

Bonaparte's Egyptian Campaign

George F. Nafziger, U.S.A.

In 1797 Napoleon was a rising star, a victorious general ruling a kingdom he had conquered in Italy under the nominal direction of the Directory, which he loathed and detested. The *coup d'état de Fructidor* had removed the Council of Five Hundred as a political entity opening up political opportunities for him. His involvement in the signing of the Peace of Campo Formio brought him even more prestige and power. His political fortunes rose with each step and he began to cast about for new arenas in which to push his career even further.

Not only did Bonaparte "play to the crowd" for political gain, but he was also discovering the benefits of wealth and power that resulted from his control of the wealth of Italy. In addition, the public support from his aggrandizement of the French military reputation and the expansion of its territory built a power base for his future career.

While these thoughts were evolving in Napoleon's mind France was still facing its irreconcilable enemy, England. The invasion of England was proposed and discussed at length. Napoleon perceived three options for the relationship between France and England, 1.) making peace, which was politically impossible, 2.) the French army could attack Hanover, but this could provoke a general European war, 3.) an invasion could be launched against England, which would have little hope of success, or 4.) France could threaten England's commerce with India by taking Egypt.

In addition, Napoleon saw the romantic East as a place where a new kingdom could be carved for him to rule. He, no doubt, saw it filled with treasure to be looted for his personal benefit. He must also have seen it as an opportunity where even further military glory could be gained facing an enemy who was technologically inferior and was, militarily, an easy victim.

The Invasion is Launched

After much debate, the Directory made the decision invade Egypt. On March 2, and April 12, 1798, the it issued the necessary *arrêts* and the preparations for the invasion began. Napoleon was given overall command.

Five embarkation ports were selected: Toulon, Marseilles, Genoa, Ajaccio and Civita Vecchia. Admiral Brueys took over the Toulon fleet and prepared it for an unknown destination. Twenty-one demi-brigades were selected from the French forces serving in France, Switzerland, Rome, Corsica and Italy, and directed to the embarkation ports.

In addition to selecting the military forces and picking the staff to command the expedition, the Directory selected 500 civilians to accompany the expedition. Of them 167 were the most distinguished men of letters and scientists of France. Not only was this to be an expedition of conquest, it was to be a scientific expedition to the mysterious orient.

The "Legions of Rome", as they were called, arrived at their ports and by May 1, 1798, 14,000 infantry, 680 cavalry and 1,160 artillerymen were at Toulon. At Genoa were 6,000 infantry, 855 cavalry and 250 gunners. Desaix found his command at Civita Vecchia consisted of 6,900 infantry, 1,080 cavalry and 250 artillerymen. At Ajaccio, General St. Cyr commanded 3,900 infantry, and 680 cavalry.

Such extensive preparations could not be concealed, so the French took pains to ensure that the true target was concealed in an elaborate plan that suggested raids against Ireland and Portugal. The very real threat of a British fleet in the Mediterranean had to be dealt with, even if only with deception. The army was then given the formal title of the "Army of England" to further the confusion.

Despite the care, the scientists proved incapable of holding the secret and word soon reached England that the targets included Malta and Alexandria. The sailings were staggered and the first fleet departed from Toulon on May 19th. The Civita Vecchia convoy missed the rendezvous and headed straight for Malta.

The British fleet was delayed by a heavy storm and confusion of the actual target. Nelson had insufficient frigates to keep a constant eye on the French, so they slipped past him and his fleet, arriving in Malta. There was little fight left in the Knights of St. John and Malta quickly succumbed. On June 19 the French departed, leaving General Vaubois and 4,000 men behind as a garrison. The French convoy was to arrive in Egypt without incident, though during the night of June 22-23, the pursuing English fleet barely missed the opportunity to engage the entire French convoy.

The French landed the last of their forces on July 3. The French fleet had withdrawn to Aboukir Bay as the transports unloaded near Alexandria. On July 2 Lord Nelson found the French fleet in Aboukir and sank it. Though ashore and unharmed, the French *Armée de l'Orient* was cut off from home in a foreign and inhospitable land.

Adding to their misery, the French began their first march across the arid Egyptian plains. They marched 45 miles from their landing sites to Alexandria. Morale was bad and mutiny near, when on July 9th, 18,000 French arrived in Damanhur. The first clash occurred on July 10, when Desaix's division defeated a detachment of Mameluke cavalry.

Mameluke Egypt

At this time Egypt consisted of 24 provinces, each of which was ruled by a Mameluke Bey. The 24 beys were formed into a governing council or divan, presided over by a Turkish governor, or pasha. Though Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish

government's role consisted of little more than exacting tribute from the provinces, who in turn took it from the peasants.

