

CHAPTER XXIII

BATTLE OF BEERSHEBA

IN the assault upon Beersheba the divisions of XX Corps were to strike north-east between the Khalasa-Beersheba road on their right and the railway on their left. The Wady Saba, after clearing the town on its way from the east to the Ghuzze, ran through this sector on the railway side. While the 60th and 74th Divisions advanced on the Turkish ring of defences between the wady and the Khalasa road, troops of the 53rd Division were to smash the defences north of the wady. This attack was intended to draw the main strength of the Turkish garrison to oppose the British infantry, and thus to let Chauvel's mounted men enter the practically unopposed town from the east. The enemy held Beersheba with his 27th Division, reinforced by a few battalions from the 16th and 24th Division; his defences extended from Tel el Saba on the Wady Saba, east of the town, through a series of detached groups of trenches round the south and south-west. These earthworks were placed on commanding positions with good zones of fire; but on the east and south they were not protected by wire, and as trenches they were inferior to those on the Turkish line further west. The Turks had clearly reckoned on the safety which the absence of water on the British side apparently gave to the town; they were prepared for a raid with "about one infantry and one cavalry division," but they were not ready for such a force as Allenby was speeding forward on the night of October 30th.

The village of modern Beersheba in itself offers no facilities for a prolonged defence. It lies in a shallow saucer at the foot of the Judæan hills, which rise abruptly from its outskirts to the north, with high ground also to the east and south-east. Before the war Beersheba was a squalid trading-centre, linking up the hinterland with the port of Gaza, and a distributing-centre for camels. In the operations against Sinai it was constantly used by the enemy as a base; many new temporary buildings arose, and the town became the scene of much activity. As the Anzacs first saw it from the

hills to the south-east at sunrise on the morning of the 31st, it had, except for its new mosque built by the Germans, the appearance of a struggling township on the pastoral country in Australia. To the dusty ring of mounted campaigners it promised no prize in comfortable quarters or in foodstuffs. But it contained that which was still more essential and coveted, for the village was rich in springs of good water. Perhaps never since the far-off days of Abraham had the water in the old wells of the patriarchs been so needed by parched men riding in from the southern desert.

Chauvel's orders, when he moved from Asluj early on the evening of the 30th, were twofold. He was to straddle the Beersheba road—which leads up through Judæa to Hebron and Jerusalem—at Sakati, some six miles north-east of the town, and so both prevent reinforcements from coming in from that direction, and also cut off escape from the town. That road closed, he was to storm Beersheba. His march from Asluj lay over barren, stony hills. The tracks off the main road between Asluj and Beersheba were but faintly marked and troublesome to follow, and the going was severe on the horses. The 7th Light Horse Regiment of the 2nd Brigade, as advance-guard to the corps, cleared Asluj at 6 p.m. and led the long column of the Anzac and Australian Mounted Divisions north-east along the track to Bir Arara, which was reached at 2 a.m. on the 31st. The Australian Mounted Division moved from Khalasa, and, marching by Asluj, had some miles further to travel than the Anzacs. All the men carried three days' rations; but the horses, despite their great loads, were touched with excitement, as they always were when marching in large bodies, and fretted on their bridle-reins as they stepped briskly over the harsh country. Smoking was as usual forbidden, and any talking was in subdued tones. But the bare hills sounded with the beat of thousands of shod horses, and sparks struck from the stones marked the direction of the trusty flank guards.

At Thaffha the track split. While the 2nd Brigade under Ryrice, which was aiming for Sakati, pressed on to Bir Arara, the main column, with the Wellington Regiment of the New Zealand Brigade in the lead, turned along the road to the north by El Shegeib and Iswaiwin

towards Bir Salem-Abu Irgeig, immediately to the south of the Wady Saba. The night passed without sight of the enemy. At 3 o'clock in the morning the Wellingtons reached El Shegeib; at 7 they were riding past Iswaiwin and, followed by Anzac Mounted Division, less the 2nd Brigade, advancing on Bir Salem-Abu Irgeig; meanwhile the Australian Mounted Division under Hodgson swung to the left towards Beersheba, and after marching a few miles halted and remained in reserve. Ryrie's brigade made Bir el Hamam soon after 7 a.m., and was then halted while patrols were pushed out towards the line Tel el Saba-Sakati. Beersheba was now clearly in view, and the horsemen appreciated the promised advantage of the high ground from which they looked down upon it. What they appreciated still more was the sight of a large pool of water in the wady near the town. While the Anzacs were at Asluj a thunderstorm had brought along heavy showers, and it was plain that the fall around Beersheba had been copious enough to be useful to the horses. Shortly before 8 o'clock the New Zealand Brigade was concentrated at Khashm Zanna, in touch with the 2nd Light Horse Brigade on its right, and soon afterwards the New Zealanders were in possession of Bir Salem-Abu Irgeig.

Two hours earlier, at 5.55, Chetwode had opened his bombardment on the enemy's advanced defences south-west of the town. Soon more than 100 field-pieces and howitzers were jolting the shallow advanced trenches with high explosive, and shrapnel was falling effectively on all moving targets and cutting off the positions from their rear. Twenty heavy guns were engaging the Austrian batteries. Unfortunately for the gunners, however, there was not a breath of wind, and all targets quickly became obscured by the smoke and dust of the bursting shells. Observation was for a time impossible, and the infantry commanders were left in doubt as to how far the enemy wire had been destroyed.

The roar of the guns, echoing and re-echoing in the hills, was highly stimulating to the horsemen on the right. The concern of the garrison was quickly evident. The quiet town-ship started suddenly into activity, and troops and transport were rushed to the threatened points. At 8.30 the 181st Infantry Brigade of the 60th Division advanced and quickly

captured Hill 1070, a strong outpost, and British guns were rushed forward over the rough ground to bring them within range of the main Turkish line of defences. At 12.15 Chetwode launched his main attack with four brigades, and the infantry, advancing in beautiful order, speedily carried all their objectives between the Khalasa road and the Wady Saba. Soon afterwards troops of the 74th Division captured the last of the defences north of the wady. So dense had been the dust of the barrage, that in places little parties of the British had been able to creep forward, complete the cutting of the barbed-wire by hand, and so ensure a clear dash at the trenches. The work of the infantry had been brilliantly and completely successful, and the day was still young. All now depended on Chauvel.

