

# †The First Recorded Aeromedical Evacuation in the British Army – The True Story

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During the First World War the airplane was used for evacuation of casualties to a very minor extent<sup>1</sup>. It was thus very interesting to find in Rexford-Welch's *History of the Royal Air Force Medical Services during the Second World War* the following paragraph:

"The first British record of a wounded man travelling by air is dated 1917, in the Sinai Desert. A trooper of the Imperial Camel Corps had his ankle shattered by a Bedouin bullet during an attack on Bir-el-Hassana, and at first preparations were made to send him to railhead in a cacolet on a camel. However, his medical officer persuaded the pilot of a DH-4 biplane to carry him as a sitting casualty in the observer's seat of the aircraft and on February 19, with his ankle in a box splint, he was flown to Kilo 153. The journey by air took 45 minutes, instead of the usual 2½ to 3 days"<sup>2</sup>.

Considering Rexford-Welch's work as a secondary source, an attempt was made in order to find a primary or at least contemporary record of the event. It was not mentioned either in the British Official History of the War or in the British Medical Services General History of the First World War. Several diaries written by people who had participated in the war against Turkey in the Sinai Peninsula failed to reveal any information concerning an event of aeromedical evacuation.

Two sources were found in which the event was mentioned: The first was a diary of an anonymous "Serjeant-Major RAMC" who wrote:

"It is interesting to note that one case, that of a wounded British officer, was evacuated from Magdhaba by aeroplane"<sup>3</sup>.

Opposite the page with this remark there was a photograph of the aeroplane in which the casualty had been evacuated.

The second source was the official history of the Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine:

"While the post (Bir-el-Hassana) was being surrounded Lance-Corporal MacGregor was shot and severely wounded by armed Bedouins; it was found impossible to evacuate him on a camel cacolet, and he was therefore carried back to El Arish in one of the aeroplanes which had been co-operating with the force"<sup>4</sup>.

This description fits almost completely the one in Rexford-Welch's book<sup>2</sup>: the location of the event, the date and the type of casualty. "Kilo 153" was near El Arish, where a "receiving station" and a casualty

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clearing station were located. On the other hand, the case described by the "Serjeant-Major" was different in place and might be also different in time. That description could not be ignored as it came from a contemporary source and included a photograph of the aeroplane which had evacuated the casualty.

Were the two descriptions referring to the same case? Although the reports were different from one another in several details, it had to be postulated as a working hypothesis that the three descriptions referred to the same case. Assuming that there were two different occasions in which aeroplanes were used for evacuation of combat casualties, at the same period of time and area, would mean that there was a kind of policy concerning aeromedical evacuation. Yet it was not mentioned in the official accounts of the British Army and Royal Army Medical Corps.

Further support for the assumption that there was only one event of aeromedical evacuation during the Sinai Campaign is found in W. T. Massey's book *How Jerusalem was won*:

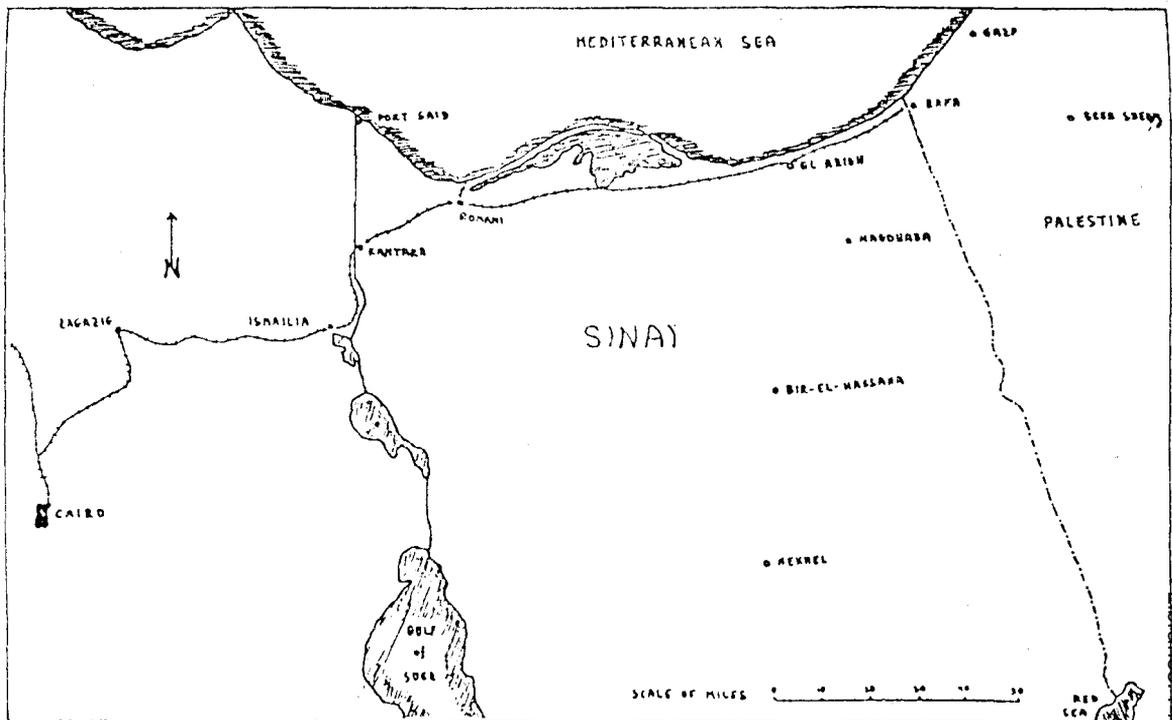
"The aeroplane has been put to many uses in war and, it may be, there are instances on other fronts of it being used, in emergencies, as an ambulance. When a little mobile force rounded up the Turkish post at Hassana, on the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula, one of our men received so severe a wound that an immediate operation was necessary. An airman at once volunteered to carry the wounded man to the nearest hospital, forty-four miles away across the desert and by his action a life was saved"<sup>5</sup>.

Mr Massey, who was attached to the Egypt Expeditionary Force Headquarters as a reporter representing the London newspapers during the operations in Sinai and Palestine, must have heard the story somewhere. Being impressed by the uniqueness of the event, he included it in his book, glorifying the pilot.

Postulating that the different descriptions were related to the same case, an explanation had to be sought in order to clarify the problem of "where" (Magdhaba or Bir-el-Hassana), and "when".

## The Battle of Magdhaba

The Anzac Mounted Division, the cavalry division of the British "Desert Column", entered El Arish, which had been deserted by the Turkish Army, on the 21 December, 1916. Intelligence reports revealed that the Turks had retreated to Rafa and to Magdhaba, the latter being located about twenty miles to the south of El



Arish. It was estimated that the garrison at Magdhaba included 1600 troops.

The British Headquarters decided to attack the garrison at Magdhaba immediately in order not to let the enemy reorganize itself in the new post. At 08.00 December 23, 1916, Magdhaba was attacked by the Anzac Mounted Division which included two Australian Light Horse Brigades, the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade, the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade and artillery batteries. At 16.00 the same day, the battle was over; the victorious British took 1282 Turkish soldiers prisoner.

The British casualties were 124 wounded, 22 killed<sup>6,7,8</sup> or 134 wounded, 12 killed, according to another source<sup>9</sup>.

A "dressing station" was located three miles west of Magdhaba by the mobile section of the New Zealand Field Ambulance with the 1st Australian Light Horse Brigade Field Ambulance. On December 23, eighty wounded British soldiers were treated at this station and urgent surgery was performed. This group of casualties was evacuated to El Arish, during the night of December 23/24, by cacolets (special litters designed to carry casualties on camels) and by sand carts.

