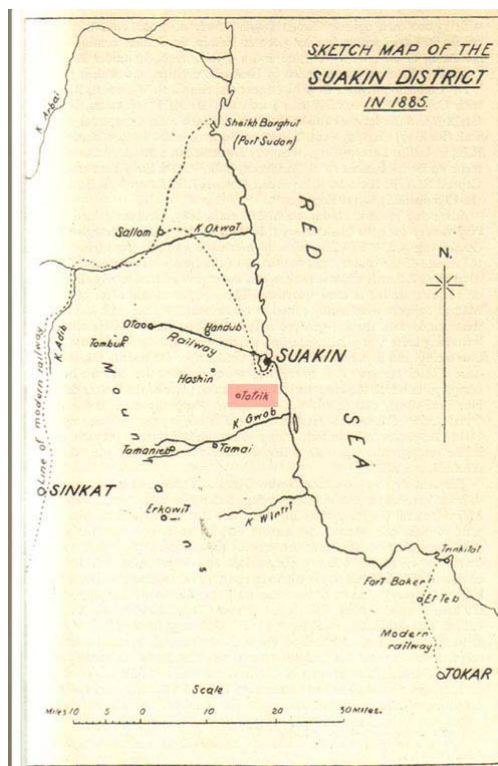


**Extract from “Indian Sappers and Miners”**  
**By Lieut.-Colonel E.W.C. Sandes D.S.O., M.C., R.E. (Ret.)**  
 published by The Institution of Royal Engineers, Chatham, 1948, Pages 300 to 306  
**Describing the Battle of Tofrik, 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 1885.**



The Madras Sappers were present in Cairo on September 30th when 18,000 troops were reviewed by Sir Garnet Wolseley. They left the capital by train on October 8th, reached Suez on the 9th, and Bombay on the 28th. Two representatives, however - Subadar Jeyram and Naik Sheikh Ismail - were sent to England with men of other Indian units and were received by Her Majesty the Queen. Though the Madras Sappers took only an inconspicuous part in the Egyptian campaign, their valuable assistance was recognized by the award of the honours "Tel-el-Kebir" and "Egypt, 1882."<sup>1</sup> Colonel Browne wrote of them<sup>2</sup> that he had found them thoroughly efficient, handy and willing, and that the amount of work they accomplished surprised the Royal Engineers of the home establishment; and when Sir Frederick Roberts presented medals to the companies from Afghanistan on parade at Bangalore on February 5th, 1883, he mentioned that he had been so impressed with the usefulness of the Corps that he had recommended that two regiments of Madras Infantry should be formed into Pioneers on the model of the 23rd and 32nd Regiments of Punjab Native Infantry and that his suggestion had been approved.<sup>3</sup> Thus the labours of the Madras Sappers in Afghanistan and Egypt had far reaching results.

It was not long before some Madras Sappers and Miners were voyaging again up the Red Sea, on this occasion to the sweltering though picturesque seaport of Suakin. The Mahdi had set the interior of the Sudan aflame and annihilated a force under Colonel W. Hicks, and some irregulars under Major-General Valentine Baker had been routed near Tokar<sup>4</sup> by the elusive Osman Digna. Major-General Charles Gordon had perished in Khartoum after Lord Wolseley had failed to reach him by the Nile route, and as Suakin was then in danger, an expedition under Lieut.-General Sir Gerald Graham, V.C., late R.E., was sent thither in 1885 to destroy Osman Digna and clear the coast sufficiently for the building of a railway from Suakin to Berber on the Nile. Arriving in Suakin on March 12th, 1885, Graham set his engineers to work on the construction of the projected line towards the mountains at Otao, and shortly afterwards took the field with 13,000 men against Osman Digna's force of 7,000,

<sup>1</sup> Military Despatch dated May 17th, 1883.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Col. James Browne to Gen. Sir Frederick Roberts dated Nov. 15th, 1882.

<sup>3</sup> "Presentation of Medals to the Q.V.O. Sappers and Miners at Bangalore," appearing in *The R.E. Journal*, Vol. XIII, 1883, PP. 76. 77.