The safety of Beersheba against attack from the east and south-east hinged mainly on a strong redoubt on Tel el Saba. The tel lies on the northern bank of the Wady Saba, three miles due east of the town, and is made up of a great mound with a cliff-face abutting on the rough wide water-course. A few acres in extent, it rises steeply to a height of a few hundred feet from the bare surrounding country. Its top is fairly flat, but is covered with boulders, which, with very little digging, gave sound cover to infantry, and provided perfect pockets for machine-guns. Two lines of trenches, one cut above the other in the cliff, commanded the plain across the wady to the south, and swept the floor of the waterway to the east. The steep sides of the mound were inaccessible to men on horses, and the naked plain held out unpromising prospects to a dismounted advance. Across the wady south of the town the Turks had barred the way with a chain of redoubts, and on the north up to Sakati their rear flank was safe in the rugged intricacies of the rising hills of Judæa. Chauvel was faced with the problem which was his unenviable portion in so many Palestine fights. He had a formidable objective, which demanded for its capture a heavy preliminary bombardment, followed by an attack by successive waves of infantry. At his disposal he had, scattered over many miles of front, only six brigades of horse, each capable of putting about 800 dismounted men into the firing-line, with one four-gun battery of horse artillery to each

brigade. On the strength of his brigades after Beersheba depended the grand advance of which this day's work was only the preliminary; and so, as in former fights, he dared not risk his horsemen in a precipitate assault.

As in all the fights of the light horse and New Zealanders, the enemy, if he was to be broken, must be broken by the exercise of superior wits, by resource, and by straight, effective shooting. Victory must be achieved not by heroic, forlorn-hope charges endangering and enfeebling Desert Mounted Corps at a critical time, but at the lowest possible cost. Such was the prospect as it appeared in the morning. But at Beersheba the usual tactics of the Anzacs, although exercised to the full, were found inadequate to overcome the opposition; and the light horsemen, appearing in a new rôle, threw caution and cunning to the winds, and snatched victory at the last moment in a blind, wild, headlong gallop.

Chauvel had hoisted his pennant on a commanding hill about four miles to the south-east of the town, while Chaytor had his headquarters at Goz el Shegeib. Both commanders had a complete view of the theatre of operations, and could see clearly most of the movements of their troops. By 9 a.m. the brigades were in readiness for the second phase of the advance, which aimed at seizing the Beersheba-Hebron road at Sakati and capturing Tel el Saba. At about that time mounted enemy troops were seen moving to reinforce the garrison at the Tel el Saba redoubt, and it was plain that the mound was strongly occupied; meanwhile enemy cavalry, guns, and transport were moving out of Beersheba by the Hebron road, either to escape capture or to guard against a raid on that line of communications. Ryrie at 9.30 having received orders to move with "all speed" on Sakati, the brigade trotted off from near Bir el Hamam, and headed north-west, Onslow with the 7th Light Horse Regiment setting the pace. The country was open and the going good. Onslow, always headstrong, had a mission greatly to his liking. Soon he had quickened the pace, and the horses, making light of their heavy loads and fighting for their heads, were rattling along at the gallop. Ryrie had scattered his brigade into artillery formation, and the precaution was quickly justified. As soon as the enemy



ВЕРСНЕВА

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BRIGADIER-GENERAL L. C. WILSON, COMMANDER OF THE 3RD AUSTRALIAN
LIGHT HORSE BRIGADE, 1917-19 AND HIS STAFF

Aust War Museum Official Photo No. B776

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perceived his mission, shrapnel fire was opened over the regiments; but, as usual with galloping troops in extended order, the artillery proved futile, and the Australians did not suffer a single casualty. The line of Onslow's advance lay across a large scattered Bedouin encampment, with its customary collection of fowls, sheep, donkeys, and camels. Through this excited, clamorous medley thundered the regiments, with shrapnel bursting thickly above them—and, while the light horsemen escaped loss, a number of the natives were hit.

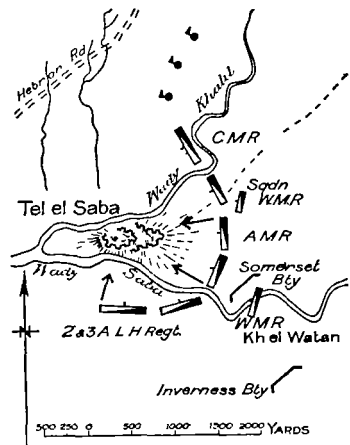
Onslow gained the Hebron road without slackening the pace, and his screen there rushed and captured a Turkish convoy of ten waggons with horses and mules. But on the heights immediately ahead was an enemy battery, some machine-guns, and riflemen. These had lost the range on the rapidly approaching horsemen, but they now fired point-blank into Onslow's squadrons, and only their excitement saved the Australians from heavy casualties. Fortunately the rough country gave immediate cover; into this the regiment was rushed, safe, but disappointed that, after winning to within a few chains of the guns, the hopelessness of the ground prevented their capture. About this time three of Onslow's men under Corporal E. B. Picton¹ very gallantly rushed and captured thirty-nine Turkish riflemen, who were overwhelmed by the daring of the Australians. Here in a wady near the road, under good cover but unable to move, the brigade stayed all day. Its immediate task was accomplished, but in that country a further advance was impossible.

Meanwhile Chaytor had sent the New Zealanders and the 1st Light Horse Brigade against Tel el Saba. At 10 o'clock the Somerset Battery opened fire on the position from near Bir Salem-Abu Irgeig at a range of 3,000 yards, to cover the advance of the New Zealanders to the north of the wady, while the 3rd Light Horse Regiment of Cox's brigade was ordered to attack the mound from the south-east. Approach up the bed of the wady was made impossible by enemy machine-gun fire; and Lieutenant-Colonel G. J. Bell,²

¹ Cpl. E. B. Picton, D.C.M., M.M. 7th L.H. Regt. Carrier; b. Narrabri, N.S.W., 23 July, 1893.

² Col. G. J. Bell, C.M.G. D.S.O. V.D. Commanded 3rd L.H. Regt. 1917/18. Grazier; Member of Australian House of Representatives; of Yolla, Tas.; b. Sale, Vic., 29 Nov., 1872.

of the 3rd, after consultation with the commanding officer of the Aucklands, decided to move along open ground south of the water-course, with the Aucklands conforming on the north. A spirited gallop under fire carried Bell's regiment to within 1,500 yards of the enemy position before the men dismounted. The Inverness Battery covered the attack from a position near Khurbet el Watan, at a range of only 2,600 yards, and concentrated its fire upon a nest of machine-guns in caves some 400 yards east of Tel el Saba. But the fire of such light batteries against an enemy in earthworks is seldom destructive. The two batteries were handled with skill and marked fearlessness, and the Somerset guns were during the fight galloped up to within 1,200 yards of Tel el Saba; but the Anzac lines on either side of the wady were nevertheless subjected to punishment which, increasing in intensity as they advanced, soon threatened them with complete destruction. The Australians on the south were especially exposed, but the two advanced squadrons, led by Major A. Dick³ and Captain W. T. Tackaberry,⁴ crept gradually forward until they were able to bring effective Hotchkiss fire to bear upon the trenches on the face of Tel el Saba. A section of the machine-gun squadron under Lieutenant R. G. Garvie,⁵ working forward with the regiment also obtained good targets at close range.



