

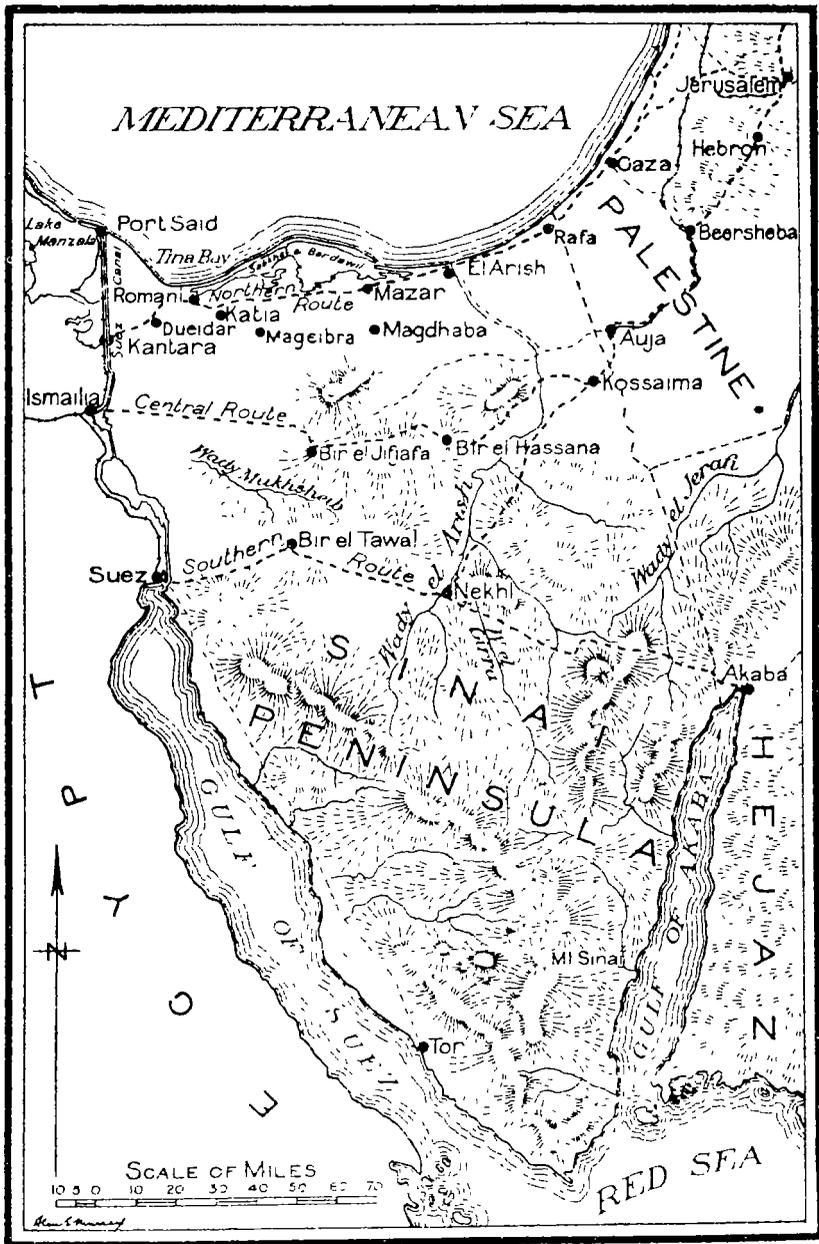
CHAPTER XVI

THE DEFENCE OF EGYPT

WHILE the soldiers of this new nation were thus pulling their full weight in the vast, swaying struggle in which the Allies were trying to overturn the main German incubus on the Western Front, in the Middle East the war against the Turks had again suddenly flared up.

When, by March 1916, the cool season in Egypt had ended without the Turks' having made any attempt to advance across Sinai from Palestine, it had become certain that the danger of any overwhelming attack upon the Canal was over for the year. But attacks in moderate strength were possible. On April 7th Murray pushed out a British Mounted (Yeomanry) Brigade from the Canal defence line to Romani, Katia, Oghratina and Mageibra, fifteen to twenty miles out along the old caravan route to Palestine, skirting the Mediterranean Sea. A fortnight later, in the misty morning of April 23rd, a strong body of Turks surprised and overwhelmed the Oghratina and Katia camps (which had been studied from the air by German pilots), killed or captured several squadrons of Yeomanry, and drove in the whole brigade. They even tried to raid the Canal defence line at Dueidar, but here Scottish infantry beat them back.

