

## *Post-war operations in the Middle East*

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*The Australian Imperial Force's involvement in the Great War in the Middle East Theatre did not end with the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918. There was order to be maintained in occupied territories until civil government was re-constituted. This involved the Australians in law-enforcement actions in Syria, southern Turkey, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Kurdistan and Gallipoli. Most Australians were repatriated home by the end of 1919.*

**Key words:** Australian Imperial Force; World War I; Great War; 1919; Egypt; Syria; Turkey; Mesopotamia; Kurdistan; Gallipoli.

The Great War in the Middle East Theatre ended with the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918, just after the capture of Aleppo in northern Syria by the British Empire's Egyptian Expeditionary Force, but this did not end the Australian Imperial Force's (AIF) involvement in the Middle East. At that point, the Desert Mounted Corps (5<sup>th</sup> Indian Cavalry Division and Australian Mounted Division, commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel) was pursuing Mustapha Kemal's VII Army from Syria into southern Turkey.

### **The Middle East Armistice and its Problems**

Following the armistice, General Sir Edmund Allenby, commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, gave Chauvel responsibility for administering Syria and southern Turkey, an area of 35,000 square miles including the Turkish cities of Alexandretta, Kilis, Antep, Maras, Urfa, Adana and Ras-el-Ain<sup>2</sup>. As representative of the occupying power, Chauvel had huge political issues to manage, but he had limited resources. On paper, his was the most explosive of the areas under Allenby's control – the others being Palestine and Egypt.

As an example of the issues Chauvel faced, a group of Kurdish bandits set up a roadblock on the main Aleppo-Damascus Road and proceeded to liberate merchants of their possessions. The 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Light Car Patrol was dispatched to deal with the problem. The arrival of armed cars, at high speed and using their Lewis guns, came as a nasty surprise. The bandit group was either killed or surrendered and the road reopened.

Chauvel, however, had bigger problems than bandits. The Turkish army was required to evacuate large areas of Turkey itself, but was showing signs of ignoring these armistice provisions. Chauvel's judgement and calmness proved important. At one point, he threatened to resume the offensive against Mustapha Kemal. It was bluff, he had neither the troops nor the political support to do it.

The threat, however, led to the Turkish government removing Kemal from command of the VII Army. Later, the commander of the II Turkish army, Ali Ihsan, also became troublesome. Allenby moved Chauvel's headquarters from Damascus to Aleppo along with the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Cavalry Division and a new infantry brigade to reinforce him. Eventually, Allenby had to go to Constantinople personally to get the Turkish government to restrain its military. The threats and diplomacy had their effect. The Australian divisions were withdrawn to Egypt in early 1919. Chauvel operated with his Indian divisions until he himself left at the end of April.

### **Gallipoli and the War Graves Commission**

A concern of the AIF was the care of their comrades' graves on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Shortly after the Armistice, Chauvel despatched the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Light Horse Regiment and New Zealand's Canterbury Mounted Rifles to secure the peninsula, survey the cemeteries and undertake battlefield clearance (Gullet 1941: 786). These regiments were withdrawn in early 1919 when it was clear that there would be no attempt by the Turks to interfere with the cemeteries.

Also, immediately after the Armistice, Lieutenant Cyril Hughes, a civil engineer and surveyor, proceeded to Gallipoli to become Australia's representative in the area for the Graves Registration Unit. Hughes had difficulty locating the graves. The cemetery plans contained no surveying reference points and individual graves had been identified only by wooden crosses, now gone. There were also unmarked burials and unburied remains. He surveyed accurately the area from Chatham's post to Hill 60 to provide a baseline for the development of cemeteries<sup>3</sup>.

Charles Bean returned to Gallipoli in February 1919. Hughes suggested to Bean that the whole of the Anzac area should be set aside as a great commemorative

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<sup>2</sup>Chauvel, H. G. *The Australian Light Horse in the Great War: a short history of the Desert Mounted Corps*, p. 49. Unpublished manuscript, National Archives of Australia file A1194 33.68/15152.

<sup>3</sup>Rutherford, D. (2015). *Establishing Gallipoli's graves*, Australian War Memorial Blog, 19 January 2015 at <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/establishing-gallipolis-graves>.

space. The Australian government was induced to lobby the British government to include Gallipoli in any treaties that allocated areas to the Imperial War Graves Commission (Bean 1948: 14-23)<sup>4</sup>.

