

# *The Third Battle of Gaza, October-November 1917*

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*The Egyptian Expeditionary Force campaign in 1917 was against two Ottoman armies holding the heavily-fortified Gaza-Beersheba line which blocked access from Sinai into Palestine. After two failed attacks against Gaza in the spring, a third attempt in autumn involved holding attacks against Gaza and direct attacks and manoeuvre around the open eastern flank of the line at Beersheba made by infantry supported by horse-mounted and camel-mounted infantry. Third Gaza, overall, was a well-planned and well-executed battle. By its conclusion, the road to Jerusalem lay open.*

**Key words:** Egyptian Expeditionary Force; General Sir Edmund Allenby; Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel; Egypt; Sinai; Palestine; Gaza, Beersheba; Tel el Khuweilfe; Hareira; Tel el Sheria; Kauwukan.

By early 1916 in the Great War's Middle East theatre, Britain's army-sized Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) – General Sir Archibald Murray, commander-in-chief – was holding a defensive line in the Sinai east of the Suez Canal. The EEF was opposed by the German-led 4th Ottoman Army, based in southern Palestine, which was planning an offensive in the Sinai, with its forward elements already probing the Canal defences.

General Murray also proposed a Sinai campaign to the British War Cabinet to capture El Arish in eastern Sinai, so as to defend the Canal from a forward position and to provide a logistical foundation for a future invasion of the Ottoman Province of Palestine. This latter aim was to be achieved with a rail line and water pipeline along the Mediterranean coast (Map 1). The War Cabinet authorised Murray's Sinai campaign in March 1916.

The EEF overcame the immediate threat to the Suez Canal by victory over the Ottomans at Romani, just east of the Canal, in August. General Murray then advanced across the Sinai employing mounted-infantry manoeuvre operations against the withdrawing Ottoman forces and won major battles at El Maghaba in December and Rafa, on the Sinai/Palestine border, in January 1917. Concurrently, he continued to build the railway and water pipeline along the Mediterranean coast. By February 1917, Murray had closed up to the Ottomans' Gaza-Beersheba defensive line which now denied him access to southern Palestine.

On 11 February 1917, the British War Cabinet authorised the Southern Palestine Campaign to capture Gaza and then Jerusalem. This committed Murray to two poorly resourced and executed battles – the first battle of Gaza, 26 March 1917; and the second battle of Gaza, 17-19 April 1917 – that failed to capture the well-fortified coastal town of Gaza.

## **Allenby Takes Command** (27 June 1917)

As a consequence, the EEF was substantially re-

**Map 1:** The Sinai campaign 1916 – during which the Ottoman 4th Army was opposed by the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force – showing the locations of the key battles at Romani, El Maghaba and Rafa, and the Sinai railway and water pipeline  
[Source: Fenton 2013]



inforced and a cavalry general, Edmund Allenby, was appointed to replace Murray as Army commander. Allenby was the man to reinvigorate an EEF that had been given two bloody rebuffs. He “always meticulously developed communications and supply along his strategic axis of advance. That he achieved near perfection is evident in the rapid moves on Damascus and Aleppo.” (Bullock 1988: 148)

Allenby arrived in Egypt on 27 June 1917, and immediately moved his battle headquarters from the Savoy Hotel, Cairo, to just north of Rafa. According to Gullett (1984: 357), for the first time since they had crossed the Canal, the soldiers felt the influence of a strong and guiding personality; they were driven harder than ever before, they knew that they were being driven by a man who did not spare himself, and who was concerned not only for the winning of battles, but also with the welfare and advantage of his men.

One officer applauded Allenby's energetic approach, pleased at the promise of action and learning “beforehand the general outline of the scheme. Why does no other commander realize that the men are capable of taking an intelligent interest in things, and that, if they know what is going on, are much more likely to hit on the right solution when things do not go exactly to plan? Allenby has some common sense and understands Tommy Atkins.” (Bruce 2002: 113).

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Early in August, Allenby re-organised the expanded EEF into three corps, two infantry and one mounted. Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Chetwode took command of XX Corps and Major-General Edward Bulfin was given XXI Corps. The Desert Mounted Column was expanded to become the Desert Mounted Corps, which consisted of the Anzac Mounted Division, the Australian Mounted Division, and the (British) Yeomanry Mounted Division, plus the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade (Rees 2011: 165-166).

