

CHAPTER III

THE MIDDLE EAST—ADVENT OF No. 1 SQUADRON

It became the custom of the people, and even of the authorities, in Britain to refer to all operations in which British troops were engaged, in theatres of war other than France and Belgium, as "side-shows." In a sense they were such, and certainly they were for the greater part of the war treated as of secondary importance in the matter of equipment and reinforcements. The Germans also regarded the Turkish theatre in much the same light. Both sides believed, and rightly, that the decision on the Western Front in France would settle the issues on all other fields. At least on the British side the lot of the troops who were engaged in "the side-shows" was probably harder than that of those on the main front—harder, because supplies and equipment were generally inferior or insufficient, because soldiers' home leave was almost unknown, and because, as the war lengthened out, commanders on minor fronts were liable to be hampered and thwarted indefinitely by the demands of "the general strategical situation."

The Palestine campaign—perhaps the most important of all the Allies' minor-front campaigns—was carried to its brilliantly successful conclusion after bitter experience of muddle, wasted energy, false moves, and inefficient support of earlier operations in the Near East. In 1915 the British Army learned its hard lesson in the Gallipoli Peninsula and in Mesopotamia. By early 1916 the only relief in the sombre disillusion of the nation was the splendid heart of the men who fought and suffered and died and in part somehow survived in those badly organised ventures. The British Government seemed in the beginning to believe that Britain's prestige in the Near East was as good as an army already fighting for her there. So to some extent it was. The bombardment of the Dardanelles forts and the military landing in Gallipoli on one side of Turkey, and Townshend's advance upon Baghdad on the other, were each, in the enthusiasm of this belief, credited beforehand with assured success. They were

dramatic blows, and both movements were expected to march swiftly to the desired and perfect *dénoûment*.

The strategy of the simultaneous attack upon Turkey from two sides was sound, but the plans were ill-considered. Turkey was "the ramshackle Empire," and the British attacked her, if not with ramshackle, at least with careless, tactics. The scheme of operations was left too much to fortunes of the moment; its authors seemed to leap over every stage between the launching of the plan and its conclusion. No military force, however daring, can, if left unsupported, perform a task which depends on constant reinforcement of men and supplies, the clearance of wounded to adequate hospitals, and the establishment of efficient communications along the line of advance. These lessons had been learned in former wars by the British Army, but apparently not by Government departments in Whitehall. The eastern campaigns of 1915 flickered out with Townshend's surrender in Kut and the evacuation of Gallipoli. Those efforts made the military reputation of the Australians, and added laurels to the name of both British and Indian soldiers. Not to them belongs any disgrace of defeat. The War Office subsequently explained that these operations served an important purpose in holding down and crippling the Turkish military strength. This also is true; but it was not the designed objective, nor did it assuage the soldiers' bitter memories of lost opportunity in Gallipoli, or of the awful scenes among the neglected wounded who died in agony along the Tigris.

The year 1916 brought to Britain disillusion, but not yet her darkest hour. In the early part of that year the great German blow against Verdun failed. In July the first full-weight attack by the Allies on the Western Front, the offensive on the Somme, failed also in its local objective, though it relieved German pressure on Verdun. As the immensity of the task of beating Germany gradually became realised in Britain, the British people were roused to supreme endeavour. Conscription for the Army replaced voluntary enlistment: the tide of recruiting in all the Dominions reached its highest mark. The whole Empire now recognised that the Germans meant to fight to the death. Roumania joined the Allies.

The United States seemed to be turning steadily against Germany. The Allies prepared an immense effort for the campaign of 1917 against the Western Front. In the early months of that year the minor British fronts in the Near East were also awakened to new life with the advance of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force from the Suez Canal towards Palestine and the arrival of a new Mesopotamian army under Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude at Baghdad.

In these great efforts Australia played her full part. The Australian infantry force, withdrawn to Egypt from the fierce schooling of Gallipoli, was early in 1916 expanded into four divisions, which were sent to France as soon as they were formed. The Australian Light Horse, in combination with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles, having been increased in strength to two cavalry divisions, remained in Egypt. The Camel Corps, later converted into cavalry, was also largely Australian. The Australian Flying Corps was founded in fact as well as in name, and 1916 saw also the first complete Australian flying squadron on service in the desert between the Suez Canal and El Arish. By the end of the year the establishment of a squadron had swollen to a scheme for four service squadrons. This in due course led to the formation of an Australian wing of four training squadrons in England for the supply of reinforcements to the fighting fronts.

Australia alone among the oversea dominions of the Empire established a flying corps of her own for service in the war. It was a portion of the Australian Imperial Force, though its squadrons for the most part served separately from each other and under the orders, as in the case of all British air squadrons, of the Royal Air Force. The first proposal for such oversea units came from the Army Council at the end of 1915, in a suggestion that the Dominions might wish to raise complete squadrons for service with the *Royal Flying Corps*¹ instead of continuing to encourage individual enlistments in the British flying arm. The Australian Government, perceiving the value of an air force for future training as well as for the present emergency, promptly adopted the suggestion.²

¹ The *Royal Flying Corps* was then the title of the military air arm. Australia was invited to form military air squadrons only, not naval. The re-amalgamation of the R.F.C. and the R.N.A.S., under the name of the *Royal Air Force* (as has been explained in the Introduction) was not brought about till 1 April, 1918.

