Air Power in Darfur, 1916: The Hunt for Sultan Ali Dinar and the Menace of the Fur Army

By Brigadier Andrew Roe

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Abstract: The Darfur campaign of 1916, against Sultan Ali Dinar, the one time official Government agent for the region, attracted little external interest at the time and remains largely unknown today. Of particular note, air power, in the form of a small detachment of 'C' Flight, of Number 17 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps (RFC) played a key role throughout the operation. Although not employed in the final pursuit of Ali Dinar, as the air detachment had been ordered to return to Egypt, aircraft helped in reconnoitring and attacking the Sultan's positions and also provided a tangible symbol of the might, reach and power of the British Army. The deployment of the Flight was an early example of model staff work and logistical planning, and underlined the adaptability and dependability of the RFC.

Introduction

The brilliant work of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) during the operations in Darfur will rank as one of the finest efforts of our Army airmen in the war. The airmen, who were detailed to act with [Lieutenant] Colonel Kelly against the Sultan Ali Dinar, had to move south at very short notice, and travel by sea, rail, and desert track for 2,000 miles before they could reach the barren spot from which they were to operate. Though the natives were not astonished to see machines in the air, they were surprised beyond expression when the men alighted from them. One who found speech was heard to say: 'the Government was always great, but now it is greater than ever'[1].

Background

The little-known operations against Sultan Ali Dinar[2], the Sudan Government agent in Darfur, in 1916, are of questionable historical significance when compared with the mightier conflicts of the time in Europe and Asia. It was, however, the largest military undertaking in the Sudan since the massacre of the army of Sudanese Dervishes on a plain near Omdurman on the 2nd of September 1898[3]. And it resulted in the addition of a large stretch of country to the administered territories under the Government of Khartoum, with total military victims on the 'British' side of 4 officers and roughly 25 other ranks killed and wounded. In contrast, estimates state that the Fur Army suffered over 1,000 casualties. Although unremarkable in terms of fatalities or wider global impact, the physical challenges that were overcome and the manner in which operations were resourced and conducted mark this intriguing colonial episode as a military feat of some distinction[4]. At its very heart, the campaign in Darfur is a telling example of 'superior organisation and firepower to overcome a more numerous but less-well-armed and less-well-supplied local force'[5]. Of particular significance to the *Air Power Review* readership, a key component of the operation was the effective early use of aircraft in desert warfare, at the end of a very long and challenging supply line. Their appearance had a profound moral effect on the locals and achieved impressive physical results, although Lieutenant John Slessor, who flew throughout the campaign and was to become a future Chief of the Air Staff, cautions that: '… the material results achieved [in Darfur] by air action were comparatively insignificant'[6].

Sudan remained relatively quiet in the European media, figuring lightly throughout 1914 and 1915. The focus, predictably, was on the United Kingdom declaring war on Germany in 1914[7] and the Second Battle of Ypres, including the first use of poison gas by the Central Powers on the Western Front, and the ill-fated Dardanelles Campaign, which both occurred in 1915. This was unexpected, considering the wars fought in the late nineteenth century between Anglo-Egyptian forces and those of 'the Mad Mahdi', Muhammed Ahmad bin Abd Allah, and his successor, Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, who both led uprisings against British and Egyptian rule[8]. The Great War appeared to make little impression on the people of the region or the allegiance of their leaders, although minor military operations did occur to stamp-out unrest. In December 1914, a number of patrols took place to re-establish order and protect friendly tribesmen in the Duk Fadiat district of Mongalla Province. Other patrols sought to punish the Nuer tribesmen of the Lau district, Bahr el Ghazal Province, who had attacked a

mission station. Lieutenant General Sir George MacMunn and Captain Cyril Falls note: 'A rather larger affair was the Lokoia patrol of January 1915, to punish the tribes of Jebel Lyria and Jebel Lunch, in the Mongalla Province, who were openly defying the Government'[9]. Other military activity occurred in February, March and August 1915[10]. But few were serious undertakings and even the rumours of a Turkish victory in the Suez Canal in early 1915 resulted in no discernible increase in overall violence or unrest. But that was all about to change when an Anglo-Egyptian force of 2,000 men entered Darfur in March 1916 on the hunt for Ali Dinar.

Fast forward a century and Darfur figures highly in today's news. The United Nations (UN) described Sudan's western Darfur region as one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Local conflict, which started in February 2003 when rebel groups took up arms against the Government after allegations of regional neglect and oppression against Darfur's non-Arabs, erupted into widespread rebellion. The Government responded with a counter-insurgency campaign to stamp-out agitators, unrest and open revolt. This led to accusations of indiscriminate bombing from the air, the burning of homes and looting of livestock. Significantly, it resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians and the relocation of family groupings. Violence reduced after 2005, but again flared-up at the start of 2013. It was assessed that almost 400,000 people were displaced in the first half of 2014 alone and 100,000 people have left the area since the beginning of this year. The UN and African Union peacekeeping force in the region amounts to 20,000 troops, but has faced considerable criticism for alleged inactivity[11]. British troops, in a non-combat role, have recently arrived in the region, where they are part of the UN peacekeeping mission. Their responsibility is to carry out engineering work to strengthen local infrastructure. The history of the region, therefore, has a renewed significance[12]. But a century ago, British forces had a very different mandate and role.

Operations in Darfur – 1916

Darfur Province, the 'land of the Fur people', contained a complex mix of Arab and Black Muslim inhabitants in 1916. It was bounded in the north by Dongola and the Libyan desert, on the east (Kordofan Province) and south by administered provinces of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and on the west by the French central African territory of Wadai. It measured approximately 450 miles from north to south and 350 miles from east to west. The capital, El Fasher, a flat-roofed mud town, located *circa* 300 miles south-west of Khartoum, contained between 5,000 – 10,000 inhabitants. The total population of the province was under 1,000,000. Of particular relevance to military planners, the topography of the region is uniform sandy desert, covered with a low scrub and peppered liberally with large tebeldi trees[13]. Low ranges rise abruptly out of the flat central desert, and in the south-west a mass of low mountains, called the Jebel Marra, disrupt movement. Some of their heights reach over 5,000 feet. The climate is severe. Famine, resulting from extreme heat, routinely took its toll. Temperatures of 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade are not uncommon. And violent and unpredictable sandstorms are frequent. Water was particularly scarce in 1916 and determined the whole strategy of the campaign. The region had few wells, which were isolated and scattered, no permanent water

supply and there were few proper means of transport. Darfur was virtually un-surveyed at the time and mapping that did exist was inaccurate, crude and unreliable.

