

Standoff at Zizata

On one memorable night in 1918 Australian and Turkish soldiers stood together against a common foe. By Damien Fenton



The Ottoman Fourth Army was dying. Given the job of guarding the Hejaz Railway and the eastern ramparts of the Jordan Valley, it had been all but marooned by the maelstrom that had engulfed its two counterparts in Palestine.

There, British forces under the command of Lieutenant General Sir Edmund Allenby had annihilated the Ottoman Seventh and Eighth armies in one of the most successful allied offensives of the war, the battle of Megiddo (18-21 September 1918). Within days of this victory, the Turks were driven out of Palestine, and British, Australian and Indian cavalry were spearheading the British advance into Syria.

Meanwhile the Ottoman Fourth Army found itself pinned down by a British attack towards Amman and a series of raids by Amir Faisal's Arab Northern Army to its rear. On 22 September the German commander-in-chief in Palestine, General Otto Liman von Sanders, ordered the Fourth Army to abandon its positions and fall back on the rail junction of Deraa. Chaos quickly ensued as the isolated Turkish garrisons were left to organise their own escape as best they could. Those lucky enough to find trains used them to cover as much ground as possible before being stopped by one of the many segments of track destroyed by the Arab and British raids. The less fortunate faced a nightmarish march on foot for the entire journey. Columns of Turkish soldiers, their progress hindered by the sick and wounded among them, were soon strung out along the length of the Hejaz Railway.

Left: Major-General Chaytor with Colonel Ali Bey Wahaby, commander of the Ma'an garrison. AWM B00088

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H. Septimus Powers, *Ziza*
(1935, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 244 cm, AWM ART 12673)

The temptation this sight presented was too much for the Arabs of the region, most of whom had hitherto refused to join the Arab Revolt. With their Turkish masters clearly beaten, the local tribes seized the opportunity to exact revenge for the often harsh treatment they had suffered under Ottoman rule. Small parties of retreating Turks were butchered and looted, while the larger columns were shadowed by Arab tribesmen waiting for the inevitable stragglers to fall behind. The Turks responded with atrocities of their own, massacring the inhabitants of any Arab village that lay across their path.

It was this bloody morass that “Chaytor’s Force”, named after its New Zealand commander, Major General Edward Chaytor, found itself thrust into.

Built around the horsemen of the Australian & New Zealand Mounted Division, it was Chaytor’s Force that had carried out the attack against Amman. After the capture of that city on 25 September, Chaytor’s orders were to fan out and mop up those remnants of the Ottoman Fourth Army that had failed to reach Deraa. In particular, Chaytor was ordered to locate and destroy the biggest unaccounted-for group of Turks in the area, the former garrison of Ma’an. Estimated to have a strength of some 5,000–6,000 men, this force was known to have abandoned Ma’an, almost 200 kilometres south of Amman, on Liman’s orders, but little had been heard of it since.

The first real clue to its whereabouts came

from a Turk captured by the 2nd Australian Light Horse Brigade during a sweep south of Amman on 27 September. Aerial reconnaissance the following day found the Turkish force near El Qastal. A message was dropped, informing its commander that every well to the immediate north was in British hands and that if he did not surrender his troops within 24 hours they would be bombed. Next morning, two squadrons of the 5th Light Horse Regiment and their commander, Lieutenant Colonel Donald Cameron, broke camp and rode south with orders to make contact with the enemy. Finding El Qastal to be deserted, they pushed on a further five kilometres and discovered the Turks had established a hastily entrenched position around Ziza Station. There followed one of the strangest episodes of the Palestine Campaign.

As Cameron and his Queenslanders moved forward to occupy the high ground to the north of the Turkish trenches, they noticed that hundreds of Arab horsemen and cameliers had gathered on the hills to the east and west of Ziza. Paying them little attention, Cameron concentrated on ascertaining the Turkish commander’s intentions. To his relief, a Turkish officer carrying a white flag approached the Australians shortly after their arrival and indicated that the Turkish commander, Colonel Ali Bey, wanted to arrange a meeting with Cameron. Before this could be organised, Ali Bey sent another message expressing his willingness to surrender,

but also his concerns over the ability of the small Australian unit to protect his men from the Arabs in the surrounding hills.

For by now the Arabs, men of the local Beni Sakhr tribe, were gathering, not in their hundreds, but in their thousands. Cameron's two squadrons had reached Ziza around 10 am, and the Arabs had taken their arrival as a signal that the British intended to attack. Word had spread quickly and by midday other roving bands of the Beni Sakhr had begun to converge upon Ziza in anticipation of the spoils to come.

