

W. T. Massey on Allenby's Progress *September-December 1918*

After the British capture of Jerusalem in 1917, further advances were prevented by German reinforcements until September 1918 when Sir Edmund Allenby launched the Battle of Megiddo at Rafat. A series of victories followed, persuading Turkey to surrender on October 30, 1918. The following is a British observer's account of Allenby's progress.

Our progress during September was rapid, and the extent of our advance, on a very wide front, is so great that it may be the impression at home that we were weakly opposed.

That would be wholly wrong. A document which has been captured shows that the ration strength of the Turkish Eighth Army was 39,783 men, of the Seventh Army 28,575, of the Jordan Group 5,223, and of the Fourth Army 21,899. On the lines of communication were 4,958 men, and of animals there were 39,234.

These figures may be exaggerated. But it is clear that General Allenby was opposed by an army of over 100,000, who, at any rate in places, fought strongly, and at times got to grips both with bomb and bayonet. The prisoners exceed 70,000. The dead, I believe, are not more than 10,000. Many got away home by other roads.

We have learned much from captured documents illustrating the strength of the enemy opposed to us. In the equipment of the Turkish army large support was given by the Germans.

In the Yilderim army group there were 509 guns, including thirty in the repair shops. Of the balance we have captured over 350 of various calibres. There has not been time to search the hundreds of square miles of mountainous country, but doubtless others are hidden in the hills with many hundreds of machine guns and an enormous amount of gun ammunition.

With the Turks were 15,635 Germans, including several battalions of infantry, machine-gun companies, artillery, and the remainder technical troops running the railways, transport, signal service, etc.

There was thus a large stiffening of Germans, with many technicians, and they were generally found wherever the enemy put up a strong resistance. The prisoners include a large number of Germans and Austrians.

The sheiks of the Ruwalla tribe, one of the most powerful in Arabia, brought 3,000 horsemen and the Haurani peasantry others, so that when near Deraa there was a force of 11,000 camelry, horsemen, and Arab irregulars with the column, which on September 16th got to the Hejaz Railway, south of Deraa, and blew up the line.

Next day the north town was destroyed, with six kilometres of railway and an important bridge. On the night of the 18th they cut the line between Deraa and Nabulus, in the Yarmuk Valley, burning the station of Mezerib and the rolling stock, with six German lorries.

The following day they moved south of Deraa, having made a complete circle round the town, and blew up the bridge. An armoured car saw two airplanes and riddled them with bullets.

As the line was repaired it was again destroyed, so that the enemy's railway communication between Damascus and the main Turkish Army was broken for five days. The Amman garrison was cut off for eight days.

Wherever the Arabs camped enemy planes bombed them, flying low and using machine guns. At one period near Deraa the enemy planes made frequent bombing raids, but were ineffectual to prevent the complete disorganization of the railway service.

When General Allenby's attack began the Arabs fought their way up the railway line. One section, under Shereef Nasser, marched seventy miles in twenty-four hours, fighting part of the way, and reached the outskirts of Damascus on September 30th.

The work of the Air Service has been most praiseworthy. The difficulty of the cavalry keeping contact with the vast front has been overcome by the untiring energies of the airmen. One pilot for four days had an average of eight hours each flying day, and on occasions had to fly low, subjected to heavy machine-gun fire. His machine returned from one expedition with seventy-four bullet holes, but was unhit in any vital part.

Our planes south of Amman secured the surrender of 2,000 Turks. The pilot, seeing a long-drawn-out column, dropped a message to say that if they did not surrender they would be bombed. He returned to the aerodrome and six machines shortly afterward were sent out with bombs, and while circling the ground the signal was laid out recalling them; the Turks had hoisted the white flag.

September 30th

The operations of the last few days afford an illustration that the role of cavalry in present-day warfare over a front so wide as this makes it almost impossible to keep touch with the daily movements.

