

Epilogue, by Jeremy Archer

Having been promoted to captain on 27 July 1885, John Compton Pyne attended the Staff College in 1889/90, passing the course with high marks. On 12 February 1892, he was attached to the Intelligence Department of the Egyptian Army and, whilst in Khartoum, served as Aide-de-Camp to his first cousin, Brigadier-General H. H. Kitchener, who had just been appointed Sirdar of the Egyptian Army, which had come under British control ten years earlier. In the field he was an Intelligence Officer with the Egyptian Frontier Force.

While serving as a Bimbashi – from the Turkish meaning ‘chief of a thousand’, equating to the rank of major – with X Soudanese, Pyne wrote *Notes on the Egyptian Army, Strength, Composition, Distribution, Material, Etc.*, the illustrated manuscript of which is also held by the Military Museum of Devon and Dorset. First of all, he sets the scene: “[d]ip into history where you will, Egypt has always been a prime factor. Latterly especially so. But Egyptian territory has shrunk in spite of growing political importance. Ten years ago Egypt reached to the very heart of Africa, including the whole course of the Nile and Somaliland and the Horn of Africa.” A few paragraphs later, he writes: “The Khedive of course is Head of the Army. His C-in-C or Sirdar, Kitchener Pasha. His H^dQ^r Staff, W.O. Cairo consists of A.G. ‘a’ & ‘b’. The first of whom



Figure 104: Illustrated cover page of Pyne's *Notes on the Egyptian Army*.

looks after the discipline, service, strength, distribution, training; the latter pays, houses, feeds, clothes, arms & moved the Army. The Intelligence Dept. of the H^dQ^r Staff gains and arranges all information respecting the people,

country, supplies, etc., whether in Egypt, or the Soudan & compiles maps, records, etc.”

He describes the conditions of service of the soldiers under his command: “[a]ll soldiers are housed, clothed & fed entirely at Government expense; the same may be said of the Native Officers, who get an allowance in lieu of clothing & food in kind. This in all cases a soldier’s pay is all his own, to do as he likes with it. An Egyptian Private Soldier receives, although he belongs to a Conscript Army, 2½ d a day, and the various non-commissioned ranks get up to a maximum of 1/- d a day, out of which he need pay nothing on account of food, clothing, or housing. This makes him probably the best paid conscript anywhere. Soudanese soldiers, who are not conscripts, but who serve for life or as long as they can bear arms, and who make the Regiment their home, receive as Private Soldiers from 3¾ d to 6¼ d a day, ‘unencumbered’ with any stoppages or deductions whatever – the one rate or the other being dependent only on their market value.”

Pyne then describes the mixed nature of his command: “Soudanese Regiments contain men of more than a dozen different tribes, many so-called tribes being in reality distinct nationalities, as Abyssinians, etc. The principal peoples of Central Africa – of the very indefinite and

expansive part called the Sudân or ‘Country of the Blacks’, as it means – are Abyssinians, Somalis, Gallas, Shilluks, Bongos, Dinkas, Nubâwi, Nuer, Naim-Niam, the people of Dar Fur called Ferâwi, and Dar Fertit, men from Khartum, Omdurman and Obeid, from the great Kingdoms of Waddai, and Sokoto, Bornu, reaching to the Albert and Victoria Lakes, besides men who have fought over vast extents of country with Gessi, Gordon, Emin, etc. and some who travelled with Stanley.”¹

He next describes the uniforms and equipment borne by each element: “[t]he clothing and equipment of the army is partly English, partly French. Soudanese winter cloth clothing is of Zouave pattern² (vide on the next page [Figure 105]). Summer and fighting kit is Karki after Indian patterns. All arms, at all seasons of the year wear cloth putties – a most excellent article of kit. Ammunition boots, but on the march they are as often as not carried and a rough sandal substituted at the Regiment’s own expense. Some Regiments still carry old French knapsacks, some have new English valise equipment. The ‘Tarbush’ or fez is universal for all ranks and arms – European officers included. But in the summer sun and tropical heat we wear helmets as in India.”

