

French Soldier in Egypt 1798–1801

The Army of the Orient



Harry Crowdy • Illustrated by Christa Hook



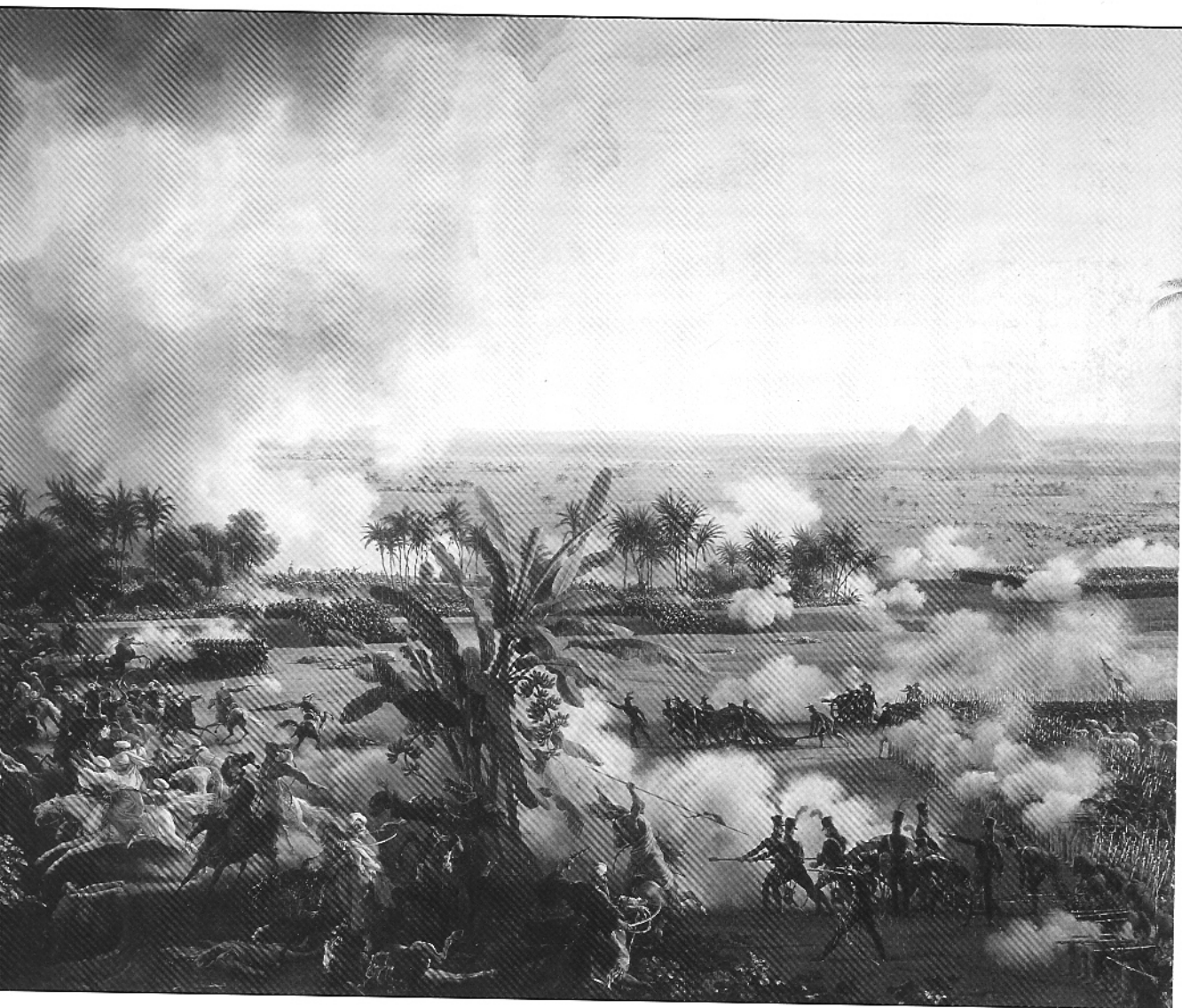
TERRY CROWDY has had a life-long interest in the life and times of the common soldier of the late-18th and early-19th centuries, with a particular passion for the subject of the French 9ème Légère. A committed re-enactor and historical researcher, Terry has written numerous articles for various magazines on the French forces of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. He lives in Kent, UK.



CHRISTA HOOK began her illustrating career in 1986. Her work has featured extensively in the worlds of publishing and television, and she has established herself as one of Osprey's most popular illustrators. Her illustrations combine the historian's attention to detail with the artist's sense of drama and atmosphere, and they are sought after by collectors worldwide.

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Author's note

Dates have been converted from the Revolutionary calendar and place names given in their most common spelling. Contemporary French terminology has been used throughout: the Bedouin are referred to as 'Arabs', while 'Turk' was the generic term for Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.

Editor's note

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Artist's note

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E. Sussex,
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FRONT COVER **The Bataille des Pyramides (21 July 1798) by Baron Lejeune. Five French divisions formed in large squares drive the Mamelukes into the River Nile. This victory opened up the way to Cairo, which was occupied three days later. (Ann Ronan Picture Library)**

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FRENCH SOLDIER IN EGYPT 1798–1801

INTRODUCTION

Although ultimately a military failure, Napoleon's expedition to the Middle East began an enduring popular fascination with ancient Egypt, a civilisation that was then all but lost to history. The three-year military campaign would have a profound impact on Western culture, influencing science, art, design, literature, cinema and tourism for the next two centuries. These achievements however, were not the original goal of the expedition. Fresh from his victories in Italy (1796–97) Napoleon Bonaparte was asked by the French government to consider an attack on Britain, Republican France's sole remaining enemy. Realising that a direct attack on mainland Britain could not be undertaken while the Royal Navy dominated the seas, Bonaparte turned his attention elsewhere.

The alternative appeared to be a French move to take control of the eastern Mediterranean by seizing first Malta, then Egypt. A new colony in Egypt would replace her lost territories in the West Indies, opening new markets for exports and providing a springboard from which to attack Britain's biggest colonial asset – India.

Napoleon's army of 34,000 men would be accompanied by a large number of scientists and artists, or *savants*, whose primary mission was to introduce modern scientific and agricultural techniques into the new colony. While attempting this, the savants were staggered by the abundance of ancient monuments and artefacts, which they investigated and recorded in their *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–22) – the foundation work of modern Egyptology.

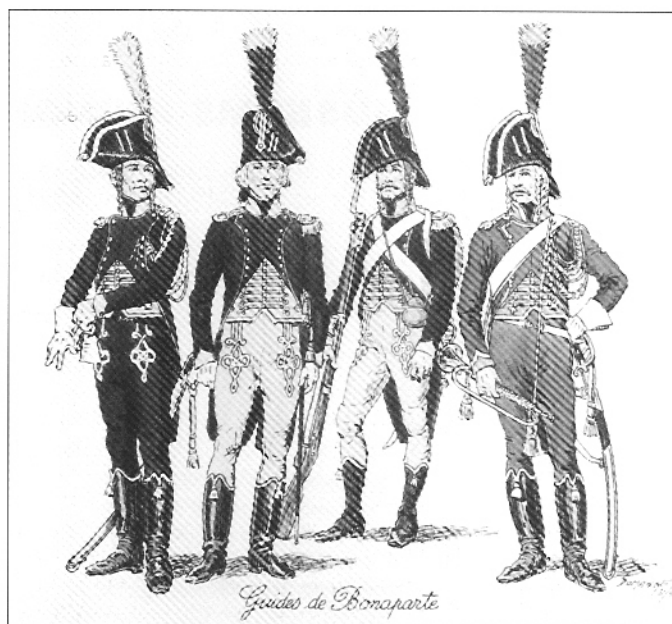
The scientific advances came at a high cost. The three-year duration of the expedition included several hard-fought battles and sieges, as the French overthrew the local Mameluke overlords and then had to defend their conquest against the combined efforts of the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain. Beyond the trials of the battlefield, the French had to endure the extreme conditions of Egypt and the Holy Land (1799): heat, thirst and outbreaks of bubonic plague would not distinguish between the generals, soldiers, scientists and civilians.

Conversion table of French pre-metric measurements.

TABLE OF MEASUREMENTS

	1 <i>ligne</i>	(2.226mm)
12 <i>lignes</i>	= 1 <i>pouce</i>	(2.707cm)
12 <i>pouces</i>	= 1 <i>pied</i>	(32.484cm)
6 <i>pieds</i>	= 1 <i>toise</i>	(1.949m)

Members of Bonaparte's personal bodyguard, the *régiment des guides*, 400 of whom accompanied their commander to Egypt.



CHRONOLOGY

(Bonaparte's Syrian campaign in italics)

1797	17 October	Treaty of Campo Formio ends War of First Coalition
1798	5 March	The government orders Bonaparte to seize Malta and Egypt
	19 May	Bonaparte departs from Toulon
	21 May	D'Hilliers' Division joins fleet at Gulf of Genoa
	27 May	Vaubois' Division picked up off Corsica
	28 May	Desaix's Division joins fleet from Civitavecchia
	10 June	French attack Malta
	12 June	Knights of St John seek truce
	19 June	Fleet departs for Egypt leaving General Vaubois with a garrison of 4,000 men
	30 June	French land in Egypt at Marabout Bay
	1 July	Alexandria taken by force
	13 July	First engagement against Mamelukes at Shubra Khit
	21 July	Battle of the Pyramids – Mamelukes defeated
	24 July	French take Cairo
	1–2 August	Naval battle of Aboukir Bay (or the Nile) sees the French fleet destroyed, marooning the army in Egypt
	25 August	Desaix leaves Cairo to campaign in Upper Egypt
	7 September	Battle of Sediman – Desaix defeats Mamelukes
	9 September	Ottoman Turkey declares war on France
	21–22 October	Cairo uprising
1799	3 January	Russo-Turkish alliance against France
	6 February	<i>Bonaparte begins invasion of Syria</i>
	9–19 February	<i>Siege of El Arish</i>
	25 February	<i>Gaza surrenders to French</i>
	7 March	<i>Capture of Jaffa</i>
	8 March	<i>First signs of the plague among the French troops</i>
	16 March	<i>Fall of Haifa</i>
	18 March	<i>Siege of Acre begins</i>
	31 March	<i>Nazareth occupied</i>
	1 April	<i>French reach the River Jordan</i>
	8 April	<i>Battle of Nazareth (or Luby)</i>
	16 April	<i>Battle of Mount Tabor – Kléber defeats Turks</i>
	7 May	<i>Turkish relief force approaches Acre</i>
	8–10 May	<i>Heavy assaults on Acre fail</i>
	20 May	<i>Siege of Acre lifted; French fall back on Egypt</i>
	14 June	<i>Bonaparte arrives in Cairo</i>
	25 July	Land battle of Aboukir – Turkish expeditionary force defeated
	23 August	Bonaparte abandons Egypt – Kléber given command of army
1800	28 January	Kléber signs treaty of El Arish to evacuate Egypt
	18 March	British inform Kléber they will not honour treaty
	20 March	Battle of Heliopolis – Turks defeated
	27 March	French put down a renewed revolt in Cairo
	14 June	Kléber assassinated in Cairo; Menou assumes command of army
	25 September	French on Malta capitulate to the British
1801	8 March	British land at Aboukir Bay
	21 March	Battle of Canopus – French attack repelled by British
	25 March	Turkish forces land in Aboukir and advance from Syria
	26 April	French under siege in Alexandria
	9 May	Action at Rahmaniya – French withdraw
	27 June	After a six-day siege, French in Cairo surrender
	30 August	Menou surrenders his forces in Alexandria to the British
	1 October	Peace signed between Britain and France
	9 October	Peace agreement between France and Turkey

ASSEMBLING THE EXPEDITION

Arriving in Toulon, naval recruit Sanglé-Ferrière thought he had been:

... transported into another world. I saw warships and the sea for the first time. The port and the harbour were filled with boats of every kind; the town overflowed with soldiers, sailors and people of diverse professions, who had come to join the expedition. It was a hive of considerable activity; the grandeur of the enterprise, the mystery which surrounded it, the names of the heroes who commanded it, the confidence in its success, held everyone in a sort of delirium and I felt proud to find myself associated with an army that had covered itself in glory in Italy.

Aside from 2e Légère from the *Armée de Sambre et Meuse*, the soldiers joining the expedition were veterans of Bonaparte's Italian campaign. Many were originally volunteers from the south of France, who were considered more likely to adapt quickly to the Egyptian climate. Before embarkation, each soldier was medically examined to ensure that he was, 'in the prime of life with lively and animated eyes, teeth in good condition, regular breathing, a good head of hair, elevated head, manly face, broad chest, strong thick shoulders, long arms, strong wrists, strong hands, pronounced muscles, well proportioned, trim waist, a slightly bent back, straight legs, the calves as well formed as the feet.' Those showing serious symptoms of venereal disease were promptly sent to hospitals in Toulon and Marseilles.

The greatest difficulties faced the cavalry. An officer of the 14e Dragoons noted some of the problems encountered during his regiment's preparations:

The harnesses had to be put into a first-class condition, weapons repaired and each dragoon provided with a new coat, waistcoat, breeches and a pair of boots, bought from our own money as the regiment's accounts were left with only fifty *Livres*. ... [Général



Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1822). After his victorious Italian campaign he enjoyed enormous popularity among the soldiers and savants at the outset of the expedition – it waned rapidly after the ill-fated Syrian campaign.



Vice-admiral Brueys (1753–98). The fleet he commanded was impressive: 55 warships, 130 merchant ships and 150 transport ships, carrying 10,000 sailors and 34,000 soldiers. He met a violent end at Aboukir, almost cut in half by a cannonball before his flagship, the *Orient*, exploded.

Murat] chose those horses whose age and constitution would allow them to survive the long journey. ... One hundred horses were designated for embarkation, the rest were allocated among the different Cavalry and Dragoon regiments that garrisoned the Cisalpine Republic.

A visit to the ships in Genoa made him more anxious:

Very few ships are ready for the embarkation of the horses and we are increasingly forced to restrict the number for those that will be used by the staff, cavalry and artillery. The biggest holds cannot accommodate more than 12 to 16 horses, but we have embarked all the horse furniture and without doubt, we will be remounted in the country of our destination.

A limited number of women were officially permitted to join the expedition: three for general staff, one for each divisional staff, four per infantry battalion or cavalry regiment, one for each company of horse artillery or pioneers, ten for the

hospitals and four for the uniform manufacturers. Each woman had to be issued with a certificate from their unit's Council of Administration stipulating their function, then pass a medical examination. This would have produced an official total of 340 women working as *cantinières* or washerwomen, but was augmented by wives who were smuggled aboard.

The expedition was largely financed with money extracted from the Swiss, but as Doguereau explained, 'speculators helped to find financiers for the cost of an expedition in which a large number of people embarked, persuaded they would make a most brilliant fortune, although few people knew its true direction. I have reason to believe that the members of the commission themselves remained in ignorance of the army's true direction for a long time.'

The secrecy surrounding the expedition covered everyone. François Bernoyer, the expedition's chief tailor, concurred: 'There was a lot of talk about going to Portugal or Egypt, but the majority thought we were going to Sicily or Malta.' Even the savants, the scientists and artists joining the expedition, were kept in the dark about their destination. Having been told only that General Bonaparte had requested their skills and assured that their posts would be protected in their absence, they were recruited and directed by the engineer General Caffarelli du Falga and the chemist Berthollet.

The new colony would also require contractors and administrators. En route to Toulon, the uniform contractor, Grandjean noticed a clear sign: 'We had several suspicions that the expedition that was being prepared was for Egypt. What confirmed this idea was the taking of almost all the works of literature that dealt with that country. ...They said that the travellers who had passed through had taken everything

they had found on the subject.' The expedition's scientists were equally unsure if Egypt was the true destination: 'Despite all the probabilities of the expedition's goal,' wrote one savant, 'not one of us knew its true end.' Chef de Bataillon Morand of the 88e demi-brigade, on the other hand, had his own theories:

The conjectures are limitless; the one I have adopted, after the way in which Général Desaix has been in the libraries researching all the books and maps relative to Egypt, Syria and Persia ... [and] appears most founded and most reasonable is that The Directory, not believing it possible to descend on England at this moment, has concluded the project of carrying an army to India through Asia and the Red Sea, if we can procure a large enough number of transport ships in the neighbouring ports of Syria and Egypt.

FINDING THEIR SEA LEGS

Lieutenant Laval recalled, 'Before embarking, Bonaparte formed the officers and *sous-officiers* of the troops in Toulon into a circle. He harangued us and told us that he was going to lead us into a country, from where not a single soldier would return to France without bringing back enough to purchase five or six acres of land. He said to us: "You know that I did not deceive you when I led you into Italy. Count on my word." The troops embarked without a murmur.'

As the fleet prepared to sail, François Bernoyer attended a luncheon, which proved to be short lived:

... no sooner were we at the table than the cannon fired: it was a signal of the squadron's departure. ... A boat was in the port ready to convey me to the *Patriote*. Arriving there I found the crew busy raising the anchor: It appeared that they were only waiting on me. All the ships had hoisted their sails and sailed by, receiving gun salutes from the city's forts and the batteries of Fort l'Amalgue. All the boats had raised their national ensign; they occupied an immense area. One could see everyone on deck, taking in the most beautiful sight that had ever been seen on the Mediterranean: an immense city floating majestically on the sea. Aboard each vessel, all the bands played those much-loved tunes, so often witnesses of our glory, leading us to victory.

Miot witnessed a sadder scene, 'On the admiral's departure his wife came aboard to say her goodbyes. She stayed until the moment the anchor was raised. As she shed her tears, the admiral embraced his son tenderly, then gave him back to his wife saying "adieu my son, this could be the last time I press you to my heart." A sad farewell and a fateful prophecy, which would be realised.'

In the port of Civitavecchia, near Rome, was Desaix's Division. Morand was becoming impatient:

The greatest agitation reigns around me. Our expedition's destination is still shrouded in mystery, but the eagerness for a

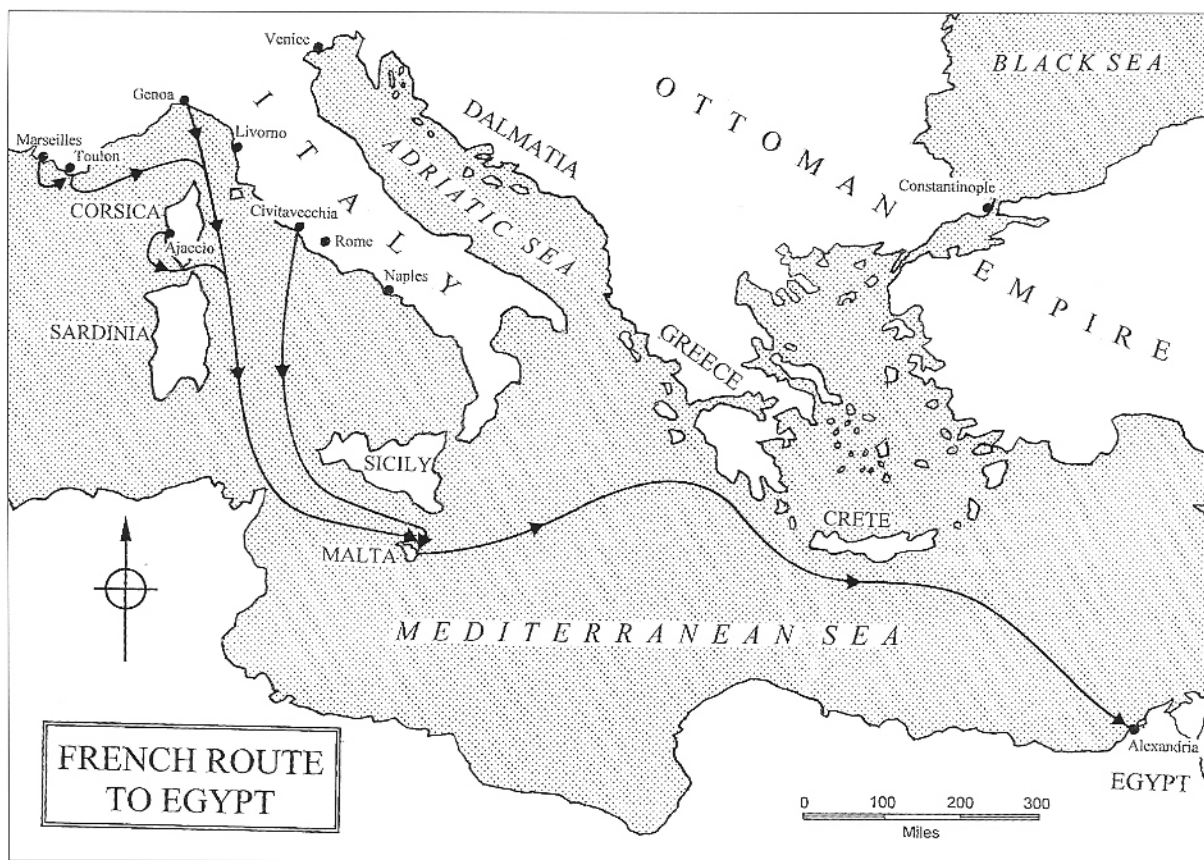


change and this extraordinary enterprise inspires high spirits in us all. The idea that we are going to fight England, no matter where, is sufficient to raise our enthusiasm. The delight at the news we have received from Genoa and Toulon inspires the troops, most of whom have never seen the sea, who see themselves piled into unarmed ships and abandoned to the whims of the wind, to the fury of the waves, to the hazards of unequal combat, the regret of leaving wonderful Italy, going far from home from that fortunate land, where each believes he sees the flowing tears of a mother, a lover or a friend, scared of the dangers which menace us. These regrets, this astonishment, I say, give way to the love of glory, to the hatred of England, to the need to revenge the ills of that rival nation, and the pleasure of setting off on romantic adventures.

