

The Imperial Camel Corps Brigade

Introduction

In connection with studies of the campaigns in Egypt, Sinai and Palestine 1916-1918, I acquired the book *With the Cameliers in Palestine* by Major John Robertson in order to acquire knowledge of how the probably largest camel-borne combat unit in modern times operated.

Imperial Camel Corps Brigade

Units (from Source 1)	Remarks
1st Camel Battalion	1st - 4th (Australian) Company
2nd Camel Battalion	5. - 8. (English) Company
3rd Camel Battalion	11. - 14. (Australian) Company
4th (Anzac) Camel Battalion	15th and 16th (New Zealand) and 17th and 18th (Australian) Company
2 detached companies	9th and 10th (English) Company
No. 26 Machine Gun Squadron	8 pcs. camel-borne Vickers machine guns
Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery	6 pieces. 10-pdr camel-borne mountain guns
Brigade Ammunition Column	
Field Troop, Royal Engineers	
Signal Section, Royal Engineers	
Detachment, Army Service Corps	
Australian Camel Field Ambulance	Camels were used to transport the wounded



Shoulder badges

from 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th Camel Battalion,
Imperial Camel Corps Brigade.

Drawn according to information in the book.

However, the First Australian Imperial Force Order of Battle 1914-1918 and other sources attribute green to 3.

Battalion and blue for 4th Battalion. Whether the black and white triangle is divided vertically or horizontally is not clear, but vertical is known from other Australian brands.



Australian, English, New Zealand and Indian camel rider of the Imperial Camel Corps.

From Source 6.

Lieutenant-Colonel CL Smith, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, was given command of the brigade with the temporary rank of brigadier-general. Despite his age of only 38, the general was an experienced gentleman and had immediately previously been commander of the Egyptian army's camel corps; the war experience stemmed from, among other things The Boer War and from fighting in Somaliland against The Mad Mullah [1](#)). Here, as a lieutenant, attached to *the Somali Mounted Infantry*, he received the Victoria Cross in 1904.

A part of the subdivisions had served in 1915-1916 during the battles against supporters of the fundamentalist political-religious Senussi movement [2](#)) in the border areas between Egypt and Sudan, but were first assembled as a brigade on 19 December 1916 in connection with the impending attack over the Sinai Peninsula.

The brigade then took part in almost all major battles during the advance towards the border with Palestine and then in the first part of the campaign in Palestine.

The brigade was disbanded in June 1918 prior to the last part of the campaign [3](#)), where there was a greater need for cavalry than mounted infantry.

The Australian parts of the corps were redesignated the *14th* and *15th Light Horse Regiments*, and were equipped with sabres, while the New Zealand companies formed *the Second New Zealand Machine Gun Squadron*.

Together with the French *Regiment Mixte de Cavalerie de Levant* [4](#)) they now formed the 5th Light Horse

Brigade, Australian Mounted Division.

The Imperial Camel Corps Memorial

One of London's smaller, but very beautiful, memorials, which stands in Embankment Gardens, immediately north-east of Embankment Underground Station.



Camel Corps Monument, London.

Photographed in March 2005.

On the plinth is the following inscription:

"To the glorious and immortal memory of the officers, NCOs and men of The Imperial Camel Corps - British, Australian, New Zealand - who fell in action or died of wounds and disease in Egypt, Sinai and Palestine, 1916 - 1917 - 1918."

1916	Hassana	Maghara
1917	Jordan Valley	Sana Redoubt
1918	Mazar	El Arish
ROMANS	Gaza 1	Beersheba
Rafa	Mudawara (Hedjaz)	Maghdaba
Amman	Dakhla	A Khu Weilfe
Sailor	Gaza 2	Hill 265

On the monument are the names of the corps' 346 fallen, in addition to an overview of the most important battles in which the corps took part:

About the camel companies



One of the Australian companies of the 4th Camel Battalion, photographed in the training camp at Abbassia in Egypt.
From Source 5.

Each camel battalion consisted of 4 companies of 6 officers and 169 non-commissioned officers and privates.

The companies were organized as follows:

- Stab
- Signal sharing
- Machine gun platoon (3 Lewis Guns) 4
- platoons (8 teams of 4 men)

The Camel Corps was mounted infantry, in the style of, for example, *the Australian Light Horse*, but could not change positions quite so quickly.

Some of the Australian contingent came from *the Australian Light Horse*, but the bulk apparently from the infantry. The English camel companies were mainly formed from personnel from the volunteer cavalry regiments, which were sent to Egypt shortly after the start of the war as a replacement for the regular units which were sent to Europe.

Yeomanry regimenter i 2nd Camel Battalion

Company (from Source 6)

Posted by

No. 5

Lined up by infantrymen.

