusi breaking westwards. While this movement was being executed Souter's force came under fire from artillery, machine-guns and rifles. This Yeomanry now took up a strong position about half a mile west of the Sanusi left flank, where they dismounted and advanced to pin the enemy to his ground. They were aided in this by two armoured cars which were particularly useful in keeping down enemy machine-gun fire, although they found the soft sand difficult going.⁸³

By 1100 hrs Lukin had his infantry ready to deploy for the attack, 3 Regiment was to lead the assault, supported by 1 Regiment. The infantry advanced in line over a frontage of about a mile with the men spaced at intervals of about two paces, the line covered by the flanking machine-guns of four armoured cars. The guns of the Notts Battery RHA were galloped into position and opened an accurate covering fire from about 3 miles range. By now the infantry too had come under fire which increased as they moved forward. The terrain was flat and offered no

cover except to a prostrate man, and the enemy remained invisible in the heat haze.⁸⁴ As at Halazin Ja'afir attempted outflanking tactics against the advancing infantry, this time against the weaker left flank of the South Africans. His initial dispositions were not so favourable to this move at 'Aqqâqîr however, and Lukin countered it by ordering Lt Col Dawson to extend a company of 1 Regiment to the left. This was quite sufficient to counter the Sanusi move and Dawson was even able to deploy his troops to threaten the enemy's right, so that Lukin was able to allow the Yeomanry Squadron on his left to rejoin the main party on his right, in preparation for the anticipated pursuit.⁸⁵

Since 1000 hrs Souter had been aware of the Sanusi's preparations for moving off and throughout the infantry engagement bodies of Sanusi with camels and horses began to move off to the south. Souter covered their withdrawal by moving his squadrons in succession along the enemy flank, parallel with their line of retreat. His task now was to watch for a general withdrawal and to attack the enemy as he fell back from his positions.⁸⁶

At about 1300 hrs, as his leading infantry reached to within 500 yards of the Sanusi lines, Lukin decided to throw in his reserve in order to gain fire superiority, warning Souter to prepare now for the enemy breaking off the action. Shortly after this a company of 1 Regiment on Lukin's left gained a foothold in the Sanusi line and the anticipated withdrawal began in earnest. The remainder of the infantry did not take long to enter the position but the depth of the Sanusi lines, which were really a series of sand dunes, made it difficult to drive out the defenders. A running fight developed, so that by the time the infantry reached the southern edge of the position three hours had elapsed and most of the Sanusi had made good their escape.⁸⁷

81. *ibid.*, Helio messages 0740 hrs., 0310 hrs., 0830 hrs. Report by Mounted Orderly 0905 hrs.

82. Lukin's Despatch No. 1 *op. cit.* Solomon, *op. cit.*

83. Lukin's Despatch No. 1, *op. cit.* Souter's narrative, *op. cit.*

84. Lukin's Despatch No. 1, *op. cit.* MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, P. 127. Solomon, *op. cit.*, P. 35.

85. Lukin's Despatch No. 1, *op. cit.* MacMunn and Falls *op. cit.*, P. 127.

86. Souter's narrative, *op. cit.*

87. Lukin's Despatch No. 1, *op. cit.* MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, P. 127.

Souter had decided to allow his horsemen all the advantages offered by the flatness of the terrain by allowing the Sanusi to get well clear of their entrenchments and wire before committing his men to close-quarters combat. He had shadowed the retreat by moving parallel with the Sanusi column, about 1 000 yards to the west, attacking with dismounted fire whenever it became necessary to rest the horses.⁸⁸ By 1430 hrs he could see the whole enemy retreat extending over about 1½ miles, covered by fighting units on the flank and at the rear.