The prospect that the 3rd Light Horse Regiment might cross the wady and scale the tel was not bright; but the fire and menace of the Australians were calculated to give full opportunity to the New Zealanders, who were now

³ Maj. A. Dick, D.S.O. 3rd L.H. Regt. Farmer; of Mount Templeton, S. Aust.; b. Yacka, S. Aust., 1 May, 1890.

⁴ Lieut.-Col. W. T. Tackaberry, 3rd L.H. Regt. Officer of Aust. Permanent Forces; of Malvern, Melb., Vic., b. Wexford, Ireland, 17 Sept., 1879.

⁵ Lieut. R. G. Garvie, M.C., 1st Aust. M.G. Sqn. Law clerk; of Crafer's District, S. Aust.; b. Aldgate, S. Aust., 4 July, 1895.

threatening the position not only from the east but across country which afforded more cover in the north. At 1 p.m. Cox ordered the 2nd Light Horse Regiment in from the south on the left of the 3rd, and they advanced at the gallop until they reached a zone of heavy fire, when their dismounting afforded a pretty example of light horse work at its best. So rapidly were the galloping horses checked, cleared, and rushed back by the horseholders, and so quickly did the dismounted men resume their advance on foot, that the Turks, under the impression that the regiment had retired on the horses, shelled the galloping animals, while for a time the riflemen were not fired upon. The Australians speedily cleared a group of huts in which riflemen had been concealed, and then pushed on towards the wady. The two advanced squadrons of the 3rd had by then gained the bank of the wide wady immediately opposite the Turkish position on the tel; the Wellington Regiment had been thrown in on the right of the Aucklands, and the enemy was now under intense converging fire. Every Turk who showed was an easy target, and the position of the garrison had become precarious. At 3 o'clock the New Zealanders rose from the line to which they had crawled, and dashed up the slopes with the bayonet. Simultaneously Dick's squadron of the 3rd Light Horse Regiment advanced across the wady. The resolute Aucklands, who throughout the day had displayed fine cunning and boldness alternately, were the first to reach the trenches. As they scrambled up the mound, 132 Turks tamely surrendered, while the rest fled towards Beersheba and the north-west. Four machine-guns were captured on the position. Troops of the 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Regiments at once gave chase and, taking up a position where the Wady Saba joins a wady from the north, caused many casualties among the running foe. At about the same time an enemy force moved out from the town and threatened a counter-attack, but was speedily driven off by the Australians.

By 3 o'clock Chaytor was in possession of Tel el Saba; with Ryrie's brigade on the Hebron road at Sakati, the Anzacs had completed the second phase of their advance. But the enemy resistance at Tel el Saba had been stiffer than Chauvel expected. Earlier in the afternoon, he had detached the

3rd Light Horse Brigade and two batteries of artillery from the Australian Mounted Division, and sent them round on the right of the New Zealanders to assist in the attack on the redoubt. The appearance of the regiments, trotting in mounted, doubtless contributed to the collapse of the garrison, but the movement also weakened the Australian reserves.

At 3.30 orders were issued for the final phase of the struggle, the occupation of Beersheba. The 3rd Light Horse Brigade was to strike for a line between the Hills 970 and 1020 north of the town, while Cox's 1st Brigade, moving on the left of the 3rd, was to take as its objective a line from the mosque in the town to Hill 970, both inclusive. But the position was now grave. The enemy, although driven off Tel el Saba, was strong south of the town, and still stronger in the hills immediately north of it. The country ahead of the 1st and 3rd Brigades was rough and difficult, and progress must be slow. There remained only a few hours of daylight. Chetwode's infantry divisions could not be moved on the town because of the absence of water-supplies, and because a further advance would disorganise the next stage in the operations, when they were to march north-west on Sheria and Hareira.

The moment had come for the employment of the Australian Mounted Division and the 7th Mounted Brigade, which, astride the Khalasa-Beersheba road, had filled the gap between Chetwode's infantry and Desert Mounted Corps. In none of his fights was Chauvel ever in a hurry to commit his reserves. "If there was one lesson more than another I had learned at Maghaba and Rafa," he remarked some time afterwards, "it was patience, and not to expect things to happen too quickly. At Beersheba, although progress was slow, there was never that deadly pause which is so disconcerting to a commander." His plan was to hold up Hodgson's Australian Mounted Division until the Anzacs had carried Tel el Saba, and then to launch it in a main assault on the town. As the hours passed, he had reluctantly ordered Wilson's 3rd Light Horse Brigade round to Chaytor's assistance; but he resisted any temptation he might have felt to fling more of Hodgson's force into what was only the preliminary phase of the struggle.

Immediately Tel el Saba fell, however, and as the 1st and 3rd Light Horse Brigades became available to strike at the town from the east, Chauvel gave decisive orders to Hodgson. At that time (about 3 o'clock) Hodgson, together with Grant of the 4th Light Horse Brigade and FitzGerald of the 5th Mounted (Yeomanry) Brigade, was at Chauvel's headquarters. Had Tel el Saba fallen earlier, as had been anticipated, a dismounted attack would doubtless have been decided upon. But with the day on the wane, it was now neck or nothing. There was a brief but tense discussion, in which FitzGerald and Grant pleaded for the honour of the galloping attack which was clearly in Chauvel's mind. FitzGerald's yeomanry had their swords and were close behind Chauvel's headquarters; Grant's Australians had only their rifles and bayonets, but they were nearer Beersheba. After a moment's thought, Chauvel gave the lead to the light horsemen. "Put Grant straight at it," was his terse command to Hodgson; and Grant, swinging on to his horse, galloped away to prepare and assemble his regiments. Chauvel throughout the campaign scrupulously guarded against showing a preference to his Australians over the British yeomanry. "If I did ever favour the light horse," he said afterwards, "it was at Beersheba, when, in giving the lead to Grant, I was perhaps influenced by a desire to give a chance to the 4th and 12th Regiments, which up to then had seen very little serious fighting."

While Chauvel was thus engaged in flinging Hodgson's men into the fight, an exchange of telegrams took place between Allenby's headquarters and the Australian leader, about which there has been much controversy and misunderstanding. In all serious actions, no matter how resolute and promising, provision must be made against the possibility of failure. If Beersheba was won, the horses of Chauvel's two divisions were to be watered at the wells in the town and the pools about the Wady Saba. But early in the afternoon, as Tel el Saba continued to resist, Chauvel was asked from General Headquarters if he could water in the Wady Malah, in the event of the supplies at Beersheba not becoming available. At that time he had no thought of failure; but, replying literally to the inquiry, he said: "Water situation in

Wady Malah is not hopeful, and if Commander-in-Chief approves, it is proposed to send back all troops which have not watered to Bir Arara and Wady el Imshash, if Beersheba is not in our possession by nightfall." When this telegram reached General Headquarters, Allenby was away with Chetwode at El Buggar, and it was at once repeated to him. Allenby had no knowledge of the original message of inquiry which Chauvel was answering, and naturally interpreted the statement as implying a contemplated withdrawal. His response was characteristic of his hot-tempered, impulsive nature. "The Chief orders you," Chauvel was advised, "to capture Beersheba to-day, in order to secure water and take prisoners." This peremptory message afterwards became known to the whole army; and it was generally believed, outside Desert Mounted Corps, that Allenby's intervention was directly responsible for the great light horse charge which gave the British victory.

