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RICHARD CORFIELD AND THE DUL MADOBA INCIDENT;
AN EPISODE IN THE SOMALI STRUGGLE AGAINST BRITISH
COLONIALISM

Historical Background

Prior to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Somali coast offered little attraction to the European countries. It was only Britain which had secured anything resembling a permanent foothold on a small coastal strip opposite the Gulf of Aden and, even then, its sole motive was to secure essential provisions such as meat, grain, and hay for the British garrisons at Aden. The situation, however, changed drastically following the opening of the Suez Canal, which event established the shortest route via the Gulf of Aden to the Far East, for the maritime powers. France, Germany, and Italy started to scramble for analogous spheres of influence all along the Somali coast, and Britain took steps to consolidate and even expand its own sphere of influence. In pursuit of these objectives Britain sent Lieut. Col. F. M. Hunter in the 1880s to sign treaties with various ethnic groups on the coast, stipulating British protection and prohibiting them from ceding any part of their respective territories to any other power. In 1887, British acquisitions were duly notified to the signatories of the Berlin Agreement and consolidated into the Somali Coast Protectorate. The government of India, through its residency in Aden, took charge of the protectorate until 1898 when the Foreign Office took over. The latter was responsible for giving the protectorate its defined boundaries and for

changing its name to British Somaliland Protectorate. The British Somaliland Protectorate occupied a mere 68,000 square miles out of a total of 400,000 square miles of the Somali inhabited area of the Horn of Africa. It lay between 8° and 12° north of the equator and was bounded by the Gulf of Aden to the north, flanked by the Italian Somaliland Colony to the east, by Ethiopia to the south and by French Somaliland to the west. The area covered by the protectorate is very dry and arid, with an average rainfall of three inches.

The history of the British Somaliland Protectorate between 1899 and 1920 is dominated by the anti-colonial movement of Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hassan (known in Europe by the derogatory epithet of the 'Mad Mullah'). Within this period Great Britain was pre-occupied with the task of devising policies which might lead to the downfall of the Sayyid's movement. These included limited military action, diplomacy, full-scale expeditions, partial occupation of the interior, coastal administration and finally aerial bombardment.

This article deals with one of these phases - the phase of the camel corps - which was conceived and inaugurated in 1912; it turned out to be the most disastrous of all the policies hitherto experimented and it ended up with the humiliation of British forces at Dul Madoba in August 1913. Thus, the Dul Madoba encounter was one of the isolated cases in the history of colonial Africa when Belloo's dictum to the effect that "whatever happens we have got the maxim gun and they have not", did not hold good. It took the British another good seven years before the maxim gun "compelled respect, obedience, humiliation and subjection."¹

Between 1901 and 1904 Britain sent four military expeditions against the Sayyid's forces (the Dervishes). The first expedition consisted of 50 Punjabis and 1500 levies;

its assignment was to capture or kill the Sayyid. After several engagements which ended inconclusively, the British realized they had underestimated the strength of the Sayyid's resistance. The second and third expeditions, though organized on a grander scale, did not fare much better. As for the forth expedition Britain's plans were massive and elaborate. It recruited 6000 troops from India, and borrowed several K.A.R. units from different colonies. The expedition, under the general command of Major General Egerton, cornered the Sayyid's forces at Jidbali and defeated them but did not manage to capture the Sayyid. The latter took refuge at Illig, in the Italian colony, and sought Italian protection. In 1905 the Sayyid, the Italians and British signed what came to be known as the Illig Agreement which stipulated, inter alia, that the Sayyid had become an Italian subject and that peace would prevail between the three parties. It soon transpired, however, that the Sayyid had only wanted time to recuperate for within a few months he was attacking British positions in the protectorate. Britain was at a loss to know how to deal with such a man.

Towards the end of 1905 Britain was so totally fed up with its protectorate that it decided to vacate the interior in order to concentrate on the coast which was a vital source of supplies for Aden. The rest of the protectorate must look after itself, with the help of a few rifles supplied to the tribes which were not hostile to Britain. Winston Churchill, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, was for total evacuation since he could not see any future for the British in that region, but the colonial office prevailed upon him to settle for the policy of coastal administration.²

By 1908 the Sayyid, taking advantage of Britain's weakened

position in the interior, was at the peak of his power and was, in fact, threatening the British administration on the coast. It was unrealistic for Britain to imagine it could be left in peace at the coast while the interior came under the sway of the Dervishes.

