

Turkish units at the Suez Canal, February 1915



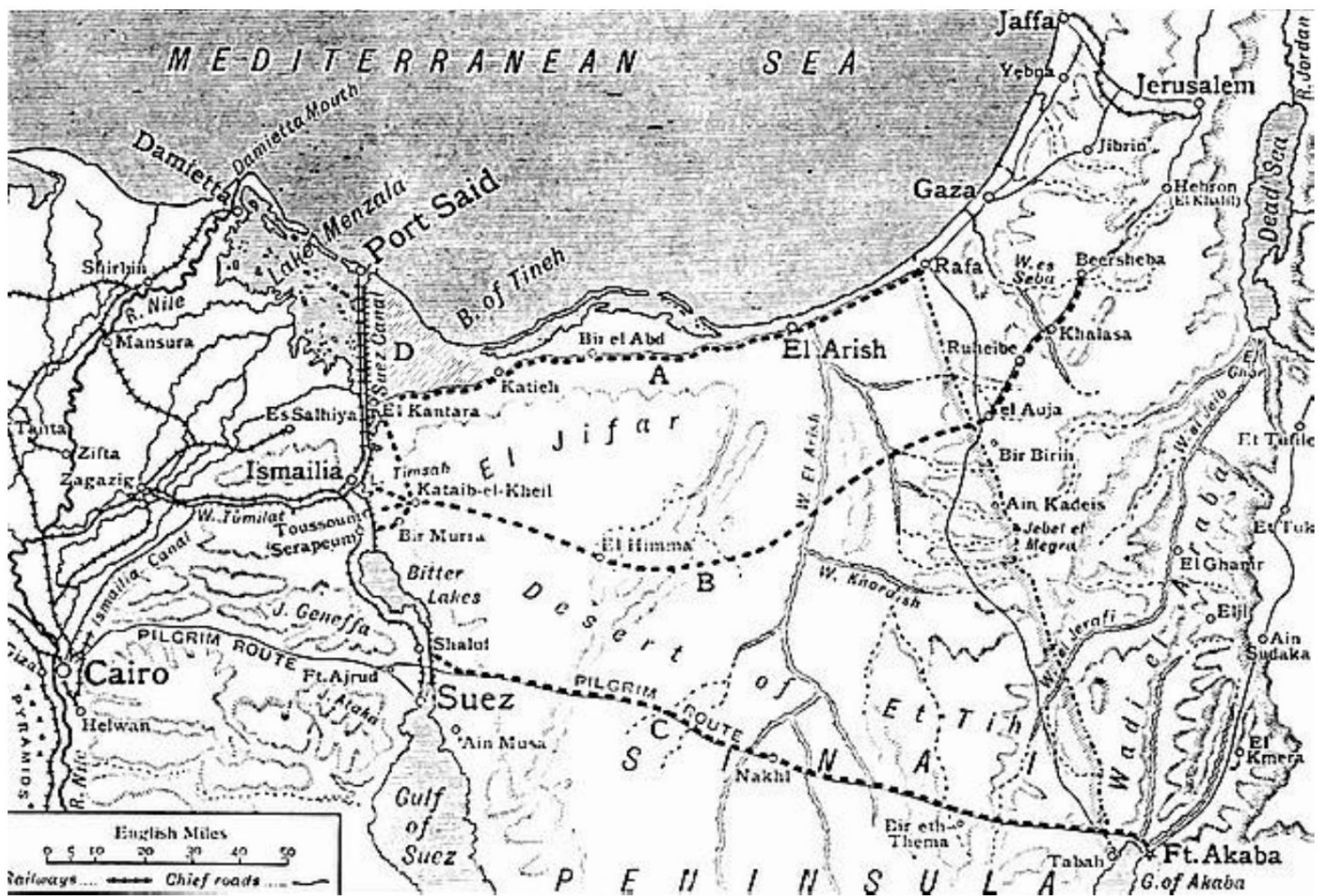
Ahmed Djemal Pasha.
From FirstWorldWar.com)

Introduction

On 14 January 1915, a Turkish force of approx. 25,000 men under the command of Ahmed Djemal Pasha [1](#)), the Young Turkish Minister of Marine, from Beersheba, across the Sinai Peninsula, towards Ismalia on the Suez Canal. The operations were thoroughly prepared by the German *Oberst Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein* [2](#)), who from November 1914 had carried out an extensive reconnaissance of the Sinai Peninsula with a view to just such an attack.

