GROUP RESEARCH STUDY

PLANS AND PREPARATIONS FOR THE FINAL OFFENSIVE
(World War - Palestine campaign)

Submitted by

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MEMORANDUM FOR:  The Director Second Year Class, The Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

SUBJECT: Plans and Preparations for the Final Offensive.  
(World War - Palestine Campaign)

I. Papers Accompanying:

A Bibliography for this study.

II. The Study Presented:——A critical analysis of General Allenby's plans and preparations for the final offensive in Palestine in 1918.

III. Historical Facts Relating to the Subject:——

In December 1917 General Sir Edmund Allenby was called on by the British Government for a statement of his plans for furthering the successes that ended with the capture of Jerusalem.  In replying he stated that his further plans were largely dependent on the rate of advance of the railroad which was being constructed behind him.  (1)

He stated further that he proposed to establish his XXI Corps beyond the Nahr el 'Auja which runs into the Mediterranean and then advance his right to the Wadi el Auja which runs into the River Jordan ten miles north of the Dead Sea.  That during the remainder of the wet season and while his railroad was being pushed to the north he would operate against the Hejaz railroad as he was informed that there were 20,000 Turks south of Amman on that railroad.  He then hoped to gradually advance his left to the railroad junction at Tul Karm, west of Nablus, covering railroad construction and preparing for a major offensive with naval cooperation.

The Government was not satisfied with this plan and the War Office suggested an advance to Aleppo thus cutting Turkish communications to Mesopotamia (2) and as an alternative in case available forces were not sufficient to reach Aleppo, the occupation of all Palestine.  (3)

In reply Allenby stated that by June or July he expected to have a large force north of the line Nazareth - Haifa if no extraordinary difficulties were encountered.  He pointed out that an advance against Aleppo from this line meant moving against Damascus and Beirut, a front served by a broad guage railroad with good lateral communications and apparently ideal ground for defense (4), that, if strongly held, would require a large addition to his present Mounted Corps.  (5)

He again stated, in January 1918, that his plan outlined in December was the best and that he thought it advisable to deal with the Turks along the Hejaz railroad before continuing the advance to the north.

(1) OHW Vol. I p 293; Wav. p 173.
(2) Ma. p 188
(3) Ma. p 7
(4) OHW Vol. I p 294
(5) Wav. p 173
Further pressed he insisted on January 4th that it was essential to consolidate his present line (north of the Majr el 'Auja and of Bire on the Nablus road), secure his eastern flank to the Jordan and dislodge the Jericho garrison. Allenby was, in fact, already making arrangements to carry out the first part of this plan. (6)

It must be borne in mind that the British Government assumed that an advance on Aleppo following a series of great blows would drive Turkey out of the war and that the defection of Bulgaria would follow. How nearly this assumption was correct cannot be determined. (7)

Apparently there was no conception at Versailles of the difficulties of an advance to Damascus and Aleppo and as far as can be judged from the morale and attitude of the Turks in Palestine there seems to be no good reason to believe that another defeat or even the occupation of Damascus and Aleppo would cause them to rise against their German masters and conclude a separate peace. (8)

The final decision was to undertake a decisive offensive against Turkey with a view to annihilating her armies and causing the collapse of her resistance while standing on the defensive elsewhere. (9)

Lieutenant General Jan C. Smuts was sent to Egypt to consult with Allenby as to the best methods of coordinating British efforts in the Middle East for the elimination of Turkey from the war. (10) As a result of the conference the following plan was decided on:

1. An advance to the Jordan and the demolition of the Hejaz railroad, thus isolating the Turkish forces from Ma'an to Medina.

2. An advance toward the line Haifa - Tiberias. The railroad to be pushed rapidly to Haifa and thereafter possibly to Beirut.

