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# ***Keeping the peace – Egypt 1919***

**Dr Michael Tyquin<sup>1</sup>**

*This is a little known account of early Australian Army participation in civilian conflict during the Egyptian Rebellion of 1919. Bitterly disappointed at Britain's refusal to hand over power to them at the end of the war, Egyptian nationalists fermented a widespread anti-European revolt. Their cause was helped by a number of grievances which were incorrectly laid at the feet of the occupying power. Troops of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps Mounted Division, particularly men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse Brigade, played a key role in quelling the uprising.*

Civil conflict and efforts to contain it are commonplace nowadays and Australia continues to play its part in this important Defence role across the globe. It is worth remembering, however, that Australian troops were a critical part of an early and little known episode of peacekeeping shortly after the end of World War I. In the post-Great War era, political cultural niceties and the almost universal respect for human rights that we take for granted today were not part of the social inheritance of Australian Diggers. They were nurtured in an imperial Anglo-Saxon mould that gave expression to the White Australia policy. Both official and unofficial writings and documents of the day are rich in the condescending terms of the day; and 'niggers', 'wops' and other non-whites were regarded with disdain. This was certainly the case in Egypt in 1919. It was this attitude that lay behind the cavalier, almost detached, attitude that Diggers showed throughout these months of what was a serious policing operation.

## **Background to the Uprising**

Until November 1914, Egypt was still nominally a province of the Turkish Empire, despite being administered by Great Britain. Then, on the outbreak of war, Britain declared Egypt a protectorate. After the Armistice in 1918, Pasha Zaghul formed a new Nationalist Party aware of United States President Woodrow Wilson's wish for self-determination for many former colonies and protectorates. Zaghul declared an independent Egypt and absolved Egyptians from recognising British authority in their country. The British Government, however, took another view, and when an uprising broke out in 1919, it used Australian troops to crush it.

How did this scenario come about? Zaghul could capitalise on anti-British feeling which had come to a head immediately after the Great War, for there were good reasons why this former supporter of British military operations in the Middle East became the new enemy.

Firstly, there was a large pool of well-educated, capable and ambitious young Egyptians who found

themselves with little hope of employment in the new world order. All key government appointments were held by British officers or appointees. Secondly, during the war, through nepotism and corruption, village mayors (Omdahs) had seen to it that villagers who did not pay them exemption fees were forced to work in the many labour battalions that were a critical part of the British war effort in Egypt and Palestine. Thirdly, again through corrupt practices, Omdahs had collected grain from farmers but they failed to pass on what the British Government paid for it. In 1919, Zaghul could conveniently blame the British for all these problems, whereas Britain was directly responsible only for ignoring the professional aspirations of the indigenous population.

Consequently, by early 1919, there was a large number of dissatisfied Egyptians of all classes who could be easily swayed by local propaganda. Zaghul had no difficulty in capitalising on this dissent. His move to incite rebellion was premature, only by a month, but sufficient time to enable the uprising to be put down effectively and brutally. Had Zaghul bided his time a little longer, the only troops left in Egypt would have been a few British and Indian battalions on garrison duty at various prisoner of war camps.

## **The Uprising**

In March 1919, however, when they did rise, the nationalists failed to take into account the presence of four complete Australian mounted brigades and a part of the New Zealand Mounted Brigade. These troops had been making the last preparations for their long-awaited repatriation home. When unrest broke out, all Australian soldiers were placed on immediate alert, ordered to resume patrol work and told to be prepared to stay on in Egypt indefinitely. A number of troopers left their hospital beds to bring units up to strength. The rebellion began with a concerted attack on Egypt's communication system – telephone, telegraph and rail. This was accompanied by a wave of attacks on British troops, Christian churches, Armenians and the first trickle of post-war European tourists. There was a number of outrages on those unfortunate to be caught in the streets alone or unarmed. At the time, Egypt had a population of approximately 15 million.

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<sup>1</sup>E-mail: [makinghistory@bigpond.com](mailto:makinghistory@bigpond.com)

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