

APPENDIX No. 2.

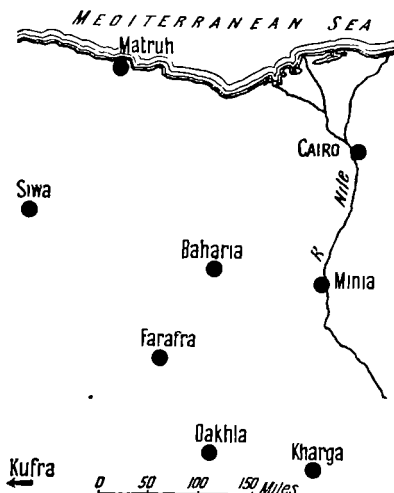
THE LIGHT CARS IN THE LIBYAN DESERT

Although the main force of the Senussi had been beaten in the Sollum campaign, the Nile valley farther south continued to be threatened by congregations of tribesmen in the neighbouring oases. There is said to be evidence that not only the Senussi, but the Sultan of Darfur and possibly the Turks were working upon a concerted plan. It thus became necessary to safeguard the western edge of the Nile valley. The part played in this by the light horse and the Imperial Camel Corps has been mentioned in *Volume VII*.¹

The British Official History² states:

The Imperial Camel Corps (which, the authors say, "was predominantly Australian") was the backbone of the defence of Egypt from the west. But the use of camelry in war is ancient, and it was the internal-combustion engine which now completely altered the situation.

The reference is to the motor-car patrols,³ which were of two types—light car patrols of Ford cars, and light armoured motor batteries of Rolls Royce cars and tenders. It was to this service that Murray sent the Australian light-car patrol,⁴ which arrived in Egypt in the middle of 1916. This unit consisted of three armoured cars of the heavier type, armed with Colt guns; the bodies had been built by the members of the unit themselves in Melbourne to the plans of their commander, Captain James.⁵ On August 15th they were sent from Ismailia to Minia, from which point, working with the 11th and 12th British Light Armoured Car Batteries, they patrolled the line of blockhouses to the Baharia oasis.⁶ which in October was re-occupied by a force under Major-General Watson.⁷ The Colt guns of the Australian cars worked well enough, but, though all the drivers were accustomed to bush driving in Australia, their cars proved much more difficult



¹ Pages 211, 212, etc.

² *Military Operations Egypt and Palestine, Vol. I, pp. 137-8.*

³ Aeroplanes also proved to be of enormous assistance in desert warfare.

⁴ See p 184

⁵ Capt. E. H. James, M.V.O., M.C., V.D.; 1st Aust. Armoured Car Section. Engineer; of Hawthorn, Vic.; b. Melbourne, 22 Nov., 1879

⁶ Movement of Arabs was checked by keeping a look-out for fresh footmarks, which, when seen, were always followed up.

⁷ Major-Gen. W. A. Watson, C.B., C.M.G., C.I.E., p.s.c.; 39th (K.G.O.) Central India Horse. Officer of Indian Regular Army; of Finchampstead, Berkshire, Eng.; b. Delhi, India, 25 Sept., 1860

to work in sand than the British Rolls Royces.⁸ Apart from the possibility of breakdown in the desert—to which both cars and aeroplanes were liable—there was no great danger in the work.⁹

On December 3rd the unit was ordered south. Its cars and guns were returned to Cairo, but the personnel went by railway to the Kharga oasis, which the British had re-occupied in April. Here cars and Lewis guns were taken over from a British unit. Extra drivers and some despatch riders (with motor-cycles) joined, and the unit became No. 1 Australian Light Car Patrol. Its first duty was to escort General Watson to the Dakhla oasis (reoccupied since October, 1916). At the end of the year the unit was employed in discovering new routes from the southern end of that oasis to Kharga, the ancient track (Darb el Gubari) being too flinty for tyres. A more southerly route was soon found—leading through a pass in some rocky hills,¹⁰ beyond which was firm sand allowing motors to travel at high speed to Kharga, which was their goal.

Meanwhile, all the important oases had been re-occupied except Siwa, where the Senussi himself was located. Hearing that he proposed to withdraw thence to Jaghbub, Sir Archibald Murray decided to raid Siwa from Matruh. This was done at the beginning of February, 1917, but the Senussi escaped. It was while these plans were in preparation that the Australian patrol, then at Dakhla, was asked to discover a route from Dakhla direct to the Kufra oasis, 400 miles to the west in the centre of the desert. The oasis had never been approached from this direction, access having always been from Cyrenaica in the north. Three cars started, with two despatch-riders. But the surface was found to be soft drift-sand; the cars had to be worked in low gear and constantly pushed.¹¹ One broke down at the 80th mile, and a second when nearing the 200th. The country ahead, seen from a high hill, showed no sign of improvement, and the attempt was therefore abandoned. The patrol returned to Dakhla oasis just as its last water-can was emptied.¹² A second attempt was about to be made when the unit was sent to Palestine.¹³ The British, who were now raiding the Senussi's camps from the

⁸ The difficulty was partly met by discarding some of the armour and unnecessary parts, and by fitting twin tyres to the rear wheels. The cars always worked in pairs, so as to have labour available when the going was bad.

⁹ On September 6 the Arabs surprised and shot two British Officers who were out with a car near the Baharia oasis. The chief danger, however, is typified by the fate of two British airmen whose aeroplane was forced in July to land in the desert. Lieutenant R. W. Creswell (of Melbourne), second-in-command of a company of the camel corps, made a gallant dash from Kharga into the desert to recover it. The pilot and observer were found dead, but the machine was brought back.

¹⁰ These hills were east of the ancient caravan route from Dakhla to the wells of El Sheb. The cars were guided mainly by compass, although these were affected by the magnetos. Frequent checks had to be made. To mark the routes, cairns were built and capped with empty petrol-tins, the shining sides of which could sometimes be seen for twenty miles.

¹¹ It was found that, by keeping the two following cars in the wheel-tracks of the leader, they could be driven on top gear. To save weight, the car-bodies had been removed, and, to save water, only one car carried its Lewis gun. Condensers were fitted to the radiators.

¹² One car had to be temporarily abandoned, but was recovered a week later.

¹³ Its subsequent history is referred to in *Vol. VII* of this series.

north in conjunction with the Italians,¹⁴ and destroying his ammunition, in April, 1917, made terms with Sayed Idris, the Senussi's cousin (and son of his predecessor). This leader was now recognised as occupying the Senussi's position; Sayed Ahmed himself was in August, 1918, smuggled by an Austrian submarine to Constantinople, where he for a time took a prominent part in the Pan-Islamic movement.

¹⁴ Some of the camel corps took part.