

ALLIES IN THE BRITISH-LED EGYPTIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE, 1916-1918

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Postal history can only be understood in its context. This display concerns the small French Detachment sent to support the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) in July 1918 (more men could not be spared).

Strategists on both sides of the First World War (WW1) could clearly see the vital importance of both the Suez Canal and the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. The Allies gave the defence of these their priority. This was the setting for the EEF.

The aim of the 1915 Dardanelles Campaign was to assist our Ally Russia and distract German forces from the Western Front. The Headquarters was in Alexandria, Egypt. The forces involved were together called the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF).

On 20th March 1916 the survivors of MEF brought back from the disastrous Dardanelles Campaign and the original Egyptian garrison were merged into one new EEF to defend the Suez Canal. First attempts to push back the Ottoman forces from the brink of the Canal and then from Sinai were very successful. EEF, which consisted at this stage mostly of British and Commonwealth troops, reached Gaza and there met fierce resistance. In 1917 two important defeats followed and more than 10,000 EEF troops were killed. The British called for help from their Allies.

In spite of all the detail now available concerning the postal history of the British troops, the postal history of the important allied forces has so far escaped description in English. So, while setting the context for the Allies in British EEF postal history, the prime focus of this display will be the postal history of each of the Allies who made such a contribution to this campaign and the French, though briefly, in particular. Thus the purpose of this display is to give an over-view of the postal history of our Allies.

ALLIES IN THE BRITISH-LED EGYPTIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE IN WW1¹

Strategists on both sides of the First World War (WW1) could clearly see the vital importance of both the Suez Canal and the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. So the Germans and Ottoman forces pushed forward to try to capture both, knowing that, if they did, their enemy could not survive. The Allies gave the defence of these their priority. This was the setting for the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF).

The Dardanelles Campaign

The aim of this was to assist our ally Russia and distract German forces from the Western Front. The Campaign began in March 1915 as a naval bombardment by British and French ships but they sustained heavy losses (mostly by mines in the sea). Military landings followed in April and August 1915. These too ended in humiliating defeat. So all Allied troops were withdrawn by January 1916. The Headquarters controlling these actions was in Alexandria, Egypt. The forces involved were together called the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF).

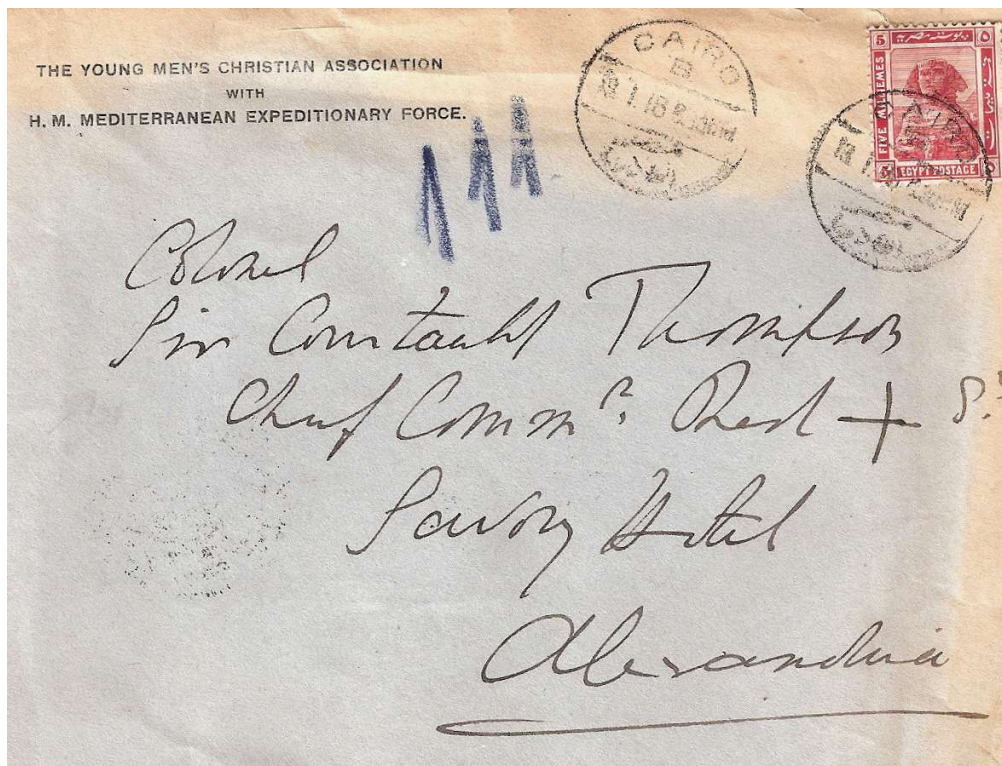


Figure 1.1

Cover addressed to Sir Courtauld Thompson, the Chief Commissioner of the British Red Cross Society, who was staying at the Savoy Hotel in Alexandria. The envelope used bears the imprint of "The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) with "H.M. Mediterranean Expeditionary Force" (MEF), even though the MEF had ceased to exist in March 1916. Since it was probably only senior staff of the YMCA who ever had access to such official stationery, it can be assumed that this was addressed by a senior YMCA official. The cover bears the 5m adhesive of Egypt and the date-stamp of Cairo, 13.1.1918.

¹ Extracted from my *Aspects of Palestinian Postal History 1914-1979* (2021) published by the Postal History Society and included here with permission of the Editor.

Free postage for military personnel in Egypt started on 15th March 1915. At the beginning of 1916 there were two military groupings in Egypt - the survivors of MEF brought back from the Dardanelles Campaign and the original garrison, known as the Force in Egypt, which had been defending the Suez Canal throughout 1915. On 20th March 1916 these two groups were merged into one new EEF. Until the merger the mail service for the MEF personnel had been separate from that for the Force in Egypt. The combined postal service was run from Army Base Office "Z" at Alexandria (see Fig.1.2).



Figure 1.2

Another YMCA envelope, this "With the Egyptian Expeditionary Forces" imprint, partly covered by the Registration label of "Base A.P.O. Z". The two penny British adhesive is cancelled and tied by the BASE ARMY POST OFFICE / Z, 18 OCT 1918, date-stamp.

EEF began in Egypt simply to defend the Suez Canal. First attempts to push back the Ottoman forces from the brink of the Canal and then from Sinai were very successful. The EEF consisted at this stage mostly of British and Commonwealth troops. It reached Gaza and there met fierce fighting. In 1917 two important defeats followed and more than 10,000 EEF troops were killed.

The military aspects of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) have been described in detail by military historians². The postal service of the Indian Army in WW1 and the postmarks of the British forces have been described in detail by Charles Entwistle³ and Ted Proud.⁴ More recently Rodney Unwin has described the posts of the British in the EEF⁵.

In spite of all the detail available concerning the postal history of the British troops, what has so far escaped description in English is the postal history of the important allied forces. So, while setting the context for the Allies in British military postal history, the prime focus of this chapter will be on the postal history of the Allies who made such a vital contribution to this campaign.

² For example *The advance of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force ... July 1917 to October 1918 compiled from Official Sources*. 1919. 2nd Ed.

³ (1999). *A priced checklist of Indian Base & Field Post Offices 1914-1924* [Publ. Entwistle: Perth]

⁴ Edward B Proud (2016). *History of the British Army Postal Service. Volume II 1903-1927*.

⁵ Rodney Unwin (2019). The post during the Palestine Campaign. *The London Philatelist*. 128.71-81

Key points in the timing of operations⁶

20 March 1916. EEF formed from Mediterranean Expeditionary Force & the Force in Egypt.

August - December 1916. Gradual advance toward Rafah (on Palestine/Egypt border).

March & April 1917. First & Second battles of Gaza; 10,441 British & Allied casualties.

June 1917. General Edmund Allenby appointed Commander of EEF. He reorganised the army into three Corps. Troop numbers increased to c.100,000.

31 October - 7 November 1917. Third battle of Gaza - very costly but victorious.

9 December 1917. Jerusalem occupied. Twenty month total casualties reach 21,559.

Early 1918. The campaign spread eastward toward Amman and the Ottoman railway to support the Arab revolt. Three quarters of British troops withdrawn to Europe and replaced by Indian sepoy who had to be trained for battle on site.

September 1918. North of Jaffa, Allenby's infantry drove a gap in the Ottoman army, encircled them and captured more than 75,000 troops.

