

## CHAPTER III

### OPERATIONS IN THE SINAI PENINSULA

At the end of 1916 the force in Sinai, reorganised as the "Eastern Force" with an advanced "Desert Column," moved across the peninsula to El Arish, near the Palestine frontier, and shortly afterwards raided the two remaining enemy posts in northern Sinai at Magdhaba and Rafa. In this phase of the campaign there became prominent in the medical arrangements the "receiving stations," which were to play an important part in evacuation. In the second raid a withdrawal ordered by the higher staffs involved the "collecting stations" of the ambulances in a difficult situation.

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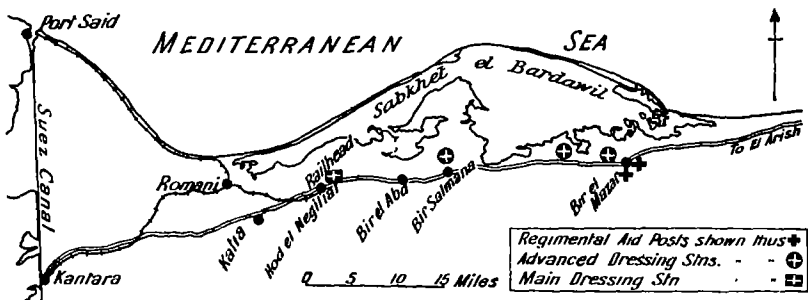
After the Battle of Romani there seemed to the War Council little reason for any forward move on the part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. The situation in Europe was more satisfactory; no danger threatened Egypt from the Turks. The War Council accordingly sanctioned only the advance to El Arish, the strategic objective in the original plan of Sir Archibald Murray for the defence of Egypt. With this intention the railway and pipe-line were pushed forward at the rate of twenty miles per month and lines of communication were organised, actual military operations being meanwhile confined to counter-patrol work. After his successful repulse of his pursuers at Bir el Abd the enemy had established himself at El Arish, with an advanced post at Mazar, a small group of wells twenty miles east of Bir el Abd.

In the middle of September, the railhead having reached Hod en Negiliat, a resumption of the offensive was begun with a reconnaissance in force by the Australian mounted

troops and Camel Corps<sup>1</sup> on Mazar, which only was to develop into an attack on the position if no serious resistance were encountered; its capture would ensure a water-supply<sup>2</sup>—a factor of vital importance.

#### British advance

The reconnaissance was carried out by the 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Brigades and the 1st Battalion of the Imperial Camel Corps, with artillery; these were accompanied by the 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulances. A small medical detachment with a few camel cacolets was supplied for the camel battalion by the D.D.M.S., No. 3 Section. Medical arrangements provided that the two mobile sections should accompany their brigades; one and a half ambulance convoys from the 42nd and 52nd Divisions



were attached, to be stationed at Bir el Abd; a dressing-station to function as a relay post would be formed eleven miles west of the position to be attacked, and a second at Salmana. A special feature of the medical arrangements was the provision at railhead for early surgical treatment, an improvised surgical team being stationed there with the

<sup>1</sup> A formation organised early in 1916 and mounted entirely on camels. Of 10 companies (each consisting of 5 officers and 125 other ranks, with 153 camels), 4 were formed from men drawn from the 1st and 2nd Aust. Divisions. In September 1916 authority was received from Australia for the formation of four additional camel regiments from surplus light horse reinforcements. In November these were organised into battalions, of which two consisted of four Australian and one New Zealand company each and were designated 1st and 3rd (Anzac) Battalions, Imperial Camel Corps. The 4th (Anzac) Battalion was formed at the end of 1916. The 2nd Battalion was British. The medical establishment consisted of one medical officer with orderlies to each battalion. No medical unit was at first attached and for the evacuation of their sick and wounded the battalions relied on adjoining light horse or infantry formations.

<sup>2</sup> For religious reasons the Turks rarely destroyed wells in a retreat.