Britain was thoroughly vexed. In 1909, the Colonial Office sent Sir R. Wingate, the Governor-General of the Sudan, to Somaliland to study the situation and recommend a policy to be adopted by the British government. Although Wingate recommended the re-occupation of some vital points in the interior, the British government was already uncompromisingly committed to the policy of coastal concentration. Thus, Wingate's recommendations were ignored.³

Between 1911 and 1912, Britain's position on the coast became untenable. The Sayyid issued several ultimatums to the effect that if the British did not withdraw altogether from the coast he would drive them into the sea. Yet Britain could not possibly abandon the coast which was supplying the Aden garrisons with essential supplies. Apart from that, Britain's prestige, internationally as well as locally, would have been dealt a blow had it to evacuate under those circumstances. Some formula which would neither involve Britain in another full-scale war with the Dervishes nor result in complete withdrawal had to be found. It was in the context of this historical background - a background of dilemma as to what to do with British Somaliland - that the idea of a camel corps was conceived.

Inception of Richard Corfield's Camel Corps

At the beginning of 1912 the governor of the protectorate, Horace Byatt, wrote a long memorandum pointing out the flaws and dangers of the policy then being pursued - the policy of coastal administration with a few scattered

armed encampments of the pro-British tribes in the hinterland. He wrote, *inter alia*,

"the policy now in operation has disappointed expectation; it has been given a complete trial and it has failed. It is leading to a steady diminution of government's prestige and it promises a worse condition of affairs in the future than at present ... The commercial possibilities of the country are not capable of further development, and therefore, the decision as to the future must depend chiefly upon consideration of political expediency, but the consideration of the cause of humanity may also be taken into account."⁴

Then Byatt proceeded to consider and evaluate the various courses of action which might provide the answer to the impasse. The first possibility in his opinion was for Britain to organize another full military expedition against the Sayyid. Byatt could see good prospects for the success of a fresh military expedition because the over-confident Sayyid had already moved his bases to a radius of some 15 miles from the coast, and his position among the Somali was believed to have been weakened by his high handed administrative methods; in the event of a well organized military expedition, a substantial number of disgruntled Dervishes would defect to the British side. The second possible course of action was to abandon the protectorate altogether but this line of action had already been ruled out on the grounds that Britain's prestige would be impaired; the idea of a fresh military expedition was equally repugnant on account of the expenses involved and the uncertainty of the outcome.

In Byatt's opinion there was yet one expedient

"which might be tried, but would have to be tried without undue delay. This is the maintenance on the coast of a small mobile striking force, which could be used to main-

tain order by coercion within a radius of 50 miles or so of Berbera, and to keep the roads clear. It should consist of a Camel Corps of natives of the country not less than 70 strong."⁵

Byatt's proposal was received with reservation in the Colonial Office, for it tended to reverse "to a certain extent the policy laid down by the Cabinet after prolonged discussion, that our administration should be confined to the two or three towns on the coast."⁶ Byatt travelled to London in May for the purpose of defending his proposals. The Colonial Office was finally swayed to Byatt's views, not so much because they appeared sound and practicable, but because the camel corps "would be cheaper than the cost of garrisoning system in force."⁷ The cabinet endorsed the camel corps proposals in June 1912 and suggested its strength to be at 150 instead of the 70 originally proposed.

The training of the camel corps was completed by the end of the year and, on Byatt's recommendation, the force was put under the command of Richard Corfield. The latter was considered suitable for the post on account of his previous experience in dealing with turbulent political situations in Africa. His military career in Africa started with the Anglo-Boer war of 1899 in which he served as a junior officer. At the end of the war he joined Baden Powell's scouts who were responsible for suppressing what remained of the Boer resistance and for disarming those Africans who had acquired arms during the course of the war. With the return to normality of the South African situation, Corfield became redundant and was forced to return to England. He found life in England too dull for his liking, for he was a man of an impulsive nature, with a strong craving for adventure. Of his impatience to get out of England, he wrote, "I think of trying America, Colombia, Equador or some-

where; there is always a revolution going on there."⁸ His plans to leave for South America were cut short by a Colonial Office appointment in 1905 to British Somaliland as a political officer. He left Somaliland in 1910 because of Britain's decision to reduce its administration to the bare minimum. In November of the same year Corfield took up a new job in northern Nigeria but found life there very boring owing to the relative absence of political upheavals. He longed to return to Somaliland, and his wishes were answered when he was appointed to command the newly formed camel corps.

