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*Proceeding at Court of Enquiry
into disturbances in Cairo.*

2/4/15

THE NIGHT THE GREAT WAZIR

BY MURRAY MOORHEAD

ONCE upon a time, when they were still young, when they were many in number and when the memories were still vivid, any man who was asked if he had taken part in the Battle of the Wazir would likely have said "yes", with an ear-to-ear grin.

But today the few that are left of the men of 1914, while showing no reluctance to admit that they were in the middle of that celebrated incident, tend to shrug it off with a faint smile as one of their "silly youthful escapades". But of course it was more serious than silly, and despite the legends which grew up around it, the riot for that is what it was—remains a blot on the Anzac participation in the Great War.

Good Friday, 1915, was declared a general holiday for all of the troops in Egypt and many thousands of men left their dreary desert camps and headed for the hot spots of Cairo. It is difficult now to determine what sort of mood they were in. They had not been in Egypt long—only since the beginning of the year—but they were feeling "let down". They had sailed from

Australasia all fired up with a patriotic fervour to get immediately to grips with the enemy. Instead they had marched and drilled and watched over the Canal, but apart from a very poor attempt by the Turks to cross the Canal in the early morning of February 3, which gave some New Zealanders a rather unsatisfying baptism of fire, life had been relatively unexciting.

This desire for action, plus the holiday atmosphere, plus the utter disrespect with which the average Anzac regarded the Egyptian, proved to be a volatile concoction.

Nobody ever arrived at the truth behind the cause of the trouble. There were many versions given, all sworn to as true and most of them undoubtedly richly coloured to provide justification for the excesses of the soldiers. It began in the notorious brothel street opposite the famed Shepherd's Hotel, named the Wazir, but better known to the troops who frequented it as the Shuiring.

It was a street of dingy bars and cafes, red light houses and the worst legions of Cairo's notorious street merchants.

Some witnesses said that a soldier had been snuffed, others that a man had been cornered in an upstairs room by thieves, and that his

males had gone to his rescue.

Then there was a persistent story that a Greek or Levantine bar owner had insulted a Maori and brought down the wrath of the Maori's New Zealand mates. Whatever happened, the first indication of trouble was a sudden deluge of furniture and household effects from an upstairs window. Chairs, carpets, beds, bedding and even a piano went crashing down into the street. A match was struck and soon a huge bonfire flared, blocking the roadway and quickly spreading to nearby buildings.

Drawn by the noise, the smoke and by word of mouth, thousands of Australian and New Zealand revellers from all over Cairo converged on the Wazir. Few if any knew what it was all about, but if there was a "bunnet" going on with the Egyptians, everybody wanted to be in on it.

As the fires grew, the waves of men in khaki swept through the street like a raging flood. Every cafe and bar was literally torn apart, the owners beaten up and the great variety of alcoholic ware afforded a safe refuge in the stomachs of the rioters. At the height of this destruction the Cairo Fire Brigade appeared on the scene, the engines manned by massive looking Nubian

crews, but their size in no way daunted the rioters who were by now thoroughly under the influence of their alcoholic loot.

As fast as the loots were run out, the Anzacs cut them into small pieces with which they pelted the firemen and finally drove them from the scene.

Already on the scene, of course, were the military police. For a time they hovered ineffectually around the fringes of the riot, blowing their whistles and calling for peace and sanity. With the feelings that the average Aussie or Kiwi had towards the hated "Redcap" it is amazing that they were allowed to continue their whistling and calling for so long without the inevitable retaliation. But with the departure of the firemen, the rioters turned in search of new enemies, and there they were, ready made.

For a moment the policemen stood their ground, swinging their batons lustily, but under the ferocious attack of hundreds of soldiers they stood no chance. Revolvers were drawn and when this had no effect, shots were fired and four Australians were wounded. Luckily for the Redcaps they were able to break off and save their own skins by a hasty retreat.

By now the rioters had spread beyond the confines of the Wazir. Parties of them were rampaging through other streets nearby, picking up establishments which they had nothing against—a cafe, which sold bad liquor, a street vendor who had short-changed someone, a house of ill repute which at some time failed to satisfy the tastes of a soldier.

