

THE IMPERIAL CAMEL CORPS

Situated in the Victoria Embankment Gardens, London is a memorial commemorating the Imperial Camel Corps. The memorial was sculpted by Major Cecil Hew Brown (1868-1926). Born in Scotland he was educated at Harrow and Exeter College, Oxford. He pursued a career as a painter after studying art in London and Paris. During the 1890's he became interested in sculpture. As a keen horseman, he concentrated in particular on equestrian sculpture. In 1913, he designed a medal for the London Medical Congress of that year.

He served during the First World War in the Middlesex Yeomanry and because of his knowledge of horses was transferred to the Army Service Corps, serving in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Egypt and Palestine. After the war he was art master at Bedford School and was commissioned to sculpt a memorial to commemorate the Imperial Camel Corps.

The bronze memorial has a relatively small statue of a man riding a camel, atop a Portland stone pedestal and inset on each of its four sides with bronze panels. Two list the names of the 346 men who died whilst serving with the Imperial Camel Corps in Egypt, Sinai and Palestine between 1916 and 1918.

These plaques are inscribed with the names of 191 men from Australia, 106 from the United Kingdom, 41 from New Zealand and 9 from India. Depicted on the south facing panel are two soldiers running and on the north facing panel two officers standing next to a camel.

The bronze work was cast by A.B. Burton. The foundry was founded in Thames Ditton by Cox and Sons in 1874, later it became Drew and Co., in 1880, then Moore & Co., and was taken over by Arthur John Hollinshead and Arthur Bryan Burton in 1897.

When Hollinshead died in 1902 the foundry became known as A.B. Burton until his death in 1933. The business was closed in 1939 and was later again used as a foundry until 1972 when the site was acquired by the District Council and demolished in 1976.



The memorial inscription on the stone plinth beneath, the south facing bronze panel reads:-

To The Glorious And Immortal Memory
Of The Officers N.C.O.'s And Men Of Imperial Camel Corps ~ British,
Australian, New Zealand, India Who Fell In Action Or Died Of Wounds
And Disease In Egypt, Sinai And Palestine, 1916, 1917, 1918.

Inscribed on the stone plinth beneath the north facing panel are Imperial Camel Corps engagements:-

1916 ~ Romani, Baharia, Mazar, Dakhla, Maghara, El Arish, Maghdaba.

1917 ~ Rafa, Hassana, Gaza 1, Gaza 2, Sana Redoubt, Beersheba, Bir Khu Weilfe, Hill 265.

1918 ~ Amman, Jordan Valley, Mudawar (Hedjaz).

The Somaliland Camel Corps had been formed by the British Army in 1912. After the outbreak of the First World War the Camel Transport Corps (CTC) was raised at the latter end of 1915. It was a Regular Army British unit of locally recruited Egyptian camel handlers, subject to military discipline and commanded by British Officers and N.C.O.'s. The CTC was not used as a fighting unit.

The Imperial Camel Corps was established in January 1916 primarily to assist with the fighting against the Senussi, an Islamist movement supported by Arab and Berber tribes of the Libyan-Egyptian border region. After two months of training at the Camel Training Depot at Abbassia, near Cairo the first four companies were deployed patrolling the Libyan Desert re-asserting British control of the border. By the end of March 1916 the rebellious tribes had been virtually suppressed. The Egyptian Expeditionary Force was created under the command of General Sir Archibald Murray, in March 1916 from units who had been evacuated at the end of the Gallipoli campaign in December 1915 and January 1916. They had been sent to Egypt for rest and re-equipping before being sent to the Western Front. Four infantry divisions, one cavalry division and other infantry and cavalry brigades were retained and designated the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

Initially four company-size units were formed as the basis of the Imperial Camel Corps. In March 1916 six additional companies were raised from British yeomanry regiments and in June four Australian companies were formed from reinforcements for the Australian Light Horse regiments. Similarly two companies from the New Zealand Mounted Rifles were raised in August and December.

On the 19th December 1916 the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade was formed under the command of Brigadier-General Clement Leslie Smith V.C. Originally the Brigade was made up of three battalions 1st Australian, 2nd British and 3rd Australian with supporting units. Each of the battalions, divided into four companies was comprised of 770 men, 922 camels and a Headquarters Company. The 4th Anzac Battalion was formed in May 1917 allowing the brigade to rotate one battalion through the Camel Brigade's Training Depot at Abbassia for rest and refitting leaving three battalions in the field.

Other units which completed the Brigade's formation were the 265th (Camel) Machine-Gun Squadron, the Hong Kong and Singapore (Mountain) Battery (formed from men of the Indian Army), Royal Engineers (10th Camel Field Troop), a Signal Section, Australian (Camel) Field Ambulance and 97th Australian Dental Unit. There was also a veterinary section, Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Ammunition Train and Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Train with five days of rations and supplies. When at full strength the Brigade required approximately 4,000 camels, supported by a Camel Remount Depot at Abbassia. The soldiers were known as Cameliers and rode to the scene of battle and fought dismounted.

The Egyptian Expeditionary Force had launched an offensive in the Sinai Desert in August 1916 and on the 23rd December in support of further operations the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade fought in the Battle of Maghdaba a few days after its formation. Throughout 1917 the Cameliers participated in operations with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force including the Battle of Rafa, capture of the Turkish force at Bir el Hassan, setbacks and failure during the First Battle of Gaza in March and on the 2nd April an attack on the Sana Redoubt in August. Rested and refitted they took part in the victories gained at the Battle of Beersheba, Third Battle of Gaza, Battle of Maghara Ridge in October and November. By the end of the year they had crossed the Sinai and continued their advance into Palestine.

The Imperial Camel Corps Brigade moved into the Jordan Valley in early 1918 and participated in the Spring campaign against the Turks. After three days of battle at Amman the British were unable to penetrate the Turkish defences around the city and withdrew. In the second Trans-Jordan attack on Shunet Nimrin and Es Salt the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade were deployed to the western defence of the Jordan River ford at Umm esh Shert to support the left flank of the 4th Light Horse Brigade. Attacked themselves on their left the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade had to withdraw. The change in the terrain and topographical features encountered by the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade as the Egyptian Expeditionary Force advanced from Sinai into Palestine gradually led to its disbandment. In June 1918 Brigadier General Claude Stuart Rome assumed

command of the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade as Brigadier-General Smith V.C., was transferred to command the 24th Infantry Brigade, 10th Division. Also during June the Australians reverted to form the 14th and 15th Light Horse Regiments and the New Zealand troops were formed into the 2nd New Zealand Horse Mounted Machine Gun Squadron. The three units formed the 5th Light Horse Brigade. The British companies of Imperial Camel Corps Brigade were retained and took part in the Arab Revolt and sabotaging operations in July 1918 along the Hejaz railway line. The six companies were reduced to two and in May 1919 the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade was disbanded.

The Imperial Camel Corps Memorial is a Grade II listed monument and was refurbished in 1999 by Westminster City Council.

Sources

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