



# The South African Military History Society

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## Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

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## NEWSLETTER - MAY 2018

The 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual General meeting took the place of the Curtain Raiser lecture. Minutes are available from Joan at the letterhead address, as are copies of the accounts summary. Income was R 4 506 greater than expenditure. Society membership fell by 24 to 470 members.

Hamish Paterson was elected Chairman for 2018-19. The rest of the committee comprises Kevin Garcia; Jan-Willem Hoorweg; Joan Marsh; Peter Rush; Richard Schutte and David Scholtz.

The main lecture was presented by *Robin Smith* whose topic was “**Allenby and the campaign in the Holy Land 1917-1918.**”

Here is his summary:

General Sir Edmund Allenby was described as Britain's Greatest General after his successful campaign in Palestine and Syria in 1917-18. His relations deteriorated with his Commander-in-Chief Douglas Haig in May 1917 and Haig decided to replace him with Lieutenant-General the Hon. Sir Julian Byng.

David Lloyd George became British Prime Minister in December 1916. Lloyd George was always mistrustful of his generals. An influential body of senior officers, including Haig and Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, loathed him in turn for his open doubts about their own professional competence.

Lloyd George's hopes were pinned on the Middle East front. He had in mind an advance in southern Palestine that would end triumphantly in the capture of Jerusalem – an event that would cheer a war-weary Britain. An able, aggressive and experienced general was needed and Allenby was the ideal candidate.

On 7 June 1917 Allenby heard Lloyd George's plans for a Palestine offensive – Jerusalem by Christmas. He promised to deliver all the men and resources that Allenby would consider necessary. To help him, Lloyd George presented Allenby with a copy of Sir George Adam Smith's *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, remarking that it contained much of practical use.

There were excellent strategical reasons for an advance to Jerusalem. Broad political issues were also involved. The Prime Minister and several senior colleagues were convinced that the stalemate on the Western Front could never be broken. Winston Churchill, Lord Milner and Lord Curzon were ardent backers of the Palestine campaign.

Allenby arrived in Cairo on 28 June. The news of his coming was greeted with great excitement. Within three weeks he had completely revitalised his army and a wonderful spirit of optimism was enkindled among the men. He chivvied his staff from their snug quarters in Cairo and sent them to Rafah within range of the Turkish guns. "Staff officers" he said, "are like partridges – they are better for being shot over."

Allenby made a five-day visit to the front after scarcely a week had passed since his arrival. His first tour was made in a particularly disreputable Ford truck. Allenby quickly overhauled the staff in Cairo. At the end of July he created three corps, the Desert Mounted Corps under an Australian, Harry Chauvel, Philip Chetwode took command of XX Corps and Edward Bulfin the XXI Corps.

On 12 July Allenby met with Captain T.E. Lawrence who attended the interview in Bedouin costume. Allenby soon became one of Lawrence's strongest supporters. Cooperation between Arab forces would amount to a guerrilla campaign designed to ensure that Turkish troops guarding the Damascus-Medina railway line would be unable to interfere with Allenby's advance on Jerusalem. The Arab Revolt up to now had been a disappointment and the Turkish garrison had easily held Medina. Allenby pledged material support which radically changed the nature of the Arab movement and he found Lawrence to be charming and learned.

As Allenby pressed forward with the preparations for his offensive, private tragedy intervened when his secretary, Lord Edward Dalmeny, handed him a telegram which brought him the news of the death of his only son. He received a letter from Douglas Haig who wrote with a heartfelt, comradely sincerity free of personal animus.

The Turks had made Gaza into a strong modern fortress. It was discovered that Asluj and Khelasa had been populous centres in ancient times. The 2nd Australian Brigade was sent to repair this vital water supply and Allenby himself paid them a visit – "We thought a lot of him," wrote Trooper Idriess "coming out all this distance."

