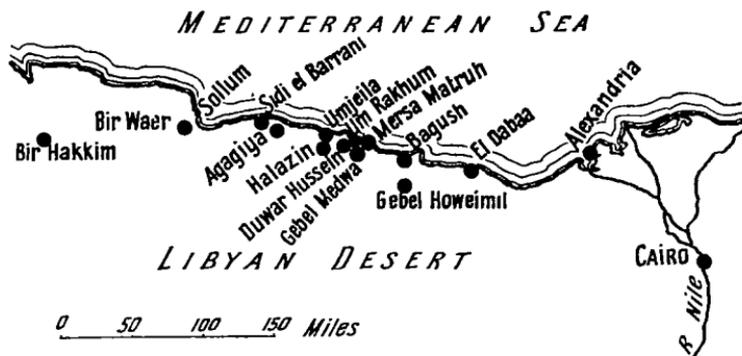


APPENDIX No. I.  
THE SOLLUM EXPEDITION

Egypt was threatened during the war not only by Turks from the east, but by Arabs from the west. The Arabs of the Libyan Desert—under the religious dominance of Sheikh el Senussi, Sayed Ahmed<sup>1</sup>—had been at war with the Italians since they turned the Turks out of Tripoli before the Great War; and, although the Senussi himself was not altogether unfriendly to Great Britain, the position became highly complicated when Italy joined the Allies. Some of the former Turkish officers had remained in the desert, and others—together with Germans—had since been put ashore by submarines. These<sup>2</sup> sought every opportunity of embroiling the Senussi with England, and, although Sir John Maxwell treated him with almost limitless patience, in November 1915 there occurred events which made war inevitable.

The western boundary of Egypt lay some 300 miles west of the Nile, but civil administration by the Egyptian Government was at this stage confined to a few stations along the Mediterranean coast



and to the nearer oases. On the coast were garrisons, chiefly of Egyptian coastguard, at El Dabaa—the head of the “Khedivial railway” (85 miles from Alexandria)—Mersa Matruh (160 miles), Sidi el Barrani (230), and Sollum (280). There were also a few minor posts. Arab troops, however, trained by Ja’far Pasha, an able Arab who had arrived from Constantinople in April, were concentrated in a threatening manner near some of these positions; and when, early in November, the British armed steamer *Tara* and horse-transport *Moorina*<sup>3</sup> were sunk by submarines in the Mediterranean and the survivors (95 Europeans and about 40 Indians) were handed over to the Senussi, who refused to release them, General Maxwell took immediate steps to meet the menace. The garrisons of Sollum, Barrani, and other advanced posts were withdrawn to Mersa Matruh, and from such forces as were available in Egypt

<sup>1</sup> Grandson of the founder of the Senussi sect, a puritan body.

<sup>2</sup> Nuri Bey, brother of Enver Pasha, was eventually given command of the Senussi’s troops.

<sup>3</sup> The *Moorina* (formerly the N.D.L. steamer *Lothringen*) was one of the ex-enemy vessels captured in Australian ports and subsequently lent by the Commonwealth to the Government of India (see Vol. IX, Appendix 6).

there was hurriedly improvised the "Western Frontier Force," which, under the command of Major-General Wallace,<sup>4</sup> was to strike back at this enemy.

Maxwell's resources consisted of only the odds and ends of troops left in Egypt during the Gallipoli fighting. He had written to Kitchener that, if the Senussi gave trouble, all that could be done was to "turn wild Australians on to him." The striking force now improvised—a brigade of cavalry and one of infantry, with one and a half batteries of guns and two aeroplanes—was mainly British. It included, however, a composite regiment of Australian light horse, consisting of squadrons from the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Brigades respectively; a section of Australian signallers; and, for wheeled-transport, the train of the 1st Australian Division, whose drivers—mostly bush-bred Australians of the fine type from which this service was generally recruited—had eaten out their hearts in looking after horses and waggons at Alexandria while their comrades were fighting in Gallipoli.

The actual fighting in the ensuing campaign against the Arab regulars and their Bedouin associates has been described by an officer of the light horse as being—so far as they saw it—"more like murder" than that to which the A.I.F. was accustomed. The opposition to the infantry in some phases of the four main engagements—at Wadi Senaab, Gebel Medwa, Halazin, and Agagiya—was moderately stiff. But the real struggle of the campaign was that concerned with ensuring provision for the force over a long and exposed line of communications.<sup>5</sup> The men of the Train had therefore quite as prominent a share in it as their comrades had in the struggle of Gallipoli. At Mersa Matruh, as at Sollum, was an anchorage for ships; but, since these were dangerously exposed to submarine attacks, communication from Dabaa onwards must be largely overland. The route was through the half-desert country near the sea, generally either along the cleared track grandiloquently known as the "Khedivial Motor Road," or near the telegraph line. Inland lay the true desert.

