

CHAPTER IV

AIR FIGHTING IN THE DESERT

BIR EL MAZAR lies nearly half-way between Salmana and El Arish, and, while the crossing of the intervening desert was fairly easy for a mounted raiding party, it was a much more serious undertaking for a main force of all arms which had to consolidate its position as it advanced, make road, railway, and telegraph communications where none existed, and bring artillery and vast quantities of supplies in its train. While the army was moving up, the airmen constantly reconnoitred the El Arish region. On September 28th Lieutenants Wackett and J. Bell,¹ and two British machines from Ismailia, bombed and photographed El Arish, but the clouds prevented good photography. Another patrol to El Arish by Lieutenants E. G. Roberts,² A. D. Badgery,³ and Muir on October 2nd disclosed the fact that the German hangars at that place had disappeared. Following this, air raids on El Arish became frequent. An advance-party of troops temporarily occupied Bir el Mazar on October 5th and removed hand-pumps from the wells. On the same day both Masaid and El Arish were bombed, Masaid by No. 1 Squadron and El Arish by No. 14.

A flank position in the Maghara hills, across the desert to the south, had not been cleared of the enemy. There had been some previous fighting with the Maghara Turks shortly after the Romani battle. A mixed body of light horse, yeomanry, and camelry made a reconnaissance of this position in force on October 15th, and all available Australian machines, though much hindered by fog, co-operated by patrolling or bombing ahead of the troops. After a short engagement these withdrew, as in the affair at Bir el Mazar.

An important patrol by Lieutenants Roberts, R. M. Drummond,⁴ and W. J. Y. Guilfoyle⁵ on October 25th encountered no anti-aircraft fire over El Arish, and discovered

¹ Capt. J. Bell; No. 3 Sqn. Grazier; of Rokewood, Vic.; b. Melbourne, 7 Oct., 1885. Died of wounds in France, 27 Dec., 1917.

² Capt. E. G. Roberts; No. 1 Sqn. Accountant; of Canterbury, Melbourne, b. Camberwell, Melbourne, 8 Jan., 1894.

³ Capt. A. D. Badgery; No. 1 Sqn. Aviator; b. Sutton Forest, N.S.W., 19 Nov., 1888.

⁴ Group Capt. R. M. Drummond, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., p.s.a., R.A.F. (previously A.A.M.C.). Of Cottesloe, W. Aust.; b. Perth, W. Aust., 2 June, 1894.

⁵ Group Capt. W. J. Y. Guilfoyle, O.B.E., M.C.; R.A.F. (previously Aust. Light Horse). Commanded No. 28 Sqn., 1918. Agricultural Student; of South Yarra, Melbourne; b. (of Australian parents), Edinburgh, Scotland, 1890.

signs of diminished strength in the Turkish force there. This observation was confirmed by another reconnaissance report two days later, and there quickly ran round the army the rumour of a coming new advance. The uneasiness of the enemy was only one ground for this report; another, far surer, was the rapid progress of the railway from Kantara, which the Egyptian construction gang had by now taken well forward of Salmana. Aerodrome hangars were arriving at the new Salmana landing-ground, and No. 1 Squadron was searching for a ground as far forward as Bir el Mazar. Australian pilots were returning from courses finished in England. "A" Flight arrived at Kantara from Upper Egypt on November 8th, and No. 1 Squadron was now working as one unit—an immense tactical advantage. A new note of confidence was discernible in the squadrons; they still had inferior machines, but pilots coming from training in England brought news of great development in the home factories, both in production of aeroplanes and in improvement of design. The Egyptian Expeditionary Force was looking ahead towards Palestine. A few months ago El Arish had seemed an ambitious goal; it was now but an obstacle between the desert and the Land of Promise. New strength, new eagerness, in No. 1 Squadron demanded a wider sphere of work; within a fortnight a series of important raids began upon points far behind the enemy's lines; and by the end of November an Australian machine had flown beyond the Dead Sea.

