



A Flight to Damascus

28 February 1917

by Ian Burns

A Short 184 of the East Indies and Egypt Seaplane Squadron with the Turkish coast in the background.

:E.M. King albums

A unique aspect of the war in Palestine and Syria was that the Turkish right flank was wide open to interdiction by Allied naval forces. There were no Turkish naval units based on the coast, and the only interruption to Allied naval operations were irregular visits from German U-boats, mostly concerned with the convoy routes to and from Alexandria and Port Said. Following the Dardanelles there was little taste for further large-scale landings. So, operations against the Turkish flank mostly took the form of shelling Turkish forward and rear areas in support of land forces, and interception of schooners and caiques attempting to run supplies down the coast. One important advantage the Allies exploited was the carriage of floatplanes aboard warships and converted merchant ships to spot naval gunfire, and make reconnaissance flights over the rear areas of the Turkish forces. These flights commenced in December 1914 and continued into 1918.

Flights were conducted by l'escadrille de Port-Saïd through 1915, then by the East Indies and Egypt Seaplane Squadron (EIESS) from January 1916. Initially a joint Anglo-French unit the EIESS became a completely RNAS unit in May of that year. All flights were made by floatplanes, usually launched less than 15km (10 miles) off the coast and often extending up to 55km (35 miles) inland. The longest penetration inland, by one of the EIESS's Short 184s operating from HMS *Anne*, was over 80km (50 miles) as the crow flies; the Short 184 involved followed the railway and roads there and back.

The official Summary of Work Done, couched in navalese, was a dry document¹.

H.M.S. "ANNE"

1st March 1917

To

The Commanding Officer

East Indies & Egypt Seaplane Squadron

Sir,

I have the honour to submit the accompanying report of operations in H.M.S. "ANNE" from February 26th to March 1st, 1917.

In accordance with orders, H.M.S. "ANNE", escorted by the French Trawler "NORD CAPER" left PORT SAID at 7a.m., on Monday, 26th February, 1917, and arrived off HAIFA at 5.30a.m., on the 27th.

Between 6.30 and 9a.m., two Short Seaplanes reconnoitred the country in the vicinity of the CARMEL RANGE and HAIFA VALLEY. Special attention was paid to the nature and condition of the roads. No movements or concentrations of hostile troops were noticed. Anti-aircraft fire was experienced at TABAUN and EL FULE. At the conclusion of the work, the ship proceeded to a point W. of BEYROUT.

At 5.30a.m., on the 28th, H.M.S. "ANNE" approached BEYROUT, and at 7a.m., a Short Seaplane proceeded to make a reconnaissance across the saddle of LEBANON. The railway repair shops at REYAK were examined and photographed. The machine then proceeded to DAMASCUS and returned above the road to ZAHLE. On this road two battalions of troops were observed near DAMASCUS, marching towards the town. No hangars were seen at DAMASCUS, and no hostile aeroplanes appeared. The machine returned at 9.45a.m.; and the ship proceeded with journey to PORT SAID, where she arrived at 11a.m. on 1st March.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

A. W. Clemson (signed)

FLIGHT COMMANDER. R.N.

When *Anne* sailed from Port Said she had aboard two Short 184 floatplanes, 8021 and 8022, both on their first outing for the

HMS Anne with a Short 184 being towed back to the ship. See CCI 52 p.182 for a sea level view of Anne. :Sub Lt H B Burd, RNR, album courtesy Australian National Maritime Museum