The 1st Divisional Train, at Mex Camp under Major Holdsworth,<sup>6</sup> was on November 17th ordered to Wardian Camp. Thence, on the 29th, No. 4 Company under Major Francis<sup>7</sup> moved by rail to Dabaa, followed in the next three days by Nos. 1, 2, and 3. From Dabaa on December 4th half of No. 4 under Lieutenant Thomas<sup>8</sup> set out to march with the 15th Sikhs to Matruh, the object being to establish along the route a series of posts with supplies. Two days later the main striking force followed, accompanied by the rest of No. 4.

On this march the water in the wells at Abu Gerab was entirely consumed by the advance-guard of yeomanry, and on the second day the main body had to face a march of thirty-three miles to El Bagush

<sup>4</sup> Major-Gen Sir A. Wallace, K.C.B., Officer of Indian Regular Army, of Fleetwood, Wellington College, Berks., Eng.; b. 22 Aug., 1858. Died 25 Dec., 1922.

<sup>5</sup> As far as Dabaa the line was guarded at first by the New Zealand Rifles, later by the 161st British Infantry Brigade.

<sup>6</sup> Col A. A. Holdsworth, D.S.O., V.D. Commanded 4th Div Train, 1916/18. Estate agent; of Prahran, Vic., b. Bendigo, Vic., 4 Nov., 1875. Died 9 Oct., 1932.

<sup>7</sup> Lieut.-Col. F. H. Francis, D.S.O., O.B.E. Commanded 5th Div. Train, 1916/18. Tea merchant; of Lyndoch, S. Aust.; b. London, Eng., 17 July, 1876.

<sup>8</sup> Lieut. C. E. Thomas, No 4 Coy., A.A.S.C. Public servant, of Ovingham, S. Aust.; b. Prospect, S. Aust., 15 Sept., 1889. Died of wounds, 16 Dec., 1915.

without replenishing its supply. The distress of the troops was great, but that of the animals was greater, and again and again the Australian drivers were seen pouring the contents of their precious water-bottles into plates, so as to enable their horses to keep their mouths a little moist. Throughout this march the inexperience of the staff resulted in insufficient allowance being made for the difficulties of the heavy draught-horses with their loads; but Matruh was reached on the 9th, and, the other companies following on later days, the whole train had arrived there by the 11th.

General Wallace had decided to strike the enemy at once. Accordingly, on the 11th, Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon<sup>9</sup> of the 15th Sikhs, with his own battalion, a yeomanry regiment, armoured cars, and two guns, moved out to disperse an enemy force at Duwar Hussein, sixteen miles west of Matruh. While on their way, the cavalry and guns, which were taking a separate route to southwards, were attacked and stopped. A report, however, had been sent to Matruh, and, on the arrival of a squadron of Australian light horse, the enemy was cleared out of the Wadi Senaab, losing 80 killed, against 16 killed on the British side.<sup>10</sup>

The infantry meanwhile pushed on, and camped at Um Rakhum, where, in spite of the broken nature of the road, they were joined next day by two companies of the 6th Royal Scots and No. 4 Company of the Train under Lieutenant Thomas. On December 13th the force, leaving its transport at Rakhum, started for the objective, but was almost immediately attacked by the enemy, 1,500 strong with two guns and three machine-guns. Ja'far Pasha's "regulars" operated with some skill, driving in the flank guard of Royal Scots, and the whole force was threatened with encirclement. The British official account states:

Colonel Gordon sent a helio message to the camp at Umm Rakhum ordering up all reinforcements that could be spared. In reply he was informed that the machine-gun section of the Royal Scots and 75 men of the Australian A.S.C., who were armed with rifles, were being sent. The former did not arrive until the action was over, but the Australians came up in time to be of excellent service. Then at 2.15 p.m. it was reported by helio from Umm Rakhum that in response to a telephone message . . . two squadrons of Australian Light Horse had come up and were escorting the two guns of the Notts Battery. Owing to the difficulty of the ground the guns came into action close to the camp, at 3.15 p.m., at long range, but a lucky shell fell in the midst of one of the largest bodies of the enemy, which scattered and disappeared.

The task which had been undertaken by the seventy-five Australians (who are described in the diary of the Force as having "turned out full of fight, with shirts and trousers and with rifles and bandoliers") was to clear out some Arabs who, by occupying certain wadis, were cutting off part of the 15th Sikhs. Lieutenant Thomas divided his men into three parties under himself, Lieutenant McQuie,<sup>11</sup> and the transport officer of the Royal Scots. A machine-gun of the Royal Scots was to cover the attack. Seeing the limber with the ammunition for this gun stuck fast in a dangerous position, Thomas most gallantly seized two mules and led them to it across the open. As he was putting them in, he fell mortally wounded.

