The British Campaign in Aden, 1914-1918

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The intention of this article is to show that the lessons gathered during a century of colonial warfare and policing were applicable to certain campaigns during the Great War. The attention given to the battles fought on the Western Front has tended to overshadow British, Dominion and imperial activities in other theatres, and therefore tends to create the impression that this vast conflict proved all previous experience at best only partially useful in modern, industrialised warfare. As this piece will make clear, the principles of colonial warfare, as codified in 1896 by C.E. Callwell in *Small Wars. Their Principles and Practice*, were relevant in a global conflict that otherwise revolutionised, or made redundant, so much of pre-existing British military practice. The campaign in Aden also provides an interesting insight into the nature of the British Empire during the Great War, particularly the position of native troops within the Indian Army, and the application of new technologies for 'traditional' British imperial purposes.[1]

Originally occupied in 1839, by 1914 Aden was of vital importance to Britain's worldwide empire. The territory's strategic importance and value lay in its geographical position at the junction of the Red Sea and the Aden Gulf. It was a significant nodal point allowing access to the

African and Arabian coasts and into the Indian Ocean. The vast expansion of the British Empire during the nineteenth century, the advent of steam shipping, which created a need for strategically placed coaling stations, and the opening of the Suez Canal made Aden a lynchpin in British communications. Although Aden's security was therefore of great concern to the British, the political mechanisms for its governance were far from satisfactory. R.J. Gavin, historian of British Aden, was unequivocal in his condemnation and claimed that its 'whole history since 1839… [was] marked by administrative confusion and complication.'[2] In 1914 a Political Resident, usually the commander of the British military detachment, who was answerable to the Government of Bombay, and thence to the Government of India, administered the territory.[3] It was thus a fairly laborious command structure, but the combination of civil and military powers in a soldier was a common practice in the empire. From the 1870s the Political Resident had been forced to maintain an awareness of Turkish ambitions in the area. The Turks had invaded the Yemen in 1872, which brought them close to the somewhat ill defined edge of British territory. Negotiations over the border were conducted between 1902 and 1904 resulting in a general, if slightly loose, agreement.[4]

In terms of geography and climate Aden was far from welcoming to Europeans. Soaring mid-summer temperatures provided the greatest problems, which then gave way to sudden spells of cold weather in the winter and spring. Balancing this intense problem slightly was the low

risk of tropical diseases due to the absence of vegetation, and the relative purity of the drinking water. Three steam condensers had been installed at Steamer Point, and wells and an aqueduct had been built to bring water from the hinterland. However, the wells and aqueduct supplies were declared suitable for Arabs, Somalis and animals only. The centre of the territory was the port of Aden itself and its protecting peninsula, Steamer Point: twenty-one square miles in total. Fanning out behind was the desert which rose upwards gradually to the settlement of Sheikh Othman,[5] the key position in the hinterland as it was the head from which Aden's water supplies flowed. Beyond this Wadi Tiban ran up to the Yemen frontier, and on its eastern banks were the settlements of Waht and Lahej, governed by an Arab bound by treaty to Britain, as, in theory at least, were the leaders of all other Arabian groupings up to Muscat on the Persian Gulf. Communications from the port to these outlying points was by road and then track.[6] The most remote of Aden's territories was the island of Perim lying 100 miles west of the port. It forms a 'road block' in the southern entrance to the Red Sea and was therefore of considerable strategic importance. Menacing this British outpost was a Turkish garrison just across the narrow strait at Sheikh Said in the Yemen.

Aden's significance in Britain's maritime and cable communications with the empire was not matched by a particularly impressive defence commitment. In August 1914 it consisted of only two battalions, one British and the other Indian, lacking field or mountain artillery, and one

cavalry troop barely 100 strong under the command of the Political Resident. British troops generally spent only one year on garrison duty as the final assignment of an Indian tour.[7] Few soldiers enjoyed their service in the 'arsehole of the empire', so-called because everything went through it.[8] Numbers appeared to support the Turks for they had an army corps just over the board in the Yemen. However, the exact number and condition of these troops and their supporting logistical infrastructure were unknown. The only hard evidence available was that provided by Sir R.E. Solly Flood. Visiting the Yemen as part of the British team negotiating a border settlement in 1905, he inspected Turkish troops and was suitably impressed by their quality and demeanour.[9]

Defending Aden against the Turks therefore demanded a dual approach. On the surface it was a colonial warfare scenario due to the reasons sketched out above: any potential military operations would have to be carried out in an environment lacking a full, modern, westernised infrastructure; the potential enemy was a rather shadowy and mysterious force necessitating a careful intelligence-gathering programme, and the outcome of any clash with the enemy would have wider psychological and physical affects on the native peoples relating intimately to Britain's prestige and influence in the region. This seemingly tricky combination of factors was, however, not unfamiliar to the British and had been faced many times before in the previous century. However, on the flip side it

was a modern combat putting British and Colonial troops against an army trained, organised and equipped along European lines.