<sup>4</sup> The battle took place at Et Teb, 12 miles north of Tokar, on Feb. 4th, 1884. Tokar is 55 miles south-east of Suakin. All places mentioned in this narrative of the Suakin operations are shown in the *Sketch Map of the Suakin District in 1885* which is included in this chapter.

concentrated chiefly at Tamai with a further 3,000 at Hashin. An Indian contingent, consisting of an infantry brigade and a cavalry regiment under Brig.-General J. Hudson, was included in Graham's division, and with it was " F " Company, Madras S. & M., under Captain C. B. Wilkieson, R.E., with Captain F. J. Romilly and Lieutenant E. M. B. Newman, R.E.. Graham had the services also of the 17th and 24th Field Companies, the 10<sup>th</sup> (Railway) Company, two Telegraph Sections and a Balloon Section, R.E., an Indian Labour Corps, a Survey Detachment, a Mounted Detachment under Lieutenant A. E. Sandbach, R.E.,<sup>1</sup> and a Field Park under Captain S. A. E. Hickson, R.E.. Brevet-Colonel J. B. Edwards, R.E., was the Commanding Royal Engineer.

Advancing towards Hashin on March 10th, 1885, Graham gained an easy victory over the Hadendowa tribesmen at that place. Though not closely engaged, " F " Company obtained some valuable experience of the nature of the country and the tactics of the enemy. The ground was covered with thorny mimosa bushes, and the enemy seemed to rely chiefly on surprise attacks at close quarters. The equipment and dress of the Madras Sappers were hardly suited to the occasion, for the rank and file were armed with the five-grooved muzzle-loading Snider carbine and a "working knife" or a hand-axe, and were clothed in a scarlet tunic with blue facings and dark blue trousers with a red stripe. On their heads, they wore a black turban. It is interesting to observe that this was the first campaign in which the black turban was worn in place of the former dark blue head-dress, and that it was the last in which the men served as "Privates".<sup>2</sup> The work at Hashin consisted in helping the 17th and 24th Field Companies to build four strong points, and afterwards preparing a *zariba* as an advanced post for a British battalion. "F" Company then returned to Suakin.

The next step was to attack Osman Digna at Tamai, but before doing so it was necessary to establish supply depots along the route. Accordingly, Major-General Sir John McNeill, V.C., was sent southwards on March 22nd to make and garrison two *zaribas*, one five miles and the other ten miles from Suakin. His force comprised two squadrons of cavalry,<sup>3</sup> two battalions of British infantry (Berkshires and Royal Marines), three battalions of Indian infantry (15th Sikhs and 17th Bengal and 28th Bombay Native Infantry), a naval detachment with four Gardner machine-guns, the 24th Field Company, R.E., under Brevet-Colonel E. P. Leach, V.C.. R.E., a Telegraph Section, R.E., and "F" Company, Madras S. & M. - about 4,000 men in all. McNeill set out in square formation to guard against surprise attacks; but his progress was so slow, owing to his enormous convoy of camels, that at noon he obtained permission to halt at Tofrik, six miles from Suakin, and there prepared to build a thorn-fenced *zariba* consisting of a large central square for his transport animals and two smaller flanking squares for his troops. Screened by cavalry vedettes in the bush, the Berkshires and Marines were posted to the east of the selected site, while the Indian troops covered the other sides, the 17th Bengal Infantry facing south, the 15th Sikhs west, and the 28th Bombay Infantry north. As the heat was terrific, the infantry and engineers piled arms before setting to work and then proceeded to clear a field of fire and build the defences. When the flanking enclosures began to take shape, some of the Marines occupied the northern one with two Gardner guns and some of the Berkshires the southern one with the other two guns. The bush being thickest on the north and west, the defences on these sides were finished first.