<sup>9</sup> Brig.-Gen. J. L. R. Gordon, C.B., C.S.I.; 15th Sikhs. Officer of Indian Regular Army; of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland; b Colombo, Ceylon, 17 Nov., 1867.

<sup>10</sup> These included Lieut.-Colonel C. L. Snow, an officer well known in that desert, who was shot while trying to save a wounded Bedouin.

<sup>11</sup> Major L. F. McQuie, 1st Div Train. Of Mildura, Vic; b. 25 Aug., 1892.

The attack of the left party would now have hung fire had not Sergeant Sanders<sup>12</sup> taken the initiative and cleared the gully of Arabs, afterwards rejoining the other parties, which, though almost entirely untrained for such work, had accomplished it in a highly creditable fashion. They lost, besides Lieutenant Thomas, one man killed and five wounded. The appearance of the light horse on the enemy's flank completed his repulse. The Arab casualties totalled about 125 men, against 65 British; but the affair was indecisive, and the troops were next day withdrawn to Matruh.<sup>13</sup>

It now became evident that Mersa Matruh camp might be attacked. While fresh stores were being landed from steamers—now available—the camp was prepared for defence.<sup>14</sup> On Christmas day, the weather becoming favourable, an attempt was made to crush the enemy by striking at his position at Gebel Medwa, in broken country six miles south-west of Matruh. The striking force, some 2,500 strong, left Matruh early in the morning and was in action by seven o'clock. By midday the infantry (which included the 1st Battalion, New Zealand Rifle Brigade) had driven in the enemy, and an opportunity arose for the cavalry which had made a long détour to the south, to cut off his retreat and possibly at one blow finish the campaign. The cavalry force, of which the Australian light horse guided by Lieutenant Beck<sup>15</sup> formed the advance-guard, had met with little resistance. At sunrise the leading squadron under Major Bisdee, encountering some badly mounted and badly armed Arab cavalry, had deployed at the gallop, and, with the assistance of "A" Battery, H.A.C., easily dispersed them. The artillery shot extremely well, and the Australians without any difficulty dislodged their opponents from farther positions also. Major Pelham,<sup>16</sup> who commanded the composite light horse regiment, now asked for permission to cut off the retreat of the enemy's main force, which could be seen escaping near the coast; but, in spite of urgent messages from the commander of the main British column, the commander of the cavalry force considered the task too difficult for his troops, and the opportunity was missed.<sup>17</sup> The light horse lost only one man killed, and half-a-dozen wounded. The total British loss was 64; the Arabs are said to have lost 300 killed. But the action was nevertheless indecisive, and the force was withdrawn to Matruh. On December 28th another sortie was made by a small mixed force to clear a body of Arabs reported to be at Bir Haswa threatening the communications with Dabaa. Insufficient precautions, however, were taken to ensure surprise, and the camps were next day found to be deserted; but a number of camels and sheep were seized and a store of grain destroyed.

<sup>12</sup> Warrant Officer A. J. Sanders, M.S.M.; 1st Div. Train. Stevedore, of Exeter, S. Aust.; b. Collingsfield, Redhill, S. Aust., 1883. Died, 28 Jan., 1920.

<sup>13</sup> Major Holdsworth had now been appointed A.D. of S. & T. on General Wallace's staff, and Major Francis therefore commanded the Train.

<sup>14</sup> Some of the outer line of picquet posts were on certain occasions held by men of the Train.

<sup>15</sup> Capt. W. Beck, 12th L.H. Regt. Farmer and grazier; of Candelo, N.S.W.; b. 4 Nov., 1875.

<sup>16</sup> Major Hon. D. R. H. Pelham, D.S.O.; 10th Hussars. Of Newark, Notts., Eng., b. 5 July, 1872.

<sup>17</sup> Pelham appears to have made this request personally and later to have sent Lieutenant D. V. Hannay (of Toowoomba, Q'land) with a message urging that it should be granted.

With the new year there set in the heavy rains, which are normal along that coast during the winter. This prevented further excursions until January 12th, when a mixed column, including the whole of the Australian transport, moved out, in the same direction as on the last occasion, to destroy a camp at Gebel Howeimil. The light horse, as it generally did, formed the advance-guard. It was found that the Arab "regulars" had been by then withdrawn, but the column burned some smaller camps and brought in many camels and sheep and a few Bedouin. On this day the cavalry marched fifty miles.

