

The Long, Long Trail

Researching soldiers of the British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918

The campaign in Egypt and Palestine

This section of the Long, Long Trail will be helpful for anyone wishing to find out about the fighting in the campaign in Egypt and Palestine.

British forces involved in Egypt and Palestine (Egypt Expeditionary Force)

Note that some Divisions moved to Egypt as a base for operations at Gallipoli. This included the British 29th Division and the Australian Divisions. Formations are only listed here if they took part in local operations in Egypt or Palestine or the Western Desert prior to leaving and going elsewhere.

- **42nd (East Lancashire) Division** (arrived September 1914, left February 1917)
- **2nd Mounted Division** (arrived April 1915)
- **53rd (Welsh) Division** (arrived December 1915)
- **31st Division** (arrived December 1915, left March 1916)
- **46th (North Midland) Division** (arrived and left January 1916)
- **54th (East Anglian) Division** (arrived December 1915)
- **52nd (Lowland) Division** (arrived January 1916, left April 1918)
- **ANZAC Mounted Division** (formed March 1916)
- **74th (Yeomanry) Division** (formed March 1917, left May 1918)
- **Australian Mounted Division** (formed February 1917)
- **75th Division** (formed March – April 1917)
- **60th (2/2nd London) Division** (arrived June 1917)
- **Yeomanry Mounted Division** (formed July 1917)
- **10th (Irish) Division** (arrived October 1917)

Battles and engagements

Background

Today the land where the British forces were active in 1914-1918 lies in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria. For centuries before the Great War, this land had been part of the Ottoman Empire. 'Palestine' is a shorthand for this campaign, applied to a widespread war that was initially centred along the banks of the Suez Canal, which links the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, in Egypt. Later, operations were necessary in the Hejaz and in Aden, before in 1917 an offensive was launched which took British troops into the Holy Land and Syria. The Arab tribes in the area played an important part in the developing war, some rising against the British, many against the Ottomans.

The land covered by this campaign varies in widely in terms of landscape. The most important features affecting the fighting were the narrow coastal plain from the Suez Canal area stretching northwards past Gaza and Jaffa, and the rocky heights of the two sides of the Jordan valley.