On October 30th Captain Williams and Lieutenant Turner (observer), and Lieutenants Muir and P. Ainsworth,* escorted by Guilfoyle in a Martinsyde, took twenty photographs of Masaid. Wackett photographed the whole line El Arish-Maghaba on November 4th; two days later Muir and Guilfoyle visited this line again, and No. 14 Squadron reconnoitred Rafa. While these preliminary patrols spied out the land, the squadron worked hard to overhaul and refit every available machine for a raid on Beersheba. That town was at this time the Turkish army headquarters and the site of the

* Capt. P. Ainsworth, No. 63 Sqn., R.A.F. (previously 126th M.G. Coy., 42nd Divn.). Yarn and cloth merchant; of Lancashire, b. Blackburn, Lancs., 14 Jan., 1890.

Germans' chief aerodrome, and the raid by No. 1 Squadron on November 11th was on the largest scale yet undertaken by the Australians or by any other air squadron in the East. One Martinsyde and nine B.E.'s, loaded with bombs and petrol, left the Kantara and Mahemdia aerodromes at dawn and assembled at Mustabig, just west of Bir el Mazar. There a raiding force of five B.E.'s and the Martinsyde filled up with petrol and bombs and set off in formation towards Beersheba. When over El Arish they saw one German machine on the ground; a bomb was dropped near it, but the German could not be persuaded to take the air. Over Beersheba the anti-aircraft guns engaged them with high explosive and shrapnel, and the raiders flew through a flurry of white, black, and green bursts. The Martinsyde dropped a 100-lb. bomb fair in the centre of the aerodrome; two 20-lb. bombs hit tents; others made direct hits on the railway line and the station. Only two of the Australian machines were capable of defending themselves against air attack—a structural defect of the B.E.2.c as a fighter has already been described—and those two were the Martinsyde (Guilfoyle) and one B.E. (Wackett and Turner), in which Wackett had fitted to the top centre-section a gun-mounting contrived by himself. A Fokker and an Aviatik ascended from the ground to fight, and, as luck had it, they attacked only these two Australian machines. The Germans were decisively beaten off and decamped. After photographing Beersheba and the damage caused by the bombs, the airmen turned homeward, and on the way back Wackett and Turner reconnoitred Khan Yunis and Rafa. All machines arrived safely, after having spent seven hours in flight. Two days later a German aeroplane retaliated by bombing Cairo. Australian machines which took the air to intercept it on its return journey lost the enemy in consequence of his superior speed.

The next British advance, against the Wady El Arish line, was to be made by a cavalry movement round the enemy's left flank, south-east of Maghaba. Reconnaissance patrols over the El Arish line were a daily duty of No. 1 and No. 14 Squadrons, and, in preparation for the further offensive, the Australians photographed an extensive triangular region on

the flank of Magdhaba—the area between El Kossaima, El Auja, and Abu Aweigila. This was done on November 15th in the course of a four hours' flight by Williams and Turner (observer), escorted by Guilfoyle in the Martinsyde; they photographed all camps and dumps in that area with twenty-four exposures. The value of such work at this time, and later in Palestine, was inestimable; the available maps were inaccurate and incomplete, and had to be supplemented and revised in the field primarily by means of air-photography.

