

# GAZA PROVISIONALS

*By Sarkis Cilingiroglu  
Translated by Kemal Giray*

When I started to collect Postal History in 1975 first book I had was 'The Turkish Post in the Holy Land' by F.W. Pollack. Particularly the chapters about the Gaza and Beni Saab provisional stamps caught my attention. I still remember the excitement of to own a Beni Saab cover like yesterday. However I have found out the story wasn't the way we have been told after studying new documents and contacting other fellow philatelists. There was a lot of controversy about the subject. In this article I wanted to share all the information I have on this subject.

## **The Gaza Provisional Overprint and Battles of Gaza**

Following the defeat of Romani- Muhammediye and 2<sup>nd</sup> Suez Canal battles, 1<sup>st</sup> Expeditionary Force under the command of Colonel Kress von Kressenstein, return to town of El-Arish. When the British Army attack on 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, Ottoman Army decided to retreat and leaving El-Arish to the British troops. Following the loss of Magdabe, Tel-al-Refah and El Makrunateyn, Ottoman Army decided to defence 41km long Gaza – Tel-al-Sheriya – Beersheba line. The main reason to defend this line was the valuable water sources.

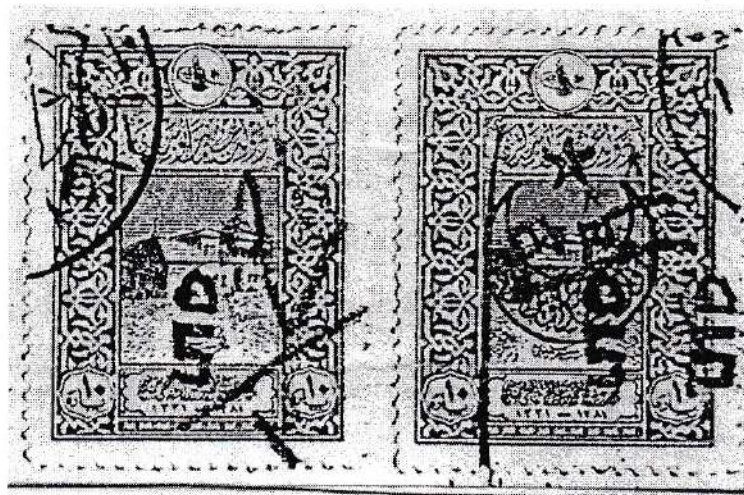
The main subject of this article was the Gaza Battles therefore I have shown the documents posted from Gaza and Beersheba between the 1<sup>st</sup> Gaza Battle to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gaza Battle from my collection and my archive. You will be able to see that during the war none of the civil and field post office cachets lost and they have been used as usual. Most of the documents we have today by the Lieutenant (Mulazim) Ekrem Efendi correspondence from Gaza and Beersheba to his family in Samatya, Istanbul. He was from the 10<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company tied to 4<sup>th</sup> Army, 22<sup>nd</sup> Corps, 7<sup>th</sup> Division, 134<sup>th</sup> Regiment, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion.

Usually Gaza cancellation found illegible or rubbed out. That is because I believe there wasn't enough ink or postal clerk wasn't showing enough attention. As we know Gaza battles in Palestine front was a turning point for both the Ottoman and British Army. In his book Pollack describe the situation (brief) as below;

“During the siege of Gaza by the British forces in 1917, the town passed from hand to hand in several times.

Some denominations of the postage stamps were lost or destroyed during the fighting. In order to satisfy the demand for stamps of 5 para, for the postal order service, the Commander-in-Chief of the 13<sup>th</sup> Army Corps, General Refet Pasha, sanctioned an order by the O.C. of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Turkish Infantry Division, in March 1917, to overprint the 10 para stamp, pink, of the 50<sup>th</sup> postal anniversary issue.

In accordance with official regulations, all items used on money orders remained at the office of arrival, and were cut with scissors or torn after the prescribed period had elapsed.



The obliterator GAZA and field post office cachet were lost during the heavy fighting, and as a result this stamp is never found with GAZA cancellation or field postmark. These stamps were only cancelled later or not at all.”

Pollack and other philatelists were probably describing the situation in the 1<sup>st</sup> Gaza Battle. You will find the whole story of three Gaza battles below.

### **First Gaza Battle 26 – 27 March 1917**

Battle starts in the early morning of 26<sup>th</sup> of March with the attack of British forces and ends next evening, just before the sunset. Attack started with 52<sup>nd</sup>, 53<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> Army Divisions commanded by Sir Charles Dobell, Anzac Cavalry Division and other Empire forces.