² See Appendix No. 2.

Accordingly the first complete Australian flying unit, No. 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, together with first reinforcements for the same—a total of twenty-eight officers and 195 other ranks—embarked from Port Melbourne in the transport *Orsova* on the 16th March, 1916, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel E. H. Reynolds.³ The squadron was a twelve-aeroplane squadron, with three flights—"A", "B", and "C"—each of four machines. "C" Flight also bore the wireless equipment and personnel. At a later time, in Egypt, the wireless section was transferred to squadron headquarters, and each flight was equipped, as were R.F.C. squadrons, with six machines, making eighteen in all. On embarkation the several flights were commanded—"A" by Captain W. Sheldon,⁴ "B" by Lieutenant Manwell, and "C" by Captain Williams. The squadron took with it from Australia no technical equipment of any sort except two motor-cars and seven motor-bicycles, all presented by members of the unit who owned them. Its machines and technical outfit were supplied in Egypt by the R.F.C. The original intention was that Australia should pay for such material, and that, on the conclusion of the war, the squadron should take back to the Commonwealth what was left. The war, however, lasted longer than was generally expected, and at the Armistice any machines and stores held by Australian squadrons were returned to the Royal Air Force as equivalent to the original issue of equipment, no money passing between the British and Australian Governments on account of any technical material used. In other respects, the Australian Flying Corps was equipped and maintained in the field under the same arrangement as that applying to other Australian units. Many expenses were in the first place met by the British Government, the Commonwealth afterwards repaying them on a *per capita* basis in calculating which the British Government showed an invariable liberality.

The personnel of the squadron was raised in Australia from pilots and observers who had completed courses at the Australian flying school, from suitable volunteers already in

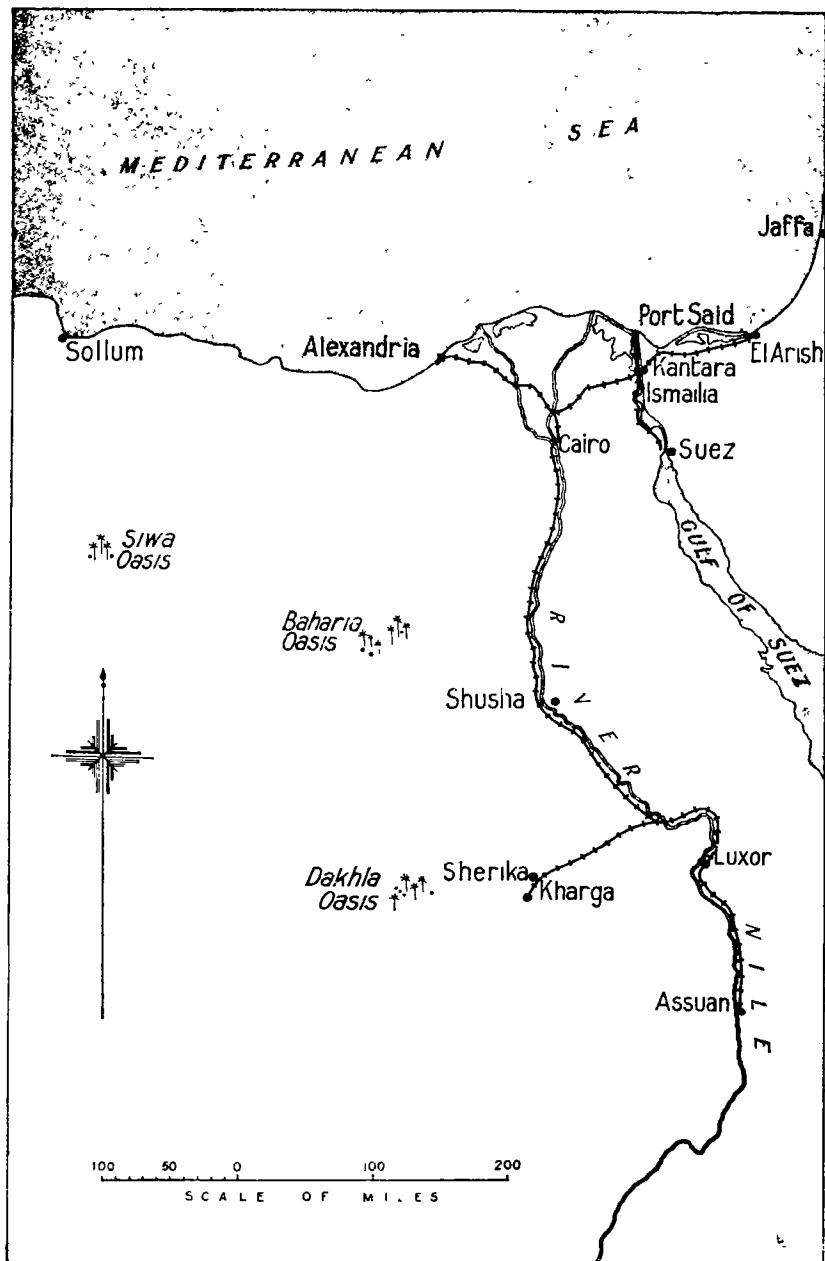
³ Colonel E. H. Reynolds, O.B.E., p.s.c. S.O. for Aviation, A.I.F., London, 1917/18. Officer of Aust. Permanent Forces; b Paddington, Sydney, 20 Oct., 1878.

