

Benin Punitive Expedition

Report by Harry Rawson

Commander of the expedition

Published in Life of Admiral Sir Harry Rawson

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Published in London LONDON by EDWARD ARNOLD 1914

Pages 281 -

APPENDIX

The despatches which the Admiral sent home after the Benin Expedition are here reproduced:

Admiralty,
May 7, 1897.

Despatches, of which the following are copies, have been received from Rear-Admiral Harry H. Rawson, C.B., Commander-in-Chief on the Cape of Good Hope and West Coast of Africa Station, reporting operations against the King of Benin and the capture of Benin City.

H.M.S. "St. George" at Forcados,
February 27, 1897.

Sir,

With reference to the arrangements I had made for a naval expedition against Benin City, in compliance with your telegram No. 9 of the 15th idem; and in view of the absence of any reliable information in regard to Benin, and of the necessity for immediate action, I considered it advisable to organize the expedition on the largest scale which the force at my disposal would permit.

2. Between the dates of my reaching Brass (30th ultimo) and of the arrival there of Mr. R. D. R. Moor, C.M.G., H.M. Commissioner and Consul - General for the

Niger Coast Protectorate (3rd instant), I obtained much valuable information about Benin, which had been collected by Captain H. L. Gallway, D.S.O. (H.M. Acting Commissioner and Consul-General).

The fact of the position of Benin City having never been astronomically fixed, however, nor the country and creeks surveyed, necessitated my having to rely in a great measure upon reports from the only three natives who had ever visited the place.

3. The few white men who have ever been to Benin appear to have taken the route from Gwato, because, I am given to understand, the King has never permitted them to approach the city by any other road; but as it is well known that there is no water on that route, and as there was every reason to believe, from the reports of natives, that there was a continuation of the Ologi Creek (fresh water) at a short distance to the eastward of the city, I decided, after carefully considering the question, to form a base at Warrigi, widen the existing path from thence to Ceri, and then, if practicable, cut my way through the forest along the left bank of the Ologi Creek to within striking distance of Benin, thus insuring a good supply of water throughout the march.

4. Seeing, however, that I could obtain no reliable information as to the nature of the country through which I proposed to march, until I could place a force at Ceri, my alternative plan was to cross the creek at Ceri by a wire suspension bridge which I had prepared to throw across (the creek here being fifty yards wide and fourteen feet deep, with a strong current), to establish a depot at Ologbo Beach, and then cut my way through the forest from thence to Benin^ should there be no suitable road.

5. In this decision H.M, Consul-General and Lieutenant-Colonel B. M. Hamilton concurred ; and I also arranged, after consultation with them, that, about the date of the expedition landing at Warrigi, two separate forces should be detached:

One, under Captain M. P. O'Callaghan, of H.M.S. " Philomel," to destroy Gwato; then advance to Eggbini, hold that place until the 14th instant, and then occupy and hold Ikoro.

The other, under Captain T. Macaill, of H.M.S. "Phoebe," to stockade and hold a position four miles above Sapobar. By despatching these separate expeditions, it was considered that two objects would be attained —

(1) To divert the enemy's attention from the intended direction of the attack on the city; and

(2) To prevent the escape of fugitives to the eastward or westward into what are now peaceful districts.

6. Whilst awaiting the arrival of the transport "Malacca" (on the 8th instant), all carriers procurable (two thousand one hundred and sixty) were collected and sent to Warrigi, where a base was established, and stores for the expedition landed. H.M. ships "Philomel," "Phoebe," "Barrosa," "Widgeon," "Magpie," and "Alecto" were sent up the Benin River, and the "St. George," "Theseus," and "Forte" anchored off the mouth of the Forcados River.

I also hired four light draught steamers from Lagos for service as transports in the river and creeks.

7. The Niger Coast Protectorate troops were, in the meantime, moved up to Warrigi, with a party of native road-makers, to complete the road to Ceri, and to form a camp there for the whole force, thus enabling the bluejackets and marines to march to Ceri the same day they were to land at Warrigi.