But before Allenby's telegram reached Chauvel Grant's regiments had their orders for mounted action, and were making ready for the charge. The 11th Regiment was spread over a line of outposts extending towards the 7th Mounted Brigade, but the 4th and 12th were immediately available. These two regiments, the 4th (Victorian) under Lieutenant-Colonel M. W. J. Burchier,⁶ and the 12th (New South Wales) under Lieutenant-Colonel D. Cameron, were in the Iswaiwin area, four miles from Beersheba. On their arrival there in the early morning the horses had been off-saddled, and both men and horses fed. They had spent a quiet day in rest and, when they received orders to saddle, were fresh and eager for action. Aircraft activity, which has brought so many changes into warfare, prevents the close assembly of waiting cavalry in readiness for the charge. At 3 o'clock Grant's regiments, as a precaution against bombing, were waiting scattered over a wide area in single troops; it was therefore nearly 4.30 before Burchier and Cameron drew up their men behind a ridge about a mile north of Hill 1280.

From the crest of the ridge Beersheba was in full view, four miles away to the north-west. The course of the Aus-

⁶ Brigadier Hon. Sir Murray Burchier, C.M.G., D.S.O., V.D. Commanded 4th L.H. Regt., 1917/19, and 4th L.H. Bde. for short periods, 1917/19. Grazier; of Strathmerton, Vic.; b. Potulla, Vic., 4 Apr., 1881. Died, 16 Dec., 1937.

tralian lay down a long, slight slope broken occasionally by tracks cut by heavy rains, but bare of growth or other cover. Somewhere between them and the town lay a system of enemy trenches. Grant knew from photographs taken from the air, and shown to him by Chauvel when he received his orders, that these trenches were protected by neither barbed wire nor pits; but they were cleverly masked, and could not be definitely located. The Victorians were on the right, the 12th Regiment on the left. This was a pure cavalry adventure, but the regiments bore neither sword nor lance, and, in order to give the charge as much moral effect as possible, the men rode with their bayonets in their hands.

Each regiment formed up on a squadron frontage in three lines from 300 to 500 yards apart. More than a year earlier the light horsemen had made a mounted dash across the saltpan at Katia; but that was a slight rear-guard action, on which no great issue depended. What was coming was something very different. Long before the mounted troops had reached Beersheba, every troop leader and most of the men had gained, despite all the secrecy observed, a sound grasp of the main feature of Allenby's great scheme. They knew that the whole Gaza-Beersheba line was to be broken; they knew Beersheba must be captured on this first day. From the hilltops they had watched the slow progress of the attack by Anzac Mounted Division; and they realised that only a wild, desperate throw could seize the prize before darkness closed in and gave safety to the enemy. Already the horses were casting long shadows as troop after troop moved into position, and the light, although still clear, had that uncertain quality which marks the failing day. Every man therefore was restless, excited, and resolute for victory; and Grant, as he took his final look at his men, must have felt that, if strong, fast horses urged on by great-hearted men, ably led and completely careless of their lives, could achieve the purpose, it would surely be achieved.

At 4.30 the two regiments moved off at the trot, deploying at once until there was a space of five yards between the horsemen. Surprise and speed were their one chance, and almost at once the pace was quickened to a gallop. As the force topped the crest, Grant with McKenzie, his brigade-

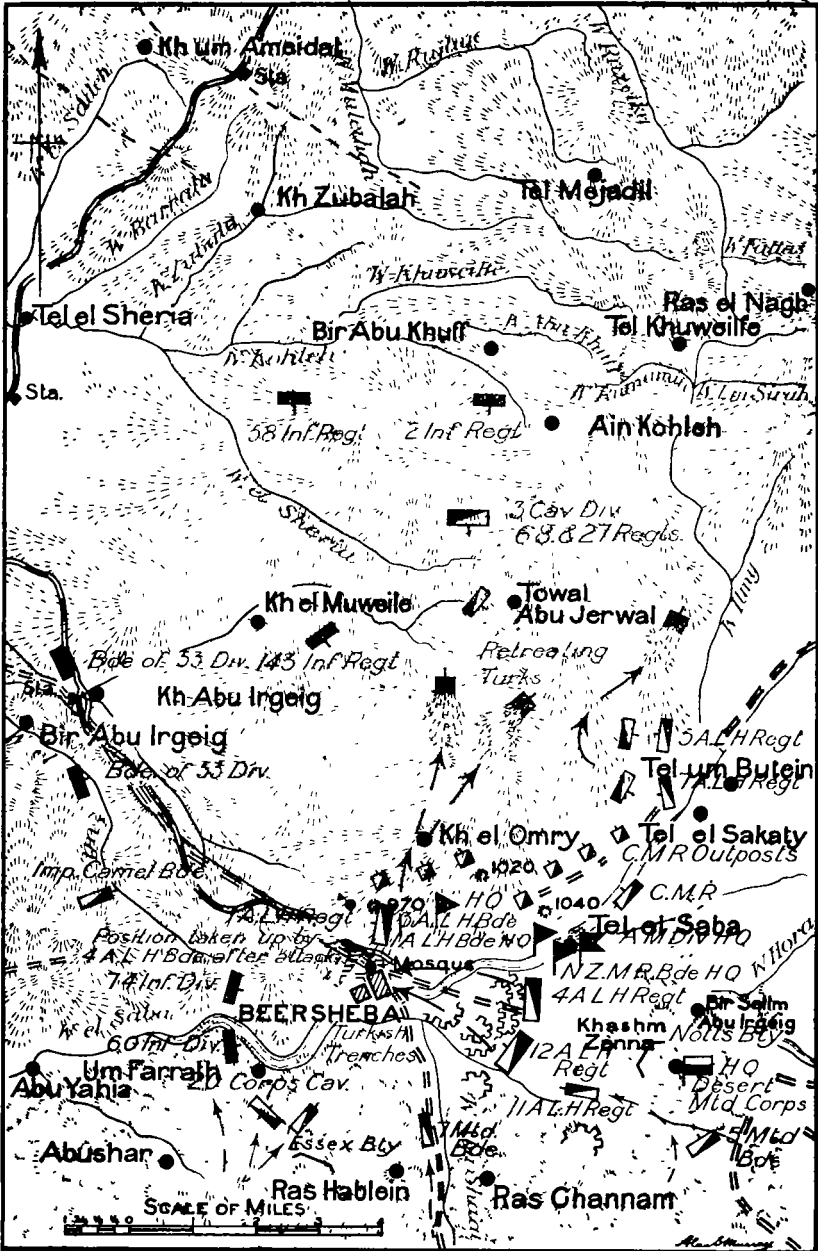
major, rode in the lead, and Bouchier and Cameron were at the head of their regiments; but when once direction was given to the movement, the leading squadrons of each regiment pressed forward, and Grant fell back into the reserve line, from which he could control subsequent developments. Cameron and Bouchier were never far behind the vanguard. The leading squadron of the 4th on the right was under Major J. Lawson,⁷ a powerful young Yorkshireman, who had emigrated to Victoria some years before the war; the vanguard of the 12th was entrusted to Major E. M. Hyman,⁸ a farmer from New South Wales. Regimental headquarters and the machine-guns rode with the reserve squadron. The 11th Regiment followed at the trot, and then came FitzGerald's 5th Mounted Brigade, while away on the left the 7th Mounted Brigade advanced briskly along the Khalasa road. If, therefore, the heroic galloping vanguard was a slender striking force, it had a substantial following in close support.