General Allenby's mounted troops are being supremely successful, never missing an opportunity of hitting hard and swiftly, following up one big movement immediately by another equally vigorous, until the three cavalry divisions have to-day converged on Damascus.

Troops from the Northern and Southern Hemispheres are now looking on the most ancient of living cities. Masses of British Yeomanry and Australian and Indian Horse, a force larger probably than was ever before assembled under one command, have outmanoeuvred the Turkish forces, dealing the death blow to the Seventh and Eighth Armies before attacking the Fourth Army over the Jordan.

Only those who have seen the superb cavalry of General Allenby's army could appreciate the possibilities, and not many of those in Palestine dreamed it was possible that Damascus was within reach of the wide stretch of the cavalry arm.

In ten days the mounted troops have covered fully 150 miles, in a country that yielded no food for man or beast, and are now practically surrounding the white city, set in a most beautiful green frame.

The glorious gardens, rendered more refreshing to eyes used to the glare of the Eastern sun by comparison with the desolate, stony hills overlooking the verdant scene from all sides, are momentarily put to military uses by the enemy.

In the mud-walled garden enclosures are nests of machine guns which at present we have not attempted to disturb. There are obvious signs that the Turk's days of possession of the city are numbered.

Since the morning the enemy has been burning vast stores, and there have been numerous explosions of ammunition and petrol. Military establishments are ablaze, and the enormous wireless installation for communication with Constantinople and Berlin has been blown up. From the position of the fires it is believed that the two railway stations have been destroyed.

So far the city seems to have escaped, though with the high wind the huge fires are dangerous, the city being built mainly of wood. Every soldier looking on the city hopes it will be preserved, but it would be in keeping with the blighting influence of the Turk on everything he touches if by his action Damascus, which has changed hands many times in the 4,000 years of its life, should be destroyed for the first time by the Turks. Happily, that fate appears to be unlikely.

As a preliminary to jumping off for this jewelled goal, a portion of the cavalry moved to Deraa with orders to advance up the eastern road. A larger column took Tiberias and secured the bridge over the Jordan south of Lake Hule. The blowing up of the central arch of the ancient structure did not prevent the crossing, owing to the swimming of the river by an entire Australian regiment.

Yesterday the cavalry halted at Kuneitra while supplies were brought over the steep, winding road from the Jordan Valley, many miles of which are absolutely the worst surface in the world for highways. It is a mass of unrolled lava boulders strewn in the roadway. Progress was extremely difficult for wheels, but the cavalry's spirit surmounted all obstacles.

As the sun was setting last night the move forward from Kuneitra began with the weird and impressive spectacle of thousands of horsemen passing in the darkness. There was no sound save the horses' hoof beats and the rumble of wheels. The Australian Mounted Division led, the Yeomanry and Indian cavalry following.

Hardly any part of the country was visible in the gloom, except where the irregular crest of Mount Hermon blotted out the stars. Less than a dozen miles on the journey a brisk action delayed the advance for three hours. They were precious hours, for we knew that what remained of the Fourth Army was trekking north to Deraa, partially disorganized and with scanty transport, and we were anxious to bag the whole lot.

On the steep, rough hills overlooking the road, with a wadi in front, several hundred Turks and Germans waited with machine guns, with a couple of field guns well placed to cover the road. They had the advantage of the light of the waning moon. We got them in flank with a few casualties, and took prisoners. Those escaping up the hill were captured early in the morning.

The German machine gunners were greatly surprised by the rapidity of our advance. At 8 o'clock our troops on the western road reached the south-western edge of the hills holding Damascus in their hollow. There was one small but effective charge on the plateau, and strong opposition athwart the road at Kaukeb, ten miles from Damascus, the enemy striving hard to delay our advance until the destruction of the stores in the city's environs was complete.

At noon there was a spirited mounted attack at Kaukeb by the Australian Light Horse, who overrode the enemy in a brilliant charge, and enabled the brigade's cavalry to ride forward along the road west of the city and pursue the enemy attempting to get away on the Rayak road.

