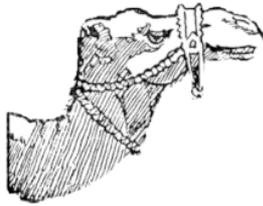


The Camel Brigade

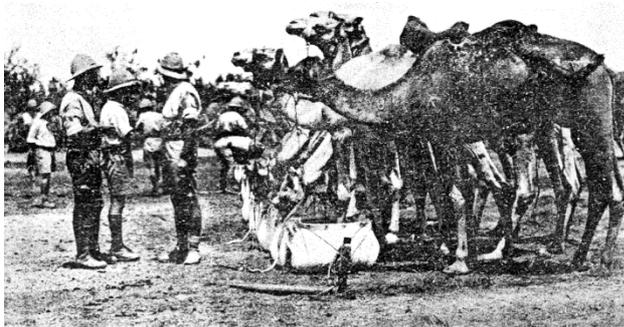
by Bluegum (Major Oliver Hogue)

From "Australia in Palestine" published by Angus & Robertson, 1919.



HERE are, maybe, ten thousand Australians who will never see a map of Egypt or Palestine, never hear of the Great War, never sing or listen to a Christmas Carol, and, perhaps, never even boil a billy, without thinking of camels.

Nor is it altogether surprising; for camels played so prominent a part in their lives in the days of Armageddon. They lived on camels; they always slept near, and often on camels; and camels carried their tucker, their water, their clothes, their blankets. The last thing they saw as they fell asleep at night was a string of long-necked camels silhouetted against the bare horizon. The first thing they heard after reveille was the raucous noise of a camel lifting up its voice in the wilderness. Nothing but camel, day and night, from the Senussi stunt to the Jerusalem-Jericho-Jordan scrapping.



Watering time, Camel Brigade

None of us really liked our camels. Frankly, most of us loathed them. They were a necessary evil. In a desert campaign they were indispensable: so they were tolerated. But for many, many months the Cameleers cursed them without ceasing for the vilest, stupidest, craziest beasts that ever cumbered the earth.

Then, suddenly - it was about midsummer, 1918 - we began to realize some of the many virtues of the much-maligned camel. We remembered that even on the scorching sands of Sinai, we were rarely short of water. We reminded each other that, while Light Horsemen shivered on the freezing Judean Hills, we snuggled cosily 'neath a bivvy and four blankets. We thought of all the little extra canteen delicacies we had carried in our capacious saddle-bags. And we talked about the good times we had at the camel sports with Horace, and Mange, Dressing and Starlight.

The reason for this volte-face, this sudden revulsion of feeling in favour of the camel, lay in the fact that our camels were to be taken away from us. We were to be transformed into cavalry for that Big Push which we hoped would result in the smashing of the Turkish Army. And remembering the comparative luxury of the Cameleer's life, we tried to make the amende honorable and say kind things of and to our old hooshtas.



"Prepare to Mount"

The Australian Camel Corps was formed early in 1916, when the Senussi became troublesome. Four companies of infantry just back from Gallipoli formed the nucleus of the corps. They proved a most valuable asset, so more were demanded. But it was not certain that a sufficient number of Australians could be provided, so the 2nd Battalion was composed of English and Scotch Territorials, and the force became known as the Imperial Camel Corps. Later, a third Battalion was made up of Australians and New Zealanders, and, at the end of the year, a fourth Battalion, of Australians.

The Camel Corps was handicapped because of the general ignorance concerning it. The A.I.F. in Sinai knew little of it; Australia knew less. Often it was confused with and mistaken for the Camel Transport Corps, a valuable unit, which has done splendid work, but is not a fighting unit like the I.C.C. The members of the Imperial Camel Corps had all left their parent Regiments, and so, for a long time, missed those welcome parcels that the different Comfort Funds so generously sent to the boys. Later, however, the A.I.F. Comforts took a kindly interest in the poor Cameleers - and the Cameleers were unfeignedly grateful.

Coming back to Egypt from the Western Desert, the Cameleers spelled awhile, then moved over the Canal to Sinai and participated in the Romani-Bir-el-Abd fighting. Then came the big trek east towards El

Arish with its attendant patrols and skirmishes. When Abdul bolted from El Arish the Army followed, the Light Horse and the Camel Corps in the van.

Maghdaba and Rafa followed, two of the most picturesque and decisive battles of the campaign; and in each the Camel Corps distinguished itself greatly. Then on to Khan Yunis - where lived Delilah of old — and then to historic Gaza: the lion in our path. The story of the three battles of Gaza has already been told. There is no need to recapitulate here the part played by the Camelry in those engagements, save to mention that in the second battle the I.C.C. rushed and captured their objective, suffering about 75 per cent, casualties; while in the third, and victorious, battle, they held the line at Kouelphi and Ras el Nagb in face of heavy counter-attacks.



Member of the Camel Corp at Ludd

The army had now turned the corner, and, under General Allenby's inspiring leadership, the Camel Brigade pushed north with the remainder of the force until Jerusalem was captured. Then the army settled down in the stalemate line of trenches stretching from just north of Jaffa to the Jordan near Jericho; by which time the Cameleers had suffered so many casualties, and the camels were in such deplorable condition, that they were sent back to Rafa to recuperate - and hold a sports meeting.

Mention should be made of the Hong Kong - Singapore Indian Mounted Battery, known to the Camel Corps as "The Bing Boys." These Indian soldiers participated in all the fighting in Palestine.

In March, 1918, the Camel Corps trekked through Palestine to Richon, where they sampled the wine of the country. Then, after the rains, they ploughed their way through mud and slush and wire to Bethlehem. From the wintry heights of Judea they descended by way of Jericho to the midsummer of the Jordan Valley and on to Amman. Much has been written about the adventure, or misadventure, into the hills of Moab. Never will the Cameleers forget that night journey over slippery goat-tracks to Es Salt. Never before or since was there ever such a journey. Hour after hour the cavalcade struggled onward and upward, crawling round ugly devil's-elbows on mountain tracks, slipping and floundering in the mud. Time and again camels would collapse, bogged and helpless, and some toppled over the precipice. But the Brigade got to Amman and blew up the Hedjaz Railway.

Back to the Jordan Valley again, the prey of snakes and scorpions and spiders, mosquitos and flies and Turkish shells — but the mosquitos were the worst. Scores and scores of men went sick with malaria, which recurred during subsequent operations. The last big scrap of the L.C.C. was the defence of Musallabeh, which the Turks attacked with grim determination. In spite of very heavy casualties, the Cameleers held on and beat off the enemy. Because of this gallant defence. General Allenby decreed that henceforth Musallabeh should be called "The Camel's Hump."

With Sinai far behind and well-watered country ahead, it was seen that the Camel Brigade had outlived its usefulness. So, in May, the Cameleers returned westward towards Jaffa, handed over their camels, and were mounted on horses and armed with swords for the Big Push.



Photograph from the Australian War Memorial AWM H00774