

# The Mounted Riflemen in Sinai and Palestine

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### CHAPTER I.

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To give the reader some general idea as to the circumstances in which the New Zealand Mounted Rifles did their work, a few remarks relative to the Sinai and Palestine Campaigns will be in place. The reader will note that the account contained in this book appertains only to the doings of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles in this double campaign, which was not their first. The Mounted Rifles had suffered severely on Gallipoli, and had returned to Egypt after the time of the evacuation in December, 1915. They went into camp at Zeitoun, near Cairo, from which place they moved out to oppose the Turks in the Sinai Desert. In April, 1916, all the other New Zealand troops which had been in Egypt since the evacuation of Gallipoli left for France. The Mounted Rifles were then the only New Zealand troops remaining on this front.

The Egyptian Expeditionary Force, of which they formed part, was in those days a comparatively small force. At Romani, where occurred the first big Desert action, the troops engaged were the Anzac Mounted Division, a Yeomanry Brigade, and a force of infantry. The number of men concerned in the fighting did not total much over 20,000, and this was the major part of the force on this front. As the campaign progressed, this force gradually grew in numbers, notably before Gaza, where the Turks offered such a stubborn defence and held up the British for so long. At the time of the operations culminating in the Armistice with Turkey, the British force had grown from its small nucleus into an army second in numbers only to that in France. Official figures are not available at the time of writing, but, with line of communication troops, this army was numbered in hundreds of thousands.

The New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade was one of the very few units which took an active part in the campaign from its inception in 1915 to its close at the end of 1918. The New Zealand Brigade was essentially a fighting unit start to finish, -a unit which suffered its full share of battle casualties, with, in the later stages of the campaign, a big proportion of loss from tropical disease. It may be said that during the whole of the campaign the Brigade took part in every major operation east of the Suez Canal -a record probably possessed by them alone.

Towards the end when troops were so badly needed in France, some of the white divisions were withdrawn from Palestine, their places being filled by Indian troops. Some of these were Indian Cavalry, but the bulk of the mounted troops were, throughout, Australasian horsemen. In the final operations under General Allenby, probably the largest force of cavalry that has ever moved together in a concerted operation in the world's history was assembled on this front.

The campaign, which opened with the Turkish attempt on the Suez Canal in 1915, and ended in their utter defeat at the end of 1918, can be divided into several stages.

The first commenced with the repulse of the enemy forces which attacked the Canal. It continued through the subsequent defense of the Canal and the gradual pushing back of the Turks in the Desert; and it may be said to have ended with the fall of Magh Daba and Rafa, the two important southern outposts of the Turks on the border of Palestine.

The next stage was the clearing of the country to the Gaza-Beersheba line in southern Palestine, and the two unsuccessful attempts to take the Turkish stronghold of Gaza which resulted in such heavy loss to the British.

Up till the time of the first attack on Gaza, the campaign had been a series of actions against strongly defended enemy positions, each further forward than the last. After the first failure at Gaza, an extension of the front to the right took place. The second attack was thus on a line held by the Turks from Gaza, on the coast, to Beersheba, thirty miles inland. As the campaign progressed, so the front extended bit by bit first to Jerusalem then to Jericho and the Jordan. Finally, the British were operating on a front extending from the Mediterranean coast to the Hedjaz railway, east of the Jordan on the plateau beyond the mountains of Gilead. The distance across this front was 75 miles by air, but nearly 120 miles by road.

After the two unsuccessful attempts to take Gaza, came General Allenby's move in October, 1917, which turned the enemy's flank at Beersheba, and broke through the line at Gaza and elsewhere. This move was a continuation of successes which only ended when the British line lay beyond Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Jericho.

