

Grant and Sherman On the Nile

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Aug. 11—From 1869-1883, a group of 50 American military officers, veterans of the Union and Confederate armies of the Civil War, were voluntarily dispatched to Egypt to help establish a national army and a military training program, based on the model of West Point. Members of the American team developed coastal defenses, conducted missions of exploration throughout the Horn of Africa, built a formidable Egyptian army and navy, and established an educational system for the children of the Egyptian armed forces.

The “Americans on the Nile” project was launched by the enlightened Khedive of Egypt, the administrator for the Ottoman Empire, Ismael Pasha. Ismael approached Thaddeus Mott, a West Point graduate then serving in the Ottoman Army after having fought with the Union Army in the Civil War. The son of a prominent physician and an anthropologist himself, Mott received permission from President Ulysses S. Grant’s Army Chief of Staff, Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, to recruit the team of American officers. Mott traveled in 1869 to Egypt, accompanied by Gen. Charles Pomeroy Stone and Gen. Henry H. Sibley. Stone would remain in Egypt through 1883, and became the Chief of Staff to Khedive Ismael Pasha.

The American mission was fiercely opposed by the British and the French, who were as adamantly opposed to Egyptian independence and sovereignty as the Ottomans, whose grip on Egypt had already been weakened by the Anglo-French machinations. The feeling was mutual, as reflected in the memoirs of Gen. William Wing Loring, a prominent member of the mission, from his decade in Egypt. Loring wrote a stinging denunciation of the Anglo-French efforts to loot Egypt, based on the debt that had been incurred through the building of the Suez Canal.

By 1878, the British-French combination conducted a coup in Egypt. They forced the abdication of Ismael Pasha, as a precondition for a debt restructuring. British and French officials were installed as heads of the Finance Ministry and other key posts. The first demand of

the Anglo-French debt-holders was the dismantling of the American-built Egyptian Army and Navy. Soon, 80% of the armed forces were shut down, and all but one of the remaining American officers—Gen. Stone—were sent home.

The impact of the American officers on the future of Egypt, however, was not to be so easily wiped out. Under American commanders, including Gen. Charles Chaille-Long and Major James M. Morgan, major explorations were conducted into present-day Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan. Major lakes and rivers, part of the Nile River tributaries system, were mapped for the first time, and the Mediterranean coastal defense were established that would serve Egypt in the future. Most importantly, the Egyptian equivalent of West Point was firmly established, along with a high-quality educational system for the children of the Egyptian military. In effect, a seed was planted that would be an essential feature of the Egyptian republican revolution of 1919. Many of the leaders of that independence movement were themselves either veterans of the American military program or children of those Egyptian officers. The full account of the American hand in Egypt’s future is yet to be written; however, the fact that, to this day, the Egyptian armed forces are seen as the backbone of any patriotic movement, speaks volumes about the long-term impact of the American mission.

The American deployments to Egypt were fully blessed by the Grant Administration. In 1872, Gen. Sherman paid a visit to the Americans in Egypt; in 1878, former President Grant, as part of his world tour, also visited the Americans serving the Khedive. Grant would write, at the time, that he marveled at the Egyptian history and considered it one of the highpoints of his entire world expedition.

The Americans who served in Egypt, in some instances, went on to great achievements in other parts of the world. William McEntyre Dye, one of the American officers on the Nile, went in 1888 to Korea, where he served as chief military advisor to the government, on the personal recommendation of Gen. Philip Sheridan. Confederate Army Engineer Samuel Henry Lockett, who organized the coastal defenses of Vicksburg, then went to Egypt, and later went to Chile, where he supervised railroad construction to the end of his life. Before moving to Chile, Lockett served under Gen. Stone in the construction of Liberty Island, where the Statue of Liberty was placed.