

A DH9A which equipped squadrons in Palestine

General Sir Edmund Allenby's joint operations in Palestine, 1917-1918

By Dr John Mordike

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British Prime Minister Lloyd George was disappointed over the results of the offensive he had pressed for at Arras in April 1917. He turned his hopes from the Western Front in France to the Middle East. A victory in Southern Palestine leading to the capture of Jerusalem could serve to bolster flagging spirits on the conduct of the war and perhaps lead to the defeat of Turkey. Such an undertaking needed a capable general, one that was experienced and confident, able to inspire a force that had stagnated under the confident leadership of General Sir Archibald Murray.¹ General Sir Edmund Allenby, having been removed from his command of the 3rd British Army by Haig after Arras, was an ideal candidate.²



Sir Edmund Allenby

Briefing Allenby in London in June 1917, Lloyd George told him that he wanted Jerusalem 'as a Christmas present for the British nation'.³ But, in June 1917, this seemed to be wishing for too much. The British people were beginning to show signs of war-weariness. Some members of the government doubted that victory over Germany was possible; Lloyd George and several of his senior colleagues were convinced that they were locked into a stalemate on the Western Front. The outlook was bleak. An offensive in Palestine could help restore faith in the government and boost national morale. There were also strategic benefits to be gained. Turkey was judged to be one of Germany's most fragile supports and defeat in Palestine might be the decisive blow that could lead to Turkey's collapse. Britain's post-war stake in the Middle East also had to be kept in mind. Such was the background to Lloyd George's approach to the Middle East theatre and his decision to appoint Allenby to command the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.⁴

Allenby went through the hot, dusty camps of his army like a strong, fresh, reviving wind...

Allenby arrived in Cairo on 28th June, just two weeks after the former commander, General Sir Archibald Murray, had learnt of his dismissal. Murray had mounted two unsuccessful attacks on Turkish defences at Gaza, then ordered his men to dig-in. Months of static warfare had followed.⁵ Allenby's appointment was the turning point for the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, a force described as being tired and listless, pleased to be rid of the remote and hesitant Murray. Field-Marshal Viscount Wavell recorded that the force 'was in the doldrums, becalmed and dispirited, held between failure and success. It needed the wind of Allenby's tremendous personality to fill the sails and give it steerage-way'.⁶ Allenby's most recent biographer Lawrence James wrote that the Egyptian Expeditionary Force's intelligence officer, Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, now 'looked forward to working under a decisive general known for his "energy and push", which would be welcomed in a torpid army where staff thinking had become stuck in a narrow "trench warfare" groove'.⁷ One of Allenby's first actions was to move his headquarters from the Savoy Hotel in Cairo to the operational area in Kelab. The Australian official military historian, Henry Gullett, recorded that: 'The army applauded the move.' They were even more appreciative of 'the resolution of the Commander-in-Chief' to learn about his own forces and those of the enemy. '[Allenby] went through the hot, dusty camps of his army like a strong, fresh, reviving wind,' Gullett wrote, '... At last they had a commander who would live among them and lead them.'⁸

Murray had never inspired his men like Allenby would. Richard Williams, who commanded No. 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, in the Middle East – and was soon to be promoted to command the Fortieth (Army) Wing – commented that: 'We had never seen the previous Commander in Chief. The only time we were aware of his presence in the area was when we had to provide a patrol over his special train.' 'Allenby stopped all that,' Williams explained approvingly.⁹

The new commander was not without his faults. Allenby was given to outbursts of rage which could only be destructive in personal relationships – behind his back his troops referred to him as 'the Bull', a nickname acquired during 'the grim, dark days on the Western front' where his 'fiery, impulsive, driving temperament ... was ill-suited for leadership'.¹⁰ But it is clear that he had decided to exercise a positive leadership role in the Middle East. Wavell observed that: 'his temper was under better control than in France ... Still, there were occasional explosions ...'¹¹ Despite these outbursts, the new commander was just what the Egyptian Expeditionary Force needed. Within three weeks, Allenby had kindled an air of optimism in the force. 'Allenby breathes success,' Meinertzhagen noted after their first meeting, 'and the greatest pessimist cannot fail to have confidence in him.'¹² On meeting the new commander shortly after his arrival, T.E. Lawrence also noted that he was 'physically large and confident', adding that Allenby was 'morally so great that the comprehension of our littleness came slow to him'.¹³

The new commander also harboured ideas on how he intended to fight in Palestine. Originally a cavalry officer, Allenby was now free of the constraints he had experienced on the Western Front where trench warfare had stifled the conduct of military operations. Instinctively, he wanted to fight in the way that the cavalry would like to fight, in battles 'where boldness and dexterity of manoeuvre held the keys to victory'.¹⁴ And there was no doubt about what Allenby intended to do. 'What had hitherto been a rather casual military adventure with no definite goal,' wrote Gullett, 'was suddenly converted into a stern, clear-cut campaign with nothing short of the complete destruction of the Turkish force in Palestine and the capture of Jerusalem as its immediate objective.'¹⁵

This paper will examine Allenby's joint operations in Palestine from late 1917 to late 1918. The paper will progress in the following stages:

- The Opening Round
- The Prelude to the Final Battle
- Plans for the Final Battle
- The Battle Begins
- Concluding Comments

THE OPENING ROUND

Allenby's offensive to drive the Turks from their defences on the southern frontiers of Palestine began in late October 1917. By this time, he had reorganised the Egyptian Expeditionary Force and had 80,000 front-line troops at his disposal. His force consisted of three corps, one mounted and two infantry. The Desert Mounted Corps, which included Australian, New Zealand and British cavalry, was commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel, an Australian officer. XX Corps of three infantry divisions was under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Chetwode and XXI Corps of three infantry divisions was under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Bulfin.

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German Fokker Dr.I aircraft





SE5a's serving in Palestine 1918

Now, for the first time, after 17 months in the field, we had aircraft with which we could deal with our enemy in the air

Allenby's force also included an air power component. Lawrence James noted that Allenby was an air power enthusiast. He well understood that in the period before his arrival in the Middle East theatre the opposing forces had enjoyed air superiority, largely due to the quality of their machines: German Rumpler and Fokker aircraft. So, in preparation for the coming battle, Allenby requested more aircraft to eliminate Turco-German air supremacy as well as balloon observation detachments and wireless detachments to assist in the provision of accurate air-to-ground direction of artillery fire.¹⁶ Other vital roles were air reconnaissance and photography. Allenby requested the War Office to bring his aircraft strength to seventy-two machines, which would give his force one more aircraft than the estimated Turco-German total.¹⁷

With an increased strength in air assets, Allenby formed the Palestine Brigade, Royal Flying Corps, on 4 October.¹⁸ It was comprised of two wings. The 5th (Corps) Wing was dedicated to air cooperation and direct support tasks for the surface force. The 40th (Army) Wing was dedicated to counter-air missions and operations in the rear area, such as bombing the enemy's support infrastructure (in the terminology of the time, these were described as strategic operations). One of the 40th Wing's squadrons was No. 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps. Towards the end of 1917, the Palestine Brigade started to acquire more advanced aircraft designs. One of its squadrons received the new SE5a and No. 1 Squadron received some Bristol Fighters, obviously because of 40th Wing's counter-air function. Richard Williams, commander of the Australian squadron, recalled that: 'Now for the first time, after 17 months in the field, we had aircraft with which we could deal with our enemy in the air.'¹⁹ The new machines proved to be a vital step forward in achieving air superiority over the enemy.

