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THE MILITARY SITUATION IN UPPER EGYPT.

By Major VON WISSMAN.

(Translated from the "Militär-Wochenblatt," by permission, by Commander H. GARBETT.)

THOUGH the military affairs of nations whose method of warfare differ from the European are of interest to Germans who follow the calling of soldiers, this has become still more the case since Germany entered the ranks of the Colonial Powers, and it behoves her to take lessons from the older of those Powers in matters relating to Colonial military systems.

As the duty fell upon me three years ago to establish the first German Colonial corps, it was of special interest to me to make myself acquainted with the English military Colonial systems, and I joyfully seized the opportunity afforded me by a journey up the Nile for my health to study the soldiers of the Egyptian Army who had been trained by English Officers. It was of special importance to me to see the Negro battalions, because the major portion of the German force in East Africa is drawn from men of the same Sudanese races as the Egyptian black battalions. In Egypt the Sudanese are considered as distinct from the Egyptians; they form the infantry and are looked upon as the flower of the Army and the most trustworthy in war.

The Egyptian fellah is in many respects superior to the negro; he is more muscular, more intelligent, and a better rifleman, but he is far inferior in soldierly *moral*, and this one defect outweighs all the other excellent points in him. I said in soldierly *moral*, as in regard to common human *moral* the above observation does not apply. The Egyptian is more temperate and less given to quarrelling, for which reason the black battalions are never garrisoned in the large towns, but are always stationed on the frontier before the enemy. The Egyptian is, I might say, a better peace soldier; the Sudanese has more soldierly instinct and is a born field soldier, he serves in the Army so long as he is fit for active service; the fellah, on the other hand, only for six years; and after he has completed his service, returns to drive his camels, or plough with his buffaloes the fruitful valley of the Nile.

The Egyptian Army has as its tactical unit only the battalion, the squadron, and the battery; it is at present from 10,000 to 12,000 men strong.

The Egyptian battalions have four companies of 150 men each, the Sudanese battalions six companies of 100 men, whilst the squadron numbers from 70 to 80 horses.

Nearly half the Army is distributed in Lower Egypt, in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, and at Suakin on the Red Sea; the remainder is distributed along the Nile on the high road from Egypt to the Sudan.

Suakin is the port of exit of the best and shortest road for an army to the capital of the Sudan, and will in all probability become the base of operations in the event of future operations against the Mahdi. I turn now to the Nile Army, which, since the last attempt of the Dervishes at Toski, in 1888, to force their way into Lower Egypt was frustrated, forms Egypt's wall of defence against the Mahdi's forces.

The state of readiness of this Army, whose reserves are stationed in Lower Egypt, is in the first place conditional upon the state of the Nile, the only route for an army. Wide stretches of country on each side of the Nile are impracticable on account of the want of water.

The Nile is navigable from its mouth to the First Cataract, at Assouan; and from there again to the Second, between Wadi-Halfa and Sarra. At the Third Cataract the outposts of the Mahdi are to be found, and, although it is now two years since any exchange of shots took place, he is still considered by the Egyptians as a hostile rebel, while he on his side, in his own interest as a ruler, cannot conclude peace. Between the Nile and the Red Sea dwell Nubian tribes, principally the Bisharin, who acknowledge the Egyptian Government, and are responsible for the security of the left flank of the Egyptian position on the Nile.

The left bank of the Nile is for a considerable distance unpopulated, for the Bedouin tribes belonging to the religious sect of the Senoussi, who live on the western borders of Lower Egypt, do not extend as far south as Assouan, where the civil administration of the Government comes to an end and the military begins, which latter embraces that portion of the Nile valley occupied by the Field Army, and is under the charge of the Sirdar, the English Commander-in-Chief of the Army. It is worthy of remark, the length of time English Colonial experience leaves a country in which absolute security does not yet reign under a military administration, and in a measure in a state of siege.

As we enter the military province at Assouan, below the First Cataract, we first meet with the reserves of the frontier forces, who are advanced as far as the Second Cataract. Everything can be brought as far as Assouan from Lower Egypt by means of steamers. A short railway on the right bank is laid round the cataract and conveys the traffic to the portion of the river which leads to the frontier. Assouan, garrisoned by two battalions, and the railway and landing place opposite the island of Philæ, above the cataract, are protected by a number of small forts which crown the edge of the Nile valley. Two river gunboats armed with one heavy and two machine-guns secure the traffic between the two cataracts, which is carried on by means of ten steamers. Half way between Assouan and Wadi-Halfa, on the right bank, lies Korosko, which is fortified and garrisoned by one battalion; it is the resting place for the night for boats making

