

## Introduction

No Sudan game would be complete without Nile gunboats! The big problem? Other than the Melik and some drawings of the Tamai class, there exists very little information about colonial gunboat operations on the Nile. This despite the fact that in some operations there were close to 30 steamers in the combat zone! Not only that, the Mahdists did have steamers and gunboats of their own, but the only reference I've seen is the one that was put out of action by French forces near Fashoda. Gordon's forces operated gunboats continuously during the siege, but again, little is known about the actual combat operations.

## What is Known?

We do know for a fact that there were very few dedicated gunboats and most of those were around during Kitchener's final drive to Omdurman. Most "gunboats" were converted passenger or freight steamers, with some boiler plate armor, sandbags, and an assortment of armament. But, this is what makes the topic so much fun and interesting!

## Choosing a Gunboat Type

Here's your first big decision. Do you want a converted steamer or a dedicated gunboat? Second, do you want it to be screw driven, i.e., all of the propellers, rudder, etc., under the hull, or do you

want a stern or sidewheeler? These decisions will impact the design of the boat, the complexity of building it, and what parts you will need. Screw driven are the easiest, since everything is under the hull there's no need to build anything extra. Sidewheelers take some work, but look the best in my opinion. Finally, stern-wheelers are the hardest to build because of the exposed paddles.

Also, you will need to decide if it will be lightly or heavily armed, will be armored or use improvised armor such as mealie bags, crates, etc., and how many decks it will have. All of these need to be decided before you get started as they will seriously impact the construction.

## Getting Started

For this project I've decided to build a Mahdist gunboat. The boat is a converted river steamer with sandbag armor, two decks, some antique cannon, and it will be a sidewheeler. I've chosen a length of about 10 1/2" with a beam of around 2 1/2". Large boats such as the heavily armed Sultan and Melik would be around 15" long. Although your boats will probably be way out of proportion to the ground scale of your land rules, they need to look right for the game. You also need to decide if you want a narrow bow or a wide bow as well. I've gone with a wide bow ending in a point, with a rounded stern.

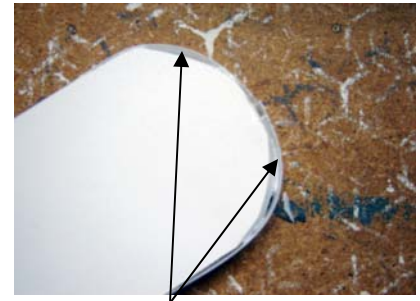


First, I used the 1/2" thick foamcore

available from craft stores. You can use wood, thinner sections of foamcore, or other materials, but I've found that this works best. To take care of the foam

sides, cut out 1/2" strips of sheet plastic and glue them over the sides of the hull. If you want the bow section to be raised, cut the strips for the front a little higher or taper them so it appears as if the hull is raised a little towards the front.

Now, cutting foamcore is not an exact science, particularly any rounded sections, so you will have gaps, usually at the bow and stern. Here's where a great little product can help you out. By using acrylic modeling gel (sold at arts and craft stores near the oil paints), you can fill in any gaps quickly as it dries clear and fast.



Large gaps between the hull and plastic strips.

## The Main Deck

Most river steamers and gunboats in the 19th century had some type of wooden or teak deck. This is tough to model in 15mm as the boards would not be very long. There's two ways that I use to make decks for the gunboats and steamers.

The first is to trace the top of the hull onto some very thin sheet plastic. Then, using a ruler, mark off boards that are

about 1" long and 1/8" wide. Use the back of an X-Acto blade to make the impressions on the sheet plastic. This is time consuming, but it comes out pretty good. The other method is to use scribed sheet plastic available at most hobby stores that already has the long lines done for you. You just have to mark off the boards in 1" incre-



ments and lightly cut them into the plastic. While this method is much faster and looks a little better, the only drawback is that the decks will be a little bit thicker than regular sheet plastic. Paint the decks tan, then ink them, and drybrush with a lighter color.

At the start of this project I said that building these boats was all about decisions, and here we are again with some more that have to be made! Do you want



the boiler exposed? Should the boiler be at the front, middle, or back? What should you use for the paddlewheels and should they be exposed or covered?

I decided that the boiler would be in the middle of the boat (as are about 75% of all river steamers) and that it would be exposed enough so that it would have to be modeled. We're not building a boat that will be displayed in a museum with the correct scale and working parts, so the idea is to make something that looks functional.

Michael's craft stores have a great

section of bagged wooden pieces that are generally used for doll houses. I took two of the wooden shapes and glued them together, then added a few odds and ends that looked like valves, doors, and a few pieces of wire. I then spray painted the whole thing black and drybrushed it gunmetal. In no time at all I had the boiler done.