Until 1898 Darfur had formed part of the Dervish dominions, administered by a series of Dervish Emirs. When the British Army reached Omdurman in 1898, and battle on the plains of Kerreri looked likely, Ali Dinar, one of the Khalifa's[14] more astute lieutenants, and a descendant of the old Sultans of Darfur, realised that a new order was imminent and that Dervish rule was in jeopardy. Seeing an opportunity, he fled south on the day of Kitchener's victory at Omdurman, taking with him a few thousand countrymen, who ultimately guaranteed his authority. They eventually reached the province of Darfur in 1899 and Ali Dinar established his cruel, tyrannical and rapacious[15] authority in the capital. No Europeans were ever allowed into his kingdom[16]. Empty and waterless, with nothing of any value in the country, Britain and Egypt were broadly happy to leave Ali Dinar, the most powerful tribal independent ruler in Darfur, to his own devices. Stuart Hadaway notes in *Pyramids and Fleshpots* that according to the Foreign Office brief on the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Ali Dinar was 'left to go his own way', but it was well-known that his religious zeal was obsessive[17]. Despite a growing anti-British track record, until the outbreak of war in 1914, Ali Dinar was regarded as relatively loyal to his British neighbours in the Sudan[18]. He was appointed the official Government agent for Darfur in 1899 and adopted the title Sultan, carrying on the line of an independent Sultanate that reached back to 1650. He acknowledged Anglo-Egyptian suzerainty by the annual payment of £500[19] to the Governor General, Baron Sir Rudolph von Slatin Pasha, rendered annually from June 1901[20]. But Ali Dinar was ripe for exploitation and regional events helped transform his attitude.

Seeing an opportunity, Germany made attempts to stir Ali Dinar into rebellion, but with little real impact. He was also a target for Ottoman pressure; Egypt and Sudan were theoretical provinces of the Ottoman Empire until 1914, when Britain declared that Egypt was now a British Protectorate. Surrounding himself with hardliners and fanatics, who twisted, misinterpreted and falsified evidence, he was also influenced by his religious affinities with the Libyan leader of the Senussi people. The Grand Sheikh of the Senussi (Sayyid Ahmed al-Sharif), would later supply him with 250 rifles and boxes of ammunition down the great Arba'n camel route. German, Ottoman and Senussi complicity in the Sultan's belligerence was presented with great intensity in official correspondence – and perhaps exaggerated. Nevertheless, with numerous internal and external pressures at play, Ali Dinar's allegiance to the Sudan Government became increasingly tenuous. Interactions, particularly via communiqués, became strained and by April 1915, in an insulting letter to Sir Reginald Wingate, the Sirdar of the Egyptian Army and Governor-General of the Sudan, he formally renounced his allegiance to the Government. Moreover, he proclaimed *jihad* (holy war) against the Government in the name of the Sultan of Turkey. He also made clear his intentions to invade Kordofan and to drive the British to the sea. This was a troubling development.

Fortuitously, Ali Dinar's neighbouring chieftains did not support his ambitions. This was lucky for the Government; they were unable to spare troops from the Nile to deal with the Sultan

and many garrisons were already dangerously depleted, with ammunition stocks worryingly low. Lieutenant General Sir George MacMunn and Captain Cyril Falls posit: 'An interview with a British official might have had satisfactory results [in changing his motivations and goals], but unfortunately he would not admit one to his capital. He was treated with forbearance and given repeated opportunities to retreat from a position which in saner moments he probably regretted having assumed'[21]. However, by the beginning of 1916 it was clear that Ali Dinar was about to carry out his invasion threat. Active operations could no longer be avoided. A military expedition was seen as the most preferable course of action by the Government. But it was also viewed as beneficial to the French, whose colony of Wadi was on the western side of Darfur, and who faced negative fallout from the Sultan's actions[22]. However, the Fur Army was going to be no pushover and Ali Dinar would prove to be an elusive prey.

Ali Dinar's 'slave' army in 1916 consisted of between 3,000 – 4,000 riflemen and 1,700 cavalry. Formed into three divisions, they were, as a rule, badly trained and poorly supplied with ammunition. They were equipped with an assortment of modern and antiquated weapons, including .45 elephant rifles, muskets, double-barrelled shotguns and Italian rifles. These were acquired through trade, raids, gifts and Egyptian military disasters. Ammunition, crude but effective, was manufactured locally. There were also a significant number of men armed with spears, shields and swords, and a large number of horsemen – largely made up of Baggara tribesmen. The elite were the *mulazimin* or personal bodyguard of the Sultan. These tribesmen were armed with Martini-Henry rifles. Slessor notes post the campaign that: 'They [the Fur Army] had very little idea of tactics; their natural morale was low, as they were mostly slaves and hated their ruler, but they were capable when worked up to the proper pitch of Dervish zeal, of very desperate fighting. Until actually brought to bay before El Fasher they never put up any resistance worth speaking of, due a certain extent no doubt to the action of aeroplanes'[23].