By getting involved in a running fight with the retreating force Souter had lost touch with Lukin since receiving the original order to prepare for a pursuit. He now had to decide for himself on the best way of tackling the problem. His horses had not been watered all day and could obviously not sustain another long period of galloping. Souter decided therefore to make one great last effort to place himself alongside the main body of the enemy in order to attack it mounted. By 1500 hrs the Yeomanry had drawn level with the Sanusi retreat and gave their horses one last rest, keeping up a dismounted fire all the while. By 1515 hrs all the Dorset squadrons were together, although the Bucks Squadron was a considerable way ahead, keeping up a flanking pursuit. Bearing in mind the state of the horses Souter decided to attack with the 200 Dorsets. His men advanced slowly in two lines, immediately coming under fire from 3 machine-guns and about 150 rifles in the rearguard. Fortunately the covering fire of his machine-gun section allowed Souter to press home his attack and at about fifty yards the charge was ordered. Although the enemy's regulars and gunners stood their ground the remainder of the rearguard broke and Bedouin streamed off into the desert in all directions.⁸⁹

By some mad chance Souter's horse was shot down just in front of a collection of Turkish officers, including the wounded commander Ja'afir. After a brief gun battle Souter secured his Turkish prisoners and removed them on the horses of the machine-gun section. Souter's presence of mind in this incredible situation resulted in one of the most significant gains from the victory of 'Aqqâqir. The Dorsets pursued the broken foe deep into the desert, killing a large number, although their own losses were heavy, for they were



Ja'afir Pasha after his capture at 'Aqqaqir

not a regular cavalry regiment used to the skills of close-quarter fighting. A large number of them had their horses shot down or were isolated as the pursuit spread over an ever-widening area.⁹⁰

It was a merciless business with wounded on both sides simply finished off. As Dawson explained it . . .

. . . 'All the wounded Sanusi we found were finished off and prisoners were only taken when one could not very well do otherwise. It was very horrid, but the only thing to do with people of that sort, who will shoot one if able to, even when wounded.'⁹¹

88. Souter's narrative, op. cit.

MacMunn and Falls, op. cit., Pp. 127-128.

89. *ibid.*

90. *ibid.*

The capture of Ja'afir was of considerable benefit to the Allied cause. Later, when the Arabs of Hejaz revolted against the Turks he served with Feisal and became commander of his regular forces, receiving a CMG for his services. After the war he became Minister of War and Prime Minister in the Iraqi cabinet, and later served as Iraqi Ambassador to Britain, see Wavell, op. cit., P. 37.

91. Dawson's letter, op. cit., letter of 27 February 1916.

The mounted action was still in progress as late as 1630 hrs, by which time the infantry were already looking for a camping ground before darkness fell. When the Dorsets returned they had lost 5 officers and 28 men killed, and 2 officers and 25 men wounded, while the Bucks had lost 1 dead and 3 wounded. Of the infantry 3 Regiment had borne the brunt of the fire-fight with 1 officer and 10 other ranks dead and 5 officers and 73 men wounded. 1 Regiment lost 6 dead and 18 wounded. Lukin estimated the enemy's losses at about 500 out of a force of 1 800; in addition the Sanusi lost a great deal of ammunition and supplies.⁹²

Despite the losses suffered by the Imperial Forces, the heaviest in the campaign so far, the blow dealt to the enemy was decisive. For the first time a retreating enemy had been properly pursued and harried. Never again would the Sanusi await a frontal attack by Imperial forces and risk the sort of disaster which had overtaken them at 'Aqqâqîr.

Lukin's force spent the next day on the field of battle, with the unpleasant task of burying the dead. On 28 February the troops marched unopposed to Barrâni, described by one soldier as

... 'a small deserted village at the coast.'⁹³

Barrâni was immediately placed in a state of defence and converted into an advance base for further operations. The intention was to push forward sufficient supplies by land and sea until an adequate reserve had been established at Barrâni to allow the remainder of the Western Frontier Force to come up from Matrûh and join in a combined forward movement to Salûm.⁹⁴

92. Lukin's Despatch No. 1, op. cit.
Souter's narrative, op. cit.
MacMunn and Falls, op. cit., P. 128.

93. War Diary, op. cit.
Solomon, op. cit., P. 37.

94. SADF Archives, Series WOID, Box 4, 'Eyewitness account of the campaign in Western Egypt. Dated 20 March 1916.'



Sanusi prisoners. The man standing second from the left is a Turkish officer

THE ADVANCE ON SALÛM

On 2-3 March aircraft were sent to search the area between Barrâni and Salûm, the only large body spotted was at Bir Wa'ir, where 300 tents were seen. An armoured car patrol sent west from Barrâni reported only starving Bedouin, although a mounted patrol shot 3 fleeing Arabs near the local wells.⁹⁵

