

The Desert Gate to the Conquest of Palestine - The Battle of Beersheba October 31, 1917 by Gerd Stolz

Preface

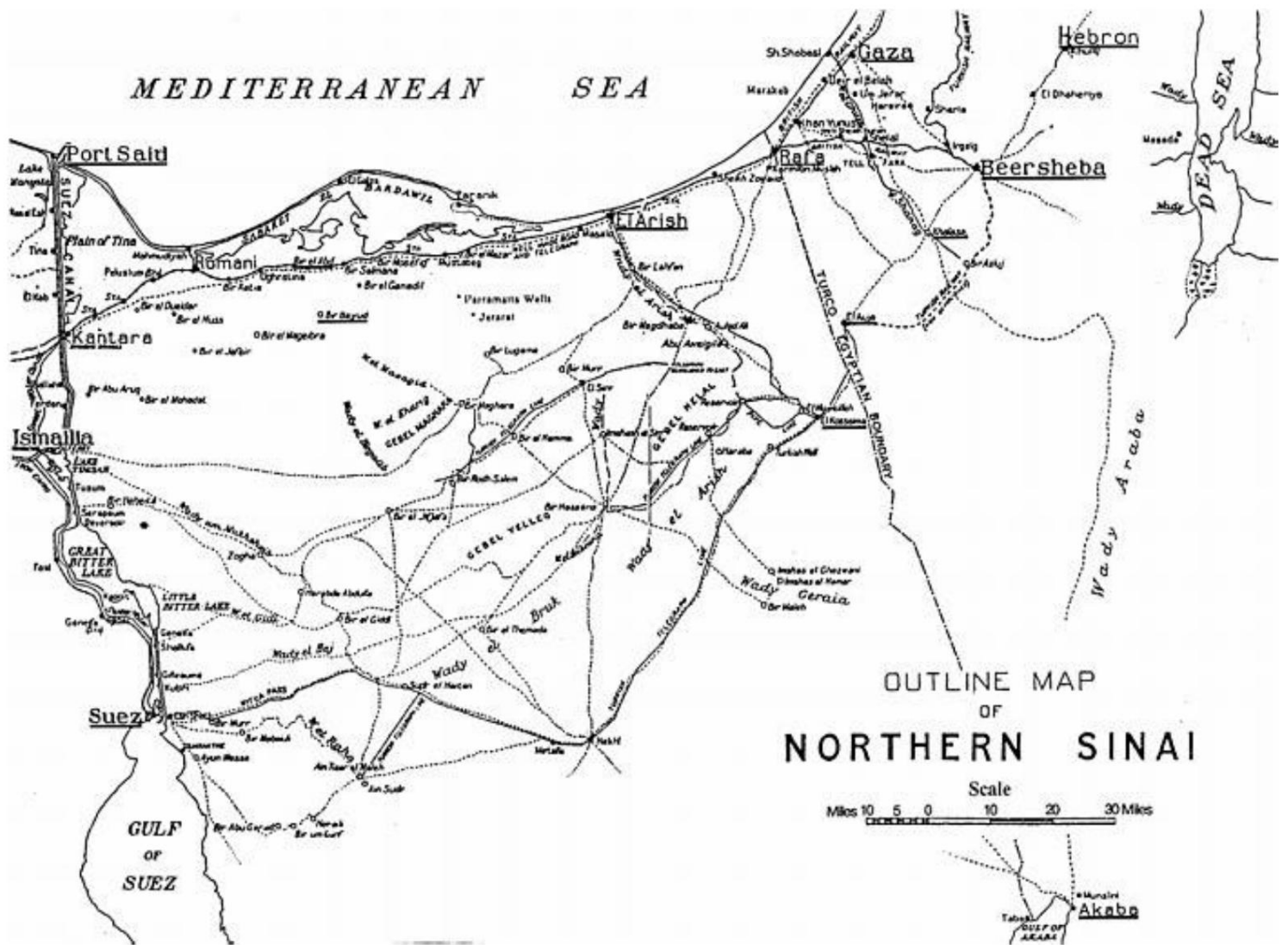
The following article by Gerd Stolz, translated from German by cand.pharm. Uwe Stromeyer, comes from *Kriehistorisk Tidsskrift* no. 2, August 1997. I have supplemented the article with a few illustrations and notes.

The article can be read in conjunction with General Sir Edmund Allenby's joint operations in Palestine, 1917-1918 by John Mordike, as it reviews in greater detail the battle for Beersheba and the operations prior to General Allenby's assumption of command of the forces in Palestine, as well as the situation from the Turkish-German page.

