

## 1918 in the MIDDLE EASTERN CAMPAIGN – Jill Curry

### Australian Curriculum, Year 9 – ACDSEH095, ACDSEH097

#### The Jordan Valley

By the time the Allied troops had secured Jerusalem, the winter rains had set in and the troops were enduring wet, muddy days and freezing nights in their tents. In February they moved down the steep valley to the lowest place on earth and the ANZAC mounted troops were the first to reach Jericho – the ancient City of Palms. On March 21, 1918, the troops crossed the pontoon bridge over the Jordan River and headed for Amman to cut off the rail supply route running from Damascus into Saudi Arabia. After several days of fighting they were forced to retreat being defeated by the terrain, the bad weather, a shortage of supplies, high casualty rate, additional Turkish reinforcements arriving, and the promised Arab backup not arriving to assist the Allies.

A second attempt followed on April 30-May 3, which again proved unsuccessful on several fronts, not the least being that once again the Arab reinforcements did not turn up. As summer approached, General Allenby wanted to keep the Turks thinking the next attack would be on this eastern border, while actually planning to break through near the Mediterranean Sea. The ANZACs were left to sit out the hot, dry months in the breezeless Jordan Valley, which even the locals considered uninhabitable. They shared this time with deadly spiders, scorpions and malarial mosquitoes and contended with Turkish snipers and German planes. To confuse the Germans they made wooden frames and covered them with hessian to look like horses from above, so their camps were not such a target.



#### Galilee: The Great Ride – Megiddo Sweep

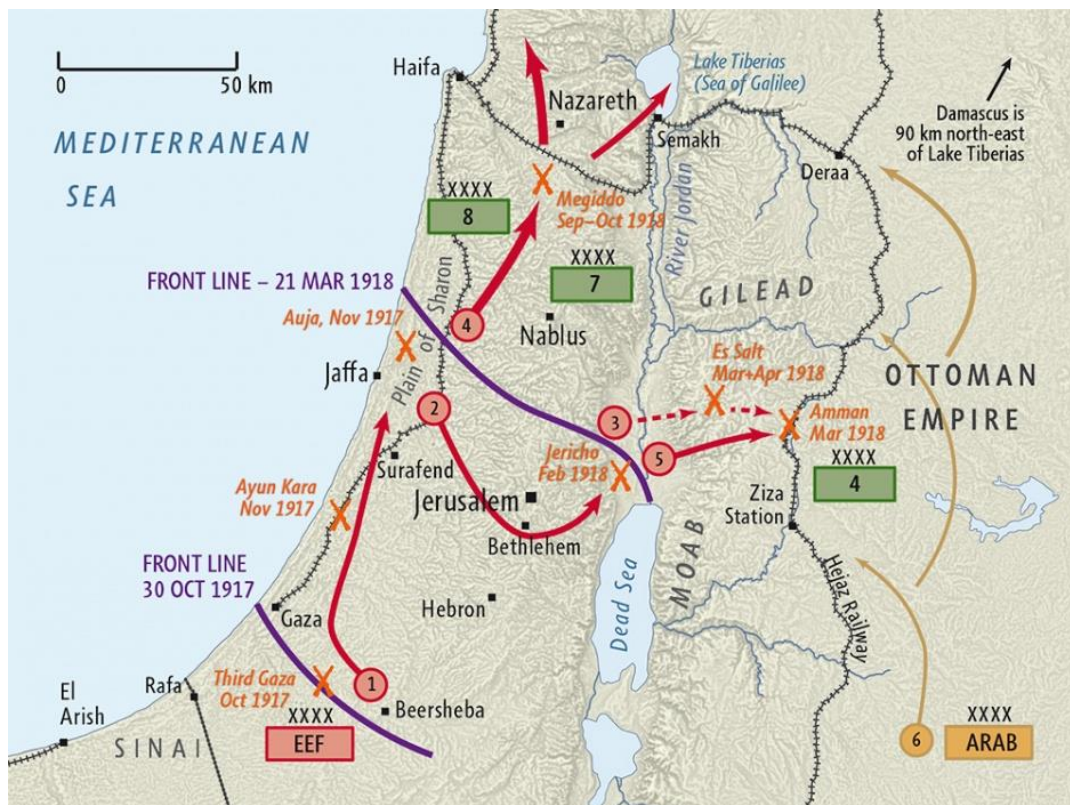
Over summer, some regiments were sent to the Western Front, necessitating the reorganisation of and re-training of the troops. Additional Indian reserves joined the Allies. On September 19<sup>th</sup> 1918 before dawn, the artillery guns and bombing aircraft, closely followed by British & Indian infantry, broke through the defence line near the Mediterranean coast. Hot on their heels were the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Divisions which dashed through the gap of the dishevelled defence and rode for their lives towards Nazareth. This was the headquarters of the German commander of the Turkish forces, Liman Von Sanders, 110 km northeast over the Mt Carmel mountain range. The Allies knocked out the Turkish communications centres, thus sending the enemy into confusion. In a brilliantly coordinated multi-faceted attack that stretched about 100 km right across modern-day Israel and another 60 km through Jordan to Amman, soldiers from many different countries, religions and backgrounds, worked together to defeat three Turkish armies, taking tens of thousands of

prisoners. The Arab army under Emir Faisal and T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) also finally came good and played their part.