Supply became Peyton's greatest problem again, for even the 2 000 camels making up the supply train were insufficient to provide for the whole force at one. Besides, overland supply was an expensive business, consuming time and manpower as every convoy took four days from Matrûh to Barrâni, with escorts of 50-100 men required for each journey, in addition to civilian drivers. Peyton attempted to alleviate the problem by ordering Lukin to send all but a small section of his mounted troops back to Matrûh.⁹⁶

The harbour at Barrâni was 90 miles nearer than Matrûh to Salûm, but was an indifferent landing place, whose utility was dependent on good weather. There remained the ever-present threat of submarines. Nevertheless,

on 3 March H.T. 'Borulos' arrived with sufficient stores for Peyton to begin moving the bulk of the Western Frontier Force towards Salûm. On that same day the first two companies of 4 Regiment SA Infantry arrived at Barrâni, followed by the remainder of the regiment on 6 March. Over the next two days they were joined by Peyton's HQ, and by 2 Regiment SA Infantry.⁹⁷

During 2 Regiment's march along the coast-line Rev Harris made some observations of factors which had influenced the campaign as much as the fighting.

'On the maps all the coastal belt is marked as cultivated land and a great deal of it has been ploughed and sown this year... This year they will reap none of their crops and to such a race of people, this fact spells disaster.'⁹⁸

95. War Diary, op. cit.

Daily Intelligence reports, op. cit., Armoured Car Reconnaissance 29 February 1916, Aerial Reconnaissance 3 March 1916.

96. Massey, op. cit., Pp. 148-149.

MacMunn and Falls, op. cit., Pp. 128-129.

97. War Diary, op. cit.

98. Harris, op. cit., letter of 20 March 1916.



Lt Shenton and Lt Cameron 4 SA Infantry relax between marches towards Salûm

Nor was destruction limited to supplies . . . 'there was a small cluster of Arab dwellings . . . We carried no firewood and the bush scrub is very scarce so the roof timbers were invaluable. The dwellings were made of mud and sometimes with stones, but they had an earth roof supported by good beams. It took very little time for these homes to be dismantled and good fires burning' . . .⁹⁹

The next stage of the campaign was preceded by another substantial transfer of units. The Composite Yeomanry Brigade had broken up, while 1 NZ Rifles and 1 Australian Division Train had been moved to other theatres in Egypt. The Force had added some picturesque-sounding units to its strength including the Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery, a detachment of the Kent Field Company RE and a company of the Australian Camel Corps. In addition it had acquired the remainder of 2 Mounted Brigade. The whole of the Force had not arrived in Barrâni by the time the advance was under way however.¹⁰⁰

Salûm lies on a bay with a good harbour, some 50 miles west of Barrâni. The town is encircled by the Taref mountains which are

cut only by a narrow approach along the coast from the east, between the escarpment and the sea. From the top of the escarpment stretching west and south into the desert plateau there is the Haggag el Salûm. As we have said the escarpment at Salûm is extremely precipitous and overhangs the bay from a height of 600 feet, and any attempt at assault here would obviously have invited very heavy casualties. The key to the position, therefore, was to secure a foothold on the plateau east of Salûm, thus turning the enemy's flank with an advance along the edge of the plateau. Aerial reconnaissance reported the town to be well held by Sanusi, now reinforced by the fugitives of 'Aqqâqir', and Peyton decided to attempt an ascent of the plateau by way of the few so-called passes to the east of Salûm. These passes are in fact little more than steep and rocky tracks, affording only slight relief to the steep face of the mountains.¹⁰¹

This move would involve problems of a different sort, for it involved a movement away

99. *ibid.*

100. MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, P. 130.

101. *ibid.*

War Diary, *op. cit.*

Eyewitness dd 20 March 1916, *op. cit.*



4 SA Infantry in camp

from road and sea communications, with all the attendant doubts about water-supply. Peyton decided in view of the water problem to move his force from Barrâni in two echelons to avoid draining the wells. Lukin was to lead the first column making for Buqbuq and thence south-west to Bîr el Ogîrîn where according to available information there was a good supply of water. From here he was to attempt to take the passes Naqb Mad'an and Naqb el 'Arâqîb, some 17 to 20 miles south-west of Salûm. Once the plateau was gained the water problem should ease, for there were large cisterns at Mad'an and Bîr el Siweiyat. These passes were, however, impossible for the armoured cars, and these would have to attempt an ascent some 30 miles further south-east, to co-ordinate their arrival at Mad'an with that of the infantry, there they would help in the work of taking the passes.