The final stage, which developed into a Turkish rout, commenced in September, 1918. A breach was made in the enemy line at an unexpected spot, through which were poured thousands of fast-moving mounted troops. These disorganised the enemy's lines of communication and finally cut them, the British mounted forces which reached Damascus and other northern points taking thousands of prisoners. On the right flank, at the same time, a force out the Turkish line of retreat across the Jordan, and, pushing into the mountains of Gilead, seized Amman, the enemy supply depot on the Hedjaz railway. There they secured as prisoners the garrison of the town and many Turkish troops cut off lower down the line and unable to retreat. This advance ended in the complete defeat of the Turks, forcing them to sue for an armistice.

Throughout the Sinai and Palestine campaigns, the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade had no official correspondent to chronicle its doings, with the result that but few people not immediately concerned have any idea of the experiences and adventures of this, for a time, almost forgotten unit. The Brigade got little official recognition from Imperial or Australian correspondents -many times, indeed, the work done by the New Zealanders was credited to others, and as the Brigade possessed no official news representative, to contradict or elucidate such reports, they usually remained unchallenged.

Although knowledge of their accomplishments was denied to the outside world owing to the circumstances mentioned above, it may be such that amongst troops with whom they worked, our men gained and held the high reputation as first-class fighting men, on this front, that the New Zealand Division so proudly possessed in France.

New Zealand's representation in the field throughout this campaign, with but slight variation, was comprised as follows: -

A Brigade of Mounted Rifles, consisting of Headquarters, Auckland, Canterbury, and Wellington Regiments; one Machine-gun squadron, one Mounted Field Ambulance; a field troop of Engineers, one Signal troop, and a mobile Veterinary Section. The strength of the New Zealand Brigade was approximately 1,850 men and 2,200 horses, although the unit was often much below this strength in the field as regards men. The New Zealand unit formed, together with the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigades, the Anzac Mounted Division, although later in the campaign, after the capture of Rafa, the 3rd Light Horse were detached to make up another Division.

In addition to the above troops, New Zealand maintained a company of New Zealand Army Service Corps, employed in the Divisional Train, and two companies of Camel Corps. Towards the end of the Campaign, when the Imperial Camel Corps was disbanded, the two New Zealand companies were formed into a second New Zealand Machine-gun Squadron, which, however, was not attached to the New Zealand Brigade, but did excellent service with an Australian unit in another division. There was also, in Palestine, a force of several hundred Rarotongans. These Islanders were employed on the lines of communication, and did yeoman service in unloading stores landed on the coast in surf boats, and in handling heavy shells in ammunition dumps. They gained the reputation of being the smartest and strongest body of men on this work on the whole front.

The base training camp, through which passed all reinforcements for the Brigade arriving from New Zealand, and men returning to duty from hospital, was situated at Moascar. This was on the fringe of the Desert, near the Suez Canal town of Ismailia, on the railway-which runs from Port Said to Suez. During 1918, this camp was moved to a new and better locality on the shore of Lake Timsah, one of the canal lakes. This was a much more congenial spot and gave the opportunity of plenty of healthy bathing in the intervals of training.

In this camp all newly arrived reinforcements received their final training before being sent up the line to replace casualties. This training consisted chiefly of the use of gas-masks, musketry, and field work. Sufficient horses were kept to mount a squadron at a time, and were constantly employed in mounted training.

A training cadre of officers and non-commissioned officers was maintained, these instructors being detailed from regiments in the field for a tour of duty extending over three months.

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After the return to Egypt from Gallipoli, the Brigade was for some time encamped at Zeitoun, about seven miles out of Cairo.

In January 1916, the Mounted Rifles marched out from this camp, and, heading to the east, left the verdure of the Nile Delta for the sand of Serapeum. There they bivouacked on the west bank of the Suez Canal not far from the Great Bitter Lake. Much training was done in field work in the different formations for moving around the desert that were shortly to be employed on the Sinai Peninsula. Towards the end of the stay there one squadron at a time was sent over the Canal to do patrol duty, in front of the British defences protecting this vital waterway. At the end of February the Brigade crossed the Canal, and for some time occupied a section of these defences, perhaps ten miles in length, out in the desert ten or twelve miles from the Canal. The positions were entrenched, and our men had an endless task shovelling sand, which drifted into the trenches almost as fast as they could take it out. At the same time they were called on to do long patrols out into the Desert, feeling for any move of the Turks which might be threatening the Suez Canal. It was while holding these positions, protecting the waterway of so much importance to the Empire, that the New Zealand Mounted Brigade received its first and only visit from the Prince of Wales.

