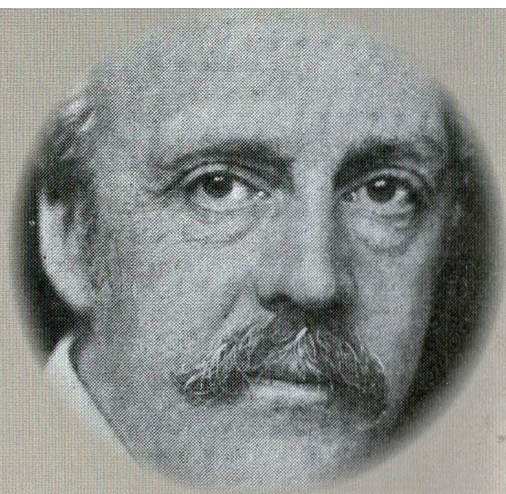


Lloyd George



Lord Balfour



General Allenby



General Chauvel

The War Cabinet authorised—

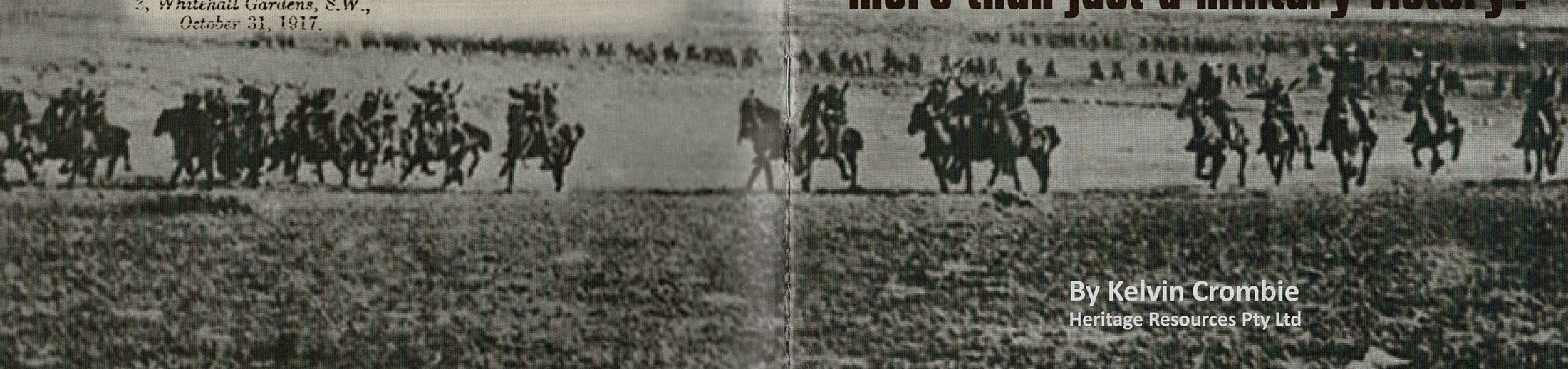
The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to take a suitable opportunity of making the following declaration of sympathy with the Zionist aspirations:—

“His Majesty’s Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
October 31, 1917.