The attainment of air superiority was only one function for aircraft, and, as Major-General Geoffrey Salmond, Air Officer Commanding RAF Middle East, explained, once air superiority was achieved 'a whole field of operational activities became open to us which until then had been a closed book'.²⁰ Aircraft were to be utilised in many ways for the coming operations. One way was to exploit the aircraft's perspective of the battlefield to acquire information and then to use the aircraft's speed to pass the information to cavalry forces below for a speedy response. Alec Hill wrote about this in his 1978 book on Chauvel of the Light Horse. Hill referred to two early contacts between the light horse and Turkish troops in March and April 1916, just after the force had moved into the theatre. One of the valuable outcomes of these contacts, Hill observed, was the opportunity to practise cooperation between the mounted force and aircraft. 'In both operations,' Hill wrote, 'aircraft reconnoitred far ahead, dropping written reports at the very feet of the troops, while Chauvel was able to keep in touch with his little columns by wireless, carried at this stage on camels.'²¹

Wireless was developed as the war progressed, but the number of sets was limited. Transmitters were placed in some aircraft and new operational procedures were introduced. At the beginning of 1917, the air component of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force was allocated men and wireless sets to develop and to practise what was called 'Artillery Co-operation', that is the procedure of using an airborne observer to call for and adjust artillery fire support. 'It was fully realised that the question of Co-operation between Aircraft and Artillery was one which was destined to have a great influence on the future conduct of operations,' a report on the activities of the Palestine Brigade noted. An intensive training program was established with practice shoots being carried out on an 'almost daily' basis in the Wadi El Arish. During these shoots 'numerous difficulties were experienced and prejudices had to be overcome'. Few observers had any experience with artillery and 'had to be trained from the start'. The gunners were also reported to be 'sceptical as to the value or reliability of Aeroplane Observation'. While there were many other demands on the use of aircraft, sufficient artillery practices had been conducted by the end of March to ensure that 'every Battery of the Front (Field, R.H.A., Heavy and Siege) had carried out practice shoots'. It was reported that the practices demonstrated 'the value of Aerial Observation' and the 'mutual confidence established' brought 'results in subsequent operations which cannot be over-estimated'. In addition to the training of aerial observers, gunners had to be trained in the use of wireless. Signallers were also transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, becoming operational 'before serious operations commenced in October'. This was the time when the 5th Wing was established; two of its squadrons were 'to specialise in Artillery Work'. 'These Squadrons carried out thorough and systematic registrations and destructive shoots before the attack on the Gaza-Beersheba Front,' it was noted. These developments were an indication of the importance of these procedures to the coming operations.²²

Aerial photography was another important function for aircraft. It served two purposes: mapmaking and intelligence. At the beginning of 1917, the existing maps of the area 'were purely small scale topographical charts, shewing [sic] the position of the scattered villages and ruins; the approximate courses of wadis, roads and tracks; together with some spot levels and hachuring'. 'None of these maps,' it was recorded at the time, 'contained sufficient details for modern military purposes, and it was, of course, practically impossible to locate even the approximate position of any photographs on them.' To rectify this shortcoming, aerial photography during 1917 became a function of 'steady progress and expansion'.²³

The use of aerial photography for intelligence purposes was also developed significantly in 1917. At the start of the year, 'no regular system existed for the study of aeroplane photographs, and for circulating the info [sic] obtained from these'. But the information acquired through photography became a valuable resource for planning operations. 'During the period preceding and including the attack on the Gaza-Beersheba line,' it was recorded by staff officers at headquarters, Palestine Brigade, 'photographs were taken daily of all the sectors of importance.' A streamlined process was also developed for distributing the results of the photographic missions. Information was quickly transferred to a map which was itself copied by photography. 'In this way,' it was recorded, 'the latest information as to enemy organisation was placed in the hands of the Corps within four or five hours of the time when the photograph was taken.' In January

1917, 277 photographic exposures were made with 2,493 actual prints being processed. In October, the month of the start of Allenby's operations against the Gaza-Beersheba line, there were 894 exposures and 24,113 prints, a tenfold increase in the use of this method of acquiring and disseminating information.²⁴

The real object of Allenby's attack was Beersheba. It was in this location that water could be found in established wells and this was essential for further operations to the north

The Turkish Eighth Army under the command of Freiherr General Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein occupied the Gaza-Beersheba line, a distance of about 30 kilometres. Von Kressenstein expected that, in mounting an offensive, Allenby would follow Murray's example and make his major thrust against Gaza. Allenby wanted von Kressenstein to believe that this was exactly what he intended to do. Allenby's Wireless Intelligence Unit had intercepted and deciphered a Turkish signal which explained: 'The enemy's commander, General Allenby, was on the Western Front this year. It's understood he is wont to attack after a violent, but short bombardment.' Therefore, Allenby reasoned that an opening artillery barrage on Gaza would lead von Kressenstein to believe that Gaza was the objective. Steps were also taken to ensure that the Turks acquired misleading intelligence that pointed to Gaza as the prime object of Allenby's interest. Bogus wireless transmissions provided further misinformation to reinforce this view.²⁵

The real object of Allenby's attack was Beersheba. It was in this location that water could be found in established wells and this was essential for further operations to the north. Access to water supplies was a major issue for operations in this theatre. By mid-1917, a system had been built to pump water from the Nile and the pipeline and rail link had been extended from Cairo to the southern boundaries of Palestine. Water could be transported and distributed by motor lorries and 30,000 camels dedicated to the task, but the limit at this stage was Beersheba. A cavalry division required some 120,000 gallons a day and an infantry division 60,000 gallons.²⁶

The operation started on 27 October with a heavy bombardment on Gaza by land-based artillery and naval gunfire from sea. This was part of the deception plan to make the Turks believe that Gaza would then be attacked. The move against Beersheba and its water wells started three days later.²⁷ Chetwode's XX Corps approached from the south while Chauvel's Desert Mounted Corps executed an outflanking approach to the east.²⁸ The town was quickly taken on 31 October by a daring charge of the 4th Australian Light Horse. Most of Beersheba's precious water supply was still intact. 'It was a smart little battle,' Allenby wrote to his wife next day, 'Achieved by careful preparation and good staff work. The Cavalry made a 25 mile night march, to turn the Turks' left flank; and the infantry did 15 miles and a battle at the end. All this was based on water supply and ammunition supply – development of wells and pumps, and pushing in of roads, trains and railways; combined with secrecy and feints – all worked well.'²⁹

From Beersheba Allenby's mounted force moved northward engaging withdrawing Turkish forces which fought a series of resolute rearguard actions. Simultaneously, the Turkish positions in Gaza were then engaged by accurate artillery fire which was directed by airborne observers. The artillery fire was not only from land-based batteries. Naval gunfire was also used with the assistance of the airborne observers.³⁰ Pressure was applied to Gaza by advancing infantry from XXI Corps and, under heavy artillery fire, von Kressenstein took the decision to withdraw from the garrison. 'The Turks have had an awful hammering,' Allenby informed his wife, 'We attacked Gaza, early this morning; and got it almost without opposition.'³¹



Allenby was clearly impressed by the terror and destruction caused by his air force; on 25 November he asked the War Office for a further twenty-five machines, up-to-date Nieuport Scouts, to be sent from France

As the Turkish Eighth Army withdrew across the coastal plain, it was engaged by mounted forces and, more destructively, by aircraft that bombed and strafed the retreating forces. As the Turkish forces moved beyond the range of land-based artillery, naval gunfire using aerial observation was also used to engage them.³² Allenby's aircraft executed these functions free from the fear of interference by enemy aircraft, because simultaneous air attacks were made with forty fighters and bombers against two German aerodromes and storage facilities at Iraq el Menshiye and es Tine. It seems that only one enemy aircraft had been able to conduct air reconnaissance during the period of the battle and it had been chased and destroyed before it could report back to its base.³³ Lawrence James noted that 'Allenby was clearly impressed by the terror and destruction caused by his air force; on 25 November he asked the War Office for a further twenty-five machines, up-to-date Nieuport Scouts, to be sent from France.'³⁴

As von Kressenstein's force continued their fighting withdrawal to the north, the New Zealand Brigade rode into Jaffa on 16 November without opposition. The road and rail links between Jerusalem and the coast had been cut.

