

Defense of the Suez Canal

Introduction

At the beginning of the war, England assumed full responsibility for the defense of Egypt. In September 1914 the English garrison (see Postscript) was sent to France and replaced by the East Lancashire Division 1) (a 42nd (East Lancashire) Division) as well as a Zealand units to. number of Indian units. Then came the Territorial Force unit; later also Australian and New



Map 1. The defense of the Suez Canal in 1914-15.
From Source 4.

Defense of the Suez Canal (1914-1915)

The defense was divided into three sectors:

- Sector 1
- Sector 2
- Sector 3

The colors are chosen here to make the division clearer.

Great Bitter Lake and Little Bitter Lake between the northern and southern parts of the Suez Canal were considered impassable, so no permanent forces were assigned here.

The Suez Canal was defended by the 11th Indian Division in the first line, reinforced with i.a. the Indian 10th and Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, Bikaner Camel Corps and few Egyptian units.

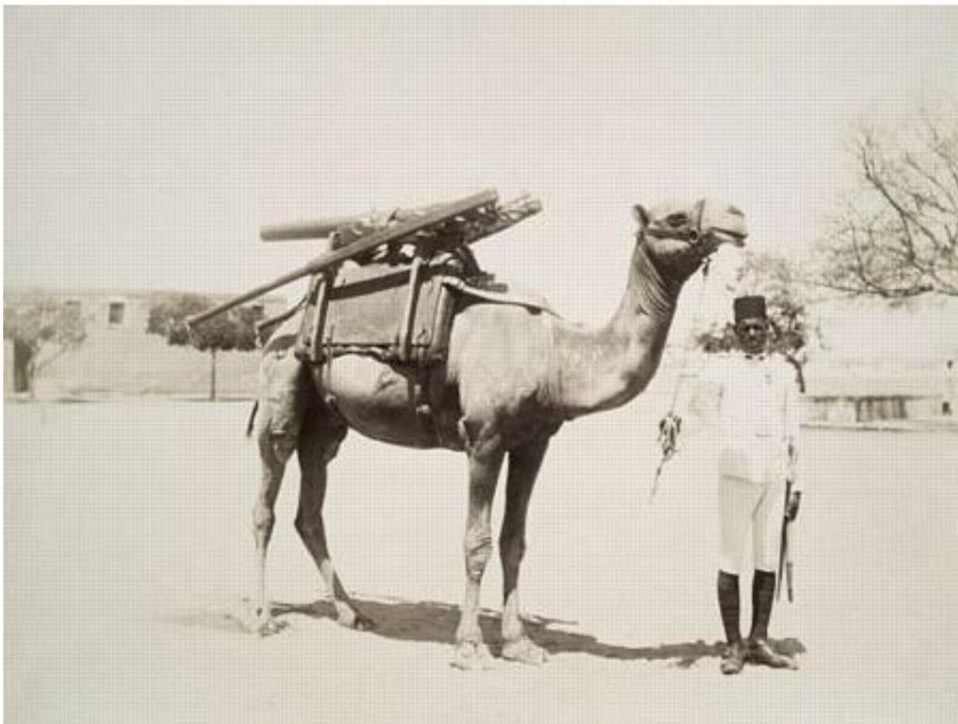
The two Indian divisions were without actual field artillery, which is why two artillery divisions from the English 42nd (East Lancashire) Division joined the defence. The Indian artillery included only mountain batteries 2). —

The Egyptian units were located in Sectors 2 and 3.

The second line of defense was made up of the Australian and New Zealand units which were then sent to Gallipoli and the 42nd (East Lancashire) Division which was also sent to Gallipoli.

5. Battery

The Egyptian artillery's 5th Battery consisted of 4 pcs. mountain guns and 2 pcs. Maxim machine guns, and was deployed on 2 February 1915 in the defense of Toussoum (Tussum) in Sector 2, approximately at Point 1 on Map 1.



Egyptian camel-borne artillery, c. 1900.

