

CHAPTER VII.

BATTLE OF BEERSHEBA.

THE moment long waited for was now at hand, and the value of our careful preparations and patient training under trying conditions was to be tested. The morale of the army was of the highest; it had completely recovered from the two set-backs at Gaza. Complete confidence was felt in the new Commander-in-Chief.

At 5 p.m. on October 31st, 1917, the regiment left its bivouac at Asluj, and moving as advance guard to the Brigade, passed Asluj Station at 6 p.m. The track led between barren, stony hills, and a thunderstorm had made a number of small watercourses boggy. The cross-roads, four miles south-west of Bir Arara, was the point where the 2nd L.H. Brigade severed connection with the remainder of the Division, which moved on Kashim Zanna. The Regiment from these cross-roads proceeded temporarily alone, the objective being Bir Arara, which was to be taken silently with the bayonet, if held.

Bir Arara was reached at 2 a.m., on November 1st. It was not held, and apparently never had been during the night, though Turkish mounted patrols were there in the daytime in some strength. A halt was made to allow the remainder of the Brigade to join up, and then the whole column moved on in the grand, wide encircling movement against Beersheba. The second objective was Bir El Hamam, a deep well, about six miles due east of the town; a mere watering-place for Bedouin flocks. This place was reached at 8 a.m., without opposition, though the N.Z.M.R. Brigade, on the high ridges about Kashim Zanna, could be seen driving in some outposts. From Bir El Hammam the dome and minaret of the great mosque in Beersheba were plainly visible, and also many troops, mostly cavalry, moving to the north of the town. A short halt was made for breakfast.

The going since we left Arara had been good, though shallow ravines caused some congestion at times. Although the altitude had greatly increased, the country was gently undulating, and gave the Brigade the utmost scope for wide movements. Not until the true foothills of the Judean Range, which lie west of the Hebron Road, and in the vicinity of Towal Abu Jerwal, are reached, does it become really difficult for mounted troops. These hills then gradually converge on the Hebron Road, and the boundary of hills and plain is there abruptly defined at Kurnet Ghazaleh. From this spot one may be said to enter the mountain country of Judea, which extends like a great rugged backbone through to Galilee, and almost to the foot of Mount Hermon and Damascus. It is true that the plain of Esdraelon interposes a barrier between the hill systems of Judea and Galilee, but for this they are one, and the geological formation is the same. These hills, at which we had so often gazed in the far distance, were now close at hand, and were to give us a taste of their rugged quality in a few days' time.

Hurried orders directed us to move with all speed to seize the third objective, Tel Es Sakaty, and get astride the Hebron Road. The Regiment moved off at a sharp canter, and almost immediately captured six transport waggons loaded with forage, and later a fatigue party of 49 men, who were at work on a culvert. These surrendered to a section of four men, in charge of Corporal Picton, who afterwards received the D.C.M. The gallop across a wide flat, which opens on to the Hebron Road, will long be remembered by those who took part in it. Turkish Cavalry and a battery had been seen moving to the west of the road, evidently with the intention of covering that highway as a possible means of retreat. The 7th Regiment, galloping forward with the Brigade in rear, menaced this force, which hurriedly withdrew to the high ground about half a mile west of the

road, dragging their guns up the steep slopes. These guns were at length brought into action, and a hail of shells fell among the troops of the Regiment, but such is the immunity against shell-fire, of "shell, or artillery formation," especially in fast-moving bodies, that not a man was hit, though a number of the Bedouins, whose camp was in the line of fire, were knocked over. The gunners possibly were somewhat rattled by the quick work. As the road was approached, the Turkish machine guns opened fire, and Lieutenant-Colonel Onslow realised that the position was too strong and too steep to be galloped; he therefore smartly swung the whole Regiment at the gallop to the right, and crossing the road, found good cover for the horses in Wadi Aujan. Beyond this, however, it was impossible to advance, as the enemy possessed many machine guns, and any movement at once drew severe fire.

Our position was consolidated, and we linked up with the 5th A.L.H. Regiment, which came in from the right shortly afterwards. Intermittent sniping continued during the day, but as the objective had been gained, no further attempt to advance was made. Our role was to hold these positions against any enemy retirement from Beersheba.

It was a fine sight to see the Australian Mounted Division moving forward to close in on the town of Beersheba. Regiment after regiment, troop after troop, they moved forward until the whole wide plain east of the town seemed to be covered with mounted men. This movement was to culminate in the gallant charge of the 4th Light Horse Brigade, which, disregarding trenches, galloped with bayonets fixed right into Beersheba, and captured a number of guns and enemy who would otherwise have escaped, besides preventing the blowing in of an all-important well.

On our left, the N.Z.M.R. Brigade was having a hard fight for Tel el Saba, a high mound strongly trenched at the junction of two deep wadis. With the support of the 1st L.H. Brigade in dealing with machine guns flanking this position, Tel el Saba was taken at about 4 p.m. The Horse Artillery Battery (Ayrshire) attached to our Brigade, had now come into action against the guns which had attempted to check our advance; very soon the enemy guns were silenced and were withdrawn out of action. An effort was made to dislodge the machine guns in front of us by shell fire, but without success. The wadi in which the Regiment, horses and all, was hidden afforded excellent protection, but any movement above these at once drew a hail of bullets, and any advance must have caused the heaviest casualties.

At night, the line was drawn back somewhat, so as to link up better with the Brigade. The explosions and fires in Beersheba indicated that the town had fallen. At 4.30 a.m., on November 1st, the Regiment moved forward again to re-occupy the line of the previous day. Troops were pushed forward to feel for the enemy, but he had retired during the night, and the ridges hitherto held were occupied without opposition. The Regiment was relieved at noon by the 6th A.L.H. Regiment, and withdrew to a bivouac close to D.H.Q., where a water supply, in pools caused by the thunderstorm on October 31st, had been found. Most of the horses had been without water for nearly 36 hours. Thus ended the Battle of Beersheba, the first blow of a series which quickly followed, and from which the enemy dragged the remnants of his army right back beyond Jaffa, where they were only able to re-form with the assistance of fresh troops. The Infantry, in attacking Beersheba from the west, had done their part well; quickly the barb-wire in front of redoubts was destroyed by concentrated Artillery fire, and the redoubts were themselves then stormed. It needed only the encircling Cavalry to batter at the back-door to cause its speedy downfall. The Turk had, however, made all arrangements for quickly evacuating the place and blowing in the wells; the dashing charge of the 4th L.H. Brigade alone prevented him from making a good withdrawal; even so, the greater part of his Garrison and guns did get away, retiring to reserve positions at Tel el Sharia before our Infantry, advancing through Bir Abu Irgeig, could cut their line.

Many booby traps, against which all had been warned, were found in the town and