The Anzac Mounted Division had then been only partly formed—its 1st Light Horse Brigade was still in the Libyan Desert. But the 2nd and 3rd Brigades had relieved the 1st Australian Division at the Canal and had made two small successful raids into Sinai: to reconnoitre the Wadi Muksheib—down which early in the previous year the Turks had made their first thrust at the Canal



THE SCENE OF OPERATIONS IN SINAI, 1916-17

—and to capture a Turkish post farther out at the desert wells at Jifjafa.¹

Murray now ordered up the Anzac Mounted Division hot foot and placed its commander in charge of the forward area from which the Yeomanry had been driven. The Light Horse searched the raided camps but the Turks had withdrawn; and Chauvel advised that the forward garrison should be concentrated in one strong camp at Romani, beside the northern route near the sea. He hoped that any invading Turkish army might be forced to accept battle there amongst the great sandhills, on ground of British choosing. Murray adopted the plan, and Romani was garrisoned by a brigade of Light Horse, reinforced a month later by the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade. In May, when the railway reached that area, the 52nd (Scottish) Division also was brought up thither. The Australian mounted troops had no artillery of their own, but some excellent batteries of British territorial horse artillery were attached to them—one battery to each brigade; and by these they were admirably supported throughout their campaigns.

Meanwhile, instead of maintaining the old advanced posts at Katia and elsewhere, the 2nd Light Horse Brigade at Romani had been employed in thrusting out on desert reconnaissances, including an expedition to Bir el Abd, twenty miles east, and another, carried out in scorching heat, to Bir el Bayud six miles south of it. Such operations gave excellent practice in desert warfare, and left the Light Horse competent to undertake operations normally almost impossible for cavalry. The troops brought in many unusual methods—the use of spear-head pumps by which horses could be quickly watered; of horsed stretchers and sleighs for the wounded; of driven, rather than ridden, waggon teams; of the sifting and inciner-

¹ A month before the Light Horse raid, the Muksheib had been searched by Captain Wilder-Neligan of the 1st Australian Division with Indian camel troops, some Light Horse supporting them (*Vol III, p. 28*).

30. Australians in Flanders shortly after their arrival in 1916. Part of the 6th Infantry Brigade with their newly issued steel helmets



31. Australians billeted in a farm south of Armentières. At the foot of the picture can be seen the edge of the manure pit in the courtyard.



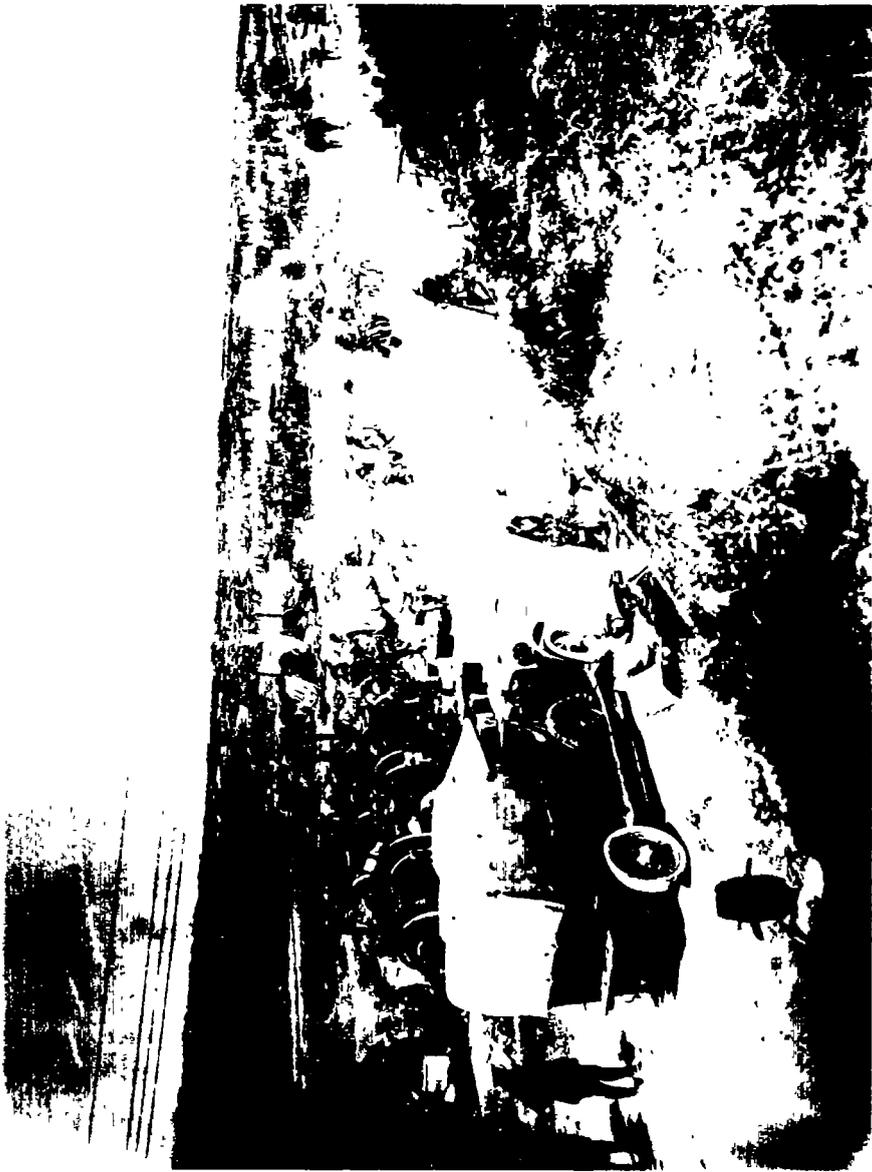
Aerial view of the opposing front lines at the Sugar Loaf salient near Fromelles. The photograph was taken shortly before the battle. It was from the nearer trench at left that the 5th Australian Division attacked on 19th July 1916.