Lukin's force was to be made up largely of the slower moving infantry units, and he was to aim to reach Bîr el Ogîrîn by daybreak on 12 March, and to secure the passes immediately. Meanwhile the mounted troops and camel corps, under the command of Brig Genl Lord Hampden, would leave Barrâni on 11 March to rejoin Lukin's force at Ogîrîn on 13 March, prior to a general advance on Salûm.¹⁰²

Lukin's force marching from Barrâni first consisted of all four battalions of SA Infantry; 'A' squadron Dorset Yeomanry; 1/1 Kent Field Company RE; 1 Notts and Derby Field Ambulance; the Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery; detachments of HQ Signalers; and a supply train. No wheeled transport was used on this occasion, but camels were employed to carry baggage, stores, technical equipment, ammunition and water. For this column alone the number of animals required totalled over 600. Despite this apparently large entourage, the men were warned that rations would be in short supply, and that every care should be taken to avoid wastage.¹⁰³

On the first day the column halted 500 yds south of the telegraph line only 5 miles west of Sidi Barrâni, at an old Roman cistern which fortunately gave a fairly plentiful supply.

On the 10th the march was continued to Bîr Abu Douma, a distance of 12 miles,¹⁰⁴ there they bivouaced by the seashore, and again found several wells and cisterns of Roman origin, but these had to be cleared by the engineers as they were badly silted up. Some soon ran dry and although the advance guard of the column arrived at 1100 hrs, it was long past midnight before all the animals and men had received their water ration.¹⁰⁵ From Bîr Abu Douma the CRE, Lt Col Griffiths, was sent forward in an armoured car, with orders to investigate the water supply at Bîr el Ogîrîn. Wanting in addition to secure as much tactical information as possible about the passes which must be taken Lukin sent along his Brigade Major, Mitchell-Baker.¹⁰⁶

On 11 March the move was continued to Buqbuq, covering the 9 miles in 4 hours. There the water supply had to be opened up before it was of any use to a column of this size, and even so was really inadequate, the water being of a sulphurous nature. The main supply had to be got by digging impromptu wells in the sand, a heavy though unavoidable fatigue for men who needed all their strength for the next march.¹⁰⁷

Lukin's original orders, it will be remembered, were to arrive at Ogîrîn on the morning of 12 March. He had therefore intended to leave Buqbuq at 1900 hrs on 11 March. Lt Col Griffiths returned from Bîr el Ogîrîn with a pessimistic report about the water supply there, and Lukin decided to await orders from Peyton's HQ. That evening Peyton arrived by motor car from Barrâni to discuss the situation, and it was decided that Lukin should proceed to Ogîrîn as arranged on 11 March and take the Nagb Mad'an. Mitchell-Baker's report indicated however that the terrain between Buqbuq and Ogîrîn was very bad for night marching, and Lukin therefore postponed his move again until 12 March.¹⁰⁸

102. *ibid.*

103. Bde Major's Diary, *op. cit.*, Operational Order No. 17.

MacMunn and Falls, *op. cit.*, P. 130.

SADF Archives, Series WOID, Box 4.

'Despatch No. 2 by Brig-Gen, H. T. Lukin CMG, DSO, commanding mobile column, operating west of Barrâni. Dated 16 March 1916.

