The composite Rifle Company sailed from Portsmouth on August 27, 1884, and arrived at Alexandria on September 7th. They rode in cattle trucks almost 200 miles to the railhead at Assiout. Two days later, they embarked upriver in steamers and barges for Assaun. Then on the 14th they again entrained and rode around the First Cataract of the Nile to ShellaL, where they took steamers upriver to Wadi Halfa. There they were assimilated into the Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment as “C” Company, and introduced to mounted camel drill. The next month was spent learning new skills in a strange country.

The veterans of the First Mounted Infantry from Abbasseyeh Barracks in Cairo (which included a Section from the 3rd K.R.R.C.) joined at Wadi Halfa as “A” Company of the M.I. Camel Regiment on October 26th. Most of these Riflemen had been in Egypt since 1882, and had fought at Kassassin, Tel-el-Kebir, El-Teb, and Tamaal. They were acclimatized to the rigors of the desert, and could ride and care for horses and tack. However, camel management was new to most of them.

On the 27th of October a mounted parade was held by the Camel Corps. Lieutenant Marling of the Rifles M.I. later wrote:

[We] did fours, right and left and wheeling, and only about six men fell off. Then Curly Hutton sounded the trot, and in two minutes the air was thick with Tommies flying about at every angle. Twenty-three camels got loose and went off with their tails in the air toward the setting sun, and we never got back five of them. Curly Hutton came off on his head.

At 2 pm the next day, the Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment started out on its first desert route march - a 13 day camel ride to Dongola. An early casualty was Major E. T. H. Hutton, K.R.R.C., O.C. Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment, who was evacuated sick on November 5th. He was later D.A.A.G. and Q.M.G. on Sir Evelyn Wood’s staff. Later still he helped raise the Second Mounted Infantry, which served at Suakin in 1885 in the operations around Ginnis.

The Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment arrived at the Nile opposite Dongola the morning of the 10th of November. After a rigorous exercise in loading camels into boats, they ferried the 1200 yards across the Nile to Dongola. There the Guards Camel Regiment joined, and the two units spent a fortnight drilling and building defensive works. While there, two Royal Artillery farrier-sergeants and two shoeing-smiths joined the Mounted Infantry - the War Office in London apparently assuming the camels required shoeing. Also sent out were two cavalry sergeants to teach the Mounted Infantry how to ride camels. One of the Rough-Riders had never seen a camel, not even in a zoo, before serving in Egypt.

The Mounted Infantry and Guards Camel Regiments rode out of Dongola on November 25th in the late afternoon. Keeping close to the Nile, they rode by moonlight, halting at 11 pm. On the 26th they passed Handouk and camped four miles beyond at Shabadood. There, two days later, the Camel Corps was inspected by Lord Sir Garnet Wolseley. He ordered the officers and men to take off their spurs. These popular uniform items were not required for riding camels!

On December 11th, the Guards and Mounted Infantry finally rode out of Shabadood, arriving at Korti three days later. There they (plus detachments of the R.E. and South Staffords) were engaged in unloading stores from boats, building a fort, and on general fatigues. On December 14th the Light Camel Regiment joined. Wolseley thought its commander (Clarke) was “worse than useless”, and the Light were thus destined to serve only on the lines of communications. Lord Wolseley reached Korti on the 16th of December. Ceremony was not neglected - a Brigade parade was held the day after Christmas in preparation of the splitting of the force into the River Column and the Desert Column.

Finally, on December 28th, the River Column, led by Major General Earle, left Korti with the larger part of the relief forces, rowing and sailing upstream toward Khartoum in “whalers”, boats which had been specially built for the expedition in England and shipped over.
Two days later, on the afternoon of December 30th, the Desert Column, commanded by Brigadier General Sir Herbert Steward, K.C.B., began its march across the Bayuda Desert toward Shendy, following the old caravan route via the wells at Gakdul and Abu Klea. All spare and baggage camels were withdrawn - only one riding camel allotted per man. The Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment rode on the flanks and in front. Each camel carried rations for seven days, five days camel fodder, and four days worth of water, in addition to its rider, his kit, rifle, and saddlery.

After an all-night march of 34 miles, the wells at Hanbok were reached at 7:30 am on the 31st. There was little water, and that bad tasting. Still, it was wet. The column continued on, stopping only briefly at EI-Howeiyat to water once again. Early in the morning of January 2, 1885, the wells (actually large natural rock cisterns) at Gakdul were reached. The Guards Camel Regiment (19 officers and 365 men), 2 officers and 25 men of the R.E., and 1 officer and 10 men of the Medical Staff were left to establish a fortified depot and to develop the good but difficult to access water sources. They were 98 miles from Korti.