By the time that Napoleon invaded Egypt the Turkish rule had all but vanished. As the Ottoman control waned over the years, the Mamelukes had become warlords ruling over their separate kingdoms. They had dominated Egypt for over 500 years, but remained true to their Circassian, Georgian and Armenian ancestry, marrying only women from those lands, despite their notoriously expansive harems. Being a small number, they kept their strength up by literally buying young boys from the Caucasus, about 10,000 to 12,000 per year, and training them to be warriors. These enslaved warriors could gain their freedom upon rising to military command.

They were undisciplined, yet ferocious warriors, dressed in flowing robes and carrying with them into battle large sums of money, jewels and other valuables as part of their military equipment. They were armed with pistols, muskets, axes, lances and scimitars. They wore no standard uniform and the colours of their clothing was like a glittering rainbow. Their horses were the finest available. Their courage and horsemanship were proverbial, but their speed in retreat could be spectacular as well.

The Campaign Begins

This force met the French on July 13, in a brief battle at Shubra Khit. The main battle was fought on the Nile between a small French flotilla of five gun boats and the slightly larger Mameluke flotilla of seven gun boats. The battle was pitched and Napoleon moved field artillery up to the bank of the Nile to support his flotilla. The French infantry formed itself into six deep squares with the cavalry and transport in the centre, in preparation for the Mameluke cavalry attack, but it never came. Instead, the Mamelukes swirled around the edges of the French squares at musket range and exchanged shots with little effect.

At noon, a lucky shot by the French artillery struck and destroyed the Mameluke flagship and the fight went out of the Mamelukes. They withdrew without permitting Napoleon to come to grips with them. The French advance resumed.

The Battle of the Pyramids

Around 2:00 p.m., on July 21st, 25,000 French arrived before the village of Embabeh and found themselves confronted by 6,000 mounted Mamelukes and 15,000 *fellahin* or armed peasants, under the command of Murad Bey. On the far bank of the Nile stood another force of Mamelukes under Ibrahim Bey. The French formed their defensive formations and the battle quickly began in the shadow of the great Pyramids of Gizeh.

Napoleon positioned his divisions in an oblique line of squares and sent them forward. The squares were, in fact, broad fronted rectangles whose frontage was a

full demi-brigade and whose flanks were a half demi-brigade. This was done to maximise the firepower they could project as they advanced against the Mameluke cavalry, while still in the security of a square.

At 3:30 p.m., the Mamelukes launched their first attack, striking the French right and almost catching Desaix and Reynier unawares. As they charged against the squares, the French pounded them with disciplined volleys of musketry and shells from a howitzer battery deployed in one of the French squares. The Mamelukes responded with cannon fire came from the village of Embabeh. The French flotilla on the Nile soon dealt with these guns and the French, under General Bon swarmed into the village, putting its defenders to the bayonet. Two thousand Mamelukes fled from the village only to be cut off by Marmont, who sent a demi-brigade forward to intercept them. The Mamelukes flung themselves into the Nile to escape. Over 1,000 were drowned and another 600 shot as Ibrahim's troops watched from the far bank of the Nile. By 4:30 p.m., the battle was over and Murad Bey, with his remaining 3,000 cavalry, fled down the Nile towards Gizeh and Middle Egypt. For the loss of 29 killed and 260 wounded the French had killed over 2,000 Mamelukes and several thousand *fellahin*.

The day after the battle the French soldiers amused themselves by looting the bodies of the dead Mamelukes of the wealth they carried. It is interesting to note that the French infantry bent their bayonets into hooks so that they could fish the drowned Mamelukes out of the Nile.

The Mamelukes fled south to Cairo, which they quickly abandoned. The French occupied it on July 24th. Another battle occurred on August 11, when Napoleon caught Ibrahim Bey and inflicted a crushing defeat on him at Salalieh.

As Napoleon established himself and a French government in Cairo Desaix was dispatched south. From August 25, 1798, until March 1799, he pursued Murad Bey's elusive cavalry up and down the upper Nile. Actions were fought at El Lahun on October 7, 1798, Samhud on January 22, 1799, and Abnud on March 8, 1799. Murad, now reinforced by as much as 10,000 Mamelukes repeatedly slipped away from the ponderous columns of French infantry, seldom numbering more than 3,000 infantry and some cavalry. The campaign finally ended when the ill-discipline of the Mamelukes caused them to disintegrate from the strain of constant campaigning. The Upper Nile was finally under French control when Belliard captured Kosseir on the Red Sea on May 29, 1799, severing Murad's communications with Arabia.

Having been invaded, even though the province was only questionably part of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey declared war on France. They began massing an army and in the Fall of 1799 began to send it south. Britain had become the Turkish ally and had a naval blockade on Egypt that completely closed it to any communications with France.