¹ Sir Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904), the journalist, author and explorer, most remembered for his 1871 expedition to find the missionary and explorer David Livingstone who had been trying to locate the source of the Nile.

² Zouave indicates a uniform with an open-fronted jacket and baggy trousers.

“In character all Soudanese are frank and above board. When charged with an offence he will generally make no attempt to excuse himself for what he has done. He takes his punishment and [is] done with it. He loves fighting chiefly, I think, in a spirit of revenge for all the years of brutal murders and cruelty he and his people have suffered from the ‘Arabs,’ now identified as ‘Dervishes.’ He’s always ready to be up and at them. He hates the drudgery of drill, and does not appreciate precision in the least – in drill at least. He loves his glass of ‘merissa’³ (beer), his jollifications, and is very domesticated, if that is proved by 700 married establishments for 700 men”!

A report on the circumstances of Captain Pyne’s death, compiled by Major F. R. Wingate, Director, Military Intelligence⁴ begins: “On the morning of 30th December, 1892, it was ascertained that the Dervishes were about to make a descent on the Frontier, and that they were divided into two forces, one under the celebrated Emir Osman Azrak,⁵ to attack Gamai, and another under Hamuda,⁶ Emir of Suarda, to threaten Sarras.”⁷ Wingate

³ A traditional fermented beverage made from toasted sorghum.

⁴ Later General Sir Reginald Wingate, 1st Baronet of Dunbar and of Port Sudan (1861–1953).

⁵ ‘Uthmān Azraq (d. 1898) (Hill, 1967, p. 367); also known as ‘Uthmān Muḥammad ‘Īsā (Holt, 1970, p. 196).

⁶ Ḥamūda Idrīs al-Baqqārī (d. 1896) (Hill, 1967, p. 150).

⁷ Şaraş.



Figure 105: Pyne’s illustration of a Sudanese soldier in Zouave uniform.



acknowledges that “it was chiefly owing to the able manner in which [Pyne] conducted his Intelligence duties that the Frontier Force was fully prepared for any such contingency.”

Pyne was sent out in command of the mounted troops and, at 5 a.m. on the morning of 2 January, he learned that the Dervishes, as the Mahdist soldiers were termed, were about to withdraw south from Ambigole⁸ Wells. Unfortunately

Pyne, who was accompanied by a small party of Egyptians, was enticed forward of his main position on the high ground, and was some 400 yards from his camels when a body of horsemen debouched through an opening in the range of hills facing him and launched a ferocious attack. According to Wingate, “Captain Pyne, who was in the central position, advanced into the plain towards the right to order the men to remain fast, and was killed near a tree with three or four Egyptian soldiers round him; he had exhausted the contents of his revolver and taken a rifle from a soldier.”⁹

In his official report, Captain Woudhouse explained that “Captain Pyne knew the country well and was a most reliable officer; he was fully aware of the supposed strength of the raiders, and knew of my views as to the pursuit which was to follow on their line of retreat and possibly pick up stragglers, and hurry their line of march.” Wingate

Figure 106: General Sir Francis Reginald Wingate (1861–1955) who succeeded Lord Kitchener as Governor-General of the Sudan.