80. A LIGHT HORSE COLUMN, INCLUDING FIELD AMBULANCE (IN FOREGROUND) ON THE RECONNAISSANCE TO BIR EL MAZAR (SEPTEMBER 1916)

*Taken by Art Mechanic R. J. Sillett No. 150th A.F.C.  
Aust. War Memorial Collection No. 12620*



81. WOUNDED BEING CONVEYED ON AMBULANCE SLEDGES FROM EL ARISH TO RAIL HEAD (DECEMBER 1916)

*Taken by Lieut Colonel W. H. Scott, 5th I.H. Regt.  
Aust. War Memorial Collection No. B2827*

*To face p. 588*



82. THE NEW ZEALAND MOUNTED FIELD AMBULANCE CROSSING THE  
WADY EL ARISH *en route* TO RAFA, 8TH JANUARY, 1917

*Lent by Capt. R. L. Withers, NZMC  
First War Memorial Collection No. B2508*



83. WOUNDED FROM THE RAID ON RAFA, 9TH JANUARY, 1917

The cacolets, which are shown alongside the ambulance tram at  
El Arish, were captured from the Turks at Romani

*Lent by Capt. R. L. Withers, NZMC  
First War Memorial Collection No. B2509*

*To face p. 589*

immobile sections of the 2nd Light Horse Field Ambulance.

**"Surgical  
team" at  
railhead**

This represented the first attempt in the campaign at early operative treatment in the field units, a procedure not, however, effectively exploited till nearly a year later.

The force concentrated at Bir el Abd, and, after a night march, an attack was made at dawn on the 17th. The position was found, however, to be strongly occupied, and after some fighting the difficult military operation of withdrawal was successfully carried out when the wounded—sixteen in number—had been collected by sandcarts. Hot food and drinks were given at the relay dressing station; Salmana was reached at 8.45 p.m. and railhead at 5 a.m. next morning—thirty-five miles in twenty hours. Five hours later the wounded were sent by truck train to Kantara. Shortly after this reconnaissance the Turks vacated Mazar.

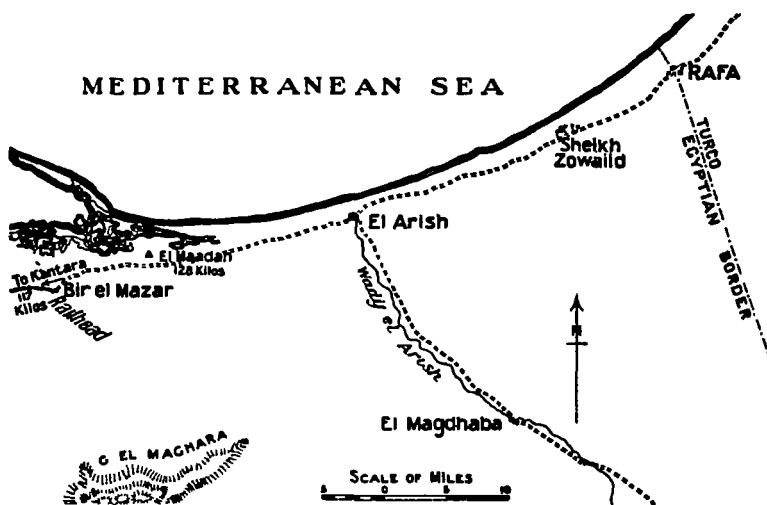
On October 23rd Sir Archibald Murray with his headquarters (including the D.M.S., E.E.F.) moved from Ismailia to Cairo. All troops east of the Canal were formed into the "Eastern Force" under Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Dobell, with Colonel M. J. Sexton as D.D.M.S.; the headquarters were at Ismailia. The advanced guard of this force—the 52nd and 42nd

Infantry and the Anzac Mounted Divisions, together with the Imperial Camel Corps—were formed into the "Desert Column" under Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Chetwode, with Colonel C. J. Macdonald as D.D.M.S.

Meanwhile the railway and pipe-line, and *pari passu* the British front, had moved steadily eastward to get within striking distance of the enemy's main position. On October 19th the Anzac Mounted Division Headquarters and on the 24th the 52nd Division were established at Bir el Abd, the former moving to Mazar on November 25th. On November 17th the pipe-line reached Romani, and on the 26th railhead reached Mazar. Evacuation from the mounted brigades was now based on their immobile sections at Mazar and Abd; thence it proceeded to Kantara by train.

**"Eastern  
Force" and  
"Desert  
Column"  
formed**

In December reconnaissances were resumed, chiefly up to the Wady el Arish in search of water and southwards towards the Maghara mountains.<sup>3</sup> On the 14th, under the direction



of the Desert Column Headquarters, a practice attack was carried out against a position representing the enemy trenches at El Arish. To the medical service this gave opportunity for testing the new portable stretchers and for applying the lessons of Romani and the raids.