3. The main body, advancing with the railroad to develop ports such as Haifa, Tyre and Beirut for supplies. The railroad from Haifa across the Plain of Esdraelon to Der'a where it joined the Hejaz railroad to be used by a smaller column moving on Damascus. (11)

This plan received the approval of the Government and almost immediately collapsed owing to the needs of the western theater. (12)

Allenby's position differed from that of his predecessors, Generals Maxwell and Murray. They were on the ground in Egypt while he was with his army which, it is true, was still based on Egypt but was carrying on a campaign which might have a very distant objective in a foreign country. He therefore asked to appoint a Major General to command in Egypt with two Brigadiers for two subordinate commands and his request was approved. Other requests covering the governing of more recently conquered territory were approved and he succeeded in relieving himself of much administrative detail which gave him a corresponding increase in time to be devoted to plans for the final offensive. (13)

Between the 19th and 20th of February Allenby completed the first step of the plan he had outlined to Lloyd George in December, by driving the Turks from Jericho and gaining possession of the hills overlooking the Jordan valley and thus making secure the right flank. (14)

(6) KA. p 6
(7) OHW. p 295; MA. p 3-221; WAV. 174-176
(8) OHW. p 296; MA. p 5
(9) WAV. p 177
(10) OHW. p 297; M. p 4
(11) OHW. p 298
(12) OHW. p 299; MA. p 6-59
(13) OHW. p 300
(14) MA. p 30; WAV. p 178
To increase the frontage along the Jordan sufficiently to permit of operations across the river and against the Hejaz railroad he advanced his lines between the 8th and 12th of March to include the Wadi el Auja and the hill Tel 'Asur which afforded excellent observation. (15)

Between the 21st and 30th of March the Jordan was crossed and three attacks were made on Amman in an attempt to break the Hejaz railroad. These attempts were unsuccessful and a withdrawal was carried out the night of 30-31 March. (16)

The German Offensive of March 21st had an instantaneous effect on the Palestine. The British War Office began to carry out the decision to replace British with Indian troops. (17) This continued throughout April, but in spite of it, minor operations to improve the British position were continued. (18)(19)

Allenby, by the last of April, had decided that, due to reorganization, he could not stage a major offensive until after the summer. (20) He had also decided that when it was staged its main effort should be on the western part of his front. (21) He now decided on another raid across the Jordan:

1. To attract the attention of the enemy to that flank.
2. To establish himself firmly on the plateau east of the Jordan in order to avoid exposing his troops to the torrid heat of the Jordan valley during the summer. (23)

The second attempt across the Jordan was made April 30th (24) and was unsuccessful in its immediate results. It had, however, in the months to come, a very important effect, for it caused the enemy to concentrate his attention on the Jordan valley and thereby assisted materially the final British Offensive. (25)

As the reorganization of the E.E.F. progressed during the spring and summer of 1918 the Service of Supply also was improved. General Allenby appreciated the necessity of ample supply facilities and took early steps to expand this service to meet the needs of the coming offensive. (26)

The time for this offensive of which he had been baulked in March was now drawing close. (27) The rainy season begins early in November reaching its height in December. He had therefore decided that his attempt must be made about the middle of September. His present plan was his own idea and not that of the British Government as was the one planned in December 1917. (18)

He was now informed that it might be possible to lend him 3 or 4 divisions from France for the winter, but on the 20th of July the War Office backed out of their offer of additional troops. (29) In reply General Allenby stated that he hoped to gain a decisive victory with the resources at his disposal. (30)

Allenby now turned to his own scheme which was to mass the greater proportion of his infantry and heavy artillery upon the eight mile front between the railroad and the Mediterranean sea, (31) attack northeastward, and thus open up a door through which his cavalry could pass to cut the enemy's communications by road and rail. (32)