Britain and Turkey rather drifted into war in November 1914 following a round of confusing diplomatic manoeuvring.[10] The opening of hostilities threw the defence of Aden into chaos for the 1/Royal Irish Rifles guarding the territory were recalled to Britain thus denuding the Proctorate of cover Aden. Reading between the lines of the Aden Force General Staff War Diaries, it appears that a detachment of troops was cobbled together and despatched from India including the a detachment of the 1/Lancashire Fusiliers were moved from Karachi as a stop-gap measure.[11] Sir John Maxwell, Commander-in-Chief, Egypt, then earmarked Major-General Sir George Younghusband's 28 (Frontier Force) Brigade for the Procterate, but did not release it immediately.[12] Anxious to ensure free movement in the southern end of the Red Sea, the initial task of the Aden forces was the defence of Perim and the deterrence of the Turks at Sheikh Said. Warned to be vigilant on 29 October, the OC Perim reported on 1 November that the Turks were not engaged in any unusual activities. Seizing the opportunity this represented, he therefore ordered the evacuation of all European women from the island on the following day. Over the next week he maintained a close watch on the Turkish positions as a new camp was established some four miles from Sheikh Said, and studied the potential for a landing.[13] On 10 November troops of the 29 Indian Brigade, en route for Suez, were diverted to Sheikh Said and

effected a landing. Although few Turks appear to have been killed or captured, a large quantity of military materials were seized and emplacements destroyed, which was probably of more significance given the logistical obstacles standing in the way of rapid replacement.[14]

Having scored this success, Lieutenant-Colonel Jacobs, the Acting Resident, signalled to ask whether he should make arrangements to despatch a column and begin arming the Arabs of the interior.[15] Such plans were typical of British colonial rule and warfare, and as such reveals the underlying conception of the situation. Major-General D.L.B. Shaw arrived on 26 November replacing Jacobs as Resident, and proceeded to make formal contact with the Arabs.[16] In January 1915 a British officer was despatched to Lahej in order to teach the Sultan's men how to use the four field guns presented to him.[17] At much the same time negotiations were opened with Idrisi of Sabia, a significant potentate in Western Arabia. Encouraged by the disruption Idrisi could inflict on Turkish rule in southwestern Arabia Shaw urged Delhi to agree a treaty. Eventually agreement was given and Idrisi was supplied with an initial consignment of 150,000 rounds of ammunition and 25,000 rupees. A few months later this was supplemented with a 200 rifles, 3,000 additional rounds, and a sale of a further 250,000 rounds was authorised.[18] Thus Shaw fell into line with British policy across Arabia: the support of Arab insurrection against Turkish rule.

In Aden itself more obvious measures were taken to protect the territory. A month before war broke out work commenced on improving the port's defences. Searchlights were placed on the Elephant's Back ridge, and all shipping was warned to signal clearly or risk fire from the shore batteries.[19] The undermanned Royal Engineers' detachment then laboured hard to improve the water condensers, an absolutely vital pre-requisite for the defence of the territory, while also extending the refrigeration plants and signalling and communications in the harbour area.[20] On the 26 November the first detachment of men from the 4/South Wales Borderers (Brecknockshire battalion), sent to replace the 1/Royal Irish Rifles, arrived. These sketchily trained Territorials were now the sole all-European force in Aden.[21] A training programme was commenced in January, and a month later they were deemed capable of manning the harbour defences.[22] Further security was given to allied shipping by the completion of new redoubts on Perim by the 23/Sikh Pioneers, and the seizing of Kamaran Island by the 108/(Indian) Infantry some 200 miles north of Perim.[23] It can therefore be seen that the greatest attention was paid to the port itself, and little notice was taken of the hinterland, and the vital position of Sheikh Othman in particular, although the Royal Engineers did manage to lay telegraph and telephone lines to Sheikh Othman and Lahej. Shaw probably believed that the treaty with the Sultan of Lahej ensured the safety of Aden's 'backdoor'.

However, with only a scratch staff and few advisers with any real experience of Aden or its peoples, Shaw was not working from a basis of hard knowledge. The intelligence reports that started to flow in from these new allies were at best patchy, and should have served as a warning. Soon after the raid on Sheikh Said an Arab informer had stated that 20,000 Turks were on the move with the intention of taking Perim; as the Staff assessment wryly noted, 'probably 200!'[24] A month later the Commanding Officer of the 109/(Indian) Infantry on Perim was told that 3,500 hostile Arabs were planning a crossing. He demanded verification of these reports, which revealed them to be false.[25]