At 8 pm General Sir H. Stewart and the M.I. Camel Regiment left Gakdul to return to Korti. Each man rode his own camel while leading two of the Guard's camels. There was an acute shortage of camels. The relay was needed so the 1st Royal Sussex could come up to Gakdul from Korti.

After two days hard riding, the camel relay column arrived back at the Hanbok Wells. 3 officers and 30 men of “C” (Rifle) Company Mounted Infantry were left there to improve the water supply. The wells at Hanbok were found to be inadequate to supply even one company with ration water, and the wells at EI-Howeiyat about nine miles away were subsequently used. During one faray there, a Mounted Infantry water party was attacked by Arabs, but driven off without loss. This was the first hostile engagement of the Desert Column.

The rest of the camel relay column continued on, many of the men now leading three camels each, having brought along most of the “C” M.I. Company’s camels for use by the Royal Sussex. They arrived at Korti the afternoon of the 5th - the same day that Lord Charles Beresford reached Korti with the First Division of the Naval Brigade. Two days later part of the Light Camel Regiment (10 officers and 106 men) left Korti for Gakdul as escort to a convoy of over 1000 camels.

At 1 pm on the 8th of January, the Desert Column formed up near the village of Korti and was inspected by Lord Wolseley. At 2 pm General Stewart started his second forward march from Korti, taking with him:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Officers</th>
<th>NCO's and Men</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Division - Naval Brigade</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th Hussars</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy Camel Regiment</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal Artillery</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st Royal Sussex Regiment</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd Essex Regiment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissariat and Transport</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Staff and Field Hospital</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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All were mounted on camels and riding 40 abreast. Scouting ahead was a squadron of the 19th Hussars on small by tough Syrian stallions. In all, there were 98 officers and 1509 men, plus 304 native drivers and drovers, 2228 camels and 155 horses. Lord Beresford was a notable exception. He rode a white donkey.
The march was a difficult one and there was much confusion and delay. The Royal Sussex were new to the desert and hadn’t yet learned to husband their water. Sir Charles Wilson contrasted them with the Mounted Infantry when he wrote

*The Mounted Infantry, all old soldiers, looked after by picked officers, did not suffer at all. They had as much as they wished to drink on the road, and brought in a large quantity of spare water.*

The riding and transport camels were already beginning to suffer from improper loading and lack of care. Marling wrote:

... *the camels kept breaking down...* [they were] *already losing condition, and consequently getting fearfully sore backs; some of them have holes you can put your fist into.*

The Desert Column arrived at El-Howardat Wells at 4:30 pm on the 11th of January. There they left the detachment of the Essex Regiment, and picked up “C” Company M.I. and continued on toward Gakdul, arriving at 11 am the next day. They found the Guards Camel Regiment and the R.E. had established two stone forts, a depot and field hospital, and had improved the water sources.

After leaving some Egyptians and Colonel Vandeleur and 150 of the Royal Sussex to guard the Gakdul depot, they saw off the Light Camel Regiment, whose unenviable task was to again escort a camel convoy back to Korti. Finally, the Desert Column set out at 2 am for Metammeh on the 14th of January with:

- Two troops of the 19th Hussars
- Naval Brigade First Division, with one Gardner gun (55 officers and men)
- Camel Battery R.A. (three 7-Pounder screw guns of 1/1 Souther Division, R.A.)
- Heavy Camel Regiment
- Guards Camel Regiment
- Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment
- 250 men of the Royal Sussex Regiment
- Detachments of R.E., commissariat, medical and supply services
- 100 native camel drivers and 1118 transport camels

Starting at daylight, they did 23 miles in very hot weather on January 15th. The camels were in increasingly poor condition; the seamen of the Naval Brigade resorted to caulking camel sores with oakum and tar.

On the 16th of January, the column was 55 miles from Gakdul, and nearing the hills of Abu Klea. A 19th Hussars patrol under Major French reported Dervishes in position between the British column and the wells. Halting about four miles from the wells at Abu Klea, the British built a zeriba, and a stone breastwork some 100 yards long to protect their camp. "A" Company Mounted Infantry built a small fort of bully beef tins and biscuit boxes to the left of the zeriba, while Captain Morse and 50 men of the Royal West Kents held a hilltop to the left front of the Rifles. The British were sniped at all night long. Three men and a few horses and camels were hit.

Fearing a dawn attack on the zeriba, the Desert Column stood to arms at 3:30 am on the 17th of January. At first light, Stewart, who was determined to march out and fight, left his baggage camels in the zeriba with a weak guard of the Royal Sussex Regiment. He ordered the Desert Column to form up and advance in open square with the camels, guns, and baggage in the center. The ground was sparsely covered with savas grass and mimosa, and broken by watercourses. To maintain its formation, the square had to move to the right onto the gentle slopes of some low hills. Barrow’s cavalry trotted further up the hills to keep the enemy on the high ground occupied.