Most soldiers found their initial enthusiasm wore off as they reached open sea, including Caporal Cailleux of 2e Légère:

We put the sails to the wind on 19 May at 3 p.m. The weather was fair despite a light northerly wind. As the waves were high, our vessel rolled continuously. This seemed increasingly unpleasant for those who did not have their sea legs. ... We became deathly pale and suffered greatly. In a word, it did not take violins to make us dance, nor surgeons to make us vomit; ... it was what they call "paying tribute to the sea". Eventually night fell and the sea was calm for several days and each man recovered. ... We continued on our route; but on the night of 22–23 May a storm blew up, driven along on a strong northerly wind, which forced us to furl all our sails and continue on our way with only the mizzen sail. The sea was dreadful and the wind so furious in the masts and rigging that it was like the

Cavalrymen having trouble embarking their horses at Toulon. In Genoa an officer of the 600-strong 14e Dragons recalled similar difficulties: 'This morning the embarkation of the cavalry horses commenced and it was conducted with great haste, but the hold space is so limited that the regiment had to leave most of the horses that have been brought here. Only 20 officers' and 17 troopers' mounts have been placed on the boats destined to transport them.'



snorting of a bull. The lightning dazzled us, the waves washed over the deck and each moment we believed ourselves swallowed by them. Fortunately the storm did not last long.

A week later, Morand and the 88e demi-brigade set sail from Italy:

On 26 May while the sun coloured the sea with its last rays, to the sound of a hundred cannon, to the cries of an immense number of people lined along the quays of Civitavecchia, to the soldiers standing on the ships' decks and sailors along the yardarms, the frigate the *Courageuse*, carrying Général Desaix, left by the port's eastern channel trailed by fifty boats. Its sails were fully unfurled from the yardarms as soon as it passed the sea wall and the wind could fill them. The numerous transport ships sailed through the eastern channel and beneath the moon, which rose around 9 p.m., our flotilla headed south on a fresh wind and a gentle sea. It was at that moment when I felt the first symptoms of that cruel malady, the painful tribute that one must pay the sea and from which few are exempt. ... Suddenly a pain in the bowels, a convulsive heaving of the stomach, woke me from my daydreaming. Awful vomiting overwhelmed me and I lost all my senses. I was carried to my bed where after suffering for several moments, sleep brought a respite, but when I awoke, it did not take long for my discomfort and sickness to return. In vain I

Day	07.00 – Breakfast	11.00 – Dinner	17.00 – Supper
1	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 192g of salted bacon	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 128g of vegetables
2	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 256g of salted beef	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 64g of rice
3	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 192g of salted bacon	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 128g of vegetables
4	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 128g of cheese	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 64g of rice
5	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 192g of salted bacon	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 128g of vegetables
6	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 256g of salted beef	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 64g of rice
7	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 192g of salted bacon	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 128g of vegetables
8	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 128g of vegetables	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 64g of rice
9	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 192g of salted bacon	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 128g of vegetables
10	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 128g of cod	192g of biscuit 230ml of wine 64g of rice

Table of rations issued to Desaix's Division during the voyage. Although great lengths were taken to provide the expedition with enough food for two months, the reliance on dried and salted products, coupled with a lack of fresh vegetables caused cases of scurvy. With just one month of poorly stored water on board, the capture of Malta was vital to the expedition's progress.

wanted to eat; taking broth, rice and chocolate; my stomach rejected all types of food and experienced awful contractions. To cap it all, the sea became rougher and my suffering increased with the rolling of the ship. In this condition, for which there is no remedy, twenty times I wanted to die, I wished to sleep in oblivion. ... On the third day, the wind had dropped and I recovered.

LIFE ON BOARD

While at sea, both soldiers and civilians, most of whom were not used to shipboard routine, had to quickly adapt to the claustrophobic tedium. Grandjean recalled the cramped conditions and seasickness he experienced onboard the flagship:

We were horribly ill onboard the *Orient* and, so to say, packed in like anchovies in a barrel. Imagine, if you can, a boat in which there were two thousand soldiers, a thousand crewmen and more than two hundred others, including generals, administrators and

members of the *commission des arts*, which carried, as well, one hundred and thirty two heavy calibre cannon, an innumerable quantity of munitions of all sorts, rations, herds of cattle, flocks of sheep to feed everyone for two months, and finally all their equipment and personal belongings. Such was the vessel the *Orient*, which, despite all this, was still the fastest in the squadron. ... My friend, whose position ranked him among the superior officers, ate at the table of the army's generals and premier officers. Having neither title nor senior position, I ate at the second table which was that of all the officers, aides de camp, administrators and some members of the *commission des arts*. This table was set for at least two hundred and fifty diners; and, because of the number, was served very frugally.

Sailing in the *Patriote*, François Bernoyer used the ship's boat to visit friends on board the *Orient*:

We took several steps aboard that floating fortress where three thousand people lived, before the *messieurs* made us descend into a kind of recess where they served us dinner. The table was well laden, but we were so close together, that we could hardly lift our hands to our mouths. Faced with this discomfort, our friends excused themselves, saying that the Commander-in-Chief, with his staff, occupied half the vessel. ... Together we looked around Bonaparte's quarters. They were laid out in a most appropriate and agreeable manner, with a refined elegance and good taste. Nothing was more surprising or marvellous than his *salon de compagnie*. It was decorated for a sovereign born into indolence and ignorance, rather than a republican general born for the glory of his homeland.

Grandjean also complained about the cramped sleeping conditions:

At night, we slept on hammocks in rows three deep. One was hung from the deck above, the other on the table and the third below; and each was so close to the next that when the sea was only slight, the movement of the vessel was enough to throw you into the hammock of your neighbour, who would fall into that of his and so on until the last, who would be thrown out of the gun port, if it was open.

Regardless of their rank, Désaix's men received three set meals a day while at sea. The menu was fixed for each *décade*, so that each person received 576g (18 ounces) of biscuit, 70cl ($\frac{3}{4}$ pint) of wine each day, with a portion of salted bacon or beef. The diet was supplemented by cod, cheese, rice and vegetables, which were preserved in a mixture of oil and vinegar. On paper this was a balanced diet, but Morand discovered the effect of the poor storage on the foodstuffs: 'Imagine yourself in a cramped and disgusting lower cabin with twenty drunk or sick men; looking at the dirty crockery full of pallid or putrefied salted meats, of broth with the odour of old grease, fighting over vegetables with weevils, sallow and foul smelling water, rotten eggs, dusty biscuits sometimes full of weevils.'

The greatest fear among the expedition was that of encountering Nelson's warships, known to be operating in the Mediterranean. Sailing from Marseilles to Toulon, the artist Denon was terrified by an alert:

Command was given to beat to arms – *to arms!* a terrible expression of which those who have never been to sea can form no idea: silence, terror, preparations for slaughter and its consequences, more fatal than carnage itself: all on board are united in one purpose: the manoeuvring of the ship and the management of the guns, are the sole objects of anxiety; the crew are considered only as auxiliaries.

Nevertheless, to improve the ship's gunnery, Chalbrand reports, 'Three times a day the troops were exercised in cannon drill'.

A terrified Caporal Cailleux was more worried by the poor handling of the French vessels:

There was another crisis on the night of 26–27 May at one in the morning. The vessel the *Tonnant*, which was to our left, came directly at us; we cried out to veer away to avoid the collision: but we did not have time, the vessel struck ours, breaking the prow and almost removing our bowsprit. Fortunately the wind was light, otherwise we would have run a great risk of being wrecked. We cleared ourselves by cutting several ropes and we were left very fearful.

Despite the spartan conditions, many were impressed by the view, when as Grandjean noted one dawn, 'the sea was perfectly calm. The whole convoy was assembled, extending for about two leagues: The warships at the head, the frigates and other armed vessels to the flanks and rear, with the flagship in the middle. Around three hundred craft in the best possible condition with brilliant white sails, offered at sunrise the finest spectacle that the imagination could form.' Although their destination remained secret, Laval could see that, 'everyone was content, and from one boat to the other, the cry of "Vive la République!" could be heard. The understanding between the servicemen – soldiers and sailors, left no doubt of the army's enthusiasm.' Miot concurred: 'The military bands made themselves heard on every side and produced an effect that I am unable to express.'

Shipboard routine continued as the fleet passed south of Corsica. 'A great calm reigned that day and our captain profited from it by cleaning his boat and carrying out the small, but necessary repairs.' However, 'in the evening,' as François Bernoyer continued, 'the amusements were more varied: Dancing, weaponry, music and above all the tales of the soldiers where each, without distinction, took part. These went long into the night.'

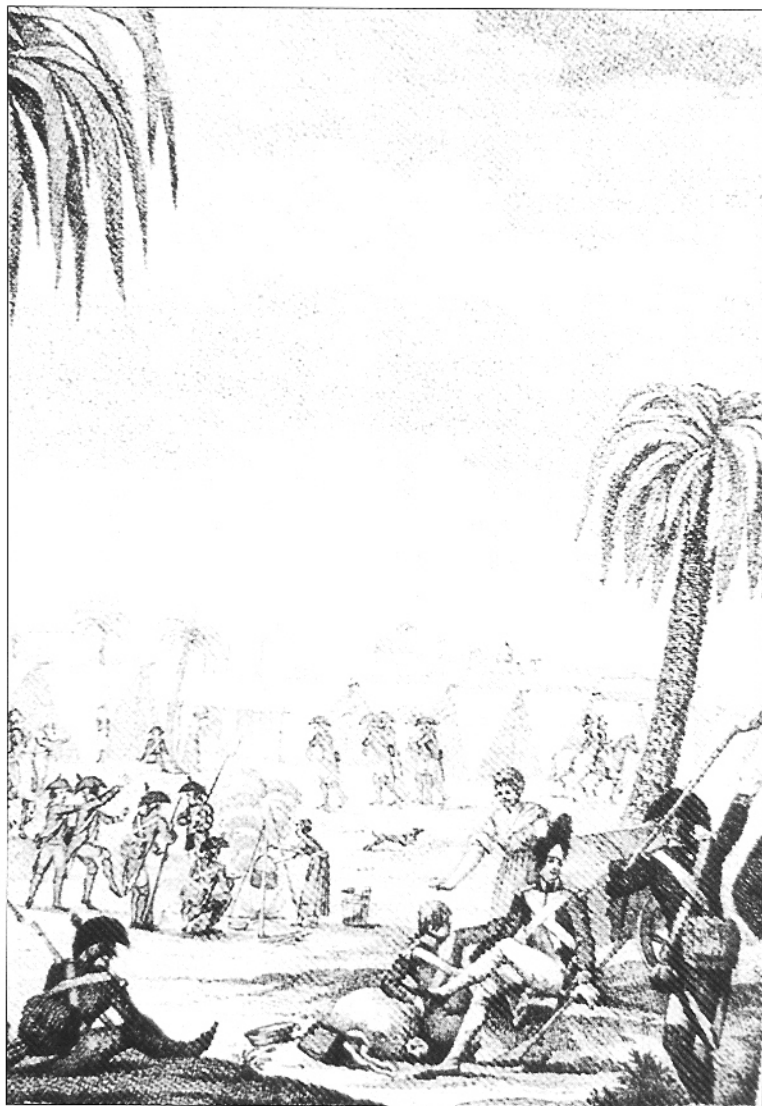
Vivant Denon took a different view:

During a calm, idleness predominates over every other passion on the ship, causing a variety of superfluous wants, and quarrels to procure them are the natural result. The soldiers wanted a double allowance of provisions and complained; those who were most

greedy sold their effects, or made lotteries of them, to satisfy their appetites: others, who had a greater predilection for gambling, played, and lost more in a quarter of an hour than they would probably be able to pay during their lives: after their money was gone they staked their watches. Of the latter I have seen six or eight lost by the single cast of a die. When night put a stop to these desperate games, a miserable violin, a worse singer, charmed a large audience up on deck: further on, a lively tale-teller attracted the attention of a crowd of soldiers, all ready to attack anyone who might interrupt the recital of the prodigies of valour and wonderful adventures of their hero, for he was always a soldier; which circumstance rendered all the adventures as probable as they were interesting to the audience.

French soldiers in camp rest before soup is distributed. A gamelle can be seen in the foreground near to the foot of the seated figure on the left.

Aboard the *Patriote*, Bernoyer discovered another way to break the tedium in a bizarre, ancient maritime ritual:



... that sailors keep at the expense of passengers during a long crossing. ... They worked all night bringing barrels of water up on to the foremast's yardarm and disguised them to better surprise us the next day. ... At 10 a.m., the ceremony was announced by several cannon shots: an envoy was sent to us saying that *le Père Tropicque* (Tropical Father) was coming and that we should go up on deck to pay him homage. Once on deck, they paraded a cortege in front of us: a postilion led the march, cracking his whip in an expert manner. Then came some satyrs and naked savages, their bodies daubed black and red. The priests, dressed in long flowing robes, followed them; finally, *le Père Tropicque* arrived, supported by pages and surrounded by all his court. This ridiculous sight is hard to describe. After having made a tour of the vessel, to the sound of discordant music, *le Père Tropicque* installed himself on a large seat in front of which was a table dressed with a black cover. On this was placed a large Gospel. *Le Père Tropicque* represented an old man with a

white beard descending to the waist. He was covered by a tunic with a striped sheepskin cape and wore a sort of crown on his head, the rim of which was decorated with horns. His face and the rest of his clothes formed the most hideous, yet most laughable character one could ever see. In turn, each of us was presented to *le Père Tropicque* by the master of ceremonies. Once the presentation was made, we remained standing before him as he told a moral about gallantry. Next we took an oath, which we repeated after him: "I make an oath never to seduce nor to caress the wife of a sailor, especially during their absence. On the contrary I must protect them on all occasions." *Le Père Tropicque* then presented his hand to be kissed; a horn full of water hidden up his sleeve soaked your face. After this ribaldry, you had to cough up and put some money into a bowl. If your generosity appeared sufficient, they let you leave; but those whose generosity appeared insufficient found themselves suddenly soaked by the large tub-full of water thrown over their heads. This pleasant ceremony amused us part of the day. The crew found itself ahead by the sum of four hundred *Francs* which was shared out between them. They were so well disguised that it was impossible to recognise a soul.

MAROONED

The expedition first stopped at Malta, which was captured after a token resistance by the Knights of St John. During his short stay, Morand was impressed by the place:

The town of Valletta is protected by an incredible mass of fortifications, which must have cost an immense sum. ... The port it guards inside its walls is one of the finest in the universe. Covered with three hundred ships and all the grandeur of flags fluttering in the air, gondolas gliding through the waves, elegantly painted launches decorated with pennants, filled with ladies in all their finery, Frenchmen, Maltese, soldiers, sailors, generals, knights, priests, officers being rowed about in an admirable confusion, from the town to the ships, the ships to the quays. ... Crowds pressed together in the streets and squares, on the quays, in the cafés. Imagine the bustle, the cries, the confusion, the costumes, the noise, the faces of men of every nation mixed together.

After leaving Malta, Kléber was surprised to hear some suggest that the expedition was bound for the Crimea or perhaps, even though they were heading in the wrong

Chef de brigade Marmont (the future Marshal) leads men from the 10e demi-brigade ashore in Malta under fire.



direction, Portugal. However, even after Bonaparte revealed their destination in an *Order du Jour*, the speculation did not end: 'It is certain that we are going to Egypt,' wrote Morand, 'but is it to form a colony or to wait in that Turkish province long enough to make preparations for our march on India – it is that we do not know.' Perhaps even Bonaparte didn't really know himself, but finally the ships reached their destination. First impressions were disappointing. 'Not a single tree or habitation was perceptible,' wrote Denon as he surveyed the Egyptian coast. 'It wore the appearance, not of the melancholy of Nature, but of her destruction, of silence, and of death. The prospect, however, did not diminish the cheerfulness of the soldiers: one of them, pointing to the desert, said to another, "There! Look at the six acres that are decreed you!" raising a sarcastic laugh amongst his comrades.'

Once ashore, a disenchanted Lieutenant Laval felt no better: 'Not having anything to eat, not knowing the language of the country nor its customs, you can imagine what was my position and that of my comrades', a sentiment echoed in a letter written by Bernoyer: 'The more I considered our situation, the more I saw misfortune. If by chance we met women or children in the street, they took flight as if we were ferocious beasts.'

Any hopes of a quick return to France were dashed a month after landing, when Nelson's fleet finally caught up with and attacked the French ships anchored in Aboukir Bay. Although most of the army had marched for Cairo, many troops had remained behind in Alexandria, unloading stores from the fleet. This naval engagement was the first that most of them had seen, the biggest impact being made by the destruction of the flagship, the *Orient*.

'At the first cannon shots we climbed the small sand dunes from where we could view the sea and the two squadrons clearly,' recalled Cailleux.