This work was satisfactorily completed by the 8th instant; consequently, when the "Malacca" arrived off Forcados on the evening of that day, the expedition was ready to start.

8. I decided, after consultation with the Consul-General, to reduce the landing-party from H.M. ships to 700 fighting men, a force thought to be rather larger than actually necessary to meet the enemy, but considered desirable with a view to the future moral effect throughout the whole Niger Coast Protectorate.

9. On the 9th instant the landing-parties from H.M. ships "St. George," "Theseus," and "Forte," and the Royal Marines from the transport "Malacca," were conveyed in the four hired steamers, via Forcados and Nana Creek, to Warrigi, where they arrived the next afternoon.

10. The following day I landed at Warrigi, and marched with the whole force to Ceri.

11. Lieutenant-Colonel B. M. Hamilton, with the Niger Coast Protectorate troops, had, before my arrival at Ceri, ascertained that any advance from that place, along either bank of the Ologi Creek, was impracticable owing to swamps.

I therefore had to adopt the alternative route mentioned in Paragraph 4.

12. On the morning of the 12th instant I commenced to move the force from Ceri, up the Ologi Creek in boats, to Ologbo landing-place (a distance of about two miles, and on the opposite bank of the creek), Lieutenant-Colonel Hamilton being in command of the advance-guard, composed of two companies of Haussas and one company of bluejackets from H.M.S. "Theseus," under Lieutenant H. A. S. Fyler, of that ship.

Here the enemy made their first stand; but, after a short engagement, were driven up a forest path beyond the village of Ologbo (about a mile to the northward of the landing-place), which was then occupied.

13. On the 14th instant the whole force, carriers, and supplies having been moved to Ologbo landing-place, the scouts and advance-guard (then composed of the Haussas and marines from H.M.S. "Theseus," under Captain Gr. L. Beaumont, R.M.L.I., of that ship) advanced from Ologbo village along a path leading in the direction of Benin City.

After proceeding about four miles, the scouts reported the enemy in front.

From this point there was a running fight, our men firing volleys and advancing at the double, the enemy making a stand whenever there was sufficient cover, and replying briskly to our volleys from flanking paths, which they had cut parallel to

the main path, until Cross Roads (a position four miles to the northward of Ologbo) was reached and occupied, this place being apparently the enemy's main camp.

14. As I had received reports from the detached forces at Gwato and Sapobar of the enemy's determined stand there, and reinforcements having been requested at both places, also, seeing that the enemy had not only shown an intention of opposing our advance throughout the whole march on the city, but that they had proved themselves much better acquainted with the method of bush-fighting than was generally supposed, I deemed it advisable to call up the remainder of the force as originally organized (see Paragraph 1), especially in view of the long line of communication with the base, which would have to be protected.

15. On the 10th instant, Captain M. P. O'Callaghan, with a force from the "Philomel," "Barrosa," and "Widgeon," occupied and destroyed Gilli-Gilli and Gwato.

He was unopposed at the former place.

At the latter he found the town deserted, and saw nothing of the enemy until half the place had been burnt, when a heavy fire was opened upon him from the neighbouring forest, which it took nearly an hour to silence. Captain M. P. O'Callaghan then destroyed the remainder of the town, and re-embarked his force with a view to carrying out his orders to advance to Eggbini and Ikoro on the arrival of the reinforcements, which he considered desirable in view of the enemy having collected in considerable numbers near Gwato.

On receiving this communication, however, I decided that the object would, under the circumstances, be better attained by directing Captain O'Callaghan, after being reinforced, to reoccupy and hold Gwato, instead of advancing to Eggbini and Ikoro.

This was accordingly done on the 16th instant, without opposition, and steps were at once taken to fortify the camp, and to clear away the bush surrounding it.

Shortly afterwards, however, the enemy opened fire from the forest, which was continued at intervals until the evening, and repeated several times during the 17th and 18th, when the enemy finally retreated.

