

CHAPTER X

THE BASE IN THE LEVANT AND MEDITERRANEAN LINE OF COMMUNICATIONS

IN February 1915, when the War Office first proposed to cooperate with the Admiralty in attacking the Dardanelles, a small body of the Corps sailed from Avonmouth for 'Base B,' the code adopted to denote these operations.

Owing to its proximity, the site suggested for this base was the Island of Lemnos in the Ægean Sea, the place of assembly of the fleet.

A survey of the Island, however, showed that it did not even possess a pier to which ships could tie up, and time did not admit of large constructional works being undertaken. Alexandria on the other hand, the commercial port of Egypt, with its fine harbour and docks, was a very suitable site for a base. Its geographical position was favourable, and there existed in Egypt large manufacturing and repair establishments connected with Government services. It was, therefore, decided to instal the Ordnance base at Alexandria.

The decision proved to be an act of prophetic wisdom, for the small Ordnance detachment which, with nothing beyond a small quantity of clothing and small-arm ammunition, set up its tents at Alexandria in March 1915, formed the nucleus of the Levant base which was to fill such an important rôle in the years to come as a great central clearing house for Ordnance services throughout the Near East.

At first the new depot was stocked by calling for assistance from the existing peace depots of our Army of Occupation in Egypt at Cairo and Alexandria ; but there was fighting on the Suez Canal, which the Turks were attacking from across the Sinai Peninsula, and not much could be spared.

The system of supply to our troops at Gallipoli will be described in the next chapter. It will suffice here to say that, though in some cases store-ships sailed direct to the advanced base later formed on Lemnos, the most

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practicable and usually adopted plan was to send freight from home in bulk to Alexandria and there load up cargo boats for Lemnos with miscellaneous consignments of what was immediately wanted.

Conditions in Gallipoli, where we could do no more than maintain a precarious foothold on shore, were not such as to call for a great variety of equipment ; and the year 1915 was largely spent at Alexandria in getting matters ship-shape. Nevertheless, as trench warfare developed on that Peninsula, Alexandria had heavy calls to meet from local sources. There was at the time a great scarcity of trench munitions. Designs of mortars, bombs, grenades, and so forth were improvised ; the articles were made in Egypt and sent to Gallipoli.

The really arduous work began in 1916, the most strenuous year of all for the Levant base. The extent to which Alexandria developed as a military port can be gauged by the following clearance figures of shipping :

	<i>Commercial</i>		<i>Government</i>	
	<i>Ships</i>	<i>Tonnage</i>	<i>Ships</i>	<i>Tonnage</i>
1914	1667	3,299,099	93	662,658
1916	554	966,763	1283	6,792,115

The attempt to capture Gallipoli failed and at the beginning of the year the troops engaged on the operation arrived in Egypt in a destitute condition, having to be re-equipped from top to toe. To outfit them with transport was in particular a heavy job, for none had been wanted in Gallipoli. Concurrently, all the stores from the advanced base at Lemnos and those saved from the Peninsula itself poured into Alexandria, there to be sorted out, cleaned and mended. At the same time operations in the Balkans were being undertaken and it fell on Alexandria to stock the depot at Salonika ; preparations were being made for an advance east of the Suez Canal and there was what became the Palestine Expeditionary Force to be provided for ; and equipment was needed for the British divisions which were being despatched from Egypt to Mesopotamia to reinforce the original expedition sent there from India.

All this entailed heavy demands on England, and a particularly severe bout of work. All told, 71 store-ships were dealt with at Alexandria between the 15th January and 15th March, and as much as 700 tons was sent out from the depot in one day, by land and sea.

It was now that the Alexandria depot began to have a separate entity under Colonel (later Brigadier General Sir Robert) Jackson. While not directly connected with any one campaign, it replaced Woolwich and Pimlico as a central base and distributing agency for several, a rôle for which it was admirably situated.

To begin with Egypt itself served as a pivot between our campaigns in the east and west. As the fortunes of war called for the transfer of divisions from one theatre to another, it was through Egypt that these transfers took place. Consequently there were in the country very extensive military establishments of all sorts for which Alexandria had to provide. It catered for our three principal campaigns of the Near East—Palestine, Salonika and Mesopotamia. It supplied Lawrence's Arab force operating from the Hedjaz, Aden where there was desultory fighting, and had dealings with East Africa, the Persian Gulf and India.

This wide field of activity gave scope for foresight to a very unusual degree; and the Levant base was fortunate in having as its chief Sir Robert Jackson, who had charge of 'provision' duties during the South African War and had made this branch of Ordnance work his hobby. The special utility of the depot at Alexandria lay in the relief it was able to afford to hard-pressed institutions and manufacturers at home. By meeting calls of a varied character from numerous sources it saved many petty demands on England from every eastern part of the world.

In this the engineering and other establishments connected with the railways, ports, docks and so on of Egypt rendered very valuable help. The railway workshops turned out gun fittings and even made complete machine guns, except for barrels and barrel-casings. But this was only one of many lines in which assistance was given.