What was happening in this operation was quite remarkable. In a period of less than three weeks, the Turks had given up their positions on the Gaza-Beersheba line and, as they withdrew some one hundred kilometres north and north-east, suffered punishing attack from mobile surface and air forces.³⁵ Allenby's force now stood ready to take Jerusalem by Christmas, as Lloyd George had wished. But some two weeks of determined fighting remained.

Allenby's force turned inland from Jaffa with a push which put most weight on the Jerusalem-Nablus road, (see map page 24) a move designed to isolate Jerusalem and avoid damage to significant religious sites in the ancient town. There was strong resistance from Turkish forces, but in the end Allenby's forces prevailed through simple weight of numbers. In the final push against Jerusalem on 8 December, the Turks quickly withdrew all their forces and, on 9 December, Jerusalem belonged to Allenby. But Lloyd George, seeking to exploit the achievement for political reasons, wanted the pleasure of announcing the achievement of the taking Jerusalem himself. 'I informed the W.[ar] O.[ffice];' Allenby wrote to his wife, 'but was not allowed to publish the news before the P.M. had announced it in the House.'³⁶

In a carefully orchestrated piece of theatre, Allenby, flanked by his staff officers, walked into Jerusalem through the Jaffa gate at midday on 11 December. He was to appear as a liberator, not a conqueror. It was a sunlit day and the event was filmed by a crew from the War Office.³⁷

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Lloyd George had his Christmas present for the nation, but, as H.A. Jones observed in the British official history, after the capture of Jerusalem 'it was impossible for General Allenby to halt'. 'Jerusalem and Jaffa were still within range of Turkish artillery, and it was necessary that the Turks should be pushed back as soon as possible, on either flank of the British Front, far enough to ensure the security of these two towns.'³⁸ Behind these immediate needs lay the more important strategic goal of the complete defeat of the Turkish forces in Palestine and the elimination of Turkey from the war, and it was to this aim that Allenby now turned his attention.

THE PRELUDE TO THE FINAL BATTLE

Allenby established his general headquarters at Bir Salem on the Jaffa-Jerusalem road, about 15 kilometres from Jaffa and 50 kilometres from Jerusalem. The road was the principal artery of communication from east to west. His headquarters was also near the railway. The main aerodrome was close at hand at Ramleh.³⁹

After Allenby's forces had taken Jerusalem, the Palestine Brigade's aircraft were involved in some work with the artillery and a few bombing raids were made against the enemy, but the main focus of activity was reconnaissance of the country to the north. There were many inconsistencies and inaccuracies in existing maps; aerial photographs were required. This work was done by No. 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, which photographed some 1,000 square kilometres of territory in the last two weeks of January 1918. German pilots, flying out of aerodromes at El 'Affule and Jenin were active but the Bristol Fighters and SE5a's were able to maintain air superiority while the photographic work continued.⁴⁰

Allenby concentrated on consolidating his position and in particular making his right flank safe, an area made more threatening by the Judaeen hills to the east. He had to drive the Turks across the Jordan River to prevent them from raiding his positions west of the Dead Sea. Allenby needed a secure base from which to continue his offensive and to make an attack against the Hejaz railway. On 21 February his mounted forces rode into Jericho to find that the enemy had already deserted the town. The main object of securing the right flank had thus been achieved. One important lesson from these operations was that movement in this area was quite slow because of the nature of the land. It was considered to be the most difficult country yet encountered in the campaign. This made the value of aerial photography and reconnaissance all that more important.⁴¹

In the period 8 March to 12 March, the XX Corps executed a general advance through the hills along the Nablus road. This was to gain more room to the north before the next phase of operations.⁴² Allenby then started planning operations east of the Jordan River with the object of taking Es Salt and destroying the Hejaz railway at Amman, a move that would isolate Turkish troops to the south.⁴³ This would assist Emir Feisal and Major T.E. Lawrence with Arab operations against the Turks in the region east and south-east of the Dead Sea.⁴⁴

The force to take Amman set out on the night of 21 March. The first obstacle to be encountered was crossing the Jordan River which had become swollen with torrential winter rains. Normally, these rains should have ceased before the end of March, but for the last half of the month the rains were almost incessant. It was judged that speed was essential element in this operation, but it was not until the 23 March that the main body was across the Jordan.⁴⁵ The wet and cold weather also hampered progress across land, exhausting Allenby's troops and preventing the forward deployment of artillery support. Es Salt was taken with slight opposition, but this was not the case when an attempt was made to take Amman. The delay in crossing the Jordan had given the Turks valuable time to reinforce and strengthen their defences around the town. By 30 March it had become clear that the move against Amman was a failure and the order was given to withdraw. Es Salt was evacuated and the force withdrew across the Jordan. It was the first reversal suffered since Allenby had taken command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. ⁴⁶ It was not to be the last. At the end of the first week of April, Allenby attempted to capture Tul Karm. The Turks proved to be too strong and a halt was called to operations.⁴⁷

General Allenby decided to make another, and stronger, raid east of the Jordan. The operation was planned to begin on 30 April. It failed, partly because the Beni Sakhr tribe, who had promised help, failed to participate, but chiefly owing to the surprise intervention of favourably placed Turkish reinforcements. The German commander-in-chief had also positioned the forces which had defended Amman a month earlier across the approach road to Es Salt, strengthening the defensive capabilities in this region. After reviewing the situation, Allenby gave orders for a withdrawal. By the evening of 4 May the force had withdrawn across the Jordan.⁴⁸

In reviewing these operations, Wavell noted that Allenby had suffered another tactical defeat in his second push across the Jordan River, but he claimed that Allenby had at the same time achieved a 'strategical objective', 'since from now onwards about one-third of the whole Turkish forces were maintained east of the Jordan'.⁴⁹ This was to be an important part of the defensive posture adopted by the German commander-in-chief, who had been appointed a few weeks earlier on 1 March to replace General von Falkenhayn. The new commander-in-chief was General der Kavallerie Liman von Sanders. And it is knowledge of this appointment which gives an insight into the way in which the Turkish forces were starting to operate and, as a result, what would happen in closing months of war in this theatre.

In the British official history of the war, H.A. Jones noted that where the previous enemy commander-in-chief 'had a lively belief in the value of manoeuvre for defence as well as for offence', Liman von Sanders 'had more rigid qualities which induced him to pay a strict attention to the value of ground'. As a result, Liman von Sanders developed plans 'aimed at keeping a firm grip on the front' (in other words, holding ground). He deployed his reserves well forward to strengthen his hold on the ground but he lost his ability to manoeuvre. From the time of von Sanders' appointment 'there was a notable stiffening in the quality of the Turkish defence'. This was to be a key development for operations in Palestine. Jones pointed out that, as Allenby's final offensive was executed in the coming months, 'the inflexibility of the strategy of Liman von Sanders contributed to the disaster which overtook the Turkish armies'.⁵⁰ The idea of taking and holding ground was to be confronted with the challenge for which it had no answer: the mobility of cavalry forces when used in concert with the speed, reach, and perspective of aircraft suddenly started a transformation in the way in which battles could be fought. The overwhelming impact of this way of fighting was made all that more devastating for surface forces when they were exposed to an unhindered, punishing application of combat power from the air.