The non-interference by German airmen during this and other daily enterprises was remarkable. The Germans had the advantage in fighting aeroplanes; and till December, 1916, there were no British anti-aircraft guns in the field against them. With a little enterprise the enemy could have enormously crippled General Murray's¹ offensive, for the British force was still weak—a third infantry division, the 53rd, was only beginning to arrive—and relied greatly on the ability of its two air squadrons to furnish intelligence and to demoralise the enemy in his defences. The opportunity to attack and harass the British advance was surely to be found at this time and place, when Murray's army was on the point of emerging from the long stretch of desert. Across this desert the advancing force and much of its supplies could as yet pass only upon a track of wire-netting laid over the sand. The railway from Kantara was being carried forward with all speed, but was still far behind the head of Murray's force. Yet after Romani the enemy refrained from any strong offensive measures, even from the air, against these communications; his bombing of forward camps was of the slightest; to attain the air superiority which seemed well within his reach he made, until it was too late, no effort worth mentioning. Unquestionably his reluctance owed something to the daring of the airmen he had to meet. The British and Australian pilots compensated by their individual courage, determination, and initiative for the inferiority of the machines they flew; and though they never claimed, until the arrival of the S.E.5's and improved Bristol Fighters in late 1917, to hold the supremacy, yet the student of their long struggle in the older

¹ Gen. Sir Archibald J. Murray, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., C.V.O., D.S.O., p.s.c. Commanded E.E.F., 1916/17. Officer of British Regular Army; b. Sutton, Surrey, Eng., 21 April, 1860.

machines will be persuaded that virtually they ruled the air from the outset of the campaign, and ruled it solely by their own boldness and skill. Theoretically they should not have had the supremacy, which was nevertheless certainly theirs. Good luck alone will not suffice to explain why no attempt was made to interrupt the raid on Beersheba or the daring venture on November 24th of two Martinsydes, one from No. 1 Squadron piloted by Muir and the other by Freeman⁸ of No. 14 Squadron. These flew from the Mustabig advanced landing-ground across a long stretch of enemy's country and over the Dead Sea, bombed the important Hejaz railway, and returned unchallenged. There was also the gallant exploit of Freeman and Minchin⁹ of No. 14 Squadron on December 2nd. While they were reconnoitring Gaza and Beersheba, two Fokkers and an Aviatik, which were waiting for them, attacked and shot holes in both of Minchin's tanks. Minchin landed perforce at Rafa in enemy country, and burnt his damaged machine; Freeman then landed alongside him, picked him up, and brought him home. Next day Muir, in an Australian Martinsyde, engaged an Aviatik near the British outpost line, and drove the enemy home to Masaid.

By mid-December the railway was well forward in the vicinity of Bir el Mazar, and No. 1 Squadron moved on to a new aerodrome at Mustabig, immediately west of Mazar oasis. About this time began the first changes in its equipment. Hitherto its machines had been B.E.2.c's, with one Martinsyde attached to each flight. In December the squadron acquired three Clerget-engined Bristol scouts, one for each flight, but in the course of the next three months these machines, inadequately engined, were found to be too slow in climbing power and flying speed, and were returned. Meanwhile B.E.2.e's arrived and gradually replaced the old 2.c's, and by March, 1917, each flight had two Martinsydes attached instead of one. A few weeks later B.E.12.a's began to replace the 2.e's. Yet in France the very name of these obsolete B.E. machines had been forgotten and their place long since taken by the R.E.8's,¹⁰

⁸ Major R. H. Freeman, M.C.; R.A.F. (previously 6th Bn., Worcester Regt.). Commanded No. 73 Sqn., 1918. Medical student; of London; b. London, 27 Jan., 1894. Killed in action, 21 July, 1918.

⁹ Lt.-Col. F. F. Minchin, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.; R.A.F. (previously Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infy). Aviator; of Annagh, Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary, Ireland; b. Madras, India, 16 June, 1890. Lost his life in attempting flight from England to Canada, Aug., 1927.

¹⁰ R.E.8—see Appendix No. 1—a useful all-round working machine and capable of effective defence against attack, as the pilots of No. 3 Australian Squadron often showed in France.

which did not appear in Palestine till October, 1917. Not till the day of improved Bristol Fighters, with powerful Rolls-Royce engines, was No. 1 Squadron adequately equipped to seek out and attack the German airmen. That day—the end of 1917—was, however, as yet twelve months ahead.