In the meantime a Turkish force was being assembled in the Yemen, and the 'British failure to undertake a more active policy was discouraging the local Arabs'.[26] Shaw's ability to demonstrate Britain's military might was compromised by the scale of the duties his small number of troops had to undertake. The 109/Infantry was divided between Perim, Kamaran and the mainland; the 23/Sikh Pioneers were also divided, half as a garrison on Perim, and the other in Aden. In addition, both the 23/Sikh Pioneers and 126/Baluchistans were detaching drafts for Indian units in France, while the Brecknocks were still learning their trade and had not yet experienced an Aden summer. Artillery was also a problem, as many of the field guns brought by the 28 Indian Brigade had been transported to the island garrisons. More troops had been promised, but there were few guarantees. Aden was hardly protected by a

concentrated force with a sharp cutting edge. Matters were confused still further by a brief outbreak of ill discipline among certain Indian troops. In 1913 exiled Indian nationalists had started a newspaper, *Ghadr* (Mutiny), with the aim of promoting non-sectarian opposition to British rule. With the outbreak of war planning commenced for a rising of Indian soldiers. British counter-intelligence managed to ascertain enough details to arrest certain key figures and investigate the conspiracy. Despite this action, some disturbances followed in February 1915 in Rangoon, and then in Singapore, but it took until May for trouble to boil over in Aden.[27] The Procterate's mail censor had consistently removed all copies of *Ghadr* from shipping passing through the port making it hard to determine whether the actions were connected directly with the plotters.[28] However, some kind of conspiracy does appear likely for violence broke out in two different units within days. Eight sepoys of the 126/(Indian) Infantry ran riot and shot at their officers, and three sepoys of the 23/Sikh Pioneers attacked two-subadars. All who took part were swiftly arrested, and there is no evidence to suggest a general break down of discipline in these units. The records do not imply any lingering suspicion of these battalions and there were no further acts of ill discipline.[29]

These disturbances may well have deflected attention at a crucial moment for the Turks were on the verge of launching their most serious assault on Aden. In mid June an attack was made on Perim. Twelve dhows were spotted in the strait and the garrison opened fire, only three

men got ashore and the attack was comprehensively beaten off. Somewhat mysteriously, and perhaps hinting that there were still some Indian malcontents, the garrison commander reported that the action was conducted without telephonic communication as the equipment had been deliberately damaged.[30] Around the same time reports began to filter in that the Turks were preparing to advance on Lahej. The Lahej detachments of the 109/Infantry and the Aden troop took these seriously enough and advanced with the intention of conducting reconnaissance missions.[31] At first Shaw and Jacobs treated these reports with suspicion, probably because the accuracy of all earlier information had been so erratic. On 29 June matters escalated as Jacobs was informed that the Turks were indeed advancing and that the Haushabi peoples in the hinterland around Lahej had no intention of resisting them. Over the next few days the situation became even worse. It was reported 'that not a single friendly Arab intended doing anything to defend Lahej. Prince Mohsin is discussing going over to the Turks as he states merely as a trick.'[32] Shaw and Jacob's strategy was thus fatally undermined, and they had to order the despatch of a Movable Column. Columns, whether flying or firmly attached to their communications, were a standard part of British military procedure in colonial campaigning, but this effort collapsed almost entirely.

Scrabbling round for troops, transports and equipment, Shaw and Jacob despatched the Brecknocks to lead the force on 10 July. Untried and

inexperienced, these men were ordered to march in the soaring July temperatures of well over 100^0 centigrade. Within a short space of time the column was in desperate trouble affecting the Indians of the 126/Baluchistans as well as the Europeans. Jacob requested information and provided advice, but it was offered far too late:

> Am personally much concerned over the progress of the column. The march will be most trying in this heat. It is absolutely necessary that the troops and transport be kept well in hand and not urged beyond their powers especially the British Territorial unit. This should not be taken further than ½ way if they cannot stand the great heat.[33]

Jacobs and a staff officer went forward in order to ascertain the situation. They found the column in chaos and witnessed Brecknockshire men collapsing by the roadside. The men had not got much further than Sheikh Othman and none appeared to have reached Lahej.[34] Men of the 126/Infantry grabbed their bridles and would not let them pass stating that Turks were already through Lahej. Officers were trying to impose some semblance of order by directing the Baluchis and Brecknocks to collecting points at the gun positions. Most were in an appalling state suffering from heat exhaustion and dehydration. The column had gone off before the Lines of Communication medical services could get into their forward positions, and the supply camels and their drivers went missing meaning that dumps of medical supplies and water had not been completed. It was only at 5 p.m. that the forward medical services could offer any kind of assistance.[35] 'Lack of transport, food and water entirely

prevented any chance of moving forward without them considering the state of the troops who were absolutely exhausted.'[36]

At Lahej the rest of its available manpower reinforced the detachment of the 109/Infantry including a 'flying guard' consisting of one section and machine guns in cars. The total force was still not very strong, no more than approximately twenty officers and about four hundred men. Positions were selected on the road leading north out of Lahej reinforced by a machine gun, and east was covered by a machine gun manned by the 23/Sikh Pioneers and two ten-pounder field guns. Manpower had been thinned still further by the desertion of the Abdali gunners, although a hundred Abdali had been rounded up and ordered to posts north of the town. The Turks came on in strength in the late afternoon and soon began to push through the thin cordon. Gradually, the men of the 109/Infantry and 23/Sikhs fell back rallying on the stoutly built Guest House before commencing a withdrawal. As they fell back they gained contact with the shattered column adding to the logistical disaster, as the wells were now giving out. Jacobs was left with little option other than to attempt to retreat with some degree of order and discipline. Intending to rally the men at Sheikh Othman, Jacobs was thwarted by shambolic logistics, and the utterly demoralised state of the Brecknockshire men. The new positions lacked shade, and, although some food and water had been brought up, many men died of heat apoplexy.[37] With no transport to

provide communications to the port, Jacob took the decision to abandon Sheikh Othman and with it the main natural water supply.[38]