The most vital point on the railroad was the junction between the Palestine and Hejaz railroads at Der'a and this point was out of his reach. For this reason he proposed to allot this objective to his allies the Arabs. (33)
On the 1st of August he issued secret and personal instructions to his three corps commanders. In the first stage of the attack the XXI Corps (Lieutenant General Sir E.S. Bulfin) with 5 divisions, was to break through in the Plain of Sharon. (34) The Desert Mounted Corps (Lieutenant General Sir H.G. Chauvel), with three cavalry divisions was to advance northward in the plain through the gap opened by the infantry, to protect the left flank of the XXI Corps on a line from Tul Karm to the sea north of the Nahr el Iskanderune, and to advance on Sebustiye (Samaria) by the Tul Karm - Nablus road. Thus, being astride the Turkish communications, it would cut not only the railroad to Nablus but the main Damascus - Tiberias - Nablus road. (35)

As soon as it had opened the breach the XXI Corps was to send one division to support the Desert Mounted Corps in its advance on Sebustiye and two divisions to strike the Tul Karm-Nablus road east of Anebta, turning the defile through which the road passes near that point. (36)

The Desert Mounted Corps was then ready to exploit the success, one division probably blocking the roads that converge on Nablus and the other two advancing up the plain toward Haifa. (37)

Meanwhile the XX Corps (Lieutenant General Sir P.W. Chetwode) with two divisions was to be prepared to attack astride the Nablus road. This was the embryo of the scheme with which Allenby startled his Corps Commanders three weeks later. (38)

On August 22nd he informed them that he had decided to extend his operations. As before, the main attack was to be made on the enemy's right flank with the XXI Corps which was to consist of the:

3rd Indian Division
7th Indian Division
54th Division
60th Division
75th Division
French Detachment
5th Australian Light Horse Brigade

Desert Mounted Corps
5th Cavalry
Australian Mounted Division (less 1 Brigade)
4th Cavalry
10th Division
XX Corps............
23rd Division

Now however, the XXI Corps with one mounted brigade attached was, after gaining a line from Qualquilye, on the railroad nine miles S.S.W. of Tul Karm, to the mouth of the Nahr el Faliq, was to swing up its left, advance northeastward, and take over the chief task previously allotted to the Desert Mounted Corps; that is, to advance in the direction Nablus - Sebustiye.

The Desert Mounted Corps was now given a far more distant objective. It was to advance to the Tul Karm - Haifa road between Quaqene (4 miles N.N.W. of Tul Karm) and Likterea (10 miles N.N.W. of Tul Karm) and hence march on El 'Affule, the junction of the Southern Palestinian railroad with that at Haifa. El 'Affule is in the Plain of Esdraelon or Megiddo, 25 miles N.E. of Tul Karm and about 40 miles in a direct line from the British trenches in the coast sector. Allenby however, hoped that it would be reached by the 2nd day. (39)
This scheme contrasts in boldness and grandeur very remarkably with the earlier one. Once a gap was opened time was the essential factor. In the first plan, if the cavalry reached the Tul Karm-Nablus road before the retreating Turks crossed it, well and good. There was however, a good chance that the enemy would reach Sebuqtiye before the cavalry and then retreat astride the railroad to El 'Affule with the lateral line Beisan - Haifa behind him.

If the second plan was successful the enemy west of the Jordan had no chance of retreating across the Plain of Esdraelon before his road was blocked at El 'Affule. Here, the cavalry would be within a day's march of Beisan in the Jordan valley, and at Beisan it could block the other road from Nablus to Damascus which passes through Samakh on the southern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias). Meanwhile, if the Turkish army in the Jordan valley, showed signs of evacuating its strong positions it was to be pressed hard as possible by the A.& N.Z. Mounted Division and certain other troops under General Chaytor.

This scheme greatly increased the supply difficulties but was considered justified by Allenby in view of his superiority in numbers and resources and of the fact that success would mean a complete and decisive victory and virtual annihilation of the Turkish Armies opposed to him. It is apparent that the whole scheme was dependent on surprise, on the breakthrough by the infantry and the advance of the cavalry with lightning speed. This was made possible by the great superiority of numbers. General Allenby had at his disposal the equivalent of 8 infantry divisions and 4 cavalry divisions. A total strength in the fighting line of about:

- 12,000 sabers
- 57,000 rifles
- 540 machine guns

He estimated the strength of the 4th, 7th and 8th Turkish Armies opposed to him at:

- 3,000 sabers
- 26,000 rifles
- 570 guns

This included reserves as far north as Nazareth and Haifa.