The Egyptian Expeditionary Force was by mid-December assembling before the line of the Wady El Arish (the Biblical "River of Egypt"), and on December 14th, preparatory to further attack, grand manoeuvres of three divisions were carried out, with aeroplanes co-operating. The spectacle obviously excited the enemy. At dawn on December 15th German aeroplanes were over on patrol, and two days later six machines, from No. 1 and No. 14 Squadrons, sent up in the afternoon to wait for the enemy, met an Aviatik. With this Muir, in a Martinsyde, fought an engagement for as long as the enemy was inclined to fight. The Australian put the German observer out of action and chased the Aviatik twenty miles beyond El Arish. The restlessness of the enemy was patent to air patrols. Reconnaissance of Maghara, on the desert flank, revealed in the wadys a concentration of tribesmen and goats, which generally betokened abandonment of a district, and on December 20th both Maghara and El Arish villages were reported by Australian airmen to have been evacuated by the enemy. The light horse occupied El Arish the same night. That the Turks had side-stepped as well as retreated was made clear next day by No. 1 Squadron's reports, for an increased Turkish force was noted at Magdhaba, farther south along the Wady El Arish. Wackett patrolled over Gaza and Rafa; in a coastal village west of Rafa the inhabitants assembled and displayed a large white flag for the edification of the machine overhead. In the following night, December 22nd, the light horse moved out to attack Magdhaba.

To distract the Turk's attention from this flank, the two air squadrons on December 22nd sent five Martinsydes to bomb the important railway bridge at Irgeig, north-west of Beersheba. The bombs hit, but did not greatly damage, the bridge, which, like most solid bridges, was not very susceptible to that form of attack. Two Fokkers and an Aviatik gave battle over Beersheba, and one of the Fokkers was chased

down. The same afternoon one British and ten Australian machines dropped over a hundred bombs on Magdhaba, where the Turks were strongly entrenched. The Anzac Mounted Division marched that night across the desert on Magdhaba, surrounded it, and attacked from all sides next morning. It was a long fight, for the Turkish strong-posts could not be rushed at once, and had to be subdued in detail. There were a few guns on each side, but the action was mainly one of rifle and bayonet. Australian airmen were over Magdhaba all day, dropped a few bombs, and attempted to assist the dismounted light horsemen by machine-gunning the enemy, but the targets were well concealed. Towards the end of the day it became increasingly urgent to finish the fight, for the horses were suffering from thirst, the nearest water was at El Arish, and a second day before Magdhaba was unthinkable. The Australians succeeded dramatically as dark was setting in; a few strong-points fell suddenly, and the position was rushed in a final charge from three sides at once. The surviving garrison, 1,250 strong, was captured and the Anzac Division, after setting fire to the village, retired again during the night to El Arish, whole squadrons fast asleep on their horses as they trekked across the desert. Next day No. 1 Squadron's patrols up the wady beyond Magdhaba found the village a blackened ruin, and El Ruafa and Abu Aweigila also deserted by the enemy. El Auja and El Kossaima, farther east and south-east, were seen, however, to be still strongly held.

At this time No. 1 Squadron was using the old German aerodrome site of Fageira, at El Arish, as an advanced landing-ground. By mid-January the railway had gone ahead of El Arish, and the squadron moved its aerodrome from Mustabig to Kilo, 143, just west of Masaid, and five miles west of El Arish. The weather of early January was wild with sandstorms and rain squalls, and more than one pilot crashed in desert landings during these winds. On only the worst days, however, was flying stopped. The army was working hard to advance its services a few more miles so as to be clear of the desert, and was relying more and more on air reconnaissance to keep touch with the enemy and to ascertain the extent of his retreat. After El Arish and Magdhaba he

elected—and was observed by the airmen on December 28th—to fall back to a main position on the Gaza-Beersheba line, and this entailed the withdrawal of his headquarters from Beersheba. The weather cleared up on January 5th, and No. 1 Squadron's patrol observed 2,000 or 3,000 Turks digging an advanced position at Rafa. General Murray decided upon an immediate attack on this place. Air patrols on January 7th reported the Turks still at El Auja and El Kossaima on the extreme southern flank and the garrison at El Auja apparently slightly increased; but these places caused little anxiety. German airmen bombed El Arish during the morning and evening of this day, taking advantage of the British concentration there. On January 8th No. 1 Squadron's patrols were in the air all day covering the assembly of the light horse for an attack on Rafa. That evening the force—comprising the same brigades which had reduced Magdhaba—set out from El Arish on its night march to Rafa.