The Turks were quick to observe the movement, and opened fire with shrapnel on the 4th and 12th Regiments immediately they deployed. But the range was long, the target scattered and fleeting, and the casualties trifling. After going nearly two miles, hot machine-gun fire was directed against the leading squadrons from the direction of Hill 1180 on the left. This fire, coming from an effective range, might have proved destructive; but the vigilant officers of the Essex Battery detected the machine-guns as soon as they began to shoot, got the range at once, and were lucky enough to put them out of action with the first few shells.

Lawson and Hyman were now within range of the Turkish riflemen directly in their track, and these, after an erratic opening, settled down to sustained rapid fire. Many horses in the leading line were hit and dropped, but there was no check to the charge. The enemy fire served only to speed the gallop. These Australian countrymen had never in all their riding at home ridden a race like this; and all ranks, from the heroic ground scouts galloping in front of the squadron leaders, to the men in the third line, drove in their spurs and

⁷ Col. J. Lawson, D.S.O., V.D. Second-in-command, 4th L.H. Regt., 1918. Hotelkeeper; of Rupanyup, Vic.; b. Halifax, Yorks, Eng., 16 Feb., 1884.

⁸ Maj. E. M. Hyman, D.S.O. 12th L.H. Regt. Farmer and grazier; b. Tamworth, N.S.W., 13 July, 1885.



BEERSHEBA—CHARGE BY 4TH A.L.H. BRIGADE—POSITION AT DUSK, 31ST OCTOBER, 1917.

charged on Beersheba. Grant, when he gave his order, had no clear knowledge of what was ahead, and neither Lawson nor Hyman yet knew. But all rode for victory and for Australia.

The fire from the trenches came chiefly from Lawson's front, and the bold Yorkshireman led his squadron straight at it. As they came within half-a-mile of the earthworks, which were now clearly in view, the casualties among the horsemen almost entirely ceased, despite an increase in the firing. Over the last few hundred yards Lawson's men galloped untouched; the Turks, surprised and bewildered at the sheer audacity of the charge, had failed to change the sights on their rifles, and their fire was passing harmlessly overhead.

The first trench, a shallow, unfinished one, held by only a few riflemen, was taken by the rushing horsemen in their stride. Close behind them was the main line, a trench in places ten feet deep and four feet wide, thickly lined by Turks. As Lawson's men galloped at this obstacle several horses and men were shot, but the excited line pressed on, jumped the trench and, reining up amidst a nest of tents and dugouts, dismounted. Lawson's three leading troops were then joined by a troop from the 12th Regiment; as the horses were led at the gallop to cover, the Australians leaped into the main trench which they had just crossed and went to work with the bayonet, at the same time clearing up the enemy in the dugouts. Lieutenant F. J. Burton⁹ was killed as his horse was jumping the trenches, and Lieutenant B. P. G. Meredith¹⁰ fell immediately after dismounting. But the Turks were now so demoralised that they offered only a feeble resistance to the bayonet, and any shooting on their part was wild and comparatively harmless. After between thirty and forty had been killed with the steel, the rest threw down their rifles and begged for pity. One of the troopers had galloped on to a reserve trench further ahead. The Turks shot his horse as he jumped, and the animal fell into the trench. When the dazed Australian found his feet he was surrounded by five Turks with their hands up. The enemy had been beaten

⁹ Lieut. F. J. Burton 4th L.H. Regt. Farmer; of Minyip, Vic; b. Nullan, Vic, 22 Dec., 1893. Killed in action, 31 Oct., 1917.

¹⁰ Lieut. B. P. G. Meredith, 4th L.H. Regt. Grazier; of Larpent, Colac, Vic.; b. Keilambete, Terang, Vic., 9 July, 1882. Killed in action, 31 Oct., 1917.

rather by the sheer recklessness of the charge than by the very limited fighting powers of this handful of Australians. Captain A. D. Reid,¹¹ who was leading the squadron of the 4th which followed Lawson, dismounted one of his troops to deal with the enemy in the shallow advanced trench, and then pressed on to Lawson's assistance. In a few minutes the fight there was over.

The progress of the 12th was equally brilliant and decisive. The Turkish defences were not continuous. Major Hyman, at the head of the leading squadron, charged up to the trenches of a small redoubt and at once dismounted with about a dozen of his men. But most of his command passed the redoubt close on their right, and, finding they had ridden through a gap in the defensive lines, galloped straight on for Beersheba, with Captain R. K. Robey¹² at their head. Hyman with his party engaged the Turks in the trenches with rifle and bayonet; a bitter little fight ensued, and not until the Australians had killed sixty of them—many of whom were shot by Hyman with his revolver—did the enemy surrender. As the trenches were approached, the second squadron under Major C. M. Fetherstonhaugh,¹³ a South African veteran and a fine old soldier, had reduced the distance between the first and second lines. Fetherstonhaugh's horse was wounded within thirty yards of the trench. With his first thought for a favourite charger, Fetherstonhaugh put the animal out of its pain with a shot from his revolver, rushed on into the trench, emptied his weapon into the nearest Turks, and then fell, shot through both legs. Most of his squadron, however, swung away round the redoubt and, led by Captain J. R. C. Davies,¹⁴ followed Robey's men at the gallop towards the town. Robey rode hard for the western side of Beersheba, aiming to envelop it by the north, while Davies led his men along the main street.

As the light horsemen galloped on, they realised how

¹¹ Maj. A. D. Reid, M.C. 4th L.H. Regt. Farmer; b. Murrumburrah, N.S.W., 25 July, 1886.

¹² Capt. R. K. Robey, M.C. 12th L.H. Regt. Estate manager, of Ulmarra, Clarence River, N.S.W.; b. Tamworth, N.S.W., 26 July, 1891.