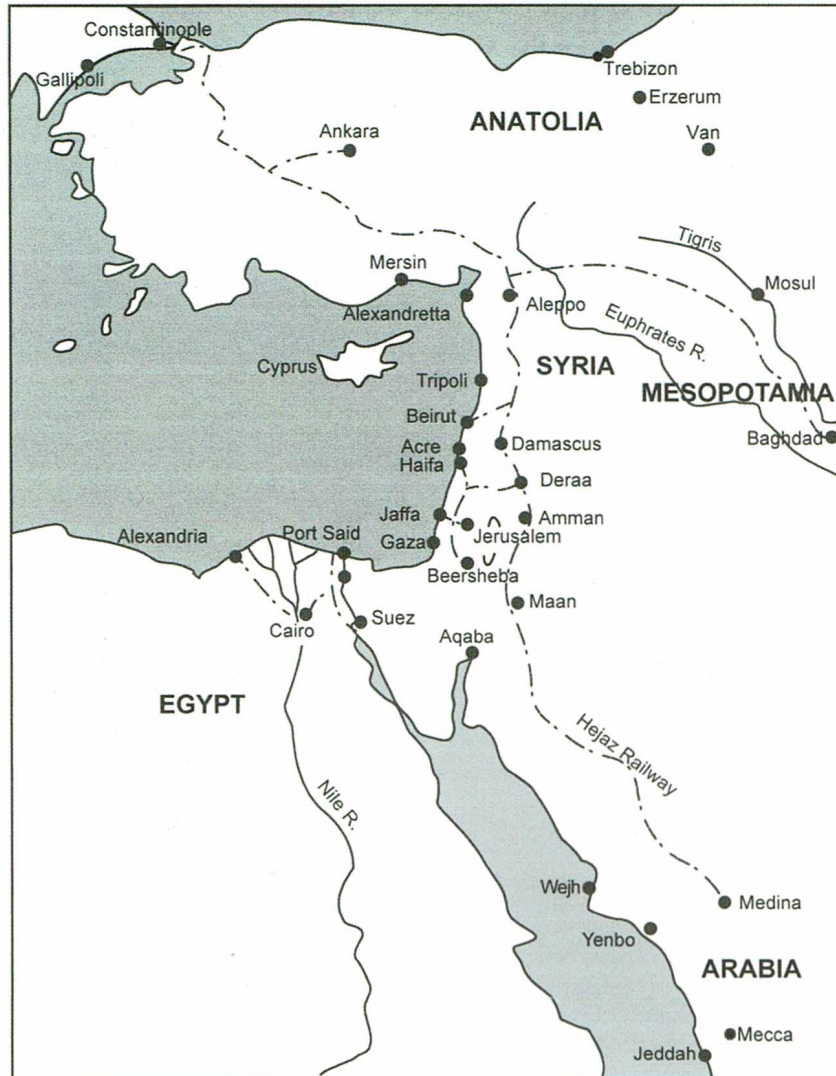
THE BATTLE OF BEERSHEBA

more than just a military victory?



By Kelvin Crombie
Heritage Resources Pty Ltd

TURKISH EMPIRE 1914 - 1918



Beersheba

Introduction – the historical importance of Beersheba



Beersheba circa 1917

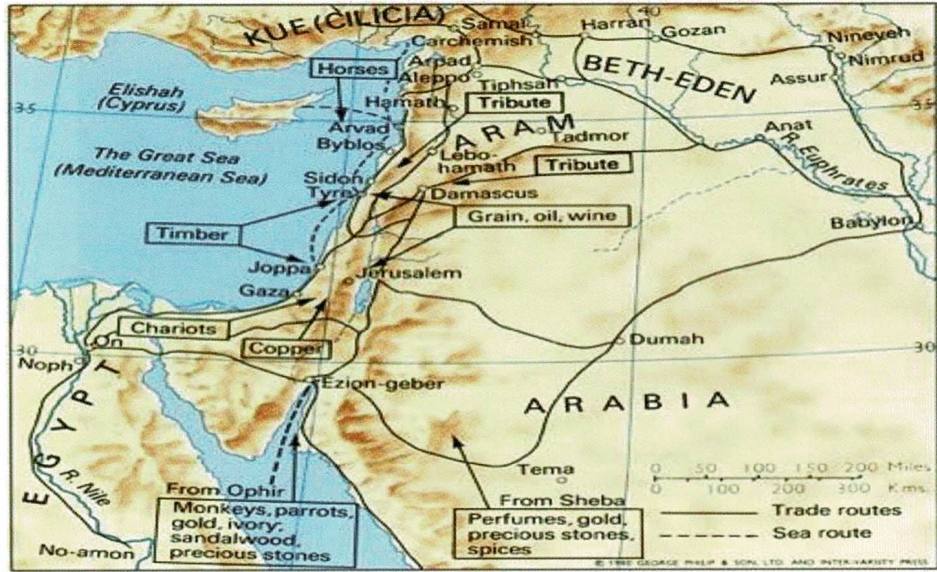
The Battle of Beersheba on this day the 31st of October in 1917 was a turning point in the Middle East campaign of World War One, and indeed in world history.