the two days trip from Assouan to Wadi-Halfa, and is also the starting point of the great caravan route to Berber and Khartoum, which cuts off the great bend of the Nile to the west, the river for some distance on being a succession of cataracts. Wadi-Halfa, below the Second Cataract, is the headquarters of the frontier field force, and is garrisoned by two battalions, two squadrons of cavalry, a mule battery, and a camel corps. The place is fortified and secured by small forts distributed along both banks of the river. A railway on the right bank, protected by small forts, runs round the cataract, which extends for a distance of nearly twenty miles, to the advanced post of Sarras above the falls, where there is a garrison of a battalion, a squadron of cavalry, and a camel corps, the latter performing the scouting service towards the Soudan. I may here observe that the fortifications, although they may be sufficient against such an enemy as the wild Derrishes, would without exception be quite untenable against an enemy provided with good artillery. The bricks made out of the tough Nile mud are ready to hand and the cheapest building matériel. In one respect the forts are disadvantageously situated; in order to effectually command the river they have to be placed as near as possible to the brink, and consequently on both banks they can be threatened from the edges of the plateau commanding the Nile valley. The choice of positions is limited, as the landing places above and below the cataract, as well as the connecting railway, have to be secured, while for a considerable distance the Nile valley is very narrow, and, as already remarked, commanded by the brow of the desert; there are only a limited number of small detached forts on the heights, as any extensive fortification of the commanding points would require a considerable body of troops to man them. The design of the forts also is open to further criticism. There is no application of any known system; unenfiladed ways and dead angles are numerous, and there is often a want of flanking works; the height of the walls and depth of the ditches, which are dry when the Nile is low, are depended upon alone as the protection against their being taken by storm. The small forts are mostly square houses, which are entered by means of ladders, and are defended by the crenelated parapets of the flat roofs. My opinion as to the condition of the troops I will leave the reader to form his own judgment upon, while I put before him my observations in turn; only I must put forward two common points of view, which place in the right light the great military Colonial experience and the practical common sense of the English Officers. In an army, the matériel of which is composed of different races, the most important question is, whether the troops are completely trustworthy and under the proper control of their Officers. This is especially a burning question in Egypt, since it is not long ago that the mutiny under Arabi Pacha gave us an example of the rudest kind of the contrary.

Although the English Officers have to pay special regard to the views of the Khedive and his Government, and that for this reason a number of Egyptian Officers are placed even in the position of Battalion Commanders, nevertheless they have been extremely successful in

winning the complete confidence of their men. Another point worthy of remark is that the men have been educated into self-respect, into a recognition of the honourable calling of a soldier, and into a certain pride in their position. Anybody who knows what the Egyptian conscripts used to be, and how their detestation of serving in the Army was shown by their numerous self-mutilations and desertions, who has seen the fellaheen wallowing in dirt in their villages, which have all the appearance of dungheaps, who is acquainted with their servile cringing habits, must stand astonished at the present self-respecting bearing of the cleanly and carefully dressed soldiers.

In the camp at Sarras I saw every tent environed by a flower garden neatly enclosed with white stones, and everything in and about the men gave proof not only of cleanliness, but of a certain sense of comfort. This is a result which could only have been arrived at after great trouble, and is entirely due to the efforts of the English Officers. It is sad to hear from the same Officers that this improved state of the men only lasts until they return to their dirty villages, but it is a sign that with proper education something can be made out of the poor, servile, and dirty fellaheen.

The Commandant at Wadi-Halfa, Lieutenant-Colonel Kempster, received me in the most friendly manner, and begged me to let him know what I wished to see; consequently on the first day I inspected the barracks of two Sudanese battalions. All the troops are quartered inside the fort in airy barracks constructed out of Nile bricks. As the Sudanese are for the most part married, one-fourth of them are allowed to leave in turn to spend twenty-four hours with their wives in the adjacent village, returning, however, for duty during the day.

On entering the barracks the men were called to "attention," and stood up in front of the bed-places which ran along the walls; they were in working dress, but were, however, military in their bearing and neat in their outward appearance. The bed-places, constructed of clay, were covered with a straw mat and a couple of woollen rugs. The arms stood in racks in the middle of the corridor, while the clothes and accoutrements hung on the walls over the bed-places. In the afternoon, upon the "alarm-place of assembly" of the centre fortification, a great game of football took place. About 100 Sudanese and some English Officers were playing. It speaks well for the military instinct of the Sudanese that an unbending of the Officers in this way in a spirit of comradeship does not cause any breach of discipline, but rather tends to raise the soldierly pride of the men; in the case of the Egyptian soldiers, with whom a more Oriental submissiveness predominates, and where there is an absence of the devotion engendered by comradeship which distinguishes the Negro, familiarity of this kind has to be avoided. On the second day of our stay we made a visit to Sarras, the most advanced post of all. The railway carries one past the Second Cataract, which presents a strange wild picture, and ends under a wall of rock rising precipitously out of the desert sand, and which is crowned by the citadel of Sarras. Sarras is armed with two heavy and two machine-guns, and lies close on the

Nile. What a magnificent climate it is, which allows of troops camping out all the year round in tents without suffering from the weather!

