

CHAPTER XXXVIII

RE-ORGANISATION AND PREPARATION

ALLENBY went to Palestine to take the offensive; he was aggressive by temperament and at no time faltered in his determination to drive the enemy. Before Jerusalem had fallen, and two months before his objective on the line of the "two Aujas" had been reached, he was unfolding to the War Office plans for carrying the war still further north. On 2nd January, 1918, Whitehall asked of him an explicit statement of his intentions for the next big advance; at the same time the War Office gave him an estimate of the strength of the enemy forces which in the near future he might have to meet. At that time, apparently, the British Government was undecided about the ultimate scope of the Palestine operations, for the despatch began by saying, "The question of the future policy in Palestine has not yet been settled by the Cabinet." After reference to the enemy's recent losses, and the probability that his morale was then low, it continued; "Nevertheless we estimate that you might possibly be opposed before long by 60,000 combatants, including 11,000 Germans, and that this force might be increased to 70,000 or even 80,000 by the middle of February. We are inclined to believe that further increase would be prevented by transport difficulties." In his reply on January 3rd Allenby said that his aim in his next advance was to occupy a line roughly from Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, on the east, to a point just north of Acre on the west. That would give him a secure right flank on the Jordan, as well as possession of the Esdraelon plain, which, extending eastwards from Haifa and Acre, cuts through the ranges of western Palestine between the slopes of southern Galilee and the mountains of Samaria. The Turkish Palestine railway, branching off from the Hejaz line at Deraa, and crossing the Jordan south of the Sea of Galilee, linked up with Haifa on the coast; a branch running south from El Afule served the armies on Samaria and the plain of Sharon. The seizure of it by the British would destroy all Turkish connections by rail between the country west of the Jordan and the north, and would leave the enemy

only the one road from Tiberias to Damascus, which crosses the river at Jisr Benat Yakub, south of Lake Huleh, and which was at that time in a wretched state for transport.

Allenby said he was confident that—provided the Turks did not exceed 70,000, and he was allowed to retain his present force, to “keep it up to establishment,” and to obtain the 7th Indian Division as well—he could hold Palestine as far as the Tiberias-Acre line. He did not think that the enemy, with his single metre-gauge railway, could maintain more than 65,000 or 70,000 troops, but if the Turkish force was increased to 70,000 or 80,000 men by the middle of February, “it is probable that any effective advance of the British line would be impossible without an increase in my force.” On 30th October, 1917, his fighting strength in cavalry and infantry had been 97,000. At the end of the year it was 69,000. “I could not deploy more troops,” said Allenby, “even if I had them, until my railway is doubled. Since operations began, it has not been possible to continue the doubling of the line eastwards of Mazar. Railway progress has been much delayed by the wet weather, and is now much less than half-a-mile a day, and the line already in use has been much damaged.”

While these messages were being exchanged, Germany was already preparing to fling all her available strength against the Allies on the Western Front; and the strong reinforcements to the enemy's force in Palestine indicated by the War Office were never sent. But, as we have seen, by April Allenby's army was disorganised and weakened by the withdrawal of British troops and the substitution of Indians. The enemy force opposed to him was not substantially increased; but with his own strength diminishing, and considering the necessity of training the Indian troops up to battle-pitch and making their leaders familiar with the country, he was unable to contemplate the general offensive which he had previously hoped for about midsummer. His strength was also in some measure reduced by the two fruitless raids east of Jordan, and by the abortive attempt on the western sector in April. He accepted the delay and, while re-organising his army, threw much energy into the extension and duplication of his railways. Fortunately the long, dry Palestine summer

permitted a few months' delay, while still leaving before the wet season sufficient time for operations on a grand scale.