33. *Aerial photograph of Pozieres village before the Somme battle 1916. The "O.G." lines can be seen to the right and "K" Trench immediately to the left of the village. The darker belts before the trenches are barbed wire; the lighter spots are spoil from deep dugouts.*



34. Sausage Valley, the main avenue of traffic to the Pozières sector during the fighting. Photographed in August 1916 Pozières lay about a mile beyond this spot.





35. *The main street of Pozières, 28th August 1916. The view is north-east from Centre Way communication trench. The stump of Pozières windmill is on the horizon.*

EZ 95

36. *Craters after the bombardment at Pozières. Looking south from the main road some months after the battle. The cross marks the grave of Captain I. S. Margetts, 12th Battalion.*

E 532





37 *The courtyard of Mouquet Farm, 11th October 1916, looking toward Pozières windmill.*

E 5

38 *Wounded being dressed in Bécourt Chateau during the battle of Pozières.*

EZ 66



39. Australian infantry returning to the Somme, October 1916. Part of the 6th Brigade on a crowded road near Fricourt at the edge of the old battlefield.



40. *The cookhouse adjoining
an officer's dugout in the
rums of Montauban
Church, December 1916.*



41. *Soldiers of the 45th
Battalion wearing gas
respirators at Garter
Point, Ypres sector, 27th
September 1917.*



42. Light Horse on the raid
to Jijiga, 13th April
1916.



43. *Australians of the
Imperial Camel Corps
Brigade.*



44. *The battleground of
Romans on the morning
of 5th August 1916.*



45. *The beginning of the
Light Horse attack on
Maghaba, 23rd
December 1916.*





46. *A recruiting march through New South Wales—the
"Kangaroos" near Wallendbeen.*

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47. *The Prime Minister,
W. M. Hughes, speaking
in Martin Place, Sydney.*



ation of all refuse, to keep down the flies; even of mounted dental units (a New Zealand improvisation) to deal with dental plates and simple troubles. Several of these innovations—pumps, driving of waggons, dentists—were at first stoutly resisted by Murray's regular Army staff. The necessary material was therefore bought from Anzac funds until the staff swung round and authorised the changes and, in some cases, ordered their adoption in the British Army. The "pedrail", however, with which guns were fitted to cross the desert, was a British invention of great importance.

General Murray, himself, was quick to appreciate the work now being done by his Anzac mounted troops. Writing to the War Office after he had sent most of his infantry to France, "I am assuming," he said, "that you are leaving the three Australian Light Horse Brigades and the New Zealand Brigade with me. Otherwise I shall be deprived of the only really reliable mounted troops that I have." After the terrible experience of the raid to Bayud, he wrote that he did not think "any other troops could have undertaken the operation successfully in the present weather". And at the end of May: "any work entrusted to these excellent troops is invariably well executed".