Introduction

On 29 October 1914, Russian naval forces attempted an attack in the Bosphorus Strait. It was countered by two German cruisers *Goeben* and *Breslau* [1](#)), sailing under the Turkish flag and names. They sank Russian ships in the Black Sea and bombarded Sevastopol. Thus, a decisive development had taken place for Turkey, which had long been under pressure from Germany with a view to Turkey entering the war on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The victorious results of these countries in the war against Russia caused Turkey to enter the war on November 2, 1914. The importance of Turkish participation in the alliance was assessed very differently from the German military side, often characterized by a lack of sense of reality.

Even before the war began, a push towards the Suez Canal had been an important goal for the Turkish army leadership. The canal was the most important route between Great Britain and the colonies in the east. Turkey could thereby also lead the "holy war" all the way to Egypt in the name of Allah. The biggest difficulty with such a push was the approx. 180 km wide Sinai Desert - escaped by the British at the outbreak of war - but which nevertheless presented major logistical problems, especially with regard to water supply.



The northern part of Sinai 2).

The southern border of the Ottoman Empire in Palestine was approx. 30 km southwest of Gaza. The city then had approx. 40,000 inhabitants, and already Napoleon had called it the "Protector of Africa" or the "Gateway to Asia". The boundary line ran from the Mediterranean at Rafah to the Gulf at Aqaba, close to present-day Eilat. Great importance in the desert area was Beersheba, newly built in 1907 with German help, and which now had approx. 2,500 inhabitants.

The Turkish attacks against the Suez Canal

Two Turkish thrusts, by the 4th Ottoman Army under the command of General Ahmed Dhemal Pasha, against the extensive British defenses at the Suez Canal failed. The Turkish staff even included as chief of staff Colonel Friedrich Freiherr von Kress and 7 German officers. The two attacks were made in January-February 1915 and July-August 1916. The Turks had hoped for an Arab revolt or a peaceful uprising in Egypt when they appeared at the canal, but this did not happen.

The Turkish railway, with German assistance, was run from Jerusalem via Beersheba in a south-westerly direction to El Kossaima (just west of the Turkish-Egyptian border) - a stretch of 450 km that was completed in May 1916. In addition, a road that could be used by cars was built from Hebron across Beersheba and on into the desert. In addition to a larger number of German officers, a German auxiliary corps of approx. 1,800 men to Palestine. The corps consisted primarily of aircrew, vehicles, telegraph personnel and machine gun platoons, as well as a pair of 16-gun Austrian Alpine Hunter batteries. Added to this was the German flying squadron 300, which from a field airfield at Beersheba, and later also El Arish (about 40 km west of Rafah), carried out aerial reconnaissance all the way to Cairo and the pyramids at Giza. These reconnaissances revealed the ever-increasing strength of personnel and materiel in the defense position from Port Said to Suez, the expansion of the railway from Port Said to the south, as well as brisk shipping traffic on the Canal.

The unfortunate outcome of the second Turkish offensive in the summer of 1916 marked a turning point in the war. This offensive was attempted with approx. 17,000 men, extensive German support and great efforts in terms of supply. Thus, 240 wells were constructed between Bir el Abl and Bir Bayud (approx. 75 km west of El Arish) and 5,000 camels were used for water transport. Despite this, the Turks now ceased to be on the offensive.

The English advance

The offensive role was now taken over by the English, who purposefully and systematically expanded their attack lines to the east - towards Palestine. Aqueducts and railway lines were built heading east, so that Rafa was captured on 7 January 1917 despite heavy Turkish resistance. The British Commander-in-Chief of *the Desert Column and Eastern Force*, General Sir Archibald Murray, planned as the next attack target Gaza, which was heavily fortified, and in connection with this the Turkish 48 km long barrier line to Beersheba. The British aerial reconnaissance had provided a good intelligence picture of the area, which was a key position for the rest of Palestine and on to Syria. The Sinai Front was now to become the Palestine Front in the event of a surprise attack on Gaza and the city's 10,000 Turkish defenders. But the Turkish front was also reinforced at the beginning of 1917 with the 3rd Cavalry Division and the 16th as well as parts of the 53rd Infantry Division in addition to Artillery. Full combat strength these units did not have, mainly because disease, caused by inadequate hygiene and medical supplies. Through aerial observations during the latter half of March 1917, Colonel von Kress got the impression that a massive British attack on Gaza was imminent, and he therefore reinforced the defense of Gaza with a German 10 cm battery and two Austro-Hungarian howitzer batteries. 18,000 Turkish and allied soldiers now stood on the Gaza-Beersheba line.

The first English attack

On the morning of March 26, 1917, the English forces under the command of General Sir Charles Dobell attacked. The northern flank was secured by English warships. Victory initially seemed within reach, but a combination of poor English leadership and tough Turkish resistance, led by a German Major Tiller, turned victory into defeat, resulting in a planless retreat. The losses in this first battle for Gaza were approx. 4,000 on the English side and approx. 1,500 on the Turkish side. Yet it was reported back to London that the battle had been "a very successful operation"!