Chetwode's plan was presented to Allenby in June. The plan in outline was to feint at Gaza, then for the mounted troops to thrust for Beersheba, 50 km to the east. The success of the plan depended on deception, surprise, swiftness of execution and water - and the horses could not be watered at all until Beersheba had been captured.

Allenby's plans to deceive, mystify and surprise were immensely elaborate. Sham preparations for a landing on the coast at the mouth of Wadi Hesi were made. The most successful act of deception was the compilation of a dummy staff officer's notebook. On 10 October an officer rode out towards Sheria, was chased and fired at by a Turkish patrol, and in escaping let go of his haversack, field glasses and rifle. The Turks were completely taken in.

The arrival of Bristol BF2 fighters and a Handley-Page bomber was effective in keeping the enemy planes busy. At least 20,000 camels as well as thousands of horses and mules with 50,000 Egyptian labourers were engaged in the preparations. By 30 October some 12,000 mounted men were assembled at Khelasa and Asluj. By 8.30 a.m. the next morning infantry had captured a strong enemy outwork, Hill 1070. One of the most amazing night marches of the campaign was under way, the two mounted divisions negotiating some of the wildest, most featureless country of southern Palestine. The rest of the Anzacs and the Australian Division turned left towards the Iswaiwin area 10 km east of Beersheba. This was possibly the biggest night march ever to have taken place in time of war, made entirely across country.

Allenby sent a telegram to Chauvel "The Chief orders you to capture Beersheba today in order to secure water." Chauvel told Brigadier-General William Grant to "take the town before dark". His troopers would go anywhere with him knowing his courage and the fact that he never

got lost. The order came down the lines: "Form squadrons, line extended." From the crest of the ridge they could see Beersheba down a long slight slope. Grant was out in front of the line. Short of the crest he pointed towards Beersheba and gave the order "Forward!" The horsemen spurred their horses into a gallop, shouting at the top of their lungs and waving their bayonets.

Enemy riflemen in the trenches hit numbers of horses. The Turks were unnerved by the screaming apparitions galloping out of the red dust. The heaviest casualties were sustained in a savage hand-to-hand struggle. The Turks offered only feeble resistance, their shooting was wild and harmless.

Two German planes bombed men of the 3rd Brigade. They hit several men and horses, including one of the great Anzac legends, Lieutenant-Colonel L.C. Maygar who had won his V.C. in the Boer war. The Beersheba charge is remarkable in the annals of mounted soldiers. Allenby was elated and he bustled into Beersheba the next morning and decorated Grant himself by adding a bar to his D.S.O.

On 1 November, Allenby ordered Bulfin to hit Gaza and before midday on 2 November Gaza was under British control. Lawrence and his party left the Roman Azraq castle, 100 km east of Amman on 7 November. They aimed to blow up the rail bridge in the Yarmok valley on the Jerusalem-Damascus line but their attack failed. Had the bridge been blown, there would have been no way of getting over the ravine. Lawrence was concerned about Allenby's reaction. But Allenby had other things to worry about.

Allenby took the bold decision to make straight for Jerusalem. Allenby was aware that Assyrians, Romans and Crusaders had recoiled from numerous assaults on the western bulwarks of Judaea. Chetwode's attack from the south on 8 December expected fierce resistance but the Turks had disappeared. Thus 674 years after the Sixth Crusade the holy city passed again into the hands of a Christian power.

Allenby entered Jerusalem, passing through the Jaffa Gate on foot, to show respect and humility. On the terrace of the ancient citadel, he read a short proclamation placing the city under martial law. To his wife Allenby wrote: "it was a great feat; our losses were light." Lloyd George's Christmas gift of Jerusalem encouraged him in his anti-Western [front] views. To discuss the strategy of a major Middle East offensive, Lloyd George sent Jan Smuts to Egypt in February 1918. He was Impressed by the excellence and fitness of the troops and their confidence in Allenby.