The architect, Sir John Burnett, arrived on Gallipoli in mid-1919 to design the permanent cemeteries and memorials. In 1920, the Imperial War Graves Commission took over the cemeteries. Hughes continued as Australia's representative in the area until 1937 and built good relations with the Turkish government.

### **The Egyptian Revolt**

Throughout the war, Turkey had done its best to encourage uprisings against British rule in Egypt. Australia's 1<sup>st</sup> Division in Cairo in December 1914 had deterred any uprising during Turkish attacks on the canal. In 1916, operations by the Anzac Mounted Division at Romani deterred the hoped-for uprising in Cairo. Now, in 1919, three factors came together to encourage Egyptian nationalists.

Firstly, few British troops were in evidence in major Egyptian centres and Turkish agents spread the message that Germany had defeated Britain in the war. Whilst the educated classes knew better, it suited nationalists to leave the rumour circulating. The Egyptians were also of the opinion that the Australians were essentially out-of-action and heading home – perhaps overlooking the fact that there were still four complete Australian brigades in the theatre under the command of T/Major-General Granville Ryrie. Indeed, reinforcements were still flowing to the Light Horse units in January 1919.

Secondly, the war had created tensions in Egypt's population. Britain had used 1.5 million members of the male population in the Egyptian Labour Corps. The actual recruitment had usually been left to local Egyptian dignitaries to organise which in turn was done using forced labour. Many died in service. Corruption was rampant and the average Egyptian suffered. Local officials, however, pinned the blame on Britain.

Finally, nationalist politicians believed that the 1914 declaration of a protectorate, which formally removed Egypt from the Ottoman empire, would be adjusted at the end of the war giving Egypt independence.

Nationalist leaders, such as Saad Zaghlul, agitated for an end to the protectorate and for Egyptian representation at the Paris Peace Conference. On 8 March 1919, to head off the movement and under instructions from London to take a tough stance, British administrators exiled Zaghlul to Malta. This immediately led to widespread disruption, strikes and violence, with women taking a leading role in demonstrations. The rebellion transcended religions with Muslims, Christians and Jews all taking part. An Australian, Chaplain-Colonel David Garland, was sent to negotiate with the Coptic

Church without success (Garland 1919).

To control the situation, the Australian Light Horse and what remained of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles were rearmed and re-horsed. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Light Horse Brigade under Brigadier-General Lachlan Wilson was stationed at Zagazig. Eventually, he had seven regiments under his command, three more were at Damanhur, one in Cairo, and one in upper Egypt; with two small columns being commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel W. J. Foster and Lieutenant-Colonel Olden. In addition to his regiments, Wilson also had under command a Rolls-Royce armoured car and motor transport (Wilson 1919: Appendix pp. 8-22). Their role was to break up riots and protests, enforce curfews, and protect property and vital assets.

There were strikes, boycotts and attacks on communications assets including telephone, telegraph and rail. The operations began under relatively simple rules of engagement: firing on mobs, except when in absolute self-defence, was forbidden. Wilson was assigned Justice J. J. Kershaw of the Egyptian Supreme Court and a representative of the finance department, essentially as political advisers.

Some examples follow of the type of operations in which Australians became involved. Some 1000 rioters rushed a troop post of Lieutenant McGregor of the 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment at Minet el Qamh. At 10 yards, the order to fire was given and, in addition, a British aircraft overhead fired two short bursts from its machine-guns – 39 were killed, 25 were wounded, and the rioters were successfully driven off. Another 40 drowned when trying to escape across a local canal.

On another occasion, a mounted patrol cleared a section of railway track, following which a railway trolley with a Vickers machine-gun was sent along the line and was manhandled across the breaks. At one point, the trolley came in contact with a crowd of 2000 – 3000 engaged in burning a railway station. The trolley patrol ran three belts through its machine-guns and dispersed the mob after inflicting some 50 casualties. Later, orders were given that every eleventh round was to be removed from either the Vickers belt or from the Lewis gun magazine so that to continue firing would be a conscious act (Tyquin 2011).

Orders were continually tightened so that when Major James Loynes DSO, acting commanding officer of the 11<sup>th</sup> Australian Light Horse Regiment, was sent with a troop to deal with the mob ransacking a school run by an English woman, he was under instructions not to use bayonets or to shoot. The troop dismounted and went to work with rifle butts. A few minutes of 'rough housing' saw the rioters off.