The doughty 52nd Division of Lowlanders was embarked for France in the first week of April, its place being taken by the 7th (Meerut) Division from Mesopotamia. A week later the 74th Division left Palestine; but the 3rd (Lahore) Division from Mesopotamia, which was to make good the loss, did not complete its disembarkation in Egypt before the middle of June. While the two British infantry divisions were being withdrawn, Allenby had also to send to France nine yeomanry regiments—which meant the breaking up of Barrow's Yeomanry Division less than a year after its formation. In addition his line was stripped of ten British infantry battalions, five-and-a-half siege batteries, and five machine-gun companies. Indian cavalry, which since 1914 had been almost in complete idleness in France, replaced the nine regiments of yeomanry and became the 4th Cavalry Division under Barrow; while Indian battalions drawn direct from India, and without fighting experience in the war, replaced the ten battalions of British infantry. In July and August the cutting down was carried further by the lack of reinforcements, which compelled Allenby to use up ten of his remaining British battalions to cover wastage, Indian battalions being employed in their place. A little later sufficient Indian cavalry had arrived to enable the formation of the 5th Cavalry Division under Major-General H. Macandrew. The 5th Mounted Brigade (now known as the 13th Cavalry Brigade) was placed in this new division, and its place was taken in Australian Mounted Division by the 5th Australian Light Horse Brigade under Onslow. Sufficient yeomanry remained to provide one regiment of British horsemen to each brigade of the 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions, which is the usual custom with Indian brigades. Two more regiments remained as corps mounted troops with the infantry.

Allenby's infantry force was thus reduced substantially in numbers by demands arising out of the critical position in France. But the reduction in numbers did not fully express the actual loss. The British infantry sent to France was acclimatised and experienced. It had, after its stern training south of Gaza in 1917, displayed fighting qualities of the

highest order; it had clearly established its superiority over the enemy under the most varying battle conditions; and, uplifted by its succession of victories, was ideal material for further offensive work. Indian troops had already in the campaign fought with dash and persistence; but the new battalions were raw, and in need of training and front-line experience, before they could be depended upon for stern work against strong opposition. But the Commander-in-Chief, if he was temporarily crippled by the change in his infantry, ultimately gained strength on his mounted side by the compulsory changes. The yeomanry regiments were a serious loss. In Barrow's strong and capable hands these British horsemen from the shires had become cavalry of a high order. They never rivalled the Australians and New Zealanders in the subtle work of reconnaissance and patrol, but, led by regular cavalry officers, they had, as their fine charges on the Philistine plain demonstrated, become great shock-troops, and every leader in Palestine deplored the necessity of sending them to do infantry work in France. The Indian cavalry, however, which took their place, possessed all the qualities necessary for the next phase of Allenby's operations. Regular lancers of long training, superbly mounted—most of them on horses of Australian breeding—and efficiently led, they came to Palestine rejoicing to be clear of the uncongenial climate and the inactivity of France. Beautiful horsemen and expert with the lance, they were also quick and shrewd observers, and were therefore at once at home when in May they moved under Barrow to the Jordan valley and engaged in the work of patrol in advance of the firing line. Their keenness for action was almost excessive; their galloping swoops on unfortunate isolated parties of Turks added to the fear which the enemy already felt of the British mounted troops. With Chauvel's Desert Mounted Corps command increased to four divisions, Allenby engaged with much happy anticipation in the preparation of the grand scheme, which, giving full scope to his 30,000 horsemen, was to bring the campaign to its sweeping and dramatic conclusion.

He had successfully resisted a proposal from the War Office that the Australian Mounted Division should be dis-

mounted and sent to France. Just as Murray had early in the campaign declared that the Australians were "the keystone of the defence of Egypt," and that not a single one of them could be spared, so Allenby now recognised that the loss of more than half his light horsemen might easily lead to stagnation and even to disaster. The Indians were dashing and promising, but they were still in a large measure untried, and it might have been fatal to reduce further the support and stiffening of absolutely reliable white troops. There was no doubt about the behaviour of the Indians in an established swinging offensive, but there was no certainty about their bearing in the face of prolonged adversity. Already both Chauvel and Allenby were gravely concerned about the heavy and always growing wastage in the troops in the Jordan valley. Not only were malaria and other diseases permanently crippling large numbers of men, but the whole force was becoming very exhausted; and there was fear that, when the time came to advance, their striking power would not be capable of a prolonged effort. Strong representations succeeded, and the Australians were allowed to remain in Palestine.