The second English attack

A renewed attack would have to be more intensive, i.a. supported by 6 tanks [3\)](#) and mobile Hotchkiss machine guns in a number of 12 per regiment and for the first time also the use of 2,000 gas grenades. This increased effort, however, was to prove to be of no importance for the continued fighting. Under the impression of progress on the front in Mesopotamia, Baghdad having thus been captured on March 11, 1917, the British Government endorsed General Murray's plan.

On 17 April 1917, the Second Battle of Gaza began with a broad frontal attack on the Turkish positions. The English tanks could not achieve the desired effect due to the terrain with the deep wadis - dried up and rocky riverbeds - and the Turkish artillery under German direction caused heavy losses to the British, who had to retreat in the evening as all attempts to encircle the Turkish positions failed due to stubborn Turkish resistance. The losses in this second battle for Gaza were approx. 6,400 men on the English side and approx. 2,000 on the Turkish side.

The Turks now believed that the front in southern Palestine could be held without significant reinforcements, and the Turkish army leadership transferred the newly formed divisions to Mesopotamia with a view to recapturing Baghdad. Colonel von Kress expressed great misgivings about this shifting of the center of gravity to Mesopotamia and thus a weakening of the Palestine front, but found no understanding either in Constantinople or in Berlin. However, the German forces were reinforced and reached approx. 3,000 men.

The preparation for a new attack

As on all other fronts of the World War, there was a deadlock on the front, but on the English side an advance of troops, weapons, ammunition and other material for a large planned operation to the north and north-east now began. The balance of power gradually deteriorated to the disadvantage of the Turks. Decisive for a future successful outcome on the Palestine front was also a change in the top management. As a result of the two defeats at Gaza, General Murray was called back to Europe and continued to the Western Front at Arras. From here came General Sir Edmund Allenby [4](#)), former cavalry officer, and he took over the supreme command in June 1917.

His arrival came to mean a turning point in the war in Asia Minor. Unlike his predecessor, who led the troops from the Savoy Hotel in Cairo, Allenby was forward in the front line with his advanced headquarters at Rafa and immediately inspected all the troops forward in their positions.

General Sir Phillip Chetwode had drawn up a plan which would result in the conquest of all of southern Palestine. With superior forces, he would make a concentrated attack on the easternmost part of the Turkish front at Beersheba, while the Turks' attention was directed to Gaza. A new formation of *the Desert Column* meant the addition of several infantry divisions as well as three cavalry divisions. The greatest difficulty was a timely capture of intact wells in and around Beersheba, so that the all-important water supply was secured. Once Beersheba had been taken, the Turks had to be pushed out of Gaza and further north and north-east.

In preparation for the operation and to prevent a Turkish attack on the English right wing, two large British attack groups had destroyed the Turkish railway line from Beersheba towards El Auja on the night of 23 May 1917 over a stretch of 23 km and with 7 major bridges. The assault groups consisted of *the Australian Light Horse* and *the Imperial Camel Corps*. In Khalasa, newly discovered old wells were uncovered and secured by British engineer troops.

Allenby reinforced Chetwode's plan for the operation so that it now included seven infantry divisions, and he reorganized the cavalry divisions, which had previously consisted of four brigades, into three brigades, which then consisted of:

- Mounted ANZAC Mounted Division: 2nd Australian Light Horse Brigade as well as New Zealand 1st and Rifles Brigade.
- Australian Mounted Division: 3rd and 4th Australian Light Horse Brigade and 5th British Yeomanry Brigade.
- Yeomanry Mounted Division: 6th and 8th and 22nd British Yeomanry Brigade.

These three divisions and *the Imperial Camel Corps* [5](#)) (about 2,800 camel riders in ten companies) constituted from August 1917 *The Desert Mounted Corps*, a mounted unit of army corps size. In this way, Allenby improved the speed and striking power of the mounted units and enabled a rapid intervention in the battle that would be crucial to the operation as a whole.

Added to this was the expansion of the stocks of catering, ammunition, weapons and sanitary equipment.

The air forces were supplied with aircraft of the latest type, and finally the railway along the coast was made two-track almost to the front line. General Allenby considered it of the utmost importance that the decisive blow should be made before winter and the rainy season.



*Turkish infantryman, ca. 1917.
From Hät Industrie.*

The German-Turkish measures

The time pressure for the British had become even greater because the Germans had set up an "Asia Corps" to support the Turks' plan for the recapture of Baghdad, and General von Falkenhayn had been loaned out as leader of the entire enterprise.