Anzacs ride to the north-east of the town and suddenly turn to the west and attacked to the north of the town. As a result they have occupied the outskirts of the town. In the meantime 53<sup>rd</sup> Army Division besiege the south of the town, and with their superior force they thought fighting was over, and didn't use the rest of the force.

As I mentioned in the beginning of the article, water was the most important element during these battles. Empire troops and Anzac Cavalry Division retreat from their places at 18.30 on 26<sup>th</sup> of March. Because they couldn't get the orders on time and they didn't water their horses over 36 hours. As a result 53<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions retreat as well, because they were defenceless on their flanks.

If the orders would've been reached on time they would've occupy the whole town easily. Lack of co-ordination between the army units was the reason of the loss of 1<sup>st</sup> Gaza Battle.

Gaza defended by 79<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from the 27<sup>th</sup> Division, 125<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from 16<sup>th</sup> Division and 6<sup>th</sup> Artillery Regiment commanded by Major Tiller. In the morning of 27<sup>th</sup> March 3<sup>rd</sup> Ottoman Infantry Division from Hirbet Cemame entered the town through the channel opened as a result of withdrawal of British troops, and secured the defence of the city.

Ottoman forces defended the town with 7 Infantry Battalions and 2 Artillery Battalions against the British Forces of 20 Infantry Battalions, 2 Cavalry Divisions as well as artillery support from the sea and land.

Both armies couldn't convert the chance of destroying each other, because of their own

mistakes. The biggest reason was either of them haven't had much of manoeuvre capability.

## **Second Gaza Battle 16 – 19 April 1917**

The battle starts in dawn with heavy artillery fire on 16<sup>th</sup> of April. British Army additional to first battle, forwarded their 74<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and Empire Cavalry Division along with heavy artillery divisions against the Ottoman 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. British force far more superior than the Ottoman forces. But instead of fighting on a narrow front they have fought on a 16km (approx. 10 miles) line. Obviously this was making difficult to organize the troops, and as a result by the end of the first day, battle turned into a trench fight.

The biggest and the bloodiest fighting was for the strategically important Jebel Ali Muntar Hill. British Army used tanks for the first time in this battle. But not knowing how to use them with the infantry, they couldn't make much of a use.

After the temporary shock, Ottoman infantries destroyed three tanks with artillery and hand grenades. Others are broken down or withdrawn. Then British used a chemical gas which they were previously used on Western Front. But that didn't make any effect at all. Because gas sucked into desert sands and become useless.

After seeing reports from all fronts, British Army decided to withdraw and four days of fierce fighting ended 19.30 on 19<sup>th</sup> of April

## **Beersheba Battle 31 October 1917**

There are moments in war makes a direct effect on result. Beersheba battle was one of them.

Australian Light Horse Brigade commanded by H.W. Hodgson was positioned on Halasa. These troops usually embarked from their horses about a kilometre away and attack on foot. On 31<sup>st</sup> of October Australian 4<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Brigade ordered to attack to town. They have sent the 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiments to attack. But the commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> regiment decided to ride in the town. Ottoman artilleries only made a few shots and couldn't even target their guns into new positions. As a result at 18.30 town occupied by the British forces.

