

Sinai & Gaza - Part 3: World War I, British Empire and Allies.

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To do full justice to this part could well take up a *QC* in itself if I were to list all the postmarks used with dates and places of use. For a study of the area of interest the date of use is important as all the postmarks used were also used in other areas in Egypt proper and Palestine with a few used at Gallipoli and in Europe. As well as British FPOs there are those of Australia, New Zealand, India from the Empire along with token contingents from Italy and France. All of these have been well covered previously in the literature not least of all the French in Pierre Grech's *French Forces in Egypt during World War One* p127 *QC* 229. In the bibleogry I give the main books on the subject from which a careful trawl through can be found the postmarks used in Gaza and Sinai.

Although for my own interest I did this some years back I have not included them in this article but have picked just a few to illustrate the different nationalities that took part in what is called the Palestine Campaign. This campaign has historically been more of interest to Holy land collectors and a few article have appeared from this point of view. The few Egypt collectors of WWI material also embraced this and none that I know stopped their collection once the forces left Egypt. The collecting of military material seems to have declined amongst members of the Egypt Study Circle sadly so with the passing of Jim Benions, John Firebrace, Robin Bertram and recently Dennis Clarke who all made significant contributions to the subject.

This article needs to be read with the previous one in *QC* which of course is the same campaign. Again there are many good books on the subject so I only give a brief outline enough I hope to make some of our readers want to pursuer the subject further.

British plans for 1916 were to maintain an active defence in Egypt and to reduce the number of troops required for the security of the Suez Canal. The first step was to be the occupation of the Qatiya, area, where the railway and pipe-line were to be brought for the maintenance of troops in the forward area. The Qatiya Oasis was to be held with one division and three mounted brigades. A reserve of three divisions was to be held on the Canal. The thirteen divisions in Egypt were to be sent to other theatres of operations as soon as possible.

Actually, before the end of March, six divisions had left Egypt. By denying to the enemy the Qatiya-Romani area, a suitable assembly place for the Turks, it would be possible to organize a mobile column for offensive operations and would enable us to abandon the long and elaborately fortified line east of the Suez Canal. It would also be possible to keep the Turks from bombarding the Canal with long range artillery fire. The Turks would have the disadvantage of crossing the sixty miles of sandy desert from El Arish if they were to attempt to assume the offensive in the area in which their chances of success were most probable, as the water-bearing prospects were far greater and more suitable for a large force than in any other quarter in the vicinity of the Canal.

For the Turks advancing on the Canal the country between Kossaima and El Arish was important. These were the two nearest road centres for a force advancing from the east towards the Canal. There should be no surprise attack on troops defending the Canal if these areas were adequately watched by mobile troops and R.A.F. It was estimated that of the 250,000 Turkish troops in Syria, a force of approximately 40,000 could be maintained with water in the Wadi el Arish, and a similar number in the Qatiya-Romani area, Neither of the other two routes leading to the Canal possessed such favourable lines of advance or such an abundant water supply.

For the supply of the British (by which I mean British Empire forces of Australian, New Zealand, Indian and others) troops in the Romani area a railway of standard gauge and a pipe-line of Nile water were brought out from Qantara. Steps were also taken to add to the mobility of the force by organizing camel companies, each of 2,000 camels, and also donkey companies, each of 2,000 donkeys. Finally, 35,000 camels and 8,000 donkeys were organized on a company basis. Trains also were organized, namely, six divisional trains each of seventy-two limbered G.S. wagons, and two mixed horse and motor transport trains, each capable of carrying seventy-two tons of supplies.