An Australian, Major-General Sir Harry Chauvel, who had been knighted after the battle of Magdhaba, was promoted to lieutenant-general to command the Desert Mounted Corps and so became the first Australian and Dominion soldier to reach that rank, and the only Australian to command British troops in World War I. Of his 10 mounted brigades, five were British, four were Australian and one was made up of New Zealanders. Most of the artillery was British and, of the three Camel battalions, one was British and two were Anzac<sup>2</sup>. The highly regarded New Zealander, Brigadier-General Edward Chaytor, was promoted to major-general and was given command of the Anzac Mounted Division (Bou 2010: 27).

By this time, the British yeomanry – led by regular cavalry officers – were beginning to achieve the fighting qualities of the Australians and New Zealanders. In the Gaza area, water was scarce, the heat unremitting and the dust omnipresent. Soldiers suffered from a monotonous diet and the absence of vegetables led to septic sores for all ranks, which lowered morale. The constant southern 'khamsin' wind and harsh conditions had its effects on the horses, bringing about their jaded and low condition.



Map 2: Third Battle of Gaza, 27 October – 7 November 1917 [Source: Wikimedia commons]

### Plans for Third Gaza

Chetwode, the cavalryman, all the while was working out a strategy to break the dug-in Turkish Gaza-Beersheba defensive line, which had much in common with the Western Front. He was well aware that any fight must be a fight for water as well as for the enemy's position. And the campaign needed to be supported by the British Government with sufficient troops, artillery and supplies for the mission. The Royal Navy also would join the third battle of Gaza; they would shell Turkish dug-in

<sup>2</sup>Anzac', in this context, means the battalions included both Australians and New Zealanders.

positions from the Mediterranean. The balance of power in the air, too, tipped in favour of the British, limiting Ottoman opportunities for aerial reconnaissance.

General Chetwode's deception included a ruse to plant false information in the thinking of the enemy's highest command. The British had an inspired intelligence officer, Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, who misled the Turks as to British intentions. He even went so far as to go out into no-man's land, where he pretended to be injured, and dropped misleading documents about the British plans.

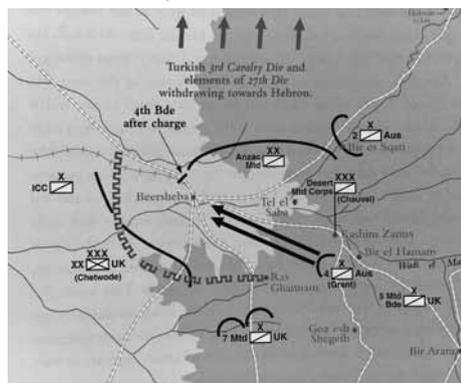
Rather than attempt another breakthrough at Gaza, however, Allenby planned initially to turn the open, inland (eastern) flank of the Gaza-Beersheba line. To this end, he ordered XXI Corps to launch holding attacks on Gaza and the centre of the line from the west and south, and XX Corps and the Desert Mounted Corps to circle to the south and move in on Beersheba from the south and the Negev Desert in the east. The Turks, however, were convinced that the main attack would fall upon Gaza.

### Beersheba (31 October 1917)

Beersheba was defended by some 4500 troops deployed in a semi-circle of trenches to the north-west, west and south, but the eastern sector was trench-free except for a major redoubt at Tel-el-Saba held by a battalion, some 6km east of the town. Allenby's plan was for the XX Corps to attack Beersheba's entrenched positions from the west, while the Desert Mounted Corps circled around to the east, then attacked the town through the open flank.

On 31 October, the British artillery moved up and shelled Beersheba's defences with effect and two infantry divisions of XX Corps succeeded in breaking into and securing the western defences by the early afternoon. Concurrently, the Anzac Mounted Division succeeded in seizing Tel-el-Saba by 3pm after some five hours of dismounted infantry assaults.

The battle for Beersheba now turned on the action of the Australian Mounted Division, which needed to enter Beersheba from the east and capture the wells intact. The Turkish troops dug in at Beersheba were supported by machine-guns and artillery defending wells where once Abraham had watered his flock. Chauvel's overall attack was seriously running behind time and daylight was slipping away. Any conventional dismounted assault was out of the question. Already the horses had travelled about 65km. Many had been without water for several days (Gullett 1923: 340-353).