To deal with the Sultan, Wingate concentrated an all-arms force of about 2,000 Egyptian and Sudanese troops at the important trade centre of En Nahud to reinforce the border, 90 miles east of the frontier of Darfur (Figure 1)[24]. In early 1916 he visited the force, titled the British Western Frontier Force or Darfur Field Force (but flippantly referred to as the Waterless Fatigue Force) and ordered its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Philip James Vandeleur Kelly, 3rd The King's Own Hussars (attached to the Egyptian Army), to cross the frontier and capture the well-centres of Um Shanga and Jebel el Hilla[25]. Both were the first permanent water supplies to the west of En Nahud and on the road to El Fasher. Importantly, they were essential logistic steppingstones to any further operations in Darfur. The advance began on the 16th of March, with the well at Um Shanga captured with little difficulty. Jebel el Hilla, due to a lack of water *en route*, was more difficult, but ultimately fell to the advancing force on the 21st, despite a brush with a force of 800 enemy horsemen. Both successes helped to restore British prestige in the region and weakened Ali Dinar's resolve.

Kelly now faced a dilemma. Should he continue the advance immediately to El Fasher, the capital town built on the sides of a depression, and potentially face severe water shortages?

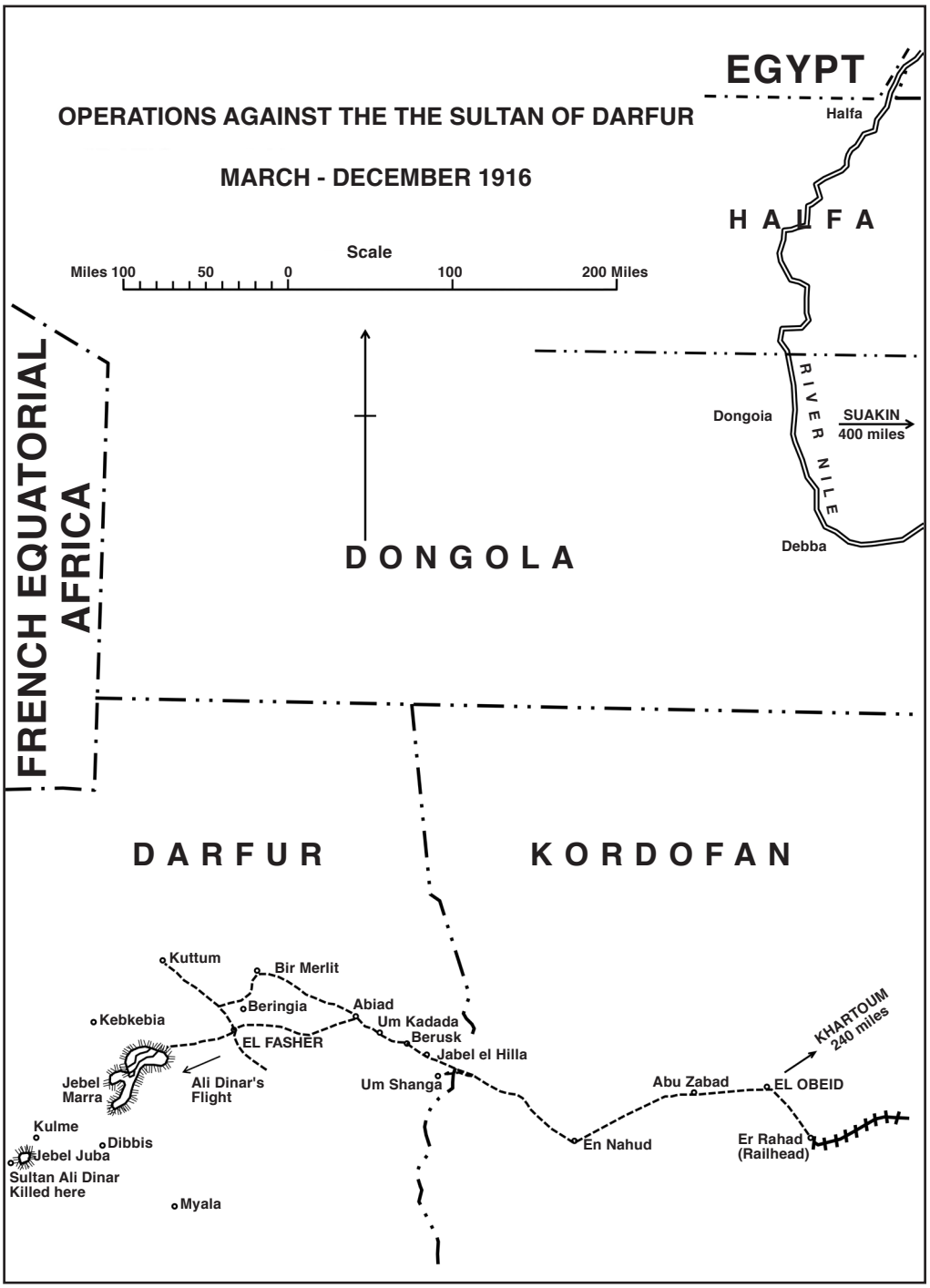

Figure 1: Operations against the Sultan of Darfur March – December 1916

Or wait until the rainy season (July to September when 15 to 20 inches routinely fell each year) when the ground would prove to be very difficult, but a larger ground force was sustainable? The advance on the capital was an undertaking of difficulty and risk under any circumstances. Relatively waterless and without roads, it was a distance of 250 miles. Advancing in the dry season would assist in pinning the enemy down to the well line and make it more difficult for the Fur Army to take part in raids on extended lines of communication. Moreover, any delay might be interpreted as weakness and post the rains could leave the country more favourable to guerrilla warfare. But there were other factors to consider. H. A. Jones notes in *The War in The Air*:

> … Wingate was anxious to include in his attacking force a detachment of aeroplanes, not only because of the help they would afford him by reconnoitring and bombing Ali Dinar's positions, but also because they would provide a symbol of the might and power of the British Army. The sudden appearance, out of the blue, of flying chariots such as no one in Darfur had seen before was calculated to impress on Ali Dinar's followers the futility of resistance[26].