The time spent in those parts was dreary and monotonous for all concerned, and is fairly well reflected in the following lines of a soldier poet who was moved to this expression of his feelings at the time: -

Twenty miles from nowhere,  
Where the sun is hot as 'ell,  
And a breeze was never heard of-  
The Mounteds knew it well.

In a sandy blisterin' 'ollow,  
'Neath a hazy azure sky,  
Lay the sun-browned cussin' Mounteds  
At a post called Gundagai.

There were trenches all around 'em,  
There was tanglefoot there, too,  
There was damn all blinkin' water,  
But heaps of bully stew.

Of drinks there never was none,  
And coves you'd 'ear 'em sigh,  
If you talked of nights at Zeitoun,  
'Fore they left for Gundagai.

Of a wash they've most forgotten  
Or of brushin' boots or 'air,  
But them don't count for nothin'  
Twenty miles from out nowhere.

For there ain't no blanky tram-ears,  
Nor pretty girls' glad eye-  
No week-end dancing parties  
Way out at Gundagai.

Yet they mostly all are happy,  
Tho' one was heard to cry,  
"Gott strafe the cove wot chased us  
To this bleedin' Gundagai."

And our horses, too, are thinking

That this summer's turned to drought,  
As they come in from patrolling,  
With their tongues all hangin' out.

While the 'skeeters 'um around `em,  
And the cruel camel fly  
Makes 'em wish they 'adn't 'listed,  
Since they've come to Gundagai.

But the boys have just been cheerin'  
For the news it just 'as come,  
That the Abduls is approachin'  
but they'll soon be on the run.

The wait's been long and weary,  
But at last they'er comin' nigh  
And they've many scores to settle.  
Have the lads at Gundagai.

Yes, they've many scores to settle,  
Mostly things from Anzac's shore.  
Where there's not a cove amongst 'em,  
Didn't leave one pal or more.

But they've sworn that they'll avenge 'em,  
And each man's prepared to die,  
For the reckoning of his cobbors,  
In a go at Gundagai.

Fate decreed, however, that our men were not to meet the Turks in battle in this part of the Desert, but they were not to have long to wait. Leaving the sandy trenches and the barren waste which had been scoured by so many patrols, on the first of April, Serapeum was reached the same day. Then, in a few days the Brigade trekked through to Salhieh, an insalubrious spot west of Kantara.

During this march the mounted men stopped one night in the sand at Moascar, where "Goodbyes" were said to the last of the New Zealand Infantry leaving for France, many brave fellows parting to meet no more in this world.

Arrived at Salhieh, training continued, to be rudely interrupted on one occasion in a most unpleasant manner by a full-sized sandstorm of true desert fury. which smothered everyone` and everything while it lasted. From Salhieh the Brigade moved one evening in intense anticipation at an hour's notice, and marching all night reached Kantara next morning. This sudden move was on account of a raid by the Turks on Oghratina, Katia, and Duidar, where they had surrounded and cut up the yeomanry at the first two places named, and penetrated to within about 12 miles of the Canal.

The Turks had withdrawn precipitately again out of reach, after their raid; consequently the New Zealanders were halted at Hill 70, about seven miles east of the Suez Canal at Kantara.

There training continued, but the Brigade on one occasion marched out to Romani in support of an Australian Brigade on reconnaissance, the route followed being through very loose, deep sand, a distance of about 20 miles.

It was on this, their first "Brigade stunt" right out into the wastes of the Sinai Desert, that the New Zealanders got their first real experience of what thirst would be. At this time it was the practice to ride twenty minutes, walk ten minutes, ride twenty minutes, and spell for ten minutes in every hour of a march. This practice was later discontinued, as it was found to be too wearing on the men, while the constant mounting and dismounting with a fully loaded saddle also affected the horses.

