

THE SCARCE EGYPT 1882 TO A SERGEANT OF THE YORK AND LANCS REGIMENT WHO SUFFERED A SPEAR WOUND TO THE HEAD DURING THE HAND TO HAND FIGHTING AT THE BATTLE OF TAMAAI, 14 MARCH 1884.



EGYPT AND SUDAN 1882-89, UNDATED REVERSE, 1 CLASP, EL-TEB_TAMAAI '1448 LCE. SERGT. J. AVENS. 1/YORK & LANC: R:'

John Avens was born at Llantrissant, Glamorgan, in 1848 and attested for the 65th Regiment of Foot at Taunton on 17 November 1866. Promoted Corporal on 24 May 1881, Lance Sergeant on 8 August 1883, and Sergeant on 12 March 1884, he served with the Regiment in India from 10 February 1871 to 27 February 1884, and then in the Sudan from 28 February 28 February to 28 March 1884, and suffered a spear wound to the head at the Battle of Tamaai, 14 March 1884. He was discharged on 2 June 1885, after 18 years and 133 days' service.

THE BATTLE OF TAMAI

Following the Battle of El Teb it had been the expectation of the British commander, Major General Graham, that the Sudanese in rebellion against the Khedive under Osman Digna would capitulate and surrender the guns and rifles they had taken from the defeated Egyptian army troops they had defeated in battle, or captured from surrendered garrisons. Graham was mistaken. Osman Digna sent a number of defiant and threatening messages that made it clear that he fully intended to continue the revolt in the name of the Mahdi.

General Graham and Admiral Hewitt were forced to abandon the plan to withdraw the British force to Egypt and instead to advance inland from Suakin to attack Osman Digna's camp at Tamai. On 12th March 1884 the rest of General Graham's force marched into the zeriba to join the Black Watch who had previous to this occupied it. During that night the British troops were kept on edge by a desultory rifle fire from a group of around 150 skirmishers who circled the zeriba.

At 8am on 13th March 1884 the British force paraded for the advance to attack Osman Digna's camp, some 2 miles distant. Two brigade squares were formed with the 2nd Brigade leading and the 1st Brigade marching on a path behind and to the right of the 2nd Brigade.

The leading 2nd Brigade comprised 1st Black Watch, 2nd York and Lancaster, the RMLI and the Naval Brigade with Gardiner and Gatling guns, the brigade commanded by General Davis. The 1st Brigade comprised 1st Gordon Highlanders, 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers and 3rd KRRC and was commanded by Colonel Redvers Buller. General Graham and his staff accompanied the leading 2nd Brigade.

The British cavalry, which had been reconnoitring the Sudanese positions, fell back behind the 2nd Brigade.

The Mahdists could be seen in the scrub ahead of the squares, skirmishers to the front and the main force in the camp to the rear. The going for the British troops was difficult, the path being intersected by gullies containing dried water courses. The ground was broken by thorn bushes. 2 squadrons of British cavalry moved forward on the left and engaged the Mahdists with dismounted rifle fire, until, under threat of being overrun, they withdrew.



THE YORK AND LANCS DURING THE HAND TO HAND FIGHTING AT TAMAI

The 2nd Brigade came into contact with the Mahdists and fire was opened as the brigade square continued to advance. The brigade then found itself on the edge of a wide deep gully. The sides of the

square were being subjected to repeated and increasingly threatening rushes by the Mahdists. The fire discipline of the troops began to deteriorate. Smoke from the rifle fire with the dust from the dry plain, stirred up by the numbers of men rushing about, made visibility difficult. The Black Watch at the front face of the brigade square were then ordered to charge the enemy in the ravine and although ordered not to do so, some of the York and Lancs followed suit leaving a hole in the front of the square into which the Mahdists launched an attack.

The York and Lancaster fell back on the RMLI and the two battalions became intertwined and disordered. The Black Watch, now thrown into confusion and suffering heavy casualties, fell back into the square and the brigade was forced to retreat, pressed hard by the attacking tribesmen. Three Royal Navy Gatling and Gardiner guns had to be abandoned as the square was sent reeling back 800 yards. Fortunately quick thinking members of the Naval Brigade manning the guns had time to lock them. Small groups of men fought back to back with the enemy, disputing every inch of ground until at last Officers regained order and the square was reformed once again.

Successfully blowing away a similar attack, Colonel Buller's 1st Brigade now came up on the right of the 2nd Brigade and poured fire into the tribesman attacking the 2nd Brigade. Twenty minutes later the attacks had been repulsed, both squares were reformed and fresh supplies of ammunition were brought forward. After a short rest, Graham's force moved forward, regaining the ground lost and retaking the abandoned guns. The two brigades opened a heavy fire on the Mahdists who were defending and then withdrawing across the ravine and up the far bank. With the 1st Brigade providing supporting fire the 2nd Brigade then stormed across the ravine. The brigades reformed on the far bank of the ravine and moved into the valley to occupy Osman Digna's camp. The Mahdists continued to resist the advance but were finally dispersed by artillery fire. The battle was over, leaving Osman Digna's camp in British hands to be burnt by Colonel Buller's brigade.

During this battle, the British suffered more losses than in any other battle of the Mahdist war, 214 soldiers being wounded or killed, ten of which were officers. The Mahdists also suffered heavily, losing 4,000 men. The Black Watch and York and Lancs suffering by far the heaviest casualties; respectively with 89 and 53 killed and wounded (the majority killed).

<https://www.britishbattles.com/war-in-egypt-and-sudan/battle-of-tamai/>



Condition; light pitting from star, otherwise GVF. Sold with copied record of service and other research. Ex Noonans 2021

A fine medal to a casualty of one of the fiercest battles of the Victorian era