The intentions of a Turkish attack were no great secret, on the contrary, they were openly declared with a view to promoting internal unrest in Egypt.

The expectation from the Turkish side was that the Egyptian society would revolt against the Allied occupation and thus promote the Turkish possibility of crossing the Suez Canal.



Map 1: The Turkish advance across the Sinai Peninsula, January 1915.
 From FirstWorldWar.com.

Among the three possible routes of advance - the old caravan route from Rafa towards El Kantara (A), the central route (B) and the old pilgrim route from Aqaba to Suez (C) - the central route was chosen for the main force, as it offered the fewest opportunities for intervention by Allied naval forces. The route, on the other hand, was also the most difficult, but the march was thoroughly prepared, i.e. when laying out water reservoirs and building roads over areas that are difficult to access.

The main force marched from Beersheba in two drops and it took 10 days to reach the area of operations. Kress von Kressenstein mentions - not without a certain pride - that the march was completed without loss of either people or animals.



Turkish soldiers, approx. 1915[4](#).

The march was watched, and to some extent attacked, by British and French aircraft [3](#)), but Turkish soldiers had no means of defending themselves against attack from the air, and the force was not supported by its own aircraft. The attacks initially caused some panic, but gradually the soldiers got used to the conditions...

Further in the operational area, patrols began against the English positions along the Suez Canal, whose main defense line lay west of the canal with smaller outposts on the east side. The defense was supported by English, Indian and French naval vessels in the channel.

At the end of January 1915, the Allied reconnaissance planes report that the Turkish units are advancing at the Suez Canal. An attack is thus immediately imminent, which is why the allied forces are put on the highest alert.

Organization

The main Turkish force consisted of: (Source 1)

VIII. Corps (Major General Djemal Pasha; Chief of Staff: Colonel Kress von Kressenstein)

- 23rd Division (68th Infantry Regiment)
- 25th Division (73rd Infantry Regiment, 74th Infantry Regiment and 75th Infantry Regiment)
- 29th Cavalry Regiment (3 or 4 cavalry squadrons) 4th
- and 8th Engineer Battalions
- Irregular units [5](#)) and Bedouins.

IV. Army (Navy Minister Djemal Pasha; Chief of Staff: Colonel von Frankenberg and Proschlitz)

- Army Staff
- 10th Division (28th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Regiment and 30th Infantry Regiment)
- Cavalry units 9
- batteries of field artillery (7.5 cm field guns) and 1 heavy battery (2 pcs. 15 cm howitzers)
- Various combat support and supply units.

VIII. Corps marched in first drop and IV. Army in second.

It is estimated that the main force consisted of approx. 20,000 men.

It is not a given that the Bedouins are included in the strength figure, as it was apparently not Turkish practice to count them.

North and south of the main force marched smaller units:

Command North

- 1 cavalry squadron A
- number of mounted irregular units and Bedouins Parts of the
- 80th and 81st Infantry Regiments (27th Division)

Command South

- 69th Infantry Regiment (23rd Division)
- A number of mounted gendarmerie units and irregular units 1 mountain
- battery.



Turkish field artillery on the march towards the Suez Canal.

Source unknown.