⁴ Maj. W. Sheldon. Commanded No. 4 Sqn, 1916/17, No. 2 Sqn., 1918. Officer of Aust. Permanent Forces; of Melbourne; b. Singapore, 20 Aug., 1889.

A.I.F. camps, and from civilians with special qualifications. Artisans enlisted from special trades were required to be skilled in those trades, and their training in Australia was practically confined to drill and the first principles of soldiering. They received in Australia little aircraft training, except for some practice in the swinging of propellers. Nor were the pilots and observers instructed at Point Cook in gunnery, armament, photography, or bombing. On arrival in Egypt most of them were sent to England for further training. When, on April 14th, the squadron arrived at Suez, it was split up within a week into parties for training with local British squadrons.

The military position in Egypt was then one of desultory warfare on at least two fronts. In Upper (or southern) Egypt the Senussi were as yet unsuppressed. In the east the desert beyond the Suez Canal was either in Turkish hands or a No-Man's Land. In the previous winter Kitchener had visited Cairo and passed his famous criticism that "the troops were supposed to defend the Canal and not the Canal the troops," and more aggressive tactics were beginning. There were in Egypt two R.F.C. squadrons—forming the 5th Wing, R.F.C.—one on the Canal at Kantara and Ismailia, and one at Heliopolis for service in Upper Egypt. The enemy had one German flying squadron operating against the Canal. British aircraft factories could not yet supply improved machines for other fronts than the French, and in Egypt at this date the British machines were of ancient type—B.E.2.c two-seaters (90 h.p. R.A.F. engine). The Germans possessed single-seater Fokker scouts and two-seater Aviatiks, machines superior in speed, climbing, manœuvring, and fighting power. Lieutenant-Colonel (then Captain) Williams writes:—"At that time we had no guns firing through the propeller, and could not fire straight ahead. Our observers were in front of the pilots. The Aviatik observer was in rear of the pilot and the pilot could fire straight ahead. We really had very little chance with him. When bombing, we had to go without observers, and although we carried a machine-gun, it was quite impossible to fly the machine and use the gun too. We depended mainly on luck. These old machines, however, did much good work."

Map No. 3



EGYPT

PRWIGHTMAN

During its first six weeks in Egypt the Australian squadron was without machines. Most of the flying officers were sent to England for training; and the mechanics, whose instruction was equally important, were split up into parties, and attached with flight-commanders to the two British squadrons in order to learn their work. One party under Captain D. V. J. Blake⁵ and one under Captain Williams went to stations of No. 14 Squadron, R.F.C., at Kantara and Ismailia respectively; two other parties, under Captain Sheldon and Captain W. H. Anderson,⁶ to No. 17 Squadron, R.F.C., at Heliopolis; and a fifth under Lieutenant R. Ross⁷ to "X" Aircraft Park, R.F.C., at Abbassia. In such training the squadron spent the remainder of April and all of May. A general uncertainty hung over its future, rumour assigning it in turn to France, Salonica, and the Canal Zone. Its commanding officers were constantly being changed. Colonel Reynolds left it at Suez, and eventually became Staff Officer for Aviation at A.I.F. Headquarters, London; Major H. D. K. Macartney⁸ succeeded him, but shortly afterwards went to England and was transferred to artillery; Major A. A. J. Broun⁹ followed him in command, but on June 1st gave place to Major T. F. Rutledge.¹⁰ Rutledge arrived from England in company with an Australian who had been flying for nearly two years in the French Flying Corps, Captain Oswald Watt.¹¹

By June 12th the fate of the squadron was known. No. 17 Squadron, R.F.C., was ordered to Salonica, while No. 1 Australian Squadron took over its machines and its Canal stations, with headquarters at Heliopolis. For some months the squadron was split up, with its several flights at stations

⁵ Brig D. V. J. Blake. Commanded No. 3 Sqn., 1918. Officer of Aust Permanent Forces; of Parramatta, N.S.W.; b. Harris Park, Parramatta, 10 Nov., 1887.

⁶ Air Commodore W. H. Anderson, C.B.E., D.F.C., p.s.a.; Aust. Flying Corps (afterwards R.A.A.F.). Commanded No. 3 Sqn., A.F.C., 1918/19. Of Melbourne; b. Kew, Melbourne, 30 Dec., 1891.