Aerial reconnaissance had revealed that the defences around Tul Karm were being developed as early as March. It was also noticed that the enemy forces were starting to move into the Nablus area. Defences around Amman were receiving attention. These were the first signs of the defensive line being developed by von Sanders. He deployed the Eighth Turkish Army in the area of Tul Karm. The Seventh Turkish Army was deployed to Nablus and the Fourth Turkish Army was deployed to Es Salt.



Deployment of British (blue) and Turkish (red) forces, March 1918

0 30
Miles

There was little surface activity in Palestine between the failed Es Salt raid in early May and the start of the final offensive in September. This was due mainly to the oppressive heat of the summer months, a factor of some concern because there was no real knowledge of the likely impact on Allenby's force. As the British official Intelligence handbook explained in a reference to the conditions in the Jordan valley: 'Nothing is known of the climate in summer-time, since no civilized [sic] human being has yet been found to spend summer there.'⁵¹ Yet, while the surface forces were largely immobile, the air forces were exerting

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a relentless pressure on the German aircrews and gaining unquestioned air superiority. Williams recorded that No. 1 Squadron had continued to receive new Bristol Fighters until March when it possessed a total of eighteen. 'As the squadron obtained additional Bristol Fighters the German aircraft were more frequently sought out and punished,' Williams wrote, 'We were now in the position of being able to make and break contact with the Germans at will and they often did not stand up to it.'⁵² This pressure on German aircrews continued through the summer. Jones wrote in the British official history that: 'It is beyond dispute that during the hot months the German pilots and observers had had a sorry time.' The German aircrews faced 'aeroplanes superior in performance and number, piloted by officers imbued almost to the point of recklessness with the offensive spirit'. The enemy 'could seldom take to the air without being fiercely attacked'.⁵³ The improved technology was certainly a factor but the aggressive spirit of the airmen was also necessary to win the air superiority that was so critical to the coming operations. 'This position was not attained without hard fighting,' Salmond reflected after the war, 'but by August over ninety hostile machines had been destroyed.' 'I want

to make this point clear, Salmond continued, 'in order to explain how it came about that we were permitted to use the Royal Air Force to such great advantage in the campaign that was shortly to open up.' But Salmond thought that the 'fighting qualities' of the pilots and the 'better machines' were not the only important factors. He emphasised that the other important factor was 'organisation', and by this he meant that the air force had 'complete repairing bases' in Egypt as well as 'large supplies of machines and personnel'.⁵⁴

During the summer, there was also a need for continued reorganisation of Allenby's force due to the higher demands for troop transfers as a result of the threatening conditions on the Western Front. But one positive outcome was the strengthening of the Palestine Brigade in August. The Fortieth (Army) Wing, under command of Williams, incorporated two new elements. One addition was No. 144 Squadron equipped with DH9s. The other addition was 1 Flight, No. 145 Squadron, equipped with SE 5a's. In August, No. 1 Squadron had also received a new Handley Page bomber. 'It was huge by the standards of that time,' wrote Williams, 'a biplane fitted with two Rolls-Royce Eagle VIII engines each of 365 horsepower, the largest engines we had yet heard of, and the only twin-engined aircraft yet seen in that part of the world.'⁵⁵ This bomber was to play an important role at the start of the coming battle. Since the end of 1917, one other squadron, No. 142 had also been added to the Fifth (Corps) Wing.⁵⁶ Liman von Sanders was not so fortunate. During the summer, his force had been sent two shipments of replacement aircraft, but they had been too damaged in transit to be used. The results of the relentless battle for air superiority also fell heavily upon his force. In the months before the final battle his four flight detachments lost many pilots and observers and received no replacements because the German offensive on the Western Front took priority.

It was Allenby's air superiority that turned defeat into disaster for the Turkish armies

Allenby went into the final battle with air superiority and this was to have a profound impact on the outcome. It was Allenby's air superiority that turned defeat into disaster for the Turkish armies.

PLANS FOR THE FINAL BATTLE

The three Turkish armies were spread in defensive positions across a 140 kilometre front from the Mediterranean coast to Amman. They had a total effective fighting strength of about 33,000 men, but it was known that their morale and strength had declined over the summer months. The Turkish forces possessed only two anti-aircraft guns.⁵⁷ The men were not well fed and their animals were short of forage. There had been a number of deserters.⁵⁸

At first Allenby planned on a limited campaign against the Turks. But he had determined that mobility was to be the key feature. As a result of earlier operations in the Judaea hills, Allenby had come to the firm conclusion that, if he were to punch through the Turkish line and exploit the mobility and speed of his cavalry in follow-through operations, he would have to do it on the coastal plain.⁵⁹ Therefore, he planned that XXI Corps would break through on the coast and the cavalry would then make for the railway junction, about half-way between Tul Karm and Nablus. The XXI Corps and the XX corps would then advance to the Tul Karm-Nablus line. This strategy meant that the Fourth Turkish Army was not, in the first instance, to be engaged by Allenby's forces.

While Allenby anticipated a successful outcome to such an operation, its scope was somewhat limited. One outcome could be that the Turkish armies might hold their positions around Tul Karm and Nablus and force him into a series of costly offensives. Alternatively, if the Turkish armies decided to retreat from their

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positions the greater part of the Turkish forces would escape to the north. But Allenby started to think on a more ambitious scale for his coming offensive. Wavell wrote that:

'One morning, not long after his announcement of the original plan, [Allenby] returned from a morning ride, strode into his office, and informed his Operations Staff that he had decided on an extension of his plan which aimed at nothing less than the complete destruction of the Turkish armies'.⁶⁰

Allenby planned that, instead of turning inland towards Tul Karm after exploiting the breakthrough, the cavalry should continue at speed up the Plain of Sharon to a point near Haifa then turn inland into the Plain of Esdraelon some fifty to sixty-five kilometres behind the Turkish armies.

This daring idea was the basis of the final battle, 'one of the most crushing strokes ever delivered in war', as Wavell put it.⁶¹ The commander left the detailed planning to his staff and the Corps commanders, but his basic idea was to be kept intact. 'The long Turkish domination of Syria and Palestine, and the military power on which it was founded,' wrote Wavell, 'were to be given their death-blow in the grand manner.'⁶²



Allenby's plan for the final battle, September 1918

0 30
Miles

The timing of the battle was simply determined. The first winter rains were due at the beginning of November and there was a possibility that, except where there were a few established roads, the Plains of Sharon and Esdraelon might become impassable for transport. Therefore, the timing of the battle was set for mid-September.

Although there had been some changes in the summer months, the essential shape of Allenby's force remained the same. He had organised the remaining divisions into the XX Corps (commanded by Chetwode) and the XXI Corps (commanded by Bulfin), the Desert Mounted Corps (commanded by Chauvel). One other component that was to operate independently was known as Chaytor's Force. It was commanded by Major-General Sir Edward Chaytor and it included the Anzac Mounted Division, an Indian infantry brigade and a few other infantry battalions.