Owing to the organization and forward policy the initiative passed to the British, and, in spite of two advances made by the Turks during 1915. On March 10th, General Sir John Maxwell handed over his command to General Sir Archibald Murray. The force in Egypt now became the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

The Battle of Romani (3–5 August 1916) was fought 23 miles (37 km) east of the Suez Canal, near the Egyptian town of Romani and the site of ancient Pelusium on the Sinai Peninsula. The British victory over a joint Ottoman and German force marked the end of the Defence of the Suez Canal campaign, the Defence of Egypt campaign, however continued. This campaign, known by the Germans as the *Offensive zur Eroberung des Suezkanals* and by the Ottomans as the *İkinci Kanal Harekâtı*, had begun on 26 January 1915. The end of the Romani operations also marked the beginning of the Sinai and Palestine campaign.

From late April 1916, after a German-led Ottoman force attacked British Yeomanry at Katia, British Empire forces in the region at first doubled and then grew as rapidly as the developing infrastructure could support them; the railway and a water pipeline soon enabled an infantry division to join the light horse and mounted rifle brigades at Romani. During the heat of summer, regular mounted patrols and reconnaissance were carried out from their base at Romani, while the infantry constructed an extensive series of defensive redoubts. On 19 July, the advance of a large German, Austrian and Ottoman force across the northern Sinai was reported. From 20 July until the battle began, the Australian 1st and 2nd Light Horse Brigades took turns pushing forward and clashing with the advancing column

The battle was over on 12 August, when the German and Ottoman force abandoned their base at Bir el Abd and retreated back to El Arish.

The Battle of Magdhaba (officially known by the British as the Affair of Magdhaba) took place on 23 December 1916 south and east of Bir Lahfan in the Sinai desert, some 18–25 miles (29–40 km) inland from the Mediterranean coast and the town of El Arish. The British victory against an isolated Ottoman Empire garrison, secured the town of El Arish and the right flank of the British advance across the Sinai Peninsula, during the Sinai and Palestine Campaign.

By December, construction of the infrastructure and supply lines had sufficiently progressed, to enable the British advance to recommence, during the evening of 20 December. By the following morning a mounted force had reached El Arish to find it abandoned

An Ottoman Army garrison in a strong defensive position was located at Magdhaba, some 18–30 miles (29–48 km) inland to the south east, on the Wadi el Arish

The Desert Column was formed and on 7 December 1916, Murray appointed the newly promoted Lieutenant General Sir Phillip Chetwode commander of the Column. As a major general.

Chauvel's Force for the attack on Magdhaba, consisted of three brigades of the Anzac Mounted Division; 1st Light Horse Brigade (1st, 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Regiments), the 3rd Light Horse Brigade (8th, 9th and 10th Light Horse Regiments), the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade (Auckland, Canterbury and Wellington Mounted Rifles Regiments), together with three battalions from the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade in place of the 2nd Light Horse Brigade. These nine regiments and three battalions were supported by the Inverness and Somerset Artillery Batteries, Royal Horse Artillery, and the Hong Kong and Singapore Artillery Battery.

The Battle of Rafa (also known by the British as the Action of Rafah) took place on 9 January 1917 at el Magruntein to the south of Rafa, By January 1917, construction of the railway and water pipeline eastwards from the Suez Canal was continuing; the railway reached El Arish on 4 January.

General Sir Archibald Murray, the commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, was keen to complete the advance across the north of the Sinai, believing pressure on the southern Ottoman Empire would compel the Ottoman forces to abandon their desert bases and outposts in the inland of the Sinai Peninsula. He ordered the advance from El Arish to Rafa, a distance of 27 miles (43 km), to begin as soon as possible

The First Battle of Gaza was fought in and around the town of Gaza on the Mediterranean coast in the southern region of Ottoman Palestine on 26 March 1917, during World War I.

The Second Battle of Gaza, fought in southern Palestine during the First World War, was another attempt mounted by British Empire forces to break Ottoman defences along the Gaza-Beersheba line. Fought on 26 March 1917. The First Battle of Gaza had been a fiasco for the Allies after the commander, General Charles Dobell, made the decision to withdraw when his troops who were, it was later thought, to be in a position to seize victory.

