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Keeping the peace – Egypt 1919

Dr Michael Tyquin¹

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 3rd 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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Angry crowds in Cairo during the Egyptian rebellion in March 1919. The riots were suppressed by the ANZAC Mounted Division before their return to Australia. [Australian War Memorial P01588.028]



Recognising the need for decisive action, the British Government appointed General Sir Edmund Allenby, at that time the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, High Commissioner with absolute powers. The reasons why Britain was not prepared to withdraw were enumerated during a secret brief given to British and Australian officers on 1 April 1919 by Captain Wooley, an intelligence officer attached to General Headquarters, Egypt. While recognizing that popular grievances were genuine, he emphasised the strategic imperatives behind the operation.

He made it clear that Britain “could not see another power gaining Egypt and incidentally the Suez Canal”. He also made reference to Britain’s huge investment in the local cotton industry, something that it would not give up lightly. He finished his address by an admonition that: “Firing on mobs, except when in absolute self defence, was forbidden.”² There were no other rules of engagement.

The Australian Response

Those Australian units still in Egypt (awaiting repatriation) were immediately deployed to three main areas. Seven Light Horse Regiments were still at Australian Headquarters in Zagazig; two others were almost 100 kilometres way at Damanhaur, near Alexandria; while another regiment was deployed on the Nile, just north of Cairo. The activities of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade, namely the 8th, 9th and 10th Regiments, which had only just arrived in Egypt from Syria, are the focus of this narrative. These men were commanded by

a Queenslander, Brigadier-General Lachlan Wilson.

This brigade was alerted on Thursday, 13 March 1919, to prepare for trouble. Subsequently, three officers and 50 men of the 10th Light Horse Regiment were despatched to secure key installations in the town of Minet El Qamh on 16 March. On the following morning, a mob of about 1000 rioters stopped a small group of Australians. The latter, fearing for their safety and joined by an aeroplane of the Australian Flying Corps, fired on the crowd. Thirty-nine locals were killed and 25 wounded, while 40 men drowned trying to escape across an adjoining canal. The Australians sustained one casualty.

On subsequent occasions, whenever a machine gun was used against rioters, every eleventh round was removed from ammunition belts to break automatic firing. This measure forced the gunner to deliberately start again, if required, after every tenth shot. This measure was an attempt to control nervous gunners and to prevent unnecessary killing.

On 27 March, an Australian mounted patrol was escorting a railway construction train involved in repairing torn up tracks near the town of Zagazig. It came across thousands of Egyptians breaking up the railway line. While under no immediate threat to themselves, the troopers immediately opened fire, killing 30 as the crowd fled. Elsewhere, another, larger mob was burning down a railway station. A few Light Horse troopers, who had manhandled a railway trolley across broken up sections of track, soon found themselves face to face with the another angry crowd. To disperse them, they used a Vickers-Maxim machine gun, inflicting 50 casualties as locals fled for the safety of the town.

²Papers of Captain B.J. Rush, 2DRL/0637, Australian War Memorial, Canberra

A patrol of the 15th Australian Light Horse Regiment leaving Mit Ghamr. The patrol had occupied the town following rioting by the Egyptians. [Australian War Memorial J06013]



Despite this tough response, the railway and telegraph network which criss-crossed the country continued to be targeted during the rebellion. Bridges and telephone lines were also destroyed. Numerous small clashes followed and the Australians' success must be explained by the lack of modern firearms in the civilian population.

No doubt the infamous 1915 "Battle of the Wazza" in Cairo's red light district, was still fresh in the memory of old timers among the troopers and their behaviour to the local population was generally exemplary – part of Allenby's "hearts and minds" information operation. But when called to action, they were brutal in putting down any displays of mass violence or vandalism. Where

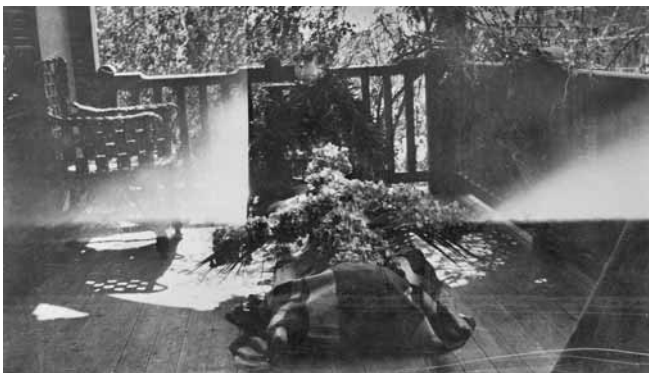
railways and telegraph posts had been torn up, the local people were forced at gunpoint to repair or return them. This was always done without demur, which was just as well for officers reported that Light Horse troopers consistently refused to take the rebellion and its dangers seriously. Overall, the Australians sustained 20 casualties during this operation.

As Allenby made concessions to the Nationalists, Egypt became quiet again, so much so that, by July, the last Australian Diggers were on their way home – some for the first time since 1915.

The Author: Dr. Michael Tyquin is a Canberra-based writer and historian, with a special interest in Australian military, social and medical history; and is also a serving Army Reserve officer. His latest work, *Not a branch in the limelight – the Australian Army Veterinary Corps 1906-1946*, is due to be published later this year. He received a Chief of the Defence Force Commendation for an earlier book, *Little by little – the history of the RAAMC*, which he published in 2003 to commemorate the centenary of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps.

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Coffin containing the body of R272 Lance Corporal James Maxwell Ferguson, 10th Light Horse Regiment, resting on the verandah of the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance's hospital. Lance Corporal Ferguson enlisted in 1914 and served right through the war until he was set upon in Zagazig on 19 March 1919 by a group disguised as a wedding party, who battered him with sticks. He died of wounds on 21 March 1919.

[Australian War Memorial P01668.011]