Articles such as pumping machinery, camel and donkey pack-saddlery, water-tanks, desert ambulance carts, wagon parts, sand-tyres and pedrails were manufactured wholesale. There were large numbers of refugees in the country, and the Egyptian refugee administration set up factories where a thousand women were engaged in the making of garments and other textiles; besides which local contractors were extensively employed on army work. In all, goods to the value of two and a half million sterling were purchased. As an instance of the care taken to tap every local market before calling for assistance from home, it may be mentioned that bungs were made from the cork trees of Southern Spain whose bark was obtained direct.

The depot, in charge of Colonel Travers, occupied a large acreage at Gabbari, a suburb south-west of Alexandria, where a very extensive workshop also existed. Still further out, four miles from Alexandria, a fine and widely spaced ammunition depot and laboratory was built at Mex, in the desert between Lake Mariut and the Mediterranean.

Rather different arrangements came into force after April 1917, when it was decided to send reinforcements of men and materials to and from the East by rail across Europe. The decision was come to owing to losses by submarine over the long sea route and to economize shipping. This land line of communications with the Mediterranean was at first organized and administered by France. Its headquarters, which included an A.D.O.S., were at Lyons, and there were transit warehouses, hospitals and reinforcement camps at each of the two termini—Cherbourg on the west coast of France and Taranto at the foot of Italy—with rest camps at various points *en route*. It was estimated that 300 tons of stores and ammunition could be despatched in this way daily, either ordered by the War Office out of one of the big depots in France or, more usually, sent to Cherbourg direct from England, and re-shipped on arrival at Taranto.

Next, in August, the War Office undertook the management of the line, posting its own headquarter staff at Paris, though this made no difference to the manner in which Ordnance services were organized. Finally, in the late autumn of the same year, when two Corps were sent from France to the Italian front, that part of the line on French soil was once more taken over by France, while from the frontier onwards the part on Italian territory came under our Expeditionary Force in Italy. C.O.O. Paris then became directly responsible for Ordnance services on the former portion, and D.D.O.S. L. of C., Italy, on the latter.

The plan worked admirably for personnel and was no doubt the means of saving much loss ; but it was not an unmixed blessing from a departmental point of view. With a journey partly over railways whose capacity was limited and partly by sea, and with two transshipments, there could not be an even flow. There was always danger that articles urgently wanted might remain in the transit warehouses and be overtaken and passed by others despatched later, besides which some important component part of a special consignment might be shut out of a ship at Taranto from want of room and have to stay over till another arrived. Moreover, even if all went well, the journey for stores, which were liable to be side-tracked to make way for troops, took substantially longer than by the all-sea route.

During the German advance of 1918, traffic over the line practically came to a standstill for a time, as every axle was needed to convey supplies in France ; and though this service was undeniably far the most urgent, all our campaigns elsewhere suffered temporarily from the block in their communications with England.

From 1917 onwards ships sailed straight from Taranto to their final destination, Alexandria, Salonika or Kantara—the main depot on the Suez Canal of our expedition in Palestine—or else, passing through the Canal, proceeded to Mesopotamia or India. But though this afforded relief to the Alexandrine base it was apt to result in goods going astray. To such an extent did this happen that

D.O.S. Salonika eventually found it necessary to post one of his officers at Taranto to watch over his interests and see that his stores did not go to Egypt or vice versa.

Moreover the Taranto route failed to eliminate the danger of submarine attack during the passage of the Mediterranean, where U-boats constantly lurked in search of prey. Many valuable cargoes and far more valuable lives were lost, the entrance to the harbour at Alexandria being a particularly dangerous spot.

One of the worst shipping disasters of the war occurred there on a Sunday at the close of the year 1917, when the troopship *Aragon* was sunk near shore in front of the Ordnance depot. This happened just at dinner time, when the whole of the A.O.C. were present and turned out to succour the victims. The first to arrive were nursing sisters, who were accommodated in the sergeants' mess, while the 900 male survivors were looked after in the men's quarters. With few exceptions all had been immersed and were in a state of exhaustion. Hot drinks, warm blankets and dry clothing were quickly forthcoming, the Corps being the means of saving many lives. More than 80 bodies were recovered and brought to the depot for burial. The very next day, the last of the year, the *Osmanieh* was sunk in the same spot, and the survivors also brought to the depot for treatment, the dead on this occasion including seven Sisters. In no establishment, save a vacant hospital, could the shipwrecked have been so well succoured.

Although, once the Taranto route was opened, Alexandria was relieved of the actual labour of handling many of the stores sent from England to the East, it continued to provide everything wanted by Palestine, relieving the D.O.S. of that force of a great deal of work. It dealt with all demands from Mesopotamia (unless met by India), fulfilled them as far as it could and arranged for the balance to be supplied from England. It still had to furnish all that was wanted in Egypt and the Soudan and much for other outlying places. For Salonika however it only supplied such articles as could conveniently

be spared, the bulk of what was wanted in that theatre going straight from England.

Notwithstanding this relief the Levant base continued to expand, particularly in connection with manufacture and repair services. With the progress of the war salvage became an increasing liability and the Government factories of Egypt, especially the railway establishment, were busily engaged on constructional work for the railway that was being extended through Palestine. They were no longer able to devote attention to Ordnance work which the Alexandrine base depot had to undertake in its own workshops.

During the period of demobilization, this base also proved very useful. It was able to set off a deficiency against a surplus elsewhere; and continued to act as a general clearing house for the Near East until it was gradually closed down and replaced by the peace depots of our Armies of Occupation in Egypt and Palestine.