GENERAL GORDON’S KHARTOUM STAR

By DANIEL FEARON

Charles George Gordon was born in London on January 23rd, 1833, near the Woolwich Arsenal. With his family he moved to Dublin, Edinburgh, and then, at the age of seven, to Corfu. After three years the family returned to England and he was educated at Taunton. He became a Cadet at Woolwich at the age of 15, and in June, 1852, he received his commission, as a 2nd-lieutenant in the Royal Engineers (it having been postponed once, following a fight with a fellow cadet). He was stationed at Chatham for two years, and then at Pembroke Docks, where he was when war broke out in the Crimea. To Gordon, perhaps the most important outcome of this war was to be his friendship with Captain, later Lord, Wolseley.

In 1860 the Taeping Rebellion was raging in China, and during the next five years it was Gordon’s task to quell it. The Emperor bestowed on him ‘The Yellow Jacket and Peacock’s Feather of the Order of Mandarin, First Class’, and also the highest military rank, that of ‘Ti-Tu’. The two Empresses awarded him the ‘Gold Medal of Distinction’ (on his return he erased his name from this medal and sold it to raise funds for the distressed cotton workers in Lancashire, out of work because the American Civil War had all but stopped their supplies). He returned to England in 1865, a colonel, a Companion of the Bath, and a national hero—Chinese Gordon.

Gordon’s next mission, six years later, took him first to the Danube, and then to the Crimea, where it was his job to inspect the war graves. He was returning home, when at Constantinople, the Khedive offered him the job of ‘Governor of the tribes of Upper Egypt’, which he accepted, having first received the Queen’s permission. He left to take up this post in the autumn of 1873, and for the next seven years he was ‘clearing up’ the Sudan. After this campaign he returned home, and soon set sail for India, intending to be Secretary to the new Viceroy, Lord Ripon, but instead he returned to England on the first ship. A short while later he was in China again, in order to quell a revolt by Li Hung Chang. He was then back in London until he took over the command of the Royal Engineers in Mauritius. He came back from this post by way of the Cape, where he tried without any success to help the Governor, Sir Hercules Robinson, over a settlement plan.

Gordon was a man of strong, and in many ways strange, religious views, and now he found time for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. (This was well portrayed in the small exhibition of Gordon material at the British Museum, arranged by the Department of Manuscripts during the summer of 1963, at which my Khartoum Star was also on view.)

On returning from the pilgrimage Gordon was in Brussels, and was on the point of accepting a job in the Congo, when on January 17th, 1884, he received a telegram from Lord Wolseley begging him to come to London at once. The Sudan was in revolt and the leader, Mohammed Ahmed, was drawing support by claiming to be the Mahdi. Gordon was in London the next morning and attended a Cabinet meeting with Wolseley. Gordon was later to write of the visit, ‘He (Wolseley) went in and talked to the ministers and came back and said, ‘Her Majesty’s government want you to undertake this. The government are determined to evacuate the Sudan, for they will not undertake to guarantee its safety. Will you go and do it?’ I said “Yes!” He said, “Go in.” I went in and saw them. They said, “Did Wolseley
tell you your orders?’ I said ‘Yes.’ I said ‘You will not guarantee the future government of the Sudan, and you wish me to go up and evacuate now?’ They said, ‘Yes’ and it was all over, and I left at 8 p.m. for Calais.’

By January 26th Gordon was in Cairo, and with Colonel Stewart (later murdered on board the Abbas), left for Khartoum two days later, arriving on February 18th. Details of the siege are too many to be mentioned here, but conditions were never favourable, and as early as April the idea of a decoration had occurred to Gordon. On the 26th of that month he wrote to Sir Evelyn Baring, ‘We are making decorations for the defence of Khartoum—a crescent and a star, with words from the Koran and date, so we can count on victory—officers silver, men copper. You will not be asked to pay for them.’ This particular design was never followed. However on July 30th he sent a letter jointly to Nubar Pasha and Baring, in which he wrote, ‘We have made a decoration with three degrees, silver-gilt, silver, and pewter, with inscription, ‘Siege of Khartoum’, and with a grenade in centre. School children and women have also received one; consequently I am very popular with the black ladies of Khartoum’ He repeats this in a letter to Wolseley, dated November 14th, ‘We have got a decoration made and distributed, with a grenade in centre; three classes, Gold, Silver, Pewter.’