It should come as no real surprise that such a world changing event would occur at Beersheba, associated as it is with Abraham. Some four thousand years ago a covenant was cut between God Almighty and Abram (or Abraham), confirming and sealing with an oath the promises previously given to Abram. One promise involved the inheritance of the land of Canaan, a promise which was then transferred through the line of Isaac, Jacob and the children of Israel. Another promise was that all families on earth would be blessed through Abraham.

While living in this region Abraham also entered into a covenant relationship with a nearby tribe. The location where this covenant was cut was named, Beer Sheva (Beersheba) – the 'Well of the Oath'. Beersheba's importance was due to

its reliable water supply and its proximity to some of the trade routes through which produce came from the Far East en-route to Europe.

This land of covenant promise was in the centre of the world, and thereby adjacent to many of these ancient trade routes, control of which rested with whoever governed this strategic land.



Ancient trade routes passed through Israel

The land between empires

The land of Israel was also geo-politically significant, sandwiched as it was between two imperial power blocks, one to the north (namely Assyria, Babylon or Persia) and one to the south, namely Egypt.

At one time the nation of Israel was exiled to Babylon. The Persian Empire then took control over the region and Cyrus, the emperor of Persia, released a remnant of Jewish people to return to the land of Israel.

Perhaps there were geo-political motives behind this move, as the Jewish people could potentially be an ally in that strategic buffer region which lay between the empires of the north and of the south. When the Ottoman Turkish Empire took control over this region in 1517 the Jewish people were again mostly in national exile and the land of Israel became a political backwater.

Control over the trade routes, especially by the Turks caused the Europeans to seek alternate sea routes to the Far East. In their quest for new markets some Dutch ships located two large land-masses which Britain later claimed and settled, naming them Australia and New Zealand. Britain's main concern though was the region of India which she jealously guarded.

But in 1798 the French under Napoleon landed forces in Egypt as a stepping stone to ousting the British from India. Britain responded by ousting the French from this region. From that point onwards Britain understood the geo-political significance of the region of Egypt and the land of Israel.

Britain's interests were seriously challenged when the French constructed the Suez Canal in 1869, causing her to become politically and militarily committed to the Middle East in order to preserve its link to India and her eastern Empire, which included Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. Britain gained control over Egypt in 1882.

The battle lines drawn

Germany then emerged as a contender in the Middle East, as evidenced when the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, visited the Turkish Sultan in Constantinople in October 1898. He then continued onto Jerusalem and opened the new German Lutheran Church on the 31st October 1898 – Reformation Day.

The Kaiser also met with Theodore Herzl, the leader of the Zionist movement. The Zionists basically believed that Germany would assist their return to the land of Israel by becoming their protector and advocate with the Turkish Sultan. But the Germans chose not to further the Zionist cause.

When War broke out in 1914, the Turkish Empire sided with the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Britain now entered into conflict against Turkey and in 1915 the Allies attacked the Dardanelles in Turkey order to break through to their Russian ally. Australian and New Zealand soldiers (known as ANZACs) also fought at the Dardanelles or Gallipoli, as too did men of the Zion Mule Corps.

Political ramifications of a Turkish Defeat

Sensing the imminent defeat of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, Britain, France and Russia then began deliberating upon the future of this vast Empire. Britain recognised that at the end of the War she could not allow any potentially

belligerent power to be in possession of the east side of the Suez Canal. Britain also began discussion with the Emir Feisal of the Hejaz.

By May 1916 the British and French had concluded a general understanding for their future geo-political aspirations in the region.

The British resisted sole French control over the province of Syria, because they did not want to face the French on the Suez Canal after the War. The ensuing Sykes-Picot Agreement left much of Palestine to be an *internationalisation* zone, a status yet to be determined.

Defeat at Gallipoli leads to a campaign in the Sinai

Plans for the dismemberment of the Turkish Empire were premature as the Turks defeated the Allies at the Dardanelles. The Turks then turned their attention to capturing the Suez Canal.