### Semakh



The most vicious battle of this part of the campaign took place at Semakh on the southern shores of the Sea of Galilee. This railway station and intersection was heavily fortified with machine guns, and hundreds of well-armed Turkish and German infantry, many secured behind the concrete walls of the station building. Before dawn on September 25<sup>th</sup>, two Light Horse squadrons, now including aboriginal riders, embarked on a moonlight charge. The enemy fire began before they were within 800 metres of the station, and several horses fell. Outnumbered and out-gunned, it was not until Australian machine gunners arrived following the charging horses that the tide began to turn. Having disabled the fire from the windows, the two squadrons entered the station fighting from room to room with rifles, swords and bayonets. Fourteen ANZACs were killed and 64 wounded, together with almost 100 horse casualties, being nearly half of the horse contingent.



### Damascus

By September 29<sup>th</sup> the Allied troops arrived on the outskirts of Damascus. The city was in turmoil as internal factional fighting had broken out. The handover of Damascus was very

tricky politically. Britain had made promises to both the French and the Arabs to keep them on their side, but these were somewhat contradictory. Political correctness demanded that the 'honour' of the handover of the city be given to the Arabs. This would appease them, despite the fact that control would eventually be given to the French. The ANZAC troops were



halted on the outskirts of Damascus awaiting the arrival of the Arabs and the British officials. On October 1, Captain Arthur Olden of the 10<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment was ordered to cut off the Damascus-Homs road to the north. The quickest way to get there was straight through town. They found themselves in the city square and Olden was ushered up to the office of the Governor Emir Said and handed the letter of surrender! With

this in hand, he proceeded on to complete his task to block the northern exit. When the Arabs arrived the next day, the whole formal process had to be repeated, so the records could be politically correct. After this the city was in such an uproar that the ANZACs were again called in to quell the riots, which they duly did. They were horrified to find the local hospital overwhelmed and sick and injured left in the open air with no food or care.

Disease was now rife and the exhausted troops on both sides were falling prey to this new menace. Some ANZAC regiments lost so many to illness that they could not continue. The remaining troops pursued and overcame the retreating Turks to the northern city of Aleppo where they met stiff resistance. When they captured the railway intersection just north of Aleppo, cutting off any chance of reinforcements or supplies entering the region, the Turks surrendered. The armistice was arranged for October 30 and enacted on October 31 at midday, exactly a year after Beersheba. The Ottoman Empire had fallen. The war in the Middle East was over.

### **Accomplishments**

Allenby's ambitious plan involving 34,000 horsemen against three Turkish armies had paid off. In only six weeks of the Megiddo sweep they covered 560 kms and took 75,000 Turks captive plus capturing 360 guns. While the Beersheba charge was perhaps more dramatic and better known, it was shorter and resulted in pushing the Turkish armies back past Jerusalem – a distance of perhaps 100 km from Beersheba or about 370 km from the Suez Canal. With the Megiddo Sweep some Light Horsemen covered up to 800 km on horseback in six weeks of pursuit across a 160 km front to complete the task to end the Ottoman Empire and change history forever. This massive accomplishment is little-known and remains largely unrecognised by Australians today. Credit should be given to our tough ANZAC soldiers, their gifted and courageous leader, General Sir Harry Chauvel, and their sturdy horses.

Pictures:

1. Dummy horses used to fool German aircraft – Australian War Memorial  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B02667/>
2. Ziv Ophir explains about the Semakh railway station (behind) – Jill Curry
3. Map – Palestine Campaign WW1 - Map produced by Geographx with research assistance from Damien Fenton and Caroline Lord. 'Palestine campaign 1917-18 map',  
<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/palestine-campaign-1917-18-map>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 14-Aug-2014
4. Arab troops arriving at the Governor's residence for the surrender of Damascus – Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J02491/>

### For further research:

Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/>  
Gullett, H., *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918. Vol VII, Sinai and Palestine*. Angus and Robertson, 1923.  
Staunton, A., *Australians in World War I, Australian Light Horse*, Department of Vets Affairs, 2007.  
[http://alh-research.tripod.com/Light\\_Horse](http://alh-research.tripod.com/Light_Horse)  
<http://beersheba100.com.au/>

Powerpoint:

1. Light Horse commemorative statue - Photo J Curry
2. Pontoon bridge over Jordan River - <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B00029>
3. Dummy horses used to fool German aircraft – Australian War Memorial  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B02667/>
4. 9<sup>th</sup> LH regiment Jordan Valley near Jericho <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B00236>
5. 9th and 10th LH regiments, Jenin <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B00259>
6. Ziv Ophir explains about the Semakh railway station (behind) – Jill Curry
7. Australian memorial at Semakh – Jill Curry
8. Map – Palestine Campaign WW1 - Map produced by Geographx with research assistance from Damien Fenton and Caroline Lord. 'Palestine campaign 1917-18 map',  
<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/palestine-campaign-1917-18-map>,  
(Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 14-Aug-2014
9. Turkish Prisoners of War, advance to Damascus -  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B00253B>
10. Arab troops arriving at the Governor's residence for the surrender of Damascus – Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J02491/>
11. Turkish prisoner of war hospital, Kaukab, Damascus  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B00364>
- 12 & 13. Text only
14. Gen Sir Harry Chauvel – Australian War Memorial  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J00503/>