No. 6

Cheshire, Shropshire, Montgomery, Denbigh Yeomanry

- No. 7 Scottish Horse, Lanark, Fife and Forfar og Ayrshire Yeomanry
- No. 8 Buckingham, 2nd County of London, Berkshire og Dorset Yeomanry
- No. 9 3rd County of London (Sharpshooters) og City of London (Rough Riders)
- No. 10 East Riding of Yorkshire, Staffordshire og Lincolnshire Yeomanry

Many of the Australians and the volunteer horsemen had combat experience from Gallipoli.

The two New Zealand companies were formed from replacements for *The New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade*. None of the soldiers had special knowledge of camels, except perhaps some of the Australians who may have worked with camels in Australia, where they were commonly used as working animals.

About the camels

It is claimed that God created the horse, but that a committee is behind the camel. In his description of the origin of the camel, the author refers to Arabic traditions which say that the camel came into being from limbs left over after the Creation - the head of a sheep put on the neck of a giraffe, which in turn is put on the body of a cow; the neck was said to bend in shame at its location. The tail is a donkey's and the legs a horse's; the foot pads come from a dog with toes from an ostrich. The result was judged to be a mistake, and the animal was relegated to living in the desert, where no other four-legged creatures live, and here the camel, in its solitude, developed its hump...



Australian camel rider.
From Source 5.

Regardless of its origin, the camel has served humanity for millennia, including serving as a military means of transport. The camel corps had, including repairs, over approx. 3,500 riding and pack camels.

They were apparently all of the one-humped species (*camelus dromedarius*) and originally came from India where the Maharaja of the desert state of Bikanir [5](#) is said to have presented the English government with 500 camels for use by the forces in Egypt.

Later, Egyptian, Somali and Sudanese camels were purchased.

The units could sustain themselves for up to five days, with each man carrying 250 cartridges as well as 25 kg of fodder for the camel (durra) and rations for himself. The water ration, which had to cover all personal needs, was carried in a tin can (*fantasy*) that held approx. 22 l; the camel can do without water for up to 5 days.

Horses generally dislike camels, perhaps because of the smell, but can be trained to cooperate with daily contact. Some of the officers in the camel corps were also equipped with horses, which over time had become accustomed to being with camels.

The author describes an incident which depicts what happens when habituation has not occurred. In the spring of 1918, when the battalion was marching through the Jordan Valley on its way to Jericho, it encountered an Indian lance division at a bend in the road. Their attitude, well-kept uniforms and horses all exuded signs of self-importance. When the horses saw and smelled the camels they became completely unruly, and the lancers now got busy getting the horses under control, while the camel riders eagerly commented on the lancers' abilities as riders.

On the disbandment of the brigade, the English companies continued in service for some time longer and in July 1918 two companies were attached to TE Lawrence's Arab forces, where they took part in an attack on the railway line at Hedjaz [6](#). The English battalion was officially disbanded in May 1919.

Lawrence negotiated for 2,000 of the camels freed by the disbandment of the brigade.

The Middle East was then virtually vacuumed for camels and it had been planned to use them to bring the transport elements of the infantry divisions up to full strength, but when Lawrence promised to lead 2,000 men to Deraa, General Allenby, against the advice of his chief of staff, immediately chose this solution.

Om No. 26 Machine Gun Squadron, Machine Gun Corps



Soldiers from No. 26 Machine Gun Squadron.

Illustration from the book.

The unit consisted of soldiers who came primarily from the Yeomanry regiment *1st/3rd Scottish Horse*.

Also included were soldiers from *the Lanarkshire Yeomanry* and *the Ayrshire Yeomanry*.

The image could be clearer, but you can see that the regiment's characteristic headgear is continued by the machine gunners.



Ford T Light Patrol Car 7). —

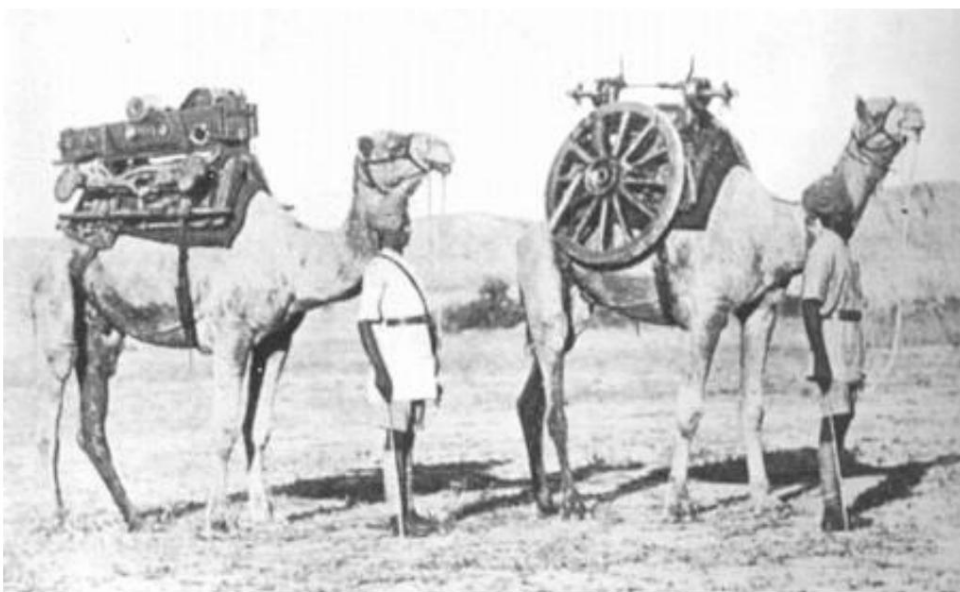
On the dissolution of the Camel Corps, the squadron was transferred to *the Western Desert Force*, where it patrolled the border with Sudan, from which the Senussi movement still operated, in machine gun carriages.