Fortunately most of these wandering rioters took streets which led to the famed Esplanade Gardens, and finding themselves in this green oasis, they calmed down and settled themselves down on the lawns to sleep it off.

By 5 p.m. apart from a few men who were still raging back and forth and keeping up the destruction, the riot was beginning to die down. The most heavily intoxicated had gone to the gardens or elsewhere to sleep it off and the more sensible, realising what the outcome of the escapade would be, had put as much distance as possible between themselves and the Wazir.

But then the British Yeomanry cavalry arrived on the scene. They were neat and dapper soldiers, and unimpaired in their manner as they sat perfectly upright in their saddles with their sabres resting with perfectly angled precision on their shoulders. The battered and wild looking rioters stared, averted and then began a menacing advance. An Australian soldier wavered ahead of the mob to confront the officer's command of the cavalry and to ask him what he and his "little tin soldiers" wanted.

The officer replied in a haughty voice that the rioters were to return to their camps immediately. The wavered a little and his answer is best left to the

imagination. The menace advance continued and the officer wisely decided that discretion was the better part of valour and withdrew his men.

As evening approached, the tempo of the riot began to pick up again. From the various barracks units of British infantry were called out and armed, but fortunately they were not sent into the Wazir area. They along with the cavalry and military police, were formed into a cordon which was spread around the riot scene, to confine the riot and to keep outsiders from joining in. The greatest fear was that Egyptians would try to retaliate, and that would have ended in a bloodbath.

The tumult continued into the night, but it was already dying out. The fires had burned themselves out, fortunately without spreading to engulf the whole district as they might well have done, and there was not an unbroken bottle of any sort of liquor to be found. There were no more shop windows to smash, no street lamps left burning, no more fishmonger shops to be pilled open. Every brook in the district had been reduced to matchwood and rags and their inhabitants chased out of the area.

By midnight most of the rioters had slipped and slid through the cordons and returned to their camps at Zoffany, Meina and Idku.

There was little that the authorities could do about the riot itself. A few stragglers were arrested in the Wazir next morning, but generally the legends which had already grown that the soldiers had acted as a retributive force against the rioters in the Wazir were not taken to rid Cairo of its worst sink of iniquity was accepted. And the legend which has persisted to this day,



A Cairo cafe, typical of the scores which were wrecked by the Anzacs in and near to the Wazir.

A typical street scene in the Wazir.

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AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES.

*N.B.—The form being applicable to any Board of Officers, or Committee, or Court of Inquiry, this blank to be filled in accordingly.

The signature of each Officer composing the Board, etc., should be attached at the end of the proceedings, and sufficient space must be left below for the remarks and Signature of the Officer who authorised its assembly.

PROCEEDINGS of a Court of Enquiry

assembled at MENA CAMP

On the third day of April, one thousand nine hundred and fifteen

by order of in pursuance with your 1484 of 3rd April

for the purpose of eliciting all information possible

regarding the disturbance in Cairo last night.

PRESIDENT:

COLONEL F.G. HUGHES. V.D.

MEMBERS:

Lieut-Col. O.A. Tunbridge, C.M.G.

Lieut-Col. L. Long.

The Court having assembled pursuant to order, proceeded to

examine witnesses.

First evidence:---

Thomas James Entwistle, Captain, Commanding 3rd Reinforcements, 8th Light Horse Regiment, on oath saith:---I was in Cairo on the afternoon of the 2nd April and left the Continental Hotel about 6 p.m. From outside appearances the town was normal. I was with Captain Daly, 6th Battalion Infantry, Lieuts Menty, Robinson, and Jaffray. A Sergeant came and reported to Capt. Dalt that a serious riot was taking place down in the native quarter. He himself had foot-marks on his neck and said he had lost his bayonet in the scrimmage. We at once went to the native quarters guided by the Sergeant and got close enough to see soldiers tossing articles of bedding and furniture from all windows of the building which was six stories high. As far as I could see the men were New Zealand Privates. They were setting fire to the furniture in the middle of the street. I did not recognise any of the men.

President:--"Was there any Australians in the crowd,"

Witness:--"Yes; 5 New Zealanders predominated."

