The Middle East and Balkan Fronts

"The men of our Eastern Armies have had the dust and toil, without the laurel, or the race to victory." Bishop of London, Arthur Winnington-Ingram

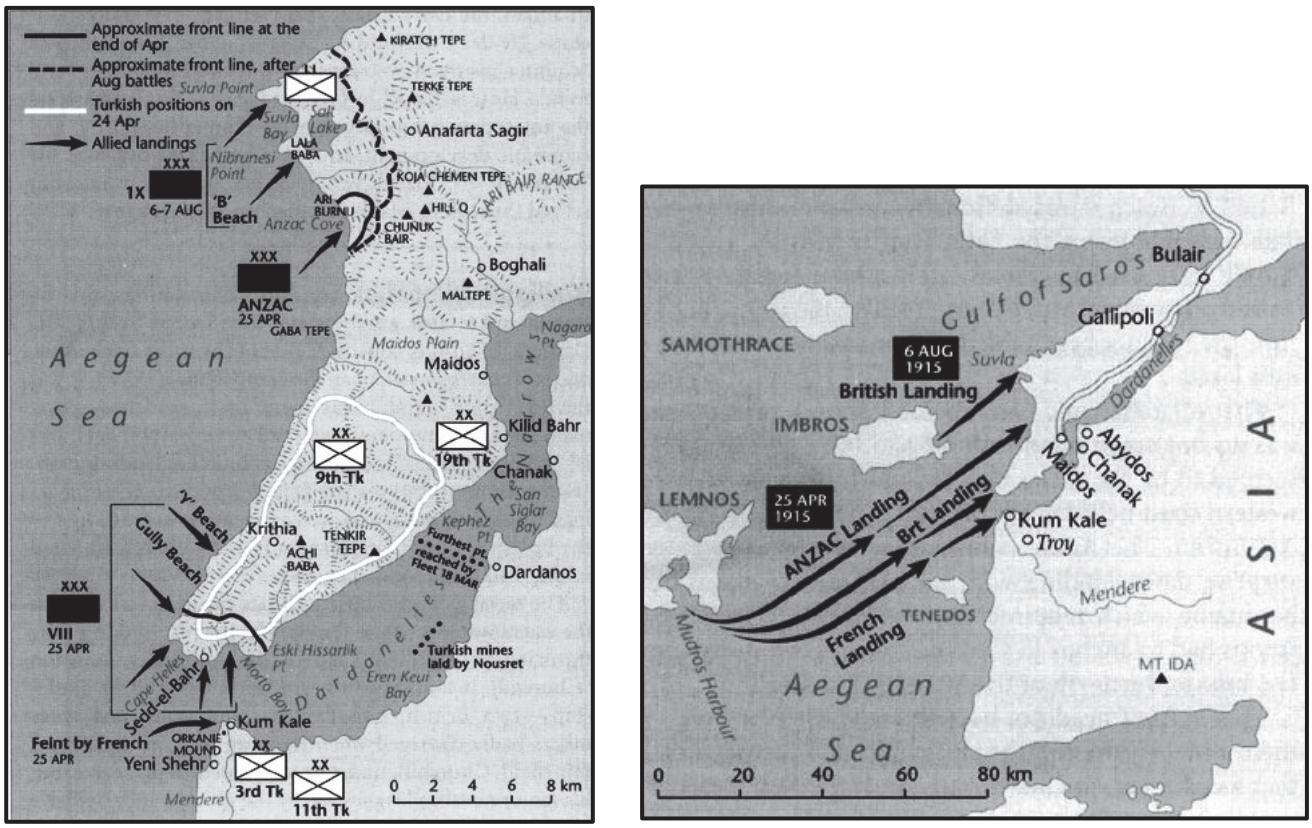
With stalemate on the Western Front and increasing difficulties in maintaining reliable trade-routes with its ally Russia, the British were looking for other ways to kick-start their war effort.

The Gallipoli Campaign 1915 - Gallipoli is the name of the peninsula to the west of the Dardanelles Straits in Turkey, which form part of the waterway that links the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. The fighting took place between British and French troops of the Allies and the Turkish troops, from 25 April 1915 to 9 January 1916. It is remembered mostly as the theatre of war where the first ANZAC – Australian and New Zealand Army Corps – joined the action in the Great War.