During the late afternoon of the 23rd, more casualties were located: forty-four British and sixty-six Turks. This group of casualties was initially treated by the medical officers of the combat units in a Turkish field hospital which had been found at Magdhaba, then evacuated to the "dressing station". There they were loaded on cacolets and evacuated to El Arish where a "receiving

station" – a kind of a field hospital – had been established. They all arrived at their destination at 04.00, December 25. Here further triage, treatment and major surgery took place. A group of 150 casualties was then evacuated to Kantara Stationary Hospital on the 29th of December, 1916<sup>8,9</sup>.

As so many details of the medical organization for treatment and evacuation were recorded, it seemed unreasonable to believe that a case of a casualty who had been air-lifted was omitted. Furthermore, it is difficult to believe that while about two hundred battle casualties, British and Turkish, among them about dozen officers, were evacuated by cacolets and sand carts, only one case was evacuated by aeroplane.

### Bir-el-Hassana

After the victory at Rafa on January 9, 1917, the only remaining Turkish forces in the Sinai area were two garrisons – one at Bir-el-Hassana, some thirty-three miles south of Magdhaba, the other at Nekhel. In February 1917, it was decided at the British Headquarters to "clean up" these remaining Turkish garrisons.

On the 17th February 1917 the 2nd Battalion (British) of the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade, under the command of Major J R Bassett, advanced from Magdhaba, arriving at Bir-el-Hassana the next morning at dawn. The Turkish garrison, taken by surprise, surrendered without any attempt to resist the British attack<sup>4,10</sup>.

It seems that the case of Bir-el-Hassana is also inappropriate, as no battle was fought there and no losses were recorded. However, Rexford-Welch's description of the shooting by local Bedouins, causing one casualty, answers the questions of where and why only one casualty required medical evacuation from Bir-el-Hassana. It was far away from any medical facility, the terrain between there and El Arish was very rough and these facts suggested the idea of aeromedical evacuation.

Still the "Serjeant-Major's" story<sup>3</sup> cannot just be ignored: there is a reason why Magdhaba has been mentioned. And the book included a picture of the aeroplane which had been involved in the aeromedical evacuation.

It seems that a possible explanation for the geographical error might rise from the origin of the unit involved in the Bir-el-Hassana affair: this unit, the 2nd Battalion of the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade had fought at the battle of Magdhaba and marched to Bir-el-Hassana from Magdhaba. For somebody who was not a part of that particular unit, these details might have been unknown.

The last phase in the verification of the various sources was to identify the aeroplane whose picture was found in the "Serjeant-Major's" book, in order to prove that the picture was indeed related to the described aeromedical evacuation.

The aeroplane was identified by Mr Dana Bell, from the National Air and Space Museum, Washington D.C., as a B.E.2c. The first DH-4 aeroplanes were produced during March 1917 and did not participate in the war before April 1917<sup>11,12,13</sup>. Thus it was *not* a DH-4 aeroplane in which the wounded British soldier was evacuated during February 1917.

## Conclusions

While we were able to show that the "Serjeant-Major" was wrong about the location where the air-lift had actually happened, the official R.A.F. Medical History was wrong as for the type of aeroplane which had been used. Thus we were able to clarify all the issues raised by the various sources and to report that the first British aeromedical evacuation occurred at Bir-el-Hassana, in the Sinai desert, on February 19, 1917. The patient was Lance-Corporal MacGregor, from the 2nd Battalion of the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade, who had been shot by a Bedouin. He was evacuated by a B.E.2c aeroplane.

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## The Development of Plastic Surgery for War

*From Brig. General (Retd) Eran Dolev, MD,  
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Antony F Wallace in his article "The Development of Plastic Surgery for War"<sup>1</sup>, relates to an event of aeromedical evacuation during the First World War (Fig 3). This figure has been taken from a book written by an anonymous author<sup>2</sup>.

Although the recorded event was the first occasion of aeromedical evacuation of a battle casualty in the British Army, a lot of confusion has existed concerning the actual date and place. It is almost certain it did not occur at Magdhaba nor during December 1916.

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