The plan of action at Rafa next morning, January 9th, was a repetition of the Magdhaba fight. The light horse surrounded the village, galloped up under fire as before, and then engaged dismounted in an all-day struggle against strongly defended field-works. The position was a treble system of trenches around an earthwork redoubt on a knoll. The light horse cordon slowly drew closer under a hot fire over the bare, gently-sloping ground. As at Magdhaba, with the thirsty horses a supreme consideration, the Australians made a final effort at sundown and captured the village in a series of determined assaults. Aeroplanes fitted with wireless hovered over the fight during the afternoon, reporting its progress constantly to the light horse headquarters, and at intervals dropped bombs about the solitary tree on top of the knoll which was given out as the objective of the attack. Rafa was captured, with about 1,500 prisoners and some guns, in the nick of time. Four machines bombed Beersheba in the afternoon and threw the German aerodrome there into confusion; on its return journey this patrol sighted at evening a considerable force of enemy infantry about Weli Sheikh Nuran, marching to the relief of Rafa. The village fell, however, before this force arrived, and after dark nothing more was heard of it. The light horse withdrew by night and retired

to Sheikh Zowaid, some ten miles south-west along the coast. Williams and Muir, flying over the place next day, saw in Rafa only plundering Bedouin parties hunting for rifles and cartridges. Muir landed there with temporary engine-trouble, and found piles of Turkish dead in the trenches.

Vigorous reconnaissance work continued over the area as far forward as Gaza and Beersheba. The enemy evidently did not intend to abandon these places until forced to do so. The line Rafa-Auja is the boundary between Turkey and Egypt; it is also very nearly the boundary between the sandy desert and a new, relatively pleasant land of brilliant winter flowers. Lieutenant L. W. Heathcote¹¹ reconnoitred El Auja on January 11th, and Lieutenant F. H. McNamara¹² photographed Weli Sheikh Nuran, which the enemy was entrenching. Anti-aircraft guns also appeared at Weli Sheikh Nuran next day. Between January 14th and 19th Beersheba was several times bombed by No. 1 Squadron in day and night raids, and on one of these raids Murray Jones, in a B.E., dropped twelve 20-lb. bombs direct upon the biggest German hangar. After these raids the German airmen evacuated Beersheba and moved their aerodrome to Ramleh. Its position there was identified by Lieutenants Roberts and Ross Smith¹³ (observer) a few days later. Patrols over the right flank on January 19th reported that the enemy had evacuated El Kossaima and were in decreased strength at El Auja.

That day was also notable for the first reconnaissance of the distant rear of the Turkish army—the towns of Beit Jibrin, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Jericho—performed by Roberts and Ross Smith, escorted by Murray Jones and Ellis in Martinsydes. Their exploit fired the whole squadron with the romance of sailing the air over Palestine and its tumbled floor of great hills and steep-banked wadys, famous old sacred towns, and alluring green patches of cultivation. Here were enemy railways and troop movements to be bombed,

¹¹ Lieut. L. W. Heathcote, M.B.E.; No. 1 Sqn. (afterwards R.A.A.F.). Air mechanic, of Melbourne; b. Collingwood, Melbourne, 4 Sept., 1893

¹² Group Captain F. H. McNamara, V.C., C.B.E.; No. 1 Sqn. (afterwards R.A.A.F.). School teacher, of Caulfield and North Koo-wee-rup, Vic.; b. Rushworth, Vic., 4 April, 1894.