The Gallipoli peninsula is about 45 miles long and only ten miles at the widest point. Cape Helles lies at the southern tip. The terrain is inhospitable: it is a rocky, scrub-covered area with little water. The hills are steep-sided and cut into deep gulleys and ravines. The hills, which form the spine of the peninsula, consist of peaks separated by valleys. The most important heights are the summits of Achi-Baba (709 ft.) which overlooks the whole of Cape Helles; and Sari Bair (971 ft.) which dominates the ANZAC beach and the Asian side of the straits. On the eastern side the hills rise out of the sea and there are no sandy beaches. At the southern (Aegean) tip there are some small sandy beaches and there are small stretches of beach also on the western coast. To the north-west is a flat area surrounding a salt lake. There are no significant towns on the peninsula, only a few small villages e.g. Krithia and Bulair.

The Gallipoli Campaign was one of the Allies' great disasters in World War 1 and was controversial from the outset. The idea for an attack on the Dardanelles appealed to the British political establishment who wanted large gains at little cost. They thought that an Allied naval force could force its way through the Dardanelles to Constantinople (modern Istanbul) where the threat of its firepower would force the Turks to surrender, opening up a sea route to hard-pressed Russia. Winston Churchill, the minister responsible for the Admiralty, was the prime advocate of the initiative. The Royal Navy, however, were sceptical about the feasibility of such an operation. The Dardanelles was blocked by mines and defended by a series of forts and German mobile howitzers.

The offensive at the Dardanelles was the first major amphibious operation in modern warfare, using aircraft (and an aircraft carrier), aerial reconnaissance and photography, steel landing-craft, artificial harbours, radio communications and submarines. On 19 February British Admiral Carden opened the attack on Turkish positions. Meanwhile British and ANZAC troops were put on standby in Egypt and later moved to the Greek island of Lemnos. On 18 March 1915 the main attack was launched by Rear-Admiral de Robeck (who had replaced Admiral Carden). The fleet, comprising 18 battleships and an array of destroyers and cruisers sought to target the narrowest part of the Dardanelles. Minesweepers manned by civilian crews were sent into the strait. However, they were under constant fire from the Turks and retreated leaving much of the minefield intact. The assault foundered on 18 March when three battleships (two British and one French) were sunk, and three others badly damaged when they sailed into a minefield. The French battleship *Bouvet* sank with 639 crew. H.M.S. *Irresistible* was mined and began to drift helplessly. The crew was taken off. There was considerable confusion in the battle amid smoke and gunfire. Despite the unfolding disaster, Winston Churchill wanted the attack to continue but the naval commanders refused. There would be no further attempt at a naval breakthrough.



Map of Gallipoli showing the landing beaches and the approaches from Lemnos.
(Australian War Memorial website)

A plan was hastily put together for the British 29th Division (under General Hamilton) to land on the beaches at Cape Helles. General Sir Ian Hamilton had been appointed commander of the newly formed Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. It contained 70,000 men from Britain, France, Australia and New Zealand. The ANZAC troops (under their commander Lt-General Birdwood) were to land at an undefended cove further north while the French staged a diversionary landing on the Asiatic shore at Besika Bay. On 25 April, Robeck's warships appeared off Gallipoli. As they bombarded the shore, the troops disembarked into rowing boats, towed in line to the shore by small naval boats. The Lancashire Fusiliers suffered more than 50% casualties when they came under fire as they approached 'W' beach on Cape Helles. They then found their way blocked by barbed wire. At nearby 'V' beach, hundreds of British soldiers were killed by Turkish gunfire as they came ashore down gangplanks from H.M.S. *River Clyde.* Despite the losses all the beaches were taken. About 18,000 Allied troops landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula on the first day, one of whom was **Bertram Alfred Bizzell** of the Royal Naval Division. He fought in the advance on Achi Baba. Having survived the attack, he was shot in the heart later and died on 10 September 1915. His body was initially buried behind the trench system, but he is commemorated on the special Memorial to the Missing in the Redoubt Cemetery, Helles, Turkey. **John Frederick Bunce MC** of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve also fought in the Gallipoli/Dardanelles area. He was wounded on 22 July 1915, but recovered. He was transferred to the Western Front when he was promoted to Sub-Lieutenant. He was posted to Howe Battalion, serving with the BEF. He was killed by a gunshot wound to the chest on 17 February 1917.