⁷ Capt. R. Ross; No 3 Sqn. Engineer; of Toorak, Melbourne; b. Carnegie, Melbourne, 23 Sept., 1891.

⁸ Colonel H. D. K. Macartney, C.M.G., D.S.O. Commanded 7th A.F.A. Bde., 1916/18. Officer of Aust. Permanent Forces; of Brisbane; b. Waverley Station, Q'land, 1 Feb., 1880. Died, 24 Oct., 1932.

⁹ Maj. A. A. J. Broun; No. 1 Sqn. Orchardist, of Spreyton, Tas.; b. Orchard House, Orchard, near Lanark, Scotland, 21 Feb., 1876.

¹⁰ Lt.-Col. T. F. Rutledge, M.C.; R.A.F. Sharebroker; of Melbourne; b. Warrnambool, Vic., 21 March, 1887.

¹¹ Lt.-Col. W. O. Watt, O.B.E. Commanded No. 2 Sqn., 1916/17 and 1917/18. Merchant and grazier; of Sydney; b. Bournemouth, Eng., 11 Feb., 1878. Drowned in Australia, 21 May, 1921.

widely separated. "B" Flight under Watt was the first to be equipped with machines and technical stores, and on June 14th it relieved at the Suez station a detachment of No. 17 Squadron. Here "A" Flight under Sheldon joined "B" Flight for a few days on June 25th, but on July 9th was transferred to Sherika in Upper Egypt. "C" Flight under Williams remained for a time with squadron headquarters at Heliopolis; in July part of the flight worked with No. 14 Squadron at Kantara, and on August 16th the whole flight took over from a detachment of that same squadron the Port Said station. No. 1 Squadron headquarters relieved No. 14's command at Kantara on September 20th; there "C" Flight from Port Said joined it on September 27th, and "A" Flight from Sherika on November 8th. The squadron did not come together on one aerodrome until December 17th, by which time the Egyptian Expeditionary Force had advanced nearly to El Arish, the last position held by the enemy within the Turco-Egyptian frontier.

The period between June and December was, therefore, one of isolated air operations. Till mid-August many Australian pilots, both for the sake of experience and because material equipment was a slow and gradual process, worked with No. 14 Squadron along the Canal and used that squadron's machines. The first six months of No. 1 Squadron's active service falls, therefore, into two natural divisions. During the first half of that period the flights were working far apart, as has been explained. During the second three months the flights, still not collected to one squadron centre, were all working east of the Canal—"B" Flight from Mahemdia, east of Port Said, and "A" and "C" from Kantara.

The Suez operations were without special incident. They consisted of frequent reconnaissances over the desert within a radius of twenty-five or thirty miles of Suez, occasionally marked by the dropping of a few bombs to impress Arab parties.

From Sherika reconnaissances of the Senussi district covered all the western desert a hundred miles or more west of the Nile from the Baharia Oasis in the north to the Dakhla Oasis, west of Kharga, in the south. A notable flight was that of Captain Murray Jones,¹² of "A" Flight, on September 7th

¹² Maj. A. Murray Jones, M.C., D.F.C. Commanded No. 2 Sqn., 1918/19. Pharmacist, of Caulfield, Melbourne; b. Caulfield, 25 Feb., 1895.



KANTARA ON THE SUZ CANAL, WITH AIRCRAFT PARK IN THE FOREGROUND

Lent by Lt Col R Williams No 1 Sqn, AFC
And Hon Museum Collection No. 4647.
Taken in January, 1919



AEROPLANE VIEW OF NEKHL, IN THE SINAI DESERT, BETWEEN SUZ AND AKABA

taken in 1917
ent by Capt. A. T. Colc, No. 1 Sqn, A.F.C.

To face p. 37.

and 8th. A British camel patrol had gone out to examine the Baharia Oasis and had failed to return. Jones flew from Sherika to Shusha on September 7th, and next day reconnoitred the Baharia region for eight hours, but found no trace of the missing patrol. He flew through the heat of the day, a considerable performance for both man and machine, and one hitherto not attempted in the desert. Engine failure would almost certainly have meant death. Some months later, when British troops occupied the oasis, they learned that the lost patrol had been captured and killed by the Senussi. On October 12th, upon news that the Senussi were abandoning the Dakhla Oasis, farther south, Williams arrived at Shusha with two officers from Kantara on a special mission to co-operate with "A" Flight in reconnoitring Dakhla and Baharia. Murray Jones and Lieutenant A. G. Adams¹³ (observer), and Lieutenants L. J. Wackett¹⁴ and V. P. Turner¹⁵ found these oases empty of the enemy. They flew far along the track towards Siwa without seeing anything except evidences that the Senussi had departed. The return flights by Williams and Wackett from Shusha to the Canal with one stop at Cairo—flights lasting five hours and a half and six hours respectively—were in those days a fine achievement.