The Commandant of Sarraz, the picture of a lank Anglo-Saxon warrior, Major Sillem, had the alarm sounded in order to show me the manning of the different posts. The troops were rapidly in position. It was a pretty warlike picture to observe from the summit of the crag, the men doubling to their stations between the small flower gardens and the tents, but the hurly-burly was soon over and the bugle-calls rapidly obeyed. The camel corps was sent forward as if to ascertain the cause of the "alarm." This corps is mounted on dromedaries, which are only ridden for scouting purposes, the men when necessary fighting on foot; it may be said to form a connecting link between cavalry and mounted infantry, such as the English have employed with much success in India and elsewhere. For a long day's patrolling in the desert the horse is far inferior to the camel, and good men armed as infantry on rapid dromedaries have been found best for the purpose. When fighting, the men dismount; three men fight, while the fourth leads the four camels, keeping them under cover in the neighbourhood of the fighting line. The great difficulty in training the dromedaries lies in getting the animals to lie down rapidly for dismounting, and still more in allowing themselves to be quietly mounted. Very few camels will remain quiet while this is being done. Attacks with camels should not be made on account of their obstinacy and want of speed for short distances. It is remarkable that the camel corps have no weapons for use against pursuing cavalry, which are faster over short stretches; I think myself that the revolver would be the most suitable weapon.

Upon our return to Wadi-Halfa the wildness of the naked black rock wilderness of the Second Cataract filled us with astonishment.

The result of an inspection of two battalions the next day was the conviction that the clothing and equipment of the troops is sufficient and answers all purposes, and that a careful and well-regulated supervision is everywhere exercised.

On the last day of my stay my worthy host the Commandant of Wadi-Halfa ordered a field day of the whole garrison. The troops first fell in in parade order in line, the cavalry on the right flank, then a mule battery, and next four battalions, two Egyptian and two Negro. The cavalry consisted of two squadrons, the front rank being armed with lances, the staves of bamboo, and the second rank with carbines; the horses, although looking lean from the want of green food, which is difficult to procure, and without being very rapid in manœuvring, seemed, however, to possess good staying powers. Rittmeister von Schuckmann, who accompanied me, spoke highly of the efficiency of the men. The mules of the artillery, content with poorer food, were fat and smooth, strong animals with powerful depth of chest. I should doubt, however, if their stubborn natures might not render them unsuitable for the work in the event of the guns being suddenly required, but for transport purposes in the desert they are excellent.

The infantry stand well, even according to our standard. Some movements and changes of front followed, and regimental exercise of the four battalions, in which the favourite échelon formations of the English played a principal part. For the march in the desert in face of a mounted wild enemy swarming down on all sides, the important battalion square is formed by wheeling the two centre companies to form the sides.

Battalion squares in échelon was the unaccountable formation in which Hicks Pasha's army of 7,000 men was drawn up when the Dervishes forced their way between the squares, and the men in which, firing on all sides, mutually shot each other down until the last man was destroyed.

When there is not a sufficient number of cavalry, there is only one effective formation against a fanatical enemy swarming on all sides, and that is a large square formed of all the troops on the march with the train in the centre. As there are no roads in the desert, the troops can march with as wide a front as is pleased, and the formation can be rapidly taken up. Formation in open order can only under exceptional circumstances be employed against the Dervishes. I found my East African experience with regard to the advantage of reserving the ammunition for volley firing confirmed. As the infantry battalions are commanded by English Officers, and the companies by Egyptian, the Battalion Commander only when absolutely necessary separates his companies, and therefore such a battalion corresponds in its tactical handling in a certain measure with a company with us.

On the day we left I made a small expedition up the left bank of the river to a precipitous conical rock rising about 100 feet out of the water, at the foot of which the wild cataract forced itself foaming through hundreds of islets and black masses of rock. We were mounted upon dromedaries of the camel corps, and covered the distance of 10 English miles in an hour and twenty minutes at an easy trot. When it is considered that a dromedary can trot for eight hours a day, carrying its rider, his arms, ammunition, and four days' water, food, and fodder, and can keep its speed up for four or five days, it will be seen of what value the animal is for scouting and similar services. Unfortunately they cannot live in a damp climate, so they cannot be utilized in our possessions in East Africa.

Durrha (a species of millet) and coarse fodder of chopped straw, &c., are the food of the camels in garrison, while on the march the hard prickly bushes of the desert form their nourishment.

On my return to Assouan I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Wodehouse Pasha, the acting Sirdar, and thanking him for the hearty welcome I had received at the hands of his Officers. I have written these pages to my comrades at home to give them some idea of the work of the English Officers in the Egyptian Service, and in the hope that they may prove of some interest to many.