Kelly decided to press on as quickly as possible. During April, further advances within the frontier secured Berusk, Um Kedada and Abiad, with little enemy resistance. Preparations began for the advance on El Fasher. It was clear that the dispersal of Ali Dinar's main army in El Fasher – including most of his recalled provincial garrisons – would prove to be the sole effective guarantee to the security of Western Sudan[27].

The Arrival of the 'Flying Chariots'

The challenges of employing rudimentary air power in Darfur were significant. It was anticipated that the attack on El Fasher, where Ali Dinar's main force of between 4,000 – 6,000 riflemen and spear and sword-armed auxiliaries were located, would begin in May, taking advantage of the full moon. May and June are the hottest months of the year, with temperatures soaring above 120 degrees in the shade[28] and 135 degrees in the direct sun. The impact on aircraft, personnel and logistics was great. Water, left in metal containers in the sun, boiled uncontrollably. Heat significantly reduced the petrol supply too through evaporation[29]. It also warped woodwork – particularly propellers. The laminations shrunk and pulled out at the boss[30]. Large dust-devils were common and there were frequent, unexpected (on the part of the barometer) and menacing *haboubs*, or sandstorms. These severely hampered visibility, making it particularly difficult to see anything on the ground, with drifting dust routinely inhibiting flying operations[31]. *Haboubs* usually occurred in the evening.

Sand would also jam the Lewis guns. Landings and take-offs always threw-up significant clouds of dust and sand. The Royal Aircraft Factory-type tent hangars used were not sand proof, making routine maintenance difficult. Iron screw pickets had to be used to secure the portable canvas hangars as wooden pickets were eaten by white ants[32]. Indeed, all wooden surfaces had to be protected by a highly poisonous alcoholic solution to prevent the entry of ants (and other boring insects) into any woodwork. The rainy season, which starts to take hold in mid-June,

brings stormy weather, torrential downpours and a thick haze. The featureless country and lack of detailed mapping hindered navigation. Plants with very sharp, two inch-long hard thorns, were *ubiquitous*. Any forced landing could result in the puncture of a tyre. Nor was there any real hope for the survival of a pilot if he was lost or captured by the enemy[33]. Equally challenging, the transportation of machines, hangars, repair shops, fuel for the whole operation and other necessary equipment, like fitters' benches, would test even the most competent logistic officers. Supply lorries, used frequently once rudimentary roads were constructed, were marooned for whole days in soft, yielding sand up to the axles. Logistic success was only attained by the first-rate organisation of Major V. W. R. C. Groves of Headquarters RFC, Egypt and other supporting personnel. The supply difficulties were formidable; the country had been depleted of transport animals and it was necessary for this expedition to raise and equip ten Army Transport companies of 200 camels each. Wingate noted more broadly in his dispatch:

> It will be realized [sic] that a most careful and comprehensive organisation [sic] was required to convey some three thousand men with stores, guns, aeroplanes and other bulky equipment of a modern expeditionary force …[34]

The nearest aviation and personnel assets were those of 'C' Flight of No. 17 Squadron, based at Suez. These had been operating against the Turks in the Sinai Peninsula, but were allocated to the Anglo-Egyptian Army for the expedition. The commander of the detached Flight was Captain E. J. Bannatyne[35]. On the 11th of May, two RFC two-seat B.E. 2c biplanes, equipped with the reliable 90 Royal Aircraft Factory engine[36], arrived at the landing strip at Jebel el Hilla, prompting a message of congratulations from Wingate. Having flown-up from Er Rahad, where they were assembled and operated initially from the dried end of a lake, their role was to support the ground column. These aircraft were frail contraptions of fabric and wooden bracing struts, with wires and glue holding the aircraft together. Er Rahad contained a tin locomotive-shed which held two fully erected aircraft. Two further machines were held in reserve at En Nahud, where sheds of wood and tin were constructed to house the aircraft. For good reason, it was not considered practical to fly the machines the whole way from Suez, the journey being fraught with many practical difficulties. Instead, a number of means of transport were used: first, a four-day, 800-mile journey by sea from Suez to Port Sudan; next, a six-day, 900-mile transit by train to El Obeid or Er Rahad (on the Kordofan railway)[37]; finally, once the aircraft were assembled, a 350 mile flight saw the aircraft arrive at their destinations. Meanwhile, all of the supplies had to initially travel on camel transport. These ships of the desert transported two hangars, spare engines and undercarriages, all fuel, ammunition and technical equipment, as well as rations and water[38]. A rough road network was constructed subsequently forward from the railheads to allow mechanical transport to ease the logistic burden[39]. This, it was hoped, would in time extend to El Fasher, a direct-line distance of 350 miles.

The duty of the aircraft supporting the columns in the advance was to: (1) reconnoitre ahead of the forward elements of friendly forces[40]; (2) keep any villages or well centres under

observation; (3) destroy enemy detachments by direct action where necessary; (4) scout for water; and (5) protect the column against surprise attack. Flights, as a rule, usually started at dawn when the air was relatively calm, but many occurred in the afternoon. As the day progressed, bumps, owing to the heat, became severe and cloud cover increased[41]. Challenging rising and falling currents, especially near hills, were also a regular hazard. Information to ground commanders was dropped by message bag; there was no wireless equipment in the aircraft. Face-to-face discussions were necessary, especially with the RFC officer (an observer or spare pilot) accompanying the ground force. He was responsible for ground-to-air communications, advice on RFC capabilities and the sighting of ground signals. Selected landing places were cleared, often by members of the Sudanese Camel Corps with broad-bladed knifes. Then, large signals, made of long strips of white cloth, were placed on the ground. Black symbols, which were experimented with, did not 'show up well'[42]. However, these markers routinely disappeared unless guarded, '… and the new robes of sheikhs' wives was evident of the uses to which the pilfered material had been put'[43].