On the day of the march in question, the sun flamed from a brazen sky, and the heavy walking through the shifting sand, in the intense heat, leading an often dragging horse, gave the men a maddening thirst. It was a killing march, but, as always, a few cheerful spirits would not be depressed. One of these was heard to remark to his neighbour, a boy nearly

exhausted by the long march after a night on horse picket "Don't open your mouth so wide, Bill, when you yawn - you'll be getting your stummick sunburnt, an' it hurts somethin' awful! "

Romani was reached about four in the afternoon, but water was not available till late in the evening, when it was eagerly gulped down parched throats. The Brigade returned to Hill 70, where they remained about a month, training continuing the whole time. Then came a move to Bir Et Malar, farther out in the Desert, where May found them bivouacked. Here they were to remain till August, with the exception of a brief spell at Kantara, before being called on to take part in the historic fighting at Romani. When the Brigade moved back for this short spell, Wellington Regiment remained out in the desert, being attached to the 2nd Brigade of Australian Light Horse, with which they worked till after the fighting in August. Their place in the New Zealand Brigade was temporarily taken by an Australian Regiment.

When our men first moved out to Bir Et Malar, they experienced the greatest difficulty in getting their horses to drink the brackish desert water. The horses afterwards became more or less accustomed to it, but did not drink it freely. During the stay there, a patrol one day found an old Bedouin and three children in a palm tree "hod" away out in the Desert. The old man was squatting on his haunches before a pile of camel dung, busily engaged in picking out what undigested grain he could find. This and a few dry dates apparently formed their sole means of subsistence, which was barely keeping life in their poor starved bodies. The men of the patrol put the old fellow on a horse, and carrying the youngsters before them on their saddles, took them into the bivouac. There they were fed and photographed, before being sent down to the Base, where, no doubt they lived in greater luxury than they had ever known before. Such Bedouins were occasionally encountered, nearly always in a state of starvation.

From the bivouac at Bir Et Malar the New Zealanders were constantly called out on patrol and reconnaissance work of the most trying kind, commonly being summoned at half an hour's notice to take part in a "stunt" of from one to four days in length. It was important work, made necessary by the continual menace of Turkish aggression towards the Canal which lay behind our forces.

In those days most of the men were still comparatively "new at the game," and turning out at such short notice in full marching order with all necessary supplies taxed them severely. A man had to draw his own rations, fill his water-bottle, and draw his horse's rations. This last had to be done up in nosebags and secured properly to the saddle, this being no mean art in itself. Horses had to be saddled, picket and head-ropes done up, and all necessary gear strapped to saddles. Besides these main items there was a host of minor details to be attended to incidental to turning out fully equipped for what the adventure might bring forth.

Later in the campaign, when men became expert in this sort of thing, half an hour's notice would be ample, and the appointed time for moving would find every man ready without any apparent rush any stragglers would usually be found to be new men not thoroughly practiced in the art of turning out and perhaps deceived by the unhurrying haste of their comrades with more experience.

The water ration was most precious, this consisting of but one water-bottle per man per day. This was the sole issue of fresh water, which could only be supplemented for ablution purposes at times by a trickle of the bitter brackish desert water, often collected most laboriously over long hours in jam tins or other small receptacles.

In the great heat of the blazing desert the temptation to drink freely was well-nigh irresistible, but every man had to exercise the greatest care, and no more than sip at his water-bottle. Water supplies were uncertain, no one knowing definitely how long it would be before more was available on these desert adventures.

It was usual to leave the bivouac at Bir Et Malar in the evening and march all night, the heat being too intense for much movement by day, unless it was absolutely necessary. During the fierce heat of the day the force on patrol would, when possible, seek the shade of some feathery date palms, which offered sanctuary in scattered "hods" far apart in the endless rolling hills and hollows of the Sinai Desert.