The disaster that befell the column quickly impressed itself on the troops stationed in the port. The rapid collapse of communications must have had an unsettling effect reflected in the laconic, but anxious, statement in the Royal Engineers war diary of 5 July: 'No information – alarmist reports. Cases of heatstroke brought in on cars.'[39] A stream of men was soon trickling back to the hospital. Sixteen cases of heatstroke were admitted on 4 July, twenty-four on 5, fifty-six on the 6, and twenty-two on the 7. Wounds caused by enemy action were, by contrast, very small, no more than about fifty.[40] The Brecknocks were a broken force with ninety-four men in hospital and the remainder declared fit for garrison work only.[41] On 10 July, Colonel H.F. Cleveland, Indian Medical Service, and Assistant Director Medical Services, took the opportunity to examine the Brecknockshire men's headgear. He declared them 'quite unserviceable… [as they] afford practically no protection from the sun', and demanded their replacement with 'Cawnpore Topis'.[42] Cleveland's judgement is damning, but the reasons why this problem had not been noted and resolved much earlier are not provided.

Fortunately, and somewhat mystifyingly, the Turks never attempted to exploit their success. Unaware of the Turks' lack of ambition, frantic efforts were made to redress the balance. The 9/Gurkhas on the

troopship *Teesta*, bound for Suez, had just arrived in Aden harbour and so were rapidly disembarked, as were the Australian Light Horse.[43] Another timely arrival also served to alleviate the situation. On 8 July Major-General Sir George Younghusband arrived with half the 108/Infantry, the first detachment of the long hoped-for reinforcements. Younghusband hurried ashore and replaced Shaw and Jacobs immediately. Brigadier-General Price, en route with the 28/(Frontier Force) Brigade and two Territorial Horse Artillery batteries, was Jacobs' eventual successor, while Shaw was ordered to Karachi.[44] Effectively, both had been *stellenbosched*. Although it could be argued that both men had been made scapegoats for the Government of India's failure to provide the requisite manpower and resources to defend the Procterate, it should also be noted that they singularly failed to establish any kind of infrastructure to support their strategy. Both Shaw and Jacobs were experienced Indian Army officers who should have understood some of the basic principles of this kind of warfare. The deployment of a column demanded some understanding of its communications and yet nothing was done to improve the road to Sheikh Othman or its defences. When the Movable Column was despatched it left hurriedly in an improvised reaction rather than as part of a carefully prepared plan. The decision to commit the Brecknocks also looks suspect in hindsight. As Indian Army officers they should have realised the potential impact of the Arabian summer sun on troops recently arrived from England; however, this may well have been the result of two closely interwoven factors. First, the recent outbursts of ill discipline among

Indian troops may well have made it appear both militarily sensible and politic to include a body of white troops on the mission. Secondly, to leave a large body of white troops on harbour defence duties when black soldiers were being marched into a combat zone might have run the risk of undermining concepts of white moral and physical supremacy.

Assessing the situation with remarkable speed and clarity, Younghusband devised a new strategy. On 16 July, he informed Delhi that he intended to retake Sheikh Othman as soon as possible. His decision was most probably driven by the water situation. He reported that Aden was calm, the troops, aside from the Brecknocks, gave no cause for concern and he was confident of taking Sheikh Othman after which he intended to fortify it. Lahej, however, was a different matter. Younghusband estimated that two full brigades were required to recapture and hold it.[45] At 3 a.m. on 21 July he commenced his advance. The leading troops were soon through Sheikh Othman, and the 51/Sikhs easily beat off a desultory Turkish counter-attack. The Turks appeared to be caught utterly unawares. Intending to pursue the fleeing enemy, the Aden troop was unleashed. They galloped off with great gusto and scattered the Turkish rearguards, but the heat and the heavy going resulted in the abandonment of the pursuit. Within twenty-four hours repairs to the water supply were completed and water was flowing into Aden. [46]

Realising that due to massive overstretch the Government of India was highly unlikely to find more troops for Aden Younghusband recommended that it be turned over to the strategic defence. The fall of Sheikh Othman had re-established the water supply and for as long as it was held strongly and its defences maintained the port was in little danger. Acting on his advice, the Government of India declared the main tasks of the forces at Aden to be the defence of the port, its water supplies and the wireless station. Lest the defence became too inert, it was agreed that a Movable Column should be formed to ensure a regular supply of information and punish any Turkish moves from Lahej. His job completed, Younghusband passed on his duties as Resident to Price and departed.[47] In essence the task was now one of frontier enforcement, albeit a complex one demanding the defence of a port, and co-operation with the Navy, but it was something the British had been doing for a long time.

