

which the water supply could not keep pace. Moreover, my troops had passed out of the water-bearing Qatia basin, and had reached a tract in which local water was almost non-existent. From Romani to Bir el Abd the local water, though generally somewhat brackish, had been always employed for the horses, mules and camels, and it had been found that, if the necessary precautions were taken, it had no ill-effect upon our troops, at all events for a limited period. East of Bir el Abd the situation is altogether different. Water is found in comparatively few and widely separated localities. Such as exists is generally too brackish for human consumption, and the wells east of the water line are so widely separated and are of so small capacity that it is a matter of great difficulty—sometimes a complete impossibility—to water any large number of animals. This latter fact greatly restricted the employment of mounted troops. During the first half of November, also, the pipe-line was not yet delivering water at Romani, and the water for the advanced troops had therefore to be brought up by rail in tank trucks and stored in improvised tanks at railway sidings made for that purpose. Since the railway had reached kilo. 109, considerable strain was thrown on its resources for this period owing to the necessity for maintaining the rate of construction, for forwarding material for the construction of the pipe-line, for supplying the troops, and for undertaking the long haulage of great quantities of water in addition. By the 17th November, however, the water situation was somewhat relieved by the delivery of water through the pipe-line at Romani. Thereafter the water difficulty again increased as the railway advanced, until the pipe-line delivered water at Bir-el-Abd, thereby again reducing the distance over which rail-borne water had to be carried. But, as the month advanced, the water question presented itself more insistently than ever. Every tactical preparation for the offensive had been made, naval co-operation planned, and arrangements made for the landing of stores and construction of piers as soon as El Arish was in my possession. But the difficulty of water supply, even with my advanced railhead, was immense. The enemy was so disposed as to cover all the available water in the neighbourhood of El Arish and Masaid. Between his position and ours, and south of his position, no water could be found; nor had search in the Wadi-el-Arish, south of the town, by parties sent in by night, proved more successful. The enemy was disposed in depth covering all the water in the area—there being about four miles between his outpost line and his third line of defence. If, therefore, he should be able to force us to spend two days in the operation of driving him from his position, it would be necessary to carry forward very large quantities of water on camels for the men and animals of the formations engaged. This entailed the establishment of a very large reserve of water at railhead, and the preparation of elaborate arrangements for the forwarding and distribution of water.

The Turkish garrison at El Arish consisted of some 1,600 infantry in all, in a strong entrenched position. Between the 9th and 14th December increased activity was shown by the Turks, and our aircraft and mounted patrols reported the construction of new works, while the enemy camps at Magdhaba and Abu

Aweigila were reported to have increased in size. On these indications of a probable reinforcement to the enemy, the final preparations were pushed on with most strenuous determination. Had rain only fallen, an earlier move could have been made, but as it was, the water supply for the striking force was not adequately secured till 20th December.

6. The swiftness of our final preparations was rewarded, but not immediately, by a successful engagement. We had been too quick for the enemy, but he had recognised it, and, knowing that reinforcements would arrive too late, had hurriedly withdrawn his troops from Masaid and El Arish. This retirement was reported by the Royal Flying Corps on the 20th December, and the Australian and New Zealand mounted troops and Imperial Camel Corps were ordered to move on El Arish the same night. Scottish troops were to move in support of the mounted troops. Accordingly, after a skilfully conducted march of twenty miles in the moonless night, the Australian Light Horse and the Imperial Camel Corps surrounded the enemy's position. Light Horse patrols reached El Arish about sunrise, and found it unoccupied. By 7.20 a.m. the Light Horse were east of El Arish, the Imperial Camel Corps south of the town, another party of Light Horse was about Masaid, and the New Zealand Mounted Rifles were at Masmi. During the day our aircraft reported about 1,600 of the enemy on the march in two columns in the neighbourhood of Magdhaba and Abu Aweigila. Sheikh Zowaid and Rafa appeared to be clear of the enemy. Maghara had been evacuated, and the enemy was apparently in process of withdrawing from the neighbouring posts. By the night of the 21st December, therefore, the re-occupation of El Arish had been effected, and the enemy was evacuating, or had evacuated, his positions west of a north and south line through that place, except those at Nekhl and Hassana. The aircraft, moreover, reported that the garrison of the latter place seemed also to be reduced.

On the 22nd December the Scottish troops were about El Arish and Bittia. Mine-sweeping operations were at once commenced in the roadstead under the direction of Captain A. H. Williamson, M.V.O., R.N., while the erection of a pier was taken in hand. In forty-eight hours the roadstead was cleared of mines, and the supply ships from Port Said began unloading stores and supplies on the 24th. Supplies were also hastened to El Arish by camel convoy, since it was of the utmost importance to accumulate at once a sufficient amount to give our mounted troops a further radius of action. Our aircraft were exceedingly active during the day. A successful attack was made on the railway bridge at Tel-el-Sharia, north of El Arish, El Auja and Bir Saba were effectively bombed, and two battalions of Turkish troops located by the Royal Flying Corps at Magdhaba, some 20 miles south of El Arish, were attacked with bombs by thirteen of our aeroplanes and suffered many casualties.

In order to emphasise the capture of El Arish, in the Southern Canal area a column assembled near Bir Mabeuk on the 22nd December, and on the following days advanced through the Mitla Pass and by the Darb el Haj as far as Sudr El Heitan, more than half-way to Nekhl. This column destroyed various enemy