¹³ Capt. Sir Ross M. Smith, K.B.E., M.C., D.F.C., A.F.C.; No. 1 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Warehouseman; b. Adelaide, 4 Dec., 1892. Killed in aeroplane accident, 14 April, 1922.

and somewhere here was the German aerodrome removed from Beersheba. One patrol, out hunting for it on January 27th, was turned back from near Junction Station by bad weather. Next day Roberts's patrol, better favoured, found it, as was expected, at Ramleh. Williams, also out on patrol, dropped propaganda leaflets for the benefit of the Bedouin; "I'll bet not one of them can read any of it," is his laconic note in his diary.

Air bombing was heavy on both sides at the end of January. The Germans regularly visited El Arish, now becoming a great British store dépôt, and No. 1 and No. 14 Squadrons as regularly retaliated on Beersheba, Weli Sheikh Nuran, and Ramleh. On February 3rd definite orders were received from General Chauvel, of the Desert Column, that the bombing of the enemy must cease, as German retaliation on the Egyptian Labour Corps was upsetting the railway gangs, and the British command had ordered that the railway should be carried forward to Rafa with all speed. The railhead was now near El Burj, half-way between El Arish and Rafa, and the wire-road had nearly reached Sheikh Zowaiid. The enemy, also working hard upon his communications, was engaged upon a light railway from Tel el Sheria, midway along the Gaza-Beersheba defence line, to Shellal, near Weli Sheikh Nuran; and Lieutenants A. T. Cole¹⁴ and J. M. Glen,¹⁵ reconnoitring this vicinity on February 5th, were attacked by two German scouts and obliged to return. Moreover, anti-aircraft fire was becoming increasingly heavy in the Gaza area, and the enemy was clearly sensitive of inspection on a front which he was actively fortifying. By the progress of the British line towards Rafa the Turks could calculate the length of time allowed them to elaborate their own defences. Murray was faced by the necessity of a pitched battle for Gaza which would demand infantry and artillery in considerable force. These, in turn, required a railhead at least as far forward as Rafa to ensure supplies.

While the remainder of February passed in this preparation, and the attacking army and its supplies were being assembled, the British command determined to clear up the

¹⁴ Air Commodore A. T. Cole, C.B.E., M.C., D.F.C., p.s.a., No. 2 Squ. (afterwards R.A.A.F.). Student; of Melbourne; b. Malvern, Melbourne, 19 June, 1896.

¹⁵ Capt. J. McG. Glen, M.C.; R.A.F. (previously 1/4th Royal Scots). Attached to No. 1 Squ., A.F.C., 4 Oct., 1916, to 10 June, 1917. B. New Monkland, Lanarkshire, Scotland, 7 Jan., 1896. Died, 17 July, 1924.

situation in the desert west of Suez, where Turkish posts had never been dislodged since the attack on the Canal in 1915.

This part of the Sinai desert was a region where, beyond the fierce raiding of lonely parties which Arab warfare has made familiar, fighting was impossible. It is mostly inhospitable desert, made the more hideous by great sand-hills heaped up by scorching winds—a vast waste of land whose dangers and loneliness are to the unsophisticated European as terrible as any sea. The tracks which reach out over it are routes which must often be followed rather by compass or stars than by landmarks or tracks of the latest traffic. The waves of the desert obliterate, as surely as the waves of the sea, the traces of its nomads' passages. The wadys receive indifferently the flush of rainstorms or the burden of overwhelming sand-clouds. No army could ever dream of operating here.¹⁶ The organisation of even a small mobile column was an exacting business. There may be mentioned, as an example, the excursion in October, 1916, of a British mounted column sent out over the northern fringe of this desert from Bir el Bayud, near Salmana, to attack the Turkish position on the Gebel Maghara. The distance of the march was only thirty-five miles, the strength of the column only 1,100 rifles, and the duration of the expedition less than a week; yet to supply this column in food and water entailed the employment of 7,000 camels, 2,300 horses, and 5,000 extra men (including natives).