1 October 1918. Damascus captured. Later, advance EEF troops reach north of Aleppo.

31 October 1918. Ottoman armistice.

The sites of operations

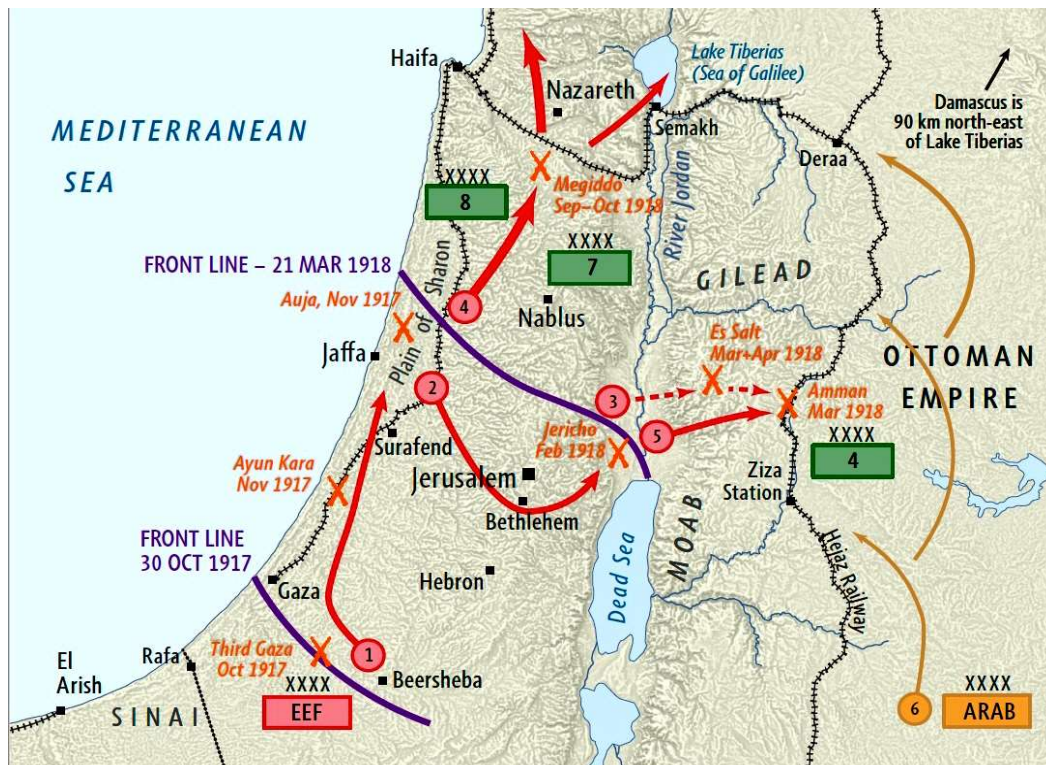


Figure 1.3⁷

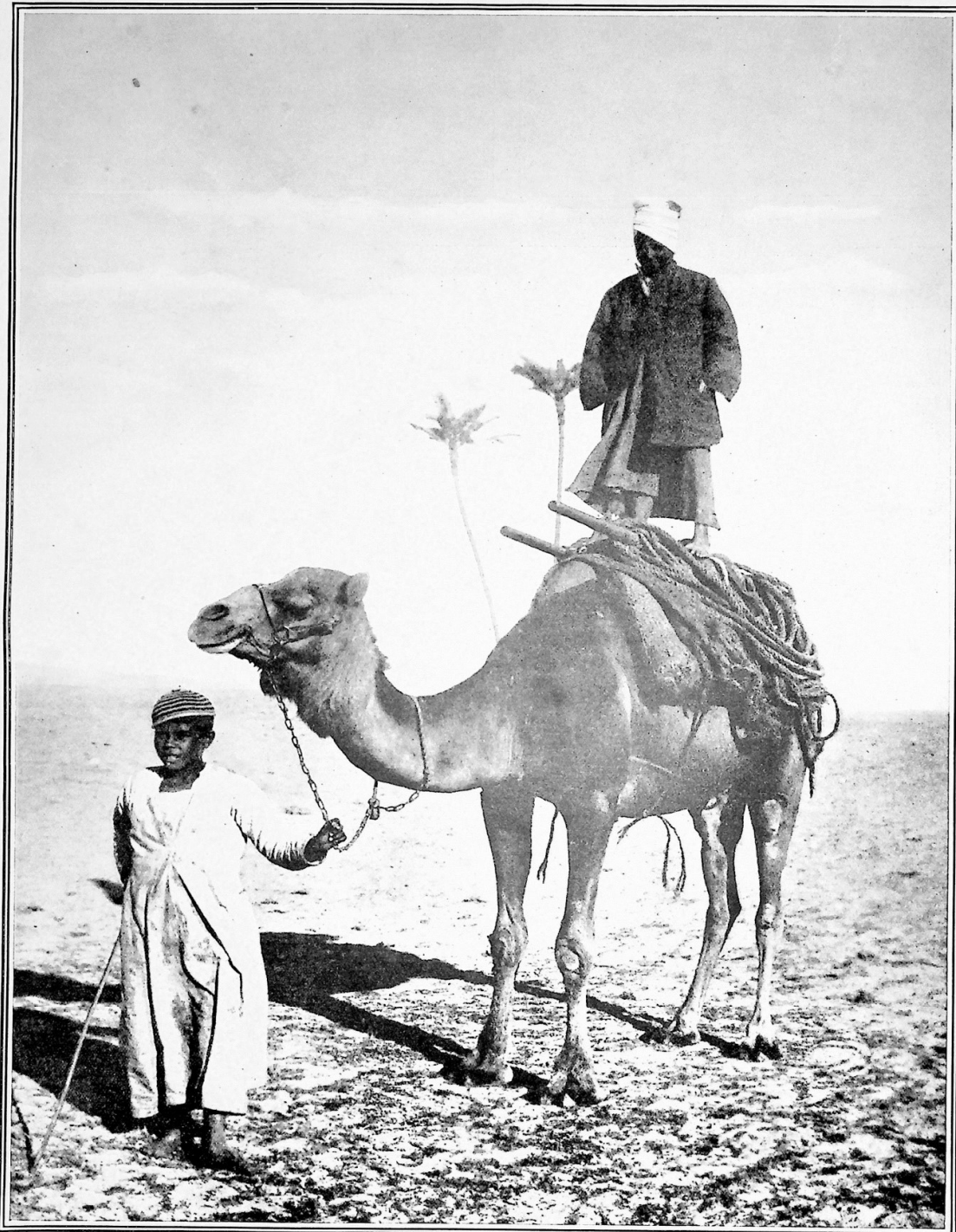
Diagram showing the movement of the 1,800-man New Zealand Brigade, part of EEF, in red. The Arab Army (orange arrows) worked on the eastern flank - the areas where they were most expert. Details may be found on the website from which this map comes (Note 7).

The EEF operation began by clearing Ottoman forces from the north bank of the Suez Canal, driving them northward with little serious opposition until lines near Gaza were drawn up. Here the EEF suffered its first serious casualties. Two significant defeats at Gaza prompted the British government to ask their Allies for support. The Force included Australian and New Zealand Mounted Divisions, two Indian divisions, an Arab Army and a French and an Italian Detachment. The number of troops sent by France was modest and sent by Italy only nominal but they were, none the less, important tokens.

⁶ James E Kitchen (2017). *Egyptian Expeditionary Force*. [International Encyclopaedia of the First World War]

⁷ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/palestine-campaign>

WITH THE EGYPTIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.



OUT IN THE DESERTS NEAR THE SUEZ CANAL

Special SPHERE picture

The above picture was obtained during a few days' leave spent in the desert. One morning this camel, in charge of two boys, appeared. Its equipment was not of an expensive character; a piece of rough cord served as a girth, but with the two barefooted urchins it made a striking picture against the wide yellow sands. The boy in the foreground, holding the camel by a light chain, wore a bright cap of red-and-white stripes and a quaint cotton surtout gathered together over the chest. The other lad wore a white handkerchief turban and a European jacket.

b

Figure 1.4

Caption at foot of next page

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POSTAL HISTORY

British forces

Postal historians have found that it is difficult to identify correspondence written in the heat of any battle. There was no time then. It was in the lull - after victory or defeat - that there was occasionally an opportunity to write home. The EEF campaign was no exception. So I have found mail from Egypt written before or after the Dardanelles Campaign and before EEF started its work but correspondence actually from EEF in 1916 or 1917 is hard to find.

It is important to understand the basic British postmark types because one or more of them were commonly applied to the mail of the Allies in EEF because the postal services were managed by the British.. Minor varieties of most of them exist. This was completely different from the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force where the postal services were managed by the Indian Army Postal Service - see the following chapter.

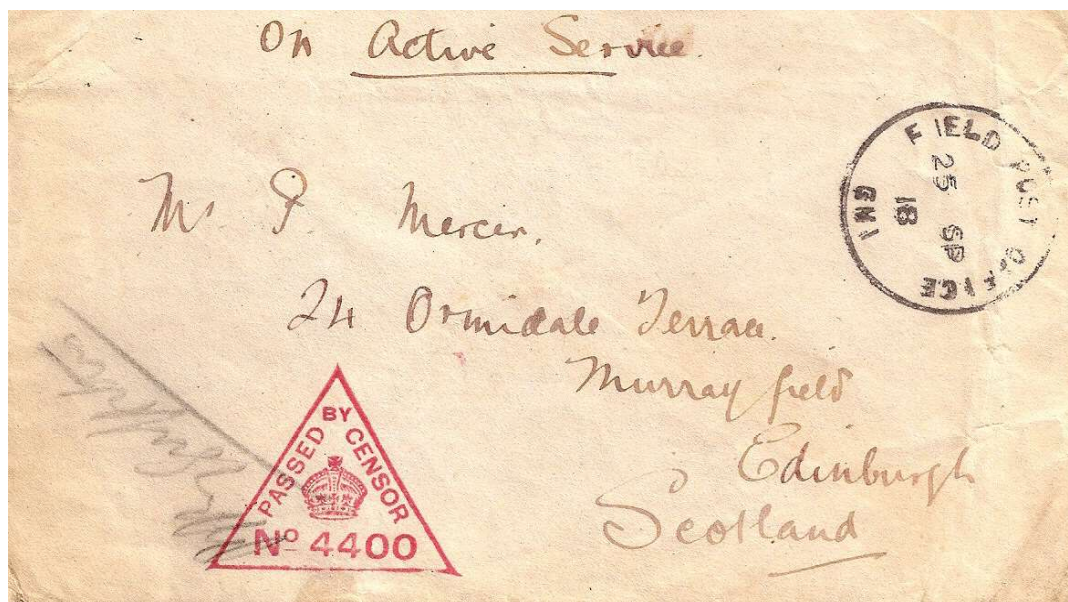


Figure 1.5

Skeleton date stamps like this with GM at the base were used at the EEF General Headquarters (GHQ). In 1917 GHQ was divided into two echelons. "GM1", as here, was used at the mobile echelon of GHQ in Palestine, while "GM" and "GM2" were used in Cairo, Egypt, 18.10.1916 - 15.12.1919.