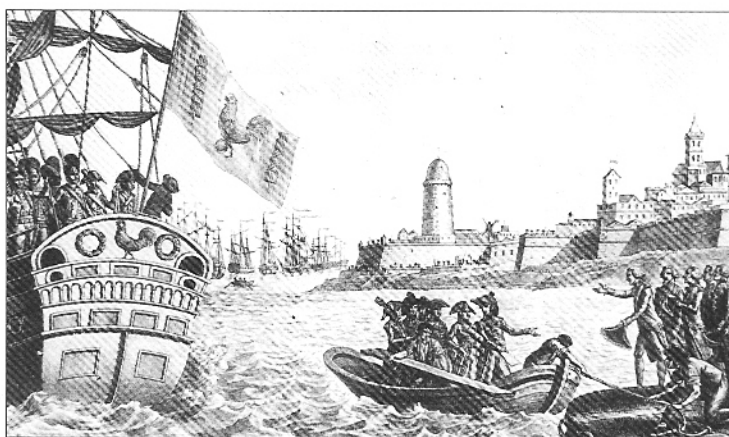
We were therefore witnesses to the terrible battle without being in any danger. The cannonade opened with such fury that it resembled a great clap of thunder. As soon as night fell, the flames from the cannon were so clear that one would have believed the town was on fire. ... The *Orient*, which was the biggest ship of the two squadrons, unfortunately caught fire. The fire onboard was put out; however, on seeing this, the English attacked with four ships. It defended itself courageously and was about to force two of the ships to surrender when it caught fire

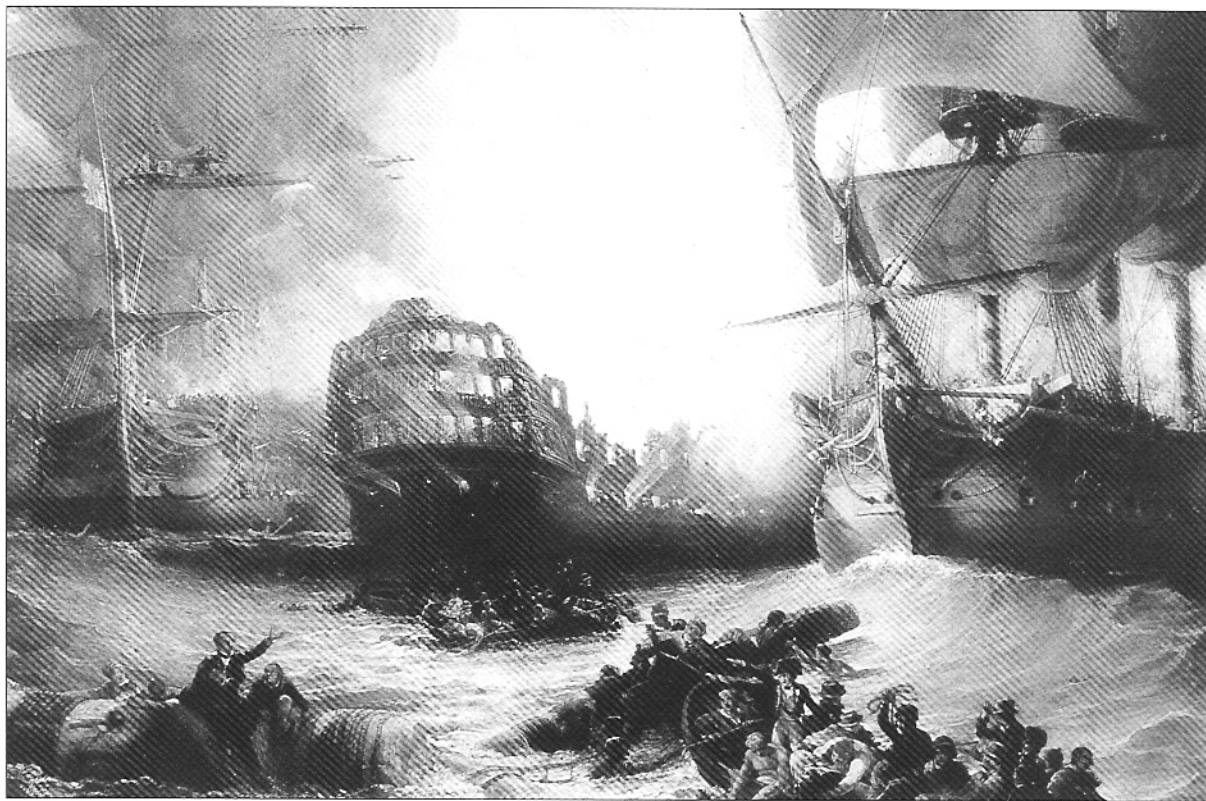
Bonaparte's *Order du Jour* of 2 July 1798 finally confirmed the expedition's true direction. Prior to this, General Kléber claimed that, 'There were no more than 40 people on the expedition who had been informed about the route we were going to take.'

Soldiers,

You are about to attempt a conquest, the effect of which will be immeasurable both for civilisation and for world commerce. You will deal a cruel blow to England where it will be most felt, even as you prepare to deal the mortal stroke. We shall undertake weary marches and fight many battles; we shall succeed in everything. Destiny is on our side. The Mameluke Beys, who favour English trade exclusively, have insulted our merchants and tyrannised the miserable inhabitants of the Nile. A few days after our arrival they will cease to exist. The people amongst whom we shall live are Mohammedans. Their chief article of faith is this: Allah is Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet. Never argue with this. Behave towards them as you have towards the Jews and the Italians. Show the same respect for their Muffis and their Imams as you have shown towards Rabbis and Bishops. The same tolerance must be shown to their ceremonies, which are governed by the Koran, and to their mosques, as you have displayed towards convents and synagogues, and to the religion of Moses and Jesus Christ. The Roman legions protected all faiths. You will find here many customs different from those of Europe, and you must learn to accept them. The people we are among treat their women differently from us, but in every land those who rape are monsters. Plunder enriches only a few, but it dishonours us all and weakens us; it makes enemies of those people we need to have as friends. The first town we shall enter was built by Alexander. Everywhere we shall see great reminders of the past, worthy of our emulation.

At Malta Bonaparte is rowed ashore to receive the surrender of the Knights of St John. As well as securing this vital Mediterranean port, the French confiscated enormous amounts of treasure.





for a second time. ... This time the fire took hold in the yardarms, sails and rigging and it was impossible to put out. The crew defended themselves valiantly until the moment when they saw that the fire had reached the *Sainte-Barbe* – that is to say the powder magazine. That tipped the scales; they had to throw themselves into the sea and swim to safety, while the poor wounded were obliged to remain as victims of that cruel fight. Finally around ten at night, the fire took the powder and the vessel flew into the air along with a prodigious quantity of bombs and shells, which burst in the air and made a terrifying din. The explosion was so powerful that the ground trembled beneath our feet.

Grandjean also witnessed the last moments of the *Orient*:

It was a spectacle as horrible and frightening as one could ever see. I was in Alexandria on a terrace, from where, despite the distance of three leagues between the town centre and the scene, I could see almost all the action from the cannon blasts, which were so rapid and so close together that we could not tell one from the other. When the *Orient* went up, we could make out men in the air, covered in flames, the cannons, the sails, the rigging; the whole harbour was on fire; and at the moment of the explosion, Alexandria was lit up.

Morand also remembered how the full impact of these events was felt the following day: 'no one was unaware of the loss of the squadron. The consternation was profound' as everyone realised that they were marooned

The explosion of the French flagship, the *Orient*. Morand wrote: 'The terraces in Alexandria were all full of people. The explosion of the *Orient* was so terrible, that its force could be felt on the terraces over a distance of three leagues.'

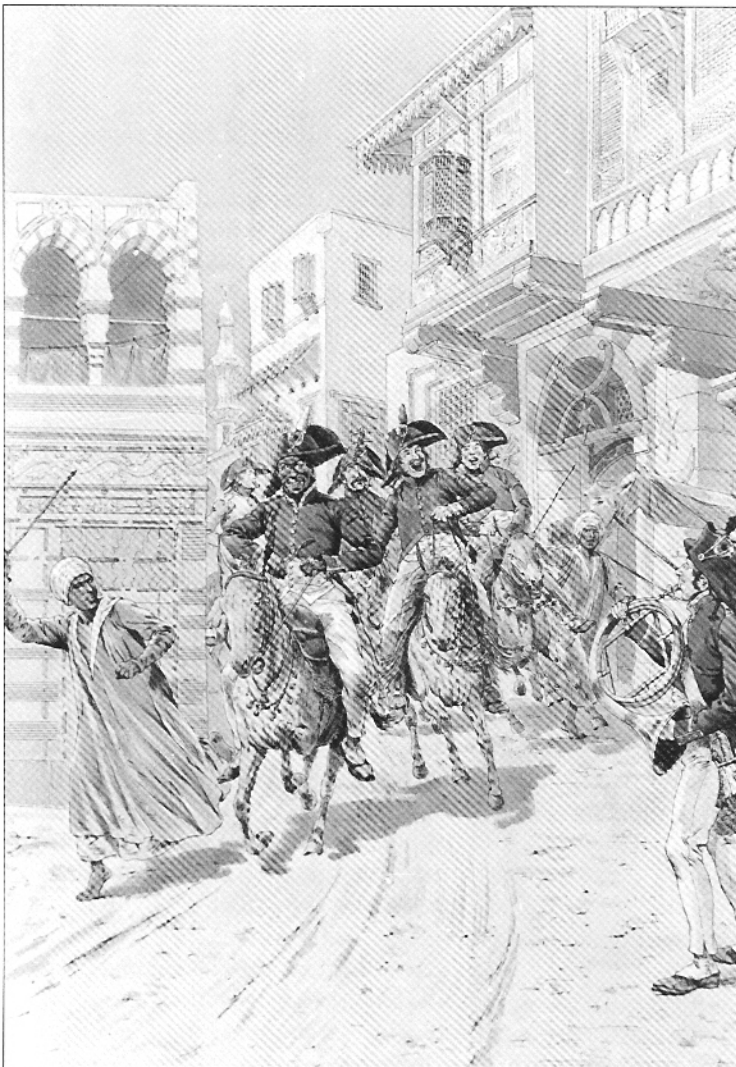
As agreed in the capitulation terms signed by the garrisons of Cairo and Alexandria, the British transported over 24,000 French soldiers back to their homeland. An additional 768 civilians were covered by the terms of the agreement.

in Egypt. 'The hopes of all the French in Egypt were based on the success of that battle,' an anxious Grandjean thought. 'The destruction of the squadron reversed all the government's fine projects, lowered everyone's spirits and was a prelude to nothing but the greatest misfortunes.'

ANOTHER WORLD

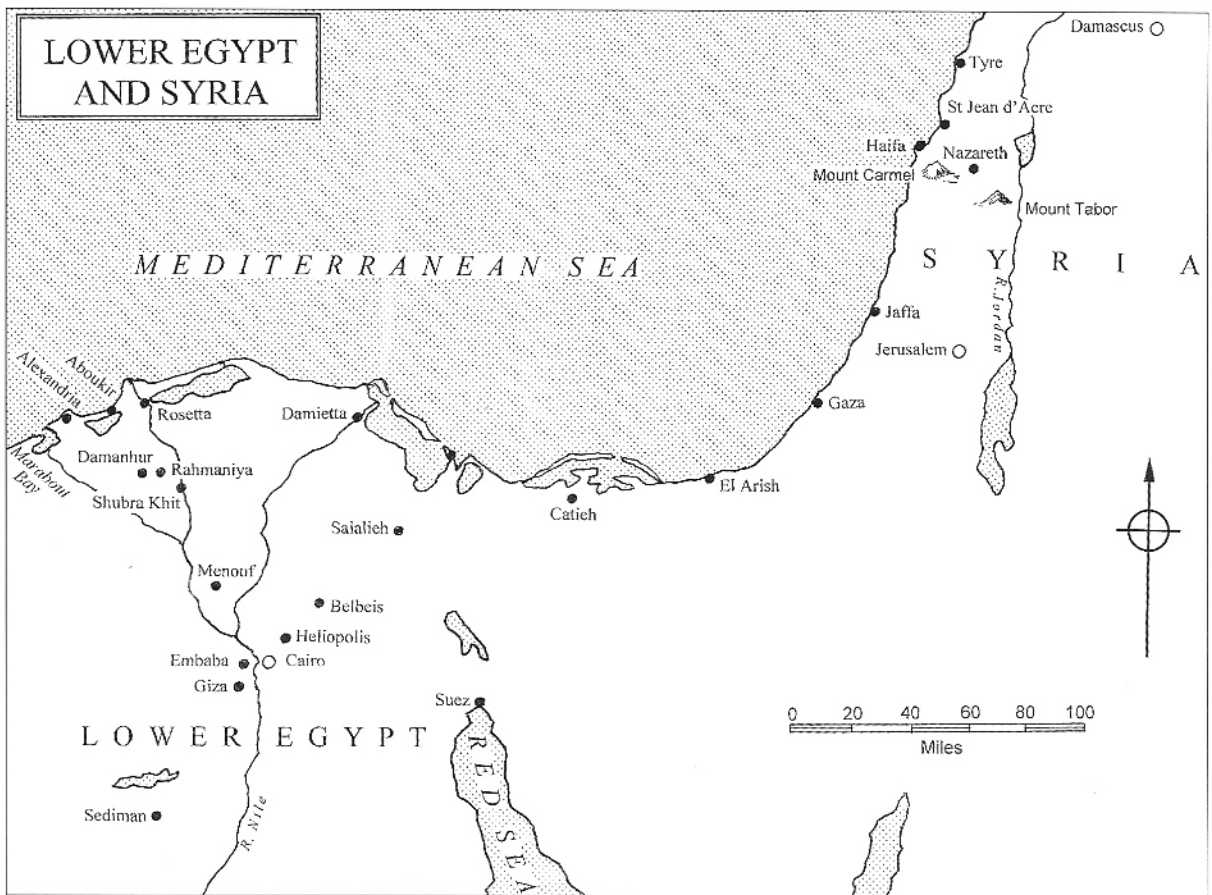
Resigned to remaining in Egypt for the foreseeable future, Lieutenant Laval observed how necessity improved relations between soldier and local:

Little by little we came closer to the Turks and each made himself as understood as he could to get something to eat, and that way we had everything that was necessary to survive. As soon as the merchants saw that we paid well, they called us to persuade us to buy something. It took time to learn a little of the Arab language; several Jews who spoke a little Italian gave us explanations and served us as interpreters.



'They make little fuss over *Piastres* (dollars), but they are keen to get *Parats*, a small silver coin worth three *Liards*, which on receiving, they skilfully tossed into their mouths and stored them in the same manner that monkeys store their nuts.' Morand recalled: 'Our coat buttons gave them great pleasure because of their yellow colour and their loops which allowed them to be attached to their women's hair.' Bonaparte set the rate of exchange at: 'one hundred and fifty *Parats* to the *Piastre*, a move made necessary by the numerous quarrels about the value of money between the inhabitants and the soldiers.'

Although pay would always be sporadic, battlefield plunder could bring considerable sums to even the humblest soldier. After the battle of the Pyramids, a dragoon officer wrote: 'Our men had gained great sums from the Mameluke spoils; purses filled with gold, precious weapons and rich clothing which had been divided out among the victors. ... Many men had huge amounts of booty which they spent with the craziest extravagance. Most of them bought little rural donkeys, which were very agile and it was a very amusing spectacle to see great big dragoons galloping at top speed on their *bourricos*, as the rural peasants call them. They went through narrow and uneven streets, musket and bayonet on their backs, legs curled up dragging along the ground.'



At the crossroads of Africa and Asia there were plenty of goods to purchase with their spoils. 'The merchandise sold in the bazaars included canvas, muslins, silk, tobacco, wool, sugar, coffee, indigo, soap, incense and spices,' remembered Bonnefons:

This merchandise arrived annually by six caravans. First, the caravan from Ethiopia arrived in Cairo by land along the Nile, carrying twelve hundred black slaves of both sexes, elephant tusks, gold dust, ostrich plumes, rubber, parrots and monkeys. The second, from Morocco, travelling along the Mediterranean coast, loaded with cashmere, Indian spices, perfumes and coffee; the third arrived from Syria and Damascus carrying silk, cotton, oils and dried fruits. The fourth came from Turkey and carried excellent smoking tobacco: its consumption is enormous. The fifth caravan arrived from Constantinople and carried clothes, weapons and furs; the sixth came from Venice, Livorno and Marseille, carrying cloth, fabric, paper, iron, lead and Venetian sequins.

Although many high-ranking Frenchmen bought slaves themselves, Laval found the slave trade abhorrent:

The merchants are Ethiopians. They sold these unfortunates like horses are in Europe; male and females are naked, except for a

loincloth. ... Their faces are marked with scars that they make to beautify themselves. The women have rings round their feet, hands, through their ears and even noses, with one of the nostrils pierced; they have their hair knotted in greased tresses. ... The majority of slaves are Negroes from the African interior seized by the Arabs, or taken prisoner in battles. They sell them in Cairo for 40 to 150 *Piastres*, depending on their age, beauty or strength.

Bonnefons shared his disgust, 'Humanity is revolted by the sight of these victims of Man's ferocity. I shook with horror when I saw the arrival of those poor souls, almost naked, chained together, carrying a look of death on their dark faces, reduced to being vilely sold like cattle.'

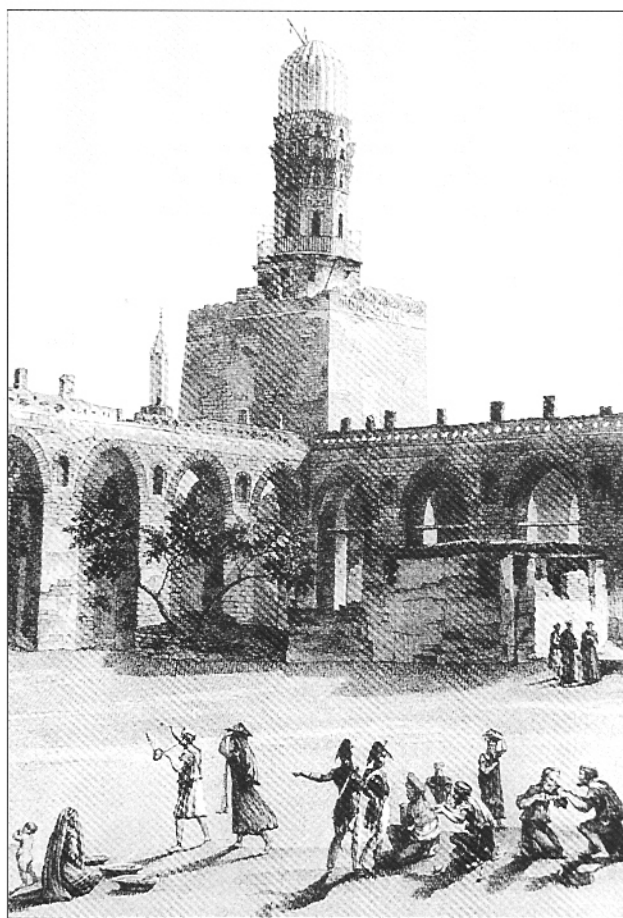
The French were more enthusiastic about the Turkish-style public baths: 'After having wrapped the head and body with towels,' remembered Dogueriau:

... a boy leads you into the steam baths, which are hard to endure when you go in for the first time and where you sweat a lot. After having loosened the limbs and having rubbed the body with a sort of serge fabric, they take you to a large basin of water, which is almost boiling. After leaving the water they soap you down and after having brought fresh linen, they take you to a bed where for over an hour, they massage the body, cracking the fingers and toes.

Captaine Moiret also enjoyed the experience:

... There were four small rooms, one at each side; steam rose continually from a fountain and from a basin in which boiling water was mixed with perfume. I at once began to sweat profusely. A slave arrived who massaged me, turning my body and manipulating my joints so that they cracked, and all without causing me the slightest discomfort. When this was over he put on a fabric glove and proceeded to rub me down for a long while; then, having led me into one of the adjoining cabinets, he poured perfumed, foaming soap over my head and left me. There were two taps in the cabinet, one of hot and one of cold water, so that I could wash myself thoroughly; then, having wrapped myself in warm linen, I followed my guide through passages leading to the outer apartment. ... I changed my clothing once more, and the boy scraped the soles and the

French troops outside a mosque in Cairo. As a propaganda stunt, Bonaparte did hint that the French army might convert to Islam, but he knew there was little chance of his men submitting to circumcision and giving up alcohol.



calluses of my feet gently with pumice stone. Finally he brought me a bowl of black coffee, which I was glad to drink. ... It is hard to believe the pleasure one experiences in such circumstances as these. When one has been in the hot, humid mist of a steam room, where sweat pours from the body, and is then transported into a spacious apartment open to the fresh air, the lungs draw in the coolness voluptuously. The blood circulates freely and it is as if one had been relieved of a great weight. There is a feeling of suppleness, a new lightness, like being newborn and living for the first time. I returned there often, sometimes alone, sometimes with my friends.

The French continued to adapt to other Egyptian ways of life, in particular drinking strong coffee and smoking tobacco from water-cooled pipes, Bonnefons remembers:

This nation is so idle that it's not rare to see the streets filled with men sitting on mats, legs crossed, smoking their tobacco from Persian pipes resting on the ground, made of a water-filled flask, through which the smoke passes before reaching the mouth. Most of these flasks are earthenware or made from coconuts, with an elastic leather hose pipe and a tin or brass mouthpiece.

As Egypt is a Muslim country, the consumption of alcohol was forbidden. Without alcohol, soldiers were introduced to a drink made from hashish and shown how to smoke hemp seeds. Soon realising the negative effect this activity had on their men, the French authorities made it a priority to produce their own alcohol to satisfy their men's needs. Laval described how 'we set up stills to make *eau-de-vie* from dates. They are a very common fruit in that country – there are almost no others.' The contractor Grandjean soon saw his opportunity: 'We established a factory for making brandy and rum, which made us some profit.'

However, once introduced, the demand for hashish would not go away. After more than two years in Egypt, on 9 October 1800, the army command finally acted, issuing the following orders:

Art. 1. Throughout Egypt the use of a beverage prepared by certain Moslems from hemp (hashish), as well as the smoking of the seeds of hemp, is prohibited. Habitual smokers and drinkers of this plant lose their reason and suffer from violent delirium in which they are liable to commit excesses of all kinds.