16. On the 11th instant the other force, under Captain MacGill (with men drawn from the "Phoebe," "Alecto," and "Magpie"), which had proceeded up the Jamieson River to Sapobar, built a stockade four miles to the northward of that place, where the main road from Benin branches in two directions.

Here the party employed in building the stockade were attacked from the neighbouring forest, and a sharp engagement took place before the enemy were driven away.

This force was again attacked on the morning of the 20th instant, but the enemy were repulsed after a short engagement.

17. On the 15th instant Lieutenant-Colonel Hamilton, with the scouts and advance-guard, left Cross Roads camp, and advanced along the Benin path.

After he had proceeded about four miles, the enemy attacked both flanks, and continued firing at intervals from the dense forest until their camp at Agagi (a mile farther on) was reached. The enemy then retreated, and the place was occupied without further opposition.

18. It had been anticipated that there would be water at Agagi, suitable, at any rate, for the carriers ; but as all the wells there were found to be dry, and each house provided with chatties, it appeared that the natives had been obliged to store their water.

19. The question of the water-supply for both fighting force and carriers became, therefore, a very serious one, since none could be found between Agagi and Ologbo Beach (ten miles), and it was improbable that there would be any between Agagi and Benin (twelve miles), which subsequently proved to be the case.

20. To keep up a sufficient supply of water for the force and carriers which I had intended to take on to Benin would have entailed great delay, which, at that stage of the march, I considered it a matter of the greatest importance to avoid, if possible.

I therefore decided to push on at once by forced marches to Benin, with a flying column, taking three days' water (at the rate of two quarts for each officer or man, and one quart for carriers per day), also four days' provisions, with the necessary ammunition, etc., the remainder of the force and supplies being left at Cross Roads camp and Ologbo Beach.

21. On the 16th instant the flying column, composed as follows, was assembled at Agagi:

- ✓ Forty scouts, under Lieutenant S. E. Erskine (H.M.S. " Philomel ") and Mr. Turner, of the Niger Coast Protectorate.
- ✓ Two hundred and forty Niger Coast Protectorate troops, with two seven-pounder guns and a Maxim, under Lieutenant-Colonel B. M. Hamilton.
- ✓ A company of sixty seamen from H.M.S. " St. George," with a Maxim, under Lieutenant Llewellyn Griffiths, of that ship.
- ✓ A rocket and demolition party of ten.
- ✓ Sixty marines, with a Maxim, from the transport " Malacca," under Captain G. T. Byrne, R. M.L.I.
- ✓ Sixty marines from H.M.S. " Theseus," with a Maxim, under Captain Beaumont, R.M.L.I., of that ship.
- ✓ The whole of the Royal Marines being under the command of Major T. H. de M. Roche, R.M.L.I., of H.M.S.
- ✓ " St. George."
- ✓ Sixty bluejackets, with a Maxim, from H.M.S. "Theseus."

The Protectorate troops being short of officers, I lent Sub-Lieutenant J. A. Gregory, of H.M.S. "Theseus," and Sub-Lieutenant B. O. F. Phibbs, of H.M.S. " St. George," for duty with them.

My personal and general staff consisted of —

- ✓ Captain G. Le C. Egerton, of H.M.S. "St. George," Chief of the Staff.
- ✓ Lieutenant W. N. England, Flag-Lieutenant, A.D.C. and Camp Master.

- ✓ Commander R. H. S. Bacon, H.M.S. "Theseus," Chief of Intelligence Department, who was also placed in the advance-guard with Lieutenant-Colonel Hamilton.
- ✓ Lieutenant Stuart Nicholson, of H.M.S. "St. George," who was in charge of the arrangements for the water supply.
- ✓ Lieutenant R. G. Gregory, of H.M.S. "St. George," Staff Officer.
- ✓ The carriers were in charge of Lieutenant E. R. Pears, of H.M.S. "Forte," and Lieutenant W. H. Cowan, of H.M.S. "Barrosa."

