

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed June 2, 1931

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A TERRIBLE MARCH

The most familiar example of climatic hardships encountered by an army on the march is furnished by Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, during which the French soldiers suffered part of the time from intense cold and at a later stage from the effects of a thaw, which turned the roads into bogs. It is interesting to find in the records of classical antiquity a case in which an army was equally afflicted by the opposite conditions of intense heat and aridity.

In the year 325 B.C. Alexander the Great, on his return from India, led his troops across the deserts of Baluchistan. The ancient accounts of this march have been collected by J. W. McGrindle. He quotes a vivid one by Arrian, who states that "the blazing heat and want of water destroyed a great part of the army, and especially the beasts of burden, which perished from the depth of the sand and the heat which scorched like fire, while a great many died of thirst. For they met with lofty ridges of deep sand, not hard and compact, but so loose that those who stepped on it sank down as into mud or rather into untrodden snow." Owing to the heat, the marches were generally made by night, and hence stragglers were numerous. Arrian says that the majority of the latter perished in the sand like shipwrecked men at sea. According to Plutarch, of 120,000 foot and 15,000 horse with which Alexander left India, only one-fourth survived the journey, but this statement of losses is probably exaggerated.

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