From the NYPL Digital Gallery.

The battery commander was *Bimbashi* (Major) I. D'E. Roberts, Royal Artillery.

However, the sources do not state whether the battery was carried by camel or mule. From 1897, the Egyptian mountain batteries were equipped with 75 mm Maxim-Nordenfolt guns, which could be carried by four animals.

The battery had arrived in the area the day before and had gone into position (dug in) on a ridge commanding the area. The artillery cover consisted of two platoons of the Indian battalion 128th Pioneers,

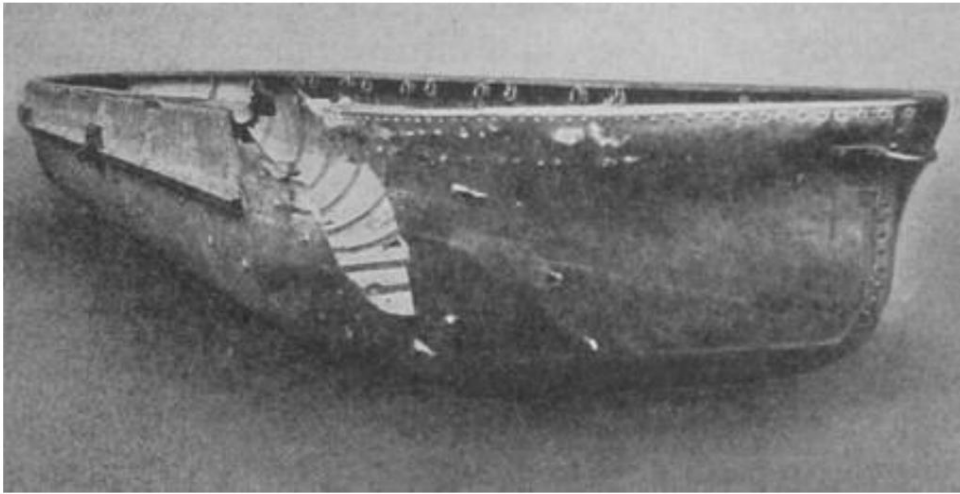
under the command of Lieutenant RA Fitzgibbon.

Sir John Maxwell's official account of the fighting (Source 2) mentions that the battery played a major role in preventing the main Turkish attacks against the Suez Canal.

In a report from The Times 19 February 1915 (Source 3) the battery's efforts are described as follows:

"The first warning of the enemy's approach was given by a sentry of a mountain battery, who heard, to him, an unknown tongue across the water. The noise soon increased. It would seem that Mudjah Ideen ("Holy Warriors") - said to be mostly old Tripoli fighters - accompanied the pontoon section and regulars of the Seventy-fifth Regiment, for loud exhortations often in Arabic of "Brothers die for the faith; we can die but once," betrayed the enthusiastic irregular.

The Egyptians waited until the Turks were pushing their boats into the water; then the Maxims attached to the battery suddenly spoke and the guns opened with case at point-blank range at the men and boats crowded under the steep bank opposite them.



One of the destroyed Turkish pontoons.
From FirstWorldWar.com.

Immediately, a violent fire broke out on both sides of the canal, the enemy replying to the rifles and machine gun fire and the battery on our bank. Around the guns it was impossible to stand up, but the gunners stuck to the work, inflicting terrible punishment."

The battery destroyed at least two Turkish pontoons.



Captured Turkish pontoons, photographed at Ismalia.
From Source 4.

Among the battery's casualties are Mulazim Awal (lieutenant) Effendi (title) Helmi, who distinguished himself during the fighting.

It appears that the lieutenant had been the gun commander of one of the battery's four pamphlets.

The battery's loss among non-commissioned officers and privates was 2 killed and 2 wounded.



Naik (Corporal) Naik Safdar Ali and Sepoy (Private) Sher Khan of the 62nd Punjabis advance at the head of their comrades to repel the attack.

Originally published in the book *Deeds that Thrilled the Empire*; here from Cranston Art.