Art. 2. The preparation of hashish as a beverage is prohibited throughout Egypt. The doors of those cafés and restaurants where it is supplied are to be walled up, and their proprietors imprisoned for three months.

Art. 3. All bales of hashish arriving at the customs shall be confiscated and publicly burnt.

The expedition's chief surgeon, Desgenettes (who had experimented with the drug), confirmed the order, writing: 'The Commander in Chief (Menou) prohibits, by his *order du jour*, under very severe penalty, the

importation, preparation and the sale of hashish, the plant from which, when distilled one obtains an intoxicating liquor; he equally forbids the smoking of hemp seeds.' Despite these measures, hashish would follow the French troops back to Europe where it slowly became established over the next century.

Although the troops grudgingly adapted to their new way of life, most French still suffered homesickness. Doguereau spoke for most when he reflected:

The life we led annoyed us greatly, for although we were all young together, it was so different from the one we had led in Europe that we had a lot of difficulties becoming accustomed to it. The heat was oppressive; we could not go out; besides where could we go? Amidst the sand and rubble, en route to the town gates, we were attacked by Arabs and needed an escort. We had little money and desperately wished to return to France.

In a bid to raise morale, selected news stories from Europe appeared in two popular newspapers, *Le Courrier d'Égypte* and *La Décade Égyptienne*. Other attempts were made to cure the growing homesickness. A delighted Morand found that 'soon, in the barracks on the Esbekieh and Birket-el-fil squares and in the French Quarter, we established cafés, some French restaurants, boutiques and workshops of the types of industry most necessary for the army.' The activities rapidly expanded: 'After several months a clubhouse was formed under the title of the *Société de Tivoli* where we went every evening,' recalled Grandjean,

The members found gaming tables of every kind there, which had been prepared for them. Those that did not want to play found divans on which they made conversation until ten or eleven in the evening. The price of this pleasure was two *Talaris* a month (just under 11 *Livres*). ... After the departure of the army for Syria, Citizen Dargenvall augmented the club's facilities with a riding school. ... For an instructor he had a *sous-officier* from the *Guides* who gave lessons twice a day.

The French celebrated the foundation of their republic on 22 September 1798. Doguereau described how, 'After different evolutions and manoeuvres in which we fired by battalion, platoon and by file, all the troops paraded past the General who had made a speech to the army in the middle of the ceremony. There was a great dinner at Bonaparte's residence; we then sent up a balloon, which stunned many of the Egyptians. In the evening there were fireworks and illuminations.' A dragoon officer was more interested that 'a ration of coffee and wine was issued for the fete days and the soldiers filled the town singing patriotic hymns like "Le Chant du Départ" or "La Marche des Marseillaise".'

During the festival, Bonaparte had an obelisk erected in honour of his victories in Egypt, which was constructed from poles and covered in painted canvas. General Kléber ironically described the fate of this monument: 'After the festival, the soldiers made a hole in the pedestal and went inside it. They found the place handy for their frolicking with the Egyptian *Kahpées*, and soon it became a refuge of vice and debauchery.'

With so few Frenchwomen accompanying the expedition, the local *kahpées* (the French pronunciation of the local word for prostitute) were never short of trade, 'Despite the rigour of the men towards women, it did not prevent us from commonly finding female prostitutes for sensual pleasure,' wrote Caporal Cailleux:

There were hardly towns or villages where they didn't have houses or public harems. These sorts of women spent the greatest part of their time in the baths, washing themselves and soaping down their whole body, which left them paler than the Whites. A large number of women have spots or marks of powder on their hands and chins and they blacken their eyelids to appear more beautiful.

While wealthier Frenchmen were able to buy slave girls (Bonaparte's stepson, Eugene Beauharnais, bought himself an African mistress for what he considered a bargain price of 1,800 livres), other Frenchmen found striking up meaningful relationships with local girls very difficult. Many were genuinely shocked by the status of Egyptian women and by their lack of freedom under Islamic law. The wearing of the burka puzzled Moiret:

The women were dressed in a long blue cotton gown, which covered only part of their nakedness; the bosom was always on view to everyone. Their faces, however, were a different matter; they were carefully covered up with a black veil wound round the neck and matching another veil draped over the head, to which it was attached by hooks. This left only the eyes visible ... Their gowns were often so inadequate as to display that which merited concealment far more than their faces. They went bare-foot like the men and like them were of a swarthy complexion. In all the villages it was usual to see girls of twelve to fourteen years old going about naked. Misery had brought them to this indecency, which so shocked our morals and our customs.



French sappers opening a dyke during the annual flooding of the Nile. Modernising Egypt's agriculture was vital for the exploitation of the new colony's full potential.

The harems of affluent Egyptians provoked enormous curiosity: 'The customs of the inhabitants of the Nile are in complete contrast to those of Europe,' recorded Laval. 'The Turks hold their wives cloistered and those that are rich can have as many as they want.' Grandjean added: 'Their women are shut up in harems which are ordinarily in the highest part of the house; all the windows are grilled and the doors carefully locked; the master alone has the key. They have no communication and cannot speak to anyone without the master's permission, and then never to a man – they do not know if any but their own exists. They have black slaves to serve them and prepare their meals.'

Nevertheless, some liaisons overcame the restrictions: 'One cannot have a true idea of the state of slavery to which they are reduced; their husbands, or rather their tyrants, brutally degrade them,' wrote Sergent Antoine Bonnefons:

During our stay in Egypt, the bait of the gold had made several prostitute themselves: these then gossiped with their friends about the freedom they had enjoyed with the Europeans, who were so tempted to imitate them that, if one had not stopped the torrent of moral depravation through exemplary punishments, the indecency would have been pushed to the extreme. ... Without considering future expulsion from their father's house, the women sold themselves freely at the first bid.

Laval recorded the price paid by these women during the second Cairo uprising in March 1800: 'Almost all the women who had communicated with us were burned in the public squares.'

Crime and punishment

To minimise problems with the locals, military discipline was strictly enforced. As early as 9 June 1798, Bernoyer wrote: 'A most severe discipline reigns here among the troops, and before the General, one observes the strictest etiquette: they look to copy the manners of the former Royal Court.' The death sentence was deployed as a widespread threat. Soon after landing in Egypt, '[Kléber], after being informed that the soldiers and sailors were selling items of uniform and arms to the inhabitants of Alexandria, issued a proclamation, in which he declared that all sellers and buyers of similar effects, would be punished with death.' Auguste Damas, serving on Kléber's staff, noted this first measure and others that followed:

This evening we shot a grenadier convicted of theft by breaking and entering. Twelve or thirteen others were condemned to the galleys for different lengths of time. ... The court-martial has condemned and sentenced Pierre Dafout, aged 28 years, native of Agen depot in the Haute-Garonne, labourer in the 4e artillery company, to two years in irons, for having threatened his superior verbally and with gestures, and in addition, having laid hands on the corporal of the guard while abusing the whole guard.

A less severe sentence, but humiliating nonetheless, was recorded by a dragoon officer: 'Two thieves who had stolen some dates were promenaded around the camp twice a day, conspicuously wearing



bunches of dates, with their coats turned inside-out and on their backs a sign with the inscription: "MARAUDEUR".'

Bernoyer recorded the investigation into a savage double murder:

Frenchmen under attack in the first Cairo uprising. Note the savants joining in the fighting.

On the night of the 8/9 January, an awful crime was committed; the body of a Turkish woman was found with that of her servant in the house where they lived. After the most minute of searches, they found in the room of the crime two buttons marked from the 32e *demi-brigade* and a piece of blue cloth the size of a six-Franc coin, which appeared to have been torn off by teeth. The order was given to the commander of the 32e *demi-brigade* to assemble each company with the aim of discovering the perpetrators of this attack with the help of these pieces of evidence. First, they noticed on the sergent-major's report, that Antoine Dubois and Pierre Stève, both grenadiers, were marked absent from roll call on the night of the crime. From there, they examined their kit; on Antoine Dubois' *habit* there were two buttons missing from the coattails, which were identical to the buttons found in the room. As for the piece of cloth, it came from the left sleeve of Pierre Stève's *habit*. The latter, on top of this, had a recent bite mark right where the cloth was missing. With such compelling proof, the two were taken before a court martial, which condemned them to just three months in prison. Bonaparte was informed of the judgement and possessing all the evidence, summoned the members of the court martial. After addressing them with sharp reproaches, he dismissed four of the most influential, then put the whole garrison under arms, when finally the two grenadiers were shot in the presence of all the soldiers.

Punishments against rebellious locals were even more severe. There were several revolts in Cairo against the French. In a letter, Bernoyer recalled that there was a clandestine retribution after the rebels surrendered: 'During the night we proceeded to make numerous arrests. I have been assured that over two thousand Turks have been arrested, among them the most significant rebels. They were all conducted to the Citadel where the order was given to behead them. ... In the night we threw the corpses in the Nile with the greatest precautions, so that the people would remain ignorant of this rigorous justice.'

Perhaps the most infamous piece of justice followed General Kléber's assassination on 14 June 1800. 'On 17 June, this wretch was impaled after we had burned the hand that had struck the blow on burning coals,' reported Laval. 'Three of his accomplices were beheaded, at the same time and place as the assassin was impaled. There was a judge who had been the fourth accomplice. We offered him mercy in return for money, demanding that he pay six hundred thousand Livres for his ransom, but he took a long time to collect it. He received fifty blows every morning until he paid.'

Insects and disease

It was not just the climate nor the inhabitants that made the Frenchmen's stay uncomfortable:

There are a great number of irritating animals and insects there,' moaned Caporal Cailleux:

We saw wolves, foxes and boars. ... Snakes are very common and very big; we found them in the desert scrub. ... We also saw a lot of tame monkeys that they made dance in the street and in public squares; I have seen some as big as the farm dogs in our country. Rats are in such great number in almost every house that they will steal from you everything they can carry; the countryside and desert are full of them. Fleas and midges are everywhere and devour you each night preventing you from sleeping. The French Army suffered greatly from insects during its stay in Egypt.

Morand endured many unpleasant nights bivouacking under the stars:

To add to the discomfort, my thin mattress lying on the ground was assailed by toads, scorpions and all the disgusting reptiles and insects that frequented the humid gardens. If I rested for an instant, I could feel them covering my body and my face. The least movement makes them run away, but encamped around me, they seemed not to allow me a moment's peace before renewing their assaults and fighting over my body.

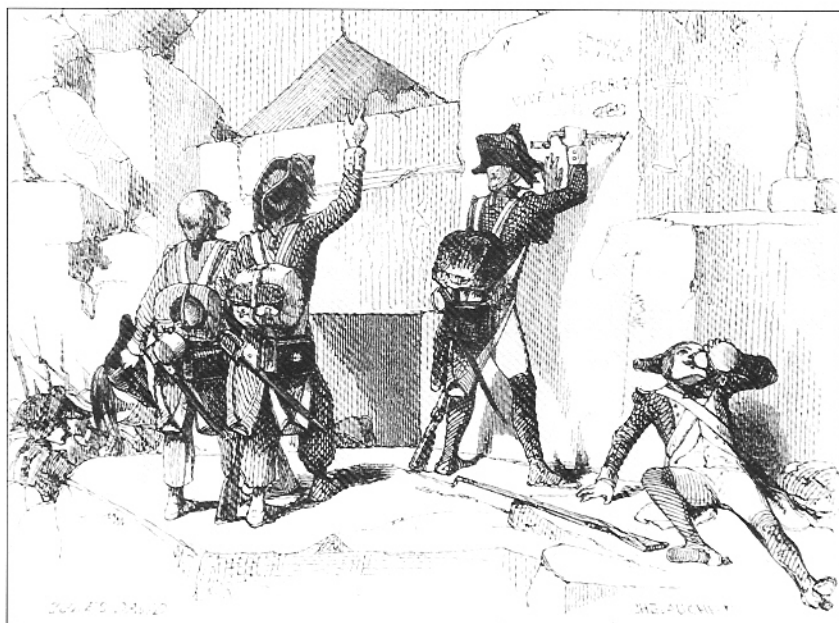
Laval recalled:

Several soldiers were bitten by the scorpions, which are very common in Egypt, and particularly in the ruins of Alexandria, where we were bivouacked. However, they are not as venomous as those in Europe. One has only to crush the insect against the wound that it has made, which is enough to start it healing,

soothing the sensation of pain in an instant. We also made an oil for pain relief, which was an excellent remedy.'

With the insects came disease, especially the bubonic plague, which was particularly virulent at certain times in the year. Many believed that wearing infected clothes spread the disease. Patrolling the coast and rivers in a lightly armed boat, one of Sanglé-Ferrière's comrades fell ill and was diagnosed as a plague victim. His account illustrates the rudimentary medical techniques of the era:

I forbade my men from following me and I ran to the little room we occupied communally. What a heartbreaking spectacle awaited me! My friend was on his back, almost unconscious. I turned to leave to go for help, when, in a sombre voice, he asked me for water. I went to find some and when he drank it from my hands, only saying to me: "I am burning." He drank voraciously and falling back on his couch, he signalled for me to go away. I left pretty quickly and went in search of a doctor. All refused me, and it was only under duress that I forced Doctor Dubois to follow me. Arriving this time, we found Dubuisson completely unconscious: the doctor approached a little way towards the bed, raised the blanket and the patient's shirt with the end of his cane, and catching sight of the enormous buboes around the groin, he leapt back, crying out: "We are lost – it is the plague." He asked for some vinegar and rubbed himself, while escaping. At the mere mention of the plague, my sailors threw themselves into the sea, while I went to the plague victims' hospital, to have him taken there. Boarding alone, the medical staff found Dubuisson waiting for them on deck. Consciousness had returned, and by a courageous effort, he had got up and put on his uniform. He signalled to them that he did not want to be touched and



Denon revealed that soldiers did not share the savants' passion for discovery: 'As for our thoughtless soldiers ... they imagined that Murad Bey (one of the Mameluke commanders) had a white camel, laden with gold and diamonds; and nothing was talked about but Murad Bey and his camel.'

disembarked onto their barge. I followed in mine as closely as possible and did not leave until at the hospital gates, offering signs of friendship. The next day, as soon as it was daylight, I was at that same gate waiting for news. He was dead.

The lands of the Bible

Most French soldiers had a basic knowledge of Pharaoh's Egypt from Bible readings. Like modern-day tourists, the Frenchmen flocked to the pyramids at Giza, Laval wrote:

These stone masses are among the seven wonders of the world ... They are built of tall stones positioned with great skill. I paced out the biggest and found that it was one hundred *toises* square, that is to say four hundred *toises* around its foundation. ... The pyramid is entered through a gate, which is almost blocked by sand.

Moiret described the interior:

One goes down for about five minutes and then climbs again for about the same length of time to reach the chamber called "The Queen's Room". This is about 20 feet square and very well constructed, but the smell of the air does not encourage you to remain there for long. It is thought that the bodies of Egyptian queens were laid to rest there. Leaving there, one climbs for seven or eight minutes through a series of vaults, access to which is quite difficult, to reach the chamber named "The King's Room". This is about the same size as the previous chamber but in it is a granite coffin, six feet long with a width and height of three feet. This, it is said, was intended as the burial place of the kings of the country. Finally, there is a shaft of unknown depth in there. Someone fired a pistol into it and the sound reverberated for so long that we thought the shaft must lead into vast caves.

Those on Desaix's march into Upper Egypt were overwhelmed on first catching sight of the ruins of Thebes, Denon wrote:

At nine o'clock, marching round the spur at the end of a chain of mountains, we suddenly discovered the site of ancient Thebes in its whole extent ... This city, enveloped in the veil of mystery, and the obscurity of ages, whereby even its own colossal monuments are magnified to the imagination, so that the whole army, suddenly and as one, stood in amazement at the sight of its scattered ruins, and clapped their hands with delight, as if the



A grenadier adding a few hieroglyphs of his own. French graffiti can still be seen on many Egyptian monuments today.



Carabiniers of the 21e Légère in action at Benouth (8 March 1799).

end objective of their glorious toils, and the complete conquest of Egypt, were accomplished, by taking possession of the splendid remains of this ancient metropolis.

Bonaparte organised an expedition to Suez to see if the age-old idea of building a canal linking the Red Sea and the Mediterranean would be viable. On this trip, Doguereau came up with a theory to explain one Biblical miracle. Having found the remains of the ancient canal, Bonaparte and his entourage forded the Red Sea, but on returning at night they found the tide had risen by three feet. Bonaparte raced off ahead, leaving guides behind him to mark a safe passage, but Doguereau ran into trouble:

Three times I tried to cross; I lost my way and I found the water higher than my horse. Finally I found myself halfway across when my horse fell into a hole. Knowing how to swim, I abandoned it right away; I reached one bank and it the other – both at the same time. ... We were very happy not to have been as unfortunate as the Pharaoh's soldiers. Moses, who probably knew the Red Sea and the times of the tide, had passed with his Israelites at the right moment; Pharaoh had clumsily tried to follow much later, when the tide was higher, or by the wrong ford.

During the Syrian campaign, many Frenchmen, including Caporal Cailleux, took in the sights of the Holy Land:

We went as far as the bridge of Jacob, situated between Lake Merom and the Sea of Galilee. ... On the other side of the bridge is the foot of the famous Mount Lebanon, the summit of which is always covered with snow. This mountain is covered with ruins that appear as old as the land around them. ... As the Holy Scriptures tell us, it is on this mountain that Noah's Ark came to rest; it is the highest I had seen until then and it is the furthest place I have ever travelled to. ... Nazareth is just a village, situated at the foot of the southern edge of the mountains. We saw a very

fine and recently-built Capuchin monastery there, which is inhabited by Europeans. The church covered a tomb and cave ... (which we entered) with the aid of a torch. ... They claim that it was in this cave that Archangel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of the Saviour.

Replacements and remounts

Much of the expedition's heavy equipment was lost during the battle of Aboukir Bay. To remedy this, the inventor and balloonist Nicholas Conté set up nine workshops in Cairo to manufacture replacements. Meanwhile Bonaparte instructed the savants to consider ways of keeping the army supplied with essentials like bread and gunpowder made from local resources.

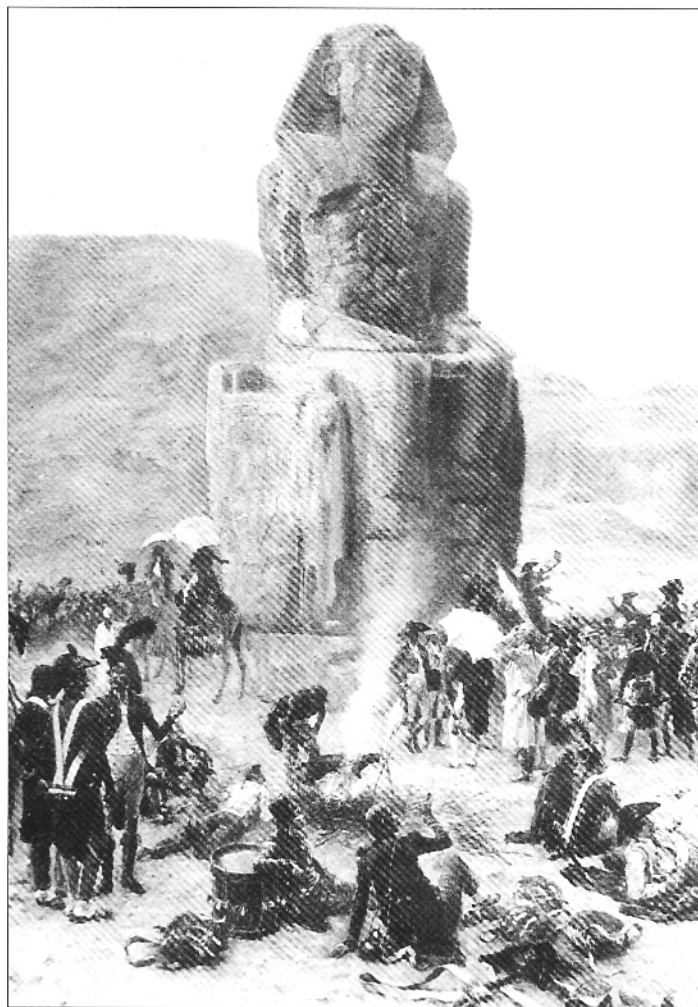
By comparing the initial strength of the army (around 34,000 men), less the 4,000 men left in Malta, their losses (as many as 15,000 killed, captured, or dead from disease) and the number of men the British reported they transported home (over 24,000 soldiers), the army appears to have found more than 9,000 reinforcements over the three years from 1798–1801.