Corfield's appointment came at a time when Britain's fortunes in the protectorate were at their lowest point. The interior was in constant turmoil, the eastern section of the protectorate was under the Sayyid's firm grip and the Europeans on the coast lived in constant fear. Worse still, many of the tribes hitherto friendly to the British administration had become disheartened by Britain's policy of retrenchment and were making efforts to get reconciled with the Sayyid. This was true in the case of the Warsengeli and Gadweyn, long-standing allies of the British. The acting governor, Geoffrey Archer, went to Las Khoray and Hays in June 1912 with a view to ascertaining whether these two tribes were still friendly to the British. He found them not only hostile but also at loggerheads with one another.⁹

The camel corps took the field in December 1912, leaving Berbera with a month's provisions, and established a base at Mandera, 42 miles to the south of Berbera. This spot had previously been a favourite target for the Habr Yunis raiders, and Corfield was authorised to take punitive action against the culprits provided he continued to remind himself of the fact

"the creation of the corps does not in any

way imply a reversal of the accepted policy of coastal concentration. The fundamental reason for the raising of the corps is the necessity to keep open the trade routes for caravans visiting the coast and also to put an end to that constant internal warfare among the friendlies which renders them incapable of resisting aggression from the outside."¹⁰

Byatt's instructions to Corfield were clearly contradictory and, therefore, self-defeating. On the one hand Byatt insisted that the inception of the camel corps did not affect the official policy on non-interference in the internal politics of the Somali; but, on the other hand, he assigned the force the duty of restoring law and order within the prescribed area, a goal which, needless to say, could not be achieved without any interference in the internal politics of the tribes involved. That the formation of the camel corps actually amounted to a change of the policy of non-interference was confirmed by Byatt's further instructions to Corfield:

"We must start with a clean plate, taking notice of an awarding punishment only in those cases of looting and fighting which occur henceforth ... But the Government will reserve the right of interfering and enforcing restitution in any such former cases as it sees fit to take up ... The Corps is to be regarded as a striking force which may be used to repress disorder and insist on compliance with any decision arrived at in Berbera."¹¹

What if the camel corps was to be threatened by a strong Dervish force? Under such circumstances, the corps should avoid a confrontation and instead retire to the coast. All in all, Corfield was given an impossible task. How was he to ensure political tranquillity within a radius of 50 miles while the Sayyid's field of operation was not similarly limited? A pattern soon emerged whereby the Sayyid

would attack the pro-British tribes living beyond the area prescribed for the camel corps, putting them into headlong flight towards the coast; the victims would appeal for assistance but Corfield was not allowed to venture beyond Mandera. In fact, the policy of having the camel corps stationed at Mandera but unable to assist the pro-British tribes being harassed a few miles away turned out to be worse than having no government troops at all, as had been the case before. At least than the people, seeing no government troops around, expected no assistance of any sort and had, therefore, to take whatever they deemed appropriate for self-protection. But to have the camel corps at Mandera which could not venture as far as Burao, Bohotleh or the Ain Valley was something quite perplexing both to the pro-British tribes as well as to the Dervishes.

The absurdity of the official policy with regard to the camel corps soon became apparent to Byatt, and the latter successfully requested the Colonial Office for authority to extend the area of operation to a radius of 100 miles, thereby covering Burao and Ber as the southernmost limits.

The extension of the operational area was received with great enthusiasm by Corfield. He wrote:

"I am immensely looking forward to the move, and the eyes of the whole country are upon it. To the natives it is quite an epoch-making affair after the Government's sphere of action having been confined to the coast for nearly three years."¹²

It is quite evident, therefore, that Corfield's conception of his assignment, let alone his enthusiasm, did not tally with the restrained instructions issued to him or the official policy.

Towards Dul Madoba

Corfield was off to a good start. Within a couple of months he had meted out punishment to those he considered recalcitrant, re-opened the caravan routes and rewarded the disgruntled groups. In May 1913 Byatt reported: "It may now be hoped that no further fighting will take place in the western district for some space of time ..."¹³

The tendency of Byatt to allow Corfield a free hand, even when it was apparent that he was over-stepping the limitations officially imposed on him, was a signal for Corfield to act in obedience to his well known temperamental and psychological inclinations, thereby courting disaster. In the middle of June 1913 Corfield took a step which clearly demonstrated his growing impatience with the restraints of the official policy. On June 12, Corfield, then in Burao, received a report to the effect that a large Dervish force was harassing people in the Ain Valley, beyond the prescribed operational zone. In utter disregard of the official policy Corfield set out in pursuit of the Dervishes with the intention of attacking them. The governor was forced to warn Corfield that

"though nothing whatsoever unforeseen occurred on this occasion, yet I cannot pass over the incident without drawing your attention to the explicit nature of the instructions conveyed to you from time to time on the subject of confining the camel corps operations to the immediate vicinity of Burao with Ber as an extreme limit for occasional patrols."¹⁴

Archer's reminder to Corfield to stick to the official policy apparently had no impact on the latter. Only two months later he led the camel corps to its destruction at Dul Madoba. On August 8, Corfield received reports that a big Dervish force was raiding to the south of Burao, as far as Idoweyna.