Witness continuing saith:--We returned to Shepherds hotel and a British General asked us if we could do anything in quelling the disturbance and we told him we had already been down there and would do anything to help. We fell in as many men as we could find to act as picquets. I had about 95 men. Lieut Maccolm of the First Reinforcements of the 8th Light Horse took over my Picquet and I was provided with a horse and tried to move the men on in company with Mr. Chanter of the 9th Light Horse. I heard firing but did not see any. I could give no idea as to what started the trouble. The Moaris were about one in ten. Men in uniform were shoving the women out of the houses. They were native women. The people I saw in the buildings were New Zealanders Moaris and Australians.

Wilfred Robinson, Lieut. in the 8th Light Horse Regiment,
saith---" I went to the Disturbance in Company with the
previous witnesses and as we neared the scene heard what we
thought was firing. Sergeant W. Sinclair, of "C" Squadron
4th Light Horse, told us when we got back to Shepheards Hotel
that that he was down there and things got too hot for him.
One fellow was standing up and smashing things, pushing in
shutters and throwing bricks through the windows. Other
men were passing things to him. This was about 6.30 p.m.
There were bottles of whisky very much in evidence. I heard
threatening language towards Officers so thought it would not be
advisable to push my way further into the crowd. We went
back to the Hotel and assisted in forming Picquets."

Ernest Arthur Hands, Driver in the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance, ~~XXXXXX~~ saith---"I got into the Ouagh-el-Birket between a quarter and half past three in the afternoon, and at that time I should think there were about 2,000 persons there. I saw things being thrown out of the window. I did not recognise the man who was throwing or the Unit to which he belonged. I walked away and on coming back saw that a fire had been started. That was about half-an-hour afterwards. The Military Mounted Police, known to us as the Red Caps came on the scene~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ and the soldiers would not let them pass. The Red Caps turned round and fired two shots but nobody was hit. The crowd seemed to get maddened at this and threw things at the Red Caps. They started to retire and while doing so turned and fired indiscriminately into the crowd. They did not take sight and I think they must have fired eight or nine shots. I saw two men fall and went to render First-aid to one but some of the soldiers would not let me go near him. They took him away.

Jehn Robert Hewes, 3rd Signal Troop, saith:---It was about 3.30 when I arrived in the vicinity of the disturbance. There was a crowd of about 1,500. Soldiers were throwing things out of the houses. The Mounted Red Caps came down at about 4 p.m. and rode through and passed on. About Three quarters of an hour after they returned and as they~~XXXX~~ get under the buildings some of the furniture being thrown out startled the horses and the Red Caps became excited. It was then that I heard the shots fired. I retired up a side street.

Alick O'Gilvie, 5th Battery Field Artillery, No.
1092. Saith" I was on duty in the streets where the
disturbace took place from 8.30 p.m. to 4.30 a.m. next
mornning. I took about 14 identity discs from men
who were looting greg and handed them over to Lieut^a? who
was acting in conjunction with Mr. McFarlane, Lieut.
3rd Infantry Brigade."

William Cernford, Private in the 7th Battalion, 2nd Infantry Brigade, saith---"I got to the disturbance about 3.30 p.m. There were not many there then. I saw a crowd up a side street and they told me that a Meari had been stabbed the previous night and the crowd were trying to straighten things up. The next I saw was things being thrown out of the window. A soldier was up at one of the windows and the crowd were calling on him to come down. He refused and as some of the soldiers went up and brought him down. The women at the windows started to "sling off" at this and this seemed to arouse the men, who rushed the place and threw the furniture out of the windows and set on fire in the road. The Red Caps came along and tried to disperse the crowd who threw parts of chairs and other things at them. This I think is what caused the firing. I was talking to a man in the street and was hit on the head with a missile. I remembered nothing more until I came to" in a chemists shop.

Edward James Sexton, Dr. 3rd Brigade Ammunition
Column, Saith "I saw a man looking out the top story and
throwing things down. He was a New Zealander. The
crowd rushed up the street and did the same thing. The
whole crowd were headed by New Zealanders."