This advance, within visual range of the Damascus minarets, has already yielded many prisoners. The regiment of Light Horse and one of French cavalry are just sending in 3,500 between them, while the Australian brigade brought machine guns into action on two hills dominating the road and killed all the transport animals and many men who blocked the road.

Another force went across country to intercept parties of Turks retiring on Damascus in front of Deraa and heavily shelled the enemy before they reached the villages on the southern outskirts of the city.

October 1st

General Allenby's triumphant march northward into Syria early this morning drove the Turks completely out of possession of Damascus, and there is now not a Turkish soldier in the city nor a Turkish official doing duty.

The appearance of the Australian Mounted Division north-westward of the city at noon yesterday set the seal on the doom of the Turkish Government in the place on which Arabs centre their eyes. Today the city was enveloped by British, Australian, and Indian troops, and the King of the Hejaz's Arab army has marched in. The few Turks who got away are scattered and demoralized. Fully 12,000 Germans and Turks are prisoners.

In and about the city a number of guns have been captured. The roads are a shambles where the enemy resisted. Transport has been smashed and most of the material left behind has been destroyed by the Germans, though some valuable transport, including a complete park of cavalry limbers, was untouched. The prisoners captured since September 19th are probably more than 60,000.

I was under the impression that Damascus would display the usual Arab calmness of demeanour and accept our appearance as Kismet, while appreciating the prospect of a change from bad to good government, and would receive us with their customary immobile features, giving no outward and visible sign of their inward feelings.

I rode into the town with an armoured-car officer when the road was deemed unsafe owing to snipers in those luscious gardens surrounding this fascinating and truly Oriental city. I was amazed at the heartiness of the welcome accorded the British uniform. The people were far from taking our victory as an ordinary incident of life.

They threw off their stolid exterior, and received us with ecstatic joy. They closed their shops and made a holiday, put on festival dress, and acclaimed the day as the greatest in the 4,000 years of the history of Damascus.

Only a few British officers have as yet entered the city, but each has been received with the same whole-hearted fervour. Here, at least, they have seen what the British name stands for. At Jerusalem the British Army was welcomed by all sects and creeds with deep feelings of thankfulness, but their condition, rendered pitiable through starvation, prevented their welcome from being so demonstrative, though equally sincere, as today's.

When a soldier appeared in the streets of Damascus he was surrounded by the excited and delighted throng. Crowds gathered to hear the news. When I told some English-speaking people, of whom there are many, of the latest victory on the western front and of the Bulgarian armistice their enthusiasm was remarkable.

But they were more keenly interested in General Allenby's army's tremendous stride through Palestine and Syria. The enormous captures of prisoners and war material, of which they had no conception, more than anything else, meant to them the finish of the Turk.

They said: "You are settling our long accounts with them." The thoroughness with which it has been done gave them the impression that our army was composed of supermen. With eyes unused to complete and orderly equipment, they admired the soldierly turnout of the men who have fought and ridden a hard 150 miles, and acclaimed them their deliverers.

They looked upon this army as the saviours of the downtrodden peoples of this part of the East. This amazing tribute to Britain and British freedom lasted all day; at nightfall the population gave a fireworks exhibition of captured Verey lights. Even the street of St. Paul called "Straight" was illuminated from end to end.

The opportunities for rejoicing were increased by the arrival of the Arab Army, which operated on our right flank. Our cavalry during the march from Deraa arrived at Damascus at 6 this morning, the northwestern outskirts being occupied by the Australian Mounted Division last night.

Soon after daybreak the Arab Army entered the city, and the streets became alive with picturesquely clothed Arabs on light steeds, almost overburdened with elaborately appointed saddlery. Arab horsemen and camelry dashed about the streets, proclaiming the victory and making much noise and continually firing their rifles.

This lasted till midnight, and the inhabitants, tired out and happy, allowed the city to become normally calm.