¹³ Lieut.-Col. C. M. Fetherstonhaugh, D.S.O. 12th L.H. Regt. Grazier; of Coonamble, N.S.W.; b. Sydney, N.S.W., 10 Feb., 1879.

¹⁴ Lieut.-Col. J. R. C. Davies, M.C., V.D. 12th L.H. Regt. Grazier, b. Puen Buen, Scone, N.S.W., 25 July, 1882.

dramatic in its suddenness and decisiveness had been their wild rush through the enemy line. When the attack of Grant's brigade was launched, the Turks had been crushed by Chetwode's infantry on the south-west and had lost Tel el Saba on the east. But the British infantry, having reached its appointed objectives, had stopped according to orders. The garrison was still able to offer a stout resistance to Anzac Mounted Division and the 3rd Light Horse Brigade on the east; if their redoubts to the south and south-east survived, they still had hopes of holding on until darkness fell, when the High Command might be able to send them reinforcements—at worst, they could make an orderly withdrawal after destroying their supplies and the precious wells. But the wild charge of the two light horse regiments had in a few minutes destroyed this expectation, and the Turks were quick to appreciate the significance of the blow. The way was now clear for the advance of the 7th Mounted Brigade, which was approaching along the Khalasa road, and the opposition to the 1st and 3rd Light Horse Brigades was at the same time taken in rear. Between the time when the advanced Australian squadrons smashed into the trenches and the arrival of Robey and Davies on the outskirts of the town, the Turkish force, hitherto in a state of comparative order, had been thrown into chaos. From staff officers to men in the ranks, the one thought was of escape and personal safety. There was a wild mob-rush towards the hills north and north-west. Guns were limbered up and moved off as fast as their miserable horses and slow oxen could draw them. Most of the engineers, who had demolition charges laid ready at the wells and important buildings, bolted with the crowd, leaving their work undone.

About half-a-mile before the galloping Australians had reached the town they began to overtake fugitive troops and guns. Nine guns were overrun, and most of the gunners surrendered on being challenged; others, who fought, were shot or bayoneted by the light horsemen from their horses. The pursuit continued through Beersheba and out on to the hills, until the Australians were checked by fire from enemy riflemen and machine-gunners in position. For some time after the town was galloped, scattered enemy parties continued

to set fire to buildings and to blow up railway points, but soon after nightfall all the prisoners had been collected. General Grant with his staff arrived at about 11 p.m.; a systematic search was made for the wells, and the horses, many of which had been for thirty hours without a drink, were relieved as fast as water could be raised. For hours the wires along the whole front repeated the news of the fall of the town; and the tidings were the more welcome because the whole army realised how close Allenby had been to an initial failure which might have balked his whole grand operation.

From the time when the 4th and 12th Regiments received orders to saddle to that of the entry into Beersheba, less than an hour had passed. It had been a glorious hour, filled not only with military achievement of a very rare kind, but with memorable deeds by individual officers and men, which serve vividly to demonstrate the spirit which alone made success possible. Lawson's two ground scouts, Trooper T. O'Leary¹⁵ and Trooper A. E. Healey,¹⁶ galloped some seventy or eighty yards in advance of the squadron, but both rode through untouched. O'Leary jumped all the trenches and charged alone right on into Beersheba. An hour and a half afterwards he was found by one of the officers of the regiment in a side street, seated on a gun which he had galloped down, with six Turkish gunners and drivers holding his horse by turn. He explained that, after taking the gun, he had made the Turks drive it down the side street, so that it should not be claimed as a trophy by any other regiment. Healey, his mate, dismounted on reaching the trenches, and was the first man among the Turks with the bayonet. While the fighting was proceeding at the trenches, Armourer Staff-Sergeant A. J. Cox¹⁷ saw a machine-gun being hurriedly dismounted from a mule by its crew. In a minute it would have been in action at close range. He dashed at the party alone, bluffed them into surrender, and took forty prisoners. Trooper S. Bolton¹⁸

¹⁵ Pte. T. O'Leary, M.M. 4th Aust. M.G. Sqdn. Station hand; b. Maryborough, Q'land, 1883.

¹⁶ Warrant-Officer A. E. Healey, M.M. 4th L.H. Regt. Carpenter; of Malvern, Melb., Vic.; b. Newmarket, Melb., 4 Aug., 1884.

¹⁷ Warrant-Officer A. J. Cox, D.C.M. 4th L.H. Regt. Assayer; of Bendigo, Vic.; b. Hazelhurst, Hampshire, Eng., 7 Sept., 1880.

¹⁸ Pte. S. Bolton, D.C.M. 4th L.H. Regt. Engine-driver; of Geelong, Vic.; b. Kilrea, Londonderry, Ireland, 1 May, 1894.

single-handed chased a gun drawn by six horses, which, with three Turks on the horses and three on the limber, was being galloped out of action by a German officer. Bolton had lost his rifle, but had picked up a revolver. As the German refused to halt, Bolton fired at him at close range, but the weapon missed fire. The Australian then knocked the German out of the saddle with the butt-end of the revolver, and forced the Turks to return with the gun. Trooper W. Scott¹⁹ had his thigh broken by shrapnel in the charge to the trenches, but refused to fall out, insisting that if he could not fight he could lead horses back. He led out at the gallop five dismounted horses, and fainted as he was lifted from the saddle.

One of the leading sections of Lawson's squadron followed Lieutenant Burton as they raced at the trenches. The four troopers and Burton were old Gallipoli men; all were shot dead as they flung themselves from their horses within a few feet of the enemy. The mounted stretcher-bearers rode forward, as they always did, with the advanced light horse lines, and worked coolly in the midst of the dismounted fight round the earthworks. While so engaged Private A. Cotter, the famous Sydney fast bowler, was shot dead by a Turk at close range. As has been recorded already, he had at the second Gaza engagement been singled out for fine work under heavy fire; he behaved in action as a man without fear.

The two regiments took prisoners to the number of thirty-eight officers and 700 other ranks, and captured nine field-guns, three machine-guns, a large number of transport vehicles, and much other material. A German officer among the prisoners said that the Turkish commander and his staff had fled about ten minutes before the Australians entered the town. The light horse casualties in the charge were astonishingly light. The 4th Regiment had two officers and nine other ranks killed and four officers and thirteen other ranks wounded; the 12th had twenty other ranks killed and four officers and fifteen other ranks wounded. Nearly all the casualties occurred at the trenches.