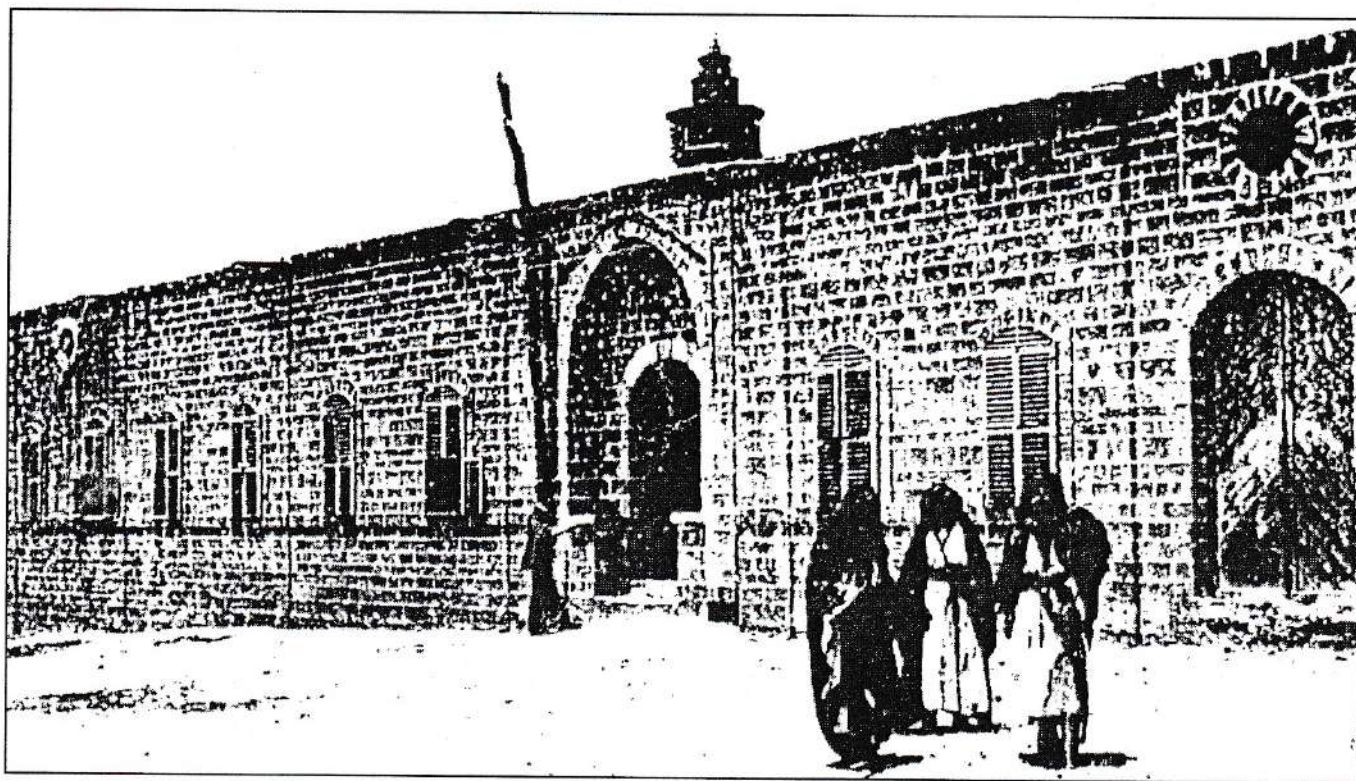
But probably the most important point that Ottoman Garrison haven't had enough time to destroy or poison the wells. This would change the course of the war. So the moment commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment's decision to attack a town was, the moment made all the differences in Gaza Battles.

## **Third Gaza Battle 1 – 7 November 1917**

The battle started on 1<sup>st</sup> of November at 23.00 with heavy artillery attack followed by fierce fighting.

The town defended by 3<sup>rd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Divisions and their artilleries of Ottoman 22<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps against the British 52<sup>nd</sup> Lowland Division, 54<sup>th</sup> East Anglican Division and 75<sup>th</sup> Division of 21<sup>st</sup> Army Corps and its 97<sup>th</sup>, 100<sup>th</sup> and 102<sup>nd</sup> heavy artillery sections. These superior forces were prepared themselves almost seven months for these battles.

Ottoman positions started to fall one by one and British were winning the war. The commander of 22<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps, in the evening of 4<sup>th</sup> November at 19.00 ordered his troops to withdraw completely from the Gaza. On 6<sup>th</sup> of November withdrawal completed and in the morning of 7<sup>th</sup> November British troops entered the empty town after a grand attack with all their forces. This was the important moment for British



Army on their mission to occupy Palestine.

Ottoman forces which defended the town have neither time nor necessity to produce a cancellation and surcharge a stamp for even one day, and loss of army and civil cancellation wasn't true at all.