- ⁸ Also known as Ambikol, a fort some ten kilometres from the Nile, manned mainly by Egyptian soldiers with the aim of protecting the railway being built at the time. Conditions in this small garrison must have been appalling: “[t]he country between [Wadi] Halfa and Akasheh is in every sense of the word “a howling wilderness”... The march is a trying one both for man and beast, and the heat in some of the rocky valleys is terrible” (*The British Medical Journal*, 2 May 1896, p. 1104).
- ⁹ The colonial wars were reported throughout the British empire, and the Australian newspaper, *The Queenslander*, p. 1, published a small notice on 8 January 1893: “[n]ews received from Upper Egypt states that a fierce battle was fought with the Dervishes at Ambigole. The Dervishes made repeated charges, Killing a British officer and forty-six of the Egyptian troops. The Dervishes lost heavily, and eventually retreated.” This was followed by a report from London, dated 4 January: “[l]ater information states that the combined British and Egyptian force surprised a large body of Dervish cavalry and infantry at the Ambigole Wells. The Dervishes were greatly superior in numbers to their opponents, and a fierce hand-to-hand fight ensued, resulting in the rout of the Dervishes, who thereupon fled to the south ward. The losses sustained by the Egyptian force were serious, Captain Pyne, of the Dorsetshire Regiment, one Egyptian major, and fifty troopers being killed.”

continued, "From information subsequently received from native sources, it appears that when Captain Pyne left his position on the hill and descended to the plain, he was attacked by the Emir En Nur Abdel Fattah, who shot him in the legs and brought him to the ground, but when this Emir was about to attack him with his sword, Captain Pyne shot him dead. Another important Emir then rushed at him, but Captain Pyne also shot him dead. Osman Azrak, the Commander of the whole force, then shouted: "All rush at that infidel"; in the final attack Captain Pyne shot Osman Azrak's horse, but he was overpowered and killed."

On 4 January 1893, Brigadier-General H. H. Kitchener sent a telegram from Cairo to Morris Ringwood at Dover, requesting that the following message should be sent to the Reverend Edward Pyne: "[i]t was with deepest sorrow I learnt of the loss of your son yesterday; killed in action after severe conflict with Dervishes lasting several hours. He fell with two other officers and forty of his men. He had three bullet wounds in front and sword cut left arm. His body is being brought into Sarras, our advanced post, and will be buried in consecrated ground." There is some debate about what happened next. Wingate wrote that "his body was subsequently found by the Cavalry, who arrived on the scene of action some hours later". According to Mrs. Sheilah Pyne of Pyne's House, Thorverton, Devon, whose husband assumed her name by Royal Licence in

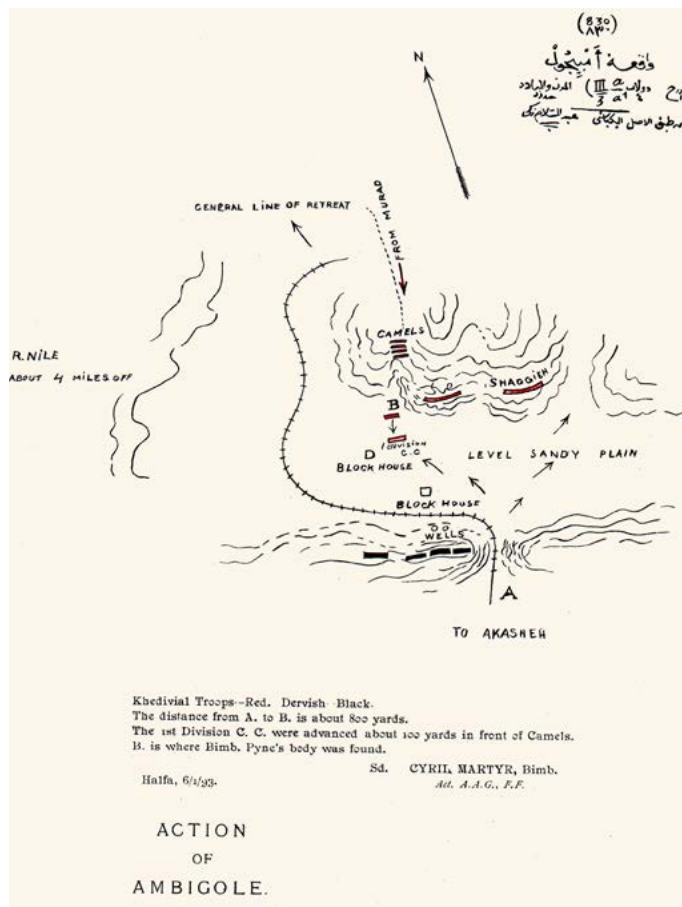


Figure 107: The 'Action of Ambigole' – map showing where Captain Pyne fell.