Unlike Shaw and Jacobs who mystifyingly failed to apply the lessons of frontier warfare, Price, who had already served in Aden, commenced an impressive programme of works to create the infrastructure required to maintain an active defence. The 109/Infantry spent much of October, November and December entrenching around Sheikh Othman, and monitoring Turkish movements.[48] Almost incredibly, a full survey of the Procterate had never been undertaken. The Royal Engineers were therefore requested to provide a full map with special attention paid to the region north of Sheikh Othman. Reacting with vigour

the CRE (Commander, Royal Engineers) requested permission to lay down a light railway from the port to Sheikh Othman with the intention of extending it to Lahej once it was back in British hands. In co-operation with the CRA (Commander, Royal Artillery) new telephone lines were established between the gun lines at Sheikh Othman and the port, which had relied on borrowed equipment for visual signalling until this point, and the newly arrived 4/Buffs, replacing the thoroughly exhausted Brecknocks, were trained in the use of field telephones. By December work was completed on the new railway providing an efficient way to move troops and equipment to the Sheikh Othman defences. Early in the new year engineering operations were completed with the construction of a new water condensing plant at Sheikh Othman which was then connected to the high level tanks at Steamer Point in the harbour, and the sinking of a deep tube linking the two points. Price was clearly determined that the garrison's water supply was never again imperilled.[49] Additional works were also carried out at Perim where the fort and water condensers were improved.[50]

Good intelligence was now required to ensure the safety of the Procterate. On Kamaran close connections were forged with the local traders and fishermen in order to keep track of Turkish movements on the coast.[51] In January 1916, a full appreciation of Turkish forces in the Lahej area was completed. It was believed that the force consisted of some 4,000 Turks, 600 Arabs, nineteen guns, and seven machine guns.[52] At this point

the opposing forces were relatively even for the Movable Column war diary gives the Sheikh Othman garrison as 500 British troops and 3,000 Indian.[53] However, it did not interfere greatly with the overall strategy, which remained in a defensive mode. This thinking dominated all subsequent decision-making. When the commander of the Kamaran garrison requested permission to attack Salif in conjunction with the local Arab leader in February 1916 it was firmly refused.[54] A week or so later rumours of a Turkish surrender and withdrawal spread. Price took the opportunity to signal Simla and ask what policy should be enacted in the event of a Turkish retirement. The reply was cautious in the extreme. It ordered Price to avoid any entanglement with the Turks and concluded, 'This policy is to be adhered to.'[55] Hopes of returning to more active operations were raised in the summer of 1916 when the Arab revolt broke out. These were increased by the belief that the campaign in East African was on the verge of a successful completion, which would free troops for Aden. Major-General J.M. Stewart, who had replaced the sick Price, requested an additional brigade and at least twelve field guns. However, neither the Arab revolt nor the East African campaign sufficiently met expectations to alter the situation in Aden, and so the policy of active defence designed to hold down as many enemy with as small a commitment as possible remained unchanged.[56] Expectations were raised again in the autumn of 1917 as the campaigns in Mesopotamia and Palestine swung towards the allies, but once again it did not result in the release and redeployment of scarce resources.[57]

Anxious to ensure that the morale and fighting spirit of the men were maintained, both Price and Steward engaged in a host of minor actions between the autumn of 1915 and the end of the war that were ideally suited to an army used to rapid deployments and manoeuvres.[58] In September 1915 the 62/Punjabis and 4/Buffs advanced from Sheikh Othman and engaged the Turks at Assela and Waht. A short, sharp action followed in which an early British advantage was reversed when the Turks brought down shrapnel fire. The column retreated to Sheikh Othman and successfully beat off the pursuers.[59] The flying column went out again in January 1916 meeting the Turks at Hatum. Again early British successes were not sustained and the Turks successfully counter attacked. However, the column clearly acted with discipline and efficiency as the Turks sustained some 200 casualties whereas British losses were under fifty.[60] Active patrolling went on throughout the spring with the flying column making almost daily excursions from Sheikh Othman in April and May. From June the pace slackened due to the summer heat. During this period a presence was maintained with regular patrols from the Aden Troop, and it is clear from the war diary of the 26/King George's Own Light Cavalry that the men engaged carried out these tasks with a great deal of enthusiasm and intelligence following and investigating every movement and development.[61] Large-scale manoeuvres were resumed in the winter, and in December the column cleared Jabir and Hatum, which resulted in the withdrawal of Turkish forces in the area to the defences of Lahej.[62] The pattern for the rest of the conflict had been

established of winter and spring skirmishing followed by a lessening of activities in the blistering heat of summer.[63] In the meantime, work continued on improving communications in the expectations of launching major operations. The railway network was extended and a new road was laid to Robat.[64]