As the Indian battalions reached the line in increasing numbers they were freely exercised in raids, and a series of successful adventures against the enemy's trenches went far to give them the experience and confidence which they needed for a general attack. Their enthusiasm was boundless, and they were quick to recognise that they were opposed by an enemy whose spirit was low and whose interest in the struggle was dissipating. Nearly all the intelligence reports about the Turks during the summer months made cheery reading for the British. The quarrels among the enemy's High Command became more acute; the strain on the single narrow-gauge railway was excessive; supplies were short and irregular. Germany's colossal stroke against the British before Amiens in March, followed by other successes on the Western Front, were exultingly and loudly advertised in Syria and Palestine; coupled with the British failures east of Jordan, they for the moment excited the confidence of the enemy. But the stolid Turkish soldier paid little heed to German reports. Like experienced troops on all fronts, he

was too well accustomed to seeing his own victories exaggerated, and his failures explained away, to lend his ear to Germany's proud claims of decisive victory. For three years he had been told these stories, but still the war went on, and still he was far distant from his family and his simple home. His religious fanaticism had long since burned itself out; his dreams of conquest and rich prizes were abandoned; by the summer of 1918 he was conscious only that he had suffered many defeats and constant hardships, and was fighting under compulsion in a country only Turkish in name and for a cause which no longer appealed to him. Great natural campaigner as he was, he was disgusted with this purposeless and monotonous fighting as a selfless unit of the vast alien German war-machine. And so, when in July and August the Indians, supported in the more serious enterprises by British infantry, boldly raided his trenches, he offered but feeble resistance and seemed pleased to be taken prisoner. Still more stimulating to the British army was the steady and growing trickle of deserters during the summer. These men, arriving each night, were in no mood to be secretive about the enemy's dispositions, and while their desertion in itself was evidence of the low spirit of the Turkish armies, they brought also much exact and valuable information. Some of the enemy's divisions, however, were not represented in this wastage; and, as showing how surely desertion is an index to morale, it was the sound divisions which resisted most strongly the British attack in September.

Although Allenby's pleading had prevented the loss of the Australian Mounted Division, British troops were, as late as June, withdrawn to France. In protesting against the further weakening of his army, the Commander-in-Chief had urged the rawness of the Indian recruits ("of whom a large number have not even fired a musketry course"), the expected reinforcement of the enemy's strength after the harvest, and the danger that the Arabs might, if the British were unable to give them active support east of Jordan, be driven south again by a Turkish counter-attack. But the War Office was adamant. Allenby was informed on June 21st that "the Government had no option but to take the risk involved in withdrawing these troops from your

command in view of the situation in France, which is and must remain extremely critical."

But if Allenby was keenly disappointed, his stout offensive spirit showed no sign of faltering. He continued to plan and act as a leader completely confident of an overwhelming victory; and through the long hot summer the troops were cheered by abounding evidence of constructive work, which every soldier knew was the preliminary to great action. Believing he would be able to advance by midsummer, the Commander-in-Chief had established a comprehensive advanced-railhead at Ludd, two or three miles north of the Jaffa road. Here in the wide olive-groves great workshops had sprung up, and huge dumps had been established. Trains branching off from Ludd to Jerusalem supplied the XX Corps on Samaria and the Desert Mounted Corps in the Jordan valley. The delay in operations, however, made the arrangement an undesirable one. Ludd was within range of the enemy's long-range guns; a slight enemy advance down the plain of Sharon would have placed it in danger, and might easily have dislocated the communications of the British right and centre. Allenby therefore decided, instead of duplicating the main line from Egypt up to Ludd, to supply Jerusalem by a branch line north-east across the Philistine plain through Irgeig and Junction Station. This switch gave him an alternative and safe line of communications, and at the same time enabled much of the material concentrated at Ludd to be withdrawn from the danger zone. During June forty miles of new broad-gauge track were laid, and in that month the traffic over the military railways exceeded 168,000 tons.