Figure .1.4 (Previous page)

The title page of a British weekly magazine, *The Sphere*, 13 April 1918, intended to show the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. In fact, this only shows a boy beside a camel while his friend stands on top of it! Illustrated magazines often had difficulty in getting suitable images to meet the regular weekly deadlines.

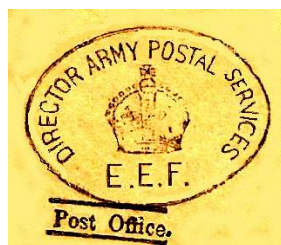


Figure 1.6

A small OHMS envelope, bearing a large registered etiquette, stamped "GM1" and "A" after the number, together with the oval framed DIRECTOR ARMY POSTAL SERVICES / E.E.F. handstamp and a similar skeleton date-stamp as the previous image but with the date, 15.DE.18, in one line.

Unlike the fore-going, this example has a gap between OFF and ICE (Proud Type D2 (SK), known used 10.7.18 - 7.4.19). The cover is addressed to Sidi Bishr, a suburb of Alexandria.

On the reverse is another strike of the skeleton GM1 handstamp across the flap (join), together with a fine strike of the BASE ARMY POST OFFICE, Z, (without code letter but like Proud Type D10) arrival double-ring date-stamp. This office was in Alexandria, near the civil General Post Office.

Michael Sacher⁸ stated that GM1 first (mobile) echelon was near Rafah July 1916 - September 1917, and south of Gaza October 1917 - January 1918. GM1 was at Jerusalem on 30 January 1918.

⁸ See Note 1.

Following the capture of Jerusalem on 9th December 1917, in early 1918 the need for a new system of postage was clear. Up to that point all military mails had been "On Active Service" (OAS), without the use of postage stamps. The postmarks had all been of typical British military FPO or Base Army Post Office design. The occupied parts of Palestine then needed postage stamps for civilian use reflecting their new status. So bilingual postage stamps were printed by the British in Egypt that incorporated the initials EEF and were issued from February 1918. A whole family of varieties were gradually produced. The early ones had no gum and were rouletted. These were followed by gummed but still rouletted types and then by perforated stamps. The story is well told by Unwin⁹.

In December 1918 new date-stamps were issued for use in the Occupied Territories. Incorporated in the date-stamps were the Initials O.E.T.A., standing for Occupied Enemy Territory Administration. There were two basic types - a double-ring with "O.E.T.A. - E.E.F" at the top and "JERUSALEM" at the foot, issued first, and later, in June 1919, single-circle skeleton date-stamps with the same wording. Varieties of these continued in use until July 1920. Thereafter date-stamps included only the place name Jerusalem, with other places gradually getting their own date-stamps later.

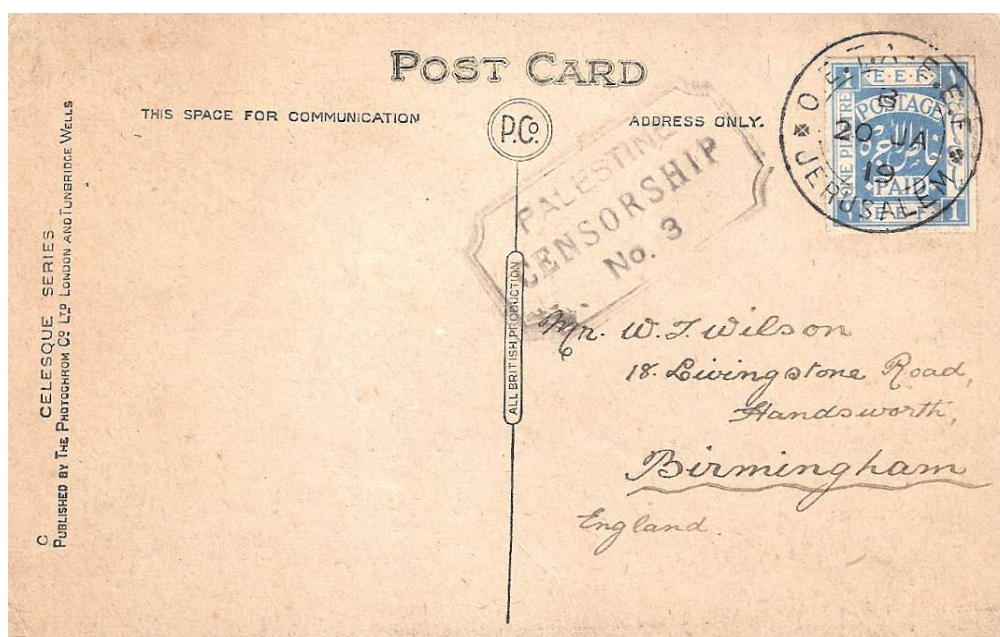


Figure 1.7

An unusually clear (probably stamped to order) strike of the OETA - EEF / JERUSALEM double-ring date-stamp for 20 JA 1919 here cancels a 1m EEF adhesive on a picture postcard to England.

The Censorship handstamp No.3 differs in detail, but not in principle, from the No.1 version shown in the next Figure.

⁹ See note 7

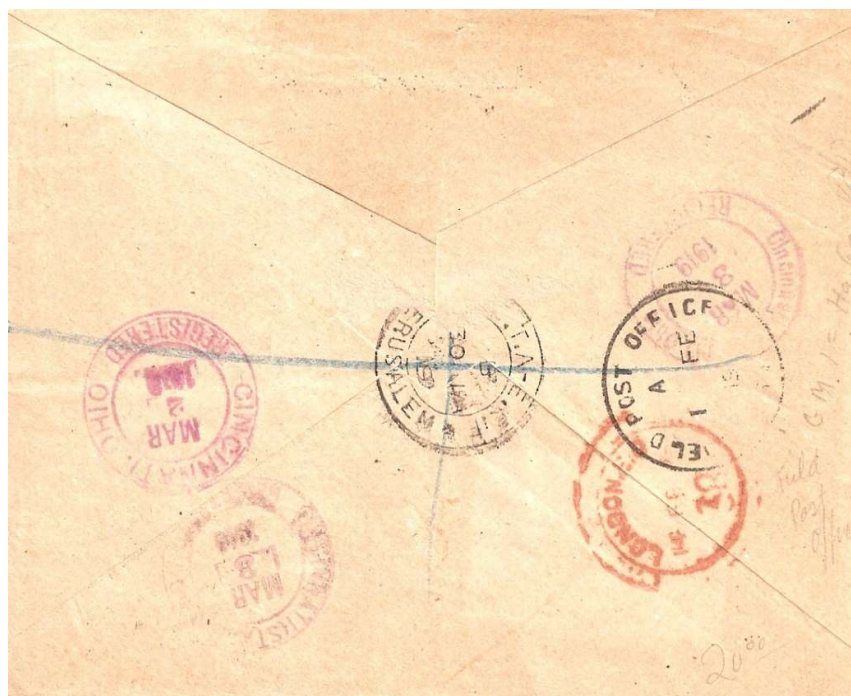


Figure 1.8

(Top) Registered cover front with two strikes of the "O.E.T.A. - E.E.F / JERUSALEM" double-ring date-stamp of 30 JA 1919. There is only one 2m adhesive on the front. The remainder were presumably on the flap on the reverse which has been removed.

The dull red "22007" on the front is probably a London transit mark, related to the similar red LONDON hooded circle date-stamp on the reverse.

Tying the envelope flap is another strike of the OETA - EEF / JERUSALEM double-ring date-stamp of 30 JA 1919. The black transit FPO date-stamp of 1 FE 19 shows how closely civilian mails were mixed with military ones then. The reverse also has three pink Cincinnati, Ohio, registered date-stamps.