The text of the plate reads:

"Naik Safdar Ali and Sepoy Sher Khan advancing along the West Bank of the Suez Canal, ahead of their comrades to attack the Turks.

In the operations on the Suez Canal at the beginning of February 1915, the Turks delivered their main attack at a point opposite Tussum, just south of Lake Timseh. On February 3rd, Naik Safdar Ali and Sepoy Sher Khan, of the 62nd Punjabis, led their comrades down a strip of sandy bank under a very hot fire to attack the enemy who were attempting to land from a pontoon boat.

In the final dash to the boat, Naik Safdar Ali was again ahead of his comrades, but he fell mortally wounded within a yard of the water's edge. He died a few minutes later, but his most gallant conduct was posthumously rewarded with the Indian Order of Merit."

See [When the 62nd Punjabis along with Allied Warships saved the Suez Canal \(Source 5\)](#) for a detailed description of the 62nd Punjabis' efforts.

The Turkish attack

The Turkish attack is described in my article [On Turkish Units at the Suez Canal, February 1915](#).

Covered by machine-gun fire, three Turkish pontoons made it across the Suez Canal, but the soldiers aboard

was quickly defeated, i.a. of 62nd Punjabis and 128th Pioneers. During these matches, the leader of the 5. Battery's Artillery Cover, Lieutenant RA Fitzgibbon, mortally wounded.



The Egyptian camel corps, c. 1905.

From The Blatchford Collection of Photographs
(American University of Beirut).

The Camel Corps

The Camel Corps was sent to the Suez Canal on 31 August 1914.

There were no British or Egyptian units in the Sinai Peninsula, so in order not to arouse Turkish sentiments, the corps was ordered to patrol only the immediate east side of the canal. Only in the event of an attack did they have to advance further into the Sinai Peninsula.

Source 1 mentions that the Machine Gun Division of the Camel Corps was subsequently deployed with the Bikaner Camel Corps in the defense of Sector 2. For a discussion of this Indian Camel Corps, see my article On Bikaner Camel Corps, 1914-15.

Engineering units

The operational reserve at the Suez Canal also included a smaller camel-mounted detachment of Egyptian pioneers/labor soldiers. At this time I am not aware if there were actual engineering troops in the Egyptian army at this time, but there was a unit called the Military Works Department that handled engineering-like tasks.



Ferry of pontoons, manned by Egyptian soldiers.
From the NYPL Digital Gallery.

An unarmed force of 110 men, as well as the aforementioned camel-mounted detachment, took part in the work of setting up defensive positions along the Suez Canal. The force was possibly under the command of Captain REM Russell, Royal Engineers.

A number of English engineers from the Egyptian State Railways and the Egyptian Telegraph Service, most of whom had a past in the Royal Engineers, took part, presumably also with manpower, in the work.

The photograph is not dated, but is possibly from around 1900.

The engineering workers included i.a. setting up positions on the west bank of the canal, as well as a number of posts on the east bank, bridge construction at El Qantara and El Kubri as well as a pontoon bridge at the ferry port in Ismalia and bridge construction over the Sweet Water Canal - a total of 8 bridges. Much of this work was carried out by two English, one Australian and two Indian engineering companies.



An English fortified camp on the east side of the Suez Canal, 1914 [3](#).

I assume that the Egyptian Military Works Department has been analogous to its equivalent in the Indian Army - the Military Works Services, which until 1899 bore the name of the Military Works Department. To

the tasks included building roads, railways, barracks and similar construction tasks 4).

Parts of the original caption read as follows:

"... The Canal is securely held along its hundred miles of length. Our illustration shows one of the several British advanced-camps on the eastern bank (the Asiatic or Sinitic Peninsula side), placed there to prevent a surprise attack. In all cases, our positions are well fortified, and, with the desert in front, present a formidable barrier to the enemy. In support of the entrenched camps, movable pontoon-bridges have been constructed at certain points. These, with the permanent railway along the western bank, will enable reinforcements to be thrown across the waterways speedily."