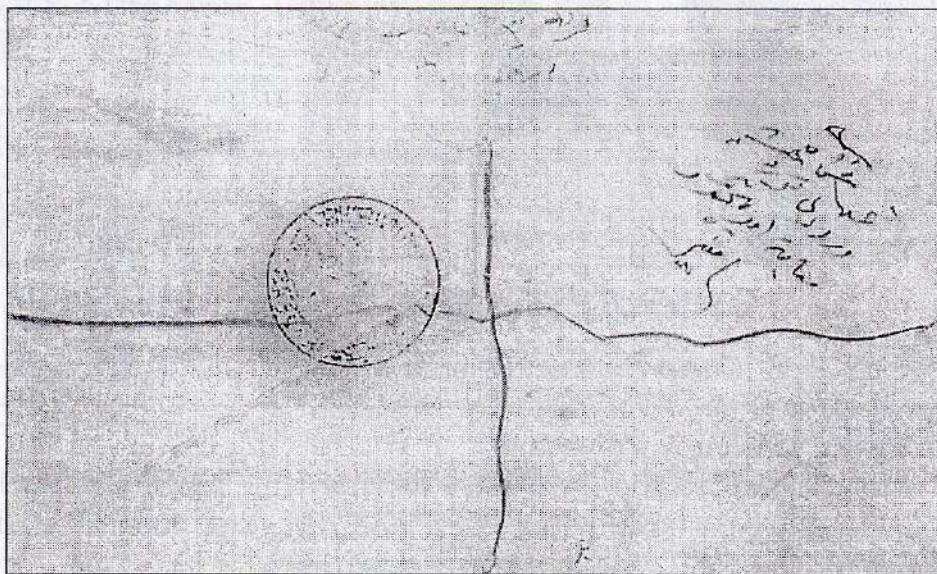
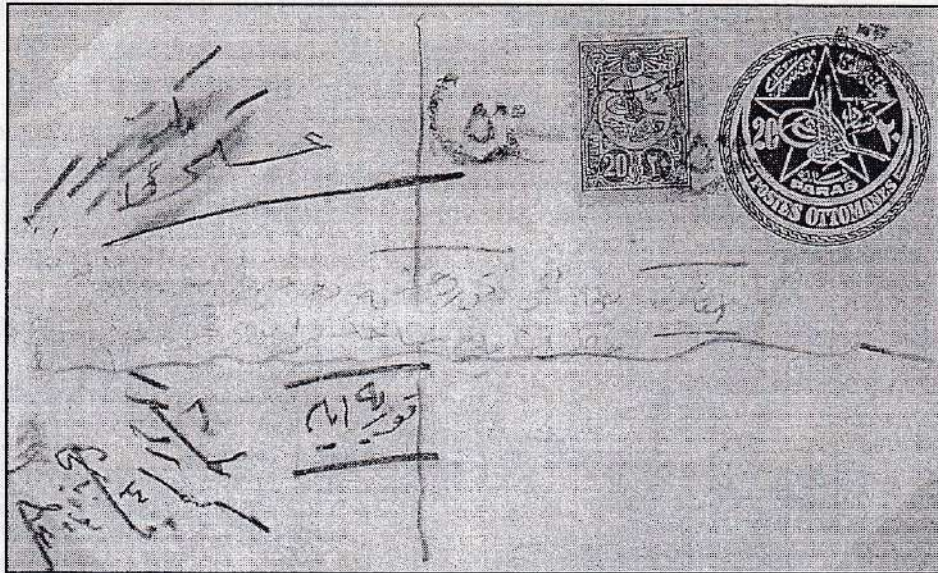
They were fighting for their lives and wouldn't worry about if the town cancel lost or not. Besides during these bloody battles I don't think anyone weather civil or army personal would've post a letter. There was a total chaos in the town.

As soon as Ottoman forces left on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November, people of the town looted all the Ottoman Administrative Buildings including the post-office.

On this date town cancel was in use in the field post office (building or a tent) and in the morning of November the 6<sup>th</sup> post-office shut down and administrative personnel left the town. Arrival cds of KOURUTCHESME on reverse is not a postal mark and not recoded by any literature.

Ottoman divisions of 3<sup>rd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> which were defended the town, have their own F.P.O. cancellations. These were always carried with the admin. personnel and they have never involved in fighting. During the battles orders carried out by phone, horse-couriers or projectors.

13<sup>th</sup> Ottoman Army Corps has got nothing to do with these surcharges or cancellations 13<sup>th</sup> Army Corps under the command of 6<sup>th</sup> Army fought in Iran Front and never been



1917 (7.11) Registered 20pa postal stationery cover uprated with 20pa Occupation of Turusina opt to Dersaadet (Istanbul) and tied by provisional handstamp. In Arabic manuscript '3.11.1917', 'military letter' and 'by messenger'. Reverse Kourutchesme arrival cds.

in Palestine Front to command 3<sup>rd</sup> Division.

3<sup>rd</sup> Division fought under the command of 22<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps of 4<sup>th</sup> Army later re-named 7<sup>th</sup> Army of 22<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps.

Gaza Provisional prepared by Major Ismail Hakki Tevfik Okday. Money Orders supposedly used with these stamps never seen, because they don't exist. Documents that exist with these stamps or rubber stamps are fantasies and prepared to give an impression that they have been used in difficult times during the war.

Handwriting on above illustration belongs to Colonel Okday. He has never been in any of the Gaza Battles. Actually that time he was in Istanbul probably preparing these documents! He was a good philatelist and being the son-in-law of the Sultan he had an access to many things. Perhaps we can say that he has innocently prepared those fantasy documents to add a flavour to the philately.