It was extremely difficult to navigate cross-country in Darfur. The landscape had an extreme sameness about it – uniform sand, scrub and low bush. Camel convoys provided a useful directional guide to pilots as did broken-down 3-tonne Leyland lorries. But slow-moving columns of camels and khaki[44]-clad men were often difficult to spot from on high. Captain Bannatyne spent three hours in the air searching for the column on the 22nd of May – 'but failed to find it'[45]. This was not uncommon. Large arrows, routinely made of calico, were placed at 30 mile intervals to aid pilot navigation or to help identify a force. But these too were often stolen by the locals or eaten by goats or white ants. Arrows, 25 feet long and 3 feet wide, were most effective. Stolen arrows often made pilots question how far they had travelled, especially if they were expecting to see a cloth marker. Fires, lit by local officials on receipt of a warning that an aeroplane would be passing, helped pilots to identify the cloth arrows, but were viewed as 'quite useless as a guide'[46]. On occasions, Sudanese troops acted as observers to point the way. Slessor recalls that Bashawish (Sergeant-Major) Badda, a tall Berber, about six foot four inches, who had fought under the Khalifa against Kitchener at Omdurman, accompanied him on his first flight from Er Rahad to Jebel Hilla:

> I was not sure that this was an awfully good idea. Bashawish Badda had never before seen anything more mechanical than a camel in his life. I need not have worried. The old boy wormed himself into the front seat between the centre-section struts without turning a hair and took me straight to Hilla, following the rather indistinct tracks through featureless bush country[47].

The seemingly *ubiquitous* Slessor notes that: 'These operations involved what for those days were very long flights, of four and five hours' duration, and for this purpose pilots used always to fly alone with a large bucket tank fitted in the observer's seat. Bannatyne on one occasion did a total of eight and a half hours' flying in nine hours … [which had an impact] not only to the pilot but to the engine'[48]. A remarkable achievement under the trying conditions. But while

it was often difficult to identify the long slow-moving columns of khaki-clad soldiers, the Fur Army was usually easier to identify, either unclothed or wearing a dirty plain (white), striped or chequered *jibbehs*, with or without coloured patches. Most wore a white turban. Even so, grazing camels could easily be mistaken as the enemy from the air depending on light conditions.

The Hunt for Sultan Ali Dinar

With the ground force poised for advancement at Abiad and the RFC well-set to support operations, daily reconnaissance flights occurred over El Fasher. These sought to update commanders on troop dispositions and Ali Dinar's personal movements. Aircraft also dropped propaganda leaflets (small green handbills), urging the Sultan to surrender and the civil population to evacuate the area. These were of two kinds. The first sought to deny the false rumour that the 'invading' troops intended to force Christianity on the people[49]. The second type explained that aeroplanes would be dropping bombs, and that the young, old and women should relocate[50]. Due to a shortage of water, the ground force departed Abiad in two columns on the 15th and 16th of May (a slow-moving column 'A' and a mobile column 'B'), reuniting 40 miles west of Abiad and 28 miles short of Bir Melit, where there was a good supply of water[51]. Bir Melit, a large well centre and the last on the line to El Fasher, was subsequently bombed (four 20-lb Hales bombs were dropped) and machine-gunned (2½ drums of Lewis gun fired) from the air[52], after a low-flying aircraft, piloted by Bannatyne, was fired-on from the villages; a bullet hitting the propeller[53]. An enemy force, estimated at approximately 500, had been holding-up in the village. The attack resulted in the enemy leaving the area at pace[54]. On the return journey, a message was dropped informing the ground force that water was available in the wells and that the enemy had fled. But, due to the severe temperatures and general fatigue, the ground force advance was postponed until the 22nd. During this three-day halt several aerial reconnaissances were carried out and the enemy were reported in force north of El Fasher, but the country was clear of enemy for the next 15 miles. Slessor, flying a reconnaissance flight on the 19th of May at an average height of 2,000 feet, notes simply:

> Flew in a southerly direction. Struck the El Fasher road about 2 miles S [south] of MELIT.
>
> Country all clear. Apparently good road, many villages empty others occupied by ordinary civilian population[55].

Unfortunately, the weather was now worsening and the air was full of sand and dust, making it increasingly difficult to make anything out from the air. A shower of rain fell on the evening of the 21st, resulting in a particularly thick haze on the 22nd. But there was little time to waste.

Underway again, this time in square formation[56], the ground force came into contact almost immediately with enemy scouts and, in turn, more serious opposition. It was necessary on numerous occasions to halt and bring the guns into action to disperse the large number of

enemy horsemen and camelry (totalling 800). The country was rough, broken and covered with small sand dunes and scattered bushes. There were significant areas of concealed ground. Visibility, as a result, was restricted and it was difficult to see more than a few hundred yards in any direction. At about eleven o'clock a main force of about 2,600 riflemen were sighted[57], holding a strong position, consisting of trenches and fortified buildings, close to the village of Beringia, 12 miles north of the capital. This Fur concentration was quickly shelled to gain the initiative, while the force prepared itself[58]. This key position contained Ali Dinar's best troops and commanders and outnumbered Kelly's force. In true Dervish style, after an advance of a company without specific orders, Ali Dinar's force threw themselves against the rifles, machine-guns and artillery of the well-drilled Sudanese force with battle flags flying for 40 minutes. Their bravery was no match for the intensive fire, including artillery guns firing case ammunition[59], although some of the attackers fell within only ten yards of the firing line. Signs of wavering in the enemy's ranks provided an opportunity, and Kelly ordered the advance[60]. With a well-drilled, orderly force advancing at pace, the enemy broke and fled. The Fur casualties amounted to well over 1,000 casualties (including 231 dead and 96 seriously wounded). Although due to their apparent ability to withstand wounds that others would have succumbed to, many more walked or staggered away from the battlefield. Ali Dinar's force was defeated, but minor attacks occurred against Kelly's force throughout the night.