A brief account of what followed has been given in another volume,<sup>4</sup> and as that account was approved by General Sir Reginald Wingate, the distinguished officer who was Governor-General of the Sudan for no less than 17 years, it is reproduced here with a sketch map to explain the situation.<sup>5</sup> At 2 p.m., when many of the troops were at dinner, the central square was still open to the east and south and partly also to the west and north. The camels and mules, having been unloaded in the central square, were collected to the east of it, and near them were two companies of Berkshires. The men were tired and there was yet no proper field of fire around the incomplete defences. At 2.30 p.m., a cavalry soldier reported that the enemy were advancing, and orders were given for the working and covering parties to come in; but before they could be collected, the cavalry galloped towards the *zariba* with the Sudanese swarming at their heels. The attack was delivered mainly against the southern and eastern sides and into the midst of the transport animals and non-combatants. Enveloped in clouds of dust, and filling the air with savage cries, the Sudanese surged onwards in a vast impetuous mass. Our working parties rushed for their arms; some men found them, others did not. Thrown into disorder by the cavalry riding through them, the 17th Bengal Infantry fired a volley, broke their ranks, and rushed towards the central square. The two companies of Berkshires, forming square to the north of the transport animals, stood firm, but the enemy were soon among the camels and mules, and an avalanche of Sudanese, Bengal Infantry, followers and animals burst through the central square in a stabbing and hacking mob and carried away with them some of the Royal Engineers and Madras Sappers. A party of the 24th Field Company managed to fight its way back, and another under Lieutenant C. Godby, R.E., joined the rallying

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<sup>1</sup> Afterwards Commandant of the Bengal Sappers and Miners.

<sup>2</sup> The term " Sapper " was introduced in Dec., 1885.

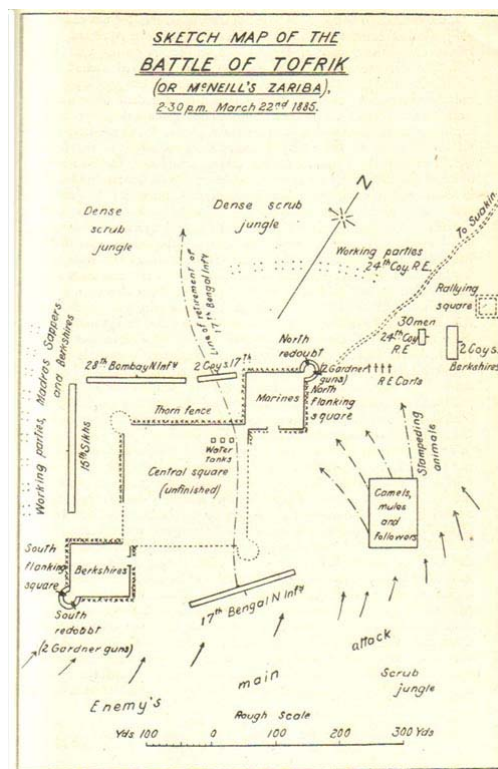
<sup>3</sup> Only 1 squadron (5th Lancers) is mentioned in *Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India*, Vol. VI, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> *The Royal Engineers in Egypt and the Sudan*, by the present author, pp. 72, 73.

<sup>5</sup> *Sketch Map of the Rattle of Tofrik (or McNeill's Zariba)*, 2.30 p.m., March 22nd, 1885.

square of the Berkshires outside the *zariba* and helped to repel the assault. "For the next few minutes," writes Godby,<sup>1</sup> "we were infantry pure and simple: targets in plenty: range, three to thirty yards; ammunition, not marksmanship, required." The situation was saved chiefly by the Marines and those of the Berkshires who were securely entrenched with their Gardner guns in the flanking squares, although their fire killed hundreds of our stampeding camels.

Both the 24th Field Company, R.E., and "F" Company, Madras S. & M., suffered severely.<sup>2</sup> When the attack began, Captain F. J. Romilly, R.E., was superintending the Madras Sappers who were loading their equipment on mules, and the retreating Bengal Infantry carried these Sappers with them across the unfinished angle of the central square. Captain C. B. Wilkieson, R.E., severely wounded in the leg, saw a Sudanese warrior run alongside Romilly's horse and spear the rider through the side and heart. The man was shot immediately afterwards. It seems that Romilly was attempting to save the life of a brother officer, Lieutenant E. M. B. Newman, R.E., was killed by a swordsman, his left arm being severed and the top of his head sliced clean off. His opponent was soon among the dead. The Battle of Tofrik was finished in twenty minutes. When the smoke cleared away, the place was a shambles. Dead bodies of men and animals lay in heaps on every side. The British lost about 100 men killed and 140 wounded, and no less than 900 camels perished. At least 1,000 of the enemy lay motionless around and within the *zariba*.<sup>3</sup>



