

HORSE AND MORSE IN ACTION AT RAMADI, 1917

A little-known signal squadron

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The AIF's 1st Australian Wireless Signal Squadron's experience with the British Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force (BMEF) during the First World War is not well known. In total, 558 Australians served with the Squadron in Mesopotamia.¹ Its Signals intelligence capacity was exceptional.² Its C-Station supported the British rout of a Turkish garrison at Ramadi in defence of Baghdad on September 28, 1917.³

The strategic and operational picture

The Turkish Ottoman Empires' entry in to the War to form the Central Powers in late 1914 instigated a British Mesopotamian campaign.⁴ That was because Britain saw the protection of British-India and the Anglo-Persian oil-supply at the head of the Persian Gulf as priorities. A key to the campaign was the defence of the city of Baghdad, which the British had taken from the Turks by March 1917.⁵ Until then, the Ottomans had controlled Baghdad almost continuously for 383 years!⁶

A Turkish garrison at Ramadi, around 110 km to the west of Baghdad threatened the city. The 1917 Russian Revolution meant that the allied Russian Army advancing to Baghdad from its northeast had withdrawn, leaving the Turks to fill the void.⁷ To pre-empt this threat, as a part of his mandate to defend Baghdad, Britain's Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Maude launched an attack to capture Ramadi on the banks of the Euphrates.

Horse and Morse arrive

The expanse of Mesopotamia meant that communication was difficult. Access to wireless equipment and Signaller operators was equally challenging. To solve these problems the BMEF called upon Australian and New Zealand expertise.⁸

Broadly, a troop of Australian and a troop of New Zealand wireless Signallers arrived in Mesopotamia in early 1916. In March of that year, they were expanded by a third Australian troop and an Australian headquarters to form the 1st (Anzac) Wireless Signal Squadron, the latest of its names.

By August 1917, a second Australian squadron had arrived along with a troop for service in Ford motorcars. Because the New Zealand government's focus was the Western Front, an

¹ Bean, C.E.W., 1941. *Appendix 5 – Australians in Mesopotamia*. First World War Official Histories, Volume V, pp. 703 - 704. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1416783> [Accessed 30 August 2022].

² *Ibid.* p. 712.

³ 1st Australian Wireless Signal Squadron War Diary. PDF. p. 11.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1355356> [Accessed 31 August 2022]

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 706.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 717.

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Baghdad-1534> [Accessed 1 September 2022]

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 721.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 703.

Australian troop replaced the New Zealand troop, and the formed body finally became the 1st Australian Wireless Signal Squadron.⁹



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A 1st Australian Wireless Signal Squadron wireless station in Mesopotamia on the move.

Each of the Squadron's troops were generally equipped with four wireless stations.¹⁰ Around half of those were horse drawn mobile stations while the remainder were pack stations. Other than for the Fords, all the troops were mounted. The Australian drivers were experienced horsemen, although some of the wireless operators needed to be trained by British cavalry instructors.¹¹

Morse code was the Squadron's forte. Aside from their efficient operational messaging, they were also most adept at Signals intelligence. "The uncanny power which this information... secured...gave [Maude] one of the outstanding features of the Mesopotamian campaign."¹²

The Squadron Sapper and Unit Historian, Keast Burke in his exquisite *With Horse and Morse in Mesopotamia*, writes that the Squadron's resourcefulness was conspicuous, and their extreme effort in crisis was renowned.¹³ "Their operation of their little sets was so skilful that they normally communicated over many times the distances then set down in the Field Service Pocket Book."¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 704.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 711-12.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 711.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 712.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Burke, K. & Australian and New Zealand Wireless Signal Squadron History Committee, 1927. *With Horse and Morse in Mesopotamia: the story of Anzacs in Asia*. Editor Keast Burke, Chairman of Committee. C.W.C. Marr A. & N.Z. Wireless Signal Squadron History. Committee, Sydney.



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1st Australian Wireless Signal Squadron Unit Historian, Sapper Eric Keast Burke, at his billet in Baghdad, Mesopotamia (Iraq).

Ramadi

The Squadron's C-Station supported Maude's 6th Cavalry Brigade column's manoeuvre around Ramadi.¹⁵ The AIF's Official Histories records that Maude "maintained close personal control not only of preparations, but, so far as possible, even of columns sent out on detached

¹⁵ 1st Australian Wireless Signal Squadron War Diary. PDF. p. 11.
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1355356> [Accessed 31 August 2022]

operations. This he effected constantly through the employment of the wireless stations, through which the column commanders had to report to him, usually, every hour.”¹⁶

C-Station regularly stopped by the side of the moving column to despatch and receive the Morse code traffic as long as required. They then caught up with the column, to stop again to operate. Continuity of reception was achieved by a method of relays known as ‘stepping up’.¹⁷



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1st Wireless Signal Squadron's mobile C-Station station operating during the battle for Ramadi.

The Turkish commander at Ramadi held a formidable position, which was a ridge with his left on the Euphrates and his right on a lake.¹⁸ Feinting east of the river, Maude sent the cavalry column with C-Station across the desert to the western flank. The infantry followed.

By the early hours of September 28, the Turks were outflanked.¹⁹ The attack was launched and the cavalry dashed across the Turkish rear. By the afternoon, they were shelling the Turks from behind, while C-Station, under shrapnel fire, reported to Maude. With “pellets...churning the dust around [them] C-Station never missed a dot or wavered on a dash.”²⁰

¹⁶ Bean, C.E.W., 1941. *Appendix 5 – Australians in Mesopotamia*. First World War Official Histories, Volume V, pp. 713-14. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1416783> [Accessed 30 August 2022].

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 714.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 723.

¹⁹ Bean, C.E.W., 1941. *Appendix 5 – Australians in Mesopotamia*. First World War Official Histories, Volume V, p. 723. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1416783> [Accessed 30 August 2022].

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 723.

The Turks, surrounded, unsuccessfully attempted to break through the cavalry in the rear, and the garrison of nearly 4,000 was captured.²¹ At the time, this comprehensive British success crumpled the Turkish defence on the Euphrates.²²



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Members of the 1st Wireless Signals Squadron after the battle for Ramadi.

Read more in: Bean, C.E.W., 1941. Appendix 5 – Australians in Mesopotamia. *First World War Official Histories, Volume V. The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Main German Offensive, 1918* (8th edition, 1941).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*