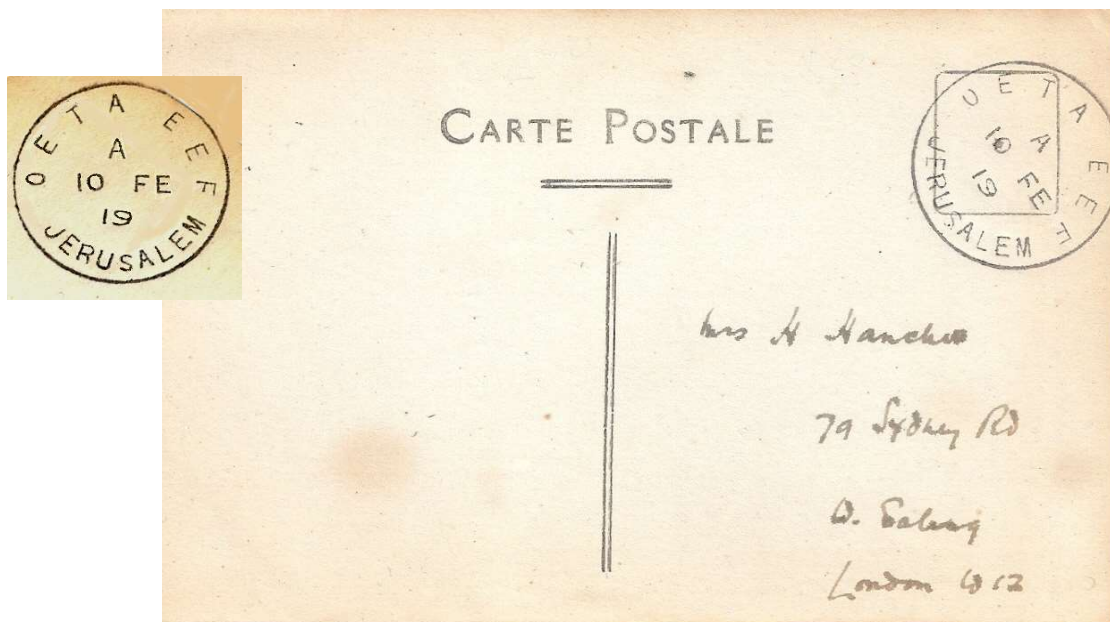


Figure 1.9

The second main type of OETA date-stamp - a single ring without any punctuation, dated 10.FE.1919, (Proud Type D5, but earlier than his earliest known use, 2.5.19). This was probably stamped to order, possibly on the first day of use. There is no longer any censorship.

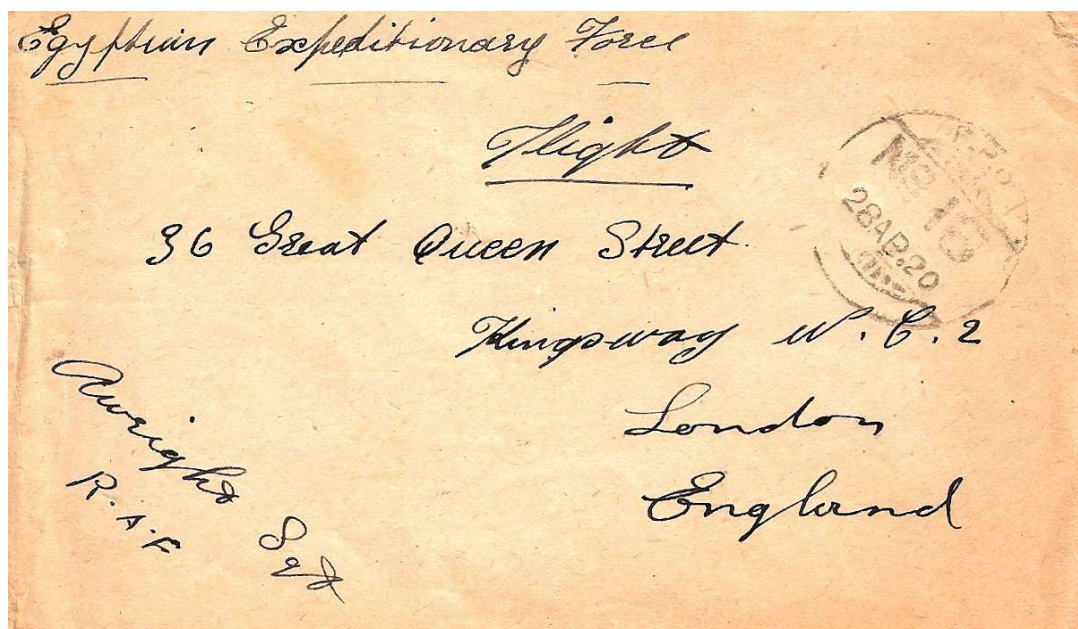


Figure 1.10

Cover endorsed "Egyptian Expeditionary Force" and signed by a Royal Air Force Sergeant, with an Indian Field Post Office handstamp No.18, 28 AP 20, addressed to *Flight*, a London-based magazine.

The important feature here is the fact that the cover has been handled by an Indian FPO. This suggests that the Indian FPOs had returned from Mesopotamia and had taken over management of the EEF Army Postal Service formerly managed by British FPOs. Proud identifies FPO 18 as being at the Stationary Office at Heliopolis, Cairo, at this time.

EXAMPLES OF ALLIED EEF POSTAL HISTORY

Australia

Formed on 15 August 1914, the volunteer-only **First Australian Imperial Force** (1st AF) was the main expeditionary force of the Australian army during World War 1, initially with a strength of one infantry division and one light horse brigade. The infantry division subsequently fought at Gallipoli between April and December 1915. Later it was reinforced by a second division and by three light horse brigades. After being evacuated to Egypt from the Dardanelles, the AIF was expanded to five infantry divisions, three of which went to the fighting on the Western Front in France and Belgium. A sixth infantry division was partially raised in 1917 in the United Kingdom, but was broken up and used as reinforcements following heavy casualties on the Western Front. Two mounted divisions remained in the Middle East to fight as part of EEF against the Ottoman forces.

By the end of the war the AIF had gained a reputation for being a well-trained and highly effective military force. They played a significant role in the final Allied victory. However, this reputation came at an awful cost, with a casualty rate among the highest of any belligerent in the war.

Generally known at the time as *The AIF*, it is today referred to as the *1st AIF* to distinguish it from the *Second Australian Imperial Force* of World War 2.



Figure 1.11

Cover from a soldier serving with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) at Cairo in August 1915. That was the time when troops were being brought back from the Dardanelles to Egypt before the EEF was formed in March 1916. The date-stamp reads AUSTRALIAN BASE / DETAILS PO.

On the reverse of the cover is a CAIRO date-stamp (shown here).



Figure 1.12

Australian YMCA cover "WITH THE A.I.F." The British-style FIELD POST OFFICE / M.D.2. date-stamp of 14 AP 1917 was then assigned to the Australian Mounted Division This was the time of the Second Battle of Gaza in which the Australians were involved.

[Reproduced by kind permission of Peter Harvey, of military-mail.com]



Figure 1.13

The Australian Mounted Division at Mount Scopus, otherwise known as the Mount of Olives (Olivet), a photograph probably made in early December 1917. The rocky terrain can have provided very little food for so many horses. Such photographic evidence of the presence of AIF supports postal history.

New Zealand

The New Zealand Expeditionary Force, which had fought in the Dardanelles Campaign, was reorganised in Egypt into the New Zealand Mounted Brigade and the New Zealand Division (Infantry). Reinforcements from New Zealand Infantry embarked for France in April 1916. The New Zealand Mounted Brigade, 147 officers and 2,897 other ranks, remained in Egypt as part of the Anzac Mounted Division¹⁰. In April 1916, it was deployed to the Sinai Peninsula where it was part of the EEF. New Zealanders fought in most of the battles leading up to the fall of Jerusalem and the defeat of the Ottoman Army and were praised for their fighting alongside their Australian and British comrades. In 1919, Field Marshal Sir Edmund Allenby said of the New Zealand soldiers in the Sinai campaign; "Nothing daunted these intrepid fighters: to them nothing was impossible." A total of 17,723 New Zealanders served in this campaign and New Zealand casualties were 640 killed in action and 1,146 wounded.

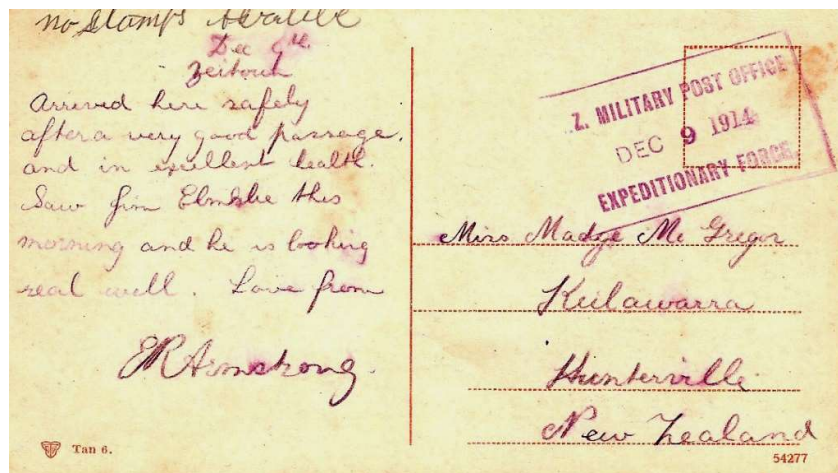


Figure 1.14

This picture postcard, from Tanta (between Cairo and Alexandria), bears a dated handstamp N.Z. MILITARY POST OFFICE / EXPEDITIONARY FORCE of 9 December 1914, which authorized free postage.

This shows how quickly New Zealand forces arrived in the Middle East after the outbreak of WW1, before they were involved in the Dardanelles Campaign.



Figure 1.15

(Above right) Example of later authorizing date-stamp(s) with new handstamp line, FIRST, FOURTH, SIXTH (etc) REINFORCEMENTS, (also incorporating the (top line) words N.Z. MILITARY POST OFFICE).