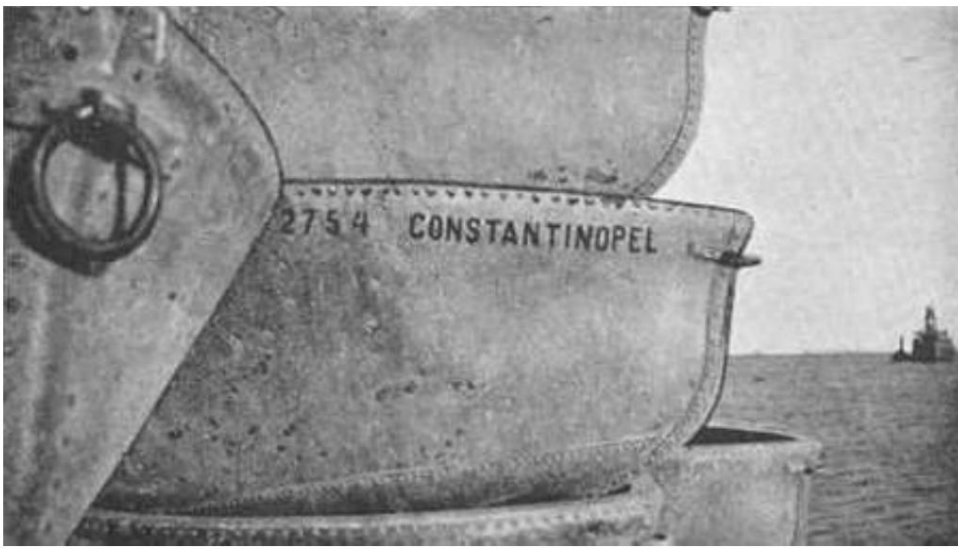
The two secondary commands are estimated to have consisted of approx. 5,000 men.

Quite impractically, both the Minister of Marine and the Major-General were named Djemal and bore the title of Pasha; in contemporary times they bore the nicknames *Biyuk* (the big/elder) and *Kuchuk* (the smaller/younger) respectively .

Source 1 mentions that the artillery must also have included at least one 12 cm pamphlet, as shell casings of this caliber were subsequently found.

Although the caption may fit, the photograph could also date from the Turkish attack on the Suez Canal in July-August 1916.

Transition material



*Captured Turkish pontoons that were of German manufacture.
From Source 4.*

The 4th and 8th Engineer Battalions brought a number of German model 6 steel pontoons, each capable of holding approx. 20 men. In addition, a number of rafts were brought along which were constructed of wood and carried aloft by empty "gasoline barrels" 7).

The pontoon's "home port" is listed on the bow.

On the march, both the transitional equipment and the heavy artillery were pulled by oxen.

The supply service

The supply service, which played a vital role in the passage of the desert regions, included 5,000 camels carrying water supplies. This part of the supply service was under the command of the German Major Fischer.

Up to another 5,000 camels were used in the other supply service.

Organization, in general



Turkish infantryman, 1914.

From the Handbook of the Turkish Army,
published in Cairo, 1916
(Australian War Memorial).