HENTY, EDWARD ELLIS, Lieutenant in the 8th. Regt. 3rd. L.H. Bde

saith. I was at the Continental Hotel yesterday in company with Capt. Batwistle, Capt. Daly and others, when a sergeant came up and told Capt. Daly there was a riot on in one of the side streets. He bore marks of violence and had a bandage round his neck. We all went down to where the riot was in progress, but found that we could not get through the crush of soldiers. We then went back to Shepherd's Hotel. An English General then came up and asked what was going on, we told him all we knew which was not much. He asked us if any officers up there were in charge of picquets, but we told him we could not say. He then went into the hotel and telephoned. We asked later if we could be of any assistance. We then went up to another side street where we got nearer to the scene of disturbance. Here I got separated and got some men together and formed a picquet to block the road.

There was no firing whilst I was in charge of the picquet. I did not see any firing.

A big crowd of soldiers tried to break through the picquet line. There had been a lot of smashing up in the buildings and there was a fire in the lane at the back of the picquet. The ambulance and fire brigade came through. There was another picquet at the other side of the fire, but could not see very well as it was then getting dark. The fire was in the middle of the street, and was all household effects. The soldiers in front of the picquet began to move away, and at this stage ~~xxxxx~~ a General came up, I think it was General Walker and told me to let the men know there were no English Officers there. I did that. A mounted picquet of Yeomanry was on the main road. I then went up the lane with half a dozen men and found some other officers there and picquets on the doors of buildings which had been badly smashed. I did not see the Police doing anything. I heard sounds which may have been shots but would not say that they were. This was about 6 o'clock.

~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~

I saw soldiers in ~~thux~~ some of the houses, but could not recognise them. I saw one man with putties. I could not tell who they belonged to, but they were soldiers. They may have been New Zealanders, or they may have been Australians.

I saw no women being ill-treated.

The rioters seemed to be having it all their own way. There seemed to be absolutely no restraint in front when I first saw them.

DONOVAN, WILLIAM. 10th. Light Horse, 3rd. L.M. Brigade.

I was in Cairo on Friday April 2nd. 1915 at 4.30 p.m. at "The Wazzah" when the wrecking of the houses occurred.

There was no fire in the street when I arrived, but they had commenced to throw the furniture out of the building

I do not know who set the furniture on fire; I was about 50 yards away.

There was a large crowd collected there and the Redcaps rode up and the crowd hooted. The Redcaps drew their revolvers and fired point blank into the crowd. At least 8 shots were fired straight away. No one interfered with them before they fired beyond the hooting.

I saw one man drop just ahead of me, and two more appeared to drop further to the right of me. The crowd then commenced to throw broken furniture etc. at the Redcaps, and one of them turned round and commenced to trot away and the others followed firing as they went. They were side on to the crowd when they were firing.

I should say there were about 12 Redcaps.

There were Maoris, New Zealanders, Territorials and Australians there.

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No. 598, Sapper McLAREN. ROBERT LAWRENCE 3rd. SIGNAL TROOP
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I was at the disturbance in Cairo between 3.30 and 4 p.m. It was about this time that the disturbance started. It commenced by things, furniture etc. being thrown out of a Brothel from about the fourth story. I waited about and a crowd soon began to collect. There seemed to be about twelve causing all the trouble. The fire occurred about half an hour after they started throwing the furniture from the building. I did not see the fire commence, and I do not know who started it. The Police came down the street a little while after the fire had commenced and rode right down the street, returning again a little later, I should say about half an hour. They then rode into the crowd and tried to quell the disturbance. The things being thrown from the Brothels startled the horses and they (the Police) then commenced to fire upon the crowd, and continued firing as they went away, and one ~~xxxxxx~~ policeman presented a revolver at me and said we had to get out of it or he would fire. I moved away. I could not recognise any of the men, but I think the majority were New Zealanders.

No. 567. Pte. HENDERSON. JOHN STUART. "A" Company, 8th. Batt.
No. 3 Platoon.

I was in the street where the disturbance took place at about 2 o'clock in company with 3 of my mates. There was a small crowd there then. We then went away for a time, returning between 3 and 4 o'clock, and the crowd had grown. We then went and had some tea in the same street about 2/300 yards from where the crowd was. Whilst there we were disturbed by a rush of troops caused by Redcaps breaking through the crowd. The Redcaps rode right down the street and returned again in about three quarters of an hour. A good deal of firing then took place and missiles were thrown at them.