¹⁰ Wikipedia

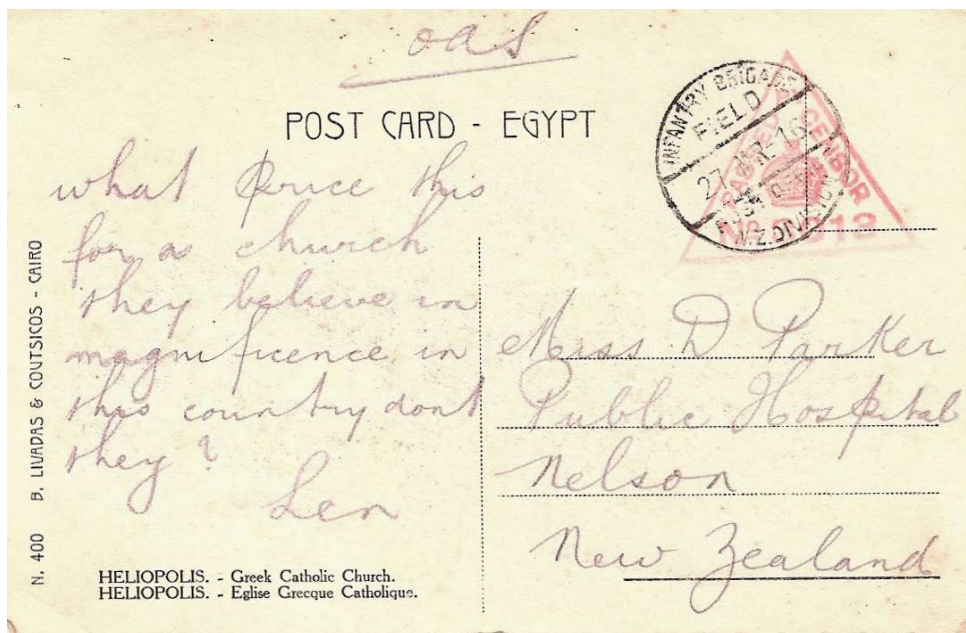


Figure 1.16

Picture postcard of a Greek Orthodox church at Heliopolis, sent OAS (On Active Service) to New Zealand, with an INFANTRY BRIGADE FIELD POST OFFICE, N.Z. DIVISION date-stamp, dated 27 MR 1916.

This was but a week after EEF had been officially established. Heliopolis was a southern part of Cairo. Triangular dull red censor's handstamp (Type CM3)



The Official Record of the Campaign (see note 1) records that the New Zealand Division cooperated so closely with the Australian Mounted Division that they were commonly known then as the "Anzac Mounted Division". They were actively involved in all stages of the campaign from the Suez Canal to the Jordan Valley and the capture of Amman.

India

The Indian Expeditionary Force (IEF) in EEF consisted of the 3rd (Lahore) Division and the 7th (Indian) Division¹¹. Both Divisions had served in France (1914-1915) and in Mesopotamia (1916-1917). The Indian Division landed in Egypt in January 1918 to reinforce the EEF and was actively involved in the fighting from May to September 1918, mostly in the Acre-Tyre region of Palestine. The Lahore Division, which landed in Egypt in April 1918, was involved in fighting north of Jerusalem.

The first two items shown here date from the Force in Egypt period, before EEF was formed. Such letters were usually to report safe arrival in Egypt. Finding mail to or from Indian soldiers in Palestine in WW1 is extremely difficult. I have failed to trace any.

¹¹ A Division consisted of 10,000 to 25,000 men. So there were probably at least 30,000 to 40,000 Indian men in Palestine.

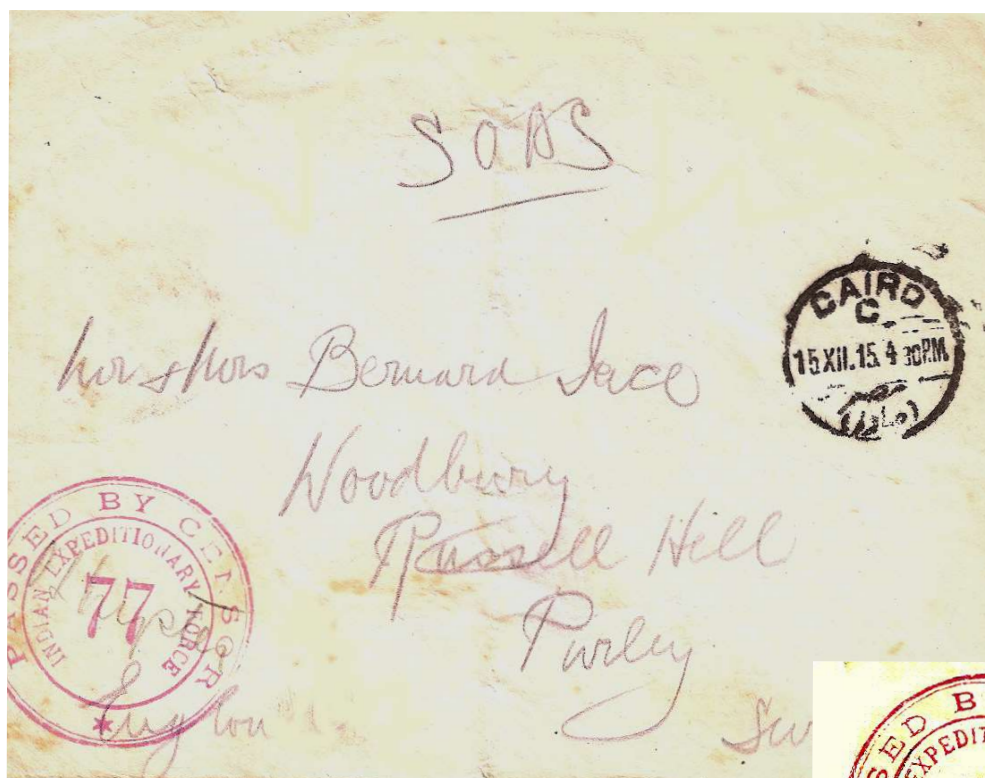


Figure 1.17

Cover from the time of the Force in Egypt when military mail passed through the civilian postal system. Thus this cover shows the CAIRO date-stamp of 15.12.1915, before EEF was formed on 20 March 1916. After EEF had been established, military mail was handled by the British military postal system.

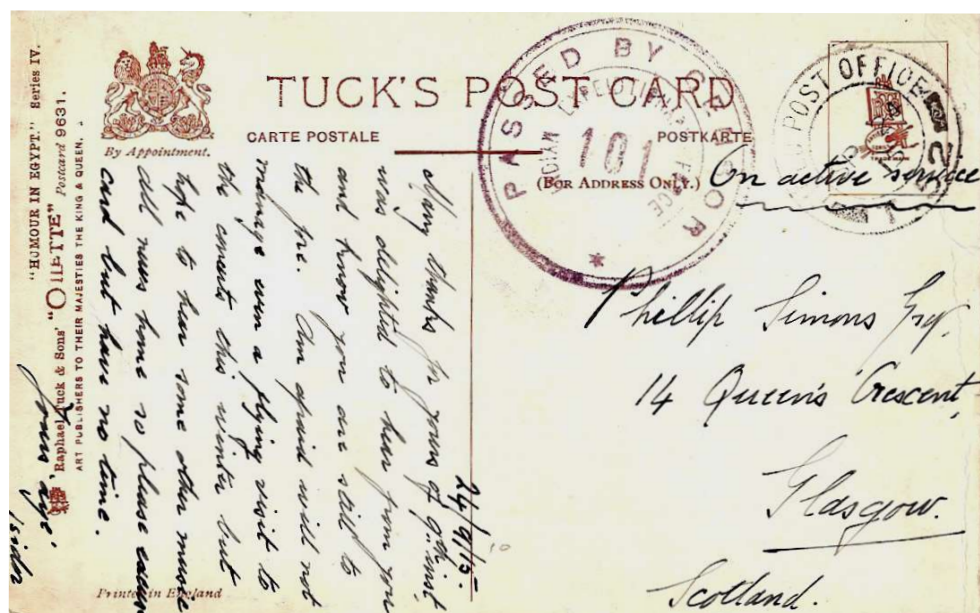


Figure 1.18

A similar IEF "Passed by censor 101" handstamp with a British FPO T52 date-stamp of 24 SP 1915. FPO T52 was then attached to the 10th Division based at Port Said, having arrived by 23.6.1915.

France

The French Detachment was known as CORPS EXPÉDITIONNAIRE D'ORIENT (CEO). It consisted of two Regiments, two Batteries, four squadrons of cavalry and full supporting staff of engineers, signals, medical staff, Field Hospital, Casualty Clearing Station etc, probably totalling some 36,000 - 40,000 men. Of these many had been recruited locally, Syrians, Armenians and others.

They landed at Port Said, Egypt, in August 1918 but did not arrive for action until 18th September 1918. The Cavalry fought at first beside the Australian Light Horse near the coast at Jaffa, thence to Nablus and then the river Jordan. The infantry engaged the Ottoman forces further inland, working, in the opposite direction, toward Haifa which was reached on 8 October 1918. Both groups reached Beirut on 20th October.

