

co-operation at any point which might be necessary.

The Navy were, as always, prepared to give me every assistance in whichever course I might decide to adopt.

On the one hand, Sollum Bay is completely commanded by encircling heights, and, as it would be necessary to remove the mines which had been laid at the entrance, surprise would be impossible. On the other hand, the country between Barrani and Sollum was known to be almost devoid of water, and the physical difficulties to be overcome would certainly be great.

After visiting Matruh, and going into the question on the spot with General Wallace, who had not yet left, and with Commander Eyres Monsell, Royal Navy, I decided to utilise the land route only; supplies to be put by sea into Barrani and Sollum as soon as possible after their re-occupation by us.

These were my instructions to General Peyton when he left Cairo to take over command. As you are already aware, he carried them out, with the assistance of the Navy, to my complete satisfaction.

Just as the preparations for the advance were approaching completion, news was received that a hostile force had occupied the Baharia Oasis on the 11th February. This oasis lies some 200 miles south-west of Cairo and about 100 miles from the rich and thickly populated districts of Fayum and Minia. The strength of this force, which was discovered by an air reconnaissance on the day of its arrival, was said to be about 500 men; it was increased on the following day to about 1,000. Further reinforcements are known to have arrived from the west, and the more southerly oases of Farafra and Dakhla had both been occupied by the 27th. All reports are to the effect that an orderly form of Government has been set up—indeed in most cases the Egyptian officials are believed to be carrying on their ordinary duties, but a few Copts have been induced to embrace the Moslem faith. This move of the enemy had, of course, been foreseen, and I had obtained War Office sanction to organise a command, under Major-General J. Adye, C.B., for the defence of the southern provinces of Egypt. This command had recently come into being, and General Adye was able to establish his headquarters at Beni Suef and to arrange for a thorough system of patrols from the Fayum to the neighbourhood of Assiut and the south, with a small guard on the important bridge over the Nile at Nag Hamadi. Subsequently, as our successful operations cleared the situation in the north, and the centre of gravity began to shift southward, General Adye was able to strengthen and to extend his defensive line until, at the moment of handing over my command to Sir A. Murray, his most southerly detachment was at Esna.

Meanwhile I had withdrawn the Civil Officials from the Kharga Oasis as soon as it was known that Dakhla was in the enemy's hands. I had the choice of occupying and protecting that oasis or of withdrawing from it everything which would be of value to the enemy, and contenting myself with occasional patrols. The strategic importance of these oases is, of course, very obvious, but in view of the uncertainty as to what troops would be under my command at any moment I considered that any

enterprise distant from the Nile Valley would be out of place, and I restricted General Adye to purely defensive measures, with, however, instructions to prepare a small mobile column with which he could strike at the enemy should he approach the cultivation.

All this time the oases were kept under constant observation by means of aeroplanes. Very long flights were necessary, and to reduce them as much as possible a system of advanced depôts in the desert was started. The credit for originating this system is due to Lieut. (now Captain) Van Rynefeld, R.F.C., and to Mr. Jennings Bramley, of the Sudan Civil Service, and was first put into practice on the occasion of the flight to Qara mentioned in my previous Despatch.

Such was the situation when I handed over my command on the 19th March.

Meanwhile the preparations for the advance in the North were steadily proceeding. An advanced depôt was established at Unjeila on the 16th February, and, on the 20th February, General Peyton despatched a force, under Brig.-General H. T. Lukin, C.M.G., D.S.O., consisting of one squadron Royal Bucks Hussars, Queen's Own Dorset Yeomanry, Notts Battery, R.H.A., 1st South African Brigade, less the 2nd and 4th Battalions, a detachment 1/6th Royal Scots and two field ambulances, with orders to establish itself at Barrani, and thus to secure the second stepping-stone on the way to Sollum.

On the following day the hostile forces were located by air reconnaissance at Agagia, some fourteen miles south-east of Barrani. Reports by surrendered Bedouin confirmed the accuracy of this information, and added that both Nuri Bey and Gaafer Pasha were in the camp, although Sayed Ahmed himself had left for Siwa.

As General Peyton considered that the advanced force was sufficiently strong to overthrow any opposition which it was likely to encounter he ordered General Lukin to continue his march and to attack so soon as he was within striking distance of his enemy.

In accordance with this order the original March programme was adhered to, and on the 24th February General Lukin camped at the Wadi Maktil. The 25th was to be a day of rest preliminary to a night approach and attack at dawn on the 26th. However, as on all previous occasions, Gaafer Pasha again showed that he was by no means disposed passively to await attack, and at 5.30 p.m. on the 25th two field guns and at least one machine gun opened fire upon the camp. The action which followed was without importance as the enemy's artillery was soon silenced and the threatened attack was repelled with a loss to ourselves of one man killed and one wounded. Nevertheless it had been sufficient to bring about a change in General Lukin's plans, and the night march was abandoned in favour of daylight operations.

A Yeomanry reconnaissance sent out at daylight on the 26th found that the position occupied by the enemy on the previous evening had been vacated during the night, but aerial reconnaissance and officers' patrols discovered him in his old position near Agagia. Having collected sufficient information to enable him to form his plans General Lukin moved out at 9.30 a.m. with his whole force except for a small detachment left to guard his camp. By