

NOTE

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Operations in Palestine
1918-1919

1. Another theatre of war in which Canadians served was Palestine. Their Canadian railway troops rendered valuable aid to the advance during the successful close of the campaign in Palestine and Syria. This Report is a preliminary account of their activities.
2. The summer of 1918 found the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (E.E.F.) under General Sir Edmund Allenby holding a front which stretched between the Mediterranean coast and the river Jordan on a line ten miles north of Jaffa and the Dead Sea. The railway from Egypt, on which the British depended for supply, was good as far as Jerusalem. In the event of an advance into Syria, however, it seemed inevitable that enemy railway demolitions would hinder the British pursuit. Particularly vulnerable were the bridges in the Yarmuk Valley, a deep gorge through which the Turkish railway descended from Der'a to Samakh on the southern shore of the Sea of Galilee. There the railway crossed and re-crossed the river on bridges so long, so difficult of approach, that the British had previously estimated the destruction of one would isolate the Turks in Palestine for a fortnight. An unsuccessful attempt had indeed been made by Captain T.E. Lawrence and his Arab irregulars during November 1917. (British Official History, Military Operations Egypt and Palestine, Vol. 2, 400, 439, 461-6).
3. Allenby had determined as early as July 1918 to take the offensive (Ibid., 448), and at about this time he requested the War Office to provide a company of expert bridge builders. The 1st Canadian Bridging Company (256 all ranks) was formed from eight of the Canadian Railway Troops battalions then in France. The unit sailed from Marseilles on 20 September 1918, arriving in Palestine twelve days later. (Report of the Ministry, Overseas Military Forces of Canada, 1918, 23, 1st Bridging Company, "Historical Record," Folder 101, file 12 [E-11]).
4. Meanwhile the Meggido battles had begun on 19 September, inflicting a sweeping defeat on the enemy. A week later the remnants of his demoralized armies were streaming north into Syria. (Egypt and Palestine, 468, 567).
5. The railway system in northern Palestine ran southeast from Haifa on the Mediterranean coast to Beisan, in the Jordan Valley, thence north to Samakh at the southern extremity of the Sea of Galilee. Between Beisan and Samakh a bridge carried the line over the Jordan at Jisr el Majami. From Samakh a link connecting the Palestine system to the Hejaz Railway ran due east through the Yarmuk Valley to Der'a. At this place the Hejaz line passed through from Medina in the south, thence generally northward to Damascus, Riyaq, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo on the way to Constantinople. (Ibid., Map facing 537).
6. On 20 September the 19th Lancers received orders to march that evening on Jisr el Majami, hold the railway bridges, and prepare them for demolition. Charges were placed in the bridge over the Jordan and also in one bridge over the river Yarmuk to the north, but they were not exploded as the line might soon be required by the British (Ibid., 522). Five days later, the enemy rearguard position at Samakh was captured, and the 12th Australian Light Horse moved eastward along the railway line up the Yarmuk, seizing one bridge. The advance was then halted, as it had been decided to move the force up the west side of the Sea of Galilee. "It was perhaps unfortunate that the brigade was not allowed to capture the second bridge, which was covered by a small redoubt, for the enemy blew it up later and its repair took many weeks." (Ibid., 521-2, 544-5)

7. The advance to Damascus began on 27 September. The Turkish Fourth Army was retiring on Der'a. In pursuit was the 4th British Cavalry Division, which followed the line of the railway from Samakh, to which town the captured Turkish railway from Haifa had now been put in order. (*Ibid.*, 546, 562, 567) It is likely that the bulk of the Turkish army might have reached Damascus in time to organize a defence, had it not been delayed by the brilliant destructive work done on the railway by Lawrence (then Lieut. Colonel) and his Arab auxiliaries. (John Buchan, *A History of the Great War*, Vol. 4, (London 1922) 357.)
8. Damascus, however, fell on 1 October; and it was now vital to extend railway communications to the Syrian capital. To this end the Canadian bridging unit was ordered to the Yarmuk Valley, where it arrived on the 5 October for work on two of the railway bridges north of Samakh. The Jordan and Yarmuk Valleys, well below sea level, are among the most unhealthy places in Palestine. Week after week shade temperatures of a hundred degrees rising sometimes to 120, are maintained. Yet the thermometer is not the only index to their horrors. Owing to the depth of these valleys and the enormous amount of evaporation from the Sea of Galilee and the rivers themselves, the air is heavy with moisture. The hills at either side of the gorge act as a screen, so the air is commonly stagnant, yellow in the sun's rays. Transport stirred up dust from the friable soil, and dun clouds would hang for long periods in the overcharged air. All this affected the troops, especially during the first days of duty, with an extraordinary lassitude and sense of helplessness. Insect life fitted the pestiferous surroundings. In the dry parts there were scorpions, six-inch centipedes, and stinging spiders, and where the ground was swampy – mosquitoes. The company was soon crippled by sickness, the causes of which were simple. The British had advanced from an area wherein every precaution known to science had been taken, straight into one in which little or nothing had been done to fight the mosquito. The incidence of malaria, for the most part of a malignant type, was high. That, however, was only the beginning. From 6 October came the wave of influenza – often followed by pneumonia – which was experienced in every theatre, and indeed all over the world. (“Historical Record,” Folder 101, File 12 [E-11]. *Egypt and Palestine*, 422-3, 597).
9. By the middle of October, sickness had reduced the Canadian bridging unit by more than 75 per cent, and a fortnight later only one officer and thirty men were left. For one week, in fact, not more than six were working. Four men died, two of malaria and two of pneumonia. With 560 men of the Egyptian Labour Corps, the Canadian task was continued, so that by the 26 October supplies could be sent all the way to Damascus by rail. (*Egypt and Palestine*, 600. “1st Bridging Coy”, file G.A.Q. 10-28 folder 5. “Historical Record.”)
10. In the north, the campaign was nearing a successful conclusion. So hopelessly disorganized were the Turkish troops that the German Commander-in-chief (Liman von Sanders) had no hope of making a real stand short of Aleppo. On 9 October, Allenby accepted an offer by Emir Feisal, Lawrence's Arab leader, of 1500 cavalry and camel-men to operate northwards against the Turkish communications between Hama and Aleppo. The Turks themselves blew railway bridges. On the 26th, the British entered Aleppo and advanced eight miles beyond it, towards Alexandretta. (*Egypt and Palestine*, 605, 611-612, 615-6.)
11. The armistice with Turkey, signed on 30 October, brought an end to hostilities. Many problems remained, however. Thousands of refugees were awaiting repatriation; whole populations were on the verge of starvation; and prisoners of war, chiefly British and Indian, had to be taken over from the Turks and evacuated. Rolling stock was essential. The 1st Bridging Company, which had moved to Hama at the end of October, worked on restoring and improving the railway until the first week of February 1919. A month later it sailed for England, to rejoin the Railway Troops Depot. (*Ibid.*, 622. “Historical Record”.)
12. In all, the campaign had cost seven Canadian lives, four, as we have seen, from malaria and pneumonia. In addition to these, one man died from dysentery, another was killed by a locomotive and the last was drowned while fishing in a tributary of the Yarmuk river. (“Historical Record”).
13. This report was compiled by Capt. J.A. Swettenham, R.C.E.

(GWL Nicholson) Colonel
Director
Historical Section (G.S.)