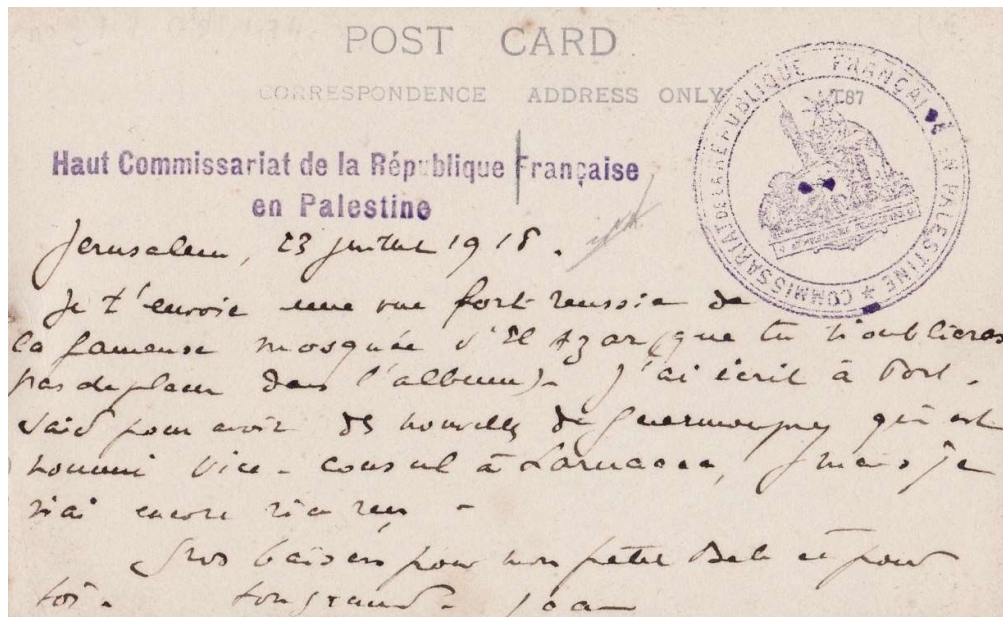
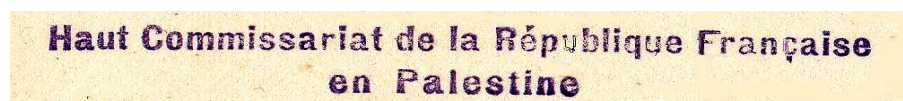


Figure 1.21

Circular and straight-line (lower case) handstamps



Addressed by sender "Jerusalem 23 July 1918."

[This and the following two images reproduced from internet images by kind permission of alex@historama.com]

This is a really important postcard. The sender gave his address as "Jerusalem 23 July 1918." It proves that the High Commissioner and his team had already reached Jerusalem when the main French Detachment was still on its way to Port Said. This is a postal history detail that the history books do not record!

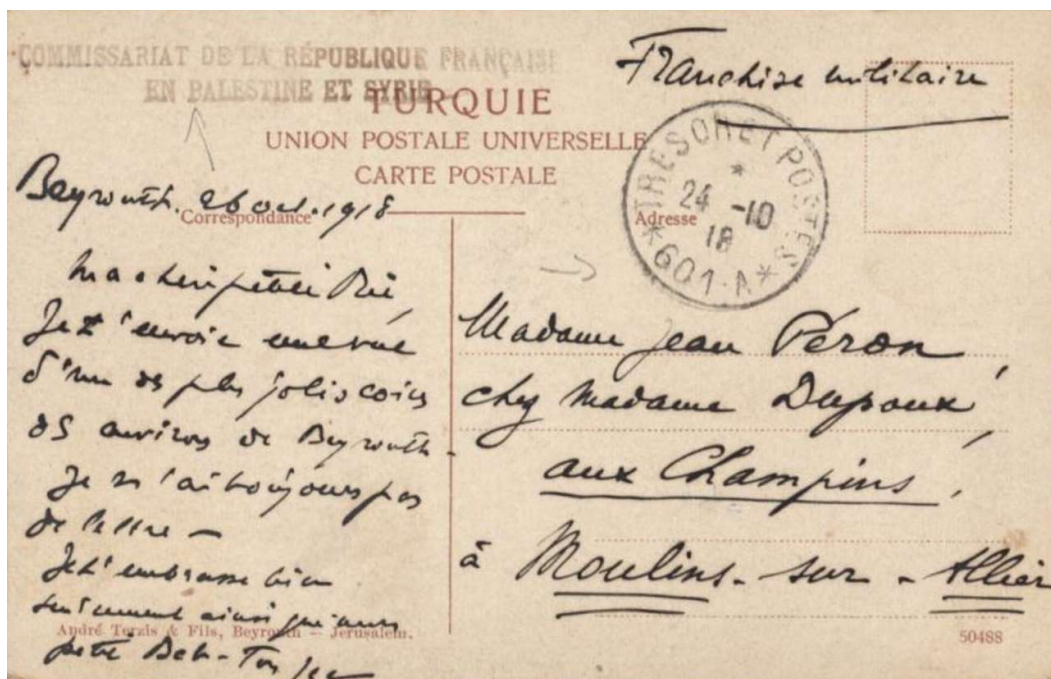


Figure 1.22a

TRESOR ET POSTES / 601 military date-stamp. A scarce postcard with straight-line rubber-stamped

**COMMISSARIAT DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE
EN PALESTINE ET SYRIE**



Figure 1.22b

Le Haut Commissaire de la République Française / en Palestine

The High Commissioner's Office straight-line and circular handstamps. No date.
These three cards are all from one correspondence.



Figure 1.23

Cover from a *Pharmacien Aide-Major de la Première Classe*, the equivalent of a Lieutenant in the Medical Corps, in this case in the role of a pharmacist. The military TRESOR ET POSTES sector 194 date-stamp is dated 18 SEPT 1916. This was after the Gallipoli Campaign and also after the start of EEF. However, both addressor and addressee were in France at this time, presumably preparing to go to the Middle East. They did not go until August 1918.

The Division number has been changed in manuscript to abbreviated "deuxième"(second).

It looks as if there was a deliberate gap after AMBULANCE N. for the number to be added and at the start of the last line for the user to insert in manuscript his role (Physician, Surgeon, Pharmacist etc).

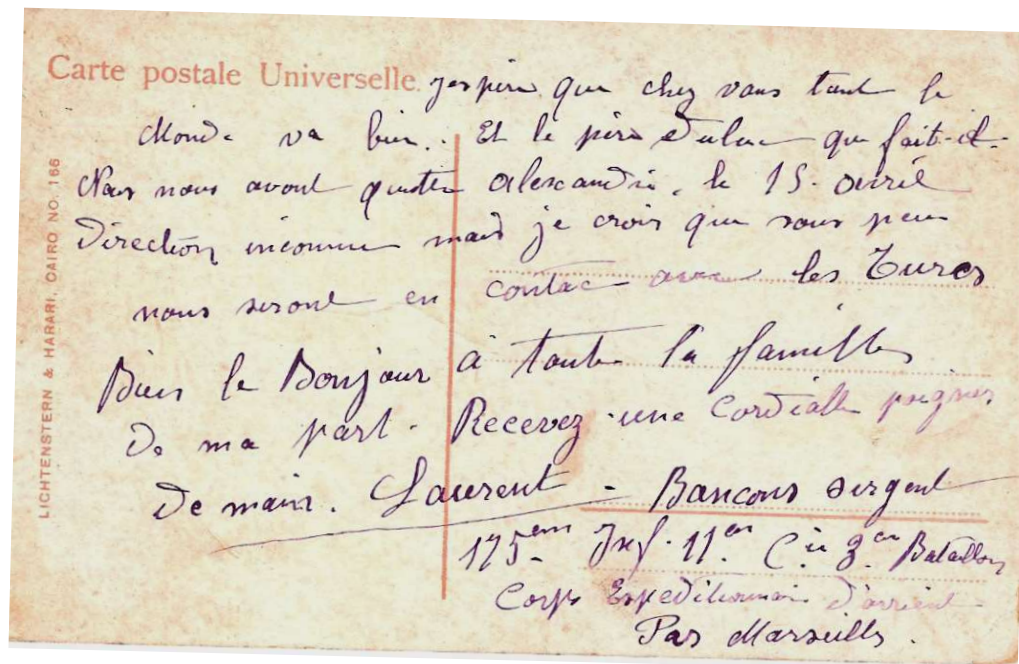


Figure 1.24

Picture postcard of Alexandria sent by a French sergeant on arrival there on "15th April". There is no date-stamp. He hoped "we will be in contact with the Turks." In conclusion he gave his address as 175th Infantry, 11th Company 3rd Battalion, n "Corps Expeditionnaire d'Orient, Par Marseilles." This helpfully indicates that there was a base address there for CEO.