The medical officers were :

Staff-Surgeon E. R. Dimsey, of H.M.S. " Phoebe," and Surgeon C. J. Fyfe, of H.M.S. " St. George."

Mr. R. D. R. Moor, C.M.G., H.M. Commissioner and Consul-General, and Captain Child, of the Niger Coast Protectorate Yacht " Ivy," accompanied the headquarters.

Lieutenant - Colonel B. M. Hamilton was placed in command of the advance-guard, and Captain C. Campbell, C.B., of H.M.S. "Theseus," in command of the rear -guard, the marines from the "Malacca" forming a reserve under my own immediate orders.

22. Leaving Agagi at 6.30 a.m. on the 17th instant, the flying column cut itself free from the base and advanced to Awoko, arriving there at 2 p.m., after having been harassed the whole way by constant attacks from the bush, the advance being necessarily very slow.

That night the camp was fired into.

23. On the 18th instant the column left Awoko at 6.30 a.m., the only alteration in the formation of the column being that the marines of H.M.S. "Theseus" (who up to this point had been with the advance guard), now changed positions with the "St. George's" " A" Company.

During the whole of this day the head and both flanks of the column were constantly attacked.

At 1 p.m. a stockade was come across, commanding a narrow causeway with a deep ravine on each side, and defended by a few guns. These were silenced, and the stockade path cleared with guncotton.

About three hundred yards farther on, as the enemy appeared to be in considerable force in front, a halt was made, and the seven- pounders and rockets were fired with extreme elevation over the supposed strongest position of the enemy, and where Benin City was thought to be.

About a mile beyond this we suddenly emerged from the bush path into a causeway about fifty yards wide, running at right angles to our path, with dense bush on each side. Here a very heavy fire was opened upon our men, and the enemy were, for the first time, actually seen, a body of them attempting to charge the head of our column as we advanced out of the narrow bush path. A Maxim, however, and a few volleys from the "St. George's" "A" Company soon drove them back into the bush. There were also some heavy guns fired from the causeway which surrounded the King's compound. *{Readers please note that Commander Rawson does not mention here coming across human sacrifice. This misinformation was added on later in the year by Reginald Bacon seeking to sensationalise his book Benin, City of Blood. All other authors there after simply copied verbatim what Bacon had written.}*

An advance was at once made along the road to the King's palace, under a rather heavy fire from both sides, which, at such close quarters, did us considerable damage. *{Readers please note that Commander Rawson refers to the 'king's palace' and not 'king's house' as Reginald Bacon decided to do in his book.}*

The King's compound was then occupied; the killed and wounded brought in; the carrier column and rear-guard marched up from the narrow path, where they had been halted until the enemy had been cleared out; and the men's water-bottles filled, leaving us with only one quart of water per man as a reserve. *{Readers please note that Commander Rawson does not mention blood everywhere. He surely would have done so had this been this case. It is inconceivable that he would have allowed wounded men to be put in a house with blood stench and blood everywhere as Reginald Bacon had allaged.}*

The heat along this causeway was terrific, and the men (who had been marching from 6.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m.) were much exhausted; but I am proud to report that not a single officer or man fell out from his place after leaving Cross Roads.

24. All tents and coverings having been left behind, the best arrangements possible were made to shelter the men for the night. *{Readers please note that Commander Rawson does not mention that they had to sleep outside the house due to blood stench. Again, this is a later addition by Reginald Bacon in his book. He also circulated this misinformation to other authors of the day and the global press.}*

25. At daylight on the 19th instant two-thirds of the force, with all the carriers, were sent off as a water party, the remainder of the force defending the camp.

The water party returned in about three hours, having found a very good running stream about two miles distant.