The most difficult part, but a vital one, of the preparation for the attack on El Arish was the provision of water for the attacking force. Between Mazar and El Arish the supply was negligible, and it was not till the middle of December that the advance of the pipe-line permitted sufficient water to be stored at Maadan (kilo. 128) for the supply of an adequate force by camel train. On December 20th, after a night-march the Anzac Mounted Division (1st and 3rd Light Horse, New Zealand Mounted Rifles, and Imperial Camel Corps Brigades) invested El Arish, which was found to have been evacuated by the enemy. After medical inspection and chlorination of

<sup>3</sup> Subsequent to the raid on Mazar, while the Anzac Mounted Division, leaving two brigades at Bir el Abd, returned to the region of Romani and Kantara, a further and somewhat similar raid was on October 13 made against Bir el Maghabara by a force of 1,100 containing the 11th and 12th Light Horse Regiments.

the wells, the town was occupied. It was found to be very squalid, mostly consisting of mud huts; but, with a mosque and a few fine buildings, and, at the mouth of the Wady el Arish (the "River of Egypt" of Herodotus), a fine grove of palm-trees, in a setting of wonderful sunsets it was pleasingly picturesque to eyes accustomed to the eternal sand of Sinai.

The Turks had retired to Magdhaba, twenty miles south-east of El Arish on the wady, and to Rafa, thirty miles east on the Turco-Egyptian boundary. It was decided by the Commander-in-Chief to clear them from these positions, the only ones retained in Sinai. At 1 a.m. on December 23rd the Anzac Mounted Division and Camel Corps moved off to the attack on Magdhaba. The bearers of the mobile section of the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance, the complete mobile sections of the 1st Light Horse, New Zealand Mounted, and Welsh Field Ambulances, and one camel ambulance convoy accompanied the force. A "receiving station"<sup>4</sup> was established on the beach at El Arish and manned—for a force of 11,000—only by the tent sub-divisional personnel of the mobile section of the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance. The immobile sections were at railhead, seventeen miles away, and No. 26 British Casualty Clearing Station<sup>5</sup> at Mazar. At this time the medical situation on the lines of communication in Sinai was as follows:—

At railhead	.. Immobile sections of field ambulances with accommodation for 700.
At Mazar	.. No. 26 C.C.S., with accommodation for 400.
At Bir el Abd	.. No. 24 C.C.S., with accommodation for 400. No. 53 and 54 C.C.S.'s parked, with equipment for 200 each.
At Mahemdia	.. No. 2 A.S.H., with 800 beds.
At Kantara	.. No. 24 Stat. Hosp., with 800 beds.

<sup>4</sup> The term "receiving station," or "divisional receiving station," was from this time onwards applied to whichever of the medical detachments of the division was situated at, or nearest to, the railhead. As a rule, it represented the last post at which the wounded were under the charge of the medical personnel of the division. It was usually formed by the immobile section of an ambulance, but sometimes—as in this instance—by a portion of a mobile section. The original term "clearing station" (its function being somewhat analogous to that of the ordinary casualty clearing station) was changed on the order of the D.D.M.S.

<sup>5</sup> In December an ambulance train was for the first time brought east of the Canal. It was composed of converted carriages from the Egyptian Railways.

Maghaba was attacked at 8 a.m. on December 23rd. The position—a very strong one, defended by 1,600 troops—was surrounded. Progress was slow, and, there being no water nearer than El Arish, the situation was at one time critical; in fact, the order to retire was given, but by 4.30 p.m., before it reached the troops, the position was captured.

For this operation a dressing station was formed three miles west of Maghaba by the tent division of the New Zealand Field Ambulance mobile section, with the 1st Light Horse Field Ambulance and No. 1 Ambulance Convoy in reserve. Here during the day eighty British wounded were treated, some urgent surgery being carried out and anti-tetanic injections administered, together with nourishment. These cases were evacuated during the night by cacolets and sand-carts to El Arish. The remaining wounded—44 British and 66 Turks collected on the 23rd and 24th—were taken to a Turkish hospital found within the fortifications. Shortly after noon of the 24th all were sent to the dressing-station, whence at 5 p.m. the ambulance convoy set out on its twenty-three miles' march to the receiving station. The night was pitch dark and wet, and the great majority of cases were perforce carried in the camel cacolets, which gave great trouble. After

**A distressing  
march**

nine hours of intense discomfort the convoys were met, a few miles from El Arish, by sandcarts—lent once more by the 52nd Division—in which the wounded travelled in comfort to the receiving station, where they arrived at 4 a.m. of December 25th. Additional tentage was obtained from divisional headquarters, from a naval beach party, and from the 52nd Division, who supplied also medical stores and personnel to assist. Here some major surgery was carried out, though with very inadequate appliances. On December 26th a convoy of sandcarts was collected by the A.D.M.S. with the intention of evacuating to railhead (kilo. 128), but preparations had in the meantime been made by the D.D.M.S. for evacuation by sea. Weather, however, did not permit of this, and, after a wait of two days for the sea to subside, orders were received to evacuate to kilo. 139 (now railhead), where a hospital train would receive the wounded. On December 29th the largest single ambulance convoy organised

in the campaign, made up of seventy-seven sandcarts, nine sledges, and a number of cacolet camels, moved out in three lines along the beach with 150 wounded. All but a few, too bad to move, were evacuated on the following day to Kantara.