The plan called for the covert massing of the infantry from Bulfin's XXI Corps and Chauvel's cavalry along the 12 kilometres front between the coast and the railway, an area that could be called the coastal plain. It is estimated that the Turks had a strength of 8,000 infantry supported by about 120 guns on this part of their defensive line. Allenby planned to concentrate 35,000 infantry supported by nearly 400 guns and a follow-through cavalry force of 9,000.⁶³ Sea control by the Royal Navy ensured the safety of Allenby's left flank. Naval gunfire would also support the operation, as it had in the previous year when the Gaza-Beersheba line was taken. It would be an overwhelming attack which would punch through the Turkish defence system and allow the cavalry force to use its greater mobility to move quickly to the north. XXI Corps would turn inland and head towards Nablus, but the cavalry would penetrate more deeply, pushing rapidly through to El Affule on the second day of the operation. Being only 10 kilometres south of Nazareth, the location of Liman von Sanders' headquarters, a detachment of cavalry would ride forward and attempt to capture the enemy commander-in-chief and his staff. The mounted force would also be within striking distance of Beisan. By taking Beisan in addition to El Affule Allenby's forces would deny the Turks a withdrawal route west of the Jordan River.

While this was taking place, Chetwode's XX Corps was to advance north along the axis of the Nablus road. By way of a diversion, Chaytor's Force was to conduct demonstrations in the Jordan valley east of the river with the object of leading the Turks to believe that this was where the major attack was to take place. One hundred kilometres further to the east and beyond the reach of Allenby's main force, the Arabs under Emir Feisal and Lawrence were to cut the rail links north, south and west of Der'a, thus denying the Turks a vital line of communication.⁶⁴

THE PALESTINE BRIGADE, ROYAL AIR FORCE

The Palestine Brigade consisted of the following squadrons⁶⁵ :

Fifth (Corps) Wing

Headquarters - Ramleh

14 Squadron, RAF – Junction Station: 16 RE8s, 3 Nieuports

113 Squadron, RAF – Sarona: 16 RE8s, 5 Nieuports

142 Squadron, RAF, (less 1 Flight) – Sarona: 7 Armstrong-Whitworths

1 Flight – Jerusalem: 5 RE8s



An SE5a of
111 Squadron

Fortieth (Army) Wing

Headquarters – Ramleh

1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps – Ramleh: 18 Bristol Fighters, 1 Handley Page

111 Squadron, RAF – Ramleh: 15 SE5a's

114 Squadron, RAF – Junction Station: 13 DH9s

145 Squadron, RAF, HQ and 1 Flight – Ramleh

Fifth Wing and Fortieth Wing - Total Aircraft Numbers

RE8s: 37

Nieuports: 8

Armstrong-Whitworths: 7

Bristol Fighters: 18

SE5a's: 21

DH9s: 13

Handley Page: 1

A total of 105 machines of all types.

In addition to powered aircraft squadrons, the brigade also included No. 21 Balloon Company of three sections. The company's headquarters was at Sarona.

The Fifth (Corps) Wing was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Burnett, who would become the RAAF's Chief of Air Staff during World War II.

The Fortieth (Army) Wing was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Williams, an officer of the Australian Flying Corps. Williams had formerly been the commander of No. 1 Squadron, AFC. In June 1918 he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel and given command of the wing. Williams was 27 years-of-age. 'I am sure that my appointment to the command of the wing,' he later recalled, 'was the direct result not only of my length of service on that front but also of the excellence of the work of No. 1 Squadron over the preceding 12 months. Flight commanders, air crews, NCOs and men, technical and otherwise, were excellent. I could have no better.' There was one small legal difficulty, however. Williams commented that a dominion officer was unable to 'exercise powers of punishment over British personnel' and, therefore, he was 'granted a supplementary commission in the Royal Air Force'.⁶⁶

Two of the Fortieth Wing's three RAF squadrons were also commanded by Australians. Peter Drummond had No. 111 Squadron, while Edgar Percival had No. 145 Squadron.⁶⁷

ROLES ALLOCATED TO SQUADRONS FOR FINAL BATTLE

Fifth (Corps) Wing

No. 113 Squadron was designated to cooperate with XXI Corps in the coastal sector.

No. 142 Squadron (less 'C' Flight) was designated to cooperate with the Desert Mounted Corps in the coastal sector. This was the cavalry force which was to use its mobility to exploit the breakthrough by XXI Corps.

No. 14 Squadron was to cooperate with XX Corps which was to advance north on the axis of the Nablus road.

'C' Flight, No. 142 Squadron was designated to cooperate with Chaytor's Force in the Jordan valley. The primary role of this force was conduct diversionary tactics to lead the Turks to believe that a major attack could be expected in this sector. Chaytor's Force also had a role to play in the protection of Allenby's right flank.

Fortieth (Army) Wing

No. 1 Squadron, AFC, and No. 111 Squadron, RAF, No. 144 Squadron, RAF, and 1 Flight of No. 145 Squadron, RAF, were free of direct support functions and were designated to conduct strategical reconnaissance and offensive operations.⁶⁸

As commander-in-chief, Allenby issued no specific instructions to the air component for the coming battle, but the senior air staff officers were involved directly in the planning process. They were encouraged to suggest ways in which aircraft could be used to their greatest effect.⁶⁹ Air reconnaissance, aerial photography and the battle for winning and maintaining air superiority had been vital ongoing contributions, but aircraft had other significant roles to play in the battle.

'Immediately [Allenby's] general plan was received,' Salmond recalled, 'the senior Air Officers were called into conference and the enormous opportunities of realising to the full the possibilities of the air arm, to achieve results which we had dreamed of, were realised.' 'To start with,' Salmond continued, 'our

command of the air enabled us to practically guarantee the concealment from the enemy of General Allenby's plans, it enabled us to suggest plans for still further misleading the enemy, it made it possible for us to destroy his communication centres, and lastly it enabled us to contemplate the destruction of his retreating forces.⁷⁰

Concealment and deception were important in the preparatory phase for the battle. Every attempt was to be made to convince von Sanders that the focus of the attack was in the east, not the coastal plain in the west. Therefore, it was decided that enemy air activity in the eastern sector would not be challenged, so allowing enemy observers to conduct 'fleeting reconnaissances if they attempted to do so'. It was known that enemy air reconnaissance would be conducted at an altitude above 14,000 feet as a matter of practice, so preparations were made to deceive aerial observers to believe that the cavalry force was concentrated in the eastern sector. Camps were left standing, horses dragged brushwood about to create dust clouds, and dummies were placed in horse-lines. After the war, Salmond explained that this part of the deception plan was suggested by the air officers. 'We knew that if we left this area unpatrolled,' Salmond observed, 'the German airmen would report on it and apparently they did.'⁷¹ At least one enemy aircraft had conducted an aerial reconnaissance just four days before the battle was to begin. The aerial reconnaissance report was among documents captured when the enemy's general headquarters was taken. The captured documents revealed that von Sanders and his staff were convinced that Allenby would attack in the east, across the Jordan, and the aerial reconnaissance report did not provide evidence contrary to this view. It read: 'Some regrouping of cavalry units apparently in progress behind the enemy's left flank; otherwise nothing unusual to report.' By this stage, Allenby had concentrated more than 10,000 horsemen behind his left flank and von Sanders and his staff were completely ignorant of this development.⁷² While the conditions of air superiority assisted elements of the deception plan, there were a number of other important aspects.