Provided that he had troops who could work in the desert, Murray's policy of going out to fight the Turks on the narrow approach to Egypt was far more economical than the earlier British plan of meeting them on the Canal line, which could thus safely be held much more lightly than a few months earlier. To render difficult the central route across the Sinai Desert he sent out in June part of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade to spill a large supply of water which, through a sudden storm, had collected in the old wells and pools of the Wadi Muksheib. Actually this rare flood had come down while the Light Horse were out there on the earlier raid to Jifjafa. The water was pumped out, and the wells sealed; it was there-

fore now most probable that any Turkish invading force would use the northern route, and meet the defenders of Egypt at Romani.

Air reconnaissances were difficult for Murray's force. Of his two British air squadrons one had just been relieved by the 1st Australian, but this was divided between Suez, Upper Egypt, and Kantara, and the aeroplanes, B.E.2.c's, were much inferior to the German-piloted Fokker scouts and Aviatiks which served the Turks. German airmen could reconnoitre Murray's positions at will, since he was given no anti-aircraft guns. In June they bombed the horse-lines at Romani killing a number of men and horses. Bedouin Arabs also constantly informed the Turks of British movements and positions. Although the Arabs of the Hejaz in southern Arabia began in June 1916 their remarkable campaign of revolt against the Turks, the Bedouin, larrikins of the desert, served as the spies of both sides but especially of the Turks.

Murray's whole infantry now comprised only four weak territorial divisions. For mounted work, he wrote, "I rely entirely on my Anzac Mounted Division". At this stage, on July 18th, Brig-General Chaytor of the N.Z.M.R. Brigade, reconnoitring by aeroplane over the northern route towards Palestine, noted that four large bodies of Turks with camel transport had suddenly appeared a day or two's march beyond the British posts. Evidently they came from El Arish in the borderlands near Palestine. The total forces seen were estimated at some 8000 men, and presumably they had one of two objects—either to attack the British, as Murray hoped, at Romani, or to seize and fortify the Katia-Oghratina oasis area, and so establish a standing danger to the British on the Canal.

Murray kept touch with these Turks by sending out every day one of his Light Horse brigades to watch and harass them. For the moment, the enemy troops dug

themselves in at Oghratina. The Light Horse—1st and 2nd Brigades alternating—would ride out in the small hours to Katia (where a dummy camp was maintained to deceive the Turks) and then at dawn would advance, pressing back any forward Turkish posts until resistance stiffened. Occasionally a Turkish post, or a scout, was cut off, captured and sent back for examination. Sometimes the Turks counter-attacked the thin Light Horse screen—there occurred even hand-to-hand fighting and at least one exciting dash on horseback through the Turkish outposts. The midsummer heat was intense and after a fortnight of this work the Light Horse, animals and men, were becoming seriously worn.

At this stage the War Office changed its previous defensive policy. Although in Mesopotamia, as already noted, the Anglo-Indian force, that had been thrust up the Tigris, had been surrounded late in 1915 at Kut el Amara, and had been forced to surrender in April 1916,² prospects both there and in Europe now seemed better. Murray was urged to attack. But, before he could arrange to do so, on the night of August 2nd the Turks advanced to Katia. It seemed probable that they were marching straight into Murray's trap. The expectation was that the enemy would try to envelop the southern end of the Romani defences and then to seize the camp and railway behind them.

Accordingly on the following night General Chauvel placed his "resting" Light Horse Brigade, the 1st, as already planned, extending southwards the line held by the 52nd Infantry Division at Romani. Two regiments (2nd and 3rd—about 500 rifles) were lined out very widely south of the camp, in small posts reaching across three miles of hummocky sand, with the main line of lofty sandhills, south-west of the Romani defences, in rear of them. The 1st Regiment was in reserve; the

² Part of the 1st Australian Half-Flight was captured there (*Vol. VIII, p. 25*).

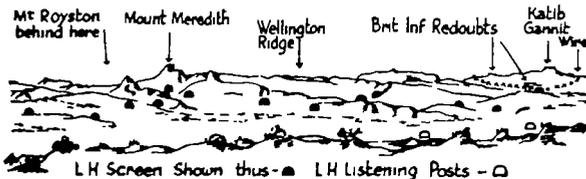
2nd Light Horse Brigade was out on reconnaissance in touch with the Turks; the 3rd Brigade, attached to the central section of Canal defences, had been ordered to move up towards the Romani area. The New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade was in reserve ten miles away with the special duty of falling upon the southern flank of the Turks when they attacked. The 3rd Light Horse Brigade would be available for the same purpose farther south; and southernmost of all was a column of mixed Light Horse and Camel Corps under Lieut.-Colonel C. L. Smith, which would have the same duty.

