

The Raid on the Suez Canal, February 1915

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Britain, expecting war in 1914, prepared defenses in many possessions she considered endangered. Among these was Egypt where her duties demanded she prepare for the likelihood of an enemy attempting seizure of the Suez Canal to choke off her maritime route to India and other Asian holdings. Britain was vulnerable too to threats in Egypt against the Anglo-French enterprise in which she was a shareholder, one that built and maintained the canal. And she bore the safeguarding of all of Egypt, which at the time was a historical protectorate of Britain. The gravity of these responsibilities saw Britain's warlords marshal some 70,000 personnel in Egypt for protection; about half of them deployed to strategic points along the west bank of the canal as its defense, together with armed warships along its waterway to support ground fortifications.

Soon after the start of war Turkey joined the Central Powers and, with German support, in January 1915 launched an expeditionary force of 25,000 troops from Beersheba, Palestine, to trek 300 km across the Sinai desert for an intended surprise attack on British defenses in an attempt to seize the canal. This desert-crossing march nearly exceeded provisioning capability, but no other means of access existed then for its determined assailants.

The Turks, equipped with pontoons to float troops across the canal, arrived February 2 at the east bank. Unknown to them, they'd been spotted days earlier by vigilant British air reconnaissance, so defenders were alert. British west-side redoubts were spaced out along the canal bank. The main one was aside Ismailia a city about mid-way along the upper length of the canal. In addition to these machine gun positions, the British had several Anglo-French squadron gunships stationed intermediately along the waterway to counter enemy field artillery. With these defenses and a garrison of about 30,000 troops mainly from India and Australia the defenders felt assured.

Before dawn on the 3rd the invaders struck at several points along the canal supported by their own machine-gun fire and by artillery bombardment. Their pontoons though proved vulnerable to defenders' fire and of the few men who landed across some were killed and the remainder captured. Skirmishes at various redoubts continued and sporadic artillery exchanges between enemy field batteries and warships happened, but the Turkish forces couldn't gain a successful crossing. Before dawn on February 4 the Turkish commander reluctantly accepted the futility of their situation. Withdrawal now was critical; their water supply had dwindled and the desert would be unforgiving during their pending retreat. Defeated, they crept away in the darkness, humiliated and facing the long slog back to Beersheba.

When tallied up, British forces had a loss of about 150 men, some killed the others wounded. Their defensive positions were mainly intact, although some of the warships had sustained damage from enemy artillery. For the Turks, they suffered a count of 2000 men lost, many killed or wounded but more captured. As they dragged themselves across the desert in retreat, they endured bombing by British airmen in flimsy biplanes and ground skirmishes with desert tribes. When the force finally made Beersheba, its men were reviled there as failures.

Although the Turkish attempt to seize the canal was unsuccessful, they made no further moves on that coveted prize. Nevertheless, to the British the Turks were a perceived threat, one that forced Britain to continue keeping a considerable armed force in Egypt for the duration.

The Suez Canal, across the Isthmus of Suez between Egypt's cities of Port Said and Suez, gives vessels travelling Europe–Asia an 8900 km shorter alternative to otherwise circumnavigating Africa. The canal passes through two inland lakes as part of its 190 km route extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Suez. The project was constructed by British and French interests, opened in 1869 and administered in its early years by The Suez Canal Company. The commitment was financed by a consortium with Britain a 44 percent minority participant and the remainder a syndicate of French business enterprises. Constructing the Suez Canal was a ten-year undertaking. The canal was a convenience vital to Britain and France, countries at the time that had substantial colonial and mercantile connections to Asian locations.

In the war that dragged on for years and expanded over many other areas the successful defense of the canal got overshadowed by multiple events, many of which snatched attention for a time. Yet repelling the Turkish 1915 raid was neither overlooked nor forgotten. Honouring that action was simply delayed. In 1930 that got remedied.

The Suez Canal Company engaged Paris modernist-architect Michel Roux-Spitz to create a monument at the site of the defense command post. Roux-Spitz designed a stone memorial, *Defense of the Suez Canal*, of massive scale—twin obelisks, 50 metres high, each buttressed with a heroic-size personification, all on a sloped plinth 240 metres across; centred on the edge of the plinth is the memorial title and the dates of the war. The immensity of the monument recalls the importance of achievement by the defenders; the twin obelisks imply Britain and France; the personifications reflect Intelligence (left) and Strength (right). These heroic figures are classic Art deco, much in favour at the time.

This project took two years from design to completion; its monument contains 4700 tons of granite sited on a drumlin-like mound of desert sand beside the canal near Ismailia. On the 15th anniversary of the raid The Suez Canal Company dedicated the memorial “To the glory of the defenders of the Canal.” A medal commemorates the ceremony.

The medal, by French medallist Raymond Delamarre, is a bronze 90 mm strike; the obverse is a frontage of the paired personification figures, the medal title is below and the artist's monogram is lower left; the reverse, a front elevation of the monument with the dedication in four lines, in each side field and particulars of the ceremony, below. The medal's inscriptions are in French.

Today, the monument endures and the medal remains a poignant messenger for its purpose.