Cameron sent one of his officers into Ziza to obtain the official surrender, but allowed the Turks to remain where they were. At the same time he sent an urgent message to Chaytor's headquarters in Amman requesting reinforcements. Upon hearing of Cameron's predicament, Chaytor immediately ordered the rest of the 2nd Light Horse Brigade to go to the Queenslander's aid; he then set out for Ziza himself.

Three years of campaigning from Gallipoli to the Holy Land had taught the light horsemen nothing if not respect for the fighting qualities of the Turkish soldier.

While welcoming this news, Cameron was disconcerted to discover that an air raid on the Turkish position had been scheduled for 3 pm. A message cancelling the attack was dispatched, but headquarters staff expressed some doubts whether it would get through to the RAF in time. Deciding not to take any chances, Cameron sent another of his junior officers into the Turkish lines, not only to warn Ali Bey, but also to provide him with the regiment's aerial identification signs. Cameron's message emphasised that even with the recognition signals displayed there was no way of guaranteeing that the pilots would see them, (or perhaps, more pointedly, take heed of them). Ali Bey thanked Cameron for doing what he could, calmly declaring that it was all in God's hands.

The 3 pm deadline came and went; then 15 minutes later, Cameron finally heard that the raid had indeed been called off. Meanwhile, the situation with the Beni Sakhr was growing more menacing by the hour. The Arab sheikhs demanded to know whether the Turks had surrendered, and, if so, claimed rights to a share of the spoils, in particular the rifles. If it were the case that the Turks hadn't surrendered, the sheikhs urged Cameron to attack, promising to give

him all the help he needed. As the afternoon dragged on, the sheikhs became more insistent and their men began to probe the Turkish positions. Soon the air was filled with the sharp retort of rifle shots and shrill bursts of machine-gun fire.

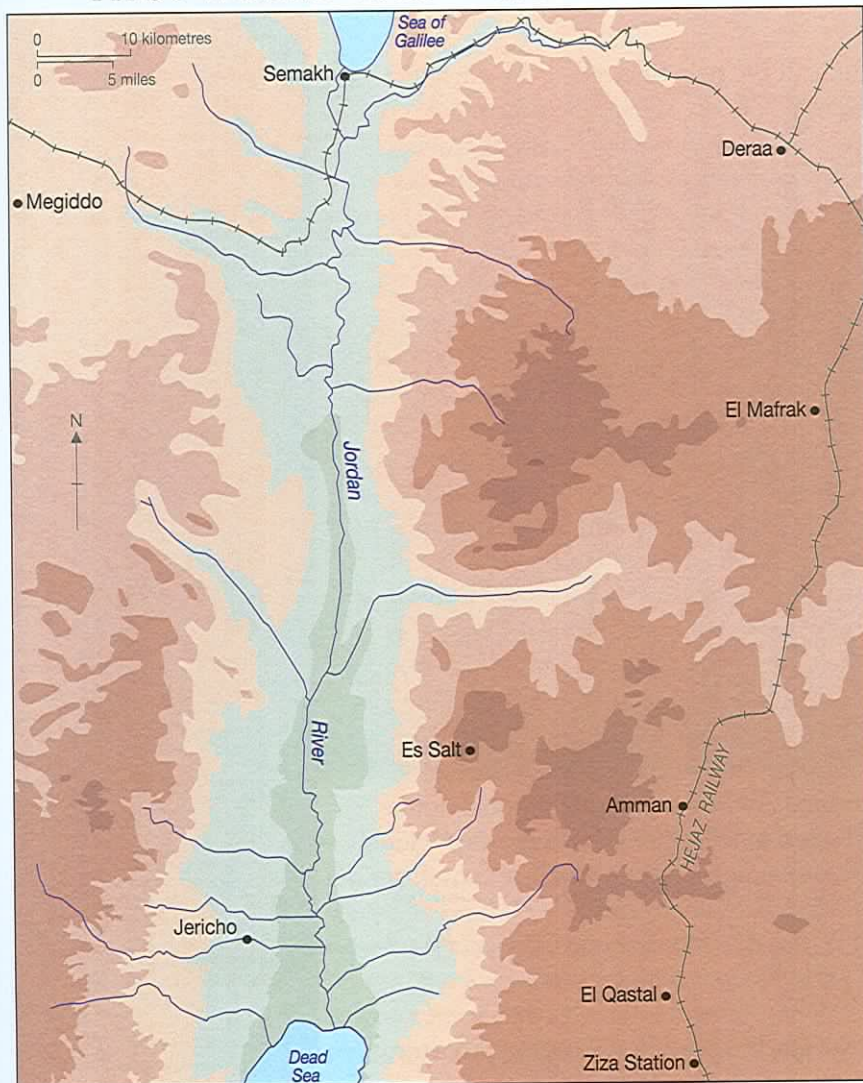
Desperate to stop the situation from getting out of control, Cameron put an end to these skirmishes by informing the Arabs that if they attacked the Turks he would attack them. This had the desired effect and by 4 pm things had quieted again. An hour later, Chaytor arrived by motor car ahead of the 2nd Light Horse Brigade. He consulted with Cameron on the day's events and decided that as the rest of the 2nd Brigade would not arrive before nightfall the Turks could remain in their trenches, under arms until the morning. Ali Bey was personally escorted by Cameron from the Turkish lines and brought before Chaytor. After the New Zealander had assured Ali Bey that his men would not be allowed to fall into Arab hands, the Colonel