These forces should be able to envelop any Turkish force which itself tried to envelop the Romani position. They might even have a chance to capture or kill all Turks engaged in the expedition. In order to improve this chance Murray directed Chauvel not to call on the reserves too early, but to hold on with his already much-tried brigades until the Turks had committed their reserve to the fight, and were thoroughly involved in the attack on the camp. Chauvel, therefore, planned, not to hold the Turks on his present line, but to swing slowly back, when necessary, across the big sandhills, towards the camp at Etmaler behind Romani, his left flank pivoting on the 52nd Division's southern post at the high sandhill of Katib Gannit. The sand through which the Turks would here advance would make very heavy going, and so anxious were Chauvel and Murray for the enemy to take this route that the Light Horse screen was not allowed to fortify its outposts lest the sight of the defences might cause the Turks to choose another line of advance.

As expected, the Turks who had advanced to Katia on August 3rd, were presently detected in a further advance: during the following night the Light Horse outposts saw men moving at certain points over the starlit sand. At 1 a.m. on the 4th, a sudden wild babble of "Allah! Allah!" heralded a creeping attack against the Australian screen. The Turks had meant to move past

the British flank to a long sandhill (Wellington Ridge) flanking the camps and railway behind the British, and then at dawn to rush these and attack the 52nd Division from rear and front. The existence of the Light Horse screen, posted that night, was until now unknown to them. Each side fired at the other's rifle flashes while the Turks crept up towards charging distance.

The British and Australians had some 10,000 rifles in their firing line and supports this night, and the Turks, perhaps, 12,000 to 14,000—not a great preponderance with which to attack a strongly fortified position. But the main part of the British strength, some 7000 rifles of the 52nd Division, was to the north, in the Romani defences, which were not seriously attacked, while the real Turkish thrust was faced by the 1600 rifles of Chauvel's two Light Horse Brigades,³ of which only two regiments, comprising some 500 rifles, were holding the three-mile line of the screen. In various parts, when the Turks were close



Position of the screen, seen from the Turkish side.

enough actually to rush and kill one or two posts, the Light Horse mounted and galloped back to the next position, where despite that most trying experience—galloping away from the enemy—they instantly turned and resumed the fight. Before dawn the Turks—estimated at 8000—rushed an overtowering sandhill in the centre, Mount Meredith, and were also seen to be obviously

³ One man in every four was a horse-holder, sent to shelter with the horses. Moreover the brigades, after their hard work, were not at full strength.

trying to outflank the Light Horse line by making for a similar dune to the south-west, Mount Royston. The 1st Light Horse Brigade had retired gradually to Wellington Ridge, south of the camps; but, following the plan laid down, it was not till this outflanking movement became urgent that Chauvel, at 4.30 a.m., ordered up his 2nd Light Horse Brigade on to the right flank of the 1st.⁴

From then onwards there raged a long, intense, difficult struggle, the Turks trying to feel their way round this extending flank, the Light Horse, constantly withdrawn from the left and tacked on to the right of the line, trying to extend the flank still farther and bar their way. The 52nd Division spontaneously helped by taking over the left of the Australian line. The great leader of the fight on the threatened flank was the South African, Brig.-General J. R. Royston, temporarily commanding the 2nd Brigade, who galloped from one threatened point to another, putting in reinforcements, cheering the men, and keeping Chauvel informed of the situation. The British territorial batteries attached to the Light Horse greatly helped by keeping the Turks under their fire; and at this stage the first part of the reserves, a squadron of Gloucestershire Yeomanry, was put in to assist in meeting the threat to the extreme flank. But by 7 a.m. the Turks had occupied Wellington Ridge and the Light Horse line was pressed almost against Etmaler Camp.

Now at last, with the Turks fully extended and growing tired, was the time for the reserves to strike their flank and rear. But here was found the weak point in the British plans. All troops in the area, except those coming from the central section of the Canal Defences, were under control of Maj.-General Hon. H. A. Lawrence, commander of the Northern Section of those defences,⁵ whose headquarters were at the Canal at Kantara.

⁴ The Wellington Mounted Rifles were with the 2nd Bde, in exchange for the 5th L.H. Regt, attached to the N.Z.M.R. Bde.