Unfortunately the 12,000 ANZAC troops had landed in the wrong place. They found themselves trapped in a narrow cove (later named ANZAC Cove), which was enclosed by ravines and ridges. It quickly became overcrowded. As the troops clawed their way to the summit of the Sari Bair Ridge a Turkish counter-attack was under way. The Turks, under Mustafa Kemal (later known as Ataturk), fired down on the ANZAC troops in mid-climb. After a week's fighting failed to drive the Australians and New Zealanders into the sea, the Turks dug trenches. The rest of the Cape Helles landings also became bogged down.

Between the beginning of May and the end of July 1915, the summer heat and illnesses, such as dysentery and typhoid, plagued the ANZAC troops who clung on to their tiny area and inflicted heavy losses on the Turks. The British and French advanced very slowly and with heavy losses. After Winston Churchill had been removed from office, Hamilton was sent reinforcements. The ANZAC garrison was reinforced by 20,000 men (British and Ghurkas) secretly at night. The assault on the Sari Bair Mountains on the night of 6/7 August was preceded by the attack on the supposedly impregnable Lone Pine position to the south of the ANZAC sector. Lone Pine was taken, but at the heavy cost of 3,000 Australian soldiers.

Other reinforcements arrived in August, and a new offensive was launched under Lt. General Sir Frederick Stopford. On 6 August 20,000 men landed at Suvla Bay and encountered little opposition; however, Stopford did not give the order to move inland until the evening. The alerted Turks moved quickly and gathered five divisions to defend the area. By the time Stopford's men had reached the Tekke Tepe Ridge, the Turks were there ready to greet them with a bayonet charge. It seems likely that this was the attack in which **Sidney Wilkins** (4th Btn Worcestershire Regiment) was injured. He was then evacuated to a hospital in Malta, where he died from his wounds on 22 August 1915.

The opportunity for a quick victory had been lost. Efforts to advance continued but gained little ground. Lord Kitchener visited the peninsula himself and gave the order to evacuate. Between 10 and 20 December 1915, 105,000 men and 300 guns were successfully evacuated from Anzac Cove and Suvla Bay and in late December and early January 1916 another 35,000 men were evacuated from Helles. Not a single man was lost in the brilliantly executed evacuation operation.

It is very difficult to determine the losses, on both sides, of this most appalling and costly conflict: perhaps the most realistic estimates are that the Turkish army suffered 300,000 casualties (including many sick) and the Allies about 265,000. The consequent effect of diverting troops and supplies desperately needed on the Western Front, particularly for the Battle of Loos, is impossible to quantify. Conditions at Gallipoli defy description. The terrain and close fighting did not allow for the dead to be buried. Flies and other vermin flourished in the summer heat, which caused epidemic sickness. In October 1915 winter storms caused much damage and human hardship, and in December a great blizzard - followed by a sudden thaw - caused casualties of about 5,000 men throughout the British contingent. Of the 213,000 British casualties at Gallipoli, 145,000 were due to sickness; chief causes being dysentery, diarrhoea and enteric fever.

After the evacuation of troops from Gallipoli, a garrison remained at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos. **Charles William Marshall** of the Royal Marine Artillery, H.M.S. *Lord Nelson*, died there on 22 September 1917.

The Salonika Campaign 1915 – 1918

The Salonika Campaign was fought in one of the backwaters of the war, along what became known as the Macedonian Front. The campaign was controversial in that it diverted valuable troops away from the Western Front. The British military hierarchy opposed the campaign, which was favoured by politicians as a way of attacking the 'under-belly' of the Central Powers. The campaign seemed to be doing nothing towards winning the war against Germany. The situation in the Balkans was complicated and had not been resolved since the Balkan War of 1913. At some stages of the campaign, the British and French were unsure as to whom they were actually fighting or what they were fighting for. The British and French forces were initially under the overall command of the French General Maurice Sarrail.

A further complication was that Greece was neutral in 1915 and the Greek prime minister allowed the British and French to use the port of Salonika to attack Bulgaria from the south. But King Constantine of Greece was against any involvement and actually favoured Germany. The Allies had to be very cautious in their dealings with Greece until that country entered the war on the side of the Allies in 1917, after the king was deposed.