After Allenby's cavalry force - less the Anzac Mounted Division - had covertly moved across to the west, wireless messages were transmitted from its former headquarters in Jericho as though it was still in this location. Elaborate steps were also taken to deceive enemy agents into thinking that Allenby's general headquarters was about to be shifted to the east from its location at Bir Salem on the plain into a hotel in Jerusalem. The hotel was cleared, telephone lines were laid and offices allocated and marked.⁷³

In the west - that is, on Allenby's left flank - steps were taken to conceal the concentration of forces. Movements were made by night. Forces were warned of approaching enemy aircraft so that concealment action could be taken. Lights were prohibited at night and no wood, only solidified alcohol, was to be used in cooking fires.⁷⁴

Special preparations were made to exploit aircraft in the coming battle. The nature of the land dictated that should the Turks be forced to withdraw from their prepared positions then they would be confined to certain withdrawal routes. There were five main lines of retreat that they might use:

- Tul Karm to Samaria
- Samaria to Jenin
- 'Anebta, on the Tul Karm road, to Jenin
- Nablus - Wadi el Far'a - Jisr ed Damieh
- Balata-Khurbet Ferweh-Beisa



Possible Turkish withdrawal routes

0 30
Miles

All of these routes were photographed from the air in the period before the battle. Defiles were noted. If bombing attacks could be made against retreating Turkish transport when they passed through these choke points then the withdrawal could be slowed allowing greater damage to be inflicted. After the battle began these routes were to be kept under constant surveillance by Bristol Fighters of No. 1 Squadron. These aircraft were equipped with long-range wireless sets so that headquarters staff would know 'the times and places best suited for a concentrated bombing offensive'.⁷⁵

As in all battles, the passage of information to commanders was considered to be a vital element, especially for the breakthrough forces on the left flank that were to use mobility and speed to encircle and cut-off the Turkish armies. No. 142 Squadron, which had been designated to cooperate with the cavalry on left flank, was to keep in touch with the leading cavalry divisions and to inform the cavalry headquarters and Allenby's general headquarters of their progress. The squadron was also to maintain liaison between these two headquarters. A liaison officer had been attached to the cavalry headquarters with equipment that enabled aircraft to pick up messages without landing. The infantry force, XXI Corps, also had its designated cooperation squadron, No. 113 Squadron, organised to assist in the passage of information. Signalling panels, klaxon horns, flares, disks and, where the fall of artillery was to be adjusted urgently, wireless were all to be used for communication between the ground forces, aircraft and headquarters.

Where aircraft were to play an important role in acquiring and disseminating information between the various formations and headquarters of Allenby's forces, it was also recognised that they could play a significant role in denying information to the enemy forces, especially the senior command elements

No. 113 Squadron was also ready to deny information to the Turkish forces by covering the advancing troops with smoke screens during the critical early phase of the initial attack. The smoke screens, which were about 400 metres long, were to be created by dropping sixty pyrotechnic devices from aircraft. The equipment for this operation had been invented by RAF personnel in the Middle East.

Where aircraft were to play an important role in acquiring and disseminating information between the various formations and headquarters of Allenby's forces, it was also recognised that they could play a significant role in denying information to the enemy forces, especially the senior command elements. If this could be done effectively, a type of paralysis could be imposed on the enemy, who, denied information, would be unable to know how to react, or, indeed, to know whether any reaction at all was required. In the official history, Jones observed that 'for the success of General Allenby's scheme it was desirable ... that, once the battle began, knowledge of the early forward movements of the British cavalry in the coastal plain should remain hidden from the enemy higher command'. Salmond made a similar comment: 'Once the battle was joined it was most important that the enemy should not realise the advance of the cavalry round their right flank.' Salmond also explained that, as result of discussions by air staff on denying information to the enemy, the decision was taken to destroy the enemy's communication centres.⁷⁷ This determined how some aircraft were employed from the outset and Jones noted that it 'reveals how carefully the staff had planned'.⁷⁸

THE BATTLE BEGINS

The battle began in the early hours of 19 September, three days after an Arab force under Colonel T.E. Lawrence had started operations to cut the Hejaz railway at Der'a and isolate the Turkish armies.⁷⁹ Aircraft delivered the first carefully considered blows. These were directed against the enemy's communications systems – the telegraph and telephone centres – and the headquarters of the enemy armies.⁸⁰ Their locations had been determined during the preparatory phase using intelligence sources and air photographs. Aerial reconnaissance of enemy headquarters and 'points where telephone and telegraph exchanges were suspected' had been undertaken by 5th Corps aircraft in the early weeks of September.⁸¹

Captain Ross Smith of No. 1 Squadron, AFC, set out at 1.15 a.m. in the Handley Page bomber carrying sixteen 112-lb bombs. His target was the telephone exchange of the Turkish army group at El 'Affule. Smith was followed at 6.30 a.m. by five DH9s from No. 144 Squadron of Richard Williams' Fortieth (Army) Wing. They attacked the same target with four 112-lb. bombs and thirty-two 20-lb bombs. The attack was repeated at 11.25 a.m. by eight pilots from the same squadron.⁸²

Commencing at 5.20 a.m., attacks were also made against the headquarters and the telephone exchanges of the Turkish Eighth Army at Tul Karm and the Seventh Army at Nablus. Aircraft from No. 144 Squadron and No. 142 Squadron of the Fifth (Corps) Wing carried out these raids. Three minor Turkish headquarters were also bombed by No. 14 Squadron.⁸³

The bombing raids were made without interference from enemy aircraft, largely as a result of the air superiority that had been gained by aggressive counter-air operations by technically superior aircraft over the summer months. This dominance was enforced on the day the battle began by maintaining constant patrols by Fortieth (Army) Wing SE5a's over the main enemy aerodrome at Jenin. Salmond explained another important reason for this particular action to General Sykes, the British Chief of Air Staff: 'the object being to prevent the cavalry turning movement from being observed in the critical stages'.⁸⁴ As a result of the constant air patrol over Jenin, no German aircraft left the ground that day and the enemy was denied vital information, ensuring that surprise was achieved.⁸⁵

Bomb damage assessments of the attacks against the communication centres and headquarters could not be made at the time, but the British official history contains the following statement by Liman von Sanders concerning the air operations on the first day of the battle:

'Shortly after daybreak British air squadrons appeared over the head-quarters of the Seventh and Eighth Armies, over the camps of the various corps head-quarters, and over the central telephone offices of the Army Group at 'Affule. From low height they attacked with bombs and destroyed part of the telephone line ... Telephonic and telegraphic communication between Tul Karm and Nazareth [von Liman's headquarters] ceased about 7 a.m. The wireless station of the head-quarters of the Eighth Army also failed to reply when called.'⁸⁶

While the air attacks were in progress, XXI Corps launched its attack against the Turkish position on Allenby's left flank at 4.45 a.m. Two smoke screens were laid by aircraft to cover the advancing troops from view. One was successful but there were problems coordinating the other screen with the surface force, so it was laid across the frontage of one of the enemy positions. Within a short time the infantry had overwhelmed the enemy and taken their positions.