During the first five months following the inception of the camel corps, the Dervishes had confined their operations to the southernmost parts of the protectorate, avoiding a head-on-collision with the camel corps. The possible explanation would seem to be that the Sayyid wished to ascertain the real intentions of the British government and the real strength of the camel corps. Some interesting changes did take place within the Dervish movement during this period, the most important being the construction of a new fort at Taleh and the transfer of the Sayyid's haroun to that place. Hitherto the haroun had shifted from one place to another, but by the middle of 1913 it had become an established fact that Taleh had become, more or less, the Sayyid's permanent headquarters. He moved out occasionally either to inspect the other forts which were scattered in different parts of the country, or to command expeditions. He always invariably returned to Taleh where he conducted the bulk of his administrative, religious and diplomatic duties. The governor who happened to be at Burao, permitted Corfield to go on a reconnaissance mission and then report to him. Under no circumstances was he to engage the Dervishes. Archer asked Gerald Summers, commanding officer of the 6th Battalion K.A.R., to accompany the camel corps, the idea being, presumably, that he would restrain Corfield from taking any rash action. The camel corps strength amounted to 3 officers - namely Corfield, Dunn and Summers; 61 camelry; 15 pony men; and 6 volunteers. They were armed with 140 rifles, 8200 rounds of ammunition and 1 maxim gun. They were joined en route by 600 spearmen, 150 horsemen and 2000 riflemen.¹⁵

On the evening of August 8, the camel corps camped near Idoweyna and from here they could see Dervish camp fires a few miles away. Summers proposed withdrawal but Corfield

brushed aside the idea.¹⁶ On the following morning the Dervishes started to move towards the Dul Madoba Hill, with the stock they had seized. Corfield decided to cut the Dervish line of retreat and a fierce exchange of fire erupted between the camel corps and the 2000 or so Dervishes.¹⁷ The pro-British tribes who had volunteered support for the camel corps took to their heels on hearing of the first shoots; shortly afterwards the maxim gun was silenced by rifle fire, and Corfield was shot dead through the head. After five hours of pitched battle the Dervishes withdrew leaving 35 of the camel corps dead, 21 wounded and 3 missing. The Dervishes too lost nearly 200 men.¹⁸

Summers admitted afterwards that had the Dervishes not decided to withdraw when they did, the camel corps would have been annihilated for it had run short of ammunition and the Somali soldiers had started to lose heart. The British regarded the outcome of the Dul Madoba confrontation as a disaster, while the Dervishes regarded it as their most outstanding victory in the history of their 14 year old struggle against the British. Archer's immediate concern was to secure reinforcements from Aden to defend Berbera in the event of the Sayyid deciding to invade the town, which he did not. Both the Colonial Office and the local administration were at one in their view that, whatever might have happened at Dul Madoba, Britain could not allow itself to be thrown out of Somaliland by the Sayyid. The policy of coastal concentration had, therefore, to be abandoned in favour of the policy of effective occupation, the very policy that Corfield had advocated and for which he became a martyr.

The Sayyid, in his characteristic style crowned the Dul Madoba 'victory' with two poems. The first poem was addressed to Corfield's sister who, the Sayyid learnt, was about to

lead a military expedition to avenge the death of her brother. After praising Allah for the death of Corfield the poem concludes as

His sister, the Midgan (outcaste) is said to
be mourning;
(It is said) she has worn black mourning dresses
and cries endlessly;
She is like one possessed by the devil, so let
her continue to mourn.

The second poem was addressed to the dead man himself:

You have died, Corfield, and you are no longer
in this world;
A merciless journey was your portion;
When, hell-destined, you set out for the other
world;
Those who have gone to Heaven will question you,
if God is willing;
When you see the companions of the faithful and
the jewels of Heaven;
Answer them how God tried you.
Say to them: "From that day to this the Dervishes
never ceased their assaults upon us.
The British were broken, the noise of battle
engulfed us;
With fervour and faith the Dervishes attacked us."
Say: "They attacked us at mid-morning."
Say: "Yesterday in the Holy war a bullet from one
of their old rifles struck me.
And the bullet struck me in the arm."
Say: "In fury they fell upon us."
Report how savagely their swords tore you,
Show these past generations in how many places the
daggers were plunged.
Say: "Friend", I called, "have compassion and
spare me."
Say: "As I looked fearfully from side to side my
heart was plucked from its sheath."
Say: "My eyes stiffened as I watched with horror;
The mercy I implored was not granted."
Say: "Striking with spear-butts at my mouth they
silenced my soft words;
My ears, straining for deliverance, found nothing;
The risks I took, the mistakes I made, cost my life."
Say: "Like the war leaders of old, I cherished great
plans for victory."
Say: "The schemes the djinns planted in me brought
my ruin."