"Anglo-French forces began landing at the Greek port of Salonika (now Thessaloniki) on 5 October 1915. The troops were sent to provide military assistance to the Serbs who had recently been attacked by combined German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian armies. The intervention came too late to save Serbia and after a brief winter campaign in severe weather conditions on the Serbian frontier, the Anglo-French forces found themselves back at Salonika. At this point the British advised that the troops be withdrawn. However the French, with Russian, Italian and Serbian backing, still believed that something of strategic importance could be gained in the Balkans".[1]

The defences of Salonika were made stronger, so that the port could be developed as a supply base and equipped with hospitals, barracks and other services of war. The countryside around Salonika offered some suitable terrain on which to build defensive works. Directly north (7 to 10 miles outside the city) a chain of hills runs from Lake Lagaza to the River Galiko. From Galiko low hills give way to marshland around the Vardar River at the western end of the line. The eastern end rested on the Gulf of Rendina. A defensive line of trenches, machine-gun posts and dug-outs was made and a great deal of barbed wire strung along the front – so much so that the defence line was nick-named 'The Birdcage'. The defenders had an uninterrupted view of the plain to the north. The Allies stayed behind these defences for some time in a stalemate situation.

The port of Salonika was used as a base for troops moving up country. The Allied commitment to the Salonika campaign steadily increased during 1916 with the arrival of contingents of Serbian, Italian and Russian troops. Offensive operations began and Monastir fell to French-Serb forces during November 1916. A second offensive in the spring of 1917 during which the British Salonika Force, under Lt General George Milne, took part in the First Battle of Doiran (24 – 25 April and 8-9 May 1917) but they made little impression on the Bulgarian defences. The front-line remained almost static until September 1918 when a third offensive was launched. The British attacked Doiran for a second time (18-19 September 1918). With a breakthrough by Serbian forces west of the River Vardar the Bulgarian army was forced to retreat. The campaign concluded with the surrender of Bulgaria on 30 September 1918.

The Salonika Campaign was dogged by appalling winter weather conditions and disease. Malaria was a real problem, especially in the low lying valley of the Struma River, where mosquito larvae thrived in the marshes and puddles. Protective clothing was worn by some troops and insect repellent was sprayed on all exposed skin. In total the British forces suffered 162,517 cases of the disease and in total 505,024 non-battle casualties. These totals exceeded those of the casualties of battle which were 23,787.

"At the height of the British deployment, over 182,500 British troops were kicking their heels, left vulnerable to the depredations of the mosquito and malaria. There could be few more depressing fronts than Salonika." [2]

Two of our Amersham soldiers were involved in the Salonika campaign. **John Redding** of the 8th Battalion OBLI was sent to Salonika from France in September 1915, embarking at Marseilles. His battalion fought with the 26th Division and the units were in position by February 1916. The division was dug in during the summer of 1916. John Redding died after an operation for appendicitis on 8 July 1916. **Albert John Dover** of the 26th Battalion Middlesex Regiment, which was a pioneer battalion (otherwise known as 3rd Public Works Service Btn), served in Salonika as part of the 27th Division. Albert was involved in building roads, bridges, battle headquarters etc in the Struma valley. He was killed on 27 February 1917. Both John Redding and Albert Dover are buried in the Lembet Road Military Cemetery on the outskirts of Salonika, Greece.

[1] www. Salonikacampaignsociety.org.uk. The website of the Salonika Campaign Society.
[2] Peter Hart *"The Great War"*, Profile Books. Page 195.

A Map of the area known as the Macedonian front during the Salonika campaign 1915 – 1918
(Re-drawn from a map in a pamphlet published by the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust)

Disaster in Mesopotamia 1914 -1918

The origins of the Mesopotamian Campaign lay with the Royal Navy and its adoption of a new generation of warships powered by oil-burning turbines. Oil had been discovered in Persia just before the war and a pipeline ran from the oilfield of Ahwaz along the Karun River to the Shatt-al-Arab and the refineries at Abadan Island. Mesopotamia was under the control of Ottoman Turks, and it was basically the alluvial plain formed by the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers meandering towards the Persian Gulf. The confluence of the rivers lies at Qurna (Kurna) to the north of the city of Basra, which is sited at the head of the Shatt-al-Arab estuary, about 70 miles from the sea. Turkey entered the war on the side of the Central Powers on 28 October 1914 and the Sultan called for a Muslim Holy War against the British Empire. This was a direct challenge to Britain's position in India and the Middle East, where an estimated 100,000,000 Muslims were living under British rule. Britain was obviously also concerned about the threat to the oil pipeline.