Djemal Pasha and Colonel von Kress - who had meanwhile become commander of the 8th Turkish Army covering the Palestine front - demanded a rapid and comprehensive reinforcement of this front. In their view, a consolidation here took priority over all other measures, because the British attack on Gaza had to be considered imminent. General von Falkenhayn, who in the summer of 1917 had taken over the leadership of the operations on the Palestine front and was at the same time appointed Turkish marshal, had the same opinion and postponed the Baghdad operation. In an attack on the western wing of the Palestine front, he would get ahead of the British. Therefore, the 7th Army, to which the best German units from the "Asia Corps" belonged, was sent to reinforce the 8th Army. The German troops were drawing up around Aleppo with a view to the Baghdad operation. However, it was too late as only parts of two divisions had arrived in northern Palestine by 30 October 1917.

Moreover, Djemal Pasha felt slighted as his military competence was challenged after von Falkenhayn had arrived and taken over the entire leadership.

The English march

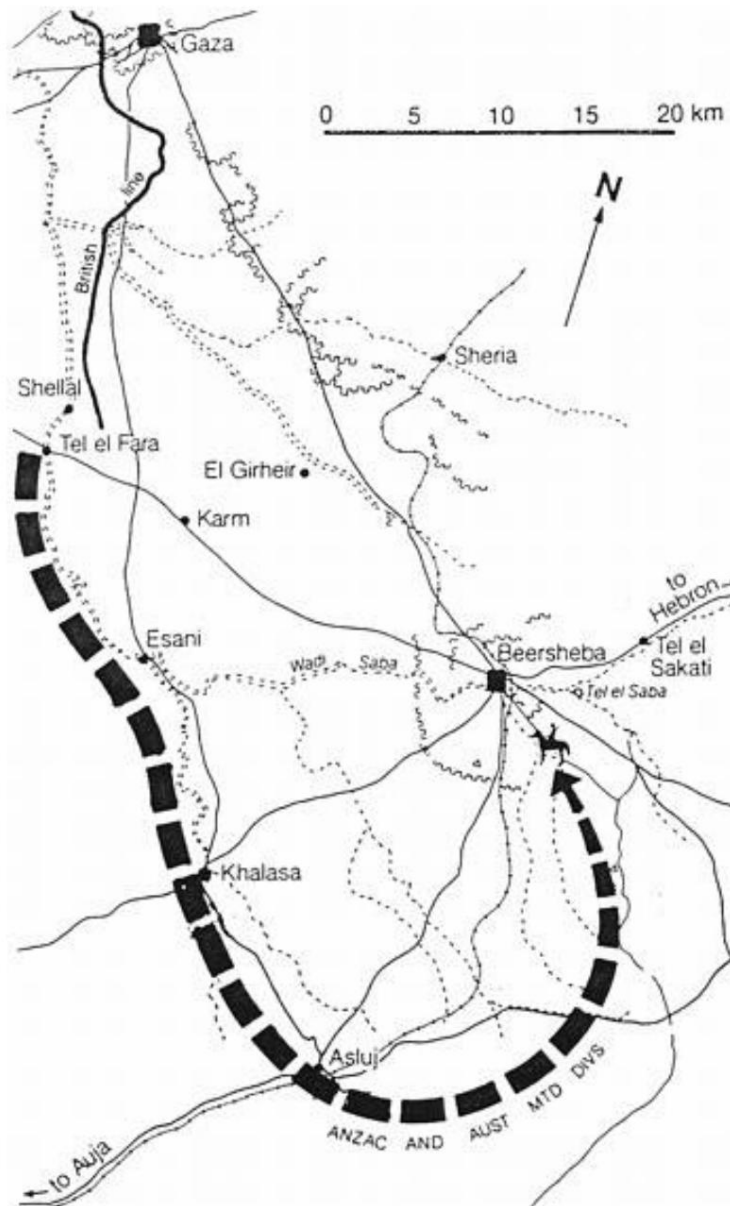
The English cavalry and infantry units intended for the attack were in the last week of October 1917 moved from the coast and inland, where the wells around Khalasa and Asluj were now used. Here Allenby inspected his units. By 30 October, *the ANZAC Mounted Division* and *the Australian Mounted Division* were ready a day's march east of Beersheba, while *the XX Corps Cavalry* to the west was ready in the exit area. The total attack units included approx. 58,000 men with 282 artillery pieces facing 4,400 men with 28 field guns - a crushing superiority!

German air reconnaissance was disrupted by British air activity and the ratio of aircraft numbers was now 1:5, with the German aircraft now operating from a field airfield at Ramleh, right back on the Jaffa-Jerusalem line. The Turkish High Command believed that the cavalry and infantry units know

Beersheba was part of a deception maneuver and expected a new main attack on Gaza. As part of an English deception maneuver, Colonel von Kress came into possession of an English staff officer's notebook, "lost" during his escape from a Turkish patrol near El Girheir 6).

From the Mediterranean off Gaza, British warships had carried out a heavy bombardment of the city, combined with a "credible" local attack on the city and immediate surroundings in the days following 20 October 1917. The appearance that a decisive and comprehensive British attack could be expected to end in a Third Battle of Gaza, could thus be maintained.