Heavy rains and cold gales marked the early days of 1917. The Wady el Arish, for most of the year a dry watercourse, came down in spate, but not to a depth sufficient to prevent the passage of horses and vehicles. On January 4th the railway reached El Arish.

Rafa now remained the only position retained by the enemy in Sinai, and its capture was decided upon. After a few days' rest in the pleasant surroundings of El Arish, on January 8th the Anzac Mounted Division, without the 2nd Light Horse Brigade, but including the Camel Brigade, assembled under General Chetwode on the eastern side of the Wady el Arish. With it was the 5th Yeomanry Brigade, whose field ambulance was under the direct orders of the Desert Column Headquarters. Medical arrangements for the force were in the hands of the A.D.M.S., Anzac Mounted Division, who had under him the 1st and 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulances, the New Zealand Field Ambulance, and the 1/1 Welsh Field Ambulance, together with Nos. 1 and 2 Welsh Ambulance Convoys. The column moved off at four o'clock in the afternoon, with all the mobile sections of the field ambulances marching together in rear of the ammunition camels of the first-line transport, instead of in their usual positions in rear of their own brigades. At 9.15 p.m. the village of Sheikh Zowaiid was reached, and here a main dressing-station was formed by the tent division of the 1st Light Horse Field Ambulance. Here also the two ambulance convoys remained, together with part of the sanitary section to attend to the local water-supply. The 5th Mounted Field Ambulance rejoined its brigade. The march was resumed at 1 a.m., the point of assembly was reached at daylight, and the brigades, each followed by its field ambulance, surrounded the enemy's position.

Few scenes could have appeared more unwarlike than that which the dawn unfolded. The matting tents of the Bedouins, with their camels, sheep, and donkeys grazing peacefully, and

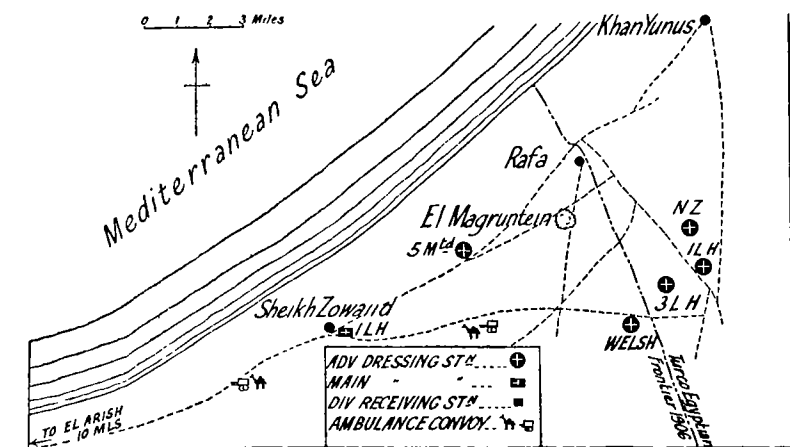
the smoke of their fires mingling with the wreaths of mist rising from the wet green slopes, made a picture which brought to mind the stories of the Old Testament. Rafa is merely a small village and police post on the Egyptian frontier, comprising a few mud huts and separated from the sea by a belt of sand dunes  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles wide. It lies thirty miles from El Arish in a gently undulating country which, though sandy and quickly cut up by traffic, was no longer the soft sand of the desert but at this time of the year was covered by green grass, wild-flowers, and young barley, which made a pleasant change to the eye. About a mile and a half to the south-west of the village was an eminence, El Magruntein, from which the ground sloped gently on all sides; this the Turks had strongly fortified and garrisoned with a force of 1,900 men.

