

ADEN FLIGHT

Aviation in Aden 1915-1919 by Ian M. Burns

WHEN A DEAL with the Sultan of Lahej to purchase Aden for use as a coaling station was reneged upon, the British East India Company attacked and captured Aden in January 1839, the new acquisition coming, in 1858, under the control of the Government of India. Ultimately, the area under direct British rule, the Aden Settlement, extended from just west of Jebel Ihsan, or Little Aden, around the harbour to Sheikh Othman, then back to the coast just east of Imad, barely 75 square miles. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Aden developed as an important coaling station. Prior to this, in 1857, largely to prevent its annexation by the French, the British occupied Perim Island, west of Aden in the southern entrance to the Red Sea. A lighthouse was built in 1861, a coaling station following in 1883.

The centre of the Settlement was the port of Aden itself. The original port was located on Front Bay opening directly on to the Gulf of Aden. Behind the port the town of Aden developed in the crater of an extinct volcano. Gradually, a new port protected by the peninsulas of Tawáhi (Steamer Point) and Little Aden was developed. Fanning out behind is the desert, rising gradually to the town of Lahej approximately 30 miles from Aden. Lahej lies at the edge of a relatively well watered area below the jebel leading up to the Yemen border. Out of the jebel flows the Wadi Tiban, which splits into two lesser wadis a few miles above Lahej. The eastern arm Wadi Al-Saghir peters out into a salt marsh before reaching the coast, the larger western Wadi Al-Kabir eventually enters Aden harbour at the small inlet of Hiswa. Both are dry beyond Lahej throughout most of the year.

The climate is noted for stifling heat and humidity, at its most bearable during the north-east monsoon, from October to April, with daily highs between 25-35°C. During the remainder of the year hot *Shamal* winds prevail and daily temperatures often rise over 40°C. Average humidity is close to 60%. Enduring the *intense discomforts of the Aden hinterland* were how one artillery officer¹ encapsulated his service in Aden.

Water is the key to the survival of Aden, whilst food and fuel could be imported local sources of potable water were essential. In ancient times the inhabitants had constructed a system of cisterns in the Jebel Shamshan, above Crater, capable of storing over seven million gallons of rain water. These had long fallen into disuse but were restored by 1856. The major source of water was from wells sunk around Sheikh Othman, an aqueduct constructed in 1867 channelled this water some seven or eight miles into Aden. Authorities considered the water fit for *Arabs, Somalis and animals only*, steamships and Europeans demanded a better quality of water. Consequently, a number of condensers were installed around the harbour. By 1914 these were producing daily over 50000 gallons of distilled water, in addition there were refrigeration plants producing some five tons of ice per day. However, the native population and livestock remained largely dependant upon the water from Sheikh Othman, a fact that would have major bearing on the conduct of the Aden Campaign during the First World War.

Whilst the British settled in at Aden and Perim Island, the Ottoman Empire was establishing itself along the eastern coast of the Red Sea and into Yemen, with its seat of government at Sana'a. An Anglo-Turkish Convention of 9 March 1914

agreed a border between the Yemen Vilayet and the Aden Province, a line that differed little from the border of the Aden Protectorate from 1919 to 1967. However, Turkish influence remained strong on the Aden side of the demarcation. Whilst the local sheikhs and tribes remained friendly to the British, and its golden stipend, they were also maintaining contacts with the Turkish Governor in Sana'a.

On the outbreak of war the Turkish Governor (*Vali*) Akdilek Mahmud Pasha had at his disposal the VIIIth Yemen Army Corps under *Miralay* [Brigadier] Ahmet Tevfik Pasha. This comprised two understrength Divisions, the 39th (*Kaymakam* [Colonel] Ali Sait Bey) and 40th (*Kaymakam* Hüseyin Ragip Bey, replaced in 1917 by *Binbaşı* [Lt Col] Galip). The former was based in Southern Yemen, with approximately 2200 Turkish regulars, 30 Field Guns, a small cavalry troop, and 1000 Arab irregulars. The 40th Division, based in Yemen and on the Red Sea coast, was of similar strength.

Facing them, the Aden Brigade of the British Indian Army on the outbreak of war comprised one Indian and one British infantry battalion and a local mounted unit, the Aden Troop of around 100 cavalry and cameliers. The port was protected by a number of forts, whose guns could not be trained inland. Within a few months the Brigade was strengthened to two Indian infantry battalions, one unacclimatized British Territorial infantry battalion, some field guns and engineers.