To achieve this, the French took a typically resourceful approach to finding recruits locally until reinforcements began trickling in from France. After Aboukir Bay, there were many sailors without ships, who were turned into infantrymen, and sent to the demi-brigades, or into the newly formed *Légion Navatique*. Kléber sent 360 sailors to join the 62e demi-brigade, while the rest were left in the charge of Capitaine de Frégate Martinet. Dumas noted:

The general also organised a company of gunners ... one of sappers and pioneers and four of fusiliers forming in total almost six hundred men. He transferred three lieutenants from the 11e and one from the 32e to each lead company, leaving Commandant Martinet to choose his lieutenants and sous-lieutenants from among the naval officers, also the two captains for the two companies of gunners, sappers and pioneers.

Barralier, a 16-year-old sailor joined this new corps, which was 'a force of two thousand men that they uniformed in a red coat with blue facings, and white trousers.' Sanglé-Ferrière, however, preferred to remain on naval duties:

The colossus of Memnon. The savants' many accomplishments were in large part possible due to the protection afforded them by the army.





The French found reinforcements where they could. Members of the Greek (centre left) and Coptic Legions (centre right) are shown flanked by a dromadaire and a Syrian soldier.

General Desaix at Edfu. Recording the march up the Nile in pursuit of renegade Mamelukes, Miot wrote: 'Our troops in traversing Upper Egypt, frequently discovered monuments of antiquity of the greatest beauty. Desaix, accompanied by Denon, visited the magnificent remains of Thebes and Tentira, both masterpieces of human knowledge in the most remote ages.'

The naval engineers finally equipped and armed a few cutters ... by means of which we intended to protect the coast and establish regular communications, despite the English patrols. ... Our launch, armed for war, was half-decked and masted like a cutter. It carried on its bow a fine bronze howitzer taken from the Maltese arsenal, and four *perriers* (stone-throwing mortars), two mounted on each side. We were equipped with plenty of muskets, pistols, pikes and boarding axes. The complement consisted of twenty-four sailors, a quartermaster gunner, a master, the captain and his second.

Infantry replacements were also recruited from among the local population, 'In Alexandria, Bonaparte has created a company of Janissaries taken from among volunteer inhabitants,' wrote a dragoon officer:

The Commander-in-Chief, who wanted to utilise every resource, incorporated young Mamelukes into our regiments at the rate of 9 per battalion and 4 per squadron; those under fourteen served as drummers. We are going to dress them in the uniform of the corps and instruct them in French. We will have agile and vigorous recruits there.



After the second Cairo uprising, Laval particularly noticed the Mamelukes who would later rise to fame in Napoleon's Imperial Guard:

There were some of Ibrahim Bey's Mameluke troops who wanted to take service among us. We retained them and formed a corps under a Greek named Barthèlemy, a famous partisan of the French and an intrepid soldier. These Mamelukes remained faithful to the army and the majority travelled to France with the army when we evacuated Egypt.

The dragoon officer was slightly less charitable about some of those who took French service: 'The Maltese who had followed the expedition since departing Valletta formed a Legion under the orders of Citizen Mac-Sheedy, but I doubt they will ever do much good with these people, who are, with very little exception, looters, cowards and idle.'

The problem of finding sufficient mounts for the cavalry took many months to solve. The same dragoon officer recorded that horses were requisitioned from Rosetta, Menouf and Garbieh:

They were soon given to the corps, harnessed in the dragoon or hussar manner, depending on their size and given to the longest-serving cavaliers. Their gait is very different from our European horses; their gallop is so easy that the troopers promptly abused them and the Commander-in-Chief had to order that any cavalier who was found galloping his horse without having a dispatch would be obliged to dismount on the spot and give the horse to the next man due for a mount after him.

It was not until 27 November 1798 that a full review of all the cavalry could be undertaken:

The General minutely inspected the horses, the weapons and the uniforms and appeared very satisfied. ... The General then ordered several manoeuvres. I must admit that they were not executed with the usual precision; these Arab horses still do not submit themselves to the exact movements of the manoeuvre. However, he was quite satisfied and our cavaliers have not lost too much of their quality in the long months they have been dismounted. The review was closed with a charge

Perhaps the most successful military innovation of the expedition saw the mounting of infantrymen on dromedaries. On long desert pursuits, the troopers increasingly adopted items of local costume more adapted to the climatic extremes.





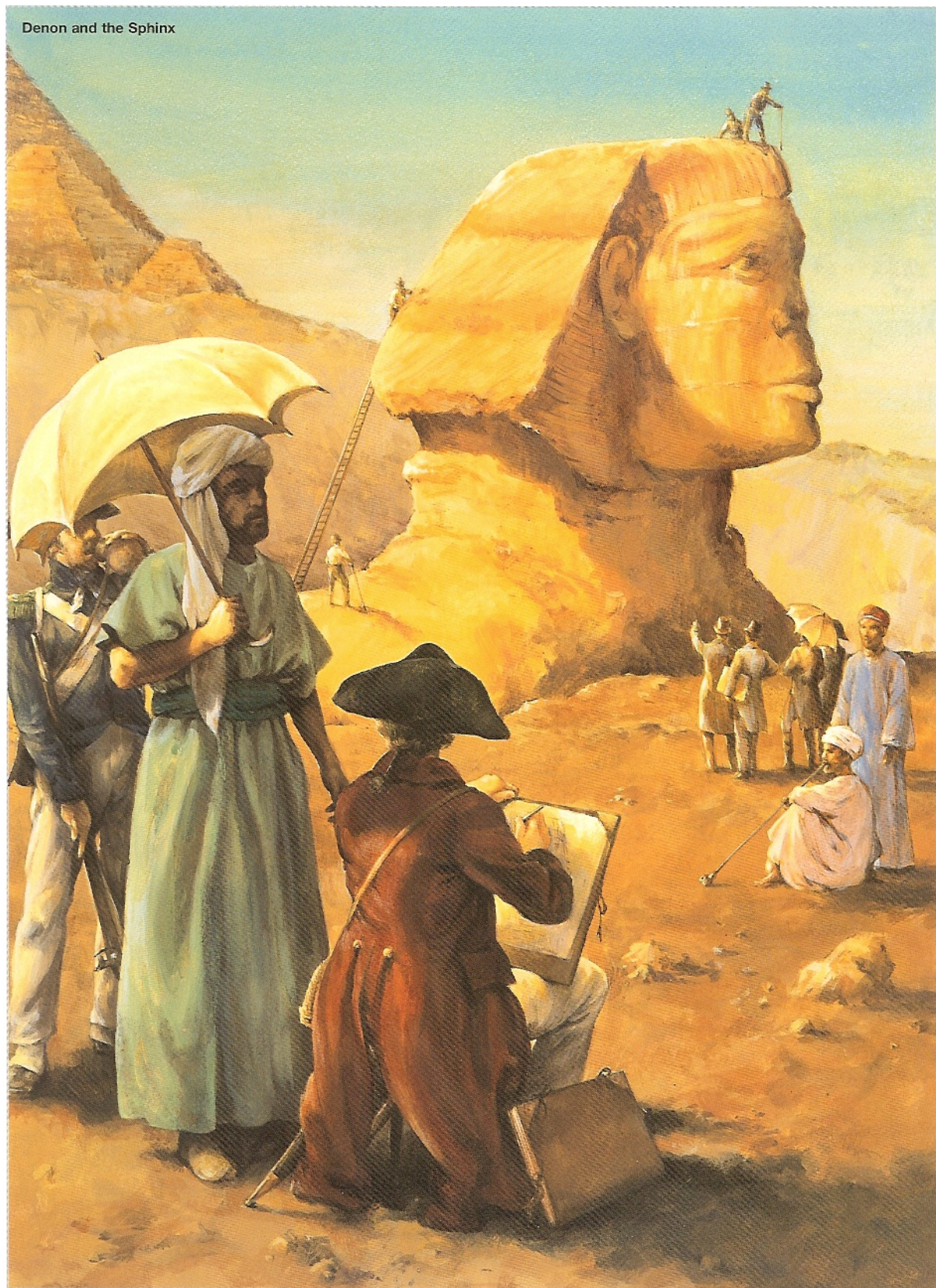


The landing a Marabout Bay

The battle of Sediman

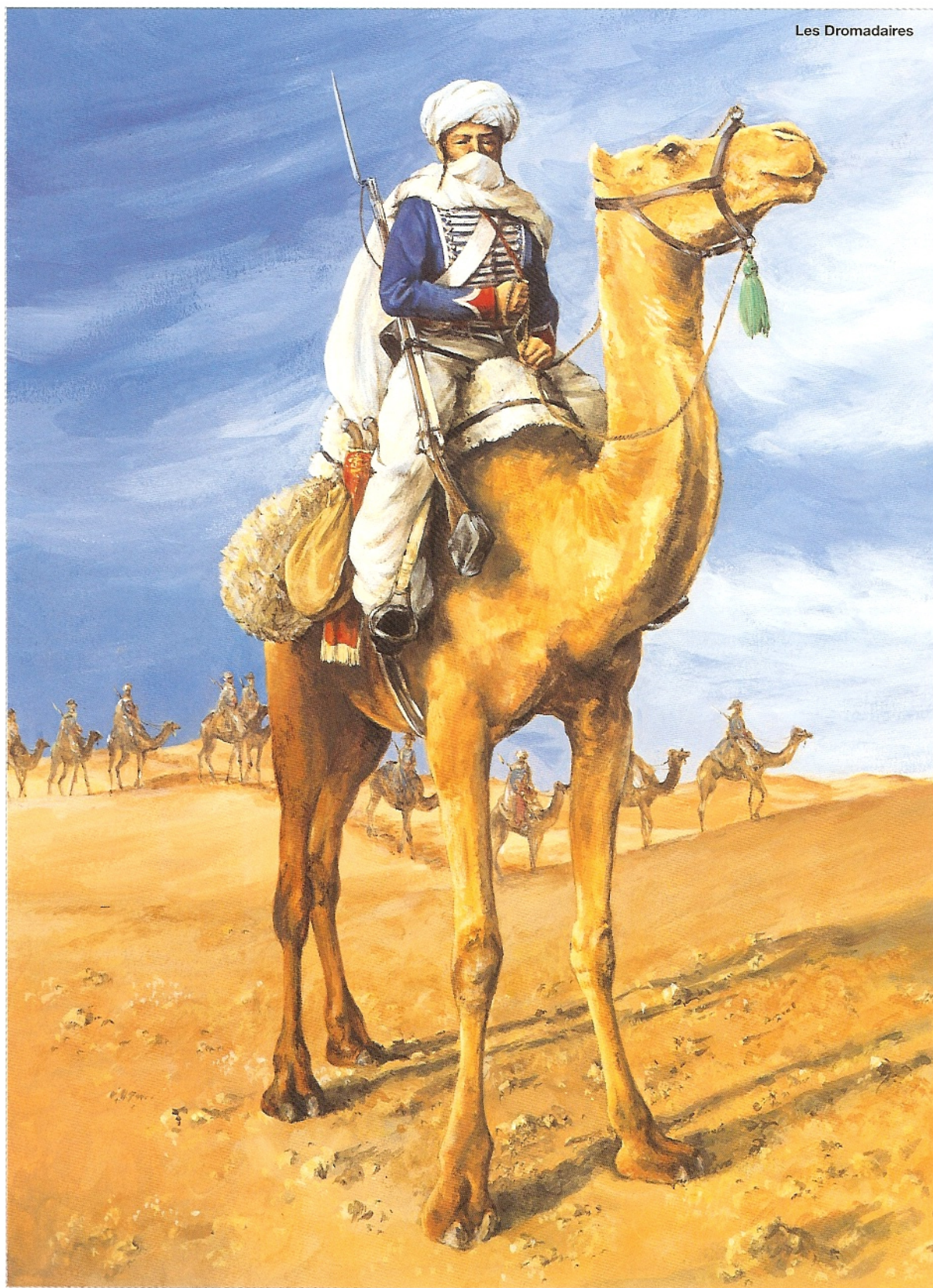


Denon and the Sphinx



The battle of Nazareth





The Egyptian uniform





which was admirable: as soon as the cavaliers had given them their heads, their horses dashed at speed, appearing to devour the space, while the sabres sparkled in the sun.

CAMPAIGNS AND COMBAT

The hardest features of campaign life, even for the veterans of Italy, were the intense daytime heat and the scarcity of drinking water. Laval quickly discovered this during the first desert march from Alexandria to Cairo:

We had not found water since leaving Alexandria. The first village we stopped at was Berquet: it was 8 July at midday; we found four wells there. We formed four Divisions, each around nine thousand men and allocated one to each. However, they were soon dry and the little water that remained could no longer be drunk. I was extremely thirsty and was obliged to squeeze the mud in my handkerchief, filtering the water through it and appeasing my thirst.

Still without horses, the dragoons 'made a bundle of their saddle, bridle and helmet and carried it all on their heads.' The same dragoon officer also recalled that, 'The weapons were in a poor state; the very heavy night-time dew and the fine desert sand quickly damaged the muskets'. Morand moaned:

The excessive heat caused heavy sweating and a burning thirst ... These marches were made all the more unbearable by the wind and we had only eaten salted meats and drunk wine or strong liquor. [On the second leg of the march, hunger set in] ... our soldiers had thrown away four days of biscuit because it was too heavy. ... Each day towards 10 a.m., when the sun had heated the air and the sand, on which we marched, burned the feet and face, mirages offered us an image of limitless inundation. Some exhausted men fell dead in the ranks as if struck by lightning or suddenly suffocated. When this occurred, the soldiers could be seen standing motionless and silent around the corpse frozen with horror, until their sadness was expressed in cries of desperation and rage.

Fortunately for Bonaparte, his gamble of marching across the desert paid off just in time, as Grandjean recalled:

The army had run out of water and also bread ... After having suffered incredible torment and on the verge of succumbing, the



Officers from Desaix's Division watch the artist Denon make sketches. While some soldiers rest, others amuse themselves or look for food.

A soldier has fashioned an elaborate shade to keep the fierce sun off his head. Temporary blindness (ophthalmia) caused by the sun's glare on the sand afflicted many on desert marches.



army finally left the desert and fell on a field of watermelons: Generals, officers and soldiers all threw themselves in and revived themselves. This fruit, which is filled with water, was their salvation – it provided both food and drink, restoring their strength, so that they could even reach the banks of the Nile, another half a day's march further away.

Eight months later, Bonaparte led the army on an even harsher march into Syria – this time filled with promises of trophies for the bravest among them. A dragoon officer recalled:

As reward for acts of courage the drummers would receive drumsticks decorated in silver – there were 25 for the army. The trumpeters would have silver trumpets, of which five were on offer. Gunners, who were distinguished for the accuracy of their fire or their intrepidity in serving or defending their pieces, received a small golden grenade, which they attached to their cross-straps – just fifteen were available for the whole army. 200 muskets decorated with silver re-warded the most courageous soldiers and cavalymen. Finally, the General made it known that there were an additional 25 *sabres d'honneur* for the feats of most extraordinary bravery.

These rewards paled against the extreme conditions and privations, which the soldiers, including Cailleux, encountered in Syria:

The whole army was assembled and we were marched off to El Arish, which is twenty-two leagues further on. We found neither water, nor any habitation during the crossing of the desert. Each soldier had to carry four days of water and seven days of rations in addition to his weapons and munitions. I can assure you that I never suffered as much as in that desert, through hunger, thirst, the heat and the difficult march through the



After a desperate search for water on a desert march, these troops have unluckily come across a poisoned well.

To avoid a mutiny in one demi-brigade, Bonaparte harangued them: 'You complain, but do you think glory is acquired through rest and pleasure? A few hours more and you will arrive on the banks of the Nile. There your suffering will end. I have heard your mutterings; have you forgotten that I have always made my glory yours? After three months I will take you back to France.' (Morand)





Detail of a scene by Tardieu. Soldiers repair their footwear and habits after reaching Aswan. One soldier attends to his fusil ensuring it is free from rust and grains of sand.

sands. Several men died of inanition, that is to say, of want, above all from the lack of water.

The newly acquired Arab horses fared better. A dragoon officer was surprised:

Never have I seen such a heavily laden horse march at such a lively pace. As well as the cavalryman and his weapons, each horse carried four days' rations, twenty litres of water on top of the camp utensils: it might have been expected that they would collapse under the load, but not at all. ... Temperate, indefatigable, they drank four times less than a French horse and marched ten times better.

However, despite capturing enemy supplies, once again the French were reduced to living off the land. Once at El Arish, the army set up camp where Cailleux soon found that, 'We were eating camels, horses, donkeys and even the dogs. I suffered even more here at this camp than in all other parts of the desert. We were forced to crush the dates so as to eat the hearts.' Laval suffered the same ordeal: 'I was obliged to eat camel, mule, donkey and dog to sustain myself until Gaza, eating grass to quench my thirst.'

On the march the French had to guard against surprise attacks by the Bedouin. From the moment they arrived in Egypt, the Bedouin were a constant thorn in their side. A shocked Grandjean wrote:

These enemies were so skilful and so well aided by their horses, known to be the best in the world, that they swooped down on our troops, seizing a man from the ranks, lifting him up and disappearing in a flash ... They never fought en-masse, but when they found a favourable opportunity, the most intrepid and best mounted emerged from the main body and fell on their enemies as I have described. Their goal was not to defend their homeland – these people do not have one. They live only in the desert, sometimes here, sometimes there – they live only for brigandage.



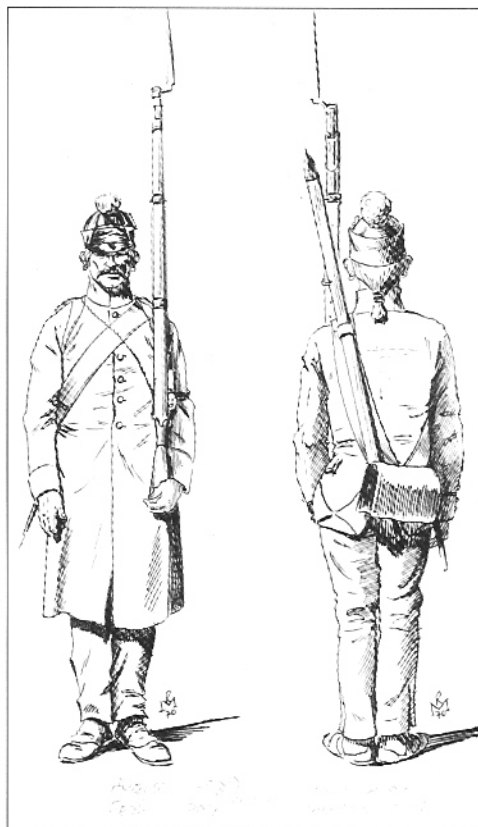
This soldier appears to be using a file to scrape gold off the hilt of a captured Mameluke sabre, before melting it down to make ingots.

The Bedouin would often torture and execute their prisoners in full view of their comrades sheltering in the squares or columns. French soldiers were appalled to see their captured comrades raped by the Bedouins. 'Pity the unfortunates who fell into their hands,' wrote Morand. 'They stripped them, and before killing them would appease their abominable passions on them.'

The squares of Egypt

The first large-scale clash against the Mamelukes came at Shubra Khit. Capitaine Vertray remembered the eve of the battle:

Each company commander announced to the soldiers that combat was approaching. This news was met with enthusiasm by the whole army and when we broke ranks, each soldier could be seen making a scrupulous inspection of their weapons, sharpening their bayonets, checking their flints and singing as if they were preparing for a fete. ... At sunrise, martial music suddenly rang out; the Commander in Chief had ordered the playing of *La Marseillaise*, as he knew its beneficial effect on the troops. This uplifting song encouraged the soldiers to be daring, ignited their patriotism and made them realise the time for grumbling was over and that they had to be victorious.



Then after a short time, Vertray anxiously noticed that, 'A column of Mamelukes came out of the palm trees to the army's left and made a semicircle as if to envelop us.'