104. Bde Major's Diary, *op. cit.*, Operational Order No. 18.

Lukin's Despatch No. 2 *op. cit.*

105. *ibid.*

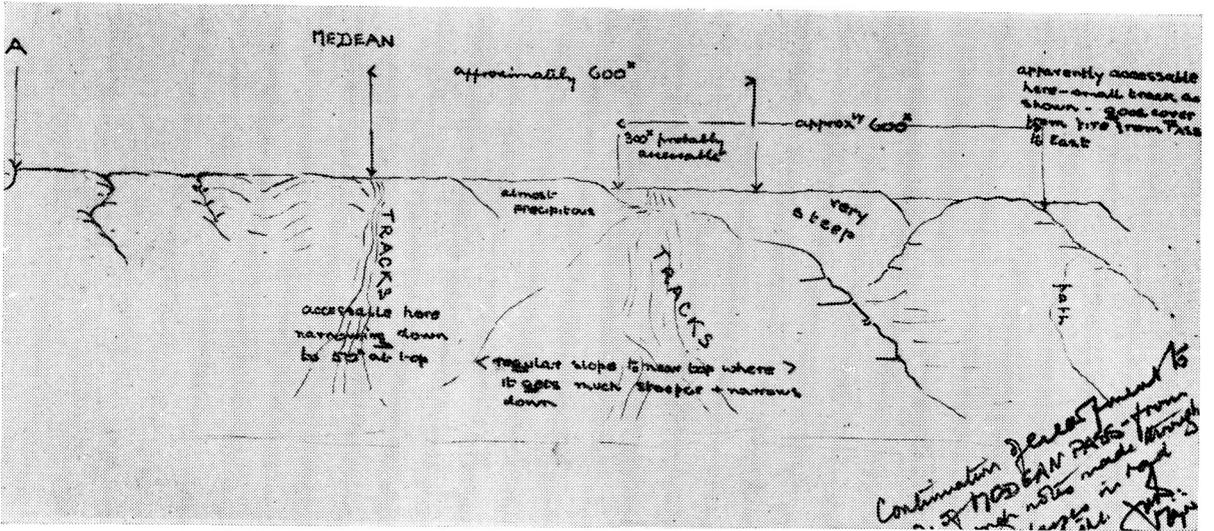
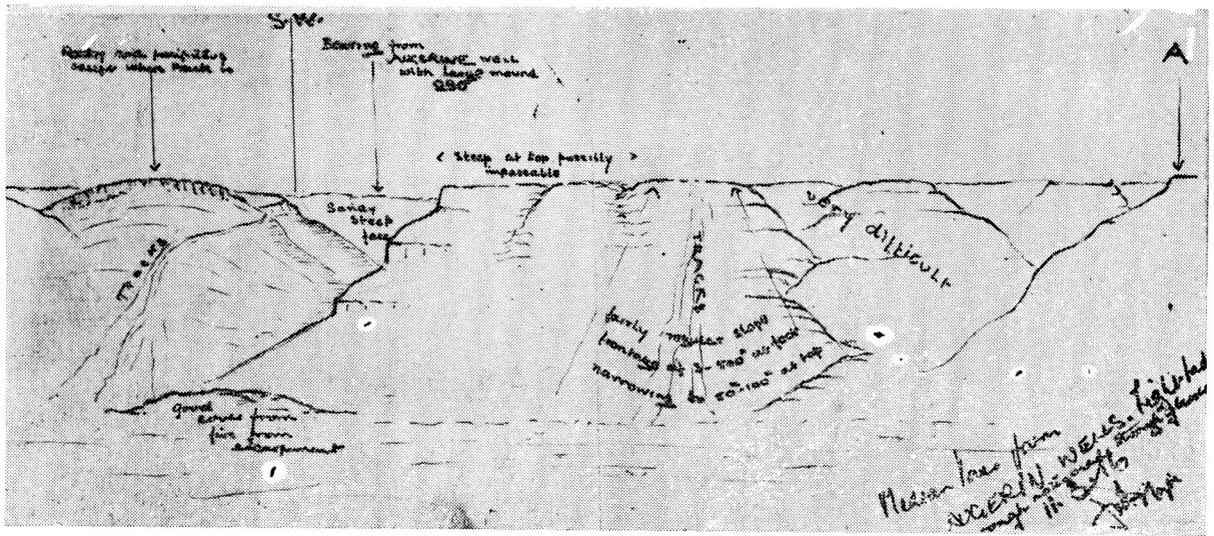
Eyewitness 20 March 1916 *op. cit.*

106. *ibid.*

War Diary *op. cit.*

107. Eyewitness 20 March 1916 *op. cit.*

108. Lukin's Despatch No. 2 *op. cit.*



Major Mitchell-Baker's sketch of the escarpment near the Nagb Mad'an

Moving his advance guard at 0530 hrs, Lukin's force arrived at Bir el Ogirîn some 6½ hours later, after a march of 12 miles. In the excessive heat and over difficult ground it was by far the most trying march yet.¹⁰⁹ For 1 and 4 SA Infantry the day was far from over, for after an hours rest, they were moving again to seize the Mad'an pass, covering the difficult 5 miles, uncertain as to whether the enemy lay in wait for them. This extra distance and the steep ascent told heavily on the men, but fortunately only 2 or 3 retreating enemy were encountered. The rendezvous with the armoured cars was successfully made and camels carrying water and supplies sent up from Ogirîn to the two infantry battalions, who remained on the ridge

guarding the pass, while the remainder for the force bivouaced at Ogirîn.

