

BENIN EXPEDITION

Captain Reginald Bacon (1863–1947)

1897

Our column on the march through the bush was about two miles in length, and correspondingly vulnerable, since carriers were totally undisciplined and were liable to take alarm and stampede at the slightest excuse. The fighting men had therefore to be distributed throughout the whole length of the column to keep the carriers steady.

The bush country round Benin is in reality a forest of some 2,500 square miles in area without any break except a small clearing here and there for a village and its compound. Imagine this forest stocked with trees of great height, with a dense foliage overhead, with smaller trees interspersed between these monster products of vegetable growth to fill up the gaps. Imagine between all these trees an undergrowth of rubber trees, shrubs, palms, and creepers, so thick that the eye could never penetrate more than ten yards, and often not even five. Imagine the fact that you might easily walk for an hour without seeing the sun overhead, and only at times get a glimmer of a sunbeam across the path, and you have an elementary conception of the bush country of Benin.

Through this dense mass of tangled undergrowth run paths leading from village to village, trodden only by barefooted natives in single line, so that the worn path is as a rule just broad enough for one man to walk in comfort, and the bush is so close that he could touch it each side with outstretched arms. Where the soil is soft, feet treading for centuries have worn the path to a lower level, and here banks strewn with dead leaves and debris rise each side almost to the level of a man's head. Where a tree has fallen across the path there it lies, and a new path is trodden to make a detour round the obstruction. There are no Rural Councils in Beniland; but as ages go by the tree decays and the old road may be resumed; or perhaps some philanthropic person may set light to the old dried wood and then the monster obstruction will gradually smoulder away like a huge piece of slow-match. It is impossible adequately to describe the grandeur of the magnificent cotton trees, with their splay roots extending like solid brackets for ten or twelve feet from the bottom of the main trunk; monuments of age and strength. Here and there great monkey ropes, decorated at intervals with orchids, festoon down, seriously impeding the carriers and their loads. Then, again, fine suckers, no thicker than a piece of string, hang down from some branch a hundred feet overhead, as if intended to supply moisture to that particular branch by a short cut. All is very lovely, very silent, very weird, and apparently a vast waste of vegetable production.

The method of fighting adopted by the natives is to lie in wait and attack the head of a column advancing along the bush path. They are of course quite invisible in the dense undergrowth. The best way of dealing with such an attempt is for the leading files of the column to fire volleys every few minutes low down into the bush on each side and ahead of the column. If there are any natives lying low they are either hit or get frightened; with the result that they generally fire their guns quickly and retire. If, however, they return the fire, it is well to get a Maxim into action and search the bush thoroughly, as an ambush in force may have been arranged. If the natives have sufficient notice of an advance they often cut an ambush path parallel to the usual path and use this to fight from and also as a line of retreat. These paths can generally be found, and an advance made along them as well as along the main track; walking, however, along a newly cut bush path is anything but pleasant.

Bush fighting is a weird business. From the time we entered the bush until the time we came out into the open near Benin, that is for four days, although we were engaged with the Beni for a certain amount of time each day, I do not think a single one of us saw a live native. Yells were heard, volleys were fired, men were wounded and some were killed, but never a sight of a native that could be sworn to. Fortunately we met with no pitfalls. These are dug in the ground and lightly covered with branches, earth, and leaves; at the bottom are pointed stakes, which inflict grievous wounds on anyone who has the bad fortune to fall on to them.

The problem which confronted me as Intelligence Officer, namely, that of leading the troops to Benin, was a difficult one. I had brought with me from the THESEUS a deck watch, sextant, and artificial horizon to check our position by observation of the sun or stars, but the forest was far too thick to afford any chance of obtaining observations. In default I tried keeping a rough log by counting the paces taken and observing the direction by compass, but this I found impossible as the path twisted so frequently and at such considerable angles that any such record was bound to be quite unreliable. It was only possible each day to obtain a rough idea of our general direction and of the approximate distance we had marched. This was sufficient to show whether our general advance had been in the direction of Benin, or if our guides had played us false. At first we had some doubts as to their reliability; since their fear of the Beni and of visiting Benin might cause them to mislead us. There were three guides at my disposal. I kept one with me near the head of the column, one in the centre, and one in the rear, and never allowed

them to meet or converse when we halted for the night; hence I was certain that there was no collusion between them. Only once was my chief guide, Owaghi, at fault, and that was when, near Benin, the natives had hidden the proper path at a bend, which is a thing they are extraordinarily clever at doing. I had then to call up the other two guides and go by the verdict of the majority.

The general plan of the operations was a simple one. Three days before the main column was landed at Ologbo to march by the shortest road to Benin, two smaller columns were to be landed to take and hold Sapobar and Gwato, the places where the eastern and western bush paths from Benin met the Benin river.

It was hoped by this means to divert attention from the main line of advance, and draw the Beni away from that route and the city itself. The scheme was successful, as our men at both the places were subjected to strong attacks, and kept a considerable number of the Beni daily employed.

These subsidiary attacks were made and the places taken on the 9th of February. On the 12th the main column landed at Ologbo, and after an hour's scrap with the natives we advanced to the village of that name about a mile away and held it until the whole of the disembarkation was completed. After this we had three days in the forest fighting and marching; each successive day being much like the one before. Every morning soon after starting our volleys would detect Beni in the bush, then came a running fight up to our halting-place for the night.

