EL KANTARA

For the last few years, the EL KANTARA talk has always been about the "Reading of the Roll" or the advance of the Turkish Army Corps across the Sinai Peninsula and the attach on Suez.

Today I want to go back before then and look at the part 13 Fd Coy and 35 Fortress Coy played in the forming of 3 Fd Coy in the second half of 1914, and a bit about what 3 Fd Coy did in Egypt from the time of their arrival in December 1914 up to the Turkish assault on El Kantara.

In July 1914, Australia received a warning telegram that England was at war with Germany. The A.I.F decided to increase the number of Australian Engineers Companies from 2 to 3 Field Companies.

1Fd Coy was from NSW, 2 Fd Coy from Vic and the new 3 Fd Coy was made up with a Section each from Qld (1 Sec), SA (2 Sec) and WA (3 Sec). A Section is what we call a Troop but with 40+ Sappers.

3 Section was made up of volunteers from 13 Fd Coy, 35 Fortress Coy and direct enlisted men. Lt John Napier was the Section Commander.

On 1 November, Aust & NZ troops sailed out of Albany and were joined 2 days later by 2 transport ships out of Fremantle carrying more WA troops including 3 Sec.

On 12 Dec, 3 Sec joined the rest of 3 Fd Coy at Mena camp, near the Sphinx and some 10 miles from Cairo.

The Fd Coy's were assigned a training area away from the main camp where they carried out technical training in desert conditions but there were limitations on what could be achieved.

Because of these limitations, it was decided that the Engineer Companies would go to the Suez Canal to carry out field fortification training on the Suez defences . 3 Fd Coy was selected as the first to be deployed to the Canal and moved to the area on 5th January.

The Unit was spread out along the Canal at Serapeum, Ismailia and El Kantara. It is not documented anywhere as to which Section was working in which area.

On the same day CEW Bean noted in his diaries - "Just before we got to Cantara we saw a batch of Australian Engineers in their wide brimmed hats beside the railway line, just on the western bank of the canal. They were going to make trenches there on every sort of pattern likely to be of use in France. The trenches will be used as a second line of defence, if necessary. They had just arrived - we saw half of them pushing their cart through the sand along the bank as we arrived".

Later that same day he also noted- "As we are sitting to eat lunch the ship began moving down the Canal towards Ismailia, and as we moved she fired some of her 12 pounders.

As we moved we saw from the Admirals Cabin a section of Australian Engineers standing to attention as we passed. They looked well, I thought. Someone in the cabin noticed that whilst the officer brought his men to attention, he stood at ease in front of them himself.

3 Fd Coy had not been in the area long before British authorities at once discovered in this company of men, experienced in almost every work which was needed. Within a week some were detached to manipulate searchlights, others had taken over the power house at Ismailia, others were surveying for artillery ranges or for maps, while the main body was making bridgeheads at Serapeum, Ismailia and Kantara, and also a floating bridge for Ismailia ferry-post.

On 3 February, part of 3 Fd Coy happened to be in the trenches south of El Kantara at the time of the Turkish attack: so in a sense it was the first Australian Engineer Company to come under enemy fire.

The General Officer Commanding the Force in Egypt informed the High Commissioner by cablegram that the 3rd Fd Coy, Engineers, had been under fire in the Canal and had comported themselves as he would wish.

Also quoted from an unofficial communication from the Chief Engineer of the Canal Defences - "They are simple invaluable, both officers and men, and have thoroughly earned the excellent reputation they have acquired everywhere they have been. The men are delighted with the work and have been exemplary in conduct.

3 Fd Coy returned to Mena Camp on 25 February having been relieved by 1 Fd Coy.

On a separate page of typed notes extracted from History of the Royal Australian Engineers 1902 - 1919 has been added the passage - Many of the Sappers involved in the action were Western Australians of No 3 Section, 3rd Field Company, recruited from the 13 Field Company and 35 Fortress Company, Perth.

A footnote on page 145 of CEW Beans "Official History WW1" reads 'A part of this company was in the trenches on the right of Kantara at the end of January. These, with those working the Kantara searchlights and possibly a few others, were the only Australians in action during the invasion.

Over the years since 1912 when the first Engineer Unit, 13 Fd Coy, was formed, the unit has undergone many structural and name changes. In the last name change the Unit is now called 13 Field Squadron.

The following publications are used as a source of information in compiling this brief story on El Kantara -

CEW Beans war diaries, Official History WW1 by CEW Bean, The Royal Australian Engineers 1902 to 1919 by Maj Gen R R McNicoll CBE, Sappers in the West by Graham McKenzie Smith.