I was not in any Brothel, neither were my mates.

I know noone who was there. They were a mixed lot, but I think the majority were Maoris and New Zealanders.

No. 313, TPR. MACNEE. HARRY MACLACHLAN. 10th. Regt. 3rd. L.H.B.
E reached the disturbance at 5 p.m. Heard firing, and saw men throwing furniture from the windows of the Brothels. From the uniforms I should say the majority appeared to be New Zealanders.

No. 5131, Cpl. Scott, George. 3rd. L.H. Brigade Train.

Between 3. and 3.30 p.m. a party of New Zealanders cleared a Brothel in the main street leading to the Wazzah., ~~xxxxxxx~~
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a lane down to ~~xxx~~ street from the Egyptian Cafe. A New Zealand soldier came out on to the pavement and spoke to a crowd of New Zealand and Territorial soldiers with a few Australians, and they rushed the place. They threw the bedding^{and furniture} into the street and set fire to it. A crowd gathered still principally New Zealanders and Territorials, with a larger number of Australians, and rushed another house, and cleared everything out into the street. Four of us, Driver Henderson, No. 1 Division, and 2 New Zealanders and myself guarded the next house and kept them out, sending the women and natives into the back room, and barricaded the doors and windows. We were here until 9 p.m. Through the lattice window we saw the crowd composed as before out the fire hose about 6.30 p.m. We also saw the Police go down the street, but did not see the collision, though we heard shots fired. We also saw Territorials and a few New Zealanders going through the goods thrown into the street and I saw them scrambling for the coins in the chests of drawers. At 9 p.m. the streets were cleared with guards placed, and we acted until midnight as a street picquet and hereafter helped to search certain Brothels

No. 818, Pvt. Stephens, James_ 2nd. Brigade Staff A.F.A.

Saw a crowd in the street where the disturbance took place.

A few New Zealanders seemed to be the cause of the trouble, but there were some Australians amongst them. I do not know who they were, to what Unit they belonged, neither could I say how to find any clue. I could tell that some of them were Australians by the uniforms they wore.

2 New Zealanders were up on the roof of one of the Brothels and were throwing missiles down amongst the soldiers.

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Between 3. and 3.30 p.m. a party of New Zealanders cleared a Brothel in the main street leading to the Wazzah., ~~at the end of the~~
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a lane down to ~~the~~ street from the Egyptian Cafe. A New Zealand soldier came out on to the pavement and spoke to a crowd of New Zealand and Territorial soldiers with a few Australians, and they rushed the place. They threw the bedding^{and furniture} into the street and set fire to it. A crowd gathered still principally New Zealanders and Territorials, with a larger number of Australians, and rushed another house, and cleared everything out into the street. Four of us, Driver Henderson, No. 1 Division, and 2 New Zealanders and myself guarded the next house and kept them out, sending the women and natives into the back room, and barricaded the doors and windows. We were here until 9 p.m. Through the lattice window we saw the crowd composed as before out the fire hose about 6.30 p.m. We also saw the Police go down the street, but did not see the collision, though we heard shots fired. We also saw Territorials and a few New Zealanders going through the goods thrown into the street and I saw them scrambling for the coins in the chests of drawers. At 9 p.m. the streets were cleared with guards placed, and we acted until midnight as a street picquet and hereafter helped to search certain Brothels

Mr. Pte. Stephens, James, 2nd. Brigade Staff A.P.A.

Saw a crowd in the street where the disturbance took place. A few New Zealanders seemed to be the cause of the trouble, but there were some Australians amongst them. I do not know who they were, to what Unit they belonged, neither could I say how to find any clue. I could tell that some of them were Australians by the uniforms they wore.

2 New Zealanders were up on the roof of one of the brothels and were throwing missiles down amongst the soldiers.

Handwritten note on a piece of paper pasted onto the left page of an open book. The text is written in cursive and reads: "Local history of the" on the first line and "of the" on the second line.