On the morning of the 23rd, when Kelly's force was advancing on El Fasher, the enemy rear-guard of horsemen was repeatedly attacked by machine-gun fire from Slessor's B.E.2c. At the same time, Slessor came across the remnants of Ali Dinar's army emerging from the southern end of the town. There were some 2,000 rallying round the Sultan's banner. *The Times* notes:

> … Lieutenant Slessor saw 2,000 enemy cavalry drawn up in reserve outside the town, and attacked them with bombs and machine-gun fire. The horsemen scattered in all directions and took no further part in the fighting. When he began bombing the cavalry the lieutenant saw a group surrounding a banner. He aimed a bomb at the party, and later information points to the Sultan having a narrow escape, two of his servants and his own [white Bishareen] camel being killed by the bomb[61].

Slessor, in his reconnaissance report of 23 May 15, recalls the situation straightforwardly:

> Left HILLA 5.15, ABIAD 6.35, arrived EL FASHER 7.40. Saw large numbers of enemy in Town. Proceeded to KHULDINGI, arriving 8.5 [sic]. Nothing to be seen. Returned to FASHER, 8.30. Saw our shells bursting over village just north of [El] FASHER. Flew over target and saw large numbers of enemy's cavalry, who fired on machine from the saddle. Bomb dropped on them also machine gun fired. Enemy fleeing in confusion to EL FLASHER & saw them pass through the Town and out south of it where they joined about 2,000 enemy. I bombed this body which retired in disorder. Then bullet entered my thigh. I proceeded north to EL FASHER to look for our Force but 'haboob' obscured everything, so returned ABIAD, flying by compass. Arrived ABIAD 11.5 [sic]. Report ends[62].

Ali Dinar had a narrow escape but, during the attack, Slessor, flying at low altitude, was wounded by ground fire and had to steer with his hand instead of his foot on the way back to El Hilla, his difficulties being greatly increased by a storm that appeared unexpectedly and strong headwinds[63]. The bullet was removed from his leg that day, but not before he brought detailed news of the victory at Beringia. The triumph was subsequently transmitted to Wingate from the aerodrome. However, due to his injury, Slessor was invalided back to the United Kingdom and played no further part in operations in Darfur. For his actions he was awarded the Military Cross. It was subsequently alleged that Ali Dinar shot at the aircraft with a sporting rifle purportedly given to him by the Governor General.

Kelly's mounted troops entered El Fasher at ten in the morning without opposition. Four guns, numerous rifles, a significant haul of ammunition and a plant for the manufacture of gunpowder were captured. It was now inhabited by women, children and old men. The following morning Ali Dinar fled south with his remaining followers into the desert. His destination was the perceived security and remote fastness of the inaccessible Jebel Marra – a journey of one and a half days across waterless desert. During the early stages of his withdrawal, the fleeing force was bombed from the air[64]. H. A. Jones posits: 'The morale of the enemy troops was destroyed by this unexpected form of assault and they broke into small parties, and later reports showed that many died of thirst in the desert because they could not bring themselves to return to El Fasher, where they might again be attacked from the air'[65]. Danger to the Sudan was now effectively over, but there was no hope of tranquillity whilst Ali Dinar was at large.

Kelly was unable to order his force to pursue Ali Dinar. Transport animals were exhausted and there was a pressing shortage of supplies. Seeing an opportunity to play for time and a favourable compromise, the Sultan sent a number of envoys to discuss favourable terms. Renouncing his sultanate in the process, these included allowing him to live with his family quietly on his lands. Initially the talks appeared positive and in late June, with the rainy season impending, 'C' Flight was ordered to withdraw back to Egypt. Its utility had come to an end and the Flight was needed elsewhere. Negotiations continued until the 1st of August, when Kelly drew a final halt to discussions. Surrender of all the enemy forces became the sticking point and Ali Dinar was stalling for time. In the meantime, the ex-Sultan was facing a different challenge. A number of his followers revolted and rebellion followed. The remaining force, loyal to Ali Dinar, now amounted to roughly 1,000 men. This was large enough to pose a problem to those remaining government forces and to keep the district in disorder. To counter this threat, military posts were established at key locations (Kebkebia and Dibbis) in September and October. These outstations helped result in another series of failed dialogues. Again, Ali Dinar failed to act in good faith. In October a mobile force departed to corner Ali Dinar. Hearing that the force at Kulme, 45 miles west of Dibbis, was suffering from sickness and starvation and was unlikely to offer resistance, Major H. J. Huddleston, the force commander, decided to seize the initiative. He occupied Kulme on the 3rd of November after only minor resistance. However, on arrival, it was found that the main body of the rebels had retired in a westerly direction towards Sugai[66].

The mounted troops caught up with Ali Dinar's fleeing force on the 6th of November in the area of Jebel Juba. In the attack that followed, the ex-Sultan was killed; he was shot through the forehead. Beside him lay his wounded son, Mohammed Fadl and close by were two more sons, Husseyn and Seif el Din, waiting to surrender. The place where he met his death was near the frontier with Wadai, which had suffered as a consequence of the rebellion in Darfur. Subsequently, numerous prisoners were taken, a significant amount of arms and ammunition were secured, as well as 600 cattle[67]. This was to be the final act in the ex-Sultan's rebellion. The Darfur campaign was finally over. Order returned to the region and for those who participated in the campaign, the reward of the silver Khedive's Sudan Medal of 1910, with clasp 'Darfur 1916', followed[68]. The £500,000 (£30,500,000 today) bill for the cost of the expedition was sent to the Egyptian Government in Cairo for payment by the Egyptian taxpayers.