The infantry component of Dobell's Eastern Force had expanded since the first battle to four infantry divisions; the 52nd (Lowland) Division, 53rd (Welsh) Division, the 54th (East Anglian) Division and the recently formed 74th (Yeomanry) Division which was made up of brigades of dismounted yeomanry serving as infantry. The mobile component remained the Desert Column which comprised the Anzac Mounted Division and the Imperial Mounted Division plus the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade.

The battle was a disastrous defeat for the British. They made no progress, inflicted little damage and suffered heavy casualties that they could not easily afford. The main losses were, once again, amongst the British infantry who were called upon to attack the strongest position.

For failing to achieve the promised success on the second attempt, both Murray, Commander-in-Chief of the Palestine campaign, and Dobell, the army commander of Eastern Force, were quickly replaced. The British War Office, perhaps hoping to avoid a repeat of the Gallipoli disaster, resolved to supply the Palestine campaign with adequate resources and capable commanders to ensure future success. Murray was replaced by the capable cavalry commander, General Edmund Allenby, whose forces were expanded to contain three full army corps; two of infantry and one mounted. These forces, on the third attempt, would be able to break the Gaza-Beersheba line and commence the drive on Jerusalem.

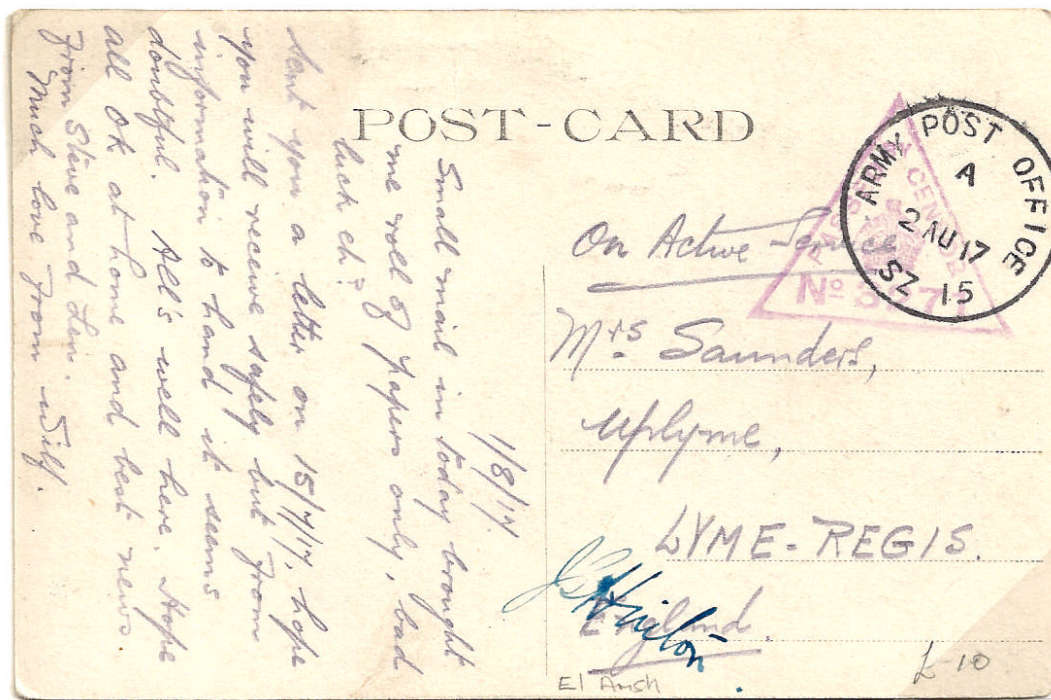
The forces at Allenby's disposal were also expanded and the ad-hoc nature of Murray's army structure was replaced with a more conventional arrangement. In place of Dobell's Eastern Force (a corps-like structure) were two infantry and one mounted corps.