⁵ Afterwards Chief of the General Staff of Haig on the Western Front

Murray had suggested to Lawrence that his control was centred too far back, and that he should either move up his headquarters or delegate command to someone in the forward area. On the other hand Lawrence feared, what Murray did not, that the Turks might bypass Romani and strike at the Canal, and he accordingly maintained his existing arrangements. But the direct telegraph line to his headquarters was broken in the battle. Communication became very slow, and the battlefront and reserves were in fact under three separate commanders with no machinery for combining their action.

Very late Chauvel managed to inform Lawrence of the position. Lawrence had by then discovered, through despatching the 5th Light Horse Regiment on reconnaissance the night before, that the Turks were not making for the Canal. He now, therefore sent forward the New Zealand and 5th Yeomanry Brigades; and though the orders to the New Zealanders were twice changed, about noon the tired battle troops, holding up 2000 Turks at Mount Royston on the exposed flank, caught sight of a distant body of cavalry. It was the approaching New Zealanders. Early in the afternoon they and the 5th Yeomanry Brigade attacked the Turkish flank—which in its turn became exposed—at Mount Royston. A brigade of Lawrence's reserve infantry division, the 42nd (Lancashire) was marching up to help; but the sand made heavy going, and though the stubbornness of the Turks caused the fight to last throughout the afternoon, this infantry had not arrived at 6 p.m., by which time the dismounted New Zealanders and Yeomanry had gradually pushed close enough to be almost within charging distance. The Turks then put up the white flag and began to surrender in large numbers.

Meanwhile other Turks, who had been massing farther east behind Wellington Ridge, had again tried to advance over its crest but were shelled off by the territorial batteries. The Light Horse began to advance, cap-

turing many of the enemy. But an intended assault by part of the 52nd Division in that sector had not developed; and the 3rd Light Horse Brigade coming up from the south-west had not received its orders in time to reach the Turkish flank during the battle. As night was now falling and his Light Horse brigades were exceedingly tired Chauvel held them back till dawn; and Lawrence, who, incidentally, was under the mistaken impression that the 52nd Division in the Romani defences had been strongly attacked, did not believe that even on the southern flank a bold encircling movement had much chance of success.

Horses had to be watered and wounded cleared.⁶ A brigade of the 42nd Infantry Division arrived and took over the right flank from the New Zealanders and Yeomanry. The forward troops of both sides rested in the positions reached in the battle. As it was clear that the Turks must be exhausted, Murray and Lawrence ordered their infantry and cavalry to move forward as soon as possible. At 4 a.m. on August 5th the 1st and 2nd Light Horse Brigades, together with the nearest infantry, advanced with the bayonet. Only in the centre of the southern front on Wellington Ridge did the Turks resist strongly, and there too they were eventually rushed and surrendered. The Turkish flank having gone, Lawrence at 6.30 placed Chauvel in charge of all mounted troops with orders to pursue keenly; the 3rd Light Horse Brigade was to outflank the Turks on the south and Smith's camel force to operate still farther inland.

The New Zealand, Yeomanry and 3rd Light Horse Brigades were still watering, but by 10 a.m. all had moved. By 4 p.m. the 3rd Brigade had boldly rushed the southern flank of the Turks south of Katia, capturing 425 men and 7 machine-guns, just as the rest of the mounted troops approached Katia from the front. But as the 3rd Brigade

⁶ There were great defects in the clearance of wounded in the rear areas, almost matching some of the incidents in Gallipoli and Mesopotamia. The system was afterwards amended.

now came under shellfire their brigadier withdrew them and the possible chance of striking decisively was lost. The rest of the mounted troops, after taking many prisoners and much booty, approached Katia and set their horses to the charge. The Anzacs, who had no swords, carried their bayonets, but after racing across a salt-pan the horses plunged into swamp. The troops dismounted but could not reach the Turkish line, which also was protected by heavier artillery than the mounted troops possessed.

The mounted troops could not take Katia and had to retire. The infantry of the 52nd Division had advanced much too late to take part, and that of the 42nd Division, new to desert marching, broke down with heat, weariness and thirst. At one time Murray thought his mounted troops, also, disappointingly slow. But at this stage he realised that three weeks of continuous hard reconnaissance and fighting had largely exhausted the Anzac horsemen, and the horses also. The Turks had not been completely destroyed as planned.