On the fourth day we reached Benin, and that day was fairly full of incident. At 4.30 a.m. we issued cocoa to all hand, each man as usual took an allowance of biscuit in his haversack. When we started at 6 a.m. the advance-guard was fired on at once. At the same time as the rear-guard was leaving the camp, one of the enemy incautiously showed himself, and was immediately killed by the rear-guard. The attack on the advance-guard continued on and off till 10.30, when a determined stand was made by the enemy, and Ansell, chief torpedo instructor, was shot. He was walking immediately behind me, being in charge of the demolition party which had been attached to me. Being a tall man of fine physique, with a beard, the Beni, who were only about fifteen yards inside the bush, probably picked him out on account of his fine appearance. He was a great loss to me.

Shortly after 11 o'clock we came to a branch in the road, and as there was at first a difference of opinion between the two leading guides as to the route, I called up the third, a deaf and dumb man; eventually all three agreed on the right-hand road. Following this road for about 200 yards, we came upon the first evidence that we were approaching Benin in the shape of a human sacrifice. Laid on the grass where two paths met was a young woman, horribly mutilated; a rough wooden gag tied on her mouth was clenched tightly by her teeth. The expression of her face told of the agony of her murder. At her feet lay a goat with its knees broken. I asked the guide what it meant, and he said it was to prevent the white man coming farther. A queer idea! A few yards farther brought us to another sacrifice; this time a man with his arms tied behind him lying on his face in the path, but for some reason he had not been decapitated, which as a rule is the second form of sacrifice. Here I heard a sailor remark: "It is just about time someone did visit this place." These were our first signs of Benin, and they did not improve our temper towards the Beni. Farther on was a small clearing, and here, their sacrifices having failed, they tried to stop us with an attack, and gave us a warm time. My good guide, Owaghi, was shot below the knee, my interpreter through the neck, and two Houssas also were wounded. Forcing on, we next met a stockade erected between two high banks through which the path ran. In front was a causeway over a ravine about twenty feet deep; in a path could be seen a gun. Sixteen pounds of gun-cotton blew the stockade literally to smithereens. Three hundred yards more brought us to a clearing, which proved to be the little village of Igba, a mile from Benin. Here we halted and brought up the guns and rocket tube to fire towards the city (whose rough direction only we knew) and served out a little water to the men who wanted it badly.

We little knew the effect those rockets were going to have in Benin. It would hardly be credited that at a mile off, and fired only in a general direction, they should have fallen into the Juju compounds. A Beni woman afterwards described what had happened, somewhat as follows: "The compound was thronged with people, when suddenly from the blue appeared two hissing thunderbolts into the very heart of their sacred precincts. Not a white man in sight! Yet here were two messengers from the sky. 'Truly the white men are gods,' they said, and ran panic-stricken from the place."

Four shells and three rockets were fired from this village, and on we pushed, this time with the *St. George's* seamen in front, the Houssas being rather short of ammunition, and in case of a dash being necessary, the white men were best at the front. A quarter of a mile more brought us to a warm corner, which proved to be the junction of the bush path with a broad avenue leading to the city. Something in the nature of a cannon was fired, but the stuff it was

loaded with went only low down round about our boots. A few seconds brought us to the open, and how broad it seemed! Hardly more than fifty yards from bush to bush, yet after the bush path it seemed open country.

As we emerged from the bush, Benin lay out of sight to the left, just a few houses of Ochudi's compound only were visible. From the opposite bush puffs of smoke showed the presence of our old friends, and the bush on the left still had Beni in it, who were keeping up a desultory fire. About forty or fifty Beni were extended about 200 yards off across the avenue in the open between us and Benin; these fired on us as we came on. The Marines extended towards the bush opposite and fired volleys to clear it, the ST. GEORGE's seamen took the bush on the left flank and the left-hand side of the avenue, the Houssas the right flanking bush and the right side of the path. The Maxim played on the men ahead, but as it had unfortunately lost its foresight in the bush, the firing was erratic and more of the enemy got away than otherwise would have been the case. Advancing up the path we had a good many losses. Captain Byrne was hit, and another Marine close to him; two others were knocked over almost on the top of each other, and several more were wounded. A guard of Marines was left with the doctors and the wounded, while the main column pushed on.

Shortly afterwards a man was seen running down waving a cloth. Firing was ceased, and in ran a Jackri boy with three cuts in his head and his ear cut in half, crying out that the Beni were murdering all their Jackri slaves, and that he had barely escaped with his life. There was nothing we could do to help them except to push on. Ahead was a large building with some guns mounted in front, behind which two or three men were running about evidently trying to persuade them to go off. At last one did, sending an odd collection of bullets and old metal about us, wounding Mr. Johnson, the gunner of the *Phoebe*. One cheer and a rush and we were up to the building, which we found was unoccupied, as were the compounds behind it. The enemy had all gone, and luckily for us they had, for a further investigation of the king's compound showed that had they held it they might have given us a bad time. The rockets had done their work well by creating a real funk of the white man. Having posted sentries, we were able to rest and wait for the rear-guard. On further acquaintance we found the town quite deserted, every inhabitant had decamped.

Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon. *A Naval Scrap-Book. First Part, 1877-1900* (1925):197-207.