British firepower had been increased by the arrival of fresh artillery with Younghusband's brigade. The few guns available to Shaw and Jacobs were largely immobile due to a lack of draft and pack animals. Price altered this scenario with the railway, the arrival of more animals, and, crucially, the fitting of sand tyres in October 1915. This increase in transport and logistical potential allowed the guns to support operations much more effectively. On 12 January 1916, 1,138 rounds were fired, easily the greatest number of the campaign in any one day, but unthinkable before the light railway.[65] However, the mobile artillery was not powerful enough to inflict real damage on the Turkish forces or engage in effective counter-battery work. To a certain extent the application of new technologies made up for this deficiency, and provided a signpost towards future imperial policing operations. Within days of the disaster at Lahej, Shaw had requested the assistance of an aeroplane or a seaplane to assist in the defence of Aden.[66] The request was accepted in 1916, but it was not until June 1917 that the seaplane carrier HMS *Raven II* arrived, and its aircraft were then used to bomb Turkish positions.[67] A not inconsiderable motive behind these operations was the perceived effect on

Arab opinion. The awing spectacle of aerial bombardment made up for the blow inflicted on British prestige incurred by the retreat from Lahej and the inability to recapture it.[68] In this respect, technology was the maiden of traditional British concerns and codes of warfare, not the precursor of a new departure. In fact, in strictly military terms, the effect of bombing was mixed. It was reported that: 'The aeroplanes have driven the Turks to ground… [but] it is difficult to draw them into any action without pushing home the attack; they offer no targets to the artillery.'[69] This was the lesson of the Western Front: when taking on an entrenched and determined enemy armed with modern weapons artillery supremacy was vital.

Somewhat ironically given this stalemate and reluctance to take action matters escalated when the Armistice was declared. The Turkish commanders in the Yemen were reluctant to surrender and disarm, and the British suspected that the Imam of Yemen was colluding in these manoeuvres fearful that the Turks would evacuate before settling their debts.[70] Lacking troops due to Spanish Influenza, the British were incapable of forcing Turkish compliance and so maintained negotiations until early December. A final demand was issued and a detachment of Turkish troops surrendered formally on 6 December. British patience was running down and so troops of the 2 101/Grenadiers were despatched from Egypt. Arriving off the coast of Hodeida on 13 December they demanded the surrender of the garrison, which was ignored. The Grenadiers landed

on the following morning and advanced from the north. A combined force of Turks and Arabs opened fire as the Grenadiers fought from house to house during the course of which the Indians suffered one killed and one wounded.[71] Stalemate reigned and continued even after the arrival of the 7/Rajputs as the British proved reluctant to force the still recalcitrant Turks any further. A march on Lahej was combined with the landings at Hodeida, which resulted in the disarming of 2,500 Turks. But, even this did not result in a neat resolution for elsewhere, including Hodeida, the Turks surrendered only in batches. The task of evacuating the Turkish garrisons was not completed until March 1919 by which time a further 4,100 men had surrendered. Only at this point could the demobilisation of the Aden Field Force commence.[72]

Maintaining a force capable of diverting the Turks between 1915 and 1918 was a demanding task due to the enervating climate and nature of Aden. Sickness and the heat were responsible for a higher attrition rate than the Turks. After the engagement at Waht in September 1915 the 4/Buffs suffered eight fatalities six of which were due to heat exhaustion. The battalion war diary remarked: 'The whole battalion suffered greatly from the heat of the sun and sand… The distance covered was between 20 and 23 miles.'[73] Between the battalion's arrival on 4 August 1915 and its departure on 30 January 1916 it incurred six casualties due to enemy action, but over 200 from sickness including nearly 100 men invalided home to Britain.[74] Troops arriving in Aden often went down with sickness

within a short period shocked by the fierce environment. A detachment of gunners sent to replace the men of the 4/Hampshire battery in June 1916 were declared unfit for service in Aden.[75] Within days of arriving from Penang the Malay States Mountain Battery was stricken with diarrhoea and dysentery.[76] Lieutenant-Colonel Baldock of the 108/Infantry died as a result of dysentery on 19 October after a fever lasting three days.[77] A mysterious fever also struck down many men of the 4/Buffs. Attempts were made to identify the parasite responsible but no firm conclusions were reached.[78] Returning to the harbour after a short period manning the Sheikh Othman defences 145 4/Buffs officers and OR were confined to hospital.[79] A few weeks later the commandant of the British Base Hospital decided to inspect the entire battalion.[80] Working hard to fight the instances of disease, the ADMS (Assistant Director Medical Services) expressed concerns about the purity of drinking water and inspected the latrine arrangements at Sheikh Othman.[81] Scurvy broke out among the Indian troops in November 1915 resulting in the distribution of limejuice and tins of jam.[82] Indian troops also experienced a clutch of Venereal Disease cases probably contracted from prostitutes in the Aden bazaar. In a move emphasising the misogynist military medicine of the period, the ADMS promptly recommended the deportation of all women found carrying the infection.[83] From September 1918 Spanish Influenza spread with appalling speed. By November the flying column was 'practically immobile from influenza with 175 deaths and over 2,600 cases.'[84]