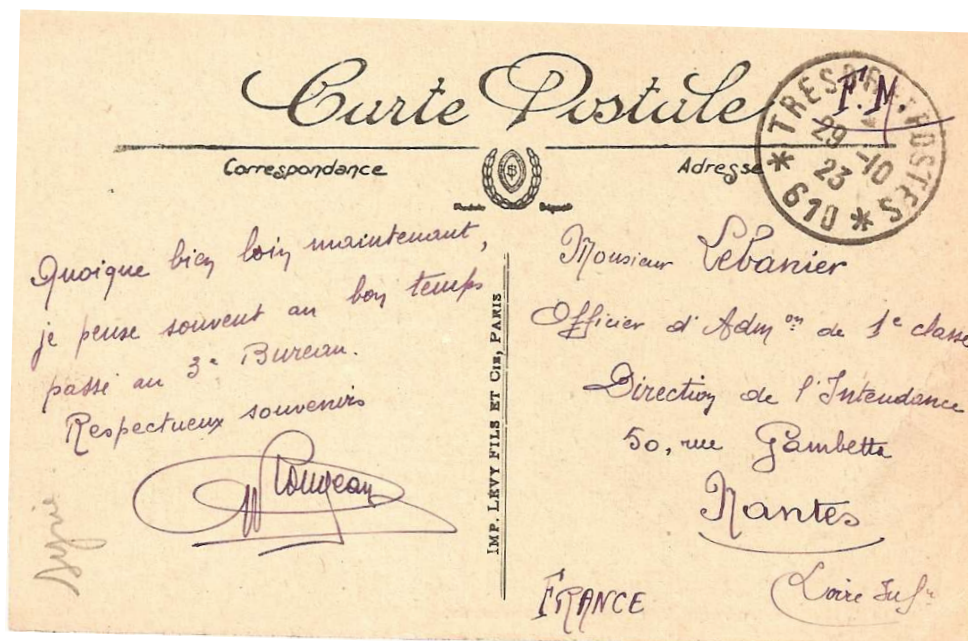
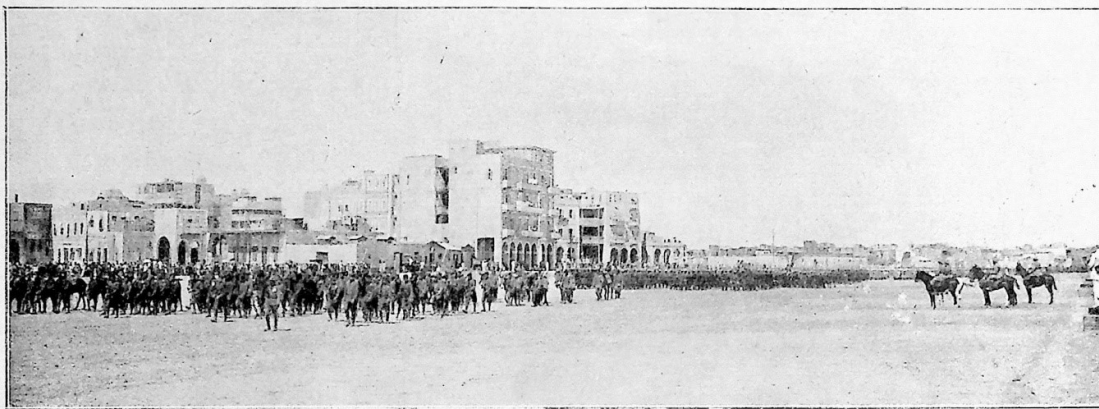


Figure 1.25

Picture postcard of Damascus, bearing the TRESOR ET POSTES date-stamp of 29.10.1923. Some five years after the end of WW1 there were French soldiers in Damascus, fulfilling the Mandate assigned to them by the United Nations on 29th September 1923 whereby the British administered Palestine and Mesopotamia and the French both Syria and Lebanon.¹³

¹³ Ashley Lawrence (2019). French Mandates of Syria and Lebanon. *Journal of the France & Colonies PS.* 69.64



A Port-Saïd : revue de troupes françaises du détachement de Palestine et Syrie, après leur débarquement.

« L'ILLUSTRATION » EN PALESTINE

AVEC LES ARMÉES ALLIÉES A JÉRUSALEM

(DE NOTRE ENVOYÉ SPÉCIAL)

Quartier général anglais, juin 1918.

Ce ne fut pas chose facile d'être accrédité comme correspondant de guerre en Palestine.

Nos alliés les Anglais, qui font là-bas si belle besogne, entendent la continuer jusqu'à la fin selon leurs procédés habituels : c'est-à-dire dans l'ombre et le silence. Ils n'en sortent que pour lancer au monde de courts bulletins annonçant, tantôt la prise de Gaza, tantôt celle de Jaffa et enfin de Jérusalem. On ignore généralement que ces avances successives représentent plus de 6.000 kilomètres carrés de terrain enlevés aux Turcs, que la Terre Sainte entière est dévolue pour toujours du joug ottoman.

Mais nos alliés ont pour coutume de ne point chanter victoire avant la victoire définitive et ils se souciaient assez peu d'avoir à leur suite des correspondants de guerre. Heureusement nous possédons en Palestine un haut commissaire à l'âme d'apôtre qui jugea utile, puisque nous entretenons dans ce pays un détachement français, que les familles de nos soldats d'Orient soient, comme celles des autres fronts, renseignées sur leurs travaux, sur leurs conditions de vie dans ce pays en réalité peu connu.

Et c'est à M. Georges Picot, à ses relations si cordiales en Angleterre où il est « persona grata », que j'ai dû d'obtenir enfin — seul journaliste français — les accréditements nécessaires pour suivre en Palestine les armées alliées.

Certes, notre modeste détachement français de Palestine et Syrie (D. F. P. et S.), n'est pas comparable à la considérable armée anglaise qui opère largement dans ce pays. Certes, ce petit corps embryonnaire n'a encore pris qu'une part minime aux belles actions des troupes du général Allenby mais il s'accroît régulièrement et son rôle deviendra un jour plus important.

Sous la ferme impulsion que lui donne son chef, le distingué colonel de Piépape, notre détachement se complète, se coordonne, s'entraîne, s'acclimatise et, dans un avenir prochain, il sera susceptible de coopérer utilement à l'œuvre anglaise.

Et qu'on ne vienne pas nous dire que ce front lointain est d'intérêt médiocre, comparativement au front de France.

D'abord il n'est point de front peu important dans la guerre mondiale. Partout où luttent, où souffrent, peinent, meurent des soldats alliés, ils ont droit à ce qu'on connaisse leurs efforts et leur vaillance.

Et puis qui songerait à qualifier de « sans importance » un front qui englobe la Terre Sainte maintenant arrachée aux Turcs ?

La victoire anglaise est d'une portée considérable, parce qu'elle affirme vis-à-vis de toutes les populations islamiques la puissance des Alliés, et parce que l'occupation de la Palestine constitue un gage, un gage moral considérable qui prendra toute sa valeur lors du règlement final.

LE DÉTACHEMENT FRANÇAIS DE PALESTINE ET SYRIE

Avant de me rendre au « Head-quarter » anglais, j'ai naturellement tenu à vivre quelque temps la vie des troupes françaises et c'est d'elles que je vous parlerai tout d'abord. Je veux vous montrer ce petit corps intercalé au milieu des troupes anglaises, bénéficiant de leur admirable organisation, de leur chemin de fer stratégique, improvisé en pleine guerre à travers le désert du Sinai, de leurs ravitaillements, prenant presque leurs usages et prouvant, une fois de plus, que l'unité de front s'étend maintenant jusqu'aux confins de l'Asie.

Nous voici à Port-Saïd qui sert de base de débarquement à l'armée de Palestine. Nos soldats, venus de France ou d'Algérie, se promènent dans les rues de cette ville qui donne l'impression d'un vaste camp international. Les cafés, les pâtisseries — car il y a encore des gâteaux ici — regorgent de consommateurs tous militaires, Anglais surtout, mêlés avec des Français, quelques Italiens, et tout ce monde circule, correctement maintenu par une discipline et une organisation méthodique que l'on constate dès l'arrivée. Des écriteaux en anglais sont placés partout, indiquant les heures où il est permis de servir les soldats, stipulant les établissements qui sont autorisés à la troupe ou interdits. Des patrouilles de gendarmes anglais et égyptiens, amusants avec leurs hauts képis coniques à couvre-nuque de toile, font observer rigoureusement ces innombrables consignes.

Je vais assister au débarquement des troupes avec lesquelles j'ai fait la traversée. Ce sont des tirailleurs et un escadron de spahis. Les soldats sont heureux de quitter le navire sur lequel nous sommes restés tout le temps du voyage en alerte constante. Certes, les risques de torpillage sont maintenant très diminués par les précautions minutieuses prises par les marines alliées. Les torpilleurs font bonne garde autour des convois qu'ils escortent, mais on vit malgré tout, durant toute la traversée, sur un continuel qui-vive ! Les soldats ont l'ordre de ne pas quitter leurs ceintures de sauvetage et, plusieurs fois en cours de route, un rauque appel de sirène nous a fait courir aux postes d'abandon. Un voyage dans ces conditions n'est donc pas une partie de plaisir.

Tandis que l'on débarque les chevaux des spahis, je vais prendre congé des officiers du bord. Ils attendent des instructions toujours mystérieuses pour leur route.

Le navire va-t-il continuer sur l'Indo-Chine ou devront-ils retraverser cette dangereuse Méditerranée ? Ils l'ignorent. Leur indifférence et leur sérénité sont admirables.

— Et cependant, me dit avec quelque amertume un officier de marine, nous ne sommes que des « embusqués » nous autres... même moi qui ai été torpillé trois fois !

Cette épithète, appliquée à des gens qui naviguent presque continuellement au milieu des dangers actuels, est certes inadmissible. Elle paraît injuste à ceux qui ont fait des traversées, qui ont éprouvé la contraction nerveuse subie par des marins sur lesquels pèse la responsabilité de nombreuses vies humaines. Mais dans le public, surtout dans celui des villes non maritimes, on ignore trop la façon remarquable dont la marine de commerce fait son devoir durant la guerre. Et cependant les officiers ne jouissent d'aucun des avantages accordés aux militaires des armées. Pour eux pas de Croix de guerre, pas de citations. Un torpillage ne donne même pas droit à une brisque, une inscription sur le livret. C'est un accident de métier et voilà tout.

— Mais, demandai-je au commissaire du bord dont la longue barbe blanche indiquait un âge canonique, pourquoi continuez-vous ce métier alors ? Vous n'êtes plus mobilisable ?