The Syrian Adventure

Napoleon was not one to sit idly by while his enemies advanced against him. His response was to advance with his army into Palestine to forestall the army under Djazzar Pasha, seize the fortress of Acre, defeat the Damascus army, and then return to Egypt where he would destroy the Turkish Army of Rhodes as it landed in Egypt.

No help was possible from France, which was under assault from the Second Coalition. Napoleon had a cart blanche from the Directory, but he had to make do with what was at his disposal. He organised what new formations he could from Jewish and Christian minorities in Egypt and reorganised his army. On December 23, 1799, the first moves occurred as General Legrange was ordered to reconnoitre the Sinai and build a base at Katia. Napoleon organised 9,932 infantry in four weak divisions, 800 cavalry and 1,755 artillery and engineers, plus 400 Guides and 80 men of the Dromedary Corps into his new army of conquest.

The true beginning of the campaign came on February 6, 1799, when General Reynier advanced out of Katia with the rest of the army following in his footsteps. Difficulties were immediately encountered at El Arish, when Reynier found himself confronted by a masonry fort defended by 600 Mamelukes and 1,700 Albanian infantry. The siege lasted from the 9th to the 19th, costing Napoleon eleven invaluable and irreplaceable days.

Gaza fell on February 25th. On March 4th Napoleon was before Jaffa, which fell three days later. In an act of unusual and inexcusable barbarity, Napoleon ordered the execution of the 1,400 prisoners taken as a result of this siege.

On March 15 Napoleon's plans took a terrible setback. HMS Tigre and HMS Theseus arrived at Acre with Commodore Sir William Sidney Smith and a French *émigré* engineering officer named Philipeaux. Between the two of these men, Acre was hastily brought into a condition to resist Napoleon's pending assault. The significance of the loss of time at El Arish now became apparent. On March 15 Napoleon could have marched into Acre, but when he arrived on March 18 it was strong enough to resist him.

Napoleon's misfortunes continued to mount, when on March 18, the ships carrying half of his siege guns were captured by the British off Mount Carmel. These guns were then taken by the British to Acre where they were mounted on the walls and used to defend it from the French.

The garrison of Acre had 5,000 men and more than 250 guns mounted in its various fortifications. Being unable to assault them in their newly reinforced positions, Napoleon was unwilling to undertake the lengthy process of a siege, with saps, mines and storming columns carrying ladders, but now had no choice. In the first attempt at an assault on the walls, the French attackers found their ladders were too short to mount the walls. They withdrew with heavy losses. Four days later a French mine exploded under

a tower on the walls, but the tower was little damaged and the subsequent assault also failed.

Meanwhile the Army of Damascus was forming in Galilee with 7,000 Turkish soldiers. Napoleon learned of this and sent a cavalry force to reconnoitre them. The French cavalry beat a larger force, but withdrew from the region because they were terribly outnumbered.

Kléber was then ordered out with 1,500 men to assist the cavalry. It encountered and routed 6,000 Turks near Canaan. Murat was sent to the region around Lake Tiberias with two battalions, where he executed a successful assault against a larger Turkish force. In another sweep, Kléber and 2,000 men encountered the Pasha of Damascus, with around 25,000 cavalry and 10,000 foot, near Mount Tabor. Trapped, Kléber moved to the attack and a desperate battle ensued. Only as their ammunition began to run low did the surrounded squares of Frenchmen see Napoleon's forces rolling over the hills to their assistance. Hearing the battle, Napoleon had led a column 25 miles, arriving in time to disperse the Turks and save Kléber.

The French had major supply problems as they stood before Acre. Not only was food short, but so too was ammunition for their heavier guns. In order to supplement their supply of round shot Napoleon ordered a bounty be paid to each soldier who brought in a cannon ball. The immediate result of this was groups of French soldiers would gather on the beach when English warships came by. By offering the British a large target worthy of a shot or two, they would coax the British into firing their guns. Once the salvo was discharged, the soldiers would scramble wildly after the balls in order to collect the bounty. Bored soldiers have always done strange things to amuse themselves and supplement their finances. This war was no different.

Despite the various military successes against the Turkish field forces, the siege of Acre was a failure, and on May 17 Napoleon withdrew his forces to Egypt. After returning to Cairo, Napoleon found the upper Nile once again in revolt. These futile efforts were put down, but the arrival of 60 Turkish transports and a British squadron at Aboukir Bay meant something else. The Turks landed 15,000 men and quickly established a beachhead. Napoleon moved his army up and on July 25 the Turks were defeated at the Battle of Aboukir. The French cavalry proved its metal on that day and was decisive in the victory.

That threat defeated, Napoleon returned to Cairo. However, the overall situation was beyond recovery and Napoleon realised his dreams were lost. In addition, the situation in Europe was coming to a political head. On August 22 Napoleon quietly boarded a frigate with some selected officers and returned to France. General Kléber was left to command what remained of the Army of Egypt. Death at the hand of an assassin awaited Kléber in Cairo, while destiny and empire awaited Napoleon at Marengo.