In the Port Said area, while "C" Flight was still attached to No. 14 Squadron, R.F.C., at Kantara, information was received of enemy movement advancing towards the British position at Romani. At this time the Turco-Germans held the valuable hod¹⁶-country east of Oghratina, and their main positions stretched from Mageibra northwards to Oghratina, then eastwards to Bir el Abd, Salmana, and Bir el Mazar. In this coastal sector they seemed to be nervous of naval operations on their flanks, and British monitors, co-operating with Australian airmen who directed their fire, sought to encourage this apprehension. By the end of July the German airmen became distinctly aggressive, and frequently bombed Port Said,

¹³ Lieut. A. G. Adams; No. 1 Sqn. Clerk; b. South Yarra, Melbourne, 18 May, 1894. Died as result of aeroplane accident, 19 Feb., 1917.

¹⁴ Wing Commander L. J. Wackett, D.F.C., A.F.C.; No. 3 Sqn. (afterwards R.A.A.F.). Duntroon graduate; of Townsville, Q'land, b. Elphinstone, Townsville, 2 Jan., 1896.

¹⁵ Lieut. V. P. Turner; No. 1 Sqn. Surveyor; b. Digby, Gunnedah, N.S.W., 9 Aug., 1890.

¹⁶ Hods are small oases in the desert, generally scattered clumps of palm trees. They mark the location of wells or of water near the surface.

Kantara, Cairo, and British military camps in the desert. The B.E.2.c's constantly took the air to intercept the raiders, but, owing to inferior speed, could rarely catch them. The British and Australian pilots carried out retaliatory bombing raids on the enemy's camps as far east as Bir el Mazar, though well aware that, should the German machines go up to meet them in the air, the B.E's had small hope of beating them off. In such risky adventures the lack of initiative in the Germans was no less remarkable than the daring of the B.E. pilots. In spite of the enemy's superiority, the B.E's regularly made at least one daily reconnaissance of the Turkish positions—flights sometimes of over two hours. Some D.H.1's began to arrive in Egypt at this time, but they were few and far between, though extremely useful for escorting the defenceless old B.E's. There were several brief and indecisive fights at the end of July between these reconnaissance machines and German scouts. El Arish was the enemy's main aerodrome, and Bir el Abd his advanced landing-ground. On the way to Mazar the B.E's had to fly over the Bir el Abd ground. No. 14 Squadron sometimes flew an early Bristol scout, which, however, was useless against the German aircraft, for it was slow—having only an 80-h.p. Gnome engine—and could not fire straight ahead. The Germans who bombed the Canal towns always flew at an altitude which it was quite impossible for British machines, starting from the ground, to attain in any useful time.

On July 31st the Germans began to drop bombs on Romani and Mahemdia, and on British outposts thereabout. For some days it had been reported that the enemy was concentrating east of Katia, and his bombing of British forward areas marked a definite advance of the Turks against the northern end of the Canal. Lieutenants A. W. L. Ellis¹⁷ and Wackett on August 1st took part in a raid of seven machines on the Turkish concentration, and Williams directed the fire of the British monitor from the sea on the hods about Oghratina. An Aviatik, which attacked this monitor next day, was engaged by a D.H.1 from No. 14 Squadron and was forced to land near Salmana. That night the Turks advanced closer to

¹⁷ Maj. A. W. L. Ellis, M.C. Commanded No. 4 Sqdn, 1918. Engineer, of Malvern, Melbourne; b. Steiglitz, Vic., 14 Oct., 1894.

Romani and brought up anti-aircraft guns to Katia. Outpost fighting on August 3rd was accompanied by several air-bombing attacks on each side, Lieutenants Ellis, Wackett, and Edwards (a pilot of No. 14 Squadron) bombing the Turkish front line, while Williams escorted them in a Bristol scout.¹⁸ This work was done without casualty, though Edwards machine was hit by anti-aircraft fire. On the following day the Battle of Romani was in full swing, and the Romani landing-ground was under a smart artillery fire.

During April the enemy in his advance to the outskirts of Romani had driven in small British yeomanry outposts holding the hods around Oghratina and Katia. Airmen confirmed the yeomanry reports of the Turkish attack on a wide desert front and in considerable strength. At this time the newly-formed Anzac Mounted Division, commanded by Major-General H. G. Chauvel,¹⁹ was being trained west of the Canal. Its 2nd Brigade was promptly moved to Romani, the remainder of the division soon followed, and British infantry was also sent to strengthen that important position. The Turks were plainly preparing a big attack, and by the beginning of August the British had a line of infantry strong-posts extending from Romani to the sea and flanking the position on the south. On the night of August 3rd the Turks, having driven in all eastern outposts, moved a force of about 18,000 men to out-flank the position on the south-west. It was a shrewd blow, but had been foreseen by Chauvel, who had placed the 1st Light Horse Brigade at the desert end of the infantry line. Attacked here at midnight, the 1st Brigade fought against greatly superior numbers till morning; it lost ground, but its line was unbroken, and at dawn the 2nd Brigade arrived in support. The two brigades and some infantry fought all day on August 4th, yielding ground foot by foot but exacting a heavy price for it from the enemy. At the end of the day the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade and a brigade of yeomanry,

¹⁸ At this time bombing raids were generally made during daylight. The machines sent out to drop the bombs required the protection of fighting scouts, because, when descending to bomb their targets, the bombers would expose themselves to hostile air attack. The B E's, slow fliers at all times, flew slower still when carrying the extra weight of bombs, and, as German aircraft were active, the B E's had to be protected throughout such duty.