Exploiting the breakthrough, the cavalry began their advance along the beach at 7.00 a.m. The very nature of such operations, where speed and manoeuvre were key features, meant that tactical decision making by junior officers and men was essential. Allenby's plan would fail if the operation depended on decisions by a senior commander located in the rear areas. At the outset, there was an early indication how information acquisition, a quick decision and speed of manoeuvre could bring decisive results. One of the aircraft from No. 113 Squadron, which had been designated to provide artillery observation for XXI Corps, noticed a house and an orchard a short way ahead of the leading elements of the cavalry. Flying low over the area the pilot and his observer discovered that the orchard was occupied Turkish troops and transport. A note was written and dropped to the approaching elements of the cavalry. They put in a quick attack, taking the Turks by surprise. Sixty prisoners were captured with two guns and twelve wagons at a cost of one life and two men wounded.⁸⁷

At midday, air reconnaissance revealed that the Turkish forces were retreating towards Nablus along one of the roads that had been previously photographed from the air. All available aircraft were dispatched to bomb the retreating column in a defile where it was impossible for transport to leave the road. Bristol Fighters, DH9's, and SE5a's from Richard Williams' Fortieth (Army) Wing and a squadron from the Fifth (Corps) Wing executed the sustained attack. These aircraft were relieved every half-hour. The damage was extensive. Liman von Sanders commented that the aircraft attack 'covered the roads with dead men and horses and shattered transport'.⁸⁸ Next day, Allenby saw the damage that his aircraft had inflicted. 'I was at Tulkeram [sic] today,' he wrote to his wife, 'and went along the Nablus road. It was strewn with broken lorries, wagons, dead Turks, horses and oxen, mostly smashed and killed by our bombing aeroplanes.' The air attacks were to continue. 'I think I ought to capture all the Turks' guns, and the bulk of his army,' Allenby concluded.⁸⁹ A young Australian observer with No. 1 Squadron, Lieutenant H.B. Fletcher DFC also commented on the impact of air attack on the enemy forces. 'Prisoners were unanimous in saying that the bombing was horrible and one of the main items in their defeat,' Fletcher wrote, 'The bombing of the Tul Keram [sic] – Nablus Road had demoralised the troops on it and as soon as the

the bombing so demoralised the troops that in almost every occasion transport, guns and prisoners were captured without firing a shot

5th Light Horse brigade put in an appearance they put up their hands and waved white flags and continued to do the latter whenever Aeroplanes flew overhead. ... Light Horse Officers are practically unanimous in saying that the bombing so demoralised the troops that in almost every occasion transport, guns and prisoners were captured without firing a shot, and they were delighted with the co-operation of the Air Service.⁹⁰

The first day of operations amounted to a catastrophe for the Eighth Turkish Army. Two Turkish divisions were destroyed as fighting forces. Seven thousand Turkish troops were taken prisoner along with one hundred guns. 'I think the Turkish Army is practically destroyed,' Allenby informed his wife. 'My losses are very slight.'⁹¹

In the meantime, the cavalry were still advancing. It appeared that they would reach El 'Affule before dawn on the second day, so the Handley Page bomber executed a night bombing attack against the Jenin station and aerodrome, destroying three enemy aircraft and damaging others.⁹²

Air reconnaissance early on the morning of 20 September revealed that most Turkish camps in the western sector had been burnt or abandoned. Jenin aerodrome was obviously in the process of being evacuated. There were still four aircraft on the aerodrome at El 'Affule, but air reconnaissance aircraft could see the cavalry forces approaching rapidly. Within hours the aerodrome at El 'Affule had been taken and from that afternoon it was used as an advanced landing ground for reconnaissance aircraft. Supplies of petrol, oil and spares were flown in to the advanced field from Ramleh and Saron. As planned, a forward element of the cavalry force, the 13th Brigade, made a quick dash to Nazareth, arriving soon after dawn. The breakdown in enemy communications meant that von Sanders' headquarters was taken by surprise. The cavalry captured the Army-Group headquarters and documents, but only just missed taking Liman von Sanders, who made his escape in his staff car.⁹³

Thirty hours after the offensive commenced, aircraft were operating out of an aerodrome that had been sixty-five kilometres inside the Turkish lines when the offensive was launched. The Eighth Turkish Army had been routed, but air reconnaissance revealed that the Seventh Turkish Army around Nablus was largely intact and only slowly starting to show signs of stirring. But the problem for this force was that the rapid advance in the west and the encircling move to their north had already cut off their lines of retreat in that direction. There was only one way they could go and that was east across the Jordan River. And, remarkably, all was quiet in that direction. Such was the breakdown of communications, the Fourth Turkish Army at Es Salt showed no sign that it was aware that anything was happening west of the Jordan River.⁹⁴

While the rout of the Eighth Army had been taking place, Chetwode's XX Corps had been moving northward on the 19 and 20 September through difficult country attempting to engage the Seventh Turkish Army and, if possible, to cut its only withdrawal route along the Wadi el Far'a to the east. By 21 September, however, it became abundantly clear that elements of XX Corps did not need to cut this withdrawal route.⁹⁵

At first light on 21 September two Bristol Fighters from No. 1 Squadron found that the Seventh Turkish Army was retreating from Nablus through Balata and then on to Khurbet Ferweh and Ain Shibleh along the Wadi el Far'a road. On the left-hand side of the road there were steep hills and on the right-hand side of the road a sheer precipice. The Australian airmen counted about six-hundred horse-wagons and guns between Balata and Khurbet Ferweh. There were about another two-hundred horse-transport beyond Khurbet Ferweh approaching Ain Shibleh. Other long columns were moving along the Wadi el Far'a

The Wadi el Far'a soon became choked and the attacks turned into a sickening slaughter which deeply affected the airmen

towards Ain Shibleh from the other direction. The Bristol Fighters were equipped with wireless and arrangements were made to begin concentrated bombing and strafing attacks. In the meantime, the two Australian aircraft started their own attack on the column between Balata and Khurbet Ferweh. The attacks were organised so that two aircraft arrived over the route every three minutes and, additionally, a formation of six aircraft would attack the column of Turks every 30 minutes. In the Australian official history, Cutlack recorded that the raids continued all day. No. 1 Squadron, No. 144 Squadron, No. 111 Squadron and No. 145 Squadron – that is the squadrons of the Fortieth (Army) Wing - were the primary attacking force, but the three squadrons of the Fifth (Corps) Wing also made a contribution. Just over 9 tons of bombs were dropped and 56,000 rounds of machine-gun ammunition were fired into the troops below. The Wadi el Far'a soon became choked and the attacks turned into a sickening slaughter which deeply affected the airmen. Few Turks returned fire and only two aircraft were downed with the loss of their occupants. Cutlack observed that: 'In all the history of war there can be few more striking records of wholesale destruction.'⁹⁶

When surface forces came to the site next day they discovered that the bombs themselves had caused only part of the damage. Other damage was a result of the blind panic that took hold of the Turks. Motor lorries had crashed into other transports and retreating troops and horses had bolted. The equipment that choked the defile amounted to some 100 guns, 55 motor lorries, 4 motor cars, 837 four-wheeled wagons, 75 two-wheeled wagons, and 20 water carts and kitchens.⁹⁷

By the evening of 21 September, the Seventh Turkish Army and the Eighth Turkish Army were ineffective fighting forces. Although some members of the Seventh Army had managed to escape to the north and attempted to cross the Jordan River, the cavalry engaged them on 24 September and took some 5,000 prisoners.⁹⁸

Remarkably the Fourth Turkish Army around Es Salt showed no signs of stirring until the afternoon of 22 September, that is a full day after the other two Turkish armies had been effectively destroyed. Chaytor's Force had not had the strength to deal with the Fourth Army in an outright attack, but when the Turks learnt of the debacle to the west they began a withdrawal, giving Chaytor his chance to begin harassing them. The Arabs also cooperated by containing the Turkish army and by obstructing its retreat route to the north.