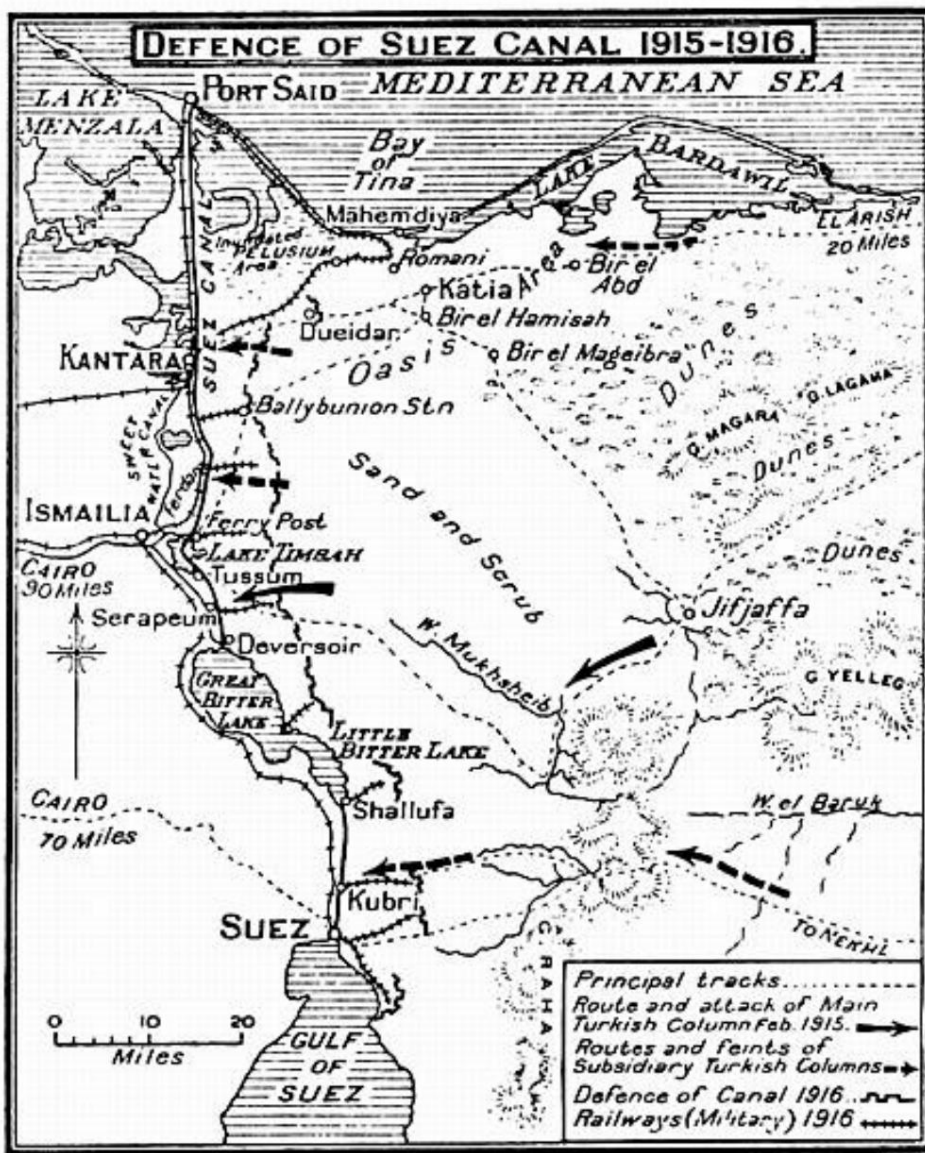
The large cooking vessel
was carried by every 10th man.

The infantry regiments of the Turkish Army usually consisted of three battalions, but it appears that the regiments that participated in the Suez Canal operations participated with only two battalions each. Source 1 assumes that the best soldiers of the regiments were gathered into the two "active" battalions, while the rest remained in Palestine.

VIII. In peacetime, Armés was garrisoned in Damascus, from which the 25th Division also originated; 23. Division had a garrison in Homs. The personnel were recruited from among Arabs who were generally not rated as efficient and stubborn as their comrades from Anatolia - 10th Division.

The article Turkish Army Prepares for War by Edward J. Erickson (World War 1 - Trenches on the Web) gives an impression of the structure, organization and equipment of the Turkish army.

The attack on the night between 2 and 3 February 1915



Map 2. The Suez Canal operations in 1915-16.
From Source 8.

The main attack was launched against Tussum and with minor diversionary maneuvers to the north and south.

The following sources available online give an impression of the operations:

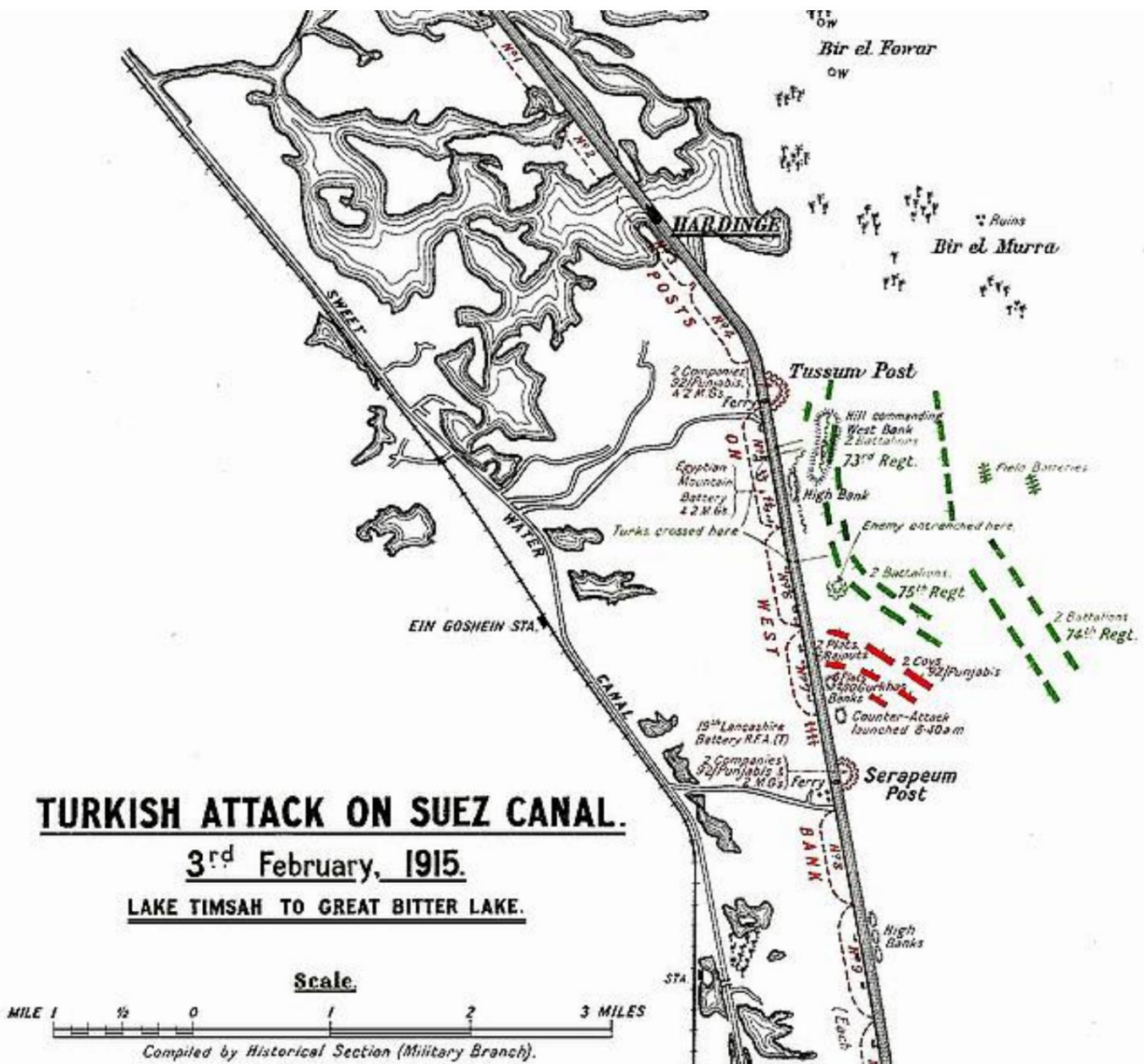
Sir John Maxwell's Egypt Despatch (Source 2).

Battle of the Suez Canal - A First-Hand Account of the Unsuccessful Turkish Invasion (Source 3).

Defense of the Suez Canal from The New Zealanders at Gallipoli (Source 4).

When the 62nd Punjabis along with Allied Warships saved the Suez Canal (Source 5).

If you are interested in more details, please refer to Source 1.



Map 3: The Turkish attack on the Suez Canal, 3 February 1915.
 From Source 1_8).

An attack command

Source 3 quotes the following from a captured Turkish command:

"By the grace of Allah we shall attack the enemy on the night of February 2/3, and seize the Canal.

Simultaneously with us the right column will attack Kantara; the 68th Regiment will attack El Ferdan and Ismailia; the left column will attack Suez; and one company from the 10th Division will attack Shallufa.

The champions of Islam, from Tripoli in Africa, from the left wing will advance to Serapeum and the south of Serapeum ...

As soon as it is dark the heavy artillery battery will take up its position. Its task is to destroy the enemy's warships in Lake Timsah. If it gets the opportunity, it is to sink a ship at the entrance to the Canal ...