XX Corps (commanded by Lieutenant General Philip Chetwode)
 10th (Irish) Division
 53rd (Welsh) Division
 60th (2/2nd London) Division
 74th (Yeomanry) Division
 XXI Corps (commanded by Lieutenant General Edward Bulfin)
 52nd (Lowland) Division
 54th (East Anglian) Division
 75th Division
 Desert Mounted Corps (commanded by Lieutenant General Henry Chauvel)
 Australian and New Zealand Mounted Division (ANZAC Mounted Division)
 Australian Mounted Division
 Yeomanry Mounted Division
 7th Mounted Brigade
 Imperial Camel Corps brigade.

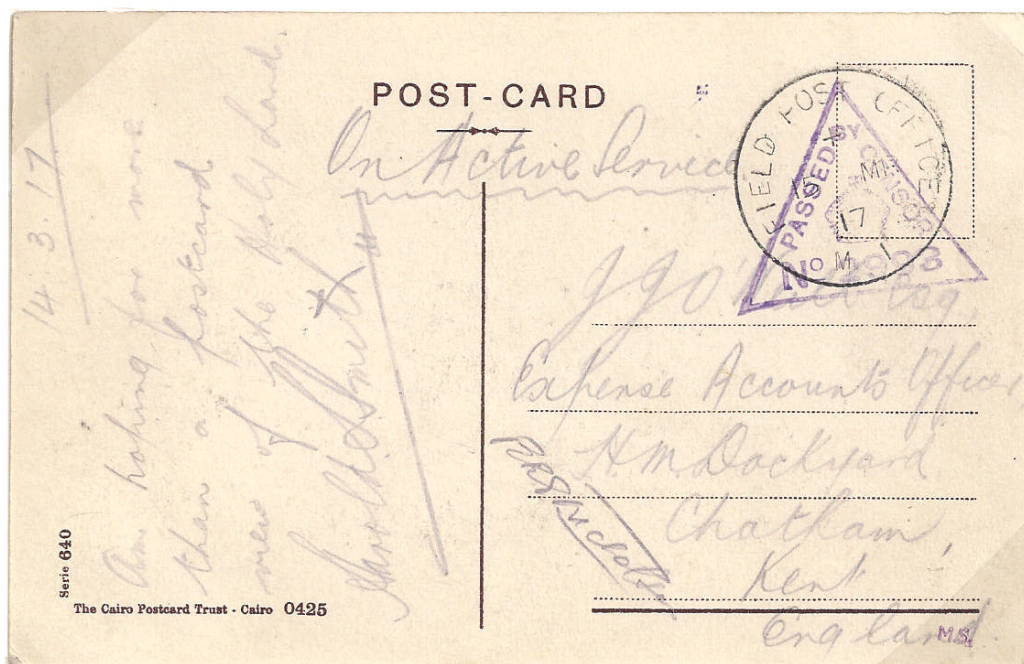
While some of the infantry divisions (such as the 60th Division which was a 2nd-line Territorial Force unit) were raw and inexperienced, the mounted divisions were battle-hardened and confident.

The Third Battle of Gaza was fought between 31 October – 7 November 1917. The British forces under the command of General Edmund Allenby successfully broke the Ottoman defensive Gaza-Beersheba line. The critical moment of the battle was the capture of the town of Beersheba on the first day by Australian Light Horse units.

The Gaza-Beersheba line was completely overrun and 12,000 Ottoman soldiers were captured or surrendered. However, the sacrifice of the Ottoman rearguards delayed the British pursuit and saved the army from encirclement and destruction. The British advance would take them to the gates of Jerusalem, which they would take on December 9th



Some ten of the S.Z. datestamps were used in the Sinai and Gaza areas. SZ 15 was at Al-Arish at the date shown to serve the military hospital there. It returned to Abbasia becoming Base Army P.O. Abbisia in April 1920.



F.P.O. M1 was introduced to serve the Imperial Camel Corps. At the date shown 17.MA.17. the corps. was at Rafa soon to be engaged in battle at Gaza.

