

7. The Western Frontier Force

November 1915 - May 1918

The forgotten campaign

Although virtually all texts on the Light Horse Campaign focus on the war from Egypt to Syria, the first legitimate use of the Australian Light Horse regiments was as part of the Western Frontier Force to Libya. Units from the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Light Horse Brigades fought in this conflict, mostly in early 1916. However, small units were allocated to assist the British forces throughout the war until 1918.

Rarity of Australian mail from the Western Frontier Force

Australian mail from the Western Frontier Force is very rare, probably the rarest of any campaign fought by the Australians, including Mesopotamia. All mail was processed by the British military postal service using British datestamps, since the Australians did not take their Light Horse datestamps with them. As such, identifying Australian mail is very difficult with very few letters and covers recorded.

Overview of the campaign

At the beginning of the war, Egypt was not only threatened by Turkey, but by the Arab Senussi tribes attacking from the Libyan Desert. By November 1915, events had escalated with the tribes to make war inevitable.

However, the Gallipoli campaign was claiming all the available troops from Egypt, and Major General Wallace was given the task of raising what men he could. Among the Allied units requisitioned were the Australian 1st, 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Brigades with the 1st Australian Divisional Train. The Western Frontier Force comprised of soldiers from Britain, India, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand regiments.

On the 17.11.1915, the Western Frontier Force left the Mex Training Camp near Alexandria and marched to Mersa Matruh. By mid December, they reached Um Rakum after a number of skirmishes. By early January 1916, with the Gallipoli campaign over, most of the Australian troops were evacuated. A force of British Gallipoli veterans and the South African Infantry Brigade continued the campaign until the fall of Sollum on the 14 March.

However, it was still necessary to protect the western edge of the Nile Valley from marauding tribesmen, and in this task, Australian Light Car patrols were assigned. They consisted of Ford or Rolls Royce cars mounted with Colt guns to assist the British Light Armoured Car Batteries. Australian Light Horse units were also allocated in defence of the western boundaries.



A rare real photo postcard of camels used to transport comforts to the troops in the Libyan Desert as part of the Western Frontier Force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Henley in February 1916.

In 1915, Henley, a wealthy building contractor and politician, volunteered to go to Egypt as a commissioner for the Citizens War Chest Fund. Organising the distribution of comforts from Alexandria, he personally accompanied the goods to their destinations. He was gazetted a Lieutenant Colonel to overcome objections to civilians entering the battle zone.

His charitable mission can be revealed in the message on the reverse of this card *"I have no difficulty in obtaining transport free. The Egyptian, English or Australian officers always agree to my requisitions"*.

In 1920, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Henley was awarded the Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

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F.P.O. F 2 Headquarters

Recorded dates of use: 6.12.1916 - 5.1918

Although most of the Australian troops were withdrawn from the Western Frontier Force by August 1916, a small contingent remained to assist the British divisions to protect the western side of the Nile.



A rare envelope cancelled by the British Field Post Office "F 2" datestamp of the 25.10.1917 and addressed to South Australia. Only a handful of Australians were fighting in the Western Frontier Force after August 1916.

Contemporary photograph

Armoured Cars



A rare photograph of Australian armoured cars and inscribed "Leaving our old camp".

Australian Light Car patrols consisting of Ford or Rolls Royce cars mounted with Colt guns were allocated to assist the British Light Armoured Car Batteries in the Western Frontier Force.

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Sollum

30.7.1916

A rare letter and envelope headed "Sollum" (near the border of Libya) dated the 30.7.1916 and addressed to South Australia. The letter was processed through the British military postal service with a Field Post Office datestamp of the 14.8, before being sent to the 1st Australian Light Horse Details depot on the 19.8 when it was located at Moascar.

The letter provides an extraordinary account of Private Kelly's movements and patriotism:

The Gallipoli withdrawal

".....Yes, it was a marvellous feat to get off the Peninsula so easy. I left at eleven o'clock on the last night. I was glad in one way to get off but I would sooner have gone forward than returned. God knows how the graves of our dead comrades will be treated. The Turkish soldiers will treat them with respect but the farm labourer when ploughing some of the cultivated fields of ground may unearth one of them with some money on him, and if so, up comes the lot. I think so anyway. I was on the Peninsula just on 7 months so I can say I have seen a little of it."