It appears that when the Sudanese broke into the central square a party of Madras Sappers under Wilkieson gathered round a pile of stores and biscuit boxes and firing with the greatest steadiness checked the assault and thus helped the Marines and Berkshires in the flanking squares to save the situation. Newman fell when a number of the enemy penetrated the Berkshires' square, where some of the Sappers were building a gun emplacement. In later years, when Commandant at Bangalore, Wilkieson used to describe how a "Fuzzy-Wuzzy," his spear dripping with blood, came rushing at him, and how he shot the man dead with his revolver after missing him twice. As a result, every officer of the Corps was required to fire 24 rounds on the revolver range each Sunday, and the Madras Sappers used to win all the revolver competitions at the Bangalore Rifle Meeting.<sup>4</sup> Brig.-General Evans relates that in 1888 Lance-Naik (afterwards Hon. Captain) Alexander told him many stories of Tofrik, and when asked how he felt when the enemy attacked the *zariba*, replied with a smile "I not fraiding too much, sah!"<sup>5</sup> The comradeship established between the British infantry and the Sappers at Suakin stood the latter in good stead in an emergency, for the Sappers had fraternized much with the British soldiers. They smoked and drank with them in their canteens and claimed that they had even won money from them at cards.

Little remains to be recorded of the operations on the Red Sea coast in 1885. Graham marched from Suakin with a strong force on April 2nd, and reinforced by the brigade at Tofrik,

occupied Tamai on the 3rd. No resistance was encountered. The engineer units destroyed Tamai, and Graham returned to Suakin. "F" Company was next employed on railway construction, in which they were said to have done more useful work than any other Corps from India. Their labours, however, were thrown away, for the railway was a complete failure. When rail-head had reached Otao at the end of April, orders were received that the force should be broken up and the railway project abandoned, and thereafter much of the material lay for years in the desert and on Quarantine Island in Suakin harbour. Captain S. A. E. Hickson and Lieutenant J. A.

<sup>1</sup> Notes by Brig.-Gen. C. Godby, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., late R.E., sent to the author on Oct. 24th, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> "F" Company lost 2 British officers and 13 Indian other ranks killed, and 1 British officer and 18 Indian other ranks wounded.

<sup>3</sup> For further details of the Battle of Tofrik see *The Egyptian Campaigns, 882-1899*, by C. Royle, pp. 416-429; an article entitled "Suakin, 1889, Field Operations" in *The R.E. Journal*, Vol. XVI, 1886, pp. 97-101; and a report by Bt. Col. E. P. Leach, V.C., R.E., entitled "Appendix to Diary for March 1885. Action at Zereba (Tofrik), 22nd March, 1885," appearing in the Official Report on the Royal Engineers at Suakin. A good account is given also in an essay by Capt. A. V. Anderson, R.E., written in 1926 and filed in Case 19, Historical Records, at Bangalore.

<sup>4</sup> Notes by Col. P. E. Hodgson, D.S.O., late R.E., sent to the author on Aug. 18th, 1937.

<sup>5</sup> Notes by Brig.-Gen. C. W. Evans, C.B., C.M.G., late R.E., sent to the author on May 29th, 1937.

Tanner, R.E., were attached temporarily to "F" Company after the Battle of Tofrik to fill the vacancies caused by the deaths of Romilly and Newman, and Lieutenant A. C. MacDonnell, R.E., joined the unit in April from Bangalore but was soon invalided. Malaria and dysentery took their toll. Captain C. H. Darling, R.E., joined also in April and assumed command when Wilkieson was invalided on June 8th; and when Darling left for England on October 1st, the command fell to Captain W. D. Lindley, R.E. Although the campaign may be said to have ended in the middle of May, 1885, "F" Company did not leave Suakin until November 20th. It embarked on that date for Bombay after earning for its Corps the honours "Tofrek" and "Suakin, 1885."<sup>1</sup> By May, 1886, all the British and Indian units of the expeditionary force had quitted the Red Sea. Osman Digna had then reoccupied Tamai, Hashin, Otao and Handub and was besieging Suakin, which was defended mostly by an Egyptian garrison. Once more, the Mahdi's followers overran the Red Sea coast.

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<sup>1</sup> G.G.O. dated July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1885.