The emphasis on ‘decoration’ rather than ‘medal’ would seem to show that Gordon intended it to be awarded for the rendering of some service, whether it be lending money or bravery. It is a copy of The Order of the Medjije, and does read, in Arabic, ‘Siege of Khartoum’. It is also dated in Arabic. The grenade in the centre is, more than likely, an idea adapted from the badge of the Royal Engineers, Gordon’s regiment. Most decorations have a crescent and star as a loop for suspension.

After the siege, a native officer wrote to Gordon’s sister; and having explained about the medals, and how he received three of them, he describes their manufacture, ‘the design of the decoration was drawn by General Gordon himself in Khartoum. He then caused several goldsmiths to cast a model from the drawing, and then he chose the best one. He had a whole number of decorations struck under his supervision.’ In The War Medal Record† the goldsmith chosen is named as Bishara Abdel Molak.

Of the three classes of the decoration the same book states, ‘The silver-gilt stars were issued to all officers of the rank of Bimb and upwards; to merchants, notables, and civilian employees (about forty). Each notable or merchant was charged at first £10 for the decoration; the money was distributed to the poor, every notable was allowed to order his own badge . . .’ There follows a list of twenty survivors of the siege who held the decoration. The medal, in fact, contains no silver or gilt, but is described as thus purely on its appearance. There is a specimen in the British Museum which, with kind permission, is reproduced as Fig. 1. Another specimen was offered for sale in Spink’s Numismatic Circular, July-August, 1962, No. 6554.

The silver star (another misnomer) was, according to The War Medal Record, awarded to ‘All officers of the rank of Mulazim up to Sagh only.’ The specimen illustrated (Fig. 2) is from my collection. The pewter star, issued ‘To all N.C.O.s and men; female servants of the troops and the students of the school’, would appear to be very similar to the silver, but noticeably poorer in quality and finish.

That women received the decoration is undeniable, but there is no evidence to suggest that it was any different from the men’s award. The specimen illustrated in The War Medal

†The War Medal Record and Orders of Knighthood. Vol. 2. Spink and Son, 1898.
Record, (Fig. 3) would appear to be a fabrication of the ordinary pewter star, probably being adapted from one that was badly cast. The story behind it might well be explained by the fact that it was bought for ‘Half a tin pot of black currant jam.’

The only contemporary illustration of the decoration that has come to my attention is in Gordon and the Mahdi—an illustrated narrative of the Sudan War, a one-shilling booklet published in 1885. The class of the decoration is not stated, and the engraver, as well as
producing a 'mirror-image', has adapted the centre to fit the text, and turned the grenade into a pomegranate. (If once written in French the word 'grenade' might have caused this.) It is said to be the specimen that Gordon sent Khedive Ismail with the following letter, 'To his Highness the august Ismail Pasha, ex-Kh. of Egypt (May God protect him). Amongst the many honours which your Highness was pleased to shower on me during your gracious reign, you have bestowed on me many decorations of which I am proud and for which I am grateful. Having been appointed Governor of the Sudan, I repaired at once to my post, and arrived safe and sound at Khartoum. Two months later communication with the North was cut off and the city was besieged. During the siege it has been my lot to witness many cases in which soldiers, civil employees, and leading men of the country have displayed courage and self-sacrifice in valiantly undergoing difficulties and privations. To reward their commendable conduct and fidelity I have caused decorations to be made for distribution amongst them. I had previously sent a specimen of this decoration to your Highness by the Steamer Abbas; but as I fear it may never have reached you, I send you today another for your acceptance. Receive it, Highness, in remembrance of my affectionate devotion, with the respectful homage of your grateful and faithful servant, (signed) C. G. Gordon, Khartoum, December 3rd, 1884.'

Fig. 4

I am unable to prove the authenticity of this document, but its contents provide a fitting summary of this decoration, which helped the morale of those in Khartoum to stand up to the siege for over eleven months. The outcome of the siege, with the arrival of the relief force too late by only two days, and the following political furore, are well known. The white-metal medallion (Fig. 4) is basically a reaction to strong public feeling. To many, Gordon had indeed been 'Deliberately abandoned to his fate until too late', and (at the expense of Gladstone) he was mourned as 'The Latest Christian Martyr'.