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THE SOLDIERS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

BY H. M. TIRARD

THE great conflict of European nations has involved Egypt in the fates and fortunes of war, with the result that nominally she has again changed masters, and instead of being styled the vassal of Turkey, she has now become in word as well as in deed a British Protectorate. No sooner was this change effected than Egypt was threatened with invasion, and, as so many times in ancient days, with invasion from the East. In times of peace even in remote ages caravans constantly crossed the eastern desert to trade with Egypt, while in times of war again and again armies invaded the land by the same route. Across the eastern desert Joseph travelled down to Egypt in one of the trading caravans of the Midianites, but before "there arose up a new king which knew not Joseph" the Hyksos armies had probably appeared on the eastern horizon and invaded and conquered the land. Afterwards the Assyrians and Persians led their armies westwards and overran the country, and again in later times the Arab tribes of the East subdued and peopled the much coveted valley of the Nile.

It is almost impossible to say how many nationalities have composed the various invading armies of Egypt in old times, and now that the Turks have called on the nomad tribes that owe her allegiance to help her to subdue her former vassal, history does but repeat herself. The present invasion of Egypt however was never a very serious matter, it fizzled out in a few skirmishes on the Suez Canal when the Turks realised that all their efforts were needed to defend the precarious possession of their European territory. If the armies that attempted to-day the invasion of Egypt consisted of many nationalities the same may indeed be said of those gathered together to defend her and to fight the Turks. Arab and Copt and the native of the Sudan see with amazement the men that have come from distant Australia and New Zealand to help them to defend their land, to join hands with them from across the world lest they should forfeit the beneficent rule of England, who has revived all their ancient prosperity. Vast camps surround the Pyramids, French cavalry vie with Arab horsemen, and the Sphinx, who has seen such wonders of old, still lies watching the wonders of to-day, for the prophecy has come true, and "the Englishman leaning far over to hold his loved India has planted a firm foot on the banks of the Nile, and the sleepless rock lies watching the works of the new busy race with those same sad earnest eyes, and the same tranquil mien everlasting."

Diverse as is the garb and the language of the soldiers watched by the Sphinx their national characteristics present also as great a contrast, and form a most interesting study. At the present time when so large a part of the civilised world is

convulsed in the throes of the greatest war man has ever seen, the national characteristics of the soldiers in the field come to the fore in the most striking manner.

All people are influenced more or less by the nature of the country they inhabit, the British for instance, like other island nations, have a keenness for adventure, a disregard for convention, and a strong feeling of rivalry with their fellows, which has led to the development of strong individual character. Great Britain has always trained her sons as individuals, and the open order in which her soldiers march to battle not only suits the British temperament, but in this war, at any rate, has proved less destructive of life in face of the terrible artillery fire. Germany and Russia with their vast plains and seething population send their armies into the field massed together, army corps after army corps supporting each other. Handled with skill by great masters of strategy, they might seem almost invincible in battle, but their training leaves no scope for the individual prowess to which we are accustomed. The Belgians of to-day, like the Egyptians of the old world, are people devoted to agriculture, and as a rule agricultural countries do not produce nations of warriors. The little Belgian army which has shown such gallantry and worked such wonders has done so in spite of national characteristics; the Belgians are not lovers of the sword, but lovers of hearth and home, and they have been inspired by their patriotism to make a stand that will be famous in all the annals of history to come.

In the midst of the great war in which we are engaged the soldiers of ancient Egypt arouse our interest anew, for like the Belgians of to-day they also loved peace and quietness; they believed the security of their land to be guaranteed not by treaties safeguarding their neutrality, but by the natural boundaries of their country, the sea and the desert. Happy and gay they lived at ease in a valley bathed in sunshine all the year round and watered by the fertilising inundation of their wonderful river. No wonder they hated fighting and became an easy prey to their invaders. Yet now and again in the old time even the soldiers of ancient Egypt, taking advantage of dissensions amongst their rulers, succeeded in freeing their land from their conquerors, and at one memorable time, long before our era, these inhabitants of the valley of the Nile were bold enough to claim the empire of the world. With success in war public opinion in ancient Egypt changed as to the ethics of warfare, for though in the older periods war is spoken of as a necessary evil, yet in the time of the great Egyptian Empire, in spite of many complaints of robbery and cruelty practised by the soldiers, we read of war as the highest good for the country.