Out in the countryside, many rioters put up Turkish flags which were immediately taken down when the mounted patrols directed the rioters to do so. Villagers often pulled up large sections of track and threw them in the local canals. The Australian approach was to round up all the village males, march them down to the canal and direct that they retrieve said railway lines and return them to wherever they had got them. On one occasion,

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<sup>4</sup>Extraordinary though idea is, today, many Australians often believe that we somehow own Gallipoli, that feeling stemming from actions in these early years after the First World War.

among the locals were several upper-class Egyptians whom it was believed were responsible as the leaders in the community. The troop leader had them pushed to the canal with instructions 'this includes you too'. General Wilson said that the villagers saw the humour of this.

By May, due to operations by the Australians in particular, along with concessions made by the British government, riots were tailing off. June was exceptionally quiet and, by July, the Light Horse was finally on its way home.

As the Egyptian Revolt was not to have prominence, no medal or clasp was ever issued for it, nor was a British General Service Medal clasp issued, unlike the clasp awarded to Kurdistan veterans. Incoming recruits, however, were made eligible for the British War Medal 1916-1918. It appears no decorations were awarded for the Egyptian Revolt, despite the work put in by people like Wilson.

### Mesopotamia and Kurdistan

Australia had operated various signals troops in Mesopotamia in support of the Indian Army from 1916 to 1918. By the end of the war, the remnants of these sub-units had been combined into the 1st Australian Wireless Signal Squadron. The Australian signallers allowed the British commander control over far-flung forces. The stations would leapfrog through each other to allow continuous communications. Often this meant that the rear station did not necessarily have an escort and had to protect itself while it caught up with the column. At the conclusion of the war with Turkey, the married personnel were repatriated but a single combined troop, now known as 'D' troop, numbering 52 all ranks (2 officers and 50 other ranks), remained to provide signals assistance to the British command (Anonymous 1986).

The most difficult area for the new Iraqi mandate was Kurdistan in northern Iraq bordering on Turkey and Iran. Britain had significant problems in establishing control – in part because Turkish agents were quite happy to agitate against the incoming Imperial power, but more because the Kurds saw this change as an opportunity to seek independence, as they still are today. There, too, was Turkish angst about losing this area – it is the stepping stone to Turkic peoples in Central Asia. This matter was more urgent for the Kurds as it was clear that Britain expected to establish a much more detailed local control than the Turks ever had.

On many occasions during the Kurdish revolt, the signallers operated on their own. Between November 1918 and May 1919, the troop was fully occupied in supporting British operations in Persia and Iraq. In Iraq, there was significant construction of telegraph infrastructure. This included the construction of line to the remote central Kurdistan town of Amadiya.

By then problems had already started, primarily in Kurdistan. In late May, a Kurdish force from Iran seized the local capital, Sulimanieh, in south Kurdistan. Attempts by ground forces to break through to relieve the town failed. An Australian, Squadron Leader Edye

Rolleston Manning MC, commanding officer of 6 Squadron, Royal Air Force, successfully evacuated by air the High Commissioner and his family from Sulimanieh. Manning was awarded the Distinguished Service Order<sup>5</sup>.

As is common in any war, British forces have to have several disasters at the start before things get on track. The revolt in Kurdistan was no exception. In late May, Colonel Bridges, commanding a battalion group based on the 116<sup>th</sup> Mahrattas including a section of armoured cars and many T-model Fords, pushed out from Kirkuk to relieve Sulimanieh. This force was supported by a 'D' troop element. The theatre commander in his dispatch indicates that this was against orders (McMunn 1922). The Mahrattas regimental history claimed that no timely orders were given and the colonel was merely acting on his initiative. After establishing a base at Chemchamal, 50km short of Sulimanieh, he pushed on to Taslujeh Pass. Blocked there on 25 May, he withdrew 20km to Baysan Pass where he was forced to abandon two armoured cars and 19 Fords. Two more armoured cars were lost in rescuing Bridge's force. In this early phase, British commanders regularly failed to occupy the high ground, thereby allowing the enemy to do so and to dominate columns. On this front, it was not until 20 June that a combined attack seizing the high ground by night forced its way through to Sulimanieh. This attack finally got south Kurdistan back under control.

The damage, however, had been done and the tribes in central Kurdistan who had been holding off, watching events, took notice that the British could be defeated. There had already been some problems in central Kurdistan. In April, in Zakho in the far west of central Kurdistan, the British political officer was murdered.