The Imperial Camel Corps (ICC) was raised in January 1916, by the British Empire, for service in the Middle East initially of four battalions, one battalion each from Great Britain and New Zealand and two battalions from Australia. Support troops included a mountain artillery battery, a machine gun squadron, Royal Engineers, a field ambulance, and an administrative train.

In the Sinai campaign it fought at Romani, Mazar, Maghara, El. Arish, Maghdaba, Rafa, Hassana, Gaza 1, Gaza 2 before moving into in Palestine.

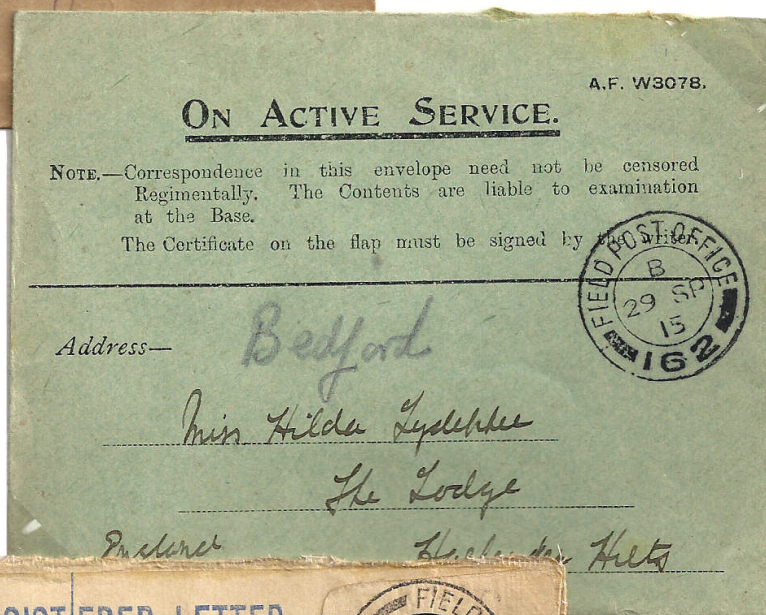
See also QC 235 p238 for a cover of M.D.1. used by the Anzac Mounted Division Headquarters.



FPO D.54 was used by divisional H.Q. It was stationed as part of the canal defences at the date shown.

Three FPOs served the three brigade using the same number as the brigade.

FPO 162 29.SP.15 of the 162nd (East Midland) Brigade



FPO 163 8.AU.16 of the , 162nd (Norfolk & Suffolk) Brigade

The 54th (East Anglian) Division was a formation of the Territorial Force. The Division served in Gallipoli and on return occupied No 1 (Southern) Section of the Suez Canal defences on 2 April 1916. It served in the Sinai and Palestine campaigns remaining in Palestine until the Armistice 31 October 1918.