That the garrison at Ma'an and troops on the Hejaz railroad north of it numbered another 6,000 rifles but except for those at Amman they were unlikely to take part in the battle.

From Bozanti in the Taurus to just east of Damascus was the area of the Second Turkish Army, consisting of only four weak divisions, perhaps not more than 5,000 rifles all told, with a few gendarmerie battalions. It was not likely that these troops could be released from their duty of guarding the coast to intervene in the battle, at least until the British reached Damascus.

The Concentration

The greatest possible secrecy was necessary to successfully concentrate the striking force on the coast. Elaborate measures were taken to prevent discovery of the necessary moves. All tents were left standing in the Jordan valley and additional tents were put up to create the impression that additional troops were being assembled there. No fresh tentage was put up outside the Jordan valley.
Dummy horses replaced the real horses of the Desert Mounted Corps. (47) All movement to the west was made at night. All movement to the east was made during the day. (48) Dust clouds were created by mule drawn sleds. A race meet was announced for December 19th near Jaffa. Movement about concealed bivouacs was absolutely forbidden between 4:30 A.M. and 6:30 P.M. Where horses had to be watered during the day the Royal Air Force cleared the area while watering was going on. (49) No fires were lit day or night. Cooking was done with solidified alcoholic. In camps located for some time the usual activities were carried out. These camps had been enlarged some two months previous and so could accommodate about double the troops originally in them. (50) Artillery and machine gun emplacements were constructed at the same time, photographed while occupied and if known to be visible from the air additional camouflage was used. (51) The R.A.F. became increasingly active over this part of the front with a consequent decrease in the number of Turkish observers. (52)

The gradual change in the locations of troops began a month before the attack on September 19th and was continued steadily but inconspicuously until just before the attack. (53)

That the whole plan of concentration was successful was proven by an intelligence map of 17 September captured at Nazareth. This map shows organizations still at their positions of a month earlier and no sign of any concentration on the coast. (54)

THE PLAN OF ATTACK AS ISSUED ON 9 SEPTEMBER

The XXI Corps with the 5th L it Horse Brigade attached, attacking on the east was to capture the trench systems and advance eastward. As soon as the crossings of the Nahir el Faliq were cleared the Desert Mounted Corps less the A.&N.Z.Mounted Division would advance on El'Affule and Beisan to cut railroad communications and block retreat to the north and northeast. (55) One division of the XXI Corps with the 5th Light horse Brigade attached was to advance via Tul Karm on 'Atara and block the railroad between Sebustiye and Jenin as early as possible. (57)

The XX Corps attacking astride the Nablus road was to gain a position from which it could cooperate with the XXI Corps and advance to the high ground north and northeast of Nablus. (56)

The Desert Mounted Corps was to leave enough troops at El 'Affule, Jenin and Lajjun to close the Turkish lines of retreat to the north and northeast and then push on and close the roads converging on Beisan from the Jordan valley and Nablus. (58)

In the Jordan valley the A.&N.Z. Mounted Division and attached troops were to protect the positions in the valley, on the front as far as a point on the Wadi el Auja and use every means to prevent the withdrawal of troops in its front to reinforce other parts of the Turkish line. In the event of such a withdrawal an advance was authorized either to the front or east of the Jordan to join hands with an Arab force from the south. (59)

(47) OHW p'461: Wav. p 201
(48) Ma. p 100
(49) Ma. p 93
(50) Ma. p 98
(51) Ma. p 104
(52) OHW p 462: Ma. p 98
(53) OHW p 463: Ma. p 98
(56) Ma. p 112-160: Wav. p 199
(57) OHW p 455: Ma.p 113:Wav. p 207
(58) Ma. p 113: Wav. p 199
(59) OHW p 456: Ma. p 114: Wav. p 199