The earliest army of Egypt of which we have any record seems to have been more akin to our old Militia than to our regular army. Every town and every village as well as each temple estate had to supply and equip a certain number of men for the army, and in time of war, as in France to-day, the younger priests were probably obliged to serve in the ranks. The servants and retainers of the great nobles were also enrolled according to the feudal system under the command of their various chieftains. These chieftains were not necessarily trained soldiers, and in time of peace they had to undertake civil duties, such as the organisation of the great mining and quarrying expeditions in the Sinai Peninsula, as well as the transport work of conveying immense blocks from the quarries to the temple buildings.

In time of war when the army was mobilised special corps were formed of Nubians from the south as well as of Libyan mercenaries, each under their own officers. The

Madoi, a warlike tribe south of the second cataract, supplied large bodies of soldiers to the Egyptian army, and the word Madoi, probably signifying hunter, became the ancient Egyptian term for soldier and passed into the Coptic as Matoi. Desert tribes always make good soldiers: like Ishmael of old, they enjoy life when their hand is against every man: they have splendid fighting qualities born of the wild desert life, and Arab warriors have more than once put to flight the armies of civilised nations.

In ancient Egypt the commissariat was an important special department under its own officials, who had to give account to the commander-in-chief. We have details of the good commissariat arrangements about 2000 B.C. when an expedition of 3000 men was sent by the Hammamat road to the Red Sea. We read that each man received two jars of water and 20 bread biscuits a day, while wells and cisterns were dug on the route and left safely guarded for use on the return journey.

A wave of martial enthusiasm and of national prosperity swept over the country after the expulsion of the Hyksos about the 16th century B.C., and, after clearing their native land of the foreign invaders, the soldiers were incited by their leaders to carry their arms into the enemy's country. Recruiting agents were appointed from amongst the class of scribes, and the army was reorganised on a far larger scale, and, in spite of the essential non-warlike character of her people, Egypt became a military state. Raids and pillage brought riches into the country, and tribute was exacted from all conquered tribes. The wealth of Asia lured the armies onward, and for perhaps three centuries the whole nation was obsessed by the lust of war. Accounts of these campaigns may be read on the walls of the Theban temples: they tell of no reverses, victories only being recorded.

In this time of Egyptian conquest, the army was divided into two great bodies, the army of the south and the army of the north: Ramses the Great subdivided it again into four great divisions named after the great Gods Ra, Amen, Ptah and Sutekh, the king himself taking command of the division of Amen. The troops were again subdivided into squadrons under captains and officers of lower rank, and several regiments were formed of allied troops and mercenaries who were regularly drilled and trained with the native Egyptian soldiers. Amongst these mercenaries were the Sherden, who may have been the ancestors of the sea-roving Sardinians; they are unmistakable in the representations with their curious spiked helmets reminding us of the German head-gear of to-day. Strategy and tactics have their place in the training of the officers, and though at most the forces in the field cannot have numbered more than twenty to thirty thousand men, yet we read of the wings, and the centre of the army, as well as of flank attacks.

The Egyptians had no cavalry in our sense of the word, though the horse had been introduced into Egypt by the Hyksos. The place of our cavalry was taken by a strong chariot force which supported and cleared the way for the infantry to charge. The Hyksos chariots were manned by three soldiers, but the Egyptians were content with two, one to fight, the other to drive: in some cases the reins were tied round the waist and managed by movement of the thighs, and the driver carried a shield to protect himself and his master. This chariot force numbered some thousands, and was very effective in breaking the ranks of the enemy.

In time of war the King appointed one commander-in-chief, who had the right to appoint officers to subordinate commands. The commander-in-chief was often a

prince of the royal house, and other princes often competed for the higher appointments under him, though whether any competitive examination was held for army appointments we know not; it is far more likely that interest at court and bribery were much to the fore. We know, however, that a good education was necessary, and that the higher officers were often diplomatists as well as soldiers. We read of a chief charioteer who styles himself a royal ambassador to all countries, the scribes of the army also are often mentioned, for out of this class of army scribes a deputy was chosen who is often spoken of as the *representative*.