Three regiments will proceed to the Camp of the Bridgemakers; the detachments will take pontoon and engineer soldiers from the companies selected as attack column ... The advances from the 'place of preparation' is to be made simultaneously in eight columns at a place to be fixed, and in a straight line; a pontoon is to be given to each squad; each squad is to send forward a party to reconnoitre ...

The march to the Canal is about four or five kilometers, and is to be accomplished without halt. The pontoons are to be launched in the Canal and the passage across is to begin immediately....

The first duty of the detachments which cross is to occupy the slope of the western bank. The two companies collected on the western bank are to advance 500 or 1,000 meters from the Canal and take up a favorable position facing west. After all the battalions in the first line have been mustered they are to continue the march. The 2/75th Regiment is to seize Toussoum and occupy the hill with small force. The 74th Regiment is to take the direction towards Timsah and the west, and is to advance as far as the railway line....

If the regiments meet with opposition from the enemy while occupying these positions, they are at once to execute a fierce bayonet charge....

At first I will be at the little hill on which are two sandhills; later on I shall go towards Toussoum."

Where did it go wrong?

While the allied side had a fairly good overview of the Turkish units and their capabilities, the sources indicate that something similar was not present on the Turkish side. Here it just needs to be added that the attack failed and the expected Egyptian revolt did not materialize, if it had been at all a figment of the imagination of the Turkish high command.



Turkish (Arab) infantrymen 9). —

The attack had hardly had a chance of being successful, as there were approx. 70,000 allied soldiers in Egypt, facing the approx. 25,000 attackers.

Among the Turkish and German explanations for why the operations went wrong, Source 1 places particular emphasis on two factors:

- The soldiers were not trained well enough to - in the dark - carry out such an advanced operation

as was the case.

- On the Turkish side, they did not deploy their best (Turkish) division (the 10th) in the attack, but instead chose an Arab division (the 25th).

The Turkish losses during the operations are given by Kress von Kressenstein as: 192 killed, 371 wounded and 727 missing, which probably includes only the main force. From the English side, the total Turkish losses are estimated at approx. 2,000 men. On the English side, the losses were calculated at 32 dead and 131 wounded.

Closing

This article can be read in conjunction with my article Defense of the Suez Canal. The modest Egyptian contribution to the defense of the Suez Canal played an important role in defeating the attack, as the 5th Egyptian Battery's 4 mountain guns and two Maxim machine guns were at the center of the Turkish attempt to cross the Suez Canal.

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).
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. *The Palestine Campaigns* by Colonel AP Wavell, Constable and Co. Limited, London 1933 (originally 1928).



A simultaneous reproduction of the Turkish attack on the Suez Canal in 1915.¹⁰

The illustration may seem legitimately fanciful at first glance, but if you imagine that the Turkish soldiers along the Suez Canal are spread over a much greater distance, then the plot makes better sense.

Notes:

- 1) Ahmed Djemal Pasha (1872-1922) (FirstWorldWar.com).
- 2) Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein (1870-1948) (FirstWorldWar.com). See also Kress von Kressenstein (Wikipedia).
- 3) See my article On British and French Air Forces in Egypt, 1914-15.
- 4) From The Turkish Rout at Romania (Great War in a Different Light).
- 5) One of the irregular units bore the impressive title "*Champions of Islam*".
- 6) Source 1 mentions that a total of 25 pontoons were subsequently collected, possibly up to 50 pontoons involved in the operations.
- 7) Referred to in Source 1 as *kerosene tins*. See Kerosenes (Wikipedia). The rafts were 4.5 m long and 3.5 m wide. They were equipped with high oar forks, intended for rowing/steering.

8) The map is an edited reproduction of a larger map originating from a special map folder that was published as a supplement to Source 1 (KGB catalog number 425958).

9) From *History of the First World War, Volume 3, No. 9*, Purnell, BPC Publishing Ltd., London 1970.

10) From *The Turkish Rout at Romania (Great War in a Different Light)*; originally from an Austrian journal.