

hood of Maghara, with small garrisons further south at Hassana and Nekhl. About the same time the railway towards El Arish, which had been making steady and uninterrupted progress, was in the neighbourhood of Bir Salmana, some four miles east of Bir el Abd. The Australian and New Zealand mounted troops, with a force of Yeomanry attached, had advanced from Romani, and were covering the advance and the railway construction east of Salmana with brigades thrown out to their flanks and rear.

2. On the 23rd October, in order to be in closer touch with the civil authority, I moved my General Headquarters from Ismailia to Cairo, and at the same time the new Headquarters of the Eastern Force came into existence at Ismailia under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Dobell, K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. At the same time the headquarters of the Inspector-General of Communications, which had always been in Cairo, were merged in General Headquarters, and on the lapse of his appointment Lieutenant-General Sir E. A. Altham, K.C.B., C.M.G., to my great personal regret, returned to England.

3 The first half of November was mainly occupied in making the necessary arrangements for pressing forward our advance towards El Arish. In the south a small column under Brigadier-General P. C. Palin, C.B., marched on Sinn Bisher and Bir um Gurf, 30 miles south-east of Suez, on the 15th and 16th November, and attacked and drove off some enemy posted in the hills.

During the latter part of the month the cavalry gradually pushed forward in advance of the railway, which by November 26th reached Mazar. Reconnaissances by mounted troops were pushed forward to within 8 miles of El Arish by 17th November, when the enemy's outposts were located at Ujret el Zol; on November 28th a mounted patrol was pushed through to Bir el Masmi, little more than 3 miles south-west of El Arish; and from this time our patrols were constantly in touch with the enemy's position at El Arish-Masaid. Throughout the month the enemy's aircraft showed considerable activity, attacking the rail-head and the bivouacs of our advanced troops with bombs. Little damage, however, was done, and our own aircraft retained complete superiority in the air. The Royal Flying Corps in this month visited Maghdaba, Sheikh Zowaid and Khan Yunis for reconnaissance purposes, and on the 11th November made very successful bomb attacks on Bir Saba and Maghdaba. At Bir Saba special attention was paid to the aerodrome and the railway station, both of which were damaged. Presumably in retaliation for the air raid at Bir Saba one hostile aeroplane dropped bombs on Cairo on the 13th, causing some casualties among the civil population and killing one private; no other damage of a military nature was done. The Royal Flying Corps promptly replied by heavily bombing the enemy's camp at Maghdaba by moonlight on the same night. On the 17th November the enemy's camps at Masaid were heavily bombed by four machines in reply to the appearance of a hostile machine at Suez the same morning.

By the 1st December the railway was east of Mazar. During the first week of December constant patrols were sent out by the cavalry, and the country was thoroughly reconnoitred in

the area Mazar-Risan Aneiza—Bir Lahfan—Bir el Masmi. In the meantime the enemy maintained his position of El Arish and Masaid, and in order to afford him no inducement to withdraw until such time as I should be ready to strike, mounted patrols were ordered to be as unostentatious as possible.

4. On the 7th December Lieutenant-General Sir P. W. Ochetwode, Bt., C.B., D.S.O., assumed command of the Desert Column, shortly afterwards moving his Headquarters from Bir el Abd to Mazar. Since January the force had gradually pushed right across the Sinai desert, fighting when necessary, organising and constructing incessantly in the heavy sand and hot sun. The pressure on the enemy in other theatres and our success at Romani were undoubtedly contributing factors to this advance, but the main factor—without which all liberty of action and any tactical victory would have been nugatory—was work, intense and unremitting. To regain this peninsula, the true frontier of Egypt, hundreds of miles of road and railway had been built, hundreds of miles of water piping had been laid, filters capable of supplying 1,500,000 gallons of water a day, and reservoirs had been installed, and tons of stone transported from distant quarries. Kantara had been transformed from a small canal village into an important railway and water terminus, with wharves and cranes and a railway ferry; and the desert, till then almost destitute of human habitation, showed the successive marks of our advance in the shape of strong positions firmly entrenched and protected by hundreds of miles of barbed wire, of standing camps where troops could shelter in comfortable huts, of tanks and reservoirs, of railway stations and sidings, of aerodromes and of signal stations and wireless installations, by all of which the desert was subdued and made habitable, and adequate lines of communication established between the advancing troops and their ever receding base. Moreover, not only had British troops laboured incessantly through the summer and autumn, but the body of organised native labour had grown. The necessity of combining the protection and maintenance, including the important work of sanitation, of this large force of workers, British and native, with that steady progress on the railway, roads and pipes which was vital to the success of my operations, put the severest strain upon all energies and resources. But the problem of feeding the workers without starving the work was solved by the goodwill and energy of all concerned.

Moreover, organisation kept pace with construction. The equipment of the fighting units with camel transport, which had reached its first stage of completion at the time of the Romani battle, had been perfected by the middle of December, the allotment of camels to units having been worked out with the minutest precision. A large number of additional camels were provided for conveying supplies and water from the railhead to the front. The striking force was now completely mobile, and the troops had grown skilful in meeting the special problems of desert campaigning.

5. But no organisation could entirely overcome the chief difficulty which had faced us all through the year, the adequate provision of water for the troops. In fact, during this final period this difficulty was accentuated by the rapid advance of troops and railway with