The water here was unpleasant too. As Harris reports . . .

. . . 'bits of camel and goat came up into the troughs and it was reported that two Sanusi had also been found, but I believe this was a libel on the spot. In any case, there was a distinct element of truth in the saying of one man that the water had plenty of body in it' . . .¹¹⁰

109. *ibid.*
Eyewitness 20 March 1916 op. cit.
Solomon, op. cit., P. 38.

110. Harris, op. cit., letter 20 March 1916.

An unexpected difficulty now necessitated a further change in plan, for the Roman cistern at the head of the pass which had been expected to provide sufficient water for the entire column was found to be empty. Further along the ridge at Siweiyat the wells were also dry and it was concluded that the Sanusi had deliberately pumped them dry thinking to block any approach from this direction. Their intention, if such it was, was not wholly unsuccessful, for the plan to send the whole force along the escarpment had to be abandoned, and a new scheme evolved.¹¹¹

Having gained the plateau with at least some of his forces, Peyton sensibly refused to abandon his strategical advantage. Moving along the edge of the plateau Lukin was ordered to advance on and seize Nagb Halfaya and if possible Nagb el Asida in order to allow the passage of the cavalry and guns by way of these passes at noon on the 14 March. He was to take the Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery and the Notts and Derby Field Ambulance as supporting troops, but to leave all mules and horses, excepting those of the battery and reserve water supply column.¹¹²

Meanwhile 2 and 3 SA Infantry were sent back under Lt Col W. E. C. Tanner to Buqbuq where Peyton formed up a third column of slow moving troops under his personal command. Instead of turning inland as previously intended Peyton's men would move along the coast, as would Hampden's mounted column.¹¹³

On 13 March Lukin's force left Nagb Mad'an for a point 5 miles short of Halfaya and at 0700 hrs next morning the Duke of Westminster's armoured cars were sent on from there to reconnoitre the pass at Halfaya, which they seized without opposition at 0830 hrs. Lukin and Mitchell-Baker moved up by motor car soon after the armoured cars, leaving the body of the force to follow at 0800 hrs. Small parties of the enemy were seen on the way, and at 0900 hrs a Sanusi who had surrendered himself told the Intelligence Officer that the enemy had left Bir Wa'ir, their camp covering Salûm on the 12th,

111. Eyewitness, 20 March 1916, op. cit.

112. War Diary, op. cit.
Lukin's Despatch No. 2, op. cit.

113. MacMunn and Falls op. cit., P. 131.



The Duke of Westminster's armoured cars

destroying stores and ammunition and retiring to the south-west. Lukin ordered Westminster to take his cars to establish the facts, giving him discretion to take up a pursuit.¹¹⁴

By now the Imperial advance on Salûm had again become somewhat disorganised. On 13 March, when Lukin moved up to the plateau, Peyton's column had reached Bîr Tashdîda, 19 miles along the coast from Salûm. Hampden's force should have linked with Peyton there, but he had received an incorrect report about lack of water at Tashdîda and therefore decided to stay at Buqbuq where he had arrived on 12 March. Consequently on 14 March when the three columns met at Halfaya Pass the cavalry had had to make a long march to catch up. Peyton now sent 2 SA Infantry up to the plateau, while his force continued along the coast road.¹¹⁵ (OH. 131-132).

As was confirmed by RFC reconnaissance the enemy had indeed abandoned Bîr Wa'ir, realizing that Lukin's flank march had made the position there untenable. The Duke of Westminster's armoured car battery consisted of 9 armoured vehicles and 1 Ford with a machine gun mounted, and had a total personnel of only 32. This small but effective detachment quickly reached Bîr Wa'ir and then followed the Tobruk road, along which the enemy had retired. Signs of the Sanusi retreat were soon visible and the cars were sniped at by stragglers. Ignoring such minor annoyances the cars covered the next 23 miles at great speed.