During the night heavy fogs would often complicate the already difficult travelling in the dark without landmarks, and daylight, on one occasion at least, found the advance guard on the tail of their own rear guard, the force during the night having travelled in a circle but a few miles from the starting point. On these night marches it was a common occurrence for a man to fall asleep in his saddle. With head sunk on chest and body moving automatically with his horse he would be carried on by his faithful plodding steed. A man would ride for long distances like this, only waking up when his horse wandered from his companions, and,

passing the troop-leader, collided with the troop in front. Then would the sleeper dazedly pull himself together, thicken the air with a few choice imprecations, and resume his original place in the column, often to repeat the performance again during the night. A column sent out like this on reconnaissance was dependent on camel trains for supplies, these usually coming up in the evening with water, horse fodder, and rations. The water was carried in fifteen gallon fanatis, or as they were more commonly called, "fantasies," and was often almost too hot to drink after travelling for hours in these metal tanks exposed to the sun -not the best kind of thirst-quenchers for parched throats, but eagerly drunk by the thirsty horsemen for all that.

On the 16th of May the Canterbury Regiment had an unenviable experience whilst engaged on work of this kind. Going out on reconnaissance to Debabis a spot where water was supposed to be available, they found that the Turks had been there before them, and no water was to be had. The Regiment had to journey back to Oghratina in the heat of the day, from which place word was sent in for the camel trains. Ninety men were struck down with sunstroke, the heat being 118° in the shade.

At one spot, where the New Zealanders had frequently to water, there were one or two disused wells of very brackish water, which could be bucketed up, and there could be seen horse and rider dinking the filthy stuff side by side out of the same trough, the water often making the men very sick afterwards.

Throughout this period the heat was almost unendurable, and flies, mosquitoes, and midges contributed their quota to the already sufficient hardships of the life. People at home, who have never experienced the flies of Egypt, cannot realize what a persistent and exasperating curse they can be, clustering in black clouds over everything, hardly deigning to leave the food one is eating even as it is swallowed. The horses were provided with cord fly-fringes, which were attached to the brow bands of their head-collars, and the men were supplied with a number of fly whisks for "swatting" the insects, but these did little to minimize the evil.

The men's rations were often indifferent, consisting largely of "bully" beef and "hard tack." Many men were afflicted with a form of sand colic, which made it almost impossible for them to eat during the heat of the day without immediately vomiting. As the New Zealanders became experienced in the desert life, it became the custom to eat and drink little except in the cool of the evening and early morning - this was particularly so as regards drinking. Thus did the New Zealand horsemen live while guarding the frontiers of Empire in the wide spaces of the Desert of Sinai.

While at Bir Et Malar an incident occurred not without its humorous side. The Brigade got sudden notice one evening to "stand-to" as the result of a message announcing the approach of a cyclone in their direction. For hours, late into the night, all hands were on the alert, horses saddled and everything ready for an immediate move. It then transpired that the message had been mangled in transmission, and really related to a consignment of "cyclone wire" which was being forwarded for use in some defensive work.

### CHAPTER III

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On the 29th of May the New Zealanders left Bir Et Malar for Salmana. The following day was spent keeping out of sight in some palm trees at Debabis. Moving on at night, they arrived Salmana early the following morning, where they had their first action of any consequences against the Turks on this front. It was however, only a very brief affair, although aeroplanes did a good deal of damage to the retiring enemy. Returning to bivouac that night, our men experienced their first bombing raid the next morning, the forerunner of many to come, when the enemy's bombs caused heavy casualties in both horses and men of an Australian Brigade adjoining the New Zealanders.

Towards the beginning of August, a force of Turks, estimated at about eighteen thousand in number, advanced towards our positions; a somewhat remarkable achievement over roughly a hundred miles of desert, carrying water, rations, machine-guns and ammunition, and dragging one heavy 6 inch gun in addition to field guns. Some idea of the difficulties of moving field guns, let alone a heavy gun such as this, may be had when it is mentioned that it took a team of 24 horses to drag a British 4.5 Howitzer through the heavy sand. The endurance of the Turkish infantry must have been extraordinary to have covered this distance over the yielding surface of the desert. The supply of water was always a

problem, as our men knew to their cost, always involving a long string of slow moving camel transport for its carriage from the very few sources of supply.