Conclusion

The occupation of El Fasher led to the final consolidation of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Darfur, until that point, was the only province within the Anglo-Egyptian sphere of influence which was not under direct control of Khartoum[69]. It is noteworthy that the force engaged throughout the campaign was purely Egyptian (principally Sudanese soldiers), although commanded by British officers and supported by the RFC. Air power, in the form of a small detachment of 'C' Flight, of No. 17 Squadron, RFC operating at extreme length from its original base location, played a key role throughout the operation. Although not employed in the final pursuit of Ali Dinar, as the air detachment had been ordered to return to Egypt, aircraft helped in reconnoitring and attacking the Sultan's positions and also provided a tangible symbol of the might, reach and power of the British Army. The rudimentary B.E. 2c biplanes were indispensible elements of the force package. The deployment of the Flight was also an example of model staff work and logistical planning, and underlined the adaptability and dependability of the RFC. There was rarely a reported case of an engine running anything other than efficiently; a significant achievement considering the extreme climatic conditions. And lessons were quickly identified and best practice distributed. The Flight War Diary notes that: '… in this climate ½ gallon [of oil] pumped into the [illegible engine part] after the first hour, and during each subsequent hour gives excellent results in keeping an engine running.'[70] It was also the first time that many of the Sudanese and Egyptians of Kelly's force had seen the employment of air power. Major A. J. Potts, who took part in the campaign, recalls: 'For the first time astonished troops saw the beautiful sight of an aeroplane gleaming against a golden sunrise as it turned in a downward circle to land on the prepared stretch of ground. "The ship of the air"' brought down the house. "By God! our General is very clever," murmured the marvelling soldiery …'[71]

But the high frequency of flights and constant danger, no matter how successful, also had its challenges. Lieutenant Bellamy was found to be in a state of collapse on the 22nd of May, after a particularly challenging flight. The Flight War Diary notes simply: 'MO [Medical Officer] reported mental strain'[72]. Slessor was shot through the thigh and other pilots and crew had

fallen sick, lost their nerve or become exhausted. The aircraft too had taken a battering during the campaign and needed a deep overhaul to maintain their readiness on return to Suez. Despite these realities, the RFC performed with great skill and distinction and this was a useful foretaste of how air power could be successfully integrated with ground forces to achieve tactical and operational success. It was a model that would become the standard across the far reaches of the British Empire in the interwar period[73]. Warfare had now entered a new and very different age. Air power was a 'must have' for any ground commander facing a tenacious, dispersed and unpredictable foe. But operations in Darfur are also a telling example of how early intervention – at reach – prevents dangerous situations getting worse. Wingate realised that it is often better to stamp-out a spark travelling along a fuse well before it reaches the explosive charge than allowing it to detonate and deal with the fallout.

In an interesting postscript, in connection with the news of the capture of El Fasher and the defeat of Ali Dinar's troops, the German habit of deliberately publishing false rumours was in evidence once again. The following wireless message was issued:

> According to reports from Constantinople, Ali Dinar, the Iman of Darfur, has declared a Holy War against England. The Iman is already marching against the Northern Sudan with troops and 8,000 camels. He has driven the English forces before him, and his plan is to advance in concert with the Senussi. The statement that the English have beaten the troops of the Iman is false. The English are in full flight, retiring on the Nile. – Reuter[74].

Nothing could have been further from the truth and no doubt brought a wry smile to the convalescing Slessor.

Notes

[1] *The Times*, 'Airmen's Work in Darfur: Bombing The Sultan's Party', 7 August 1916.
[2] His real name was Zakariya Mohammed Al-Fadi Abdel-Rahman Arrasheed. He was nicknamed Ali Dinar ('Ali is hell') by his mother for being naughty and difficult to deal with as a child. He was born in February 1865 and the name 'Ali Dinar' followed him even when he became the Sultan of Darfur.
[3] Omdurman wiped out the disgrace of General Gordon's murder at the fall of Khartoum 13 years before. See: Pollock, J. *Kitchener: The Road to Omdurman* (London: Constable, 1998) and Trench, C. C. *The Road to Khartoum: A Life of General Charles Gordon* (New York: Norton & Company, 1979).
[4] *The Times*, 'The Conquest of Darfur: A Desert Campaign Without a Hitch', 26 October 1916.
[5] Hadaway, S. *Pyramids and Fleshpots: The Egyptian, Senussi and Eastern Mediterranean Campaigns, 1914-16* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The Military Press, 2014), 83.
[6] Slessor, J. *The Central Blue: Recollections and Reflections* (London: Cassell and Company Limited, 1957), 643.
[7] After Germany's invasion of Belgium.
[8] Hadaway, *Pyramids and Fleshpots*, 81.

[9] MacMunn, G. F. and C. Falls. *Military Operations, Egypt & Palestine: From the Outbreak of War with Germany to June 1917* (London: The Imperial War Museum, 1928), 146.
[10] *Second Supplement to The London Gazette*, 25 October 1916, Number 29800, 10365.
[11] *International New York Times*, 'Report Accuses Sudan of 'Scorched Earth' Tactics in Darfur', 30 September 2016.
[12] Of note, the ramshackle 'jungle' camp in Calais, France is home to numerous migrants from Sudan. The camp sits only 31 miles from Great Britain – their ultimate goal. *International New York Times*, 'Inside the Migrant 'Jungle' in France, 26 September 2016.
[13] The great girth of the hollow trunks of the tebeldi trees stored a significant percentage of the region's water supply. It was estimated that each tree could hold up to 500 gallons.
[14] The civil and religious leader of a Muslim state.
[15] Slessor, *The Central Blue*, 644.
[16] The Inspector General, Baron Sir R. von Slatin, was for many years the chief intermediary between the Government and Ali Dinar.
[17] Hadaway, *Pyramids and Fleshpots*, 81.
[18] Jones, H. A. *The War in The Air: Being the Story of the Part Played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force – Volume V* (London: The Naval and Military Press Limited, 2002), 171.
[19] *The Times*, 'Conquest of Darfur Completed: The Ex-Sultan Killed', 14 November 1916.
[20] *Second Supplement to The London Gazette*, 25 October 1916, 10366.
[21] MacMunn and Falls, *Military Operations*, 148.
[22] *Second Supplement to The London Gazette*, 25 October 1916, 10368.
[23] Slessor, *The Central Blue*, 646.
[24] *Second Supplement to The London Gazette*, 25 October 1916, 10367.
[25] Desert wells had small openings about two feet square to prevent sand falling in and the water lay at considerable depths. The water was drawn-up in a skin bladder on the end of a long thin rope.
[26] Jones, *The War in The Air*, 171-2.
[27] *Second Supplement to The London Gazette*, 25 October 1916, 10367.
[28] Sun screens to protect the aeroplanes on the advance landing grounds were designed, and special propeller screens were constructed.
[29] Intense heat caused aviation petrol tins to burst, and evaporation was so great that a consignment of seven cases supposed to hold 56 gallons contained only 37 gallons. *The Times*, 'Airmen's Work in Darfur: Bombing The Sultan's Party', 7 August 1916. This was even more evident when petrol was being carried on camels. Cases were wrapped in grass matting but, even so, evaporation averaged nearly fifty per cent and some tins arrived at the front empty.
[30] Slessor, *The Central Blue*, 654,
[31] AIR/1/2250, 'War Diary of 'C' Flight, Number 17 Squadron in Darfur Campaign for 1st May – 23rd June 1916', General Notes.
[32] 'White ants were a great nuisance; everything had to be raised off the floor or specially protected as white ant will eat through practically anything except metal'. Slessor, *The Central Blue*, 654.
[33] Each aircraft carried: 10 x Very lights; 1 x bottle of drinking water; 1 x iron ration per officer;