Finally the cars came round a bend to find the enemy encamped at Bîr 'Azeiz only about 300 yards south of the road. As the cars appeared the Sanusi were in the process of leaving their position, camels were standing loaded and masses of the enemy were already on the move. One of the 10-pounder guns was still in position however, and this opened fire, supported by two machine-guns. The cars charged in line, covering each other in short dashes over the 300 yards in imitation of infantry tactics. The Turkish gunners had failed to get anything like the correct range and their shells passed well over the cars, to explode some two miles down the road. Once these gunners had been dealt with the cars turned their attentions to the remainder of the force. Any Bedouin offering resistance were shot, but most fled in all directions,

leaving the cars to search for Turkish officers to take prisoner. To prevent the escape of the enemy baggage train the 50 camels already on the move were shot down, with amazing results, for they exploded on being hit, having been loaded with petrol and bombs. After effecting as much damage as possible the cars returned to Salûm, leaving 3 of their vehicles to guard the prisoners and booty. The only casualty received by the British force in this encounter was one officer slightly wounded. Three 10-pounder QF guns, 9 maxims and a large quantity of stores and ammunition had been seized along with many prisoners, including 3 Turkish officers.¹¹⁶

One of the prisoners taken at Bîr Wa'ir provided information which gave the Duke of Westminster's men an opportunity to add further to their laurels. It will be remembered

114. Eyewitness 20 March 1916, op. cit. War Diary, op. cit.

115. MacMunn and Falls, op. cit., P. 131-132.

116. *ibid.*
Lukin's Despatch No. 2, op. cit.
Eyewitness, 20 March 1916, op. cit.



Major the Duke of Westminster

that in November 1915 the Egyptian patrol boat 'Abbas' and the auxiliary boarding ship 'Tara' had been sunk by U-boats and their crews handed to the Sanusi for safe-keeping. The captured man had acted as guard to these prisoners and gave information as to their whereabouts. Lukin allowed Westminster to go in search of the captives and on 17 March the cars left Salûm, with sufficient ambulances to bring back the prisoners. Their journey took past Bir 'Azeiz well into the Libyan desert for 80 miles along the Tobruk road. Finally their guide, the Arab prisoner, directed them south into the midst of the desert, though how he located this precise point remained a mystery to the armoured car personnel. From here the group of vehicles made their way over 35 miles of apparently desolate country until finally a small mound was sighted. Here were the prisoners, in the charge of a small guard which was quickly disposed of. By early next morning the return journey of about 130 miles had been completed to Salûm and the 92 men returned to a great reception from Lukin's force.¹¹⁷

The re-occupation of Salûm had been one of the objectives of the campaign, yet the South Africans found it hardly a fitting scene for any triumphal entry. One of them has left a description.

'A deserted Arab village consisting of a collection of miserable wood and iron shanties near the sea, a so-called "fort" overlooking the bay from the heights above, and another practically deserted village half a mile farther on.'¹¹⁸

These deserted villages suffered rather badly as the troops scrounged for material to improvise shelters and to provide fuel, for after serving their purpose, they were burnt.¹¹⁹

Water was plentiful at last, the weather kind, and the bathing good, but still many fatigues had to be carried out; road construction, blockhouse building and guard duties.

On 20 March Lukin and Mitchell-Baker embarked with Gen Peyton on the Abdul Mo-neim for Alexandria, leaving the SA Brigade under the command of Lt Col Dawson. Arriving at Alexandria on the 22nd the two officers proceeded to Cairo to organize the return of their Brigade from the Western Frontier Force, preparatory to its leaving for France. On 28 March Lukin and Baker made

arrangements for the Brigade to camp at Sidi Bishr, and next day details for the Brigade started arriving. Over the next two weeks detachments of the Brigade continued to arrive at Sidi Bishr, to be re-equipped and inspected, and by 12-15 April 1916 it was concentrated for embarkation, on H.T. 'Oriana', H.T. 'Scotian' and H.T. 'Megantic' bound for Marseilles. By 20 April the South African Brigade was in France, moving north towards a new front.¹²⁰

The re-occupation of Salûm, though it marked the end of the campaign for the South Africans, did not mean the end of the war against the Sanusi. As Peyton prepared for his advance along the coast from Matrûh it was known that the Grand Sanusi was gathering forces at Siwa oasis to strike towards the Nile Valley. In February his forces occupied Bahariya and Khargha oasis, but Peyton's successes that month allowed the British to switch forces to face this threat, and after 'Aqqâqîr the southern Sanusi seemed much less eager to force conclusions. In April 1916 Kharga was reoccupied by the British though it was October before Bahariya was cleared.