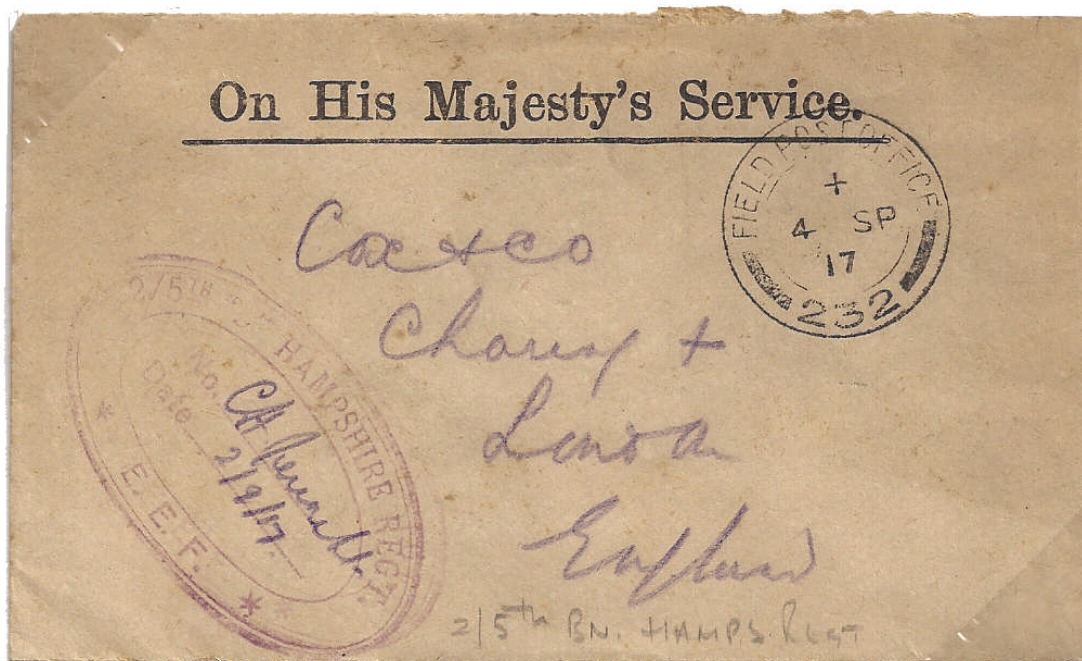
It consisted of the 161st (Essex) Brigade, 162nd (East Midland) Brigade and the 163rd (Norfolk & Suffolk) Brigade. It fought at the he First Battle of Gaza (26-27 March), second Battle of Gaza (17-19 April) and the battle of Gaza (27 October -7 November).



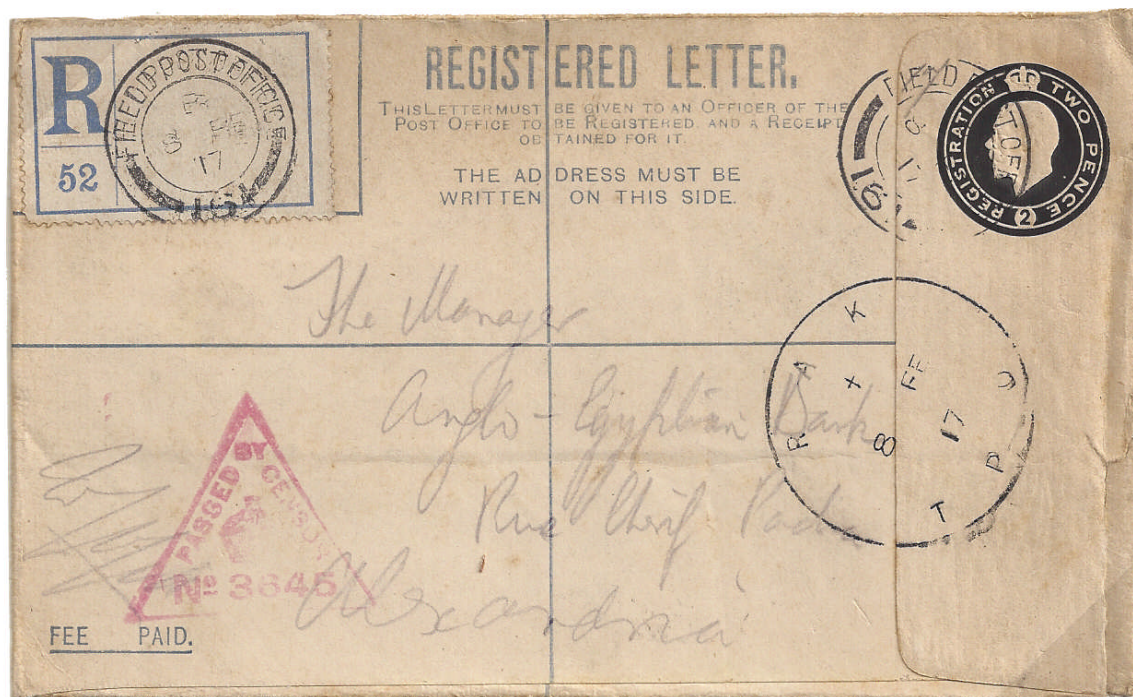
The East Lancashire Division arrived in Egypt on 25 September 1914 and served in the interior, around Cairo with some Yeomanry units, and the Australian and New Zealand contingents before going to Gallipoli.