As the Fourth Army conducted its retreat it became a target for No. 1 Squadron aircraft. There were no defiles along their route but the Turkish force concentrated at Amman. Air attacks were conducted throughout the day on 23 September. There was a lull in the attacks on 24 September. On that day, Allenby wrote to his wife: 'Telegrams of congratulations are pouring upon me. I, myself, am almost aghast at the extent of the victory! I have taken Es Salt, E.[ast] of Jordan; and, by now, my Cavalry are probably at Amman on that flank. Haifa and Acre are in my hands, and patrols are moving to Lake Tiberias.'⁹⁹

Operations resumed in earnest next day. Chaytor's Force did not give chase to the fleeing Fourth Army but, at 2.00 p.m. that afternoon, Chaytor's Force captured Amman. This force occupied this position to intercept the Turkish Second Corps which was withdrawing from the south; it surrendered without fighting. Minor operations to clean up groups of retreating Turks continued for a few days. At the end of that time Chaytor's Force had taken 10,322 prisoners, 57 guns, 132 machine-guns, together with stores and railway rolling stock.¹⁰⁰

Allenby had taken Palestine by 26 September. Two Turkish armies – the Seventh and the Eighth - had been annihilated and the remnants of the Fourth Turkish Army were in retreat. Some 50,000 prisoners had been taken. It had been the most spectacular campaign of the war.

'You are a butcher – you call that fighting.' Somehow the military mind perceived killing the enemy from the air to be morally inferior to killing them with bullets, bayonets and shells

There is much to be learnt from Allenby's joint operations in Palestine in 1917-18. Not the least is the importance of competent leadership to inspire fighting forces and to give purpose and direction to the execution of operations. Allenby's impact on the Egyptian Expeditionary force echoes throughout accounts of the operations, whether official histories or personal memoirs. Allenby's confident leadership was the cornerstone of the operations.

To appreciate the operations themselves it is necessary to take a broad perspective. To focus in on one element, to take a narrow view, is to miss the important lessons. Yet it seems that many have turned their backs on the broad perspective. In his summing up of the campaign, Lawrence James noted that: 'At the time and for some years afterwards, Allenby's success was entirely attributed to his deployment of cavalry ...' James continued: 'Less notice was taken of the part played by the [air force], which between 19 and 25 September had wreaked havoc on exposed Turkish columns jammed along narrow passes. Not as glamorous as the cavalry charge but infinitely more deadly, the continual bombing and machine-gunning of retreating men assured Allenby's victory.' James pointed out that, 'revealingly', the air supremacy won by the air force 'was given only one paragraph in the official military history'.¹⁰¹ In that paragraph, Captain Cyril Falls commented simply that air supremacy 'greatly ... assisted' the achievement of the surprise concentration of the forces behind Allenby's left flank.¹⁰² Another facet of such prejudice is revealed in a letter that Major-General Salmond sent to Major-General Sykes, Chief of the Air Staff. Describing the carnage caused by air attack on the Turkish troops during the final battle, Salmond said that Lieutenant-General Bulfin had confronted him with the comment that: 'You are a butcher – you call that fighting.'¹⁰³ Somehow the military mind perceived killing the enemy from the air to be morally inferior to killing them with bullets, bayonets and shells. Yet we need to put prejudice aside if we are to learn from Allenby's campaign.

The mobility of cavalry forces when used in concert with the speed, reach, and perspective of aircraft had transformed the way in which battles could be fought, especially with the advanced types of aircraft that were available in the last year of the war. Other technological developments, such as radio, added to this capability. But we need to be clear about the nature of the relationship between the cavalry and aircraft. It would be wrong to claim that aircraft simply supported the surface force. Of course, in certain roles – close air support and artillery observation, for example – it would appear that this was the case, but in the case of the Palestine campaign there was more to consider.

Speedy information acquisition and dissemination were fundamental requirements for the type of operation that Allenby conducted. Aircraft played a central role in this process by undertaking reconnaissance, both tactical and strategic to use the terminology of the time.¹⁰⁴ Aircraft provided the detailed aerial photography necessary for gaining knowledge about the country that lay ahead of the advance. Aircraft were also capable fighting platforms. In the space of a few hours, they destroyed the communication network between von Sanders' general headquarters and the headquarters of the Eighth, Seventh and Fourth armies. This and the ability to keep German aircraft on the ground denied the enemy commanders vital information about the nature of the attack, especially the daring thrust by the cavalry up the left flank. Aircraft worked in cooperation with components of the attacking forces providing tactical reconnaissance, artillery observation, and close air support. Aircraft played a key role in the passage of information. Aircraft maintained air supremacy during the battle. Aircraft concentrated over the routed enemy armies and brought about their destruction. Aircraft did all this with the speed and reach that surface forces do not have. But this is not to say that the cavalry did not have a vital role to play. There can be no doubt that they did. The one big lesson from Allenby's Palestine campaign is the dynamic synergism achieved by aircraft and cavalry – that a dynamic, mobile form of warfare using information dominance and manoeuvre totally overwhelmed the entrenched enemy. Another important lesson is that no one seems to have learnt this at the time. The narrow focus – prejudice – produced distorted accounts of the campaign. As von Sanders had dug trenches in Palestine to hold his ground, after the war, other men dug trenches in their minds.

Notes:

- 1 L. James, *Imperial Warrior: The Life and Times of Field-Marshal Viscount Allenby 1861-1936*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1993, p. 106.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 3 Field-Marshal Viscount Wavell, *Allenby: Soldier and Statesman*, George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., London, 1948, p. 155.
- 4 James, *Imperial Warrior*, pp. 111-2.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 6 Wavell, *Allenby*, p. 157.
- 7 James, *Imperial Warrior*, p. 114; & F.M. Cutlack, 'The Australian Flying Corps', *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Vol. VIII, University of Queensland Press in association with The Australian War Memorial, St Lucia, 1984, p. 63.
- 8 H.S. Gullett, 'Sinai and Palestine', *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Vol. VII, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, pp. 356-7.
- 9 R. Williams, *These Are Facts: The Autobiography of Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams, KBE, CB, DSO*, The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1977, p. 71.
- 10 Wavell, *Allenby*, p. 217 & p. 165.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 12 James, *Imperial Warrior*, p. 115.
- 13 T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1962, p. 330.
- 14 James, *Imperial Warrior*, p. 117.
- 15 Gullett, 'Sinai and Palestine', p. 358.
- 16 James, *Imperial Warrior*, p. 118.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.
- 18 Lecture on Aircraft in the Palestine Campaign by Squadron Leader H.I. Hanmer DFC, Air1/2397/264/1, Public Record Office, Kew.
- 19 Williams, *These Are Facts*, p. 79.
- 20 'Work of the R.A.F. in the Final Offensive in Palestine', Lecture by Sir Geoffrey Salmond, Air1/489/321/1, Public Record Office, Kew.
- 21 A.J. Hill, *Chauvel of the Light Horse: A Biography of General Sir Harry Chauvel, G.C.M.G., K.C.B.*, Melbourne University Press, 1978, p. 70.
- 22 Despatch dealing with the Work of The Palestine Brigade, Royal Air Force, during the period preparatory to and during the Operations which commenced on the 19th September 1918 – 'Review of 5th Wing R.F.C., Wireless Work for 1917 – Sinai and Palestine', Air 1/2415/303/28, Public Record Office, Kew.
- 23 Photographic Work of the R.F.C. in Sinai and Southern Palestine during 1917, Air1/2415/303/28, PRO.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 James, *Imperial Warrior*, pp. 131; see also Extract from 16th Divisional Orders 29.10.33 for Turkish intelligence assessment of Allenby's use of artillery, Allenby 1/8/21, Allenby Papers, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College, London.
- 26 James, *Imperial Warrior*, p. 122; & Wavell, *Allenby*, p. 168-9, p. 170, p. 173. Note: As experience was gained in Palestine the camels were dispensed with because, while they were well suited to operating in the desert, they were not able to move freely in the broken country of Palestine.
- 27 Wavell, *Allenby*, p. 173.
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