6.
ARTILLERY

The great bulk of the artillery was given to the XXI Corps on the right and 3/4 of that was to be on the seven mile front between the Jaffa-Tul Karm road and the sea. (60) There was to be no preliminary bombardment. (61) Ammunition was furnished on a large scale at or in front of the railheads for all mobile artillery and on a considerable scale for the immobile artillery for the early stages of the operation. (62)

SUPPLY

Owing to the nature of the country supply was very difficult. (63) In the XXI Corps two special water columns formed from the Camel Transport Corps were necessary. These consisted of 2200 camels carrying 44,000 gallons of water. (64) The Desert Mounted Corps carried five days rations either with the troops or directly behind them. Engines and pumps for the development of water supply were to be carried in the advance. (65)

COMMUNICATIONS

Effective communication was a matter of difficulty due to the speed of the advance. The following special provisions were made. All existing Turkish lines were to be used wherever possible. Each corps was given ten pigeons from the G.H.Q. loft and arrangements were made to replenish the supply at regular intervals. Wireless stations were to be erected wherever possible. Motorcyclists were to be used when possible by day and replaced by mounted men in pairs in rough country and at night. Arrangements were also made for airplanes to pick up messages. (66)

EVACUATION

Motor ambulance companies were to be used for evacuation. Casualties in the Desert Mounted Corps were to be handed over to the infantry until they had been passed. (67)

AVIATION

A squadron was attached to each corps. The squadron with the Desert Mounted Corps was short one flight which was sent to the A.&N.Z. Mounted Division in the Jordan valley. Their missions were cooperation with the artillery, contact patrols and tactical reconnaissance. One squadron at Ramle was made responsible for strategical reconnaissance, and photography. Another squadron also at Ramle with an additional flight took care of escorts and offensive patrols. A third squadron at Junction Station was made responsible for bombing operations. A balloon company was allotted to the XXI Corps. (68)

With these plans and preparations the E.E.F. rested on the evening of the 18th of September and ready for the "jump off" at 4:30 A.M. on the 19th. There remained but the overpowering anxiety as to whether the enemy was still there or had been alarmed and withdrawn leaving his front protected only by mobile machine guns and skirmishers. Almost immediately after the attack began this fear was relieved by reports of heavy gunfire from the Turkish batteries and the swift capture of prisoners in large numbers. Initially at least plans and preparations had been successful. (69)

(60) OHW p 456: Wav p 198  (66) OHW p 459-460
(61) OHW p 470: Wav p 206  (67) OHW p 460
(62) OHW p 457  (68) OHW p 460-461
(63) Ma. p 175  (69) OHW p 468: Wav. p 203
(64) OHW p 457: Ma. p 1/6

7.
There followed the battle of Megiddo, between the Hejaz railroad and the sea, from the 19th to the 25th of September. This battle included the battles of Sharon and Nablus, the capture of Haifa on 23rd of September, the capture of Samakh (70) and the capture of 'Amman (71) on the 25th of September. (72)

The extensive and bold plan of the British Commander in Chief had been successful. Its objective was sufficiently distant to call for a mighty physical effort on the part of both men and animals and it had imposed a severe strain on administrative and transport services. It had involved the complete rupture of the Turkish front by his infantry and a great flank movement by his cavalry, ending in the destruction of two enemy armies west of the Jordan. (73)

What more was in Allenby's mind he kept to himself (74) until on the 22nd of September at advance headquarters of the Desert Mounted Corps at El Lajjun he mentioned to General Chauvel his new design. He gave no instructions at this time for Haifa, Amman and Samakh were not yet captured. His mention at this time however, gave General Chauvel a chance to prepare his own plans. On the 25th of September General Bartholomew was sent from GHQ to explain to the staffs of the Desert Mounted Corps and the XXI Corps the Commander in Chief's intentions. (75)

No later than the following day (26th) Allenby held a Corps Commanders conference at Jenin and that same day issued orders for the advance. (76) On this date the Inspector General of the Line of Communications took over command to include the line Jisr ed Damiye on the Jordan to the mouth of the Nahr el Faliq on the Mediterranean. Troops were started at once to garrison Haifa and Acre. (77)

Allenby's plan was as follows:

To advance to Damascus and Beirut, employing the Desert Mounted Corps and two divisions of the XXI Corps.