¹⁹ General Sir Harry Chauvel, G.C.M.G., K.C.B. Commanded Desert Mtd Corps, 1917/19; G.O.C., A.I.F. in Egypt, 1916/19; Inspector-General, in Australia, 1919/30, and C.G.S., 1922/30. Of Clarence River district, N.S.W.; b. Tabulam, Clarence River, 16 April, 1865.

supported by an infantry force, fell on the Turkish left flank, and the tide of battle turned. At dawn next morning, August 5th, the enemy broke and fled under a bayonet attack all along the line. The Turks stood for a day at Katia, where the light horse were again involved in severe fighting. A few days later these rear-guards were forced out of their last position in the hod-country at Bir el Abd. The light horse were not equipped for far pursuit in the desert and lost touch with the retreating enemy. The airmen, however, followed the Turks past Salmana to Bir el Mazar and the region of El Arish, bombing them repeatedly.

The air work during the Romani operations was performed by No. 14 Squadron at Kantara and Ismailia, to which were attached pilots of No. 1 Australian Squadron. On August 10th the Australian airmen left the British squadron and re-joined their own flights, for which machines were now available. "C" Flight took over Port Said on August 16th and worked also from an advanced landing-ground at Mahemdia. From these bases it conducted reconnaissances to Salmana and beyond, ahead of the advancing light horse, alternating daily in this duty with No. 14 Squadron at Kantara. By August 22nd the rearmost Turkish post firing anti-aircraft guns was located at Bir el Mazar.

The German airmen gave vent to the enemy's anger at the defeat by bombing Port Said. Their raid on that place on September 1st led to sharp retaliation by "C" Flight on the Turks at Bir el Mazar, three days later. Here Lieutenant S. K. Muir²⁰ dropped twelve bombs with great effect, silenced the anti-aircraft guns with two bombs, and blew several tents to pieces. Two machines, led by Muir, again bombed Bir el Mazar on September 7th. "B" Flight, from Suez, moved to Mahemdia on September 18th, and "C" Flight to Kantara on September 27th. Meanwhile the light horse had been concentrating about Salmana and Ganadil, and on September 16th reconnoitred Bir el Mazar in force. Under cover of "C" and "B" Flights in the air—Ellis patrolling as far as Maghara to the south—the light horse on September 17th pressed their reconnaissance to a sharp engagement with the

²⁰ Capt. S. K. Muir, M.C., R.A.F. (previously Australian Light Horse). Station overseer, of Mathoura, N.S.W.; b. Elsternwick, Melbourne, 6 April, 1892. Killed in aeroplane accident, 12 Sept., 1917.

enemy's outpost at Bir el Mazar. In fact they tried the defence so hard that the Turks turned their anti-aircraft guns upon the light horse rather than upon the aeroplanes above. The Australian force withdrew from Bir el Mazar at 11 a.m. with a few prisoners, while the airmen of No. 1 and No. 14 Squadrons, who had reconnoitred tracks well to the eastward, covered their retirement and dropped messages on divisional headquarters at Salmana reporting the situation. Four days later Bir el Mazar was found to be clear of the enemy. The Turks had withdrawn to the line of the Wady El Arish, with garrisons at El Arish, Lahfan, and Magdhaba.

At this stage orders were published for the despatch from Australia to England of another Australian air squadron—No. 2 Squadron. Captain Watt, of "B" Flight, was recommended for the command of the new unit.

Notes.—Lieutenant-Colonel (then Captain) Walter Oswald Watt began flying in England in 1911, when he qualified for his pilot's certificate in a Bristol biplane. In 1913 he spent several months flying in a Blériot monoplane in Egypt, where he met several of the noted French airmen of the day. Leaving Egypt, he took his machine to France, and from May, 1914, until the outbreak of the war he was flying at Blériot's aerodrome at Buc, near Paris. On the eve of war, when it was widely believed in France that Great Britain would remain neutral, Watt enlisted as a pilot in the *Aviation Militaire* section of the Foreign Legion as "*soldat de deuxième*," which was equivalent to third-class air-mechanic. He was posted to the Blériot Squadron No. 30 as a *poilu* (soldier in the ranks), but was always called "*Capitaine*," in acknowledgment of his rank as honorary captain in the 5th Scottish Rifles in Australia in pre-war days. In April, 1915, Watt was transferred to the Maurice-Farman Squadron No. 44 at Toul, which became one of the most famous in the French Army. For valuable and courageous work done in this squadron until February, 1916, Watt received the *Legion d'Honneur* and the *Croix de Guerre*, and won the brevet rank of captain in the French service. During his service as pilot in No. 44 Squadron he earned the admiration and esteem of all his comrades—many of whom were renowned airmen—for his daring, devotion to duty, and good-fellowship. He had many narrow escapes, including one forced landing in No-Man's Land and subsequent adventurous escape under heavy fire.