This high attrition rate led to the regular rotation of British battalions. The 4/Buffs replaced by the Brecknocks in August 1915 and were themselves relieved in January 1916 by the 4/DCLI who remained until February 1917. At this point the 6/East Surreys took over remaining until January 1918 when they were replaced by the 7/Hampshires. The Frontier Force brigade was downscaled from January 1916, but Indian units generally served for longer periods probably because they were deemed better able to cope with the harsh climate. The 108/Infantry and 126/Baluchis served from 1914 until January 1916, but the 109/Infantry were not relieved until October 1917. The Malay States Guides arrived in October 1915, the 75/Carnatics in January 1916, and both remained in Aden until 1919.[85]

Although a sideshow of a sideshow, the defence of Aden was nonetheless a significant contribution to the British effort. Communications from Suez to India were guaranteed by the retention of the port, which this was the key strategic consideration grasped so firmly by Younghusband. An offensive from Aden to loosen Turkish control over the hinterland and Yemen may well have increased British prestige, but it was unlikely to influence the main Middle Eastern theatres of Egypt-Palestine or Mesopotamia. Shortage of resources made a shrewdly conducted active defence designed to tie-up much larger Turkish forces a far more profitable strategy. The military skills demanded throughout were those the British had needed across more than a century of colonial

campaigning: the ability to move relatively small forces quickly and efficiently and support them in a hostile, undeveloped environment; the ability to influence native peoples and woo them into alliances or a position of friendly neutrality, and the flexibility to act against an unpredictable enemy about which little was known, but it also required modern weaponry and artillery in particular. In the first year of the war the British commanders in Aden revealed only a partial grip on these skills. Some work was carried out to create an infrastructure capable of supporting the rapid deployment of troops, but not enough. Most of the thinking was dominated by the need to defend the immediate area of the port itself, and little consideration was given to the hinterland and in particular the vital question of the wells at Sheikh Othman. In mitigation of Shaw and Jacobs it must be stated that they had few men and guns available and had to launch an operation to capture Kamaran Island thus further weakening the force available at Aden, but their assessment of priorities still appears suspect. By contrast, the experienced team of Younghusband and Price stabilised the situation and created the conditions for an active defence using flying columns to harass the enemy. Unlike 'pure' colonial and frontier warfare, however, the enemy did possess modern weapons and equipment, and so there was very little chance of suppressing him entirely with the British and Indian forces available. Ultimately, therefore, the Aden campaign demanded a combination of traditional and modern approaches. First, it required the skills, tactics and strategies acquired during a century of empire building

and defending. Second, it required the ability to deploy modern firepower and weapons system in order to suppress a well-equipped and resolute enemy. Unable fully to pursue the latter, the British opted for a hybrid which achieved the best outcome possible in the circumstances.

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Notes

[1] The Aden campaign also has many similarities with the mismanaged early stages of the Mesopotamia expedition.

[2] R.J. Gavin, *Aden under British Rule, 1839-1967* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1975), p. 254.

[3] General Staff, India, *Military Report on the Aden Protectorate* (Simla: Government of India, 1915), p. 229.

[4] James Lunt, *Imperial Sunset. Frontier Soldiering in the 20th Century* (London: Macdonald, Futura, 1981), p. 132.

[5] Spellings of places and people differ in British documents. This piece uses the spellings given in the Aden Force war diaries.

[6] *Military Report*, pp. 15, 55, 180-1.

[7] R.S.H. Moody, *Historical Records of the Buffs, East Kent Regiment, 1914-1919* (London: Medici Society, 1922), p. 118.

[8] I am grateful to Dr Peter Boyden of the National Army Museum for this excellent anecdote.

[9] Lieutenant-General Sir George MacMunn & Captain Cyril Falls, *Military Operations Egypt and Palestine, Vol. I* (London: HMSO, 1928) p. 222; *Military Report*, pp. 209-210; Sir Charles Lucas, *The Empire at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 135.

[10] For further details of the Anglo-Turkish situation in the run-up to war see Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Vol. I To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 644-693.

[11] The National Archives of the UK (TNA): PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 26 October 1914 [All subsequent WO prefixes can be found in the same repository]

[12] MacMunn & Falls, *Military Operations*, p. 67.

[13] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 29 October – 14 November 1914.

[14] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 3 – 14 November 1914; Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 136. Interestingly both Lucas and the Official Historians emphatically state that these landings took

place on the 10 November, whereas the implication of the staff diary is that they took place on 14 November. A mistranscription probably occurred somewhere.

[15] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 21 November 1914.

[16] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 26 November 1914.

[17] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 9 January 1915.

[18] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 13-15 March, 28 April, 16 August 1915.

[19] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 2 October 1914.

[20] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force Commander Royal Engineers War Diary, October-November 1914, January-March 1915.

[21] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 26 November 1914.

[22] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries, Infantry (4/South Wales Borderers, Brecknockshire battalion), January, 19 February 1915.

[23] TNA: PRO WO 95/5436, Aden Force War Diaries (CO Perim), December 1914; (CO Kamaran), 9 June 1915.

[24] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 19 November 1914.

[25] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries, Infantry (109/Infantry), Operational Order No. 1, 12 December 1914.