Map 3: Battle of Beersheba, 31 October 1917 [Source: Coates 2010]

Chauvel turned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Brigade for the attack. His curt command concerning Brigadier-General William Grant of the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Brigade should be among military history's memorable quotes: "Put Grant straight at it" (Gullett 1923: 393). Grant's plan involved a cavalry attack by his 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Australian Light Horse Regiments to capture Beersheba and its vital wells. Lieutenant-Colonel Murray ('Swagman Bill') Bouchier was to lead the 4<sup>th</sup> (today Victoria's 4<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> Prince of Wales's Light Horse) and 12<sup>th</sup> (today New South Wales's 12<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> Hunter River Lancers) in the charge (Gullett 1923: 393-394).

They formed up in a broad hollow behind a ridge screened from Beersheba. The extended charge formation of about 800 horsemen trotted across the ridge and down to the rubble-strewn valley (Jones 1987: 99). It was about 1.7km before the first Turkish trenches. Bouchier signalled the charge and the horses broke into a gallop, the men yelling wildly. The Turkish defenders opened fire with shrapnel from long range, but this was ineffective against widely-spaced horsemen. Machine-guns were quickly destroyed by gunners of the Nottinghamshire Battery. "The machine-guns and rifle fire became intense. As we came in closer to the trenches some of the Turks must have forgotten to change the sights on their rifles as the bullets went overhead," said Trooper Fowler of the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Horse (Jones 1987: 102).

Two German planes swooped to meet the horsemen with bursts of machine-gun fire and dropped bombs that exploded harmlessly. Men and horses started to fall. The indomitable Trooper Fowler charged on through a narrow gap in a defensive redoubt. "About 20 yards to my left, I could see just a blur through the dust, some horses and men of the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment passing through a narrow opening in the trenches. I turned my horse and raced along the trench. I had a bird's eye view of the Turks below me throwing hand grenades *etc.* but in a flash we were through with nothing between us and Beersheba" (Jones 1987: 102). The 4<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment jumped the trenches and then dismounted to engage the Turks with their bayonets. Most of the 12<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment on the left of the charge rode through a gap in the defences, then galloped into Beersheba and captured the garrison, including all but one of the wells intact.

Colonel Bouchier said: "I consider that the success was due to the rapidity with which the movement was carried out. Owing to the volume of fire brought to bear from the enemy's position by machine-guns and rifles, a dismounted attack would have resulted in a much greater number of casualties." (Bou 2006)

The power of the mounted attack and manoeuvre in Palestine had been understood by the EEF by early 1917, and, just before the charge, Chauvel had issued orders encouraging charges. The light horsemen would sharpen their bayonets. Charges were very much part of the light horse repertoire even before Beersheba, but certainly became more so after it (Bou 2010: 55).

Wavell (1928: 125) makes the point that tanks would have been invaluable to the mounted troops in this fight and would have enabled Beersheba to have been taken earlier and with fewer casualties. The vulnerability of mounted troops to the air also was underlined as a large

proportion of casualties were due to air attack. Beersheba, however, "showed yet again how great is the protection from fire effect given by speed of movement. It may be argued that the Turks shot badly. But they probably shot no worse than the very great majority of troops would in similar circumstances. It requires extremely well trained and disciplined units to adjust their sights calmly and to produce good fire effect in the face of galloping horsemen. Moreover, in this and in other charges in this campaign, the clouds of dust raised by the leading squadrons formed quite an effective screen to the formation and movements of the units in rear and prevented accurate ranging or shooting by the enemy" (Wavell 1928:125). Indeed, the psychological results of the charge were even greater than the material gains.

#### **Gaza (4 November 1917)**

The capture of the wells at Beersheba was the first phase of a much larger offensive that decided the outcome in southern Palestine (Bou 2006: 82). Allenby had larger designs, but it was found that the Beersheba wells could not meet the water supply requirements of two corps. The water supply was not as plentiful as had been anticipated.

Following Beersheba's capture, there was a four-day lull and then the offensive turned to an attack on Gaza by XX1 Corps. The attack, supported by artillery and ships' guns, was more vigorous than before, but did not break through. It did seize ground and, more importantly, left the Ottoman Army unsure of the next British move. Gaza would be abandoned by the Ottomans three-days later.

In the east, the Ottoman forces fell back from Beersheba to Hareira and Tel el Sheria on the plain in the centre of the old Gaza-Beersheba line. Here they re-formed the protection to the Gaza line's eastern flank formerly provided by Beersheba. Allenby thought the main battle now would take place at Sheria – and he was right. There, however, was to be an important action at Tel el Khuweilfe first.