On 6 November 1914 a force of Indian and British Infantry landed at the head of the Gulf ostensibly to protect oil interests. The campaign was initially directed by the Government of India, which left much of the decision making to its own military authorities, including its commander-in-chief General Sir John Nixon. The mission was limited to securing the Shatt-al-Arab waterway and the oil refinery. The infantry included the 6th Poona Division of the Indian Army, to which was attached the 1st Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. They needed a forward defensive position and moved to occupy first the city of Basra (on 22 November) and then Qurna (on 9 December). The Anglo-Indian force was attacked by local Marsh Arabs who sided with the Turks. Nixon saw this victory as a spring-board for the occupation of the whole of southern Mesopotamia, as far as Nasiriya and Amara, thus expanding the campaign way beyond its original objectives.

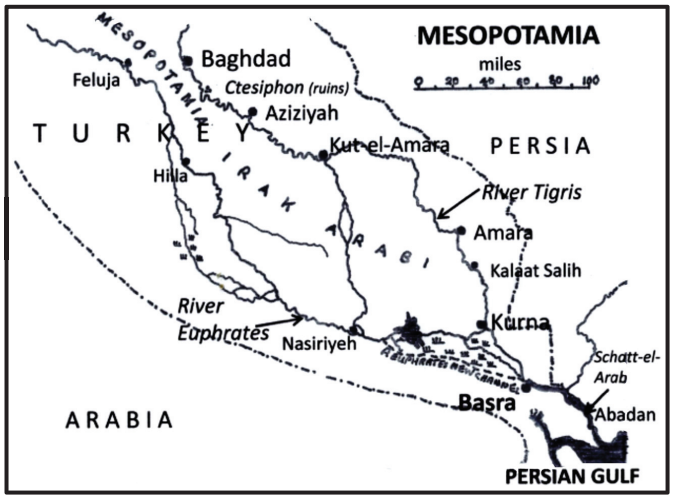
The War Office in London was against any further advances, but the Government of India (based in Simla) authorised Nixon to advance troops first to Kut-el-Amara (reached in September 1915) and then onwards to Baghdad. While Nixon stayed in Basra, the troops on the ground were under the command of Major General Sir Charles Townshend, an officer with experience in India. However, Townshend was not confident in his mission and every move forward over-extended his supply line from Basra. Moreover, the troops were debilitated by the heat and disease. As Townshend's troops

advanced up the Tigris, accompanied by gun-boats, Turkish forces prepared to defend Baghdad, by digging trenches at Ctesiphon. They had abandoned their garrison at Kut-al-Amara (just 120 miles from Baghdad) and Townshend's forces took it over on 28 September 1915. Townshend was urged by Nixon to press on to Baghdad, despite knowing that the Turks had been reinforced.

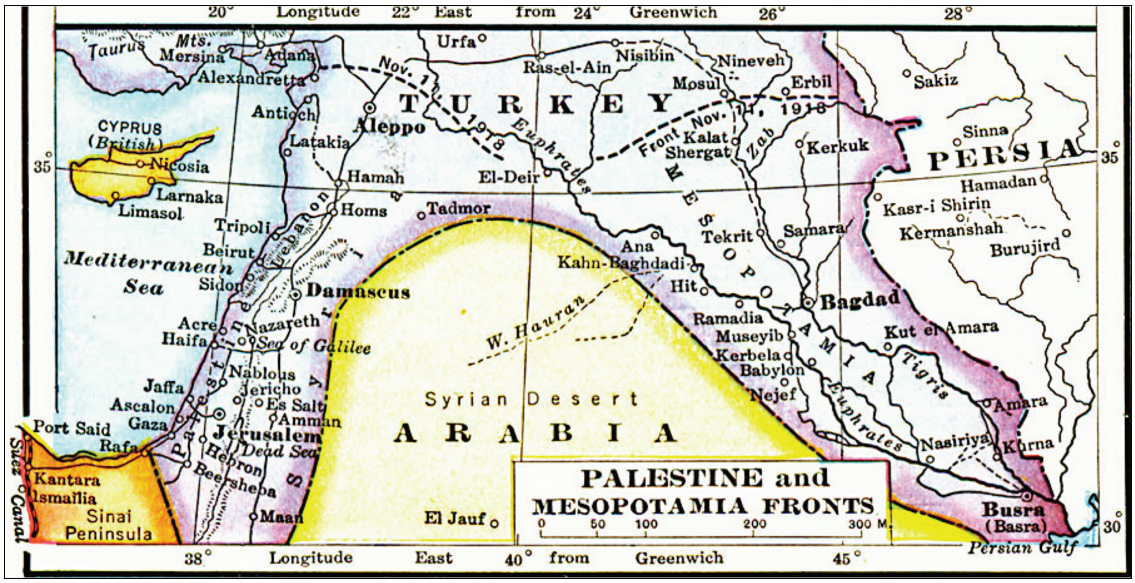
The Battle of Ctesiphon (1915) Major-General Townshend resumed his advance and attacked a strong Turkish defensive line at Ctesiphon. He was supported by four Royal Navy gun-boats, but Turkish artillery prevented them from getting near enough to give covering fire for his attack. The British forces were outnumbered but succeeded in breaking through the Turkish lines. They lost over 4,000 men, one third of their force. This battle is where **William John Slade** (1st Battalion OBLI) was killed in action on 22 November 1915. Townshend was without reserves and his food supply was precarious, so he had no option but to return to Kut-al-Amara. Two of the gun-boats were sunk during the retreat.