[26] Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 138.

[27] For more details see Strachan, *The First World War Vol. I*, pp. 791-802.

[28] TNA: PRO WO 95/5436, Aden Force War Diaries (Mail Censors' papers).

[29] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 29 May 1915; DAAQMG War Diary, 25, 29, 31 May 1915. A Court Martial was held for the men of the 126/Infantry on 31 May. Seven sepoys were

charged with mutiny and one with murder. The outcome of the trial is not recorded and, unfortunately, the diary for June is missing.

[30] TNA: PRO WO 95/5436, Aden Force War Diaries (CO Perim), 15 June 1915.

[31] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries (109/Infantry), 14 June 1915; WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 20-21 June 1915.

[32] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 30 June, 4 July 1915.

[33] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 4 July 1915.

[34] Sir Charles Lucas claimed that 100 Brecknockshire men arrived at Lahej and assisted in the defence. However, the 109/Infantry diary does not record their presence, and the battalion's war diary for July 1915 is missing. Lucas may well have wanted to 'save the face' of a white unit, *Empire at War*, p. 139.

[35] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, DAAQMG, 4 July 1915.

[36] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 5 July 1915.

[37] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries, Infantry (109/Infantry), 4, 5 July 1915; WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 5 July 1915.

[38] MacMunn and Falls, *Military Operations*, p. 223. The war diary of the 109/Infantry implies that they left outposts covering Sheikh Othman for at least the next few days, see 6, 7, 8 July 1915.

[39] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary Commander Royal Engineers, 5 July 1915.

[40] TNA: PRO WO 95/5439, Aden Force War Diary British Base Hospital, 4-9 July 1915; Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 140.

[41] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 10 July 1915.

[42] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 10, 13 July 1915.

[43] Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 140.

[44] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 15 July 1915; War Diary, DAAQMG, 10 July 1915; Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 140.

[45] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 16 July 1915.

[46] MacMunn & Falls, *Military Operations*, p. 223; WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries Infantry (Commandant Aden Troop), 21 July 1915.

[47] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 31 August 1915.

[48] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries, 109/Infantry, October – December 1915.

[49] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary, CRE, August 1915 – April 1916; War Diary CRA, 25 October 1915.

[50] TNA: PRO WO 95/5436, Aden Force War Diaries (CO Perim), September 1915.

[51] TNA: PRO WO 95/5436, Aden Force War Diaries (CO Kamaran), July 1915.

[52] TNA: PRO WO 95/5439, Aden Force War Diaries Section Defences, 11 January 1916.

[53] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries (Sheikh Othman Garrison and Movable Column), 12 January 1916.

[54] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 27 February 1916.

[55] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 20 March 1916.

[56] Lucas, *Empire at War*, pp. 142-3.

[57] Lucas, *Empire at War*, pp. 144-5.

[58] A lack of warlike activity was felt to be 'ignominious and discouraging for the troops'. Quoted in Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 145.

[59] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries (Sheikh Othman Garrison and Movable Column), 25 September 1915; *The Diary of the First-Fourth Battalion, The Buffs, East Kent Regiment – Territorial Force, 1914-1919* (London, 1927), p. 15.

[60] *Fourth Buffs Diary*, pp. 18-19; Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 142.

[61] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries (Sheikh Othman Garrison and Movable Column), February – June 1916; WO 95/5437, Aden Force War Diaries (Commandant Aden Troop), July – September 1916; War Diary 26/King George's Own Light Cavalry, August 1915 – June 1916.

[62] Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 144.

[63] Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 145.

[64] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary, CRE, 4 January 1916; Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 143.

[65] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary, CRA, 25-26 October 1915, 12 January 1916.

[66] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Force General Staff War Diary, 13 July 1915.

[67] Cliff Lord & David Birtles, *The Armed Forces of Aden, 1839-1967* (Stroud: Helion and Company, 2000), pp. 57, 73.

[68] Lord and Birtles, *Armed Forces of Aden*, p. 57; Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 147.

[69] Quoted in Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 145.

[70] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Field Force Diary, 30 November 1918.

[71] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Field Force Diary, 13, 14 December 1918.

[72] Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 147.

[73] *Fourth Buffs Diary*, p. 16.

[74] *Fourth Buffs Diary*, pp. 13-20.

[75] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 2 June 1916.

[76] TNA: PRO WO 95/5438, Aden Force War Diaries (Malay States Mountain Battery), October 1915.

[77] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 16 October 1915; WO 95/5436, Aden Force War Diaries (CO Kamaran), 19 October 1915.

[78] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 3 October 1915.

[79] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 14-19 September 1915.

[80] TNA: PRO WO 95/5439, Aden Force War Diary British Base Hospital, 8 October 1915.

[81] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 26 November, 23 December 1915.

[82] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 19 November 1915.

[83] TNA: PRO WO 95/5435, Aden Force War Diary ADMS, 13 October 1915.

[84] TNA: PRO WO 95/5434, Aden Field Force Diary, September – November 1918.

[85] Lucas, *Empire at War*, p. 144.