During the night of 30–31 October, Chetwode's forces passed unnoticed into the starting positions near Beersheba, and at dawn the British artillery began shelling the Turkish positions west of the city. At the same time as the British 53rd, 60th and 74th Divisions attacked from the west and south, units of *the Desert Mounted Corps* under Lieutenant General Chauvel turned towards the city from the east and south-east.



The indirect approach of the Australian and New Zealand cavalry towards Beersheba.

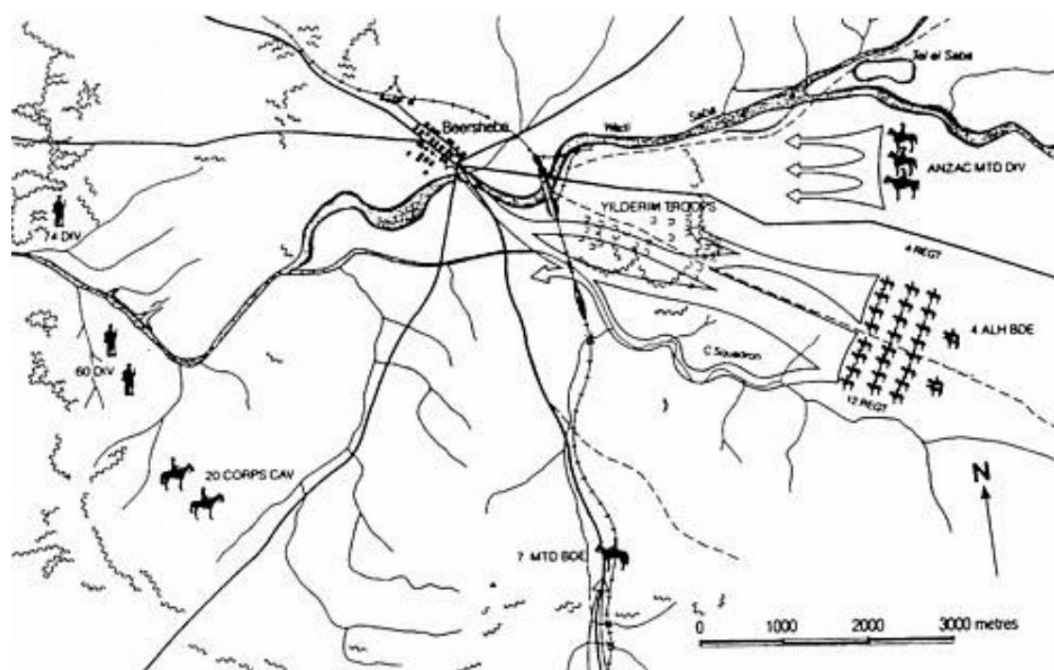
From the article that has *The Australian Light Horse* (No. 6 of the bibliography) as its source.

nd It is true that 2 *The Light Horse Brigade* with its forward units right up to the road to the north reached Hebron, but the English leadership was mistaken in its view that the Turks would use all their strength to repel the attack from the west. On the contrary, the strategically important ridge about Tel el Saba was strongly defended by the Turks. First at By 15:00 the Australian and New Zealand units had come so close that the storm on

the ridge could be completed successfully. Chauvel had so far held *the Australian Mounted Division* in reserve, but had to release a brigade in support of the attack.

The area east of Beersheba is dominated by an extensive desert landscape without wells and was therefore only slightly secured by the Turks, who naturally did not expect attacks from that side. To take full advantage of the element of surprise, the British had to run a great risk in the large-scale encirclement maneuver to be carried out by the *Desert Mounted Corps*. The water supplies for the many mounted units only lasted 24 hours. Beersheba, with its 17 wells, therefore had to be taken quickly, or the course of the whole campaign would be jeopardized, and the operation as a whole lost to the British. The infantry held the positions reached, but could not advance due to stubborn Turkish resistance. Some horses had not had water for 48 hours.

Time passed, and Allenby gradually grew impatient. Chauvel therefore decided to take Beersheba that same day. The proposal came from Brigadier-General William Grant, who commanded the *4th Light Horse Brigade*, and was for one of the brigade's 12 regiments to advance directly on the town - a frontal cavalry charge against a fortified position that went against all military principles - reminiscent of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* from the Crimean War.



The English advance on Beersheba.

From the article that has *The Australian Light Horse* (No. 6 of the bibliography) as its source.

Via the English aerial reconnaissance, it was known that the Turkish position was not secured by barbed wire or the like.

Grant was given the task and began rallying the scattered cavalry units - scattered due to the danger of German attack - and at 16:30 the two leading regiments, *4th Horse*th (Victorian) and *12th* (New South Wales) *Light Horse Regiment*, followed by the *11th* (Queensland) *Light Horse Regiment* in reserve, reached their starting position, a ridge approx. 7.5 km southeast of Beersheba.