The attack commenced at 8.30 a.m., and the course of the fighting was in striking similarity to that at Magdhaba and later at Gaza. Resistance was strong, and progress slow. As the day advanced, the situation became menacing for the attacking troops, thirty miles from their base and with an enemy force on their flank; moreover, Turkish reinforcements were reported to be advancing from Khan Yunus and Shellal. At 4.30 p.m. a preliminary order was given for a general withdrawal, but, before any order had reached the actual firing line, the fine assaults which have made this battle notable had changed the situation, and at 4.45 p.m. the most important positions had been captured. At 5.30 p.m. the battle was over. In view, however, of the general situation the brigades, with 1,500 prisoners of war, were withdrawn to Sheikh Zowaid.

The rapid changes in the military situation had involved the medical service in considerable difficulties. Early in the attack advanced dressing-stations were opened by the mobile sections at three points to the south and south-east of the position and about three miles from it. For the first time the absence of cover resulting from the unbroken slope of the country prevented sandcarts and sledges from reaching the regimental collecting posts, so that it was necessary for the ambulance bearers to carry the wounded a considerable distance to the transport. The improvised portable stretchers

**Great  
difficulties of  
mobile sections**

were of great value. Casualties reaching the dressing-stations steadily increased throughout the morning. At 2.30 p.m. it was apparent that there would be a large number of wounded,



and orders were sent to Sheikh Zowaid to send forward caolet camels and No. 1 Welsh Ambulance Convoy towards the nearest advanced dressing-station—that of the Welsh Field Ambulance. At about 4.30 p.m. orders for retirement reached the A.D.M.S., Anzac Mounted Division, and he was further informed from Desert Column Headquarters that wounded who could not be collected at once were to be left behind. A few minutes later came the added instruction that any sandcarts and sledges which arrived at the advanced dressing-stations from the firing line were not to return. These orders were passed by the A.D.M.S. through brigade headquarters to the bearer detachments behind the assaulting troops, while verbal orders were given to the dressing-stations to pack up and retire as quickly as possible. The New Zealand Mounted and 1/1 Welsh Ambulance advanced dressing-stations, with their wounded, left for Sheikh Zowaid, as did also part of the transport and equipment of the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance. The number of wounded in that dressing-station

#### Orders for retirement

was, however, beyond the capacity of the transport available for their evacuation; word was also received by the A.D.M.S. that large numbers still remained uncollected in the field. Reconsideration of the peremptory order concerning the transport for the wounded was obtained from the General Staff, Desert Column, and arrangements were made for No. 1 Welsh Ambulance Convoy—at this time five miles away—to be sent forward to divisional headquarters. By 5.30 or 6 p.m. clearance of wounded from the battlefield to the advanced dressing-station of the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance was in full swing. Divisional headquarters set out for Sheikh Zowaiid at 7 p.m. leaving on the battlefield the A.D.M.S., Anzac Mounted Division, with a general staff officer, together with one and a half squadrons of light horse, to control the collection and evacuation of the wounded. The 3rd Light Horse and New Zealand Brigades remained near the captured position till 9 p.m., when, the field having been cleared, they also left for Sheikh Zowaiid.

The medical situation in the captured position at this time was an extraordinary one. Some 100 or more wounded, British and Turk, lay in the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance advanced dressing-station, with few blankets, no food, and no lights, all these conveniences having, in the confusion, gone back to Sheikh Zowaiid on the equipment camels. The 5th Mounted Field Ambulance, with a large number of wounded, was in a similar plight. No. 1 Welsh Ambulance Convoy, long overdue, had not arrived—the convoy had indeed received such alarming reports from retiring parties, that it had returned to Sheikh Zowaiid. All telephonic communication had accidentally been cut off, the enemy was close at hand, the night was a bitter one. Cold, hungry, and hourly expecting capture, the wounded suffered severely. Happily, the enemy held off, but it was not till early next morning that, on the arrival of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade at Sheikh Zowaiid, the Welsh ambulance convoy received orders to return to Magruntein. At 8 a.m. the wounded were sent to Sheikh Zowaiid, and early the same afternoon all the sandcarts of the 52nd Division arrived from El Arish and

**Anxious plight  
of wounded**

evacuated them to the receiving station there. Some of these sandcarts went out close to Rafa to bring in a number of wounded Turks who had been missed, and arrived back at Sheikh Zowaiid at 5.30 a.m. on January 11th without molestation, although the rearguard had come in. After treatment and a night's rest at Sheikh Zowaiid the remainder of the wounded were evacuated in the 1st Light Horse Field Ambulance transport and two Welsh ambulance convoys to El Arish, where they arrived at 6 p.m. Thence they were taken away to Kantara on January 12th by ambulance train, which now came within three miles of El Arish.

The total number of wounded from this action was 415 British and 162 Turks and Germans.