During the Senussi Uprising (1915-1917) - in the absence of actual engineering troops, a detachment from the Military Works Department is deployed in an otherwise hastily assembled unit. (Source 2)

Armored train

After the outbreak of war, 2 armored trains of material from the Egyptian state railways, equipped with Egyptian cannons and cannon crews, were set up 5). The panzer trains were possibly named *No. 1 and No. 2 Armored Train, Egypt* 6).

One of these armored trains was stationed at Kantara (in Sector 3) and manned half a company of Indian infantry.



An Egyptian armored train, approx. 1915.

From *The Western Desert/Agagia Campaign* (The Keep Military Museum).

A train was observed on 26 January 1915 at Ismalia by the New Zealand soldier, John Murray Donn, and described thus 7):

"Saw armored train consisting of 6 trucks and engine, one truck carrying a gun of fair size. The crew of the trains consisted of English, Indian and Egyptian soldiers."

However, the many carriages indicate that the train was also used for troop transport.



Map 2: Excerpt from map of Egypt.
From FirstWorldWar.com.

2nd Battalion

Source 2 also mentions the Egyptian 2nd Battalion during the fighting at Suez.

Two companies (150 men), commanded by Bimbashi (Major) Pott, were garrisoned in the town of Tor on the Sinai Peninsula (see Map 2).

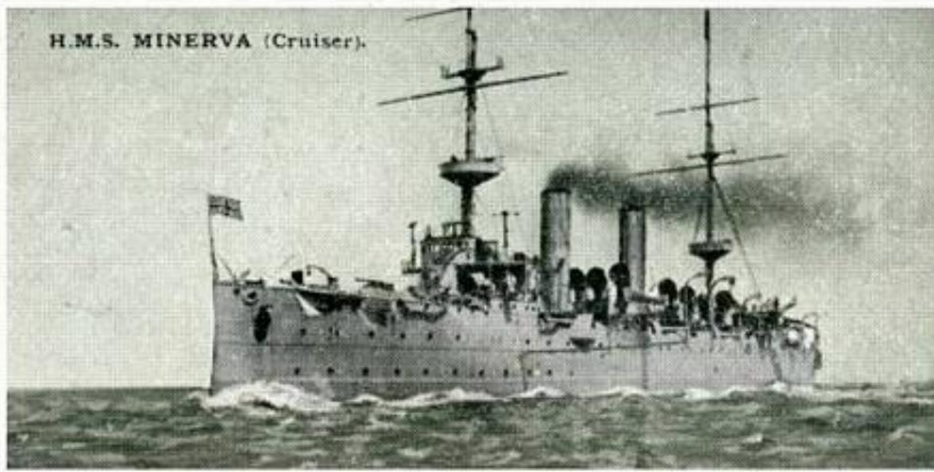
Tor was an old quarantine station, quite isolated, and a large force of Bedouins, under German leadership, attacked and besieged the town.

From the English side, it was assessed that a hostile control of the place gave the opportunity to mine the Gulf of Suez, a serious threat to shipping traffic.



Bedouins in Turkish service, photographed in trenches near the Red Sea 8).

On the night of 13 February 1915, the garrison, together with half a battalion of the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel CL Haldane, attacked the Turkish positions on Tor.



HMS MINERVA..

From the NYPL Digital Collection.

Cigarette card No. 37 in the series British Warships (Second Series), published by Stephen Mitchell & Son, 1915.

The Gurkhas sailed to Tor aboard HMS MINERVA 9).

The back of the card contains the following information:

"A protected cruiser, launched in 1895. She shelled the town of Akaba (Gulf of Akaba) November 3rd 1914, this being the first British action against the Turks. Displaces 5,600 tons; develops 19,600 hp; steams 19.5 knots; and have seven 6 -in and eight 3-in quickfirers."

