

THE BAHR EL MAGNOON.

BY MAJOR-GENERAL J. B. WILSON, C.B., C.M.G.

As one cast from the Corps by reason of age, and therefore no longer able to take part in its active affairs, I am reduced to the contemplative rôle of that white-bearded Arab who sat on his prayer rug observing the long bazaar, and gave thanks to Allah for the diversity with which he made his wonderful creatures.

In the course of these meditations it has occurred to me sometimes to wonder whether the young R.A.M.C. officer of the present day is sufficiently grateful for the admirable training he receives in his technical work, and more especially in general military duties and the Staff work of an army.

I gather from examination papers, "schemes" and general and special ideas appearing from time to time in the Journal that there is considerable diversity between the training given in these subjects in times past and that available now.

I remember being detailed for one of the earlier efforts at training of this kind. No doubt this occurred about the time it began to dawn on some pioneer intelligence in the War Office that France, Germany and the other European people were training their medical officers in those military and staff duties which they would have to perform in the Great War.

Evidently this prophet had suggested to the other great ones that the thing might be worth looking into—at all events on a small scale.

If the General Officers Commanding of the period panicked too freely it could be withdrawn.

If, on the other hand, it caught on, there was the kudos. And in any event, when the crash came, no one could say that the War Office had not done its best. There would be documentary evidence that all (or at any rate some) medical officers had been (more or less) carefully trained in Staff duties.

In fact it worked as if, in any case, the War Office would be on velvet.

The experiment in which I was implicated took the form of a "Staff Ride" in Egypt, where I was stationed at the time, and this exercise was personally conducted by the then General Officer Commanding the Command himself.

He was an officer with a distinguished record for gallantry in the Field, as well as for his unvarying courtesy and kindness to those serving under him, but not what could be described as a rapid thinker or as one unduly favourable to new ideas.

He held that the "Brains of the Army," or, in other words, the Staff, was the main thing, and the duty of the doctor was to keep the Staff in good health. He was on all occasions to analyse their water supply and their rations, and was to act as an unfailing dump for No. 9 pills and a perennial fountain of cough mixture.

The General Officer Commanding was rather a connoisseur in cough mixtures, as he considered that he suffered from slight chronic bronchitis himself.

If he could have conceived that a medical officer required some Staff training to enable him to carry on his duties for the welfare of the troops in his charge on the scale required for modern war he would only have regarded such an idea as a dangerous innovation, prejudicial alike to good order and military discipline and, therefore, to be stamped out without delay.

This was, therefore, the state of things when I was detailed for the Staff ride.

I do not, of course, know what correspondence took place between the War Office and the Command, but evidently something of a fairly definite nature, seeing that it resulted in the inclusion of a medical officer in a "Staff ride," and I was told off for the duty.

I consulted my immediate Commanding Officer as to whether I was to do the Staff work of the tour and work out the medical problems involved, or was merely to attend, as medical adviser to the expedition, which consisted of some seven or eight healthy officers, doing a pleasant four days' tour in the Fayoum, during the best part of the cold weather.

My commanding officer said I was to do the former, but as a concession to local prejudices it might be a good thing to take a supply of medicine (including cough mixture) to keep the brains of the Army in good health.

The scene of action was that part of Egypt known as the Fayoum. For those who are not familiar with the country, it may be stated that the Fayoum is a large oasis or fertile tract some eight or ten miles west of the left, or western, bank of the Nile about fifty miles south of Cairo. Cairo of course being at the apex or southern point of the Egyptian delta. The Fayoum is connected with the Nile by the Bahr Yussuf, a canal which diverts Nile water to the Fayoum, fills its lakes and keeps it fertile. The canal is stated to have been Joseph's idea during his term of governorship in Egypt, and it is supposed that his provision against the "seven lean years" mentioned in the Bible really consisted in the fact that he found out that a considerable area of the Western Desert was a few feet below Nile level, turned the Nile into it per his canal, and hence the Fayoum.

The general idea set down in the book of the words was that the Staff were to consider themselves a British force driven out of the Egyptian delta, presumably by some local potentate of the period, and forced to retreat to the Fayoum and await reinforcements from India. Our duty was, therefore, to keep the enemy at bay until they arrived. The first

position to be held was on the north-east fringe of the oasis nearest to Cairo and the river, which would probably be the point first attacked by an invader.

Near this place was a little railway station, a terminus called Lahoun on the Fayoum Railway, within less than one mile of the edge of the cultivated land which here rose in a slight ridge at the junction with the desert. I gathered that this was considered the ideal position by the Higher Command.

Behind, and parallel with the position on the desert's edge, the map showed the line of the "Bahr el Magnoon," or "Lunatic's Canal," a branch of the Bahr Yussuf. It ran about half way between the railway and the fighting line, and parallel with the latter. I do not know who invented the name for this canal, but he certainly showed a turn of speed quite unusual among the Egyptian wits of the day.