Once the telegraph line to Amadiya was completed, the Australian signals detachment there was pulled out leaving the British political officer with his two staff to monitor the situation. Two weeks later all three were murdered as they slept along with their security detail. An infantry company with an Australian Wireless station attached, was sent out to investigate. The enemy was underestimated; the force had to withdraw under heavy pressure when within 20 miles of Amadiya. The pack wireless was set up, a situation report sent, then pulled down again all within 30 minutes. The 36 miles back to base was covered in just 12 hours.

Ultimately, both the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions were committed to restoring order. In the central Kurdistan area, two large military columns were formed, each based on a brigade and supported by an Australian pack wireless station. One was to advance and seize Zakho and the second, commanded by Brigadier-General Nightingale and known as 'Nightcol', was tasked with retaking Soweira (Suwara or Suwarra) then moving on to Amadiya. The operation overall was under the command of Major-General Sir Robert Cassels. At Soweira on 14 August, the base camp of 'Nightcol' was attacked by

<sup>5</sup>Services in Kurdistan, Australian Honoured. *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), Wednesday, 18 June 1924, p. 2.

about 1000 Kurds. The camp was surrounded by bush-covered hills but had posts pushed out. Unfortunately, some of the posts had not been developed properly. The situation was touch-and-go for a while, with mountain-gun fuses set at 'instantaneous' (Bean 1941: 762). An Australian signaller, T/Sergeant A. T. Rodd, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

The last operations for the squadron were in October when the situation was now under control, and British replacements had arrived. The squadron was withdrawn via Bombay in November and most Australians were home by January 1920. Unlike the Egyptian revolt, the Mesopotamia campaign qualified for the British General Service Medal 1918 – 1962 with the clasp 'Kurdistan'. The squadron had received one Distinguished Conduct Medal, three British Meritorious Service Medals, and two Mentions-in-Despatches – not bad for a force of 52. Sir Robert Cassels was to say later that it was the wireless operations that made the offensive possible<sup>6</sup>.

### Chanak Crisis

The Treaty of Sevres had left Turkey dismembered. By 1922, two Turkish governments existed. One run by the old regime headed by the sultan as a constitutional monarch from Constantinople and a de facto organisation run by Mustapha Kemal from Ankara. Kemal moved to consolidate the area under Turkish control and push out foreign forces. This meant attacking Greek-held areas in western Turkey. Kemal was said to have 60,000 to 70,000 troops at his disposal.

On 15 September 1922, the British government sent a cable to the prime ministers of Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand outlining the situation and asking whether they would like to be represented by a contingent in any action by Britain which was in the process of sending a division to join the force of the Allied commander-in-chief, General Sir Charles Harrington, in Constantinople. The aim of the exercise would be to force Kemal to negotiate. Canada and South Africa declined. New Zealand and ultimately Australia agreed to participate.

What would Australia send? The government favoured an infantry brigade whilst Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel, Inspector-General of the Australian Military Forces, and Major-General Sir Granville Ryrie, assistant defence minister, believed that that would lead to the brigade disappearing into the British organisation and so believed that Australia was best served by sending a division<sup>7</sup>. By this time hundreds, had begun turning up at militia depots trying to enlist.

Meanwhile, a small force of Australians was already in the thick of it. Cyril Hughes, now a lieutenant-colonel, had a staff of 13 soldiers, mostly engineers, which he put at the disposal of the British commander. They rebuilt a wharf at Chanak, constructed an airfield for the RAF on the Kilid Bahr plateau, laid out a military camp, and

selected gun positions. On the eastern side of the narrows near Chanak, an Australian officer blew up all the Turkish ammunition dumps – the last in the face of advancing Turkish cavalry. Mustapha Kemal was reported to be 'not amused' (Cutlack 1924: 13).

In the end, a negotiated settlement was reached which led in 1923 to the Treaty of Lausanne and Australia's commitment was not required.

### Conclusion

The Australian Imperial Force's involvement in the Great War in the Middle East Theatre did not end with the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918. There were occupied territories to be administered and order to be maintained until civil government was re-constituted. This involved the Australians in law-enforcement actions in Syria, southern Turkey, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Kurdistan and Gallipoli. The Egyptian Revolt of 1919 was a particularly testing time. Most Australians had been repatriated home by the end of 1919.

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<sup>6</sup>Cobargo Chronicle, Saturday 17 April 1920, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup>The Argus, Tuesday 19 September 1922, p. 7.