Chalbrand compared the opposing sides:

During the moments preceding the general engagement, we had the chance to judge our new enemy's mode of combat in several skirmishes between a number of Mamelukes and our intrepid *tirailleurs*. The Mamelukes displayed an admirable, impressive composure and courage. Somehow attached to his horse, which appeared to share all his possessions, with the sabre hung from the wrist, he fired his carbine, his blunder-

Campaign dress in early 1799. The lighter uniform meant that greatcoats were issued to protect the men at night while bivouacking. The soldier on the right demonstrates how the recently issued spike was carried.



This scene by Rousselot clearly demonstrates both the swiftness of the Mamelukes' horses and the futility of attempting to break the French squares with cavalry alone.

buss, his four pistols and after having discharged his six firearms, flanked the platoon of *tirailleurs*, passing between them and the line with a marvellous dexterity. However, we soon recognised that these men, individually of an unmatched bravery, had no idea of combined movements or mass charges.

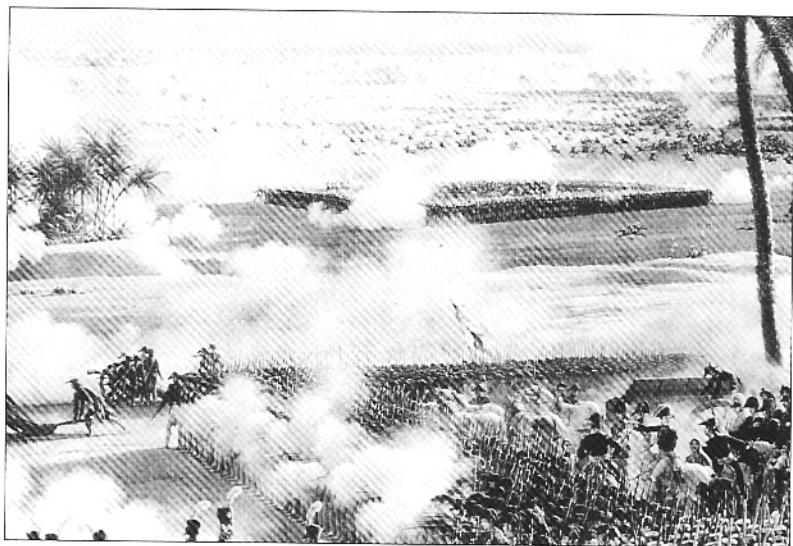
Morand watched the same engagement and formed a favourable opinion of the Mamelukes, in direct contrast with his hatred of the Bedouin, who had harassed their march:

These horsemen, who wore clothes of varied colours and carried dazzling, resplendent weaponry, were not those sinister Arabs, who until then had pursued us like *vampires*. It was the Mamelukes, who were testing themselves against us for the first time. We admired the fine air of these warriors, the speed of their horses, the audacity and composure of their movements.

Laval was more dismissive: 'Although they were the best cavalry in the world, they disappeared after the first attempts to mount a charge. They were not accustomed to see the four battalion squares we formed, one per division. They said all the French soldiers were attached to one another.'

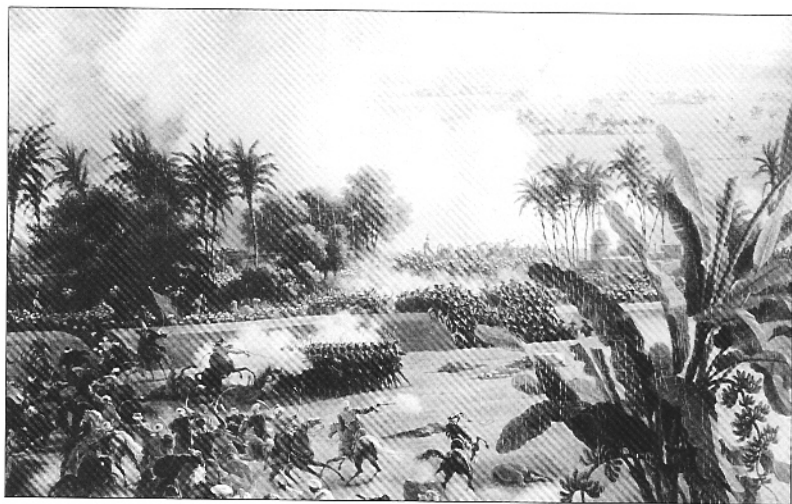
Bonaparte no doubt learned many military lessons from reading about the Austro-Russian forces in their war with the Turks a decade earlier and utilised the huge squares they had successfully used. Doguereau was impressed by their effectiveness: 'Our squares were formed; the artillery on the corners and in the intervals; the cavalry and the baggage in the centre. This formation, which presented them with masses of men and firepower on all sides, stunned them. A few of the bravest, without doubt to encourage the others, charged our *tirailleurs*; death was the price they paid for their audacity.'

Shortly after Shubra Khit, the Mamelukes made a stand at the battle of the Pyramids. Bernoyer revealed that: 'The day before, Bonaparte had sent a very skilful spy, who informed him of the size and the position of the enemy.' Knowing how



Detail of Lejeune's *Battle of the Pyramids*. A caisson (ammunition wagon) can be seen sheltering inside the square, while the artillery is positioned on the angles outside.

A separate detail from *Battle of the Pyramids* shows the assault on the trenches at Embaba. A company of carabiniers has been detached from a square and is pushing Mamelukes towards the Nile.



the Mamelukes were likely to fight, Bonaparte again formed his men into divisional-sized squares. However, the Mamelukes were not entirely reliant on their cavalry, and deployed an artillery battery at Embaba to target the French squares. Doguereau soon realised that his enemy had learned some lessons from their first encounter:

The entrenched artillery opened fire, supported by boats on the Nile. We were momentarily stunned. This fire was very murderous on a corps formed so deep; files of five or six men were cut down. We quickly marched forwards at the *pas de charge* to close with the enemy and assault the trenches. Bon's Division doubled the pace; the charge was beaten. At point-blank range, we fired at the Mamelukes as they were fleeing from the entrenchments on all sides.

Laval was in the thick of it: 'We arrived in their camp with our bayonets lowered. We bore down on them with the bayonet and the majority found no means of escaping death except by throwing themselves into the Nile and swimming.' Even in the water there was little escape from the French: 'Many threw themselves into the Nile; we fired canister at the thousands of heads we saw in the water.'

Morand watched as some Mamelukes escaped from Embaba:

The majority rallied beneath the walls of a garden not far from our right-wing Divisions. The squares were halted between two villages surrounded by gardens that guarded their flanks and hid the Mamelukes. We first saw three Mamelukes, who came to reconnoitre the Division; it appears that after they reported back, they decided to charge. ... The soldiers were resting, watching the attack on Embaba. Only a few officers and the generals saw the movement of the Mamelukes, which was so rapid that there was only just time to fire. ... A good number fell into our ranks,

where, in their impotent rage, they fought for their lives with their daggers. Caught in the crossfire from two Divisions, they fell into the interval where the cannon were placed. ... When the Mamelukes were passing through the interval between the two Divisions, they found themselves pell-mell with a large number of our soldiers, who were looking for water in the surrounding gardens and were returning after hearing the gunfire. This forced us to cease firing or at least reduce it and to aim very high. ... In the crossfire, they could not escape, except through a narrow gap, guarded by a detachment of *carabiniers* waiting in ambush, who shot them at point-blank range.

Morand witnessed 'the horrible spectacle of some Mamelukes who had their clothes set alight by the muskets' muzzle flashes and were burned alive in awful agony.' Bernoyer saw how, 'A Mameluke, having had his horse killed under him, threw his weapons away and took flight. Two grenadiers captured him: One of them swung a sword at him, slicing his ear; the other cocked his musket to kill him, but his comrade said to him: "Wait until I remove his robe so you do not burn

Before the battle of the Pyramids, Bernoyer reported that Bonaparte gathered his generals to give them their orders, finishing his speech by pointing at the pyramids in the distance, saying: 'Go, and know that from atop those monuments, forty centuries are watching you.'



it!" At this point Bernoyer intervened and asked the grenadiers to take pity on the man; their reply was bitter and firm: 'Citizen, haven't you seen the state in which they left our comrades along the route?'

Denon witnessed similar ferocity at Sediman: 'One of our wounded men was lying on the ground, seizing a dying Mameluke, and attempting to strangle him, when an officer said to him, "How can you, in your present state, commit such a horrid action." "You speak with much philanthropy," replied the man, "who are unhurt; but I, who have not long to live, must amuse myself as well as I can."' During this battle, General Belliard recalled harrowing scenes when:

We had to leave some of the mortally wounded who were impossible to move. Everyone shed tears at their cries – each asked to die by French hands, but their comrades did not have the courage and they were mutilated by the Mamelukes. One covered his eyes with a handkerchief and rolled over facing the ground, waiting for death. ... A mortally wounded soldier, seeing the Division leave, took one of his comrades by the coattail and would not let go; the other seeing that he was unable to save his comrade, took his knife and cut off the coattail and left the wounded wretch, whose days were terminated by Mameluke steel.

Sediman demonstrated that the Mamelukes had improved their combination of cavalry charges and artillery fire. Desaix had formed three squares, two of which were composed of only a few hundred men. Denon witnessed how one was broken:

... they halted and fell back, as if retiring from the field and suddenly turned upon one of our platoons, which was overthrown by this sudden attack, but all who were not immediately killed, threw themselves on the ground, and this action exposed the enemy to our main square. Taking advantage of their surprise, we decimated them with rapid fire, which again made them halt and fall back. All that remained of the platoon then joined our ranks and we collected the wounded.

A novel tactic was used to try and break a square formed by the *Légion Nautique*. The small 80-man garrison at Damanhur had been butchered, so a



A sketch by Denon shows the intensity of the fighting and the volume of smoke created by the powder-firing weapons.

At the battle of Mount Tabor, Kléber formed his 2,000 troops in two squares and held off ten times that number until a relief column led by Bonaparte finally scattered the enemy.



detachment of 1,200 men from the *Légion Nautique*, which included Barralier, was sent to exact revenge:

When we were three leagues away and had begun to scout the town of Damanhur, from the dominating heights we could see clouds of sand being thrown up by the enemy as a signal. We carried on; but quarter of an hour after the signals, a horde of men on foot and horses left the town and formed such a large force that it was impossible to oppose them. Attempting to assess the size of the force, our commander deployed the column into line of battle. Ten artillery pieces were placed in front and we waited steadfastly. This innumerable army was composed mainly of Mamelukes at the head of local rebels. As soon as they were within artillery range, our cannon fired three discharges of ball and canister, which were effective; but after having assessed the enemy force advancing on us, the commander ordered us to form a battalion square and withdraw. This retreat was very orderly and was protected by artillery. ... I was then en *tirailleur* marching through enclosed wheat fields, which the enemy set on fire an hour later. The wind promptly directed the flames towards us, behind which the Arabs charged us. A thick smoke surrounded us. We still marched in order, with little hope of escape. Ahead of the square, the *éclaireurs* found a piece of ground to the left planted with onions. The battalion square halted, faced about and sent an artillery discharge followed by heavy volley fire at the enemy, who quickly lost more than 1,500 men while the rest dispersed over the plain. ... We were, from the commander to the soldiers, exhausted by thirst, fatigue, burned by the sun and blackened by the effect of the powder and smoke.

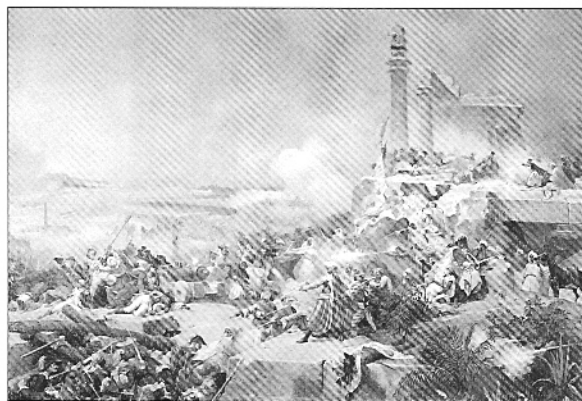
The formation of the large squares was not always well performed, especially when, as Bernoyer observed, they were formed for the first time: 'There was great confusion around me. Our general was in such a stupor that he found himself incapable of making a decision. A Dragoon captain took the initiative to rally us.' As a result, the troops were given additional training just before the start of the Syrian campaign:

Our troops were very well uniformed and in the best disposition; we exercised them often in manoeuvring the battalion squares.

To protect the front ranks, we made stakes, which could be planted in the ground in front of the square, joined together by little chains; these devices were designed to stop cavalry charges. But because of the difficulty in carrying them in the ranks and the awkwardness they caused the soldiers, a large number of these stakes were lost and were never used.

Even without these stakes, in pitched battle the squares remained all but impregnable, as Kléber's staff officer, Michaux, vividly witnessed at Heliopolis:

French soldiers assault the Turkish position at Heliopolis.



The enemy fired several cannon at our squares which were not hit. They soon charged us, sabre in hand. We lowered our bayonets and fired by files, forcing them to flee. ... Birds in flight shot at by a hunter are less easily dispersed than Turkish cavalry are by a cannon. ... Each enemy soldier followed his own impulses and will, coming and going, one brandishing a long lance, the other waving his sword, another firing a carbine or pistol out of range ... several horsemen were brave enough to come and plant their flags 50 *toises* from Friant's Division. Our *éclaireurs* soon chased them off.

Blade versus scimitar

Impressed by the enemy cavalry in the battle of the Pyramids, a dragoon officer wrote:

General Bonaparte did not want us to be engaged against that redoubtable cavalry, believing that the number of mounted dragoons was too weak for them to receive a Mameluke charge in line. This caution, perhaps justified, caused utter mortification among the cavalymen who were wholeheartedly looking forward to the moment when they could measure their blades against the Muslim scimitars. ... We finally saw those terrible horsemen face to face, whose scimitars could reputedly cut a man in half. With savage cries they threw themselves on our Divisional squares, but all their impetus was broken on our grenadier's bayonets. Our cavalymen positioned inside the square fired along with the infantrymen until the moment when, weary of their fruitless attacks, Murad's Mamelukes turned tail and followed their fleeing commander into the desert. We were then permitted to pursue the vanquished, of whom we were able to sabre only a very small number, for they were mounted on admirable horses, whose speed thwarted our efforts.

The same officer experienced a more direct clash:

Our cavalry's advance-guard met Ibrahim's rear-guard, composed of one thousand elite Mamelukes, at Salehieh. Without considering the odds, our brave troopers threw themselves on the enemy, whom they engaged in a furious combat. *Chef d'escadron* Lasalle of the 7e Hussars covered himself in glory, always in the thick of the *mêlée* conducting himself heroically; but the Hussars and the *Guides* were too few in number to withstand the effort of such a formidable cavalry and soon they were beginning to give way, despite the presence of the Commander in Chief in their midst.

Morand was also present and continues:

We threw ourselves at the enemy. The generals, staff officers and, despite his wooden leg, even Général Caffarelli, joined in the charge. The combat was extremely lively, for the Mamelukes are the bravest and most skilful horsemen in the universe and we conceded

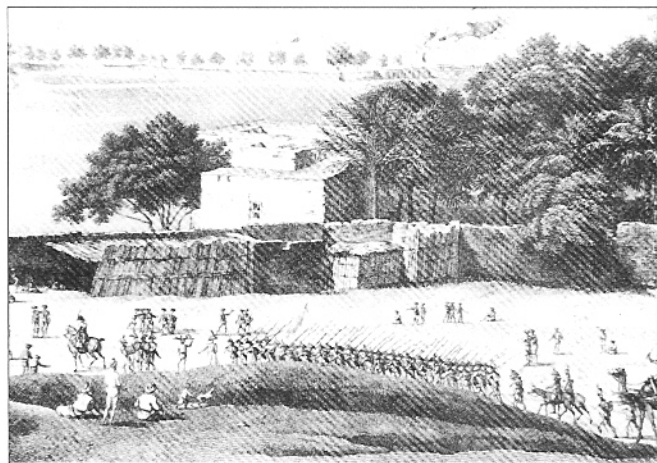


A dismounted *chasseur à cheval* fights for his life at Salehieh. At this engagement Miot witnessed the martial prowess of the Mamelukes in single combat: 'Standing erect in their short stirrups, they aimed blows with all the advantage which their height and firm footing gave to them, and it was truly horrible to see, on many occasions the effects of their Damascus blades. They cut through everything; if they fell upon the head, they cleaved our horsemen from the head to the pommel of the saddle; if they fell upon a limb, they completely severed it from the body at a single stroke.'



General Junot commands a handful of French dragoons and carabiniers in desperate hand-to-hand fighting at the battle of Nazareth. When Emperor Napoleon later made Junot a duke, he toyed with the idea of the title 'Junot of Nazareth', but on reflection decided he might be confused with someone else.

Detachments of French troops sent to collect tax payments or to garrison distant outposts were constantly under threat from local uprisings and surprise attacks from Bedouins.



nothing to them in valour, despite the inferiority of our weapons and horses. This costly skirmish would have had a fatal outcome, had not 3e Dragoons, who had been in reserve, arrived, formed into line and forced the Mamelukes to retire by their fire. We remained masters of the field, of several camels and two feeble cannon, but it was covered with French dead and wounded. Among the latter was the brave d'Etré, *chef d'escadron* of 7e Hussars, who was in shreds, his body crisscrossed with large deep wounds. *Chef d'escadron* Lasalle was luckier. His sabre

was knocked from his hand, but he had the luck and composure to recover it in the middle of the *mêlée*, not stopping to attack and defend himself and remaining unwounded.

The dragoon officer explained that the disciplined dragoon firepower was proving useful where they faced superior enemy numbers, such as in a skirmish during Desaix's expedition: 'At the enemy's approach they fired by platoons so quickly and accurately that they could never be counterattacked. All the cavalry admired the 15e Dragoons' fire, which was commanded and executed as if on parade. In an instant, the Mamelukes were in flight and disappeared into the desert as quickly as they had arrived.'

Raiding parties

In keeping with their practice in Europe, the French relied on taxation of the locals to fund their requirements, although the payments were not always willingly forthcoming. In the summer of 1799, a detachment of the *Légion Nautique* was sent to Rahmaniya. 'As soon as we arrived, we formed a mobile column to go and force the inhabitants of different villages to pay their contributions,' remembered the former sailor Barralier:

I was then a corporal in the 1st Company, commanded by a Knight of Malta. This mobile column, around 900 men in strength, was divided into companies to go out to the different provinces. Ours, composed of 250, supported by two 6-pound artillery pieces, took the road to Caffra Chabass, a village inhabited by Bedouins, who had refused to pay the contribution. We marched during the night and reached the village walls at dawn. The two cannon were then aimed at the village's principal gate. 25 *éclaireurs* went ahead to different points and opened fire on the inhabitants, who ran away. Immediately after, we saw all the armed Bedouins along the walls and who

opened fire on our column. Our two guns, loaded with ball and canister, opened a breach. We immediately marched at the *pas de charge* and entered the rebel village, where nothing was spared. After a quarter of an hour of pillage, the drummer beat *la retraite*, directing the scattered soldiers to regroup. After having set fire to the village, we formed up and left for Galine. This burning village, which the whole province could see, caused the greatest terror among the inhabitants. Those who had submitted brought us food and, above all, a lot of dairy products as we passed.

Sieges

Many cities fell to the French army on the three-year campaign. Malta, an impregnable fortress, had practically left its doors open, and the first action in Egypt – the attack on Alexandria – was only slightly more demanding: ‘Our soldiers,’ maintained Bernoyer, ‘considered this attack to be child’s play.’ Only when the French invaded the Holy Land did they encounter trouble, first at El Arish and then at Gaza, where their advance was considerably delayed. The mounting frustration finally exploded at Jaffa when the French soldiers went berserk.