and 2 sheets (for ground signals) 18' x 3'. Pilots also carried a Very pistol and clasp knife. The following emergency signals were in standard use: 'T' – the commencement of the emergency landing ground; 'F' – engine failure, machine all right; 'L' – undercarriage broken; 'Y' – aeroplane completely broken, not worth saving; 'A' – pilot and passenger injured; 'W' – one injured; 'N' – petrol shortage; 'V' – oil shortage; 'C' – propeller broken; and 'K' – require help.

[34] Sir Oliver Wingate, Naval and Military Despatches, Part VI, August 8, 1916, 172, quoted in Slessor, *The Central Blue*, 645.

[35] This consisted of 3 officers and 15 men.

[36] The 90 Royal Aircraft Factory engine throughout stood up extraordinarily well under very adverse conditions.

[37] The aeroplane cases were protected from the sun by a double covering of grass matting.

[38] One Royal Aircraft Factory-type tent hangar took 28 camels to carry, and the long roof girders had to be slung between 2 camels placed end on. Specially selected camels carried the heavier loads, '… and usually died afterwards.' Slessor, *The Central Blue*, 652. Long treks on camel back were very trying to inexperienced personnel; the camels supplied were all transport (*hamla*) camels and there were very few riding camels.

[39] *The Times*, 'The Conquest of Darfur: A Desert Campaign Without a Hitch', 26 October 1916.

[40] To assist with long distance reconnaissance requests, the following ground signals became standard: 'I' – reconnaissance required of El Fasher; 'II' – reconnaissance required of Bir Melit; and 'III' – reconnaissance required of Sayan.

[41] AIR/1/2250, War Diary, 21 May 1916.

[42] Ibid, 16 May 1916.

[43] *The Times*, 'Airmen's Work in Darfur: Bombing The Sultan's Party', 07 August 1916.

[44] A light shade of yellow-brown.

[45] AIR/1/2250, War Diary, 22 May 1916.

[46] Ibid, 16 May 1916.

[47] Slessor, *The Central Blue*, 17-18.

[48] Ibid, 653; *The Times*, 'The Conquest of Darfur: A Desert Campaign Without a Hitch', 26 October 1916.

[49] The leaflet also denounced Ali Dinar; promised justice (and religious freedom once he was gone); clemency and confirmation in office for the tribal chiefs who submitted; and humanitarian relief.

[50] Jones, *The War in The Air*, 175.

[51] MacMunn and Falls, *Military Operations: Egypt & Palestine*, 150.

[52] AIR/2250/1, War Diary, 17 May 1916.

[53] *The Times*, 'Airmen's Work in Darfur: Bombing The Sultan's Party', 07 August 1916.

[54] *Second Supplement to The London Gazette*, 25 October 1916, 10369.

[55] AIR/2250/1, Flying Log, 19 May 1916.

[56] The advance over broken sand hills in square formation often resulted in parts of the square being on high ground and the remainder entirely lost to view.

[57] *The Times*, 'Darfur Tribesmen Surrendering: Military Stories Captured', 02 June 1916.

[58] *The Times*, 'A Sudan Revolt: Sultan of Darfur's Capital Taken', 27 May 1916.
[59] Artillery ammunition that exploded into fragments.
[60] *The Times*, 'Darfur Tribesmen Surrendering: Military Stores Captured', 02 June 1916.
[61] *The Times*, 'Airmen's Work in Darfur: Bombing The Sultan's Party', 7 August 1916.
[62] AIR/1/2250, Reconnaissance Report, Lieutenant Slessor, 23 May 1916.
[63] AIR/1/2250, War Diary, 23 May 1916.
[64] *The Times*, 'Complete Victory in Darfur: The Sultan's Plight', 31 May 1916.
[65] Jones, *The War in the Air*, 176.
[66] *The Times*, 'Conquest of Darfur Completed: The Ex-Sultan Killed', 14 November 1916.
[67] Ibid.
[68] The Khedive's Sudan Medal was a British Empire campaign medal presented to those who participated in operations in the Egyptian Sudan for which no other separate medal was intended. The medal was instituted in 1911 and was awarded by the Khedivate of Egypt for service in Egyptian Sudan between 1910 and 1921 for operations as defined by clasps worn on the medal ribbon.
[69] *The Times*, 'The Sudan Victory: Fine Work by the Egyptian Army', 28 May 1916.
[70] AIR/1/2250, War Diary, 15 May 2016.
[71] Pott, A. J. *People of the Book*, (London: Blackwood and Sons Limited, 1932), 163.
[72] AIR/1/2250, War Diary, 22 May 15.
[73] Of note, it preceded the Somaliland campaign in 1920, where air power ('Z Force') was used, by four years.
[74] *The Times*, 'The Sudan Victory: Fine Work by The Egyptian Army', 28 May 1916.