

**Beersheba Dinner 20 October 2020** – an address by Lieutenant Colonel John Howells OAM RFD Ret'd

On 21 October 1917 General Sir Edmond Allenby was deploying his forces in preparation for the third attempt to break the Gaza-Beersheba line.

Since the halting of Ottoman forces heading to close the Suez Canal at the Battle of Romani in August 1916 British Empire forces had steadily forced their enemy back toward Palestine on a wide front with a focus on coastal access. This advance was halted on 26 March 1917 at Gaza.

General Sir Archibald Murray fighting the battle from his cushy Cairo Headquarters was reliant on telecommunications. The Turks were being pushed from the town of Gaza as darkness approached on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Unconfirmed reports of Turkish reinforcements arriving to counter-attack were received in Cairo. The assault was called off, defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory.

Murray decided to attack again on 17 April 1917, by then the Turkish garrison at Gaza and along the line to Beersheba was well and truly reinforced. The assault, primarily by 3 infantry divisions under the command of Lieutenant General Dobell with the Desert Mounted Column acting as flank protection, was not successful.

It was six months later in October 1917 that the British decided to have another go. There had been command and attitude changes. General Sir Edmund Allenby replaced Murray; he came with a record of success in France albeit one that involved ruffling feathers. His first action was to move his headquarters closer to the front. At the same time Harry Chauvel was promoted to take charge of the Desert Mounted Corps.

Allenby's plan was to hold the bulk of the Turkish Forces in place at Gaza by a feint, whilst taking the town of Beersheba. Beersheba even though on the flank, was the key to the line. Take it; then by utilising water from Beersheba's wells, the coastal defences could be outflanked by a force of such strength that the Turks all along the line would have to move. Outflanking the complete Gaza-Beersheba line was not possible. There was little water between Beersheba across the Judean Hills to the Dead Sea; none that could support the kind of force required to make the Turks abandon their well-entrenched line. Even Beersheba was a long shot, horses would have to go without water for three days; about the limit of their endurance.

The plan for the assault at Beersheba called for an attack by 20 Infantry Corps from the South West with the Desert Mounted Corps holding the ground to the South and East, moving into the town once the infantry had successfully taken the wells.

21 October saw the Light Horse assembling south of Gaza near the coast and water. They would move out on 27<sup>th</sup>. Three long days in the desert would follow. They moved by Asluj about 25 km to the South of Beersheba where there was some water, the corps passed through on the 30<sup>th</sup>. Few of the horses were able to water and there was further 55 kilometres to ride for them to get into position by dawn on 31<sup>st</sup>.

When the Light Horse deployed, one feature dominated their part of the landscape, Tel el Saba now called Tel Be'er Sheva. This provided the Turks with a place to cover the whole of the south eastern approach to the town. It had to be taken. Chauvel allocated the task to the ANZAC Mounted Division under New Zealand General Chaytor. The NZMR Brigade stormed the battlements, their attack started at 0900 and by the time it was taken at around 1500 the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Light Horse Brigades had been drawn into the fray. A reinforced battalion of Turks had held off a division+ for 5 hours. The Australian 4<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Brigade was held in reserve.

The Turks were just as aggressive in holding back 20 Corps. Allenby was at their HQ at 1500, he telegraphed Chauvel stating the town had to be taken before nightfall. Horses and men could last no longer without water.

Brigadier General Grant GOC 4 LH Bde had not been idle. Aerial reconnaissance had established the feasibility of a mounted assault, the trenches stretching across the direction of approach were not reinforced by barbed wire or horse pits. Chauvel put him at it; Grant ordered an approach at the gallop and a dismount on position. The rest is legend.