All Commanders were to assemble on this ground, appreciate the situation, and make their dispositions accordingly. They were to state: (a) How they proposed to defend the position, and (b) To withdraw, per El Lahoun Railway, after having inflicted the maximum loss on the enemy; but before we were all exterminated, and in order that some one might be left to welcome the Sikhs on their arrival from India, the sappers were to strengthen existing bridges over the Magnoon and to provide others to enable the defending force to deploy rapidly on to the position from the station. After evacuation they were to destroy all bridges to stop the victorious progress of the enemy when they got to the canal bank.

Infantry and Royal Artillery were to get into, and out of, action by the same route, and I was to evacuate all wounded in a like manner by a theoretical ambulance train before the troops retreated. In fact a thoroughly compendious scheme.

It seemed to me, however, that these bridges might not improbably be a little crowded towards the end of Act II, and I thought it would not do any harm if I was to look at them more in detail. Obviously the Magnoon was the crux of the position.

Sappers were sitting in the little native village working out with knitted brows the quantities of high explosives required to demolish bridges. Commanders of guns and infantry were working out positions by the aid of maps, like so many budding von Moltkes.

It was obviously no time to be idle, so I thought I had better visit the canal. I therefore started from the station, walking towards the position, expecting to find the canal halfway, I would then cross by the nearest bridge. Unfortunately, however, this did not work out according to plan. I got to the position on the edge of the desert, but found no Magnoon Canal. Either I must be mad or I must have got to the wrong desert. However, compass bearings and the replies of such of the military toilers as could spare a second from their labours for conversation, all agreed that I had got to the right desert, and was in fact in the exact centre of the

stalls—or would be—when the overture commenced. All this was a bit distressing, but further inspection of the ground solved the difficulty.

The Magnoon Canal had no doubt, at some period of the world's history, run in the direction indicated on the map, in fact there was a broad ribbon of lighter green made through the wheat crops, showing what had been its course. That section of it, however, for some half mile or more behind the position had been filled up, some decades, or perhaps some centuries previously, and as a canal the Magnoon had ceased to exist.

That evening as we were dressing for dinner my commander, to wit, the General Officer Commanding the defending force, in actual life a cavalry captain, demanded my scheme. Rapidly glancing over it he said, "Look here! what's this? How are you going to get your wounded to the station? What about the Magnoon Canal?" I said I hoped to get them to the station (if there was any station at that time of day, which did not seem probable), but if there was I hoped to get them there by stretcher or ambulances and country carts, if available; provided the ground was not too soft; also that for my purpose the canal was negligible. I was told not to be silly but to look at the map. I then asked him if he had followed the canal behind the position. "No," he said, "not exactly, in fact I hadn't time. But! Oh, well, d—n it, look at the map."

"Quite," I said, "and very nice too. Only you can take it from me that the Magnoon Canal has ceased to exist all the way behind the position for years and there is wheat a foot high growing over its track."

"But, look here," said he, "this won't do; you have upset the whole apple cart. If this scheme of yours gets to the General Officer Commanding our name is mud." "What!" said I, "you don't mean to tell me that the General Officer Commanding doesn't know either?"

"I've already told you once," said he, "not to be silly. You go and do another scheme and put in the Magnoon Canal where it ought to be and don't let's have any more chat."

I made it so.

Our dear old General Officer Commanding went through all our papers after the excellent dinner they gave us at the Medinet el Fayoum Hotel that night. He considered that, taking them all round, they were performances of considerable merit, and reflected great credit on all concerned.

Let no one, however, conclude from this truthful tale that high-class Staff work was unknown in those days. In my humble opinion our R.A.S.C. representative gave a distinguished example of it on this occasion. He was a genial lad, a subaltern, whom we will call "Tibben" (if this should catch his eye I hope he will forgive me). The last time I saw him he looked a bit careworn but wore a full colonel's badges and a considerable row of well-earned decorations.

On this occasion, however, he toiled not, neither did he spin. He appreciated the situation to one milligramme, and the exact mental effort required to compete with it.

While we toiled he did nothing, and whereas our schemes went in on painfully filled sheets of foolscap, his was submitted on something which looked like the back of an envelope. He said it was the plan by which our force was to be kept in food and forage during the war. It ran as follows: "The only point from which this force can draw its supplies is Islamiyeh (or some such name), the nearest port on the Nile. At this point, therefore, the contractor Abdul has been ordered to concentrate the rations, while the agent Mahomed, will, at the same place, accumulate the forage."

"I presume, Mr. Tibben," said the General, benevolently regarding Tibben from over his eyeglasses, "I presume that these are imaginary gentlemen?" "Yes, sir," said Tibben, "they are."