Whether the picture shows soldiers from *No. 26 Machine Gun Squadron* does not appear in the source, but the vehicle type is the most likely.

A *Light Car Patrol*, which was the unit designation, consisted of 5 Ford T machine gun trucks and a supply vehicle (*tender*).

Om Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery

The battery was recruited in Hong Kong and Singapore by ex-servicemen of the Indian Army. The battery numbered 240 men (a mixture of Sikhs and Muslims) commanded by 6 English and 4 native officers.



Cannon camels of the Aden Pack Battery in the 1930s.

From Source 3, and in the absence of the right image, this is currently the best possible solution.

For reasons not yet clear, they were nicknamed *The Bing Boys*; *The Bing Boys Are Here* was the name of a popular musical from 1916.

In many places the guns of the battery are referred to as 9-pdr, but such were not found in the English arsenal. I therefore assume that it must be a typographical error.

The first effort took place in Egypt in 1915-1916 against the Senussi movement. Then followed battles against Turkish forces in Sinai and Palestine, where the battery distinguished itself time and time again. Source 3 mentions, among other things, with a source in the official history of the campaign, the battles for Ramallah in November 1917, where the battery advanced its guns through a rocky area that was difficult to pass. The artillerymen almost carried their heavily laden camels forward, to spare the animals' bleeding hooves (camels and sharp pieces of rock are a bad combination), after which they engaged the enemy under effective fire.

Om Australian Camel Field Ambulance



Parts of the Australian Field Ambulance, photographed at Rafa, 12 February 1918.
Fra Australian War Memorial [9](#)).__

The field ambulance exclusively used camels to transport the wounded, who were carried either lying down or sitting in a kind of basket on either side of the camel's hump. The carrying device was called *the cacolet* [8](#).

It is said that the seated transport position was fairly comfortable, while the lying position was *very uncomfortable!* Another, but probably no less comfortable means of transport was also developed, namely sledges for stretchers, pulled by camels or horses.



Pack horse equipped for transporting the wounded.
From the New Rider website, Army mules circa 1937.

Cacolets were included as late as 1937 in the English regulations *Manual of Horsemanship, Equitation, and Animal Transport*, His Majesty's Stationary Office, London 1937.

The "carriers" shown weigh approx. 30 kg. together. In mountainous and other impassable terrains, the form of transport has been an effective alternative to personnel transport.

The saddles used for the camels were made in Alexandria to official specifications.

Om Signal Section, Royal Engineers



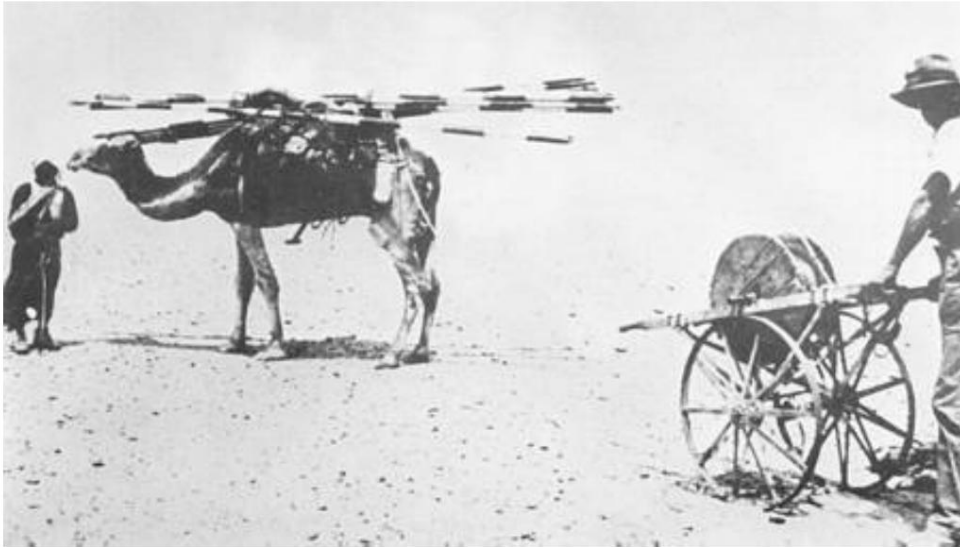
Signaling with heliograph 10). —

My currently available sources do not reveal anything about the equipment and organization of the signal division.