The commander-in-chief may perhaps be compared rather with our minister of war than with our generals in the field, for his jurisdiction extended not only over the army but also over the navy, if we may so call the fleet of vessels which the ancient Egyptians used in war. These boats were chiefly employed as transports for the troops both on the great river highway of Egypt, and also to cross the sea to the coasts of Syria and Phœnicia; we read both of the disembarkation of troops on these coasts and also of the return of the vessels to the harbour of Thebes laden with wealth and captives. Under Ramses III we have a unique account of a naval battle, the boats being manned chiefly by the famous Egyptian archers; amongst them we see some of the Sherden mercenaries, who indeed on this occasion may have been engaged in battle with some of their own compatriots, for the Sherden with other sea-faring folk were then invading Egypt. On this occasion the Egyptians finally grappled the ships of the enemy, and the fight was continued as on land with the result of a great victory for Egypt; otherwise we should probably have never heard of the battle.

Corresponding with the colours of our troops each ancient Egyptian regiment probably had a standard, a pole with the figure of an animal, an ostrich feather, a fan or some other device at the top, round which the men gathered. Their standards were revered as religious symbols, and may have been the survivals of the tribal fetishes, which, adopted by each province or nome, afterwards became the regimental badge belonging to the militia of that nome. The standard bearer is often mentioned in the inscriptions, and was probably an officer chosen out of the ranks as the spokesman for his company; we read in one place that the "standard bearer, the representative, the scribe of the army, the commander of the peasantry, they go in and out of the courts of the King's house."

In the same way as we have our Lancers or Rifles, the Egyptians also classified their regiments according to the arms they carried, they had their Archers, their Lancers and their Spearmen; some of the Lancers had a dagger stuck in the belt and carried, in addition to their long lance, a short curved sword. Large shields were probably supplied to the whole body of Infantry. A light wand, similar to the cane carried by our officers, is seen in one representation in the hand of each fifth man, and may serve to indicate a subordinate officer in command of four. The Guards, to whom the safety of the King's person was committed, were divided into two bodies of men, all equipped with lances to which battle-axes were added in the case of one corps and shields in the other, while the officers carried either clubs or wands.

The soldiers probably sang *en route*, in the same way as our men nowadays. Many love songs and war songs have come down to us, but who can tell which they sang on the march? Two thousand years hence men may indeed wonder why the English

soldiers sang "Tipperary" in the Great European War of the 20th century: it is only when the music as well as the words are extant that we can realise why soldiers adopt one song more than another; in all ages they care more for the good marching quality of the music than for the words.

It will have been seen from what has been said that the army of ancient Egypt was composed of the most heterogeneous elements. Such an army could only be kept together by the firm hand of a strong ruler who could weld together this motley crew of mercenaries and native levies. Unfortunately Ramses III was succeeded by weak kings, and gradually not only the Egyptian Empire, but also the Egyptian army, fell to pieces. The garrisons that were placed in the conquered towns became another source of weakness, for these garrison troops consisted, as a rule, not of native Egyptians but of Nubian or Asiatic auxiliaries, many of whom were the old enemies of Egypt. In the later days of the Ramesside kings the priesthood of Amen at Thebes rose to great power, and decorations, such as formerly were bestowed for valour in the field, were now showered on the members of the priesthood, who at last succeeded in making themselves rulers of the country.

A time of great political turmoil followed, for while the Egyptian army was chiefly composed of Libyan mercenaries, the population of the Delta became more and more Libyan, as great numbers of that nation immigrated and settled there, and two centuries only after the death of Ramses III, a Libyan chief was crowned king of Egypt. For a time the Libyan kings maintained an army strong enough to invade Palestine, where they scored some successes; but the short-lived glory of the Egyptian Empire was over, the ancient splendour of the great army was a legend of the past, and Egypt after fitful flickers of independence became the prey of the armies of Ethiopia, Assyria and Persia.

Thus throughout their history it is clearly seen that the soldiers of Egypt, whether ancient or modern, only fight well under leaders whom they trust. They have learnt now to trust their British rulers, and they know that success in this great war means the continued good government of the British Protectorate of Egypt.