Throughout this period political advances were being made to Sayyid Idris, cousin of the Grand Sanusi, Britain and Italy agreed in July 1916 to recognize Idris as the head of the Order, and by January 1917 Sayyid Ahmad's position was completely undermined. On 4 February the decisive blow was struck when British armoured cars raided the large camp at Siwa. In April 1917 Idris signed a *modus vivendi* with the Italians and in August 1918, Sayyid Ahmad left Tripolitania aboard an Australian submarine, for exile in Turkey, where he temporarily remained a figure of importance in the Turkish government Pan-Islamic propaganda.¹²¹

SANUSI TACTICS IN MODERN WAR

The invasion of Egypt by the Sanusi had heralded disaster for them in Cyrenaica as well, as Britain was forced to end the matter by supporting her Italian ally. The Sanuy-

117. Eyewitness 20 March 1916, op. cit.

118. Solomon, op. cit., P. 39.

119. *ibid.*

120. War Diary, op. cit. Solomon, op. cit., P. 41.

121. MacMunn and Falls, op. cit., Pp. 135-145.

siya had been in decline since 1902, now only the original Cyrenaica core of lodges remained.¹²²

The Sanusi invasion had tied down above 3 500 Imperial troops in the defence of Egypt. Even so Wavell considered that the Bedouin invasion was less dangerous than it might have been had guerilla tactics been employed and mobility used to decline battle in unfavourable circumstances. He is correct in his statement that it is generally a fatal mistake for natural guerillas to adopt regular tactics.¹²³ Would not the Bedouin have been better advised to have refused battle and merely kept the enemy tied up with raids and propaganda? This sort of war was shown to be extremely effective in Hejaz. When one considers the limited mobility of Peyton's forces, the difficulties experienced by the infantry, the shortage of water and the necessity of sticking to the coast one wonders why the Sanusi acted as they did.

Without more knowledge of the Sanusi's relations with the people of the Egyptian desert it is impossible to come to any definite conclusion. Possibly the Sanusi invaders were not able to establish that rapport with local people necessary to support small mobile bands.

Perhaps also the grandiose nature of the Sanusi's planning and that of his Turkish and German advisers was responsible for the adoption of regular tactics. Starvation and the lack of a real fighting spirit among the Aulad 'Ali, of whom so much was hoped, appears to be the real answer, however. It was their reluctance to become involved in hard fighting which probably necessitated the organization of large camps under Turkish officers, who wanted to direct an effort that would be of some use to Constantinople. In addition even the mobile warfare of the Arabs

found itself thwarted to some extent by modern technology. In the use of the armoured car and the aircraft by the Imperial forces, one can see the embryonic tactics of desert warfare in the 1940s. Employed by only one side in 1916 the effect of these machines, however puny by comparison with Rommel's or Montgomery's weapons, was devastating. Indeed when tactically deployed in battle the armoured car added a new dimension, allowing the machine-gun to adopt a tactically offensive rôle largely denied the 'queen of the battlefield' on the Western Front. In 1916 aircraft could not yet deliver pulverising attacks on enemy lines, but they could ensure that their commander was better informed than his adversary of his enemy's movements. Without the intelligence reaching Matrûh from this source Lukin's well-laid plans for 'Aqqâqir would have gone sadly awry. As it was he knew his opponents dispositions and was able to move a superior force to defeat them.

POSTSCRIPT

The Sanusi's *modus vivendi* with Italy did not make for a permanent peace in Cyrenaica. In 1923-32 there was a second Italo-Sanusi war. The organization of the Sanusiya was destroyed and an incredible amount of devastation occurred. This was not the end however, for in 1940, when Italy entered the Second World War, Sayyid Idris and a number of other shaikhs living in Egypt offered their services to the British. Five battalions of Sanusi troops were raised to fight under their own flag as part of the Allied armies.¹²⁴ In 1951 Libya became an independant kingdom, with Sayyid Idris as King Idris I.

122. Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.* Pp. 130-132.

123. Wavell, *op. cit.*, P. 38.

124. Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, Pp. 157-229.