The platoon may have followed the principles of a signal platoon belonging to an independent cavalry brigade.

If that is the case, then the division would consist of 1 officer and 42 non-commissioned officers and privates. Such a division advised, among other things, over the following special equipment:

- 8 field telephones
- approx. 11 km field cable
- 2 portable radio stations 3 motor ordinances.



Laying out the field cable 11).

Signal flags as well as heliographs and signal lamps must be added to this.

The bars on the pack camel are painted black and white and are used for high routing of the field cable.

The tub with the cable drum saves manpower, as laying out otherwise requires two men who will carry the cable drum between them.

Per Finsted

Sources

1. *A Brief Record of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, July 1917 to October 1918*, Cairo 1919.
2. *A History of British Cavalry 1816-1919, Volume 5: 1914-1919 Egypt, Palestine & Syria* of The Marquess of Anglesey, Leo Cooper, London 1994, ISBN 0-85052-395-8.
3. *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - Forgotten Fronts and Home Base, 1914- 18* of Sir Martin Farndale, Royal Artillery Institution, London 1988, ISBN 1-870114-05- 1.
4. *Horses and Saddlery* by Major G. Tylden, JA Allen & Company in association with the Army Museums Ogilby Trust, London 1965 (1980 reprint).
5. *The Australian Light Horse* of R.J. Hall, W.D. Joynt & Company Pty. Ltd., Blackburn/Victoria 1968.
6. *Yeomanry Wars - The History of the Yeomanry, Volunteer and Volunteer Association Cavalry: A Civilian Tradition from 1794* by Peter D. Athawes, private edition, 1994, ISBN 1-8987218-02-1.
7. *Animals in War* of Jilly Cooper, Corgi Books, London 2000, ISBN 0-552-99091- 4.

See also Imperial War Museum's [Recommended Reading List No. 321](#) on books relating to the Imperial Camel Corps as well as the Australian War Memorial's online collection of material on the Camel Corps.



Detail from the Camel Corps memorial in London.
From the
brochure *Twentieth Century War Memorials in Greater London*,
published by English Heritage.

Postscript

Considering the headdress, the camel rider must be assumed to show a soldier from one of the English companies.

Judging by the footage, the English were the only ones to use trope helmets, while the other contingents wore their traditional headgear - bulging hats for the Australians and New Zealanders (the former often with the brim folded up on the left side, but for field use just as often without the button up). The Indian artillerymen wore turbans, while the machine gunners, at least for service use, wore *bonnets* (Atholl Pattern).

The bomb-like container is the rider's *fantasy* (water container).

To note:

- 1) See e.g. my article *The Anglo-Somali War 1901-1920* by Axel B. Aller.
- 2) See e.g. the article *Senussi* from the reference work *answers.com*.
- 3) See e.g. my article *General Sir Edmund Allenby's joint operations in Palestine, 1917-1918* by John Mordike.
- 4) Se f.eks. min artikel *Udklipsark - African Hunters*, ca. 1933.
- 5) Militarily, Bikanir is best known for the famous *Bikinir Camel Corps*, which the Maharaja, under the Imperial Service Troops scheme of 1889, placed at the disposal of the British Government. It was deployed in Somaliland during the battles against *The Mad Mullah* in 1904 and participated in the First World War, among others. in the defense of the Suez Canal (see *The Defense of the Suez Canal*.)
- 6) Read more about this important railway

7) Fra *War Cars - British Armoured Cars in the First World War* af David Fletcher, HSMO Books, London 1987, isbn 0-11-290439-4.

8) See e.g. the article *The Evolution of the Ambulance*, which can be found on the website *Firefighters' Real Stories*.

9) The color image was taken by the Australian war photographer Frank Hurley, who was sent to Palestine in October 1917 to document the experiences of the Australian soldiers. Color photography was invented as early as 1861 and later developed by talented Frenchmen. At the time, it was not possible to produce paper copies in colour, so the images were shown on glass plates in various types of display devices.

10) From *the World War (Booklet 254-55)* by H. Jenssen-Tusch, Johs. Lindbæk, H. Styrmer and E. Gyldenkrone, Gyldendalske Bookshop, Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen 1920.

11) Fra *From Pigeon to Packhorse - The Illustrated Story of Animals in Army Communication* af Allan Harfield, Picton Publishing, Chippenham 1989, ISBN 0948251-42-5.