The division was sent to Egypt to defend the Suez Canal against anticipated Turkish attacks. The 15 pounder gun batteries were deployed on the west bank in support of Indian Army and New Zealand troops manning guardposts. These paid an important part in repulsing the attempted crossing of the canal by the 74th Regiment, Turkish 25th Division. Tussum and Serapeum on the night and morning of 3–4 February 1915.

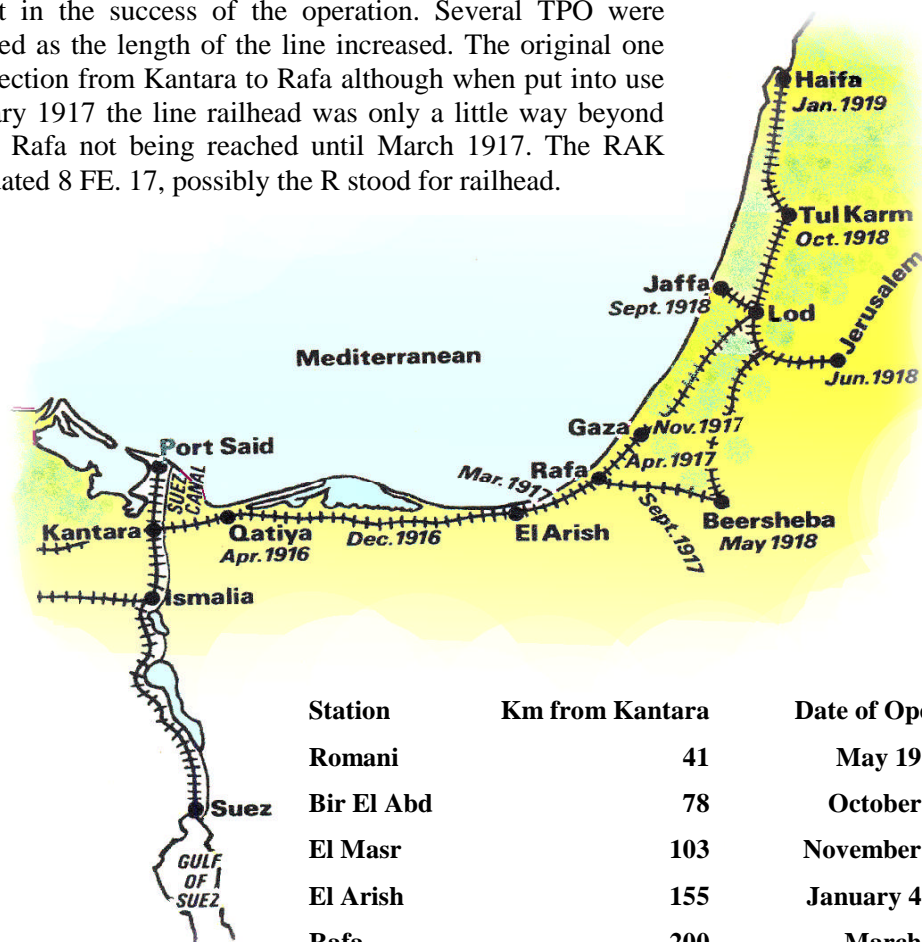
They then participated in the Battle of Romani on the 5th August 1916 and the advance from Romani to Katia. On 17 January 1917, the 42nd Division among the first of the Territorial Force to receive orders for the Western Front so designating Murray one of the battle-hardened divisions. The cover sent while waiting to embark for France shows the cachet



Cover with the cachet of the 2/5th Hampshire regiment part of the 75th Division formed at Al Arish on the 25 June 1917. made up of units of Territorial and Indian regiments who had recently arrived from India. FPO 232 was used by the 232nd Infantry brigade made up from battalions of Wiltshires, Hampshires, Punjabis, Gurkas and Kashmais. It saw action at the third battle of Gaza.