reluctantly agreed to accompany Chaytor back to Amman. At that moment, as if to reinforce Chaytor's words, the commander of the 2nd Light Horse Brigade, Brigadier General Granville de Lanne Ryrie, arrived.

Chaytor quickly briefed him, then left him in command and departed for Amman. As dusk set in, Ryrie soon found himself coming under the same sort of pressure from the Arabs that Cameron had earlier experienced. Lieutenant Colonel John Richardson, commander of the 7th Light Horse Regiment described the scene: "The vulture appearance of the Arabs, who were willing that we should do the fighting and they the looting, will not readily be forgotten." By this stage the Beni Sakhr had assembled 10,000 men.

Despite the Australian presence and the closeness to Ziza, Ryrie feared that the Arabs would be emboldened by their sheer numbers, and the approach of night, and make an attempt on the Turkish positions before daybreak. There was only one thing for it: he would take his brigade and add it to the Turkish defences.

Securing the consent of the Turks, Ryrie ordered his bemused regimental commanders to deploy their squadrons at intervals around the Turkish position. In an attempt to



dissuade the Beni Sakhr from causing any more trouble, Ryrie "invited" two of the sheikhs to accompany him and his staff into Ziza. Once inside the Turkish lines, they were informed their lives would be forfeit should the Beni Sakhr attack. This message was passed to the Arabs outside while the Australians introduced themselves to their new trench mates and began to get comfortable for the night. The lack of any noticeable animosity between the two supposed enemies struck all who witnessed it. Richardson noted: "For once all enmities were forgiven and our men and the Turks boiled their quarts and made chapatties over the same fires."

Three years of campaigning from Gallipoli to the Holy Land had taught the light horsemen nothing if not respect for the fighting qualities of the Turkish soldier. The Arab, however, had wrongly earned an unfortunate reputation among the ANZACs, based largely on experiences in crowded bazaars, poverty-stricken villages, and among rapacious camp-followers. The Australian troopers had only contempt for the Beni Sakhr who surrounded them that evening, and saw little to worry about.

The Turks saw it differently. On their journey from Ma'an to Ziza, hundreds of their comrades had lost their lives to Arab attacks. Anxious to avoid a similar fate, they kept watch nervously, straining their eyes to detect the first sign of danger. The Turkish machine-gunners, having no wish to die wondering, kept up a constant fire throughout the night – often to the amusement of the Australians. "Go on, Jacko, give it to the bastards" and similar shouts of encouragement were offered from the Australian posts.

The presence of Ryrie's brigade, not to mention his two "guests", appears to have done the trick, and the night passed without any attempt by the Beni Sakhr to storm the Ziza defences. However, as dawn approached, small groups of Arabs were caught trying to infiltrate the position from the west, and the Australians on that part of the line were forced to open fire. The New South Welshmen of "C" Squadron, 7th Light Horse, together with the Turkish machine-guns, made short work of the Arab sortie.

The threat from the Beni Sakhr dissolved as the sun rose, and more reinforcements, in the shape of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade, arrived. The New Zealanders were astounded to see Australians and Turks emerge from the same trenches to greet them. To the Beni Sakhr, the arrival of the New Zealanders dashed their remaining hopes. They began to disperse, cursing both the "British" and the Turks as they went.

The New Zealand commander, Brigadier General William Meldrum, brought fresh orders with him from Chaytor. The New Zealanders would secure Ziza and keep an eye on the Beni Sakhr. Ryrie's brigade was ordered to return to Amman at once, minus an escort for the Turks. Once the Turks had surrendered their weapons and been counted Ryrie found himself in possession of 4,602 prisoners, 14 field guns, 35 machine-guns, 25 trucks and three trains. The equipment and 534 Turks who were wounded or too sick to move would remain at Ziza.

In a fitting gesture, Cameron was appointed to command the escort. In addition to his regiment's two squadrons, Cameron's escort would also include the 7th Light Horse's "C" Squadron, now distinguished by the fact that it was the first AIF unit to have fought alongside the Turks. But Ryrie had one final touch to add: two battalions of fully armed Turks were added to the party. The sentries on duty outside Amman couldn't believe their eyes. 