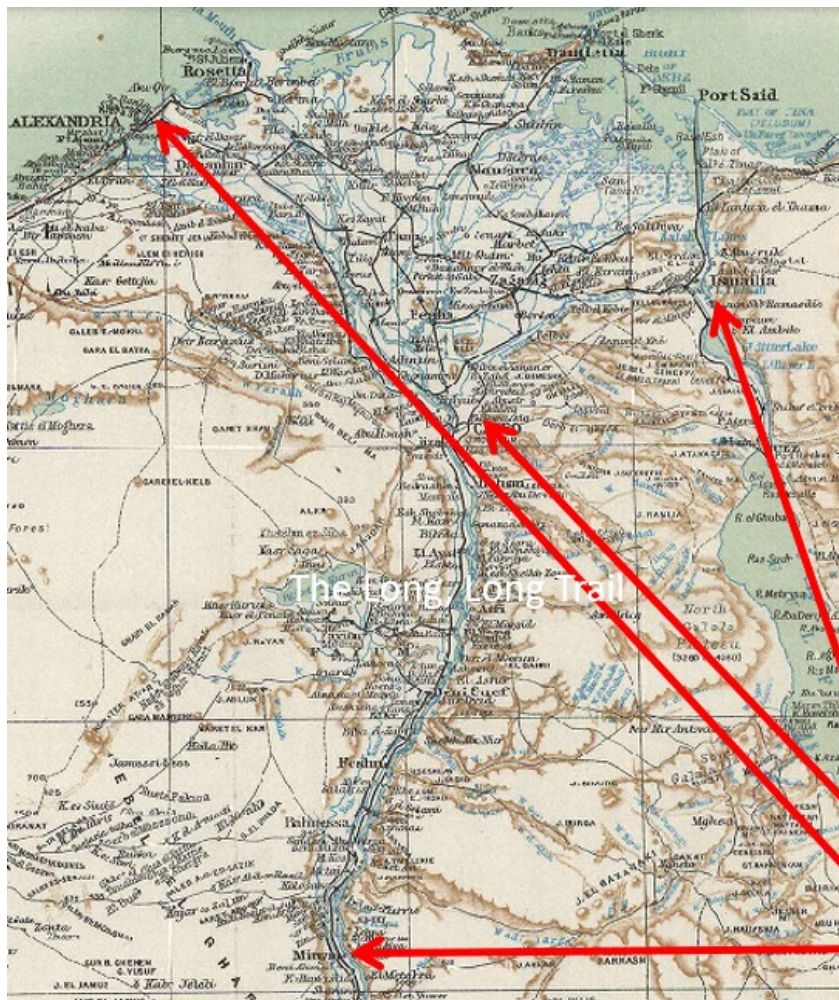


The area in which all but the very final operations of the war (which were north of Tyre and up into Syria) were fought.

The Suez Canal was a vitally important supply route for the British Empire. During the war, troops and equipment of the Australian, New Zealand and Indian forces passed this way en route for the Western Front, in addition to millions of tons of foodstuffs, minerals and other provisions bound for Britain and her Allies. The importance of the Canal had been recognised by the British Government long before the war, and steps were taken to provide defences.

Egypt was occupied by British troops long before the Great War. Germany had for many years before the war assiduously developed Turkey as an ally, which it saw as an important part of the *Drang nach Osten* (The Thrust towards the East: Germany wanted new lands, new markets). The Ottoman army was led by German 'advisors', as was much of its trade and commerce. Pushed by Germany – which also tried to encourage a Jihad (Muslim Holy War) against the British forces – the Ottoman Empire was to strongly resist the British incursion. Initially, Britain set out only to defend the Canal from the Ottoman troops that were massed in Palestine. During this phase of operations, actions were also necessary against the Senussi Arabs in the western desert. Following important victories that pushed the Ottomans further from the Canal, along with the helpful support of Arabs in the Hejaz and elsewhere, the British force began to contemplate a push into Palestine. This became additionally important once the attempt on Gallipoli was a recognised failure and Britain had suffered a catastrophic defeat at Kut-al-Amra in Mesopotamia. Politically, success in Palestine was believed by some to be a less costly way towards defeat of Germany than the painful battering at the Western Front.

From late 1914 until mid-1915, the British force stood on the defensive along the Suez Canal, defeating various Turkish and German/Turk-led Senussi attempts to capture or damage the canal. A vital victory was gained in August 1916 at Rumani near the coast, which relieved the canal position. The British began to construct a railway and supply roads along the coastal plain at this time, both of which were to prove vitally important when two years later it was necessary to provide for a larger force advancing into Palestine.



Northern Egypt, 1916. The entire area shown had developed into a strategically important British military base. Its initial importance was for the defence of the Suez Canal, the vital route between Great Britain and India, but in 1915 it also became used as the main base for operations at Gallipoli in Ottoman Turkey. When the Gallipoli campaign was abandoned in early 1916 the British force was evacuated to Egypt and the main camps at Abbassia, Minia and Kantara were developed. During 1915 operations also commenced against the hostile Senussi in the Western Desert of Egypt, and in early 1916 also began to develop eastwards along the Sinai coast towards Palestine.

Suez Canal

Abbassia (outskirts of Cairo)

Sidi Bishr, NE of Alexandria

Minia (Minya, on the Nile)

Kantara and Ismailia can be seen on the map at the top of the page.

1915

- The **Defence of the Suez Canal** (26 January – 12 August)
- Operations in the Sinai Peninsula (15 November 1915 – 9 January 1917)
- **Operations against the Senussi in the Western Desert** (23 November 1915 – 8 February 1917)

1916

- Operations against the Sultan of Darfur (1 March – 31 December)
- The Arab revolt in the Hejaz (6 June – 22 September)
- **The Battle of Romani** (4-5 August)

1917

It was not until early 1917 that sufficient force had been gathered, and lines of communication established, for an assault on the large Ottoman forces in Palestine. Two attempts on the difficult and fortified Ottoman positions at Gaza on the coast narrowly

failed, but alerted the Ottoman command, which ordered a strengthening of the front all the way from Gaza to Beersheba. A change of command, with Allenby replacing Murray, and a British Government increasingly anxious for success brought a change of approach and a marked strengthening of the British force – which was filled out, as in Mesopotamia, by a large Indian Army contingent as well as ANZAC mounted troops. The Palestine theatre became the second largest in terms of forces deployed, after the Western Front. Allenby launched an attack when he was ready in October 1917. It broke the Ottoman position at Beersheba and Gaza, then swept successfully north and east, capturing the notable prize of Jerusalem ‘as a Christmas present for the British people’ (David Lloyd George) before later moving into Syria.