Being a foreigner in the French service, Watt could not be given a position of command, and in 1916 he transferred to the Australian Flying Corps with the rank of captain and flight-commander, and was sent in May of that year to Egypt to No. 1 Squadron. In October, 1916, he was promoted major to command No. 2 Australian Squadron, which was formed in Egypt and sent to England for training. Watt took this squadron to France and commanded it for several months in the field. In February, 1918, he became lieutenant-colonel with

command of the Australian training wing in England. He had an exceptional ability to instil his own high ideal of service into all who served under him and, after his death by drowning in Australia in May, 1921, an Australian pilot who had long served under him wrote: "That he was the best commanding officer we had ever served under was the opinion of every officer and man in the Australian Flying Corps. He had every quality to make him a great leader of men—courage, determination, and an immense capacity for work, a stern and just man of discipline, unfailing courtesy to and thoughtfulness for his subordinates, and above all, the greatest factor in leadership, a genius for endearing himself (without conscious effort) to all who served under him."

When No. 1 Squadron arrived in Egypt in April, 1916, many of the personnel had never seen an aeroplane or an aeroplane-engine. Some of the officers had flown machines to a limited extent, whilst others had never flown at all. They arrived without equipment or machines.

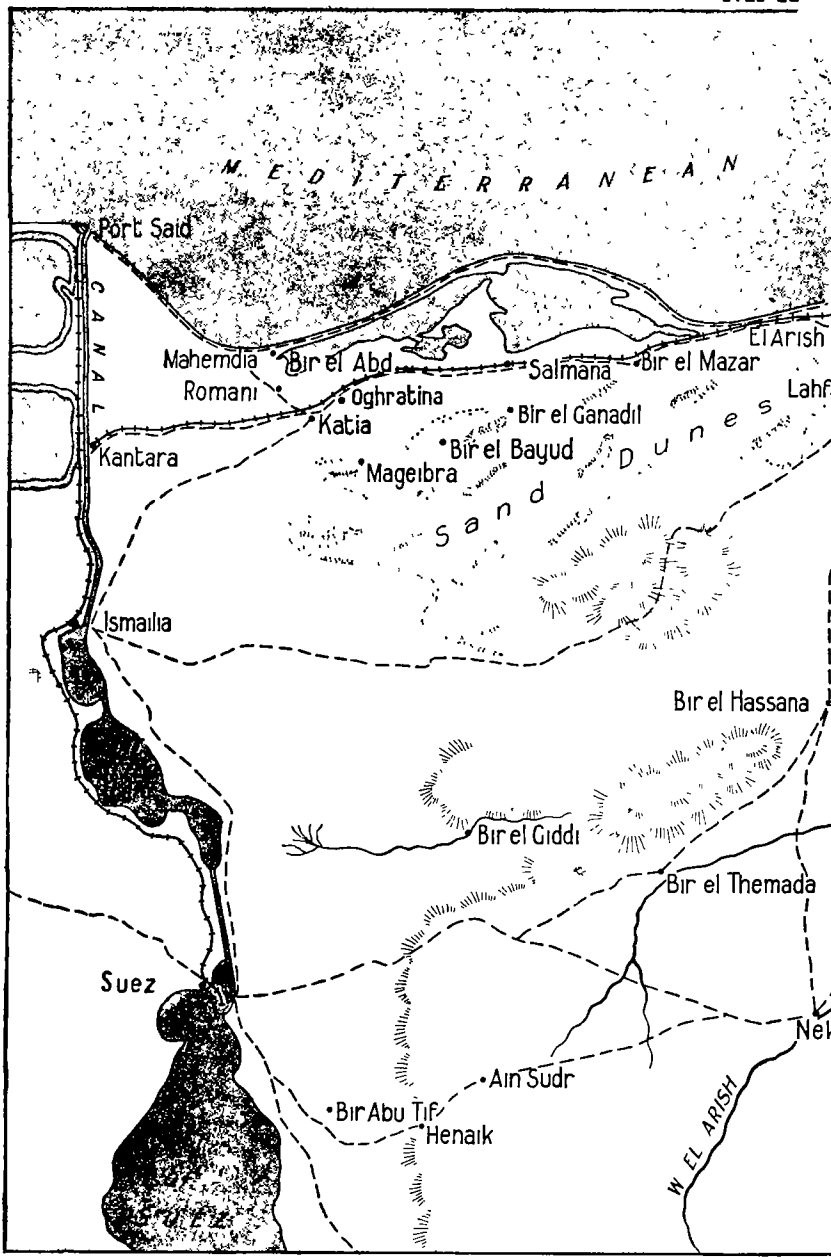
The training carried out was as follows: the squadron was divided into detachments and these were attached to the two R.F.C. squadrons on service in Egypt. Each man and officer understudied a corresponding man and officer in those British squadrons. At the end of each week reports upon the training were furnished under three headings, (a), (b), and (c), representing different standards of efficiency—

- (a) good workmen, efficient; can work without supervision;
- (b) promising, but requires supervision;
- (c) requires training.