The Turks moved on Romani on the night of the 3rd of August, and delivered their attack against the British positions in a strong attempt to turn our flank and cut the communications of our desert force in the rear. The action developed in the darkness of the early morning hours against the Australians on this flank, who throughout the day fought a sanguinary combat against heavy odds. They were reinforced during the day by infantry, and then a force comprised of the New Zealand Brigade and a Brigade of Yeomanry, supported by Infantry, descended on the exposed left flank of the Turks with crushing force. This turned the tide of battle, and a general attack at dawn the next day completed the demoralization of the enemy, who withdrew to reform his broken scattered line at Katia. The New Zealanders played a big part in these operations, at the cost of many good men. Several thousand Turks were taken prisoner, and much material was captured.

Here should be mentioned the work done by the Wellington Regiment and the two Australian Regiments with which they were Brigaded. These units were constantly in touch with the Turks night and day for about a fortnight before the Romani fight, as the enemy moved forward in the Desert, men and guns reinforcing him constantly from El Arish.

The work was most trying, as our men continually came under fire without the chance of hitting back, all the while sustaining casualties. On the night of the Turkish advance an isolated post of our men some miles out in the desert was cut off and surrounded between the two enemy columns. One man only got out, which he did by taking a very bold course. Riding alongside one of the Turkish columns in the dark, he waited his chance until an opening in the column presented itself, when he made his way through without being recognized, and so back to the British lines as fast as his horse could carry him through the heavy sand.

Following up the retreating Turks as fast as their weary horses could move, the New Zealanders came into collision with them again at Katia, six miles further on in the Desert. There our men made a frontal attack on the Turkish positions, which was strongly resisted by the enemy. The action, however, was doomed to be indecisive, for the Turks withdrew at night.

In this fight a unique spectacle was witnessed which is worth a mention. The 5th Australian Light Horse, Canterbury and Auckland rode into action in swift moving waves. The Australian Regiment galloped in with bayonets fixed and dismounted for action - an inspiring sight as these splendid horsemen moved over the sand into battle with their steel-tipped rifles flashing in the sun. This was, perhaps, the first time that a mounted unit not armed with swords had carried the naked steel into action this way on their chargers.

On the 7th of August the Brigade made a demonstration against the Turks at Oghratina when the enemy once more withdrew under cover of darkness. The following day the New Zealanders pushed on to Debabis, and early in the morning of the 9th August came into action against the Turks at Bir El Abd driving the back three or four miles. During the day the enemy was heavily reinforced, and thus enabled to put up a stiff resistance which accounted for many more casualties amongst our men. Shortage of water compelled the withdrawal of the New Zealand Brigade that night when they moved back to Oghratina, but on the 12th they again advanced and occupied Bir El Abd from which the Turks had meantime withdrawn. On the taking of Oghratina, our men found that the Turks had left a very elaborate trench system. They also found a note left by the enemy, stating that they had captured one New Zealand officer and seven men. This was the post that had been surrounded out in the Desert from Romani. The message warningly concluded that if the New Zealanders followed the Turks too far into the Desert it would be at their own risk, and their blood would be upon their own heads.

In this August fighting the Turkish force which had moved across the Desert to Romani with the confident anticipation of wiping the British off the map had been badly mauled. Approximately 9,000 Turks were made prisoners-half their total force - and after the fighting at Bir El Abd the shattered remnant withdrew for reorganization to El Arish, 50 miles away on the coast.

It should be mentioned that after the fighting at Romani practically all the work fell on the horsemen of the Anzac Mounted Division, the heavy going in the deep Desert sand precluding any rapid movement of dismounted troops. (continues chapter 4)