Chauvel's position, as from his headquarters he watched the day's fighting develop, had not been enviable. During

¹⁹ Pte. W. Scott, M.M. 4th L.H. Regt. Labourer; b. Melbourne, Vic., 1887.

the hour which followed his order to Grant, he was viewing a picture rarely seen by a corps commander in modern warfare. The New Zealanders were still swarming about Tel el Saba; on their right the 9th and 10th Regiments, widely and deeply scattered, were trotting forward under white puffs of the enemy's shrapnel. On either side of the Wady Saba glimpses of the dismounted lines of the 1st Brigade were caught, as the men pressed steadily forward with their rifles. Behind this advance the faithful little Royal Horse batteries were flinging out their shells, or, gun following gun at the trot and canter, were hurtling over the rough ground into positions nearer the enemy. Slow-moving ambulances and racing gallopers, and here and there a cloud of rushing horses, added to the animation; significantly waiting in every little pocket over the rolling country were dark masses of led horses, quivering under the noise of battle and all the excitement of the fateful hour. With all this seeming life, however, progress was, as Chauvel well knew, dangerously slow. The advance lacked the strength in men and arms which alone could carry it forward to victory before the close of the day. But then appeared the 4th Brigade. Over the skyline of their sheltering ridge came the ground scouts of the two regiments, and next Grant and Cameron and Bourchier, followed by the leading squadrons. Those who looked on held their breath as the squadrons deployed to right and left, and trotted, every horse pulling his rider almost out of the saddle, down the slope. Squadron followed squadron; then, as they all rode into view, came the enemy shrapnel. That was the signal to gallop. Away went the ground scouts in a bee-line for the mosque shining white in the setting sun; away after them went the eager squadrons. For a minute perhaps the three galloping lines could be seen by those who watched them; then they were swallowed up in their own dust and the gathering twilight. Not for half-an-hour did Chauvel learn that Beersheba had at the eleventh hour been so decisively won. This has sometimes been referred to as the critical fight of Chauvel's career. But the Australian leader has confessed that he was far more anxious during the morning of the Turks' attack at Romani than while waiting for Grant's throw at Beersheba.

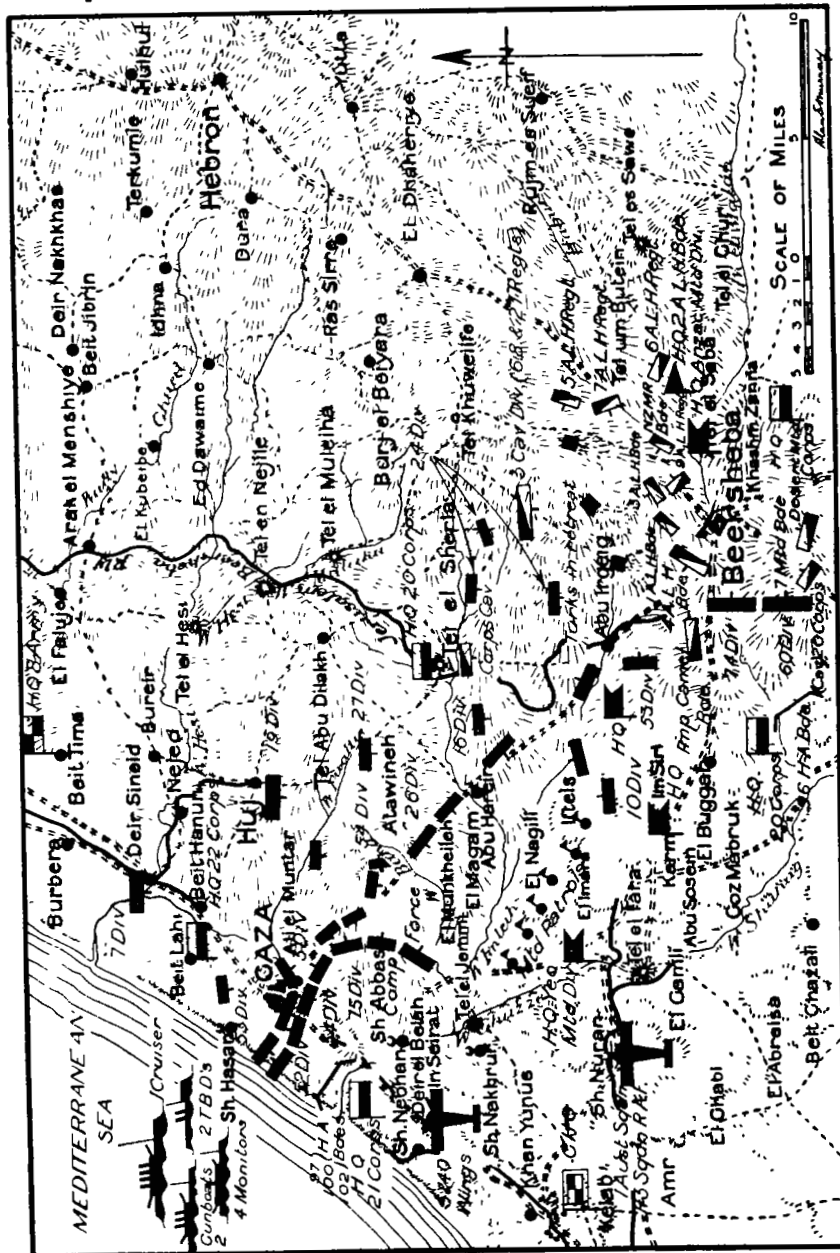
The fine exploit of the 4th and 12th Regiments, although it occupied less than an hour, and although only 400 or 500 light horsemen actually made touch with the enemy, had a far-reaching effect on the whole campaign. Nothing but a "forlorn-hope" charge could have captured Beersheba that evening, and all Allenby's plan rested on the fall of the town on the first day of the battle. That had been the emphatic point in all the British leader's orders, and he expressed it again in his peremptory message to Chauvel in the middle of the afternoon. Without the success of the Australian horsemen, the whole story of the next month would probably have been different, and the vast and careful preparations of the summer months might easily have ended in another stalemate engagement. With Beersheba in his hands as planned, with the wells available for the horses and men of Desert Mounted Corps, and with the infantry free to swing on to Sheria and Hareira, Allenby's scheme was working precisely to plan. But the charge of the 4th Brigade had results which went even further. This dazzling success of galloping horsemen against the enemy in entrenchments was of vital significance to an army commander who had at his disposal a great force of three mounted divisions. It was a shining precedent to every divisional, brigade, and regimental leader.