Nevertheless the threat of Turkish invasion had been dispelled. While the British that night fell back from Katia on the one side, the Turks were hurriedly abandoning it on the other. The 3000 mounted troops followed them, and on August 9th attacked the Turkish remnant, about 6000 strong, at Bir el Abd. The enemy eventually held them and at dusk they had to be withdrawn, carrying their 210 wounded. Again the Turks had been left in position, but two days later they again withdrew—to Salmana; and, when on August 13th the Anzac Mounted Division and its British artillery lightly attacked them there, they finally fell back to El Arish, fifty miles away on the coastal approaches to Palestine.

In truth the Turk had learnt to fear the operations of these horsemen; and possibly he did not fully realise how difficult they found it to come to grips with his infantry when it was strongly posted. At all events

Romani, though fought by comparatively few troops, was one of the decisive battles of the war. In the five days' fighting—and mainly south of Romani—the Turks lost half their force; some 5250 are believed to have been killed or wounded and nearly 4000 were captured. The British loss between August 5th and 9th was 1130, all but a few hundred being among the 5000 Anzacs. Very few of these were prisoners; with the Light Horse it was (says their historian)⁷ "a voluntary and unwritten law that no sound man should allow himself to be taken prisoner, and no wounded man should be permitted to fall into enemy hands". In the two and a half years of these campaigns only 73 light horsemen—and not one of their officers—were captured by the Turks. In the same time they captured over 40,000 Turks.

More than for any other leader, including even Royston, Romani was a personal triumph for Chauvel. Fought on the very days on which the 2nd Australian Infantry Division in France was capturing and consolidating its hold on Pozières ridge, it completely changed the outlook of the campaign in the Middle East. Now, even more keenly than before, Murray urged upon the vacillating British government that the best defence of Egypt was to advance, at least to El Arish; and, in the hope of eventually receiving more support, he now began to plan to drive the Turks from Palestine.

But across the waterless stretch from Bir el Abd to El Arish the British infantry could go only as fast as their railhead and line of water pipe. As the engineers and Egyptian labourers gradually extended these, the mounted troops occasionally thrust ahead on some foray. Smith's camel force together with some Yeomanry and Light Horse had, during the Romani operations, been striking at Turkish posts on the inland flank, at Aweidia, Hilu, and Bayud. Henceforth one condition of the fighting

⁷ Sir Henry Gullett, *Vol. VII, p. 185.*

improved. The 1st Squadron, Australian Flying Corps,⁸ was now concentrated at Kantara, and with the 14th British Squadron it constantly reconnoitred the ground ahead and bombed the Turkish camps. In mid-September three Light Horse brigades together with camel companies and artillery, and with vast provision for watering, tried to surround and seize the next Turkish post at Mazar, half-way to El Arish; and in mid-October a mixed force, with greater provision for watering, made a four days' expedition to cut out a Turkish garrison at Maghara, twenty-five miles away to the south-east in the Sinai Hills. Each of these attempts seemed to be meeting with some success when, to the great disappointment of his troops, their commander withdrew them in accordance with an overruling order that, if the first attack did not succeed, he was to consider the operation a reconnaissance and pull back his force. The Turks, however, abandoned Mazar two days after the attack.

In November Chauvel, then at Mazar, was ordered to prepare for the advance to El Arish, and on the night of December 20th the Light Horse to their delight finally marched clear of the loose sand of the dunes on to the hard plain bordering the Wadi el Arish. By dawn the village was surrounded by Light Horse, New Zealanders, and the camel brigade. The squalid place—which to troops so long in the desert appeared "a pleasant, civilised town"—had been rightly reported to have been abandoned by the Turks; and the Arab populace and chief sheikh came out to welcome the strangers with a demonstration of excited welcome.

Murray's railway was still thirty miles short of El Arish, but the British Navy could here land stores and supplies on the beach and immediately began to do so.⁹ The 52nd Division came up to hold the town. And then

⁸ Flying B.E.2.c's, Martinsydes, and R.E.8's. See *Vol. VIII*, pp. 31-3, and 47.

⁹ The Royal Australian Naval Bridging Train made a pier

at last, on the firmer ground, the mounted troops had the chance of operations more suited to themselves and their horses. Two routes led from El Arish to Palestine, one along the beach past Rafa to Gaza; the other south-south-east past Magdhaba to El Auja, near the head of the railway which the enemy was building into Sinai. To block each route the Turkish rearguard from El Arish had split in two and posted itself at Rafa and Magdhaba, each about twenty-five miles away, and about thirty miles apart. As will later be explained, a change had been made in the organisation of Murray's army; being responsible for the defence of Egypt, which was showing signs of unrest, he had removed his own headquarters from Ismailia to Cairo, and had obtained from the Cameroons Lieut.-General Sir Charles Dobell to command the force in Sinai, and from the Western Front a cavalry leader, Sir Philip Chetwode, to control his advanced troops (now known as the Desert Column). Chetwode, arriving at El Arish by sea on December 22nd, decided at once to seize these two advanced enemy posts.