The Turks still occupied all the Sinai desert south of the sand-hills which reach across it from near El Kossaima, on the Turkish frontier, to the vicinity of Suez—Gebel Helal, Gebel Yelleg, and Gebel el Heitan. Some sixty miles east of Suez the desert tracks converge at the large village of Nekhl, and about forty miles due north of Nekhl is the village of Bir el Hassana, in the gap between the Gebel Helal and the Gebel Yelleg. From Nekhl and these desert hills came the enemy's half-hearted attacks towards Suez in 1915. The enemy occupation of this wild country on Murray's flank was not dangerous, for where the light horse and the camelry found

¹⁶ Djemal Pasha's army, which marched towards the Suez Canal in 1915, included a special force of 4,000 of all arms to march on Suez across this desert, from Maan via Akaba, but it apparently suffered here severely.

sustained warfare an impossible task the enemy was not much happier. The Turks remained here chiefly in order to assert what control was possible over the Arabs. The growing hostility to the Turks on the part of these uncertain desert tribes—especially those under the King of the Hejaz—and the Arabs' designs against the Mecca railway, made it clear by the beginning of 1917 that the Turks would not remain for much longer in the Sinai desert. The advance in February, 1917, from the Canal defences was meant to test the strength of the Turks at Nekhl.

The raid was made by two mounted columns—one consisting of 11th Light Horse Regiment from Serapeum, near Ismailia, and one of British yeomanry and Indian infantry from Suez. Three machines left No. 1 Squadron at El Arish and co-operated with the columns, working from the aerodrome of No. 57 Reserve Squadron at Ismailia. The pilots were Captain Williams and Lieutenants Drummond and Cole, and the observers Lieutenants Ross Smith, Turner, and A. J. Morgan.¹⁷ The duty of the aeroplanes was to keep contact with the progress of the two columns by daily patrols, to drop messages from headquarters for them, and to scout ahead of them if necessary. There was, in the event, no fighting at all, but the expedition is interesting for the insight it provides into modern organisation of desert campaigning. It was arranged that Turner and two mechanics should go out with the light horse column to choose advanced landing-grounds and carry petrol, oil, and small spares in case of any aeroplane breakdown. The columns set out on February 13th, and were reported to each other by aeroplane on February 15th at Bir el Giddi and Henaik respectively. Next day they had reached Bir el Themada and Ain Sudr. On February 17th all three machines landed at Bir el Themada, where the light horse had to dig for water, and the little air force spent the night there. It was bitterly cold, and the airmen burnt petrol in lamps for warmth. The reconnaissance of the day disclosed that the Turks had abandoned Nekhl, about which the two columns were preparing to close, and early next morning, February 18th, Cole and Ross Smith went out at dawn to hunt for any signs

¹⁷ Lieut. A. J. Morgan, 9th Shropshire Light Infantry. Attached No. 1 Sqn., 9th Oct., 1916. Killed in action, 30 May, 1917.

of the enemy. No enemy was seen, though two machines searched seventeen miles beyond Nekhl; "consequently," reports Williams, "our bombs have to be brought back again by camel." One officer and forty-five men of the enemy garrison had, it was discovered, fled only the day before.

"Went back to Nekhl," Williams writes, after the last reconnaissance, "and had a look round. There were no inhabitants—those who were loyal to the British left when the war broke out and went to Ismailia. There are about fifty houses of mud and stone, a mosque, and an old fort. The fort seems to have been a really good one when it was built, but it is some hundreds of years old. We took a few photographs around the place and some men got a few old Bedouin guns. The southern column got in about 10 o'clock (February 18th) and left again at 11. The light horse (northern column) didn't like coming all that distance and nothing to fight at the end. They left again when their patrols came in. We flew back to Themada and packed up and came on to Ismailia."