26. In the afternoon a strong force was marched out, and destroyed Chief Ijuma's compound.

27. Orders had been sent to Ologbo Beach for provisions and ammunition to be forwarded on to Benin.

Also for the " St. George's " steam pinnace and two Jakri canoes to try and find their way by the Ologi Creek to the city, with a view of conveying the wounded down by water. The command of this party was given to Lieutenant T. F. Michell, of H.M.S. "St. George," whose report is attached (Enclosure No. 7).

28. I had intended returning with the whole force on the 20th instant, but as the Protectorate troops were short of ammunition, and had no stores up with them, I deemed it necessary to place them in a defensible position before I left the city. I therefore remained until the morning of the 22nd.

29. The 20th and 21st were occupied in preparing a defensive position for the Protectorate force and in getting water for our march down.

30. Two parties were sent out to destroy the Queen-Mother's and Chief Ichudi's compounds; also the sacrificial and crucifixion trees, and the whole of the ju-ju houses.

31. The King, with all the inhabitants, having disappeared, I was unable to carry out their Lordships' wish that he should be captured.

32. We heard from some liberated slaves that no white prisoners had been brought to Benin City, but all the effects of the late ill-fated expedition were found in the King's palace.

33. The Protectorate ammunition and stores arrived on the night of the 20th instant.

34. At 4 p.m. on the 21st instant a fire, started by carriers, spread in a few minutes over the whole town; and by the promptitude of Captain Campbell, of H.M.S. "Theseus," the wounded were got out while the temporary hospital was actually on fire.

Some arms, ammunition, and most of our provisions, were burnt. Fortunately, however, the "Forte's" company, under Lieutenant F. R. Harrold, arrived within an hour with a fresh supply, and the whole white force was thus enabled to start for the base on the morning of the 22nd instant.

35. I left, for the use of the Protectorate force, two Maxims and one rocket tube, with the necessary ammunition; also the Martini - Henry rifles which had been issued to the scouts.

I also transferred to them two of the four days' provisions brought up by the "Forte's" company.

36. The base at Warrigi was reached on the 24th, after a trying return journey for the wounded, who, however, were safely brought down.

37. The whole of the force were re-embarked by the evening of the 27th instant.

38. The Sapobar force, under Captain MacGill, reembarked and returned to Warrigi on the 25th.

39. The Gwato force, under Captain O'Callaghan, re-embarked in their ships on the 27th instant.

40. As on the march up, so on the march down, not a single officer or man of the flying column fell out.

41. I much regret to have to report the following casualties during the expedition, as detailed in Enclosure

No. 1:

(a) Killed in action:

- 2 officers,
- 8 men (5 whites, 3 blacks).

(b) Wounded in action:

- 6 officers (including 1 native officer),
- 44 men (22 whites, 22 blacks).

(c) Deaths from the effects of climate:

- 1 officer,
- 4 men (whites).

{d) Deaths from accident:

- 2 men (1 white, 1 black).

(e) Seventy-two cases of small-pox occurred amongst the native carriers.

In an expedition like this has been, where unusual hardships have been endured from excessive heat, forced marches, shortness of water, and even of provisions, to say nothing of the whole march having been harassed by an unseen enemy, I consider that every officer and man under my command has merited the highest praise; and although I am aware that only a comparative few can hope to be rewarded at present, I feel it my duty to place on record the names of many others

also, who have done such good work that I trust their Lordships will, in any case, bear them in mind for future reward.

Then follows a long list of officers whom the Admiral specially recommends to their Lordships' notice. He adds:

I have considered it my duty to specially mention what may appear at first sight a large number of officers, but the duties of the expedition have necessarily been so varied, and its organization so hurried, that a vast amount of work fell upon all the officers employed in the different departments.

Their Lordships will, perhaps, more fully realize this when it is remembered that Benin City was taken within five weeks of the receipt of the telegram ordering the expedition to be organized, and that the force only met for the first time, from widely different parts of the world, the evening before the expedition started up the river.

I have, etc.,

Harry H. Rawson.

(Rear-Admiral, Commander-in-Chief.)