The cavalry moving at once, two divisions west of the Sea of Galilee, the third moving first on D'era and after disposing of the retreating Turkish Fourth army to rejoin the remainder of the Corps. One division of the XXI Corps advancing from Haifa and Acre on Beirut to be followed by a second as soon as it could be supplied. (78) The Desert Mounted Corps was to carry two days rations for men and at least one for horses and be backed up by an echelon of lorries at El 'Affule. (79)

The expectation that the Turkish railroad from Haifa to Samakh could be used was not realized and three companies of the Camel Transport Corps proved too slow. The supply situation was serious for a few days (80) and then supplies began to be unloaded at Haifa, (31) were moved by rail to El 'Affule and thence to Samakh and to the troops by lorry from Samakh. (82)

The capture of Damascus on the 1st of October 1918 was the concluding phase of the final offensive. (83) There followed only minor operations such as the affair at Haritan on the 26th of October (84) and the subsequent occupation of Aleppo. (85)

(70) Ma. p 98
(71) Ma. p 211
(72) OHW p 656-657
(73) OHW p 560; Ma. p 160
(74) Ma. p 107
(75) Ma. p 12
(76) Ma. p 277
(77) Ma. p 279-280
(78) OHW p 561; Ma. p 223; Wav. p 224
(79) Ma. p 327
(80) Ma. p 228
(81) Ma. p 199-227
(82) OHW p 562-563; Ma. p 285
(83) Wav. p 229
(84) Ma. p 310
(85) OHW p 653; Ma. p 285
General Allenby was fortunate in that the theater of war with which he was concerned was distant from London. The efforts of those in authority in England to help were more harmful than helpful as they were made from the depths of abysmal ignorance of conditions in Palestine. Had the location of that theater of war been as convenient to the seat of government as was the theater in France it is doubtful if General Allenby would have been allowed the latitude which eventually brought him success.

The mistakes of his predecessors plus his experiences to include the capture of Jerusalem gave the Commander in Chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force a knowledge of what preparation was necessary for the final offensive far beyond the knowledge of any other man.

With this knowledge he began, after the capture of Jerusalem, a careful and systematic preparation, with the means available, for an offensive in 1918 which would finally clear the Turks and their German masters from the whole of Palestine and Syria.

Cautious and conservative in his statements to the British War Office of what he hoped to accomplish, undeterred by the failure of the British Government to furnish promised troops and by the later withdrawal of many of his tried battalions and their replacement by Indian troops, he forged steadily ahead with his preparations.

His stubborn refusal to attempt a major advance until, by minor operations, he had improved and adjusted his lines to locations which would afford room for maneuver and best facilitate a rapid and deep advance, his concurrent carrying forward of the training of new troops, improvement of supply, evacuation and communication facilities, his constant and unremitting efforts to create in the Turkish mind a belief that his next main effort would be made against the Turkish left, his postponement of the date of the offensive until September when the loss of trained troops to the western front made necessary additional time to train troops replacing them, all give indisputable evidence of the commander who has carefully estimated the situation, selected the primary objective of his campaign, and then, undeterred by any obstacle, driven steadily toward its accomplishment.

General Allenby's plans and preparations for the final offensive in Palestine and their successful realization furnish an outstanding example of compliance with "The Principle of the Objective."
REFERENCE ABBREVIATIONS

1. OHW - "Official History of the War".
2. Ma - Massey W.T: "Allenby's Final Triumph".
3. Wav - Wavell, Colonel A.P.: "The Palestine Campaign".
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KEY: (OHW) = No. 1 Text (below)

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