Covered paddlewheels are the easiest to model, so again at Michaels I found a round cardboard jewelry box for around \$1. I then cut it in half and notched the base of them to fit over the hull, leaving about 3/16" between the water surface and the paddlewheel cover. Then, take some extra cardboard or sheet plastic and cut out a semi-circle to cover the inside of the paddlewheel as we're not going to build the paddlewheel itself! However, you will need to make some paddles out of balsa wood and glue them so they are



just poking out beneath the paddlewheel covers so that they touch the surface of the water. Glue the boiler, paddlewheels, and

some lengths of dowels to connect the boiler and the paddles to the deck. Again, paint everything first, then assemble it, which is much easier.



## The Main Deck Superstructure & Upper Deck



sheet plastic or thick cardboard as well. Whether or not you want to scribe the balsa wood to show vertical planks is up to you. The variations on river steamers is astounding, with some having rounded corners, pilot houses back from the front, no cabins on the second deck, and the list goes on.

I chose a height of 7/8" of an inch for the walls, which gives enough room to fit some of the larger 15mm figures. The windows

and doors are small sections of sheet plastic that are cut out, then spray painted black before they are glued on to the superstructure walls. Although you could make fancier doors and paint the windows gray, these are gaming models, so I determined that black would be the easiest way to represent them.

By this time you should have a pretty good looking gunboat, especially if you've been painting all the sections as you assembled them. (cont. on p.10)

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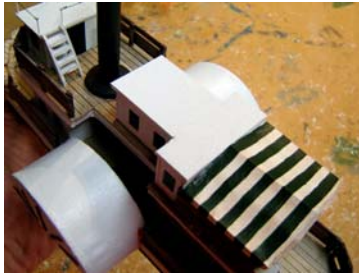
The second deck floor is again made from foam core, with sheet plastic strips that go around the outside to hide the foam section. Again, repeat the process for creating the

deck from a few steps ago, although the second deck will be smaller than the main deck. Leave a place for the stack, armament, and ladders, plus an open area near the stern, which seemed to be a common feature on many ships of this era, particularly river steamers. Also, as mentioned previously, paint the various built sections before gluing them to the ship.





Now here's where you can have a little fun. What will make or break how your gunboat looks are the details. Anyone can build a few boxes on top of a hull, but it's the details that really make the gunboat model stand out.



can be made from straight pins and string. Also, adding a few crates and flour sacks can't hurt the overall look and a flag should be added to the stern.

East Riding Miniatures makes some great 15mm ship accessories such as anchors, small boats, ladders, and armament. Since these are converted gunboats, the armament would be whatever was handy, which meant smoothbore cannon, early machine guns, and the odd howitzer.

Armor (if you could call it armor) would be mainly boards nailed to the sides of the hull to provide some cover from small arms fire. Sandbags, mealie bags, large sacks, and crates would also

be used, especially around the gun emplacements. Boiler plate armor might be used around critical sections of the deck to afford extra protection to the boiler and gun crews.

Don't worry about clutter as these boats aren't the QE II! Adding these kinds of details are part of the fun.



First, most steamers are going to have some kind of tarp or awning over one of the open places on the deck. This can be made with paper, then the stripes marked and painted on. Second, since the primary role of most of these boats was transporting passengers, there would be railings on the sides of the ship. These

## Final Thoughts

Hopefully, this article has been of use and has provided the gamer with some god ideas or inspiration to get started on a gunboat project. Details on this era are difficult to find, which is good for gamers as you can pretty much make anything that looks like a steamer and no one can say that it's not historical!



They would have seen extensive civilian service on the Nile and are not really designed for military operations, so keep that in mind when you are designing your rules.

Also, the Nile can be very wide at places, then extremely narrow in others, so shore batteries can be added to your games. There are also several places with islands in the middle of the river, plus shallows and rocks, so there are plenty of obstacles to navigation as well.

If you try to build the Melik or the Sultan, remember that those boats are heavily armored and armed, so they will pretty much destroy anything on the river. Instead, I would focus on creating converted steamers and lightly armed gunboats, which would provide a much more challenging game. A three gunboat flotilla backed by dhows with Dervishes providing the Marines that are trying to intercept a three or four Egyptian/British gunboats trying to run supplies to a besieged city would make for a great game. Remember that these boats are held together by rusty nails, glue, and prayers!

I've built six gunboats so far and plan to do more. My advice is to plan out the construction, get the parts (I have a scrap box full of sheet plastic, balsa wood, dowels, etc...), then get started. Patience can be required at times, so if you feel that you are pressing on the project, back off for awhile. You'll only get more frustrated and make some critical

mistakes if you keep going. By adding pieces day by day, you can see the ship coming together, which inspires you to do even more. Again, I cannot stress enough how important it is to paint each section before you glue it on. Building a ship, then painting it will be difficult, if not impossible to attain better results by doing it a piece at a time. Taking time of the details, such as adding lengths of thread to the stack that are tied down to the deck, can make your gunboat stand out.

So, wedge some sections of boiler plate armor between some sandbags, nail some 2 x 4s around the upper deck, drag a Krupp gun forward, and load up the marines. Gordon has to be saved!