The attack

Everyone in the attacking force knew that the outcome of their attack would decide the battle for Beersheba and Gaza, perhaps even the rest of the campaign, and that the city must be taken before dark.

For the first time, the regiments were to be used during attacks on horseback, where until now they had only marched mounted and fought from the rear. Besides rifles, they only had a Model 1907 long bayonet, which was to be used as a slashing weapon. The sun was now so low that the riders cast shadows.

Beersheba was occupied by III. Corps under Colonel Ismet Bey. The 3rd Cavalry Division, consisting of two lancer regiments, formed the reserve. The south-eastern wing of the position was held by the 48th Infantry Regiment. The regiment was considered the best in the 16th Infantry Division. The center of gravity of the coming attack, however, lay on the 2nd Infantry Regiment from the same division. The regiment was only drawn up four months in advance. Inside the city itself were the 67th and 81st Infantry Regiments, mainly composed of Arabs.

The 800 men from the two assault regiments rode at a trot in the burning heat through the barren terrain cut by deep ditches. They rode in squadrons in three ranks, with a distance of 300–500 yards (270–450 m) between them.



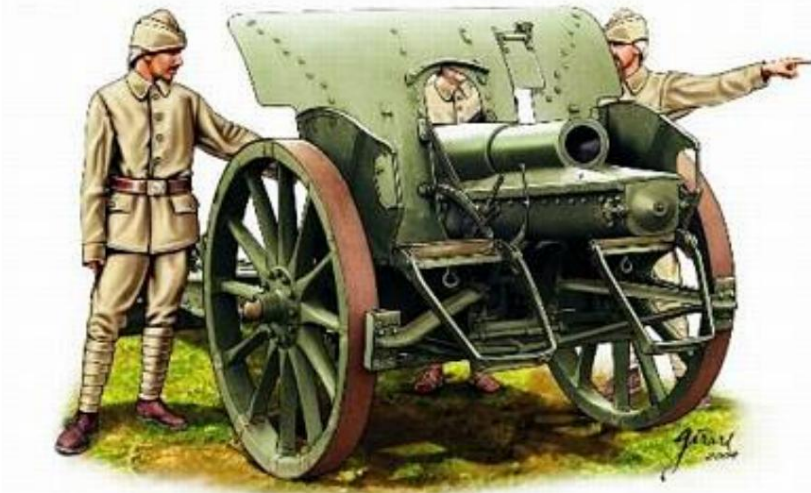
4th *Australian Light Horse attack Beersheba, 31 October 1917*).

Aimed directly at them were more than 1,000 rifles, nine machine guns and three field batteries. During the attack, they were also fired upon with machine guns from two German planes.

The Turks were waiting for the moment when the Australian regiments would dismount and continue the attack on foot.

Approx. two kilometers from the Turkish lines the order to attack came, the riders changed from a trot to an ever faster gallop and the dust was stirred up.

The Turkish field batteries opened fire with shrapnel shells, but the horsemen were quickly past the impact area. Since the attack force was approx. 1,500 meters in front of the defense line, the Turks opened fire with rifles and machine guns, many without having corrected for the distance, which is why the projectiles went high over the riders.



Turkish 10.5 cm field howitzer, approx. 1917.
From [Hät Industrie](#).

The assault force rode across the first line, which consisted of unfinished trenches, and manned only by a few infantrymen, against the main Turkish defense line, which was a 1-2 meter wide and up to 3 meter deep cover trench. The foremost horsemen rode into the pit, the next rode over it, turned, dismounted and attacked the defenders from behind. Here they now fought man against man, and after 30 to 40 Turks had been killed, the others surrendered. The second assault regiment charged through the front lines and turned against the Turks' right wing, where the Turks suffered heavy casualties, and the force then proceeded into Beersheba itself.

Simultaneously with this, *7th Mounted Brigade* came from the south-west towards the other end of the city, so that the Turks had no opportunity for an orderly retreat. It became a big jumble, with everyone trying to get rid of the whole skin. The Turkish engineering troops had to give up carrying out the planned blasting of the wells - apart from two - so that these and a water reservoir with approx. 400,000 liters of water were captured intact. A failure here would have destroyed all plans for further English operations.

From the order to sit up until the two attacking regiments were inside the town, only half an hour had passed. 38 officers and approx. 700 men were captured, nine cannons, three machine guns, a large number of transport vehicles and other equipment were captured.

4th Light Horse Regiment had 11 casualties, *the 12th Light Horse Regiment* 20 casualties, all in connection with the 4 battles for the trenches. In addition, the two regiments had a combined 36 wounded, while 70 horses were killed or collapsed from overexertion.