As was customary, Bonaparte sent an envoy into the city to offer terms. ‘A moment later,’ Bernoyer could see that ‘the head of the officer appeared on the ramparts. At the sight of this atrocity, our soldiers did not wait for the order to mount an assault.’ Guns were fired to breach Jaffa’s walls. Waiting impatiently for the attack to begin was Doguereau, who recalled:

After an hour, Bonaparte judged the breach to be practicable; we made preparations for an assault. Capitaine Netherwood, a Swedish lieutenant-colonel, went first with 10 *carabiniers*, soon followed by 3 companies of grenadiers. We fought for a long time in the breach and the surrounding areas, gaining the houses along the wall. ... At five o’clock, we were in the town. The enemy fled in a mob towards the sea, throwing away their weapons; but, not finding any boats ready to sail, the fugitives threw themselves at the feet of the victors. There was a horrible massacre; for forty-eight hours, the town was given over to the horrors of war. It is not possible to depict a more hideous spectacle; the streets were filled with corpses; children could be seen butchered in their mothers’ arms and cries of lamentation could be heard from the women, whose husbands were dead.

‘The Frenchmen, with fury in their eyes,’ wrote chasseur Millet, ‘massacred everyone they found without exception of age or sex.’ ‘Never was slaughter more awful’, witnessed Bernoyer:

Our troops had avenged the death of our envoy! On top of this, the obstinate insolence of the defenders, who would not lay down their weapons, inflamed our soldiers. These two primeval reasons were the cause of the appalling massacre of the garrison and the unfortunate inhabitants of the town. Seeing the slaughter, which followed, Bonaparte ... proposed the capitulation of the survivors; they accepted Bonaparte’s offer. He promised them that, if they laid down their arms, he would have them taken to the Syrian frontier.

EXPEDITION DEATHS

(19 May 1800 – 22 September 1800)

Killed in Action	3,614
Died of Wounds	854
Killed in accidents	290
Died from diseases	2,468
Died from the plague	1,689
Total dead	8,915

FATE OF THE ARMY AFTER BRITISH LANDING

(18 March 1801 – 30 August 1801)

Killed in action or died of wounds	3,000
Died from the plague or disease	1,500
Taken prisoner in battle	3,500
Capitulated in Cairo	13,672
Capitulated in Alexandria	10,508
Total	32,180

Confident in Bonaparte's word, they left. They were led to the seashore, where six thousand troops were lined up waiting to massacre them. ... We saw soldiers coming one after the other into camp, loaded up with booty and all kinds of goods, but what I had never seen in my life was ... [that] our soldiers brought a great quantity of young girls or young women into the camp, which soon became an arena of discord and trouble. Having been informed of the trouble that reigned in the camp, because of the women brought in by the soldiers, Bonaparte ordered that all of those in possession of one should conduct them to the Lazaret court, or face very severe punishment. This order was implemented very quickly; all around us the poor creatures could be seen being led back into the ruins of the town where they could have been given asylum. But a company of chasseurs had been assembled to shoot them.

The siege of Acre was entirely different from all the previous sieges. The Turkish governor, a former Bosnian executioner named Ahmed 'Djezzar' (the butcher), assisted by the British commander, Sidney Smith, and a French émigré and former classmate of Bonaparte at the Brienne academy, Louis Phelipeaux, proved determined opponents. Laval described the problems Bonaparte now encountered: 'We returned to camp at St Jean d'Acre on 24 April, and after having made a breach, we attempted three assaults that day. The breach was soon packed with corpses and we were forced to retire with heavy loss.'

To alleviate a desperate shortage of musket ammunition Doguereau explained how, 'We were forced to gather all the registers and books in the camp and take the powder from the artillery ammunition; for more than 15 days we were on the verge of running out of infantry cartridges.'

There was a complication with the artillery too, as Bernoyer recalled: 'Having almost run out of cannonballs, we were forced to reduce our rate of fire. We had to retrieve enemy cannonballs to continue firing. To encourage our soldiers to collect them, they were given a reward of five *sous* for each recovered! It is truly unimaginable, inconceivable, yet it is so: The soldiers chase after the cannonballs that the enemy sends them!'

Returning victorious from the battle of Mount Tabor, General Kléber was distinctly unimpressed by the poor management of the siege, Bernoyer recalls: 'Kléber said to Bonaparte, in the presence of numerous witnesses: "General, if I did not know myself that Bonaparte commanded here, I would have believed that these works had been directed by children!"'

In his desperation to seize the vital port, Bonaparte passed command of the siege over to Kléber. Vertray could easily see that, 'Many soldiers had lost their courage. Their confidence in Bonaparte had diminished. They murmured against his ambition; the popularity of Kléber, on the contrary, was more solid than ever.' 'We saw all the grenadiers assembled in the camp together,' wrote Charles Morand on Kléber's staff, 'coming with some bottles of brandy to reward them and give them encouragement for their last attempts.'

French soldiers storm the dilapidated walls of Alexandria shortly after landing.



Laval recalled:

The enemy had built some trenches outside the town, which were aligned with ours and protected the several sorties they made each day. We resolved to seize them on the night of 7–8 May. Our *éclaireurs* were charged with this mission. We took them, but they were so close to the ramparts that it was impossible to hold them: the grenades and fire-pots, which the enemy hurled from the ramparts, forced them to evacuate. On the evening of 9 May, we tried again. I was in the expedition. The signal was given at 11 o'clock in the evening; we had all reached to within ten paces of the enemy and were on our stomachs, waiting for this signal. They sent up a signal rocket to announce it to us. We leapt like lions into the enemy trench; we killed and were killed, we slit their throats and they slit ours. Only a few Turks escaped and we remained masters of the battlefield until daybreak. The enemy on the ramparts threw fire-pots and bombs at us, killing many people. From eleven at night until sunrise we lost fifteen officers in our regiment alone including our commander Boyé. The soldiers perished in the same proportion. I escaped with bruises from the stones they threw at us from the top of the ramparts. My canteen was pierced by a ball, but fortunately I saved the brandy it was filled with. ... Only a few soldiers remained, all had been killed or wounded. The General assembled the commanders to discuss the feasibility of another assault. It was decided we could. The remaining troops were lined up. Never have I seen soldiers more ready to fight.

Vertray agreed: 'With extraordinary impetuosity, officers and soldiers together, we threw ourselves at the enemy trenches. In several instants they were overrun. The combat continued furiously until the first glimmers of daylight. Despite our troops' enormous losses, Bonaparte ordered the continuation of the assault. ... My company was decimated.' Laval grimly concluded: 'On 10 May we tried twice more, but not having enough soldiers, we were forced to raise the siege.' Although French troops had breached Acre's outer defences, they had found that a second defensive wall had been constructed behind it. With Turkish reinforcements arriving by sea and plague spreading through his demoralised army (General Murat warned him against becoming 'the butcher of his soldiers'), Bonaparte finally admitted it was time to return to Cairo.

The retreat from Acre

After failure at Acre, the French endured a retreat unequalled in its misery until the 1812 retreat from Moscow. After deciding that the siege of Acre must be abandoned, Bonaparte asked his chief medical officer, Desgenettes, if it would be possible to arrange the evacuation of the wounded and those afflicted by the plague. Bernoyer recorded the reply, which sealed the fate of many:

General, I can't see any possibility in transporting them for it would be very unwise to expose the army to this terrible disease. To deal with this danger, I see no other means than to abandon them to their unhappy fate. I confess that such a decision is cruel

and inhumane, but necessity forces us to make this hard choice! It is certain that there is no other choice, unless we should inflict one less cruel option, because once the enemy perceives our retreat, they will fall on our camp and into our hospitals; then all those that they find there will be massacred without mercy. Therefore instead of the peaceful death that we could give them, we would expose them to far greater suffering. I think, to save them from suffering such barbarity, in the name of humanity we must, this very evening, put a sufficient quantity of opium in their broth to send them to sleep forever.

Despite the claims made later by those who decided on this, this drastic measure was agreed and word passed round. Kléber's notebooks recorded that, 'they proposed that the medical officers give opium to the sick and seriously wounded.' Lieutenant Laval unhappily described the scenes that followed:

We gave the order to the hospital to have all the walking wounded leave for Tantura, where they would be embarked or put on requisitioned horses, mules and asses; however, they had to prevent the large number of plague victims being moved from the hospice of Mount Carmel. It was the same in the camp, where we left those who lacked the strength to follow us. Never has one seen such a spectacle: you could hear those wretches lying in their tents, unable to move, crying: "Don't abandon me comrades, I will be butchered by the Turks."

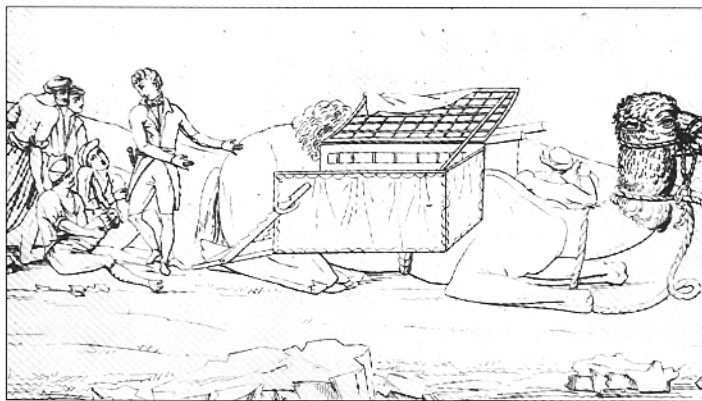
The prospect was too much for some, as Kléber saw: 'A grenadier from the 19e riddled with the plague called on one of his comrades and begged him to terminate his life. With sang-froid and resolution, his comrade rendered him this service.' Sergeant Bonnefons witnessed similar desperation: 'It was a spectacle worthy of compassion, seeing those men, half dead, asking you in the name of humanity to extend a helping hand and not to abandon them to their unhappy fate. Despite the enormous weight of the munitions, the artillery wagons still carried some wounded. This slowed our march down considerably.'

As the army pulled out, the opium-laced broth was distributed in the hospice on Mount Carmel. Vertray heard rumours of this act: 'A great number [of sick] fell into the hands of the English. The others, I am told, were poisoned on Bonaparte's orders. As for myself, I have no knowledge of the execution of that atrocious order, but I do know that several sick, knowing what was waiting for them, escaped the hospital and swam to British ships.'

More conclusive was the account given to Bernoyer by Lallemand, who had been left in the hospice but survived:

He told me that on the evening the poisoned broth was distributed,

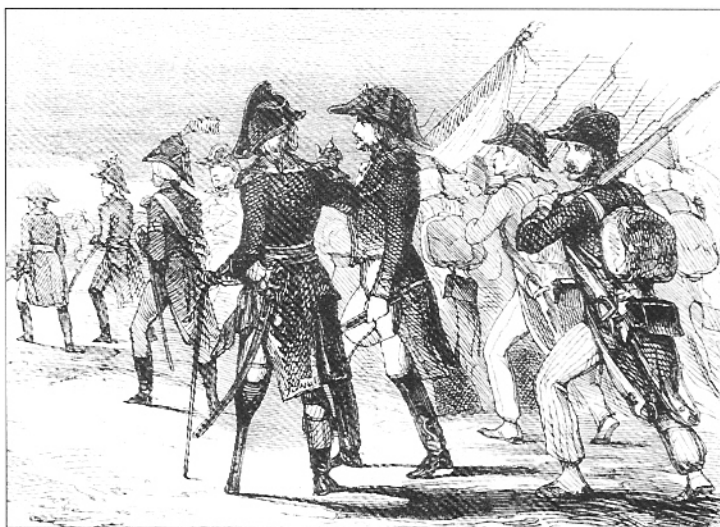
Surgeon Larrey is credited with this idea for a camel ambulance. On the retreat from Acre, the wounded were piled onto artillery caissons and wagons, while many others were carried on stretchers, hoping that the strength of their bearers did not give out.



Father Yvarin, from Avignon, whom he knew, warned him not to drink it. Therefore he left the liquid in his bowl. Then in the night, the news went round the hospital rooms that Bonaparte and his army had abandoned the siege of St Jean d'Acre. Everyone was gripped with fear. Lallemand sensed the whole horror of the situation, bitterly regretting not having drunk the beverage, which, by a peaceful death, would have freed him from the predictable massacre by the barbaric enemy. In this cruel expectation, he resolved to consume the broth. The effort he made to find the bowl caused his body to tremble all over, he felt the plague buboes reopening and was seized by violent pain. As a result he fainted for a long time until daybreak. He was awakened by a confusion of noise throughout the hospital. The door of his room was noisily flung open: some Turks entered hurriedly, sword in hand. Then, he assured me, he thought himself lost. After closely observing their movements, he was surprised to discover in their faces, an expression of pity, surprise and horror at the sight of so many dead and dying. Before this desolate spectacle, they raised their hands to heaven and demanded an explanation for such a catastrophe. Once they had been told, they began warming water and made those who still could, drink it. All those who had resisted the poisoned beverage were saved: more than forty survived because of the Turks' efforts. A commissar and a surgeon visited them: those that had recovered were given a choice: either to enter Turkish service, or be escorted to the nearest French post. The majority remained in Turkish service and soon became our most redoubtable enemies. As for Lallemand, he preferred to rejoin the French.

On 24 May, the retreating French reached Jaffa, where several hundred French victims of the plague had been left. Sergeant Bonnefons recorded: 'We arrived in Jaffa in the morning. Entry into the town was forbidden to us because of the contagion that reigned there, so we looked for shelter among the lemon trees.' 'Nothing was more horrible than the spectacle we found in the port of Jaffa,' remembered Jean-Pierre Doguereau. 'It was covered with the dead and dying who begged all the passers by for money or to bandage them, or to have them put on boats; they had the greatest fear of being abandoned. We found plague victims on every corner, under tents and on the pavements; the hospitals were full of them. On our departure we left many of them. I was assured that they had taken the means so as not to fall into the hands of the Turks alive.' This 'means' was again opium, which was administered when the last of the French left on the 28th. Lieutenant Laval recorded another lucky survivor of this second episode of poisoning:

On the retreat to Egypt, most officers followed Bonaparte's lead, offering their horses to help evacuate the wounded while they went on foot.



Jean-Baptiste Kléber (1753–1800). Born in Strasbourg, Kléber served as an officer with the Austrian army (1777–85) before later coming to prominence in the National Guard after the Revolution. He was furious with Bonaparte for quitting Egypt and passing command to him, but he was loved by the troops. He was equally upset after the British reneged on the Treaty of El Arish, which he hoped would see the army returned home. On the very same day that Bonaparte was victorious at Marengo, Kléber was stabbed to death by a fanatic from Jerusalem.



One soldier of the regiment, who escaped the poisoning in the hospital at Jaffa, assured me that a beverage had been given to him, supposedly to give them strength to cross the desert and that he, finding himself near the *marmite*, had a double dose, all of which he vomited. ... Realising that his comrades, who, like himself, had drunk the beverage, were mostly dead, he left the hospital and made his way after the army which had already left and followed a hundred paces behind us, keeping himself hidden so as not to be seen.

Even those who avoided plague or injury suffered enormously. Bonnefons heard 'musket shots coming from the convoy; we went running! What a heart-breaking scene! Some soldiers could stand the thirst which devoured them no longer and had killed themselves.' As the march continued, Caporal Cailleux found they 'were obliged to burn our artillery, to blow up all our powder magazines and to throw our cannons into the sea. This miserable march put many unfortunate soldiers, wounded or victims of the plague, into their graves; the dead bodies on the burning desert sands could easily serve as markers to our route.'

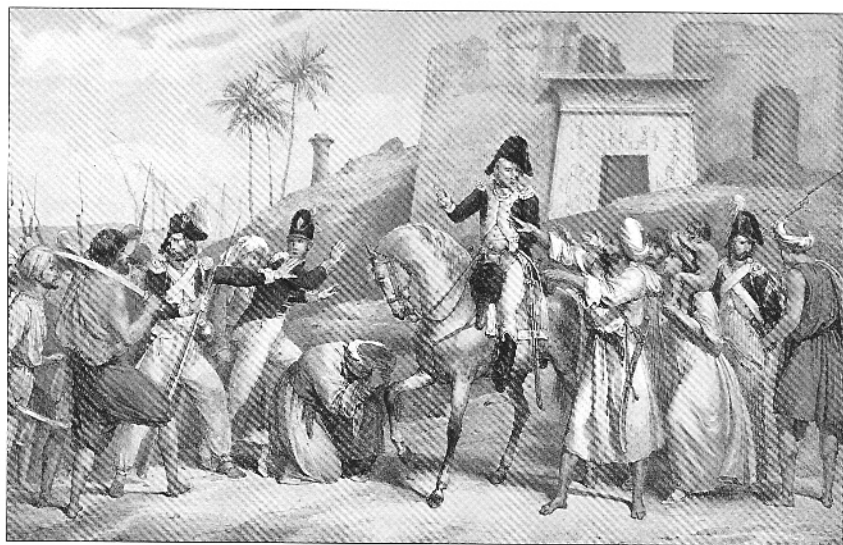
The relief of surviving such a difficult journey was most clearly expressed by Sergeant Bonnefons: 'We arrived at Belbeis on 13 June; we left the next day and our delight was unconstrained when we saw the pyramids at Giza. Delirious joy replaced the black melancholy into which we had been plunged for such a long time. The dawn of a fine day shone for us.'

HOME

Not long after returning to Cairo, Bonaparte and his closest aides secretly abandoned the army and departed for France. Moiret revealed:

We were not displeased to see the command pass to General Kléber's hands; the reputation for bravery, which he had won when in the Army of the Rhine, the prudence he had always shown, above all at St Jean-d'Acre ... soon won the army's confidence. His known character, rather different from that of his predecessor, led us to hope he would negotiate with our enemies and might succeed in returning us to our country. Bonaparte never did anything except in his own interest, and saw only the path leading to the advancement of his own fortune. ... If Napoleon had not seen the opportunity to seize supreme power in his adopted country, he would have remained in Egypt, where he would have created an independent state, but at the cost of all our blood. Like Caesar, he would prefer to be first in Cairo rather than second in Paris.

However, Kléber was unable to negotiate a passage home before he was assassinated. Command then passed to General Abdallah Menou, who had added the first name after embracing Islam in order to marry an Egyptian. Initially Moiret was troubled by his appointment:



The departure of French troops on British ships is met with conflicting emotions. Egyptians who were known to have supported the French administration could expect summary justice at the hands of their liberators.

The first name of the new general was no help to him: the republicanism of the army had not stifled the regard for conventions and the religious ideas, which we had acquired from our early education, and the customs of our country. He was a renegade, they said, a man who had renounced his country in order to embrace the law of Mohammed. ... Will he, then, contemplate abandoning his new family and returning to France where he would be despised? ... Will he not do everything he can to keep us in Egypt as supporters of his power and be his companions in his voluntary exile?

In fact, Menou proved to be a skilful and respected administrator, but with fewer than 14,000 fit troops to defend Egypt, he was unable to repel a determined British expeditionary force, which landed in March 1801. 'On 9 August we negotiated with the English,' recalled Laval. 'Menou capitulated despite the difficulties he had making that decision. The capitulation was signed on 2 September and we embarked on English ships for France on the 14th. On 20 September we set sail: I arrived in Marseille on 25 October and on the 28th, I left quarantine.'

Laval had been away from France for over 41 months – there were no six acres of land waiting for him on his return as promised. For Sergeant Bonnefons it was enough to have survived and he offered up this grateful prayer: 'I give thanks to Divine Providence and above all, to God, to have kept me safe and sound from peril. I add that I will continue to remember such a special favour until my last breath of life.'



One of the lucky ones. A third of the expedition met their end in Egypt and Syria.

MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS

To mark the bicentennial of the Egyptian expedition, a large number of excellent memoirs and accounts were reprinted in France. Above all, the Internet gives readers the opportunity to learn about and debate Napoleonic subjects, with dedicated forums, as well as links to associations, re-enactment groups and museums worldwide. A visit to the collections in Paris, at Musée de l'Armée and the Musée de Carnavalet are highly recommended, while the palace of Versailles contains many famous paintings. The Musée de la Marine in Paris is worth a visit for its models of period ships, while those wishing to carry out more in-depth research should visit the Military Archives at the Chateau de Vincennes, where surviving documentation of the expedition can be found. For those interested in the artefacts recovered and the work of the savants, a visit to the Musée du Louvre (Paris) and the British Museum (London), where the Rosetta Stone is on display, are very rewarding.

