

The War Diaries of Dr Charles Molteno ‘Kenah’ Murray

Book 3: North African Interlude

January – April 1916

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The Mediterranean en route to Egypt¹

3 January 1916. At sea. We received our marching orders on the afternoon of December 28, 1915. To entrain at 3.55 a.m. on December 30, 1915 at Farnborough, which is about 8 miles by road from Twesel-down. The night was luckily fine and we got into the train dry, and reached Devonport at about 2 pm, and got ourselves and all our stores on board by dusk. It blew so hard for the next two days that we did not get away until the morning of Sunday, January 2 1916. During this interval with the exception of a route march to Plymouth Hoe, we were not allowed off the ship. Though the wind abated it had be no means gone down altogether. The sea was so heavy that first one and then another of our torpedo boat escorts were forced to turn back.²

7 January 1916. Last evening we put into Gibraltar in the teeth of a gale of wind. A tug came out to us and after getting our orders we turned round and went out at once. This morning the wind had gone and all day we have steamed in a dead calm sea. In view of possible submarine attack we pursue a zig-zag course, going hither and thither in a most exotic fashion. There have been 4 other transports in sight during the day, also dodging about.

10 June 1916. Malta. We arrived outside last evening, but too late to go into harbour so we had to cruise about all night until next morning. We had about 1 ½ hours ashore so could not see much of this place. The harbour is very quaint and every available bit of land is crammed with buildings, those fringing the water’s edge being mostly fortifications. The country was very bare and reminded one very much of Las Palmas, except there were no high hills or mountains.

Camping in the desert outside Alexandria

13 January 1916. Arrived at Alexandria this evening and lay in the harbour.

15 January 1916. Disembarked and marched to camp at Mex. This is about 4 miles out among sand dunes on a narrow spit of land between the sea and a huge salt marsh. It is quite a nice site for camping in this weather. It has been cold so far at nights and this morning we have had a thunderstorm and heavy rain (17 Jan.1916) but the wind is getting up and the clouds drifting away. There are large quantities of troops here, and transports are arriving in a steady stream.

22 January 1916. Still at Mex. The weather pleasant - sea bathing good.

27 January 1916. Mex. Very heavy gale 3 days ago and high winds since. Tent was blown down in the night. Lost my sponge and got thoroughly smothered in driftsand.

Skirmish on the Tripoli (Libya) border

28 January 1916. Mex. Today we heard that one of our regiments which was sent to relieve some troops on the borders of Tripoli took part in an attack on about 4500 rebel Bedounis.³ It appears that the Bedounis drove our cavalry back so that when the S. Africans came up a fairly hot engagement ensued with the result that we lost 1 officer and 8 men killed and 5 officers and 104 men wounded. The Bedounis were eventually routed and their camp destroyed. The officer killed was Capt. Walsh of Natal.

5 February 1916. Usman, Welsh and I obtained 4 days leave and left for Cairo on February 1st. at 9 am. During our stay we had several rambles through the bazaars and mosques in that neighbourhood. We also visited the Citadel, the tombs of the Mamelukes and Kalifs, the museum, Pyramids, "Zoo", Old Cairo and went one evening to an Arab music hall entertainment.

12 March 1916. Mex. We are still inactive. The Colonel has made several endeavours to find out why we have not been sent to join our Brigade. From the various commanding officers both Medical and Combatant that we have seen it seems that we are included in the plan of campaign for the Western Front Force, but that up to the present there has been no call for us to supplement the medical arrangements already existing there. Our infantry were engaged again with the Senussi and drove them out of a strong position with the loss of 5 officers wounded and about 90 men wounded and about 12 killed. It is very difficult to get any definite information as the lists are published in odd details.

The Senussi of Benghazi – a potted history

The Senussi I had never heard of before coming here and as some who may read this may be equally ignorant I shall insert the gist of a few notes made at a lecture given to us by an intelligence officer some time soon after we landed.

The Senussi are a religious sect which was founded by Mohammed Ali El Senussi, born in 1784 in Algeria and settled in 1839 in the Benghazi district which is on the boundaries of Egypt and Tripoli. Subsequently he settled for a time at Mecca founding some monasteries there. In 1856 he returned once more to JAGHBUB in BENGHAZI district and founded a monastery (or Zawia) there. He died at this place in 1859. His teaching was the simple Koranic Law bereft of all its accretions and expansions. A sort of Mohammadan Puritanism. This man was succeeded by his son Mohammed El Madhi El Senussi, born in 1846. He was a very holy and religious man and in some respects a greater power (spiritually) than his father. He died in 1902 and was buried at Kiefia. As this man's son was too young to succeed him a grandson of the original Senussi was made successor, AHMAD EL SHERIF now known as THE SENUSSI.

Up to quite recent years this sect laid no claim to temporal power, and had adherents throughout Egypt, the main strongholds being the Benghazi district, and a strip of country extending from Sollum to Alexandria, occupied by the Aulad Ali tribe, and in addition to this the large oases which lie to the North of Sollum.

In the Turco-Italian war⁴ some Turkish officers were sent over to organise the Bedounis and chief among these was Enver Bey (now Pasha) and a brother Nuri Bey. It seems that the Italians never really succeeded in subduing the Senussi Arabs and it was this state of war with the Italians (now our allies) that gave the Turkish officers a handle by which to urge the Senussi, who were really friendly-disposed to the British regime in Egypt, to rise in rebellion. The hope of the Turks has been that a successful raid from the borders of Tripoli would stir a general revolt on the part of the Senussi throughout Egypt. In the last engagement the Yeomanry who were acting in conjunction with our infantry succeeded in capturing Nuri Bey and several other leaders so that there one hopes that the rebellion will gradually subside.