The English advance did not continue the following day, mainly due to problems with the water supply - the forces in and around Beersheba needed 1.8 million liters of water per day, but the eastern wing had nevertheless been breached. Until November 6, 1917, the British broke through a large part of the front between Beersheba and Gaza, which was escaped on November 7. Allenby's troops pressed the Turks northward and doggedly pursued them, although here and there there were problems with the water supplies. The defensive battles of the Turkish troops failed, due to their numerical inferiority.

The ending

On November 18, 1917, General Allenby crossed the Yarkon River where it empties into the Mediterranean (today the Jaffa-Tel Aviv area). On December 7, the German-Turkish troops escaped Jerusalem, where Allenby made his entry on December 12, 1917. The capture of Jerusalem by the British troops made a great impression throughout the world, because this city with all the holy places now after 650 years again was in Christian hands.

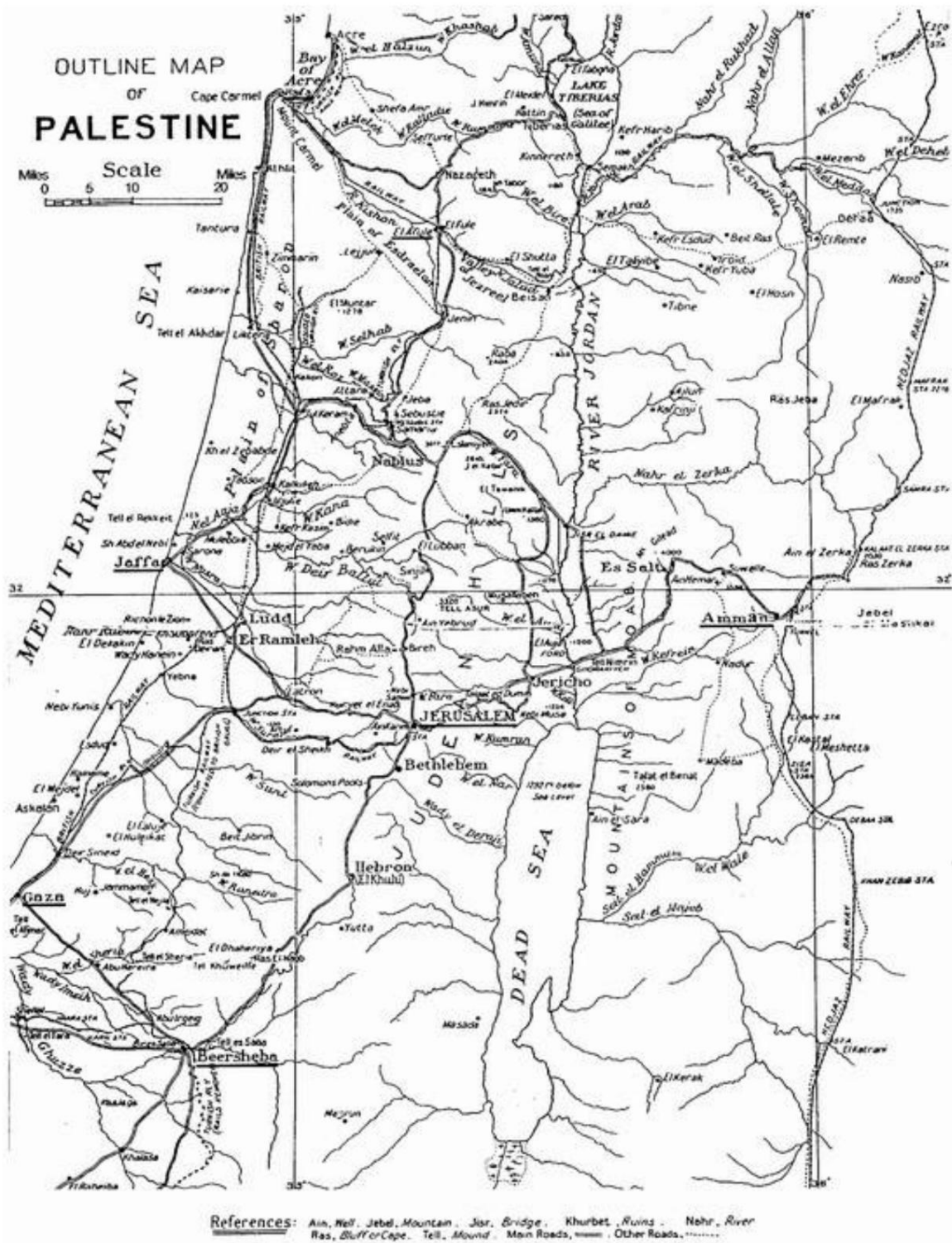
For the Allies on the European Western Front, the situation was serious, why significant British forces

from Palestine was transferred here until the spring of 1918. As the situation improved on the Western Front, Allenby resumed his offensive in northern Palestine. On September 20, Afula, 35 km southeast of Haifa, fell, which was captured on September 23, while Amman was captured on September 25, and finally, on September 30, 1918, the British captured the Syrian capital Damascus, which also meant a moral collapse for an exhausted opponent. In both the planning and execution of the entire Palestine campaign, General Allenby had combined elements of classical warfare with the use of modern means of combat.