The reorganisation of the A.I.F. was now beginning, and on January 15th two squadrons of the composite light horse regiment left this column to return to Egypt. The return of British troops from Gallipoli had however, set free a force ample for Sir John Maxwell's purposes, and he now decided to reoccupy Sollum. While help from the navy was being arranged, parts of the 2nd Mounted and South African Infantry Brigades reached Matruh, and with these on January 24th General Wallace determined to attack the Senussi's main camp—located by an aeroplane at Halazin, twenty-two miles south-west of Matruh. As before, he attacked with two columns. The enemy outflanked both, and, though a reserve squadron (Australian light horse) was sent up in support, the cavalry was forced to withdraw. However, the infantry (which also was reinforced by some light horse) broke through the enemy's centre, and the Arabs thereupon retreated. The British casualties were 312 (though only 21 were killed); those of the enemy were estimated at 200 killed and 500 wounded. The 1st Australian Divisional Train, which had accompanied this sortie, had by midday on the 23rd stuck fast in the rain-sodden ground.<sup>18</sup> The waggons were formed into a "lager" for the night, and next day pushed on to meet the returning column, feed it, and help to clear the wounded.<sup>19</sup> The effort was very exhausting, and the transport received the thanks of General Wallace.

Preparations for the final advance on Sollum were now made. On February 10th Major-General Peyton<sup>20</sup> took command; camel transport had arrived; and on the 13th the 1st New Zealand Rifle Battalion, with two guns and some cavalry, escorted a large camel convoy sent forward to establish an advanced base forty miles to the west at Umjeila. On the 18th the wheeled transport—128 waggons<sup>21</sup>—followed, escorted by the 2nd Battalion, South African Infantry.<sup>22</sup> Numbers of Arabs, who were by now starving, surrendered to the column. By the 22nd the South African Infantry Brigade had

<sup>18</sup> See *Vol. XII, plate 574*. After progressing one mile in three hours, Major Francis spread the train on a wide front, and managed to advance a further four miles by 2 p.m.

<sup>19</sup> See *Vol. XII, plate 573*.

<sup>20</sup> Gen. Sir W. E. Peyton, K.C.B., K.C.V.O., D.S.O., p.s.c. Commanded 2nd Mounted Div., 1914/16; Western Frontier Force, 1916; Military Secretary, British Armies in France, 1916/18; commanded 40th Div., 1918/19. Officer of British Regular Army; of Edinburgh, Scotland; b. 7 May, 1866. Died 14 Nov., 1931.

<sup>21</sup> Of these, 80 general service waggons (with 3,000-lb. loads) carried fodder for animals.

<sup>22</sup> On this march the force had recourse to the underground cisterns built by the Romans and ever since used by the nomads.

reached Umjeila, and on the 23rd its commander, Brigadier-General Lukin,<sup>23</sup> moved against the enemy at Agagiya, fifteen miles south of Barrani. Three days later he attacked. The South Africans drove the Arabs from their position, but the affair might have been as indecisive as the rest had not the Dorset Yeomanry, seeing the enemy in retreat, charged his rear-guard, and, in spite of considerable loss,<sup>24</sup> turned the retreat into a rout and captured Ja'far Pasha.

This ended the serious fighting. Barrani was occupied on February 28th and Sollum on March 14th. Among other units, the 1st Company of the newly-formed Australian Camel Corps<sup>25</sup> had now joined the force, and was thrust out to Bir Waer. The survivors of the *Tara*, encamped at Bir Hakkim, 120 miles west of Sollum, were released on March 17th by a brilliant dash of light armoured cars and motor ambulances under the Duke of Westminster.<sup>26</sup> Already, on March 7th, the 1st Division's train, after making two more journeys from Matruh to Umjeila, had left Matruh for Cairo, where it was urgently required<sup>27</sup> for building up the army service companies of the reorganised A.I.F. It had kept its animals in splendid fettle throughout, and General Peyton thanked it for its work.

---

<sup>23</sup> Major-Gen Sir H. T. Lukin, K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. Commanded successively, during Great War, South African Bde and 9th and 64th British Divisions. Officer of South African Permanent Forces; of Pretoria, S. Africa; b. 24 May, 1860. Died 16 Dec., 1925.

<sup>24</sup> Five officers and 27 men were killed.

<sup>25</sup> Later absorbed in the Imperial Camel Corps, see p. 180n, and Vol. VII, p. 211.

<sup>26</sup> Major the Duke of Westminster, G.C.V.O., D.S.O., Cheshire Yeomanry. Of Eaton Hall, Chester, Eng.; b. 19 March, 1879.

<sup>27</sup> Lieut-Colonel J. T. Marsh was sent to Dabaa to hasten its return.