— Le marin me regarda avec tranquillité et répondit en haussant les épaules :

— Bah ! je navigue depuis trente ans et ce n'est pas au moment où il y a du danger que je vais m'arrêter !

Bel exemple de courage professionnel discret et ignoré.

LE CAMP DE PORT-SAÏD

Une langue de sable aride, sans une herbe, sans un arbre, sorte de presqu'île de quelques kilomètres de longueur, située en dehors de la ville, assez loin et isolée de tout, d'un côté par le canal et de l'autre par des sentinelles : c'est le camp français.

Il est heureux que ce camp ne soit pour nos troupes qu'un endroit de passage, une simple base de débarquement, car il ne constitue évidemment pas un séjour de délice. Du sable, souvent soulevé par des vents brûlants, un soleil implacable et, comme seul horizon, les baraquements de la gare maritime.

Les soldats du bord, qui arrivent en même temps que moi à leur nouvelle résidence, font en voyant l'endroit quelques réflexions désenchantées.

— Oh ! dit un officier de tirailleurs abondamment brisé, ça me rappelle les Dardanelles... Encore un drôle de bled par ici ! Bah ! on verra bien !

Et, sans insister, il rassemble ses hommes, les aligne, pour leur faire effectuer dans ce camp d'aspect peu engageant une belle entrée.

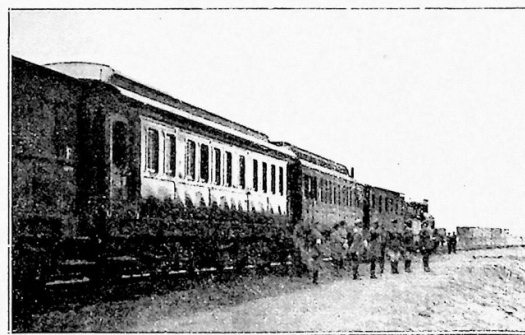
Les spahis tirent leurs chevaux par la bride. Ils sont indifférents et chantent leurs monotones chansons arabes.

On leur indique l'emplacement qui leur est réservé et, aussitôt, ils défont leurs paquets, alignent leurs hautes selles rouges, plantent les piquets des cordes avec des gestes machinaux de nomades entraînés, non seulement par quatre années de guerre, mais aussi par l'atavisme de leur race. Et puis le sable, ça les connaît, c'est un ami, ils le préfèrent à la terrible boue des Flandres ou de la Somme.

Je suis reçu par le commandant de Choin qui doit à une glorieuse blessure de guerre ce poste ingrat et difficile de commandant d'une base de débarquement. Il m'explique qu'il était difficile de trouver pour le camp un emplacement plus agréable. Les environs de Port-Saïd sont tous à peu près pareils et il fallait rester près des canalisations d'eau et dans le voisinage des bateaux et de la gare. Il se plaint cependant d'une chose. Du vent, des moustiques, de la chaleur ? Non pas, mais de manquer de place pour faire manœuvrer la cavalerie.

— Car, ajoute le commandant avec fierté, dans ce pays au moins, la cavalerie sert à quelque chose !

Dès le lendemain, je songai à quitter Port-Saïd, négligeant de visiter le camp



Le train du désert.

Figure 1.26

The French magazine *L'Illustration*, 10 August 1918, showed the French Detachment for Palestine and Syria, newly arrived at Port Said.

Italy

Of the military contributions to EEF by various nations, the Italian Detachment (*Il Distaccamento Italiano di Palestina*) was far the smallest. It consisted of a Headquarters base Platoon at Port Said (see Fig.1.30), one Company each of light infantry, of riflemen and of marksmen and a platoon of mounted marksmen. In all there were some 350 men under the command of two Lieutenant-Colonels.

For this relatively tiny group there were at least 35 different handstamps, of which fourteen were large circular ones! These are described in a well-illustrated monograph *Il distaccamento Italiano di Palestina* by Luciano Buzzetti and Silvano Sorani (1976). All the handstamps are scarce now.

The group was officially formed on 1st July 1917 according to the British official history but on 1st May 1917 according to Buzzetti and Sorani.



Figure.1.26

The large, circular handstamp, top right, and the (inverted) CENSORE No.2 are specific to the Italian Detachment. The other handstamps are Italian, almost certainly all applied in Rome. The circular one used here has a smooth outer edge, whereas another (Buzzetti & Sorani Type C) has a lobulated profile. The text of the circular handstamp is illegible but enough letters are visible to suggest that it probably is not one of the 14 types described by Buzzetti & Sorani.

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Figure 1.27

The wording of this "Italian Detachment Headquarters in Palestine" (Buzetti & Sorani Type B) is different from that shown in Figure 1.28. The CENSORE No.2 was applied by the Italian Detachment and the boxed handstamp almost certainly on arrival in Rome.



Figure 1.28

A British King George V registered envelope stamped (top right and left) with the British Army Post Office (APO) SZ34 date-stamp, 25 June 1918, time code A (morning). APO SZ34 was at Junction Station. It is also struck with the date-stamp of APO 8 (time code B), the same day. APO 8 was at Rafah, on the border between Palestine and Egypt. This shows that the cover went to Italy via Egypt. The cover also bears a typical deep pink-coloured strike of the lobulated variety (Buzetti & Sorani Type C) of the 14 different types of Italian Detachment and allied handstamps. Distaccamento Italiano di Palestina / COMANDO.

Here the CENSORE No.2 and boxed VERIFICATO PER CENSURA are both of the kind used by the Italian Detachment in Palestine.



Figure 1.29

A postcard of Herod's Arch (once part of the Roman fort of Antonia), Jerusalem, with a 5 milleme Egyptian adhesive applied to the face of the card and cancelled by a lobulated version of the handstamp

Distaccamento Italiano di Palestina / COMANDO. (Buzetti & Sorani Type C)

Comparison of the lobulations in this strike and that shown on the previous cover suggests that they both come from the same handstamp.

While there are censorship handstamps, there is no date-stamp on the card, nor any manuscript date.

[This and the two preceding images are reproduced here by kind permission of seyyah (ebay)]

Headquarters of the Italian Detachment to EEF at Port Said



Figure 1.30

Photograph from an unidentified Italian magazine, showing "Officials of the Italian Detachment in Palestine in front of their Headquarters building in Port Said."

The two men with ornate collars (second and sixth from the left) may be the two Lieutenant-Colonels listed.

General Allenby, Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces, recorded the fact that "the Italian Detachment carried out to my entire satisfaction the task allotted to it."

The Arab Army

Many of the Arab tribal groupings of Palestine, Mesopotamia and Arabia deeply resented the invasion of their lands by the Ottomans. As a result they did all they could to make life difficult and dangerous for the Ottoman troops. This was an attitude that the British greatly encouraged. The Arabs, many of them brilliant horsemen, knew their land intimately. They were willing, even anxious, to assist Great Britain and its Allies to drive out the Ottoman forces, particularly by cutting vital communications in the more hostile terrain on the eastward side of the Ottoman forces.

I have been unable to trace any correspondence to or from the Arab Army. No doubt this is largely due to the fact that I (like many Europeans) cannot read Arabic.



Figure 1.31

King Faisal of Arabia leading his Arab troops to capture the port of Yanbu (about 300km north of Jeddah, on the Red Sea coast of Arabia). The Ottoman garrison there surrendered on 27 July, 1916.

This was one of the first successes of EEF.

The British Army Postal Service¹⁴

The official record of the EEF carries a short statement concerning the Service which was formed of British, Australian, New Zealand and Indian sections. This clearly confirms that the French and Italian Detachments had their own postal service. The scale of the postal service, which staffed 140 British army post offices, can be seen from the following figures -

¹⁴ See Note 2

	British troops	Australian troops	New Zealand troops	Indian troops
Number of Officers	25	1		18 British Officers
Other ranks	564	57	12	29 British plus 257 Indian Officers & other ranks
Average number bags of letters per week	2,500	632	130	20
Average number bags of parcels per week	2,350	1,339	270	20
Average number of letters sent home	500,000	42,000	8,400	15,000

The maximum number of mail bags received in one calendar week at one port was 24,810. Every bag, from its despatch to EEF to its receipt at Railhead, had to be handled and re-handled not less than twenty five times.

Summary

British forces, assisted by Australian, New Zealand and Indian troops, formed the bulk of EEF. It was assisted by a small French Detachment and an even smaller Italian one and the Arab Army (a mix of tribal groups led by King Faisal of Arabia). Starting in March 1916, the task was to drive back the Ottomans, a primarily Turkish force, directed by some senior German officers, from the Suez Canal and then from Palestine. Heavy losses in the first two Battles of Gaza in the Spring of 1917 delayed progress but Jerusalem was captured on 9th December 1917 and Damascus on 1st October 1918. The Ottoman forces surrendered on 31st October 1918.

The postal history of the Allied forces is briefly described, for the first time in English. The numbers of letters sent from EEF each week, described above, are consistent with the rarity of postal history material. The relatively tiny Italian Detachment had more special handstamps than all the other Allied forces together. The number of letters sent by Indian troops was probably significantly more than surviving (very scarce) postal history items would suggest.

This chapter is an overview of widely different topics, each of which deserves further study.

At the same time as EEF was fighting its way north through Palestine, the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force was advancing up the lands around the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates from the Persian Gulf to, and beyond, Baghdad. This is the subject of the next chapter.