#### **Tel el Khuweilfe (2-7 November 1917)**

The results of the action at Beersheba were becoming apparent – large numbers of the Turks were moving towards a strong natural position in the Judean foothills at Tel el Khuweilfe, to the north of Beersheba on the Beersheba-Jerusalem road, where good water existed. With water remaining a determining issue and the road to Jerusalem threatened, the Turks mounted a strong and vigorous defence of Tel el Khuweilfe.

On 2 November, the 7<sup>th</sup> Mounted Brigade (a yeomanry brigade), with the 8<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment attached, moved towards Khuweilfe. It ran into a position strongly-held by Turkish infantry, supported by artillery and German machine gunners. The official history points out that from the first to last the Khuweilfe operations went in favour of the defenders (Gullett 1984: 421). The British had made a false estimate of its strength and, though reinforcements were brought up to aid the attack, the enemy maintained the balance in its favour by constant reinforcement. The assault was accidental and piece-meal. It lacked the preparation, the resolution and the individual leadership essential for success. It became a bloody hand-to-hand struggle. It did, however, ensure the flow of Turkish troops

from the Gaza district towards the eastern flank, thereby aiding Chetwode in his preparations for the great blow against Hareira and Sheria. The contentious hill, Khuweilfe, was eventually seized on 7 November by an Australian battalion.

#### **Tel el Sheria (6 November 1917)**

On the morning of 6 November, the XX Corps attacked Kauwukan, part of the new Hareira and Tel el Sheria east-flank position on the plain in the centre of the old Gaza-Beersheba line. XX Corps suffered heavy casualties but took its objective (Bou 2010: 58). This, not Beersheba, proved to be the crucial fight for a breakthrough into the enemy's rear. Chetwode flung three divisions on the Turkish 7<sup>th</sup> Army at Kauwukan – the 10<sup>th</sup>, 60<sup>th</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Divisions, with the Yeomanry Mounted Division covering his right flank. Their earlier assault on the lines south-west of Beersheba had been a trifling preliminary affair by comparison (Gullett 1984: 427). The Turks were well entrenched. The barrage had been heavy and destructive but not heavy enough to demolish powerful earthworks or to keep riflemen and machine-gunners inactive in their trenches. By about 1pm, the 74<sup>th</sup> Division had gained all its objectives. It was joined by the 60<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> who had “smashed through the main Kauwukan defences”. The day's fighting had completed the destruction of the whole enemy left (east).

#### **Subsequent Actions**

The Gaza-Beersheba offensive aimed to achieve a breakthrough on the Ottoman left flank at Beersheba, whereupon the EEF would drive north and west through Tel el Sheria, and then to Huj, to trap the enemy garrison in Gaza. The Ottoman defenders, however, eluded the trap and fought a rear-guard action as they withdrew north into Central Palestine (Bou 2010: 59). Allenby's chance to entrap the Ottoman army in southern Palestine had eluded him (Bou 2010: 61). Stiff resistance on a new defensive line between Jerusalem and Jaffa (on the coast), ably backed by German machine-gunners, held the EEF off.

Wavell had it: “As the result of a week's fighting, the Turkish armies had been driven into the open, after heavy losses, and had been forced to abandon the whole of the Gaza-Beersheba line, which they had prepared so carefully and had held so stubbornly for the previous nine months. The next stage was the exploitation of this success, in which the mounted troops were to play the leading role.” (Wavell 1928: 157)

The main features of Third Gaza were: Allenby's, and his staff's, long and careful preparation of the stroke; the success of the measures taken to deceive the enemy as to real direction and purpose of the main blow; and the influence exerted over operations by the water question – today's re-supply.

#### **Conclusion**

The EEF campaign in southern Palestine in 1917 against the Ottoman 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Armies involved direct attacks and manoeuvre made possible by horse-mounted and camel-mounted infantry and conventional cavalry. It included, at Beersheba, one of the last cavalry-style charges against entrenched defensive positions.

The Ottoman forces were good troops and well-led. They were ultimately overcome by better-led forces, including mounted action. There followed a number of mounted charges in the EEF's campaign of which the majority were successful. It was, overall, a well-planned and well-executed campaign for which much of the credit must go to the determined, driving leadership of General Sir Edmund Allenby. By the conclusion of the Third Battle of Gaza, the road to Jerusalem lay open.

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