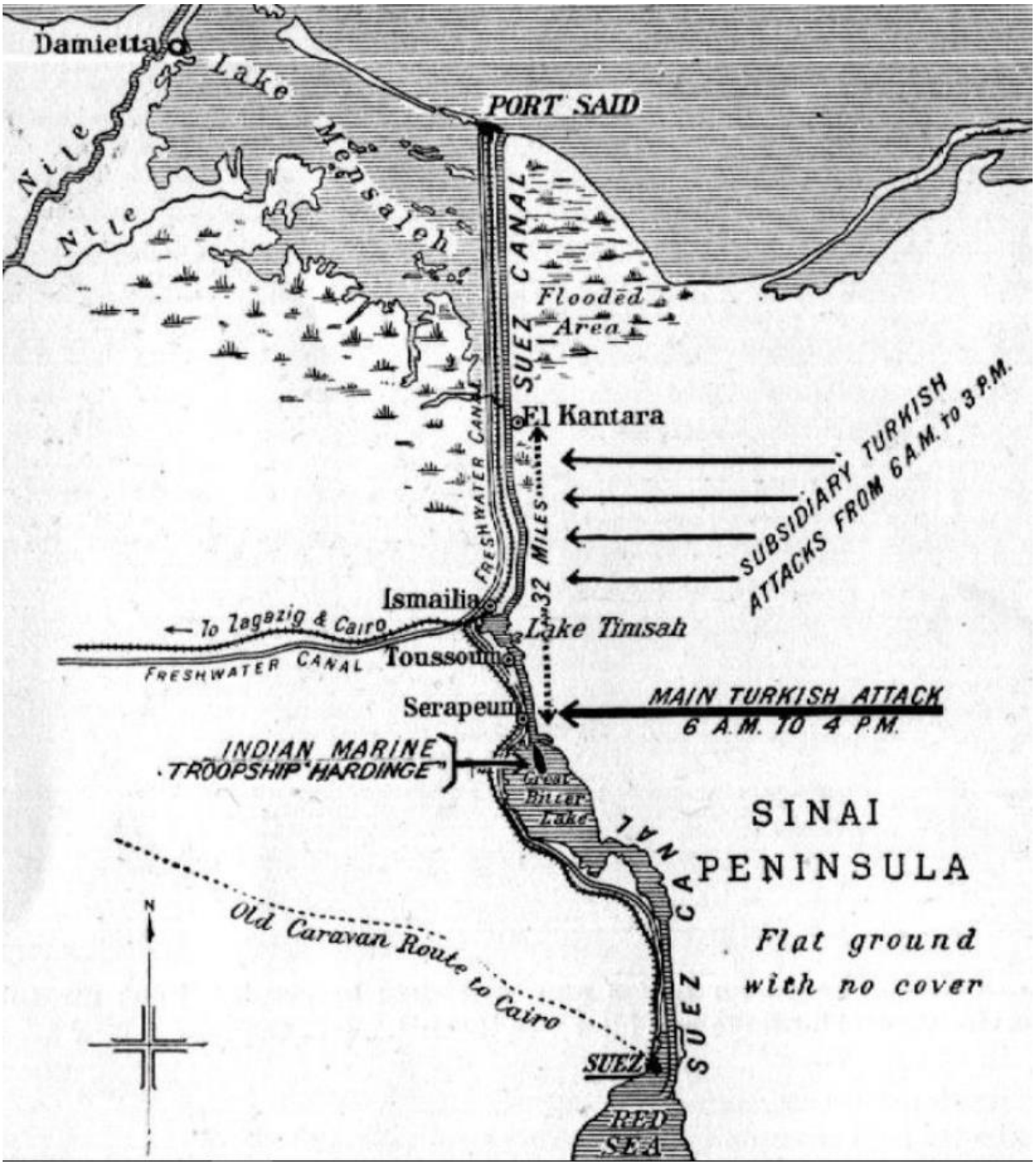
Attachments

Map of Suez Canal

Nominal Roll 3 Field Section, 3 Field Company, Australian Engineers

Note:

El Kantara is celebrated at the first RAE Association meeting in February.


Damietta
Lake
Mensaleh
Nile
Nile
PORT SAID
SUEZ CANAL
Flooded Area
El Kantara
FRESHWATER CANAL
32 MILES
SUBSIDIARY TURKISH ATTACKS FROM 6 A.M. to 3 P.M.
Ismailia
Lake Timsah
← to Zagazig & Cairo
FRESHWATER CANAL
Toussoum
Serapeum
MAIN TURKISH ATTACK 6 A.M. TO 4 P.M.
INDIAN MARINE TROOPSHIP "HARDINGE"
Great Bitter Lake
SINAI PENINSULA
Flat ground with no cover
Old Caravan Route to Cairo
N
SUEZ CANAL
SUEZ
RED SEA