The Siege of Kut-al-Amara (1915-1916) Townshend's forces were surrounded by Turkish forces on 7 December 1915. He calculated that he had enough food supplies to last two months and decided to hold out until relief came. He had 10,000 men at this point, but was encumbered with 2,000 sick and wounded as well as non-combatants and the local population of Kut. The relief effort mounted by the British stalled because there were no proper roads or railways and the river levels fluctuated widely so that navigation was difficult. Meanwhile the conditions inside Kut deteriorated. Disease and lack of food reduced the garrison to a pitiable state and the soldiers were forced to slaughter horses and mules for food. When relief failed to arrive and negotiations by Colonel T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia) failed, Townshend had to surrender his 10,000 troops (British and Indian) to the Turks on 29 April 1916. The prisoners of war were harshly treated and 4,000 died in captivity. This was the fate of **Thomas George Irons** (1st Btn OBLI) who died of dysentery on 8 May 1916. **Henry Grace DCM** (1st Btn OBLI) died of disease on 21 April 1916 at Kut, during the surrender. He had been decorated for conspicuous gallantry at Kut-al-Amara. **Frederick George Parslow** (1st Btn OBLI) accidentally drowned in the River Tigris whilst transferring from one boat to another, on 31 May 1915.

The surrender at Kut-al-Amara was a humiliating blow to the prestige of the British Empire and the British government took over control of the Mesopotamian campaign from the Indians in the summer of 1916. Much investment was made in the port facilities at Basra, new roads and railways were built and modern weaponry supplied. Under General Sir Stanley Maude, British troops retook Kut-al-Amara in February 1917 and occupied Baghdad in March. Disease was still a major cause of death amongst the troops and **Thomas William Lee** (also of the 1st Btn OBLI) died of dysentery or cholera on 1 August 1917. General Maude also succumbed to disease and died of cholera in November 1917. The British effort was then scaled down and the armistice with Turkey on 30 October 1918 effectively ended the campaign, which had cost the British army 27,000 fatalities, 13,000 of whom had died of disease.



A Sketch-Map of Lower Mesopotamia



A map to show the Palestine and Mesopotamian Fronts, on 11 November 1918.
(Source: Merton M. Wilner, *A new Atlas of the New World Corrected according to the Peace Terms Together with a Graphic Story of the Great War* (New York: *The Christian Herald*)

Egypt, Sinai and Palestinian Campaigns, 1914- 1918

The British had established a stranglehold on the Ottoman Empire, threatening the suzerainty of Egypt in 1882 and had effectively controlled the country ever since. Its importance lay in its strategic location as the neck containing the Suez Canal, the vital link between Britain and its dominions in India, Australia and New Zealand. This 100-mile-long waterway had to be defended at all costs, and this entailed a huge military commitment to prevent invasion and possible sabotage. When Turkey joined the war on the side of the Central Powers in November 1914, Britain formally declared Egypt a British Protectorate and built up a large army presence under the command of Gen. Sir John Maxwell. The army was made up of Territorials from the British 42nd Division and some Indian Divisions, joined later by the ANZAC Corps completing its training before being sent to France.