The Battle of Beersheba with *the Australian Light Horse* on 31 October 1917 became the key to dominance and success in the Middle East. This day was the last time in the history of war that cavalry units were deployed with a decisive influence on the outcome of the battle. In the time that followed, Beersheba became the symbol of Allenby's victorious Palestine campaign.

The time after that

The battle for Beersheba is therefore still remembered by *the 4th* and *12th Light Horse Regiment* and their tradition-bearing successor, today *the 2nd Australian Cavalry Regiment*, which since its formation in 1970 holds a large parade every year.



Map of Palestine, 1918 8).

The Australian self-awareness and national feeling, especially after the Second World War, meant that the battle for Beersheba - in the same way as Gallipoli in 1915 - was made in the national consciousness an "Australian" victory, regardless of the central British lead.

Through transmission in poems and other literature as well as pictures, Beersheba gained legendary status. On the 70th anniversary in 1987, the day was the theme of the film *The Light Horsemen*, which was recorded in Australia, and about while it is a glorification of *The Light Horsemen*, it follows the historical events closely.

The 75th anniversary in 1992 was marked as a national day of remembrance, Beersheba Day. In Canberra, 400 people gathered for a memorial service at the *Desert Mounted Corps Memorial*. This monument had been erected in 1932 in Port Said, Egypt and was destroyed in 1956 during the Suez War, but rebuilt in 1968 in Canberra.

Among the participants were veterans of the *Light Horse* regiments of the Second World War, but also the last survivor of the attack on Beersheba, the 94-year-old Herbert Hollingsworth.

At the Commonwealth Cemetery in Beersheba, where a large proportion of the Australian, New Zealand and English fallen were laid to rest, the Australian ambassador laid a wreath. An Israeli Honor Command paraded during the ceremony.

Beersheba is a war-historical example of strategic planning with special emphasis on the infrastructure, where mobility and supplies in particular had to be catered for.

Literature

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Postscript



Australian Light Horse, 1918 9). [__](#)

As Gerd Stolz's article states, *the Australian Light Horse* was mounted infantry, and therefore not equipped with sabers like traditional cavalry. During the further campaign in Palestine, in April 1918 the majority of the Australian cavalry regiments were equipped with sabers and trained in their use.

Sabers aside, the above picture gives a good impression of how *the Australian Light Horse* fared during the attack at Beersheba.

Per Finsted

Notes:

- 1) The Turkish names of the ships were *Yavuz Sultan Selim* (Goeben) and *Midilli* (Breslau). See e.g. the Turkish website TCG YAVUZ - SMS GOEBEN. - <http://battlecruiseryavuz.hypermart.net/english.htm>
- 2) From the article that has *Australia in Palestine*, Sydney 1919 as its source.
- 3) See e.g. my article On British tanks at Gaza, 1917.
- 4) See Edmund Allenby (1861-1936).
- 5) See my article The Imperial Camel Corps Brigade.
- 6) The man behind this deception maneuver was Major Richard Meinertzhagen (1878-1967), who was General Allenby's intelligence officer during the Palestine campaign of 1917-18. If you have seen the Australian film *The Light Horsemen* from 1987 - which you absolutely should, if you have even a faint interest in the Palestine Campaign - you certainly remember the English actor Anthony Andrews in the role of Major Meinertzhagen. Of course, this is a feature film, but it quite sensibly sticks to the historical details.
- 7) From *The Australian Light Horse* by RJ Hall, WD Joynt & Company Pty. Ltd., Blackburn/Victoria 1968.

The photograph was taken by Eric George Elliot, and has been the subject of much debate, almost ever since the attack. In an affidavit excerpted in the book, Eric George Elliot states that to the best of his knowledge the photograph is one he took on the afternoon of October 31, 1917, when he was sent forward with artillery officers and machine gun officers to prepare range sketches over the terrain.

In-depth analysis of camera angles, the position of the sun in the sky, the lack of dust and the terrain in general have led others to claim that the photograph was taken some months later, when the brigade should have "re-enacted" the attack for photography purposes. Read more about these [views on The Australian Light Horse Association's website](#). [Beersheba... The controversial photograph of the charge](#). The page also contains options for partial enlargements of the photograph, as well as the full wording of the sworn statement.

8) From the article that has *Australia in Palestine*, Sydney 1919 as its source.

9) From *First to Damascus - The Great Ride and Lawrence of Arabia* by Jill, Duchess of Hamilton, Kangaroo Press, East Roseville/New South Wales, ISBN 0- 7318-1071-6.