In March 1918 the German High Command launched a massive offensive and Allenby was ordered to rush men to France. Two divisions were recalled forcing an overhaul of the army. Allenby was never blind to Arab deficiencies but was firmly committed to Arab Prince Faisal. He spoke highly of Lawrence and what he had achieved with unpromising material. Allenby planned an advance up the coastal plain where his mounted troops could be used to advantage. By 4.30 a.m. on 19 September, after a 15-minute bombardment, the battle was underway involving 540 guns, 12,000 horsemen with sabres and bayonets and 57,000 soldiers carrying rifles. The horsemen were under orders to avoid a fight on Sharon and to advance northeast making for the rail junction of Afule and Nazareth. The only resistance from the demoralised Turks was on the Esdraelon Plain at Megiddo, the Armageddon that St John predicted in the book of Revelations would host the last great battle on earth.

German General Liman von Saunders, in his pyjamas, rushed from his quarters when told by a breathless officer that 'the British cavalry' had entered the town. His driver was told to put his foot down and they took the road to Tiberias and the north. Organised resistance just melted away – Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Olden with 400 troopers of the 10th Light Horse rode into Damascus on 1st October to a rapturous welcome from the Arab citizens. A day later Lawrence was driven into the city in a Rolls-Royce, to claim that Faisal's army had been the liberators.

Faisal arrived, accompanied by Lawrence. They met with Allenby in the Victoria Hotel who outlined the future political arrangement for Palestine and Syria. Faisal was not happy to discover that the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 dividing the Arab lands between Britain and France were going to be carried out exactly. Lawrence asked Allenby for permission to take leave in England. He left Syria, never to return. As Wavell put it, "The greatest exploit in history of horsed cavalry and possibly their last success on a large scale, had ended."

Hamish Paterson thanked the speaker.

*Joan Marsh*  
*Acting scribe*

**New Book** - ex-committee member Jonathan Parkinson's 560-page book "*The Royal Navy, China Station, 1864-1941*" is available from Matador for R627.

**Help wanted** - were you living in Johannesburg in early 1944? Do you remember a sudden blackout when a high-flying aircraft might have overflowed the city? If so please contact Jochen Mahncke at [koenigsberg@mweb.co.za](mailto:koenigsberg@mweb.co.za)

He is trying to verify the flight of a Junkers Ju 390 VI non-stop (with in-flight refuelling) from Dessau to Cape Town as claimed by the pilot in an interview in 1968

**Auction** - Peter and Margaret Rush have donated a set of the *Illustrated World War II Encyclopaedia* for auction in aid of Society funds. ISBN is 0-87475-520-4. Internet prices for the set range from \$45 to \$225 excluding P&P. There are 24 volumes and the reserve price is R480. Courier costs if applicable to be carried by the purchaser. Bids accepted until the end of June. First bid at highest price wins. Please send bids in writing to [joan@rfd radar.com](mailto:joan@rfd radar.com) or SAMHS PO Box 59227 Kengray 2100.

## **FORTHCOMING LECTURES**

### **Johannesburg:**

**Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2018**

CR: Anton van Doornum

**"Internment in a Japanese Prison Camp: 1942-1945, Mother, Sister, Aunt and myself."**

ML: Kevin Garcia:

**"Pearl Harbor has now been....avenged - US carriers turn the tide in the Pacific, Midway, June 1942."**

### **KZN in Durban:**

**Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> May**

Contact chairman **Charles Whiteing** on 082 5554689 or [charlesw2@absamail.co.za](mailto:charlesw2@absamail.co.za)

### **Cape Town:**

**Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> May**

Contact **Ian van Oordt** at 021 531 6612 or 076 315 7713 or [built2scale@gmail.com](mailto:built2scale@gmail.com)

### **SAMHSEC:**

**Monday 14<sup>th</sup> May**

CR: Andre Crozier

**"The Last Stand at Marrières Wood 1918."**

ML: Michael Mills

**"The Great Hunt."**

CR = curtain raiser ML= main lecture