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COLOUR PLATE COMMENTARY

A: INFANTRYMAN 1798

The infantry uniform underwent several modifications in Egypt in an attempt to adapt to the climate and the availability of local cloth. The first version was designed by Bernoyer, who gave an account of the process in a letter home on 30 July 1798:

[Bonaparte] asked me to rapidly draw up different uniform designs for the troops, so that he could choose one that would be more convenient for the country and the climate. He advised me to avoid usual constraints on the soldiers' uniform. From the designs that I presented him the next day, this one was chosen: a very short-cut *veste* with the lapels buttoned to the waist to replace the waistcoat; cotton trousers finished by half-gaiters, cut so the shoes were well covered to prevent sand penetrating while travelling through desert. ... Bonaparte wanted to know how long it would take me to uniform ten thousand men, the most needy of the

Trooper of the 18e Dragoons in campaign dress. Menou ordered that all troops would be issued an Arab-style woollen overcoat to be worn at the night. The cavalry overcoat was cut more amply and was sometimes provided with a hood.



A tambour (drummer), grenadier and sapper of the 25e demi-brigade in the modified uniform ordered by Kléber on 1 October 1799. It appears that troops wearing crimson or red coloured coats were ordered to wear either their greatcoats or their shirts over their coats when fighting the British.

army. I responded that it would be impossible to give an immediate response, not knowing the country's resources: He gave me up to 24 hours to inform him. ... He appeared satisfied when I told him that I could deliver the ten thousand uniforms in thirty-five days, or two thousand a week, if he gave me the authorisation to requisition all the French and Turkish tailors that I judged necessary. ... Three days later my workshop was organised, with more than one thousand craftsmen at work.

Unfortunately, this lighter uniform did not offer the same protection for soldiers at night. In November 1798, Bernoyer revealed that Bonaparte had ordered him 'to furnish ten thousand grey canvas greatcoats which would be put into the stores over the course of the following month.'

The spikes (1) issued before the Syrian campaign were approximately five feet in length. They were to be positioned ahead of the front rank and linked together by chains. The wooden heels (2) helped the soldier drive the point into the ground with his foot.

Also shown: (3) An officer's *hausse col* (gorget), (4) a typical infantry demi-brigade *drapeau* (flag), (5) large and small *habit* buttons, (6) a *tambour* (drum) and an example of the *casquette* adopted by the army while in Egypt (7).

B: THE LANDING AT MARABOUT BAY

In a chase across the Mediterranean, the British fleet under Nelson had reached Alexandria ahead of the French fleet. The last British ship had left the Egyptian coast only two hours before the arrival of the lead French ship, the *Junon*. After being informed of this and fearing the return of British warships, Bonaparte dared not delay and so ordered an immediate landing in Marabout Bay despite the advice of his naval commanders who preferred a landing in the safer waters of Aboukir Bay. Kléber's Division were ordered to prepare for the landing, drawing according to Doguereau 'four days' rations and sixty cartridges per man.' The fleet dropped anchor and the troops were rowed ashore in poor weather.

The sea was very lively and the waves covered us in water,' complained Doguereau. 'The majority of the troops were seasick because of the violent rolling of the boats.' Miot was also concerned: 'Crammed into the ship's boats, our soldiers were thrown at the coast. It was not done without losing several men. On top of this, nightfall added to the dangers of a shore strewn with rocks and reefs. It was a sad spectacle going on around me. I still recall the cries of several barges full of troops, lost to the whim of the wind and waves, vainly pleading for the help we could not give them.'

Charles Morand also recalled the landing:

On 30 June we saw a vaporous white line on the horizon announcing the land of Egypt to us. On the morning of

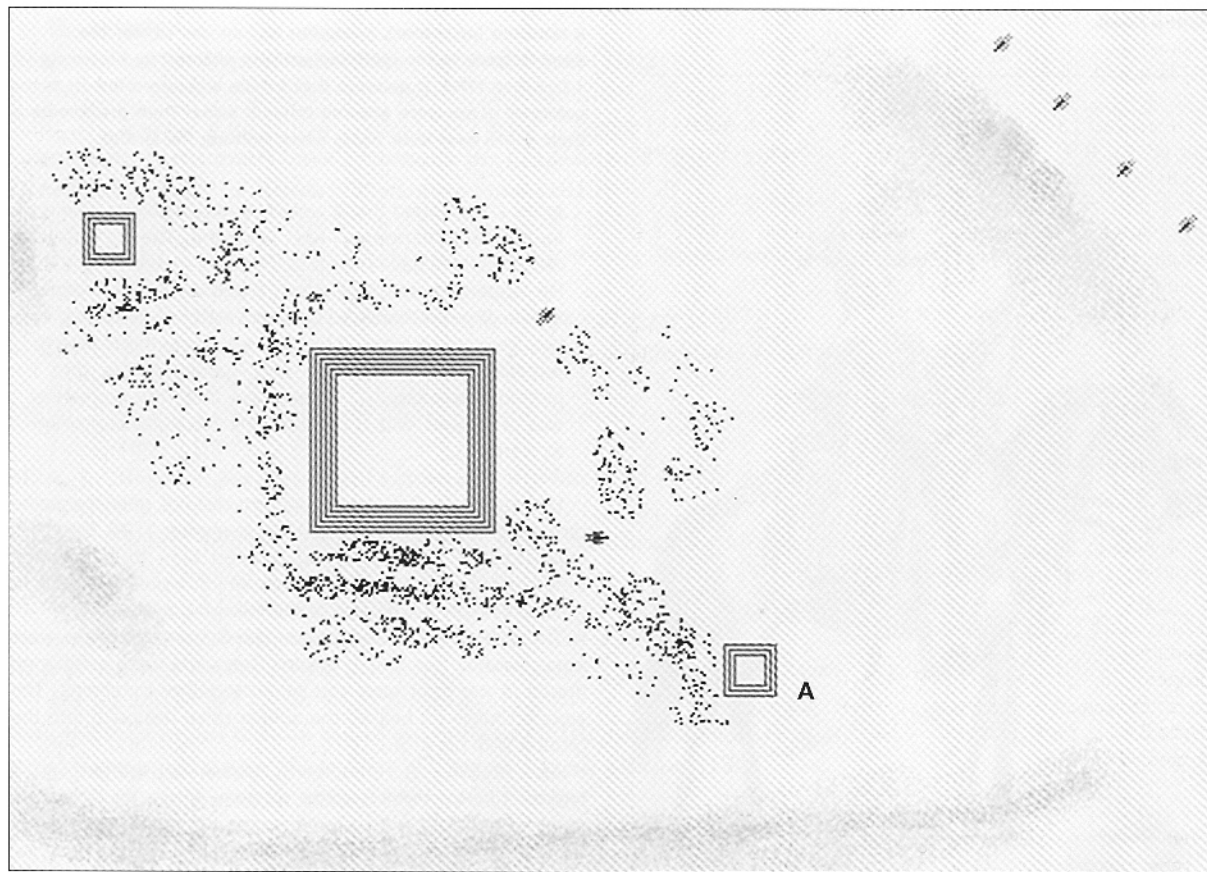
1 July we were a few miles offshore, on the longitude of the tower. That evening we dropped anchor and began to disembark. The sea was agitated by a violent west-north-westerly wind, making it very difficult. During the night only a few companies landed and we were forced to wait until the morning. ... As soon as I was in the harbour, I jumped in a *chaloûpe* and went ashore with a party of my grenadiers. A few hours sufficed to carry out the whole landing. Some Arabs from Alexandria were present during the morning on the dunes a few thousand *toises* from the shore. A musket volley sent them into hasty flight.

C: THE BATTLE OF SEDIMAN

While pursuing the Mamelukes south, Desaix's 3,000-strong division became embroiled in an engagement against as many as 10,000 enemy troops. Morand remembered it as being the only time the French were really in serious trouble in Egypt. In a detailed account of this battle, he described how:

After riding round the Division several times, they decided to attack the small right-hand square. ... The

Desaix's initial formation at Sediman after a hand-drawn sketch by Morand. After riding round the squares several times the Mamelukes concentrated their efforts and managed to break one of the small squares (A).



chasseurs of the 21e Légère volley fired at point-blank range before lowering bayonets. Neither the impetuosity nor skill of the Mamelukes allowed them to penetrate or unsettle those intrepid soldiers. Hand-to-hand fighting lasted for a few minutes when suddenly the Mamelukes retired six paces. From there, in a desperate rage, they threw their swords, muskets and pistols at the front ranks, which began to break up. The French could not close up, thirty men were struck down, the Mamelukes broke through and the square existed no more. The survivors took refuge in the main square. After dispersing the small square, the enemy threw themselves on the 88e, which formed one of the main square's faces. They were eliminated by heavy fire from that *demi-brigade* and the small square to the left rear. It was 3 pm and there was no sign of the battle ending, when amidst the shouts and cries, we heard the whistle of a cannonball passing several *toises* above the French. It was soon followed by a second. Général Desaix, after having ordered all the wounded to be moved to the centre of the square, had the charge beaten. We marched at the guns at the *pas de course*. A third cannonball knocked over some men, two others killed two artillery horses and smashed one of the cannon. The shots caused a little disorder, but the rolling terrain broke up the formation. Meanwhile the Mamelukes attempted to support their artillery. They reformed at the rear of the square. The *tirailleurs* covering that side quickly rejoined the ranks, chased by the Mamelukes. Morand halted his *demi-brigade*, turned to face the enemy with an about face and stopped them with a heavy, point-blank volley. The Mamelukes fled, stunned by their losses.

In a letter to Desaix, Morand singled out the key role played by the commander of the *tirailleurs* – Grenadier Captain Piat: 'at the moment when the square marched on the enemy guns, as the Mamelukes gathered to charge the rear, citizen Piat held them off determinedly, rallying the *tirailleurs*, producing a terrible fire, giving time for the marching square to halt and the 88e to about face without separating from the square.'

D: DENON AND THE SPHINX

The artist Dominique Vivant Denon (1747–1825) was responsible for 150 drawings included in the *Description de l'Égypte*. His two-volume journal, published in 1802, gave the first in-depth account of life on the expedition to Egypt. Although Denon regretted not having enough time to draw the monuments in the north of the country properly, he did make a brief visit to Giza, where the pyramids and in particular the Sphinx made a lasting impression:

I had only time to view the Sphinx, which deserves to be drawn with a most scrupulous attention, even more

than has ever yet been bestowed upon it. Although its proportions are colossal, its outline is pure and graceful; the expression of the head is mild, gracious and elegant; the character is indeed African; but the mouth, the lips of which are thick, has a softness and delicacy of truly admirable execution and seems real life and flesh.

In general, soldiers disliked the savants intensely, wrongly blaming them for the expedition and for being marooned in Egypt. Savants were often used by generals as messengers. On one such mission, Denon was struck by how deep the resentment towards him went: 'I galloped on to fulfil my mission, when a soldier who was marching out of ranks, and had heard me approach, turning suddenly to the left as I was passing to the right, presented his bayonet against me; and before I could avoid it, I was unhorsed by the blow, whilst he at the same times was thrown down by the reaction of the musket. "There is one *savant* less," said he while falling, for with them everyone who was not a soldier was a *savant*; but some coins which I had in my pocket inside my coat served as a shield, and received the point of the bayonet.' Denon was glad to be one of those chosen to return to France with Bonaparte in August 1799.

E: THE BATTLE OF NAZARETH

On 8 April 1799, marching out of Nazareth with about 150 cavalry and 300 infantrymen, Général Junot encountered a Turkish force in the hills of Luby. At 10am a furious battle developed as 1,000 Turks attacked the head of the column. An officer of the 14e Dragoons left a telling account of the bitter fighting:

The chasseurs and hussars scouting the march re-entered the ranks and we charged off against the enemy. A short melee began; the Turks received the shock without weakening and the scimitars rained down thick and fast on our helmets. Finally we broke through their ranks ... but this was only the first engagement. ... New groups of horsemen swept in without cease; there were

now more than three thousand against us. With admirable sang-froid, Général Junot gave orders to his small force and we calmly reached the neighbouring heights. ... As soon as we reached our position the Turkish horsemen swooped on us at the gallop, emitting horrible cries. Their scimitars glistened in the sun, their flowing cloaks exposing their rich, gold embroidered clothing; their horses leapt with fury and seemed to share their rage. On our side a profound silence reigned. Our dragoons raised their muskets ready to fire. ... At close range, Junot ordered them to fire. The volley burst out, covering the noise of the neighing and the clash of weapons. Through the thick smoke surrounding us, I perceived those hideous dark-faced horsemen, who swarmed around us like demons; but *chef de*

A translation of the first verse of this famous Revolutionary hymn penned by Marie-Joseph Chénier in 1794.

LE CHANT DU DÉPART

Victory sings,
Opening the barrier for us,
Liberty guides our step,
And from the North to the South,
The warlike trumpet,
Has sounded the hour for combat!
Tremble, enemies of France!
Kings drunk with blood and pride,
The sovereign people advances,
Tyrants descend into your coffins.

The Republic calls to us,
To know how to conquer, or how to die,
A Frenchman must live for her,
For her a Frenchman must die!

brigade Duvivier had already ordered sabres to hand and we received the furious Turkish charge steadfastly and our blades began ravaging their ranks terribly. A richly dressed Mameluke discharged his pistol at my head, the ball glanced off me, but I had the consolation of laying him out dead at my feet. At this moment I noticed *brigadier* Prévot fighting on foot against two Turks, a ball having cut down his horse beneath him, but he had got back on his feet in time, and with an astonishing calm, parried his enemies' blows. The brave Pignard rushed to him and pushed his sabre through the body of one of the enemy, while Prévot struck the other with a back-handed blow. ... A little further on, a *maréchal-des-logis* of the same regiment attacked a Mameluke who carried a standard made from a long horsetail; the two horsemen struggled hand to hand, their mounts participating furiously. Finally the entire group rolled onto the ground, but the Turk, encumbered by his loose clothing, could not get up in time. The *maréchal-des-logis*' blade drove into his chest and he expired in a rage, seeing his standard in the hands of the enemy.

F: LES DROMADAIRES

Faced with a shortage of mounted cavalry with which to pursue to the Mamelukes, Bonaparte ordered the formation of the regiment des dromadaires on 9 January 1799. Instead of using cavalrymen, Bonaparte ordered that 10–15 infantrymen from each demi-brigade be nominated for service in the new corps, which would be uniformed in an oriental style. The entry requirements stipulated a minimum height of 5 *pieds 4 pouces* (1.73m); over 24 years of age with more than at least four years' service and of recognised bravery. Enjoying the same pay scale as dragoons, the regiment, commanded by a *chef de brigade* (supported by an adjutant-major and quartermaster), would be composed of two squadrons, each commanded by a *chef d'escadron*. These squadrons would have four companies, each containing one captain, one lieutenant, one *maréchal-des-logis*-chef, two *maréchal-des-logis*, one *brigadier-fourrier*, one *trompette* and 50 dromadaires.

The men would be armed with a musket, bayonet and a 'very long lance'. Their tactics were equally novel: the dromadaires were trained to fight dismounted in a square, firing from behind their mounts, which were forced to lay down on the outside of the square to give the men cover. Once the enemy charge had been repulsed, the dromadaires were to remount and continue the pursuit, allowing the enemy no respite.

A contemporary sketch from 1800 made by one of the expedition's artists showing troops from the 88e demi-brigade in the new uniform authorised by Kléber.



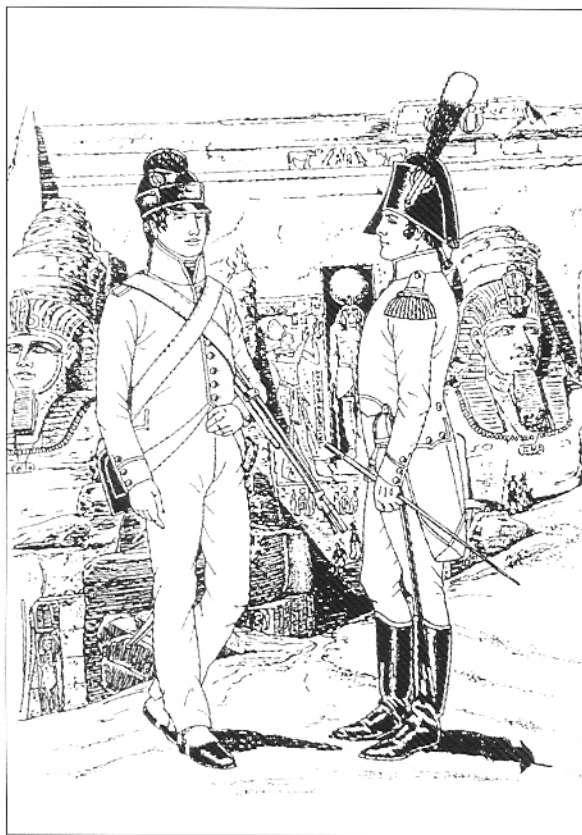
G: THE EGYPTIAN UNIFORM

After the battle of Mount Tabor, Bonaparte asked Bernoyer to replace the soldiers' ragged coats. His response was recorded in a letter of 1 July 1799:

I observed that it would be impossible to uniform them in woollen cloth and even then it would be necessary to adopt a different colour for each corps; for it was certain that we would not find enough woollen cloth for even two companies of grenadiers in the villages or their locales. The solution was to replace the woollen cloth with blue cotton. Once this project was adopted, the army would be totally equipped within a month.

However, when Grandjean designed the next uniform during the following summer, he was instructed not to use cotton:

Several days before his departure [for France], Bonaparte occupied himself with a second uniform for the army, tougher than the first, which had been made from cotton. He wanted to make this one from woollen cloth. The difficulty was in finding a large enough quantity in the country. ... In less than three months, I received in my stores 40,000 bolts of cloth of all sorts of colours, quantity and widths. ... We were forced to take what we could find in Egypt and to variegate the troops in eight or ten shades, which far from displeasing the eye, on the contrary formed a very handsome effect and made our army appear much more numerous than it was.



H: THE ROSETTA STONE

On 20 August 1799, while demolishing a wall in Fort St Julien, a soldier named d'Hautpoul found a large dark slab almost four feet in height and weighing over a quarter of a ton. Seeing inscriptions on one face, he notified his superior, Lieutenant Bouchard, who in turn contacted Michel-Ange Lancret, a member of the Cairo Institute. Lancret realised that the slab displayed Greek text as well as hieroglyphics and another as yet unknown alphabet (Demotic). Lancret ordered Bouchard to transport the stone to Cairo to be inspected by the savants.

Ever since arriving in Egypt, the savants had been frustrated at not being able to decipher the inscriptions on the ancient monuments. They rightly suspected that the Greek text on the Stone would provide the key to deciphering the other alphabets. However, after taking casts and rubbings, the excited savants remained unable to unlock the secrets of the hieroglyphs, so instead sent some ink rubbings back to Paris where they excited great curiosity all across Europe.

When the French capitulated in Alexandria, the British demanded they turn over their most significant discoveries, in particular the famous stone found at Rosetta. General Menou claimed the Stone was his private property and as such exempt from the terms of the treaty, but the British would not be denied. The confiscated Stone arrived in Portsmouth in February 1802 aboard HMS *l'Égyptienne*, ironically a captured French frigate. At the end of that year the Stone was deposited in the British Museum, where it remains today. The chance discovery of the Stone was perhaps the most significant achievement of the three-year expedition. When Jean-François Champollion finally made a translation of the stone in 1822, the secret world of the Pharaohs was at last illuminated.

Twenty-five members of the famous aerostatier corps went to Egypt with two balloons. After losing one balloon on the *Orient*, the aerostaters were limited to frightening the wits out of amazed Egyptian onlookers on fete days.

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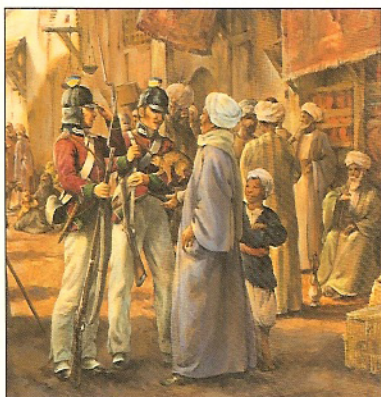
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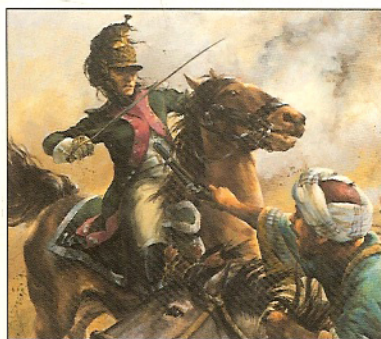
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