- The First Battle of Gaza (26 – 27 March)
- The Second Battle of Gaza (17 – 19 April)
- The Third Battle of Gaza (27 October – 7 November)
- The Affair of Huj, the Action of El Mughar and Capture of Junction Station (8 – 14 November)
- The Battle of Nabi Samweil (20 – 24 November)
- The Capture of Jerusalem (7 – 9 December)
- The Battle of Jaffa (21 – 22 December)

1918

- Operations in the Jordan Valley (19 February – 4 May)
- The Battles of Megiddo, Sharon and Nablus (19 – 25 September)
- The continuation of the Final Offensive beyond the Jordan (to 26 October)
- Armistice (31 October 1918)



The advance through Palestine and the Battle of Megiddo: the horse-lines of the Australian Light Horse under the cliff at Auja ford in Palestine. Imperial War Museum image HU90359

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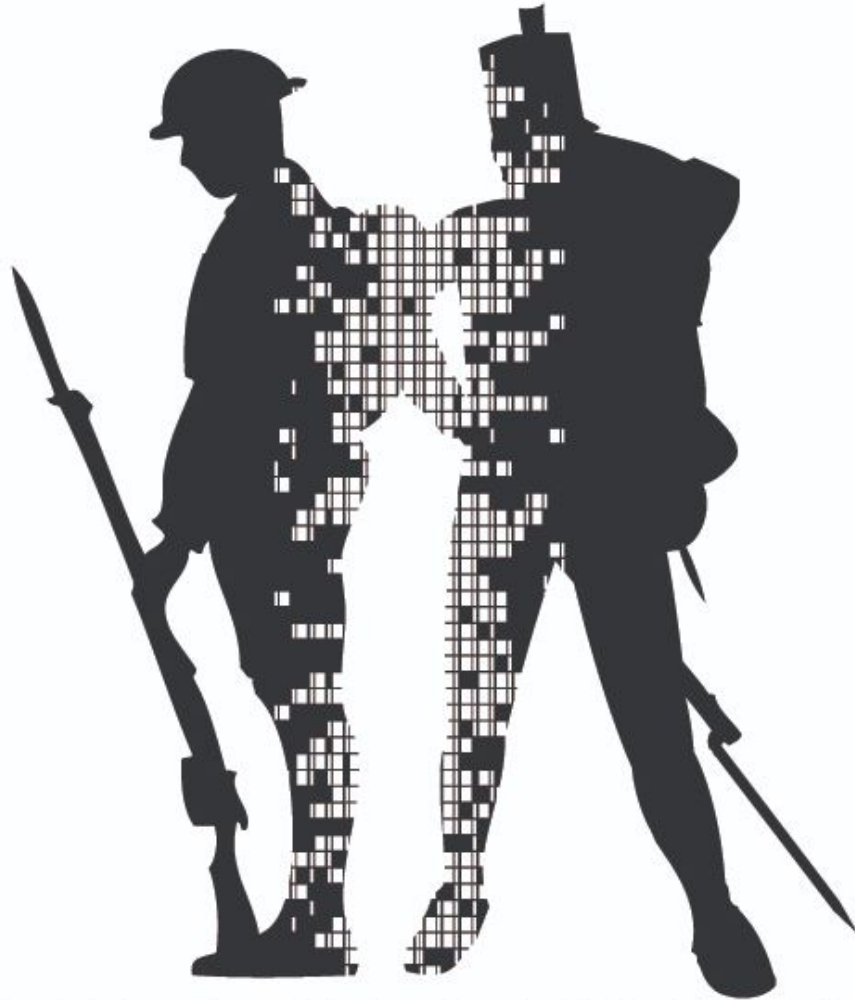


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In memory

In memory of Frank, Harry, Albert, Charles, Thomas, William, Gabriel and James, and all other members of my family who experienced the terrible Great War.

Contact

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