The expedition against the inland one, Magdhaba, began that night, Chauvel and the Anzac Mounted Division forming the striking force, but with the 2nd L.H. Brigade absent and the new Imperial Camel Corps Brigade, under Lieut.-Colonel C. L. Smith, and its mountain battery (from Hong Kong and Singapore) attached instead. This camel brigade had been raised mainly from the Gallipoli infantry after the Evacuation and comprised 2½ battalions of Australians, ½ battalion of New Zealanders, and 1 battalion of British troops. Its strength was about 2500, roughly twice that of a Light Horse brigade, and its men, like their British brigadier, were tough fighters.

The march to Magdhaba was made along the east side of the Wadi el Arish, and by night. In the small hours the Turkish campfires were seen, and, when their flicker was apparently close, the troops were halted and break-

fasted. As soon as the Turkish dispositions were clearly known, through aeroplanes flying low after dawn, Chauvel distributed his force, the camel brigade going straight for the nearest Turkish redoubt, east of the wadi, the other brigades making detours round the position, mainly on the hard plain east of the wadi, where horses could go fast. The New Zealanders worked round to the Turkish flank, and the 10th L.H. Regiment, by a long detour, to the enemy's rear.

A hard fight now developed in which the Camels, and part of the Light Horse had to advance over the open under heavy fire. Progress was slow. The horses had been long without water, and efforts to find a supply had failed. The urgency of watering the horses daily was the ruling factor in cavalry work in the desert, and after consulting some of his leaders Chauvel reluctantly ordered his brigades to withdraw.

But already, without his knowledge the Camels and 1st Brigade were in position to rush the central redoubt. Brig.-General Cox laid aside the order to retire. This redoubt was taken. Other regiments rushed the remainder, the 10th Regiment actually galloped through and over one redoubt and then attacked it from the other side. Few Turks escaped; by 4.30 p.m. 1282 had been captured and, perhaps, 300 killed. The raiding force returned with its wounded and prisoners to El Arish.

The Turkish post at Rafa was attacked a fortnight later, on 9th January 1917. Murray's airmen had clearly mapped the Turkish dispositions, and the Anzac Mounted Division, after advancing during the night and seizing the Arab village of Sheikh Zowaaid, from which news would otherwise have reached the enemy, had the Turks and their redoubts completely surrounded before dawn. At once, however, the difficulty of the operation became obvious: the redoubts lay on two central heights with completely open slopes leading gently up for a mile on every side. The approach by the surrounding lines of

men, though Chauvel's batteries tried to keep the Turkish heads down, was extraordinarily difficult; and though the reserves—3rd Light Horse and 5th Yeomanry Brigades—were put into gaps in the cordon, the prospect of reaching the redoubts seemed precarious. Ammunition was short; and at 4.25 p.m., when two forces of Turks were reported to be approaching from west and north-west, Chetwode, after consulting Chauvel, ordered the troops to withdraw, and the nearest brigade, the Yeomanry, actually began to carry this out.

But again some of the troops were then so near to victory that the order was ignored. The New Zealanders on the north and the camel brigade on the south, by long advances, rushed their redoubts. The other troops joined the attack, the Yeomanry turning back to do so. The 1800 Turks in the posts were all killed or captured. The force returned to El Arish. The approaching Turkish reinforcements withdrew; part of them next day attacked a force of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade, left behind to cover the bringing in of the wounded, and were beaten off. The total British casualties had been 486.

A month later, in mid-February 1917, two small expeditions farther south into Sinai, one to Nekhl under Lieut.-Colonel W. Grant with the 11th L.H. Regiment and some camel troops, the other made by the British camel battalion to Hassana, eliminated the remaining Turkish garrisons from the interior of Sinai. The task of clearing that difficult peninsula had fallen almost entirely on the mounted troops, of whom four-fifths were Anzacs. About that time, on hearing that Birdwood, after Pozières, wanted the Light Horse reinforcements in Egypt to be sent to France for the infantry, Murray wrote: "I cannot spare a single man from these reinforcements. These Anzac troops are the keystone of the defence of Egypt."

The way was now clear for an advance against the Turks in Palestine.