Before Beersheba all, or nearly all, the British cavalry leaders had a deep respect for the Turks in position. Here and there an officer—and fortunately Cameron of the 12th Light Horse Regiment was one of these—believed that, given good ground and plenty of pace, the Turks could be safely galloped in any minor position. Cameron had seen Boers in sangars successfully rushed by mounted riflemen in the South African War, and had frequently urged his belief upon Grant. But, with occasional exceptions, the cavalry leaders were inclined to accept the view established by the struggle in France, that trench warfare and machine-guns had, for the time at least, greatly curtailed the possibilities of cavalry shock-tactics. The Beersheba charge was for days almost the sole topic of conversation in the camps and messes of Allenby's army, and the general verdict was that Grant's adventure was something more than a desperate expedient; and everywhere, and especially among the yeomanry, there

was a resolution to lose no opportunity of following the example of the 4th Brigade. The charge had demonstrated again the incalculable effect of shock-tactics. The swift, thundering rush of successive waves of horsemen over the dusty ground in the failing light had bewildered and deceived the Turkish infantry, who had, as they afterwards confessed, believed them to be at least a division strong. The British yeomen were armed with swords, and so, unlike the light horsemen, were complete cavalry. Barrow, always a headstrong cavalryman, saw in the success of this charge the refutation of all the new pessimism as to the employment of the sword. His capable brigadiers were in full agreement with him; and in the advance up the maritime plain, during the month which came after Beersheba, they followed, to the everlasting glory of the yeomanry, the lead so convincingly set by Grant in the critical hours of October 31st. Moreover, while the famous ride cheered the British horsemen, it had a depressing and a permanent effect on the nerves of the Turks. An intercepted wireless message, sent by the Turkish commander as he fled in the night from Beersheba, was that his troops had broken because they were "terrified of the Australian cavalry."

A German staff officer captured in Beersheba said that, when the 4th Brigade was seen to move, its advance had been taken for a mere demonstration. "We did not believe," he said, "that the charge would be pushed home. That seemed an impossible intention. I have heard a great deal of the fighting quality of Australian soldiers. They are not soldiers at all; they are madmen." From then to the end of the war the Turks never forgot Beersheba; their cavalry, always shy of the light horsemen, from that hour practically faded out of the war, so afraid were they of a blow from these reckless men who had ridden their big horses over strongly armed entrenchments; and the enemy infantry, when galloped, as after Beersheba they frequently were, invariably shot wildly and surrendered early in the conflict. The charge had dealt a heavy wound to the enemy morale, from the High Command down to the men in the ranks.

The attack of the 1st and 3rd Light Horse Brigades from the east had been vigorously pressed. The 1st Regiment under Granville had during the fight for Tel el Saba been in



GAZA—ALLENBY'S ATTACK—POSITION AT ABOUT 6 P.M., 31ST OCTOBER, 1917.

reserve, watching Cox's left flank, and was fresh for the subsequent advance. As the regiment moved dismounted on the line from the mosque to Hill 970, it was at first vigorously shelled. But as it approached the town in the dusk, opposition suddenly failed—a consequence of the lightning stroke of the 4th and 12th Regiments—and Granville's men, then moving rapidly, joined up with the 4th Brigade without further opposition. They took about ninety prisoners, who were glad to surrender. Already Beersheba had the appearance of a deserted town; the native population had fled some hours earlier, and when the Turks had been rounded up the Australians were alone in the moonlit streets. The Turks, however, continued to hold a line in the hills close to the town, and light horsemen who moved within the illuminated zone of burning buildings were at once worried by snipers. Grant established his outposts, and the night passed quietly.

During the afternoon, as has been observed, the 3rd Light Horse Brigade under Wilson (less the 8th Regiment) had been detached from the Australian Mounted Division and moved round on the right to assist, if necessary, in the capture of Tel el Saba. The 8th under Maygar remained on a line about 1,500 yards east of the Ras Ghannam redoubt, and had the 7th Yeomanry Brigade on its left. As he marched round to the right of the New Zealanders, Wilson with the 9th and 10th Regiments was freely shelled with shrapnel, but no casualties were suffered. At 5 p.m. the regiments received the order to advance on the line between the two Hills 1040-960, and moved off smartly on their horses. As the 9th Regiment cleared Tel el Saba on its right, an enemy aeroplane swooped down and dropped bombs from a height of about 800 feet. The aim of the German pilot was sure, and both the 9th and the machine-gun squadron suffered severely, Captain H. Williams²⁰ and Lieutenants F. J. Linacre and A. N. McL. Brown²¹ being wounded, and thirteen other ranks killed and seventeen wounded, while thirty-two horses were killed and twenty-six wounded. Swinging round, the same airman then inflicted losses on the New Zealanders. The 9th and 10th

²⁰ Capt. H. Williams, 9th L.H. Regt. Auctioneer; b. Jamestown, S. Aust., 7 Apr., 1884.

²¹ Lieut. A. N. McL. Brown, 3rd Aust. M.G. Sqdn. Motor mechanic; b. Hurstville, Sydney, N.S.W., 27 Nov., 1893.

Regiments met with little or no opposition in their advance, as Grant's men were now in Beersheba.

All day the German airmen were bold and effective in their bombing. Both Chauvel's and Chaytor's headquarters were severely punished, and also came under a good deal of shell-fire. At 2.30 p.m. two enemy machines flew very low over the 8th Light Horse Regiment. The Victorians had just received orders to report to Chauvel's headquarters, and were in close formation, and the Germans, using both bombs and machine-guns, quickly caused many casualties. Lieutenant-Colonel Maygar, V.C., and his grey horse were both severely hit by a bomb, and the animal bolted into the darkness. The regiment never saw again their loved and gallant leader. Many troopers dashed off in pursuit, but, when the horse was found covered in blood, Maygar was missing. He was picked up during the night by other troops, and taken with all possible speed to hospital. But his wound, and the subsequent loss of blood before he received assistance, proving fatal, he died on the following day at Karm. Maygar's death was deeply lamented not only by his fighting regiment, but by the whole light horse and New Zealand forces. The fearlessness and devotion which had won him the Victoria Cross in South Africa had been followed by fine work upon Gallipoli; and at Bir el Abd, and in the bloody day of April 19th, he had in every crisis stirred the spirit of his regiment by his example in the firing line. He was a true fighting commander.

During the night all available engineer parties of the Anzac and Australian Mounted Divisions were sent into Beersheba to seek out the wells and develop the flow. But, although the town contained many wells, the supply was far short of Desert Mounted Corps necessities. Thorough as were the Commander-in-Chief's preparations, the great flank movement might still have failed, had it not been for the thunderstorms of October 25th, which left useful pools of water over a wide area about Beersheba. These pools, although rapidly evaporating, watered the horses of a number of brigades on October 31st and the days which followed. Without them all the mounted troops must have been drawn to Beersheba after the first day's fighting, and there for a

day or two the water would not have been able to support more than one or two brigades. Thus at the outset was Allenby favoured by fortune.

The only incident which disturbed the night after the capture of Beersheba was a brush which the 10th Light Horse Regiment had to the north of the town with a party of Turks, who had apparently lost direction in the dark. A squadron of the Western Australians under Major Timperley had taken up an isolated outpost on a small hill. At 9 o'clock Turks were heard approaching on three sides; when challenged, they halted, and began to dig in. The Australian machine-guns at once swept their lines, and the enemy fled, leaving fifty dead behind. Early on the morning of November 1st two German pilots again bombed and machine-gunned the 8th Light Horse Regiment. This time, however, the troops were dismounted, and one of the airmen was hit by rifle-fire and crashed in the hills to the west.