The losses on the Turkish side were 60 dead and 102 prisoners, and it is estimated that only a few Bedouins may have escaped. On the Allied side the losses were 1 dead and 1 wounded. Source 1 attributes the heavy losses on the Turkish side to the poor quality of the troops as well as a quick and effective effort on the part of the Gurkhas.

The Indian half-battalion left Tor on the afternoon of 13 February 1915.



Regimental badge: 7th Gurkha Rifles. From 7th Gurkha Rifles (The British Empire).



The original caption is called "*Kukris*"

The Gurkha badge and weapon.
From Source 4.

7th Gurkha Rifles - Historical Summary

1902: 8th Gurkha Rifles

1903: 2nd Battalion, 10th Gurkha Rifles

1907: 7th Gurkha Rifles



7th Gurkha Rifles.

th From 7 Gurkha Rifles (The British Empire). The photograph is stated to be from 1905, but fits well with 1915 as well.

Although the kukri may be said to be the distinctive feature of the Gurkhas, the caption's *badge* makes more sense when you see the regimental badge of the 7th Gurkha Rifles at the same time.

Sources

1. *History of the Great War, Military Operations Egypt & Palestine, Volume I, From the outbreak of war with Germany to June 1917* by Lieutenant General Sir George Macmunn and Captain Cyril Falls, HSMO, London 1927. Available for loan from the Royal Garrison Library, catalog number 426261 .
2. Sir John Maxwell's Egypt Despatch (The Long, Long Trail).
3. Battle of the Suez Canal - A First-Hand Account of the Unsuccessful Turkish Invasion, reproduced in New York Times Current History: The European War, Vol 2, No. 1, April, 1915 (Project Gutenberg).
4. Defense of the Suez Canal from The New Zealanders at Gallipoli by Colonel Fred Waite, Whitcombe and Tombs, Christchurch, New Zealand 1919 (New Zealand Electronic Text Centre).
5. When the 62nd Punjabis along with Allied Warships saved the Suez Canal by AH Amin (Defence Journal).
6. First Suez Offensive (Wikipedia).
7. The Defense of the Suez Canal by Chris Baker (The Long, Long Trail).
8. *Lawrence and the Arab Revolts* by David Nicolle, Osprey Men-at-Arms No. 208, London 1989, ISBN 0-85045-888-9.
9. *The Palestine Campaigns* by Colonel AP Wavell, Constable and Co. Limited, London 1933 (originally 1928).

Postscript - The English Garrison in Egypt 10) —

The need for reinforcements for the relatively small English Expeditionary Force in France led to the recall of most of the regular cavalry regiments and infantry battalions from overseas garrisons.

Before the war, the following British army units were in Egypt:

- 3rd Dragoon Guards
- 2nd Bn Devonshire Regiment 1st
- Bn Worcestershire Regiment 2nd
- Bn Northamptonshire Regiment 2nd Bn
- Gordon Highlanders

Per Finsted

Notes:

1) See 42nd (East Lancashire) Division (The Long, Long Trail) and 42nd (East Lancashire) Division (Wikipedia).

2) See my article The Indian Army - On mountain batteries, 1890-1940.

3) See Indian Sappers (1740-1947) - Military Works Branch - 1871-1923 (Royal Engineers Museum).

4) From The Illustrated War News, Part 21, December 30, 1914 (Project Gutenberg).

5) Source 2 mentions that one of the trains was equipped with two 12-pounder guns. These pamphlets may be of the same type as the 75mm Krupp gun reproduced in Part 1.

- 6) Derived from a mention of a number of postcards and letters seen for sale at Cavendish Auctions.
- 7) From Diary of John Murray Donn, New Zealand Expeditionary Force (Digger History).
- 8) From The Turkish Rout at Romania (Great War in a Different Light); originally from Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung.
- 9) See Eclipse Class (Battleships-Cruisers.co.uk) as well as Eclipse Class Second Class Protected Cruisers (World War 1 Naval Combat).
- 10) From Overseas Garrisons and Unallotted Troops (Regimental Warpath).