Say: "When pain racked me everywhere
Men lay sleepless at my shrieks."
Say: "Great shouts acclaimed the departing of my
soul."
Say: "Beasts of prey have eaten my flesh and torn
it apart for meat."
Say: "The sound of swallowing the flesh and the
fat comes from the hyenas."
Say: "The crows plucked out my veins and tendons."
Say: "If stubborn denials are to be abandoned, then
my clansmen were defeated."
In the last stand of resistance there is always
great slaughter.
Say: "The Dervishes are like the advancing thunder-
bolts of a storm, rumbling and roaring."¹⁹

Conclusion

The Anglo - Dervish confrontation at Dul Madoba was a culmination of a series of vacillating policies for the British Somaliland Protectorate. Having acquired this desert spot in order to extract certain provisions for the Aden garrisons, Britain found itself grappling with the resistance movement of Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hassan. Britain tried to crush the movement by military force but it soon discovered that the resisters, operating in their familiar terrain as they did, were a difficult nut to crack. The British government was, moreover, embarrassed by the colossal sums of money it had to spend on the four inconclusive expeditions, for a cause which could neither be defined nor defended. Thus, after the fourth expedition Britain was determined not to get entangled in more costly military adventures in Somaliland. Yet, the Sayyid's movement continued to grow both in strength and popularity. The only two realistic options left for Britain were either to abandon the protectorate or go out for total destruction of the Sayyid's movement. Both these options were equally ghastly: evacuation would have deprived Aden of its provisions and would have impaired

Britain's prestige; total destruction of the resisters could not be guaranteed even if the Treasury were willing - which it was not - to release unlimited sums of money. Thus, Britain started to experiment with various policies which were intended to provide temporary relief or limited zones of operation. These policies were incapable of answering the most crucial question - how was the Sayyid's movement to be disposed of? In the case of Dul Madoba, the tragedy which befell the camel corps was a result of a combination of the unsatisfactory policy and the character of the man entrusted with its implementation. Nevertheless, the death of Corfield and the defeat of the camel corps constituted sufficient cause, in the eyes of the British Parliament, press and public, for Britain to wake up from its long sleep and pitch its whole imperial weight against the inscrutable enemy of H. M. government in that Cinderella of the British Empire.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Webster, J. B. / Boahen, A.: The Revolutionary years West Africa since 1800 (London 1968), p. 242
- ² For a constructive discussion of Churchill's views on British colonies in general, and British Somaliland in particular, see Hyam, R.: Elgin and Churchill at the Colonial Office, 1905 - 1908 (London 1968), chapter 10
- ³ The cabinet had hoped that Wingate would share their conviction that the policy of coastal administration was the best in the circumstances. To the dismay of the cabinet, Wingate recommended effective recupation of some parts of the interior. Consequently, the cabinet refused to release

Wingate's report and instead went ahead to implement the policy of coastal administration.

- ⁴ Colonial Office (C.O.) 535/27, Memorandum by Byatt to C.O. April 30, 1912
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ C.O. 535/27, Minute by Read on Byatt Memorandum, April 30, 1912
- ⁷ C.O. 535/27, Byatt to C.O. May 26, 1912
- ⁸ Prevost / Battersby: Richard Corfield of Somaliland (London 1914), p. 192 - 194
- ⁹ C.O. 879/100, Byatt to C.O. June 6, 1912, no. 84
- ¹⁰ C.O. 535/28, Byatt to Corfield, December 3, 1912 (enclosure in Byatt to C.O. December 5, 1912)
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Prevost / Battersby: Richard Corfield of Somaliland (London 1914), p. 208 - 209
- ¹³ C.O. 535/30, Byatt to C.O. May 8, 1913
- ¹⁴ C.O. 879/110, Archer to Corfield June 23, 1913
- ¹⁵ Caroselli, F. S.: *Ferre e Fuoco in Somalia* (Rome 1931), p. 153
- ¹⁶ Prevost / Battersby: op. cit., p. 245
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ C.O. 535/31, Archer to C.O. August 19, 1913
- ¹⁹ This poem was translated by B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis and is to be found in: *Somali poetry: An Introduction* (Oxford 1964), p. 72 - 74