The likely course of the War in the Middle East

During our stay here one has heard interesting scraps of information from time to time as to the probable future course of the war in the East. The intelligence officer already refused to give it as his opinion that the Turkish attempt on the Canal⁵ had been a perfectly legitimate one from a purely military point of view. It not only threatened the capture of the canal but put to the test the theories of the Turkish and German Diplomats as to the internal feeling of the Mahommedans in Egypt and India. He considered that having failed to capture the canal last season, lost them their best chance and that now the expedition entailed would be far too prodigious to be undertaken. In addition to this their expectation as to the feeling internally had not been realised and therefore he considered that unless an attack was delivered before this month, the project could be regarded as having been abandoned. This conjecture seems to be proving correct.

Another interesting theory I heard put forward by some intelligence officers who have had many years of experience in the East was one as to the internal state of affairs in Turkey. They said that for many generations the ruling classes have chosen for their harems Circassian women, and that thus the real Turkish element in the ruling classes has become very much watered down and out of sympathy with the genuine Turkish burger.⁶ They contended that the true Turk is not at all in sympathy with the Turco-Germanic alliance and that before very long this feeling may manifest itself very strikingly. They said that it was entirely a mistake on our part to think that the Turks did not know of our intention to evacuate Gallipoli.⁷ They knew of it perfectly well but intentionally refrained from a merciless slaughter. The reason for withholding in this way being that the heart of the Turkish troops was not enthusiastically against us, and that orders for a merciless slaughter during our endeavours to get away would possibly have resulted in mutiny. What lends a touch of colour to this idea is the inexplicable manner in which they allowed the evacuation to go on from the South of Gallipoli after they had seen the troops leave Anzac.

At the time of our arrival in Egypt there were huge numbers of troops here and they were pouring in in shiploads daily. A great many regiments who have been at the front in France and on Gallipoli and suffered much knocking about and have many wounded, were amongst those sent, so that incidentally they would reap the benefit of the change of climate, and environment.

Now there is a set the other way and a sort of exodus is taking place - we presume to France. I think it is taken for granted now that no further attack on the canal can take place until next season, and in the meantime the Russians are pressing in through Erzerum and will give the Turks other things to think about. Hostilities in Egypt therefore seem now almost at an end and the military position will resolve itself into garrison work until the end of the war.

During the past month about 6000 West Indian and West African negro troops have been brought into camp here, adjoining our lines. This is one of those ways in which our resources are being wasted as these black troops seem quite worthless. The men are fairly well set up to look at, but of very poor physique, when put to the test. They have been mobilised 6 months or so and up to the present have not yet had an opportunity of learning to handle a rifle. On top of all this, the scaling pay has been fixed at 4/- per day, as opposed to the regular imperial rate of 1s/2d. You have therefore untrained negro troops drawing a very high rate of pay alongside our British troops mobilized in England at Imperial rates. This item represents an outlay of about 180,000 Pounds per month on a unit comprised of men who are really only fitted for labourers doing the most simple sort of work. (The cost of a soldier at Imperial rates has been reckoned to cost about 7/6d a day, so with increased pay these fellows cost nearly £1 per day per man). In this way you are not only wasting money but giving the negro an entirely false idea of his own worth to the Empire.

On board ship again; destination France

15 April 1916. We embarked on the Oriana at Alexandria on Thursday 13 April 1916. The Oriana was the transport that brought the Scottish Regiment of ours out to Egypt and was the boat that immediately preceded us on the Corsican. She is not nearly such a fine boat as the

latter. In fact none of these boats are anything like as comfortable as those running on our lines to the Cape.

Endnotes

¹ For reasons Kenah does not explain, his South African brigade, having been shipped to England after the close of the German South West African campaign, was now ordered to go not to the Western Front in France, but to Egypt.

² Even by this quite early stage in the war, only 18 months since fighting had started in August 1914, Britain was becoming concerned by Germany's growing submarine campaign in the North Atlantic – hence the torpedo boats accompanying the troop carrier Kenah was aboard. The German strategy of using submarines to sink all shipping, naval and commercial, in order to cut Britain off from vital food, arms and troop supplies from overseas eventually became the key factor that brought the United States of America into the war two years later, and made Germany's ultimate defeat inevitable.

³ Presumably, Bedouins.

⁴ Italy wanted to join in the European powers' general scramble to seize control of Africa after 1884 and divide it up into colonies. Italy saw this stretch of North Africa (today's Libya) lying to the south of Sicily as easy pickings since the Ottoman Empire which had held a loose suzerainty over the area for centuries was in terminal decline. Hence this Italian-Turco war.

⁵ The Suez Canal, which was vital to Britain's communications with its Indian Empire and to its assault on the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.

⁶ Kenah uses the Afrikaans word for 'citizen' here.

⁷ This is a reference to the disastrous attack in 1915 that the Allies launched on Turkey at the Dardanelles in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Turkish forces put up an unexpectedly successful defence against the British and Australian forces which had been landed there in this diversionary attack on the German/Austrian/Turkish alliance. Several members of the Molteno family played their part in this bloody campaign (see elsewhere on this website).