The Turks also saw the importance of the Suez Canal but had to cross the inhospitable waste of Sinai to attack it from the east. The Turkish Suez Expeditionary Force (SEF) was placed under the command of a German, von Kressenstein, whose job it was to make the necessary logistical preparations for the crossing of Sinai. In February 1915 a small Turkish force crossed Sinai and attacked the Canal, but they were easily repulsed.

Egypt acted as a reservoir for troops fighting in the Gallipoli Campaign, and while the fighting there was raging, the situation in Egypt settled down. The Turks had also withdrawn troops from Palestine to strengthen their positions in Gallipoli and Mesopotamia. The priority of the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) was to safeguard the Suez Canal. The defences for the canal were extended into the Sinai Desert in early 1916, with two new lines of defence. This demanded a huge investment in labour to dig trenches, lay water pipelines and a railway line from the Nile Delta to bring in supplies. They also constructed a ‘wire road’ by unrolling ordinary wire netting and pegging it to form a road, which prevented marching soldiers from sinking into the sand.

The Turks attacked again in 1916 and were defeated at the Battle of Rumani on 3 August. The well-prepared Turkish Gaza position, stretching about 30 miles to the coast at Beersheba, blocked further advance.

The Palestinian Campaign of 1917-18 The **Battles of Gaza and Beersheba** began on 26 March 1917*. "General Archibald Murray, commander in chief of the EEF, attacked the Gaza positions frontally with little success, and a second battle on 17-18 April was no more fruitful. Murray was replaced by General Sir Edmund Allenby, who inherited a more ambitious plan prepared by Lt.Gen. Sir Philip Chetwode and Brigadier Gen.Guy Dawnay. Leaving part of his army to fix the Turks and their German allies at Gaza, Allenby hooked round the desert flank, taking Beersheba, with its all-important wells on 31 October. Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Chauvel's Desert Mounted Force arrived as dusk fell and the 4th Australian Light Horse Brigade, lacking swords, charged with bayonets. The Gaza position had already been penetrated by a tank attack, and the Turks had no option but to withdraw to escape encirclement."* [1]

The New Zealanders rode into Jaffa on 16 November 1917. This severed links between Jerusalem and the coast. Allenby succeeded in defeating the Turkish 8th Army and was poised to take Jerusalem on 9 December 1917.

The Battle of Megiddo (1918) The Turks regrouped on a well-fortified line from Jaffa to Jordan. Allenby's troops attacked along the coastal plain on 19 September. Following an intense artillery bombardment, the British opened a breach, through which the Desert Mounted Corps was pushed. Helped by local Jewish settlers who guided them through marshes, they were able to penetrate the Turkish positions. The RAF attacked the retreating Turkish army and helped force them back to the Jordan. In less than a month the British and Empire forces had destroyed three Turkish armies and advanced 350 miles. They took 36,000 prisoners and lost relatively few casualties. The Turkish front collapsed and the advance to Damascus was rapid. The Australian Light Horse Brigade entered the city almost at the same time as Colonel T.E.Lawrence's Arabian forces on 1 October 1918.

On 30 October 1918 the Turks signed an armistice.

One of our Amersham soldiers died in the Egypt / Palestine theatre of war and that was **Edward George Grace** (Base Signal Depot, Royal Engineers). He died of broncho-pneumonia on 3 November 1918 (i.e after the Turks surrendered) and is buried in the Haifa War Cemetery. **George Henry Willis** of the 115th Railway Company Royal Engineers, also succumbed to disease. He caught influenza, probably in Egypt, and died of pneumonia on 15 March 1919, shortly after arriving back home in Amersham after being demobilised. **Norman Eustace Sassoon Croager** was stationed in Egypt with the 1/4th Battalion, Norfolk Regiment, from January 1916 until November of that year, when he returned to Britain to join the Royal Flying Corps.

Over four years, the Campaign in Egypt and Palestine had sucked in nearly 1,200,000 men from all over the British Empire. The British lost 51,451 casualties in the fighting but a staggering 550,000 additional casualties through disease. It is difficult to weigh up what had been achieved and whether the enormous investment in men and resources was worth it. Most analyses of the Campaigns in Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, Salonika and Egypt/Palestine conclude that the resources would have been better spent on the Western Front where the war against the Germans was eventually won.

[1] Richard Holmes and Martin Marex Evans *"Oxford Guide to Battles",* OUP, page 213.