In the advance across the Sinai the railway was an essential ingredient in the success of the operation. Several TPO were inaugurated as the length of the line increased. The original one was the section from Kantara to Rafa although when put into use in February 1917 the line railhead was only a little way beyond Al-Arish, Rafa not being reached until March 1917. The RAK cover is dated 8 FEB. 17, possibly the R stood for railhead.



Station	Km from Kantara	Date of Opening
Romani	41	May 19 1916
Bir El Abd	78	October 1916
El Masr	103	November 1916
El Arish	155	January 4 1917
Rafa	200	March 1917
Dir el Belah	217	April 5 1917
Gaza	235	January 1918
Ludd	311	December 1917
Haifa	423	September 1918



Peter Grech's excellent article covers in depth the French contribution to the War in the middle east in *QC* 220 p127-143. He mentions the fly aerial reconnaissance patrols off the coast of Sinai and Palestine p136. which played a crucial role in monitoring the Turk's movements in the Sinai in 1925. In the article he describes the Détachement Français de Palestine (D.F.P.) the French detachment attached to the E.E.F. for the conquest of the Palestine. They were moved to Khan Younis, in May 1917 with some at kilometer 210. From June to November, no activity. By November, the detachment concentrate around Gaza and employed for guard duty on the expanding depots. They were attached to the 54th (East Anglian) Division under Major-general S W Hare. Cover shown has the 601A cancel possibly used at Khan Younis.



On 1 July 1917, the Italian Government decided to send a token force to Palestine called the Distaccamento Italiano di Palestina or Palestine Italian Detachment. It joined the British Forces on 13 June 1917 with 500 troops under the command Lieutenant Colonel Francesco D'Agostino and was also attached to the 54th. Division. They took part in the Third Battle of Gaza and acquitted themselves well in other exacting combat duties, roles well suited for the Bersaglieri. Their reward was to become part of the official party to enter Jerusalem and stand with General Allenby. Cover with SZ.8 dated 17.JY.17 just before its advance to Rafa.



The Indian Army comprised a large portion of Empire forces in the Middle East. Firebrace p82 states that 113 battalions served in that theatre. In the Advance across the Sinai and the Battles around Gaza the 53rd, 60th, and 75th divisions all had Indian Battalions attached to them. These were mostly Punjabis and Gurkhas. Cover with FPO N^o.28, serving the 20th Indian Brigade at Al Arish at this date.



The British West Indian Regiment Initially the men were primarily involved in ambulance and labouring work in the Sinai but after the withdrawal of British units from Palestine in March 1918 due to the German offensive, the troops were placed into the front line sharing duties with the other troops. Lance Corporal McCollin Leekam of Trinidad was awarded the Military Medal for bravery. The first deployment was in the Jordan Valley where the 1st Battalion relieved the 3rd Light Horse Brigade. Two battalions, 1st and 2nd Battalion, were deployed as part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. Cover with SZ.7 29.JA.18 at Beersheba.

References: some of those in QC 240 p120 apply.

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Strategy and Tactics of the Egyptian and Palestine Campaign 1917-1918. Lieut. Col. A. Kearsley, Gale and Polden, 1932.

Supplement to the 'The Postal History of The Australian Imperial Forces During World War 1 1914-1918', 'Bob' Emery, Hobbs of Southampton, 1988

This is not a complete reference not mentioned many articles in the *BAPIP* magazine, *QC* and other magazines also books by Sacher and earlier as these have all been surpassed by Kennedy, George Crabb