The *Armée de l'Orient* was to remain in Egypt and

face new enemies and battles. The British landed in March 1800. There were numerous engagements and one siege. The English eventually obliged the French to negotiate, a treaty was signed, and on September 14, 1800, the first French troops embarked British vessels assigned to transport them back to France.

Aftermath

The Egyptian campaign was a military disaster for the French that cost them one fleet and had an army cut off for nearly three years engaging an enemy, the Ottoman Empire, that would not have otherwise gotten into the wars. It had distracted a small British land force away from Europe, but the disastrous 1799 British invasion of Holland was over by the time troops were sent to Egypt, so they were available and not otherwise engaged. It was Napoleon's first real taste of British naval power and his first meeting with Nelson. The next, Trafalgar, was still several years away.

The only gain to France from the campaign was a limited distraction to the English that forced them to deploy forces into a region where they were not otherwise required. The bottom line still tilts strongly towards a major British victory and a terrible French disaster. The loss of the French fleet at Aboukir removed many major vessels from French service that might have made some contribution at Trafalgar.

As for Napoleon, he returned to France the hero of the Orient. He had escaped before his army was defeated and had only added to his impressive string of victories.

The only gains for the French were the results of the scientific expeditions that explored and catalogued much of the flora and fauna of Egypt and that explored the mysteries of the ancient Egyptians. As a trophy from the campaign, the French took an obelisk from Egypt and erected it in Place de la Concorde, in central Paris over the site of the Revolutionary guillotine. It can still be seen today amidst the swirl of traffic.

However, the world did make one major gain from this campaign. While digging trenches at Rosetta a large black stone, about eighteen inches wide, was dug up. The stone contained part of an inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphics, Greek and a third language. This is the famous Rosetta Stone. It was the key to the eventual translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics and made a major contribution to man's knowledge.

Lest one assume that only the French looted as they marched across the world, it should be noted that the Rosetta Stone was seized by the British as part of the negotiations that brought the French army back to France. It can be seen today in the British Museum, in London, amidst hundreds of other "liberated" works art from the ancient world.

Recommended Source Documents on the Egyptian Campaign:

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French Armée de l'Orient 30 June 1798

Commander-in-Chief:
Général de division Bonaparte

Advanced Guard: Général de division Desaix
Brigade: Général de brigade Belliard & Friant
21st Légère Demi-Brigade (3 btns) (2,100 men)
61st Line Demi-Brigade (3) (1,800)
88th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (1,900)

Right: Général de division Reynier
Brigade: Général de brigade Damas & Verdier
9th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (1,900)
85th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (2,100)
Maltese Legion (2) (1,500)

Centre: Général de division Kleber
Brigade: Général de brigade Lannes & Lanusse
2nd Légère Demi-Brigade (3) (1,700)
25th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (2,000)
75th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (2,100)

Left: Général de division Menou
Brigade: Général de brigade Vial & Mireur
22nd Légère Demi-Brigade (3) (2,000)
13th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (2,000)
69th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (1,800)

Reserve: Général de division Bon
Brigade: Général de brigade Rampon & Murat
4th Légère Demi-Brigade (2) (1,400)
18th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (2,100)
32nd Line Demi-Brigade (3) (2,000)

Cavalry: Général de division Dumas
Brigade: Général de brigade Leclerc & Zayonszeck
7th Hussar Regiment (3 squadrons) (500)
22nd Chasseur à Cheval Regiment (3) (450)
3rd Dragoon Regiment (2) (300)
14th Dragoon Regiment (3) (400)
15th Dragoon Regiment (2) (300)
18th Dragoon Regiment (4) (400)
20th Dragoon Regiment (2) (350)

Headquarters:
Guides à cheval (1 squadron) (120 men)
Guides à pied (1 battalion) (600 men)
Foot Artillery (800)
Sappers (800)
Miners/Artisans (600)
Légion Nautique (3 battalions) (3,000)

Independant Forces:
Brigade: Général de brigade Vaubois
7th Line Demi-Brigade (1) (800)
19th Line Demi-Brigade (2) (1,500)

Division: Général de division Chabot
Brigade: General de brigade Lasalcette
6th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (2,400)
79th Line Demi-Brigade (3) (2,400)



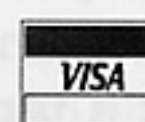
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RBG3	36 Figure 1-2 Pike/Shot Unit (12 pike/24 shot)	A
RBG4	27 Figure 4-3 Pike/Shot Unit (15 pike/12 shot)	A
RBG5	33 Figure 1-1 Pike/Shot Unit (15 pike/18 shot)	A
RBG6	39 Figure 2-3 Pike/Shot Unit (15 pike/24 shot)	A
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