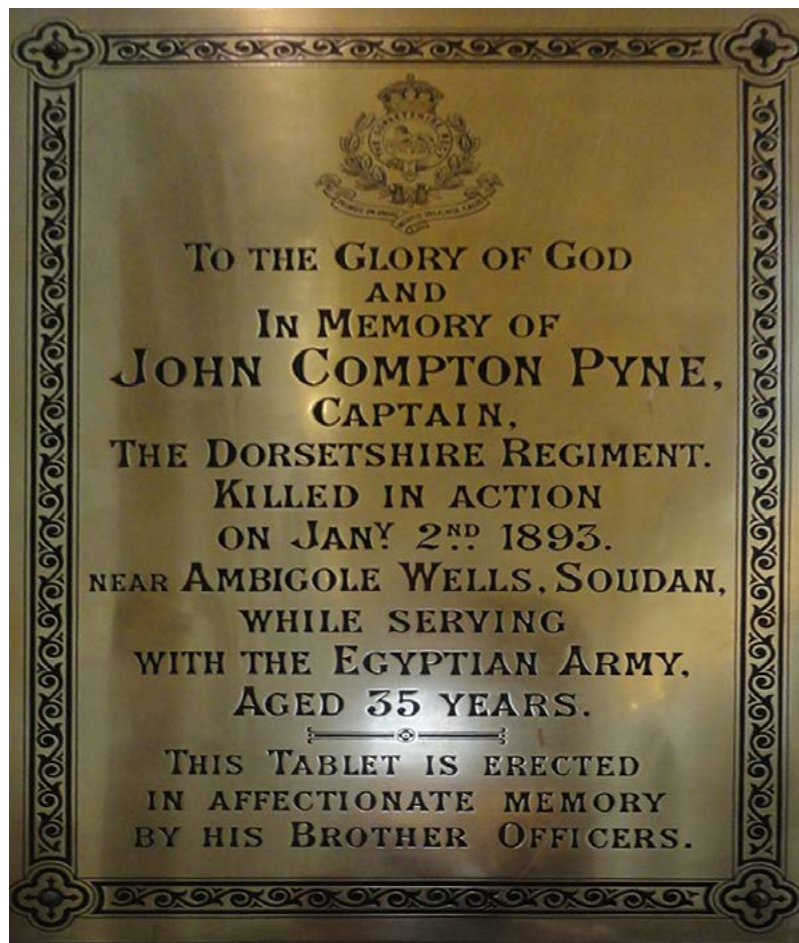


Figure 108: The memorial plaque in Sherborne Abbey.

1933, “his head was cut off and stuck on a pole at the gates of Khartoum”. Of course, both versions may be correct and Wingate may simply have been trying to spare the family from further pain.

Captain Pyne’s body was buried with full Military Honours at Wadi Halfa, which was flooded after the construction of the Aswan Dam during the 1960s. His brother officers later placed a brass plaque in “affectionate memory” in Sherborne Abbey. There is also a memorial in the Chapel of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst: “In Loving Memory of John Compton Pyne, the Dorset Regt. and Major in the Egyptian Army (Gentleman-Cadet 1877-78). Killed in Action while gallantly leading his Egyptian soldiers against the Dervishes at Ambigole 2nd January 1893. Aged 35 years. R.I. P.”

On 8 February 1893 the Sirdar wrote to Lieutenant-Colonel C. P. Egerton, Commanding, 2nd Battalion, The Dorsetshire Regiment, “Captain Pyne was one of the most valuable and excellent officers in the Egyptian Army, and there is no doubt that had he been spared his career would have been a brilliant one. All his comrades in the Egyptian Army join with me in deploring his loss.”