Meanwhile the training of the Indians was pushed on at high pressure, and the two new Australian light horse regiments formed out of the Camel Brigade were given their horses and schooled afresh. Many of the men had originally been in the light horse, but perhaps half of them had been drawn from infantry, and of these many had never been accustomed to horses. The spirit of service never shone more brightly than in their training camps near the Jaffa road, where the two regiments—including many who had been in Gallipoli in 1915—began again, like recruits, upon the elementary drill of the new arm. Good humour, and resolution

to become expert light horsemen as quickly as possible, marked the few weeks allowed for their education.

While building up his own forces for a renewal of the offensive, Allenby was not without fear of a strong enemy attack, and from the sea to the Jordan bridgeheads there were ceaseless digging and wiring on the front line and advanced posts, and also in the preparation of reserve positions. All through the summer the air force contributed to the spirits of the men in the trenches and the Arabs across the river. From the middle of 1917 the British and Australian pilots had been treated with increasing generosity by the War Office. Their old and obsolete machines, in which they had waged unequal battle, had been replaced by craft superior to those now possessed by the Germans. Ever on the offensive, they moved daily over the enemy's lines, seeking their foes in battle, and at the same time bombed mercilessly and effectively points of concentration on his rear. Amman and other places on the Hejaz line were freely raided, and the same harassing work was maintained west of the Jordan. The No. 1 Australian Squadron, located on the old enemy aerodrome near Ramleh, had by sheer performance become recognised as a great battle-squadron, and was at the same time conspicuous as a model of efficiency in all mechanical work and administration. Its excellence had its drawbacks. General Headquarters dropped into the habit of recommending all British and Allied officers who came to the front to call and see how a squadron should be conducted; the number of visitors consequently became embarrassing. Its commanding officer, Major R. Williams,¹ who was responsible for its organisation and development, was a young Australian of marked capacity.

As the summer advanced, the Arabs increased their activities all along the Hejaz railway, and gave more concern to the Turks. Maan was closely invested, and railway communication further south suspended. As their activities were extended northwards, the Beni Sakr tribe—which had so falsely promised support before the Es Salt operations—became definitely hostile to the Turks, and began raids on the

¹ Air Vice-Marshal R. Williams, C B, C.B.E., D.S.O., p.s.a. Chief of the Air Staff, R.A.A.F.; of Moonta, S. Aust., and Melbourne, Vic.; b. Moonta, 3 Aug., 1890

railway about Amman; while in May a force operating north of Deraa under Sherif Ali Ibn Hussein captured and burnt a supply train. When the Arabs declared their independence in July, 1916, the Turks had from 20,000 to 30,000 troops in the Hejaz. By April, 1918, Hussein's four sons had cleared the Red Sea coast, the railway had been repeatedly interrupted, Medina had been isolated for eight months, and Feisal had advanced 700 miles from Mecca to Tafele. Allenby estimated that during this period the Turks had in operations against the Arabs suffered 10,000 casualties in killed, wounded, and prisoners, and had also lost forty-seven guns and forty machine-guns, while the total Turkish force engaged or isolated by the rebels had been about 40,000 troops and 100 guns. Despite, therefore, the absence of discipline in the strange Arab host, their inferiority to the Turks as fighters, and their inability to storm such Turkish positions as Medina and Maan, they had already imposed a heavy additional strain on the enemy's fighting strength, and their active revolt had been of immense advantage to the British in western Palestine. Without their co-operation, spasmodic and uncertain as it was, the force opposed to Allenby would have been substantially stronger, his right flank would have been always exposed to heavy pressure, the local Arabs might have been openly hostile, and the whole course of the campaign must have been seriously affected.