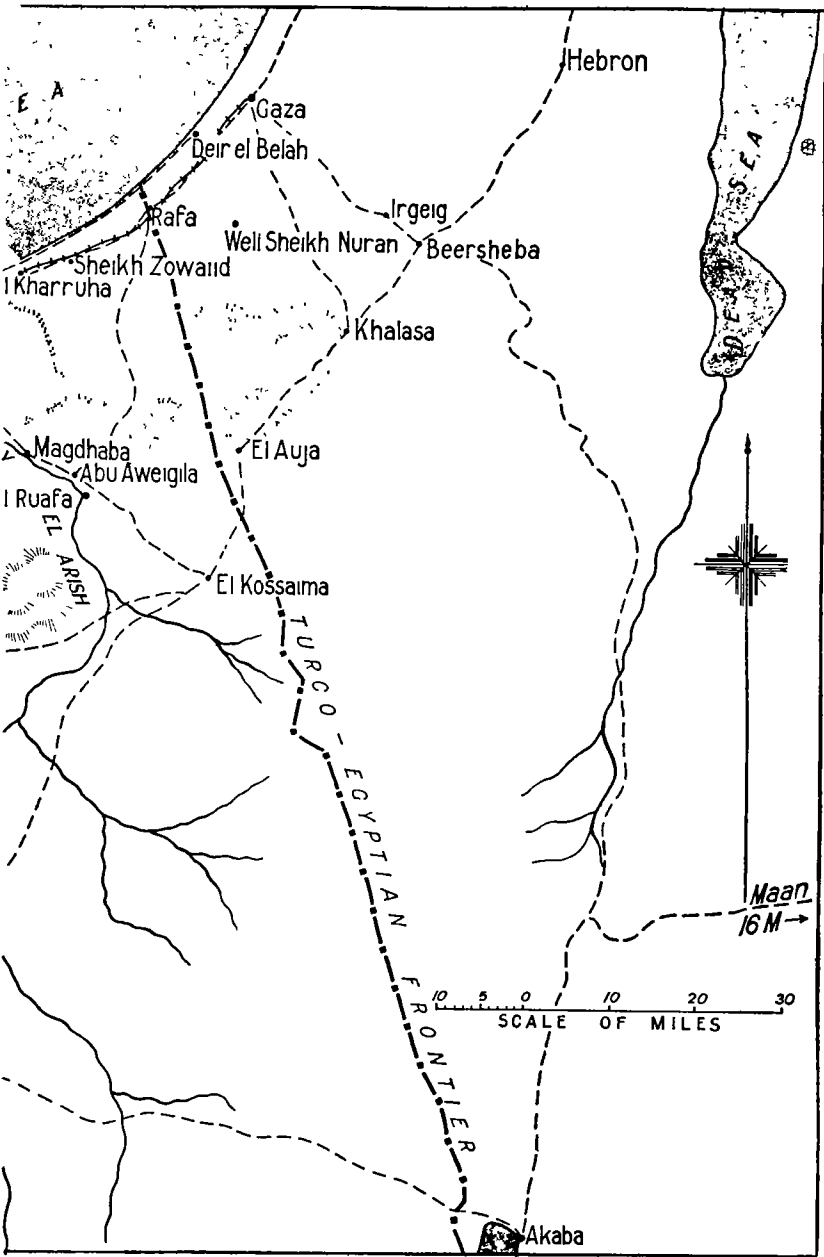
Under these conditions the squadron worked for six weeks, and its progress was remarkable. At the end of that time practically 80 per cent. of the men had attained (a) standard of efficiency. The squadron was then concentrated at Heliopolis. The first flight was mobilised for active service, and on 14th June, 1916, was despatched to Suez. In a very short time the whole squadron was on active service. Major-General W. G. H. Salmond,²¹ commanding the Royal Air Force in the Middle East, recorded officially: "The rapid training and mobilisation of the squadron reflected great credit on the industry, keenness, and discipline of officers and all ranks."

²¹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Geoffrey Salmond, K.C.B., K.C.M.G., D.S.O. Commanded No. 1 Sqn., R.F.C., 1915; 5th Wing, 1915/16; R.A.F., Middle East, 1916/21; R.A.F., India, 1927/31; R.A.F., Great Britain, 1931/33. Of London; b. 19 Aug., 1878. Died, 27 April, 1933.

MAP



SINAI DESERT, THE SCEN



PRWIGHTMAN