The Western Frontier Force

".....This part of Egypt is what is called the Western Frontier. We are fighting a tribe of Arabs called Senussi. It was from here that the relief party went out to get the survivors of the "Lara" which was torpedoed in the Mediterranean. Some of them were in a pitiful state. They had been living on roots and God knows what for months. Some of them were a bit silly when brought in...."

Sollum July 30th 1916

Dear Billy Can Friend

I received your welcome letter a week ago, but your friends must have gone astray. For it was a marvellous feat to get off the Peninsula so easy. I left at eleven o'clock on the last night. I was glad in one way to get off but I would sooner have gone forward than retired. God knows how the graves of our dead comrades will be treated. The Turkish soldier will treat them with respect but the farm labourer when ploughing some of the cultivated pieces of ground may unearth one of them with some money on him and if so, up comes the lot. I think so anyhow. I was on the Peninsula just on 7 months so I can say I have

Miss R. Allen
Main Road
Stirling
South Australia

Freeling north
Freeling

Note: The letter was written by Private Rupert Kelly of the No.1 Australian Camel Corps who was killed in action at Gaza, Palestine on the 19.4.1917.

Letters from this campaign are rare

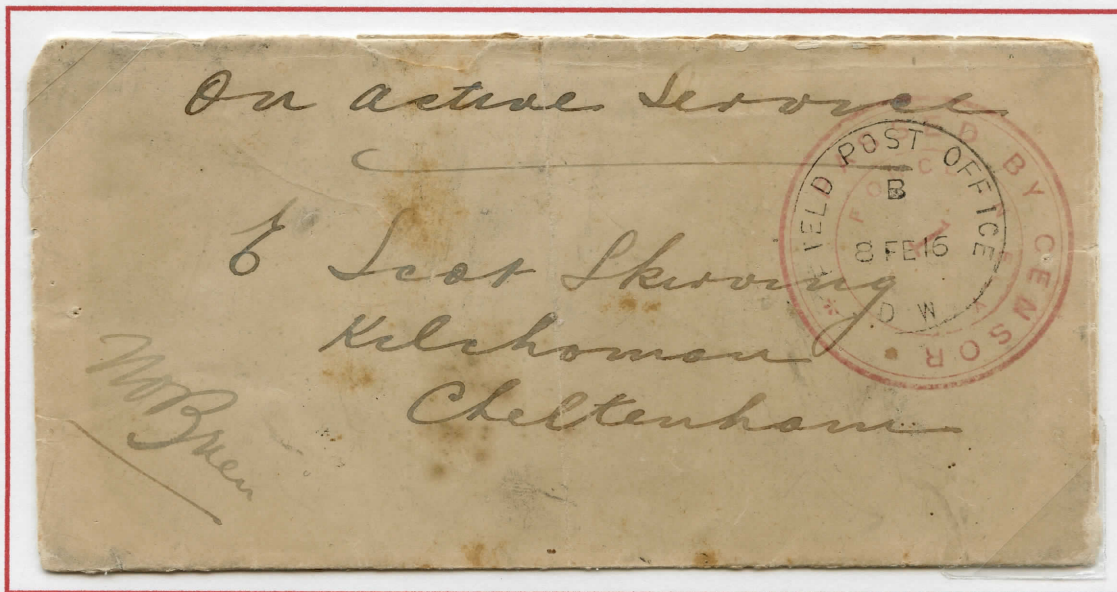
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A rare letter from an Australian Wireless Operator serving in the Western Frontier Force

An illustrated lettersheet of an Australian pastoral scene dated the 8.2.1916, addressed to Cheltenham, England and cancelled by the English Field Post Office "DW" datestamp of the British Headquarters of the Western Frontier Force.

Censorship

There is a British censor cachet No. 1 in rose which was allocated by the British military postal officials to the Australian Light Horse Composite Regiment. This series of censor cachets, which bear more than a passing resemblance to the numbered censor cachets introduced by the Indian Expeditionary Force, were only issued to units fighting in the Western Frontier Force against the Senussi tribesmen.



The lettersheet is headed "Headquarters, Western Frontier Force" and written by Lieutenant Nicholas O'Brien, Commander of the Australian Signals Section. The envelope is censored by Lt. O'Brien himself with his signature on the face. This explains why he was able to give details of his exact location in the letter, without it being expunged by the censors.