In order to protect the Suez Canal the British formed the Egyptian Expeditionary Force or EEF, composed of British infantry and cavalry (Yeomanry) - as well as Anzac horsemen, the Australian Light Horse and the New Zealand Mounted Rifles. These men were part of the Anzac Mounted Division, which became part of the Desert Mounted Corps. Anzac and British cameliers and airmen were also involved in this new campaign.

The EEF defeated the Turks at Romani in August 1916 and the Turks were then forced east towards the boundary with Turkish controlled-Palestine. By the end of 1916 the Anzac and British forces had reached El Arish. Their task of creating a buffer zone for the Suez Canal had been accomplished.

Also during this same general period the Arab revolt against the Turks, later associated with Emir Feisal and Colonel T.E. Lawrence, began.

Political future of Palestine and a new prime minister

A new government meanwhile came into power in Britain, led by Prime Minister David Lloyd George and foreign secretary Arthur Balfour. Both these men were influenced by the evangelical Christian teaching that Israel would one day be restored to its covenanted land.

Lloyd George desired a victory in the East, and so in early 1917 he ordered the EEF to begin its campaign into Palestine – **with Jerusalem as a major goal**. But the EEF suffered two serious defeats at Gaza in March and April 1917 which

cost the lives of thousands of British and Anzac lives. A new commander was then appointed named General Edmund Allenby.

Chetwode's new plan - capture Beersheba

Meanwhile, by utilising valuable information supplied by the Jewish spy ring *Nili*, General Sir Philip Chetwode devised a radical plan to strike at the more exposed south-eastern end of the Turkish line - at Beersheba.

Never had an army successfully entered the land of Israel from that direction. The Turks had numerous trenches dug on the western and south-western areas of Beersheba where an attack was expected. However they had fewer defences on the east - facing the barren Negev desert, except the domineering Tel el Saba (the ancient Beersheba of Abraham's time). Chetwode planned an attack from that direction by the mostly Anzac mounted force, while attacking the western trenches with the British infantry.

General Allenby basically adopted Chetwode's proposal. But to achieve this ambitious plan it would be necessary to fool the Turkish and German leadership into believing the attack on Beersheba was merely a feint, and that the main assault would be at Gaza, while in fact it was the opposite.

Beersheba was to be captured in one day and with its precious water wells intact. The attack upon Beersheba, was scheduled for the 31st October 1917.

The Zionist Organisation enters the equation

For Britain's geo-political plan to succeed – that at the end of the War they would control this strategic buffer region including Palestine - she needed to find an appropriate solution to the *internationalisation* scheme. Britain, like Cyrus, needed a suitable ally to administer that strategic land between empires.

The Zionist Organisation then submitted a formal request to the British Government outlining their desire for a Jewish national entity in Palestine. Britain then had to gain the support and agreement for this proposal from her Allies.

A final decision pertaining to the Zionist request would be taken at the War Cabinet meeting scheduled for – the 31st October 1917 in London.

The Battle of Beersheba – 31 October 1917

During the days prior to 31 October Anzac and British troops began moving towards their positions. The Anzac and British horsemen of the Desert Mounted Corps under the command of General Harry Chauvel moved to their positions to the east of Beersheba.

Then early on 31 October 1917 British infantry attacked the entrenched Turkish positions on the south-west of Beersheba. The bulk of the heavy fighting fell upon these infantry. Then Anzac horsemen began moving towards their objectives to the east of the town. To them was entrusted the final capture of the town.

New Zealanders and some Australians attacked the well-defended high point of Tel el Saba, the Beersheba of Abraham's time. At about this time the men of the British War Cabinet were assembling at 10 Downing Street to discuss, among other matters, the Zionist proposal for establishing a Jewish national entity in Palestine.

By early afternoon the British infantry had achieved most of their objectives, and when the New Zealanders finally captured Tel el Saba in mid-afternoon, the major obstacle on the eastern side had been overcome. But it was getting late in the afternoon and it was essential to capture the town in one day, so as to take possession of the vital water wells.

Following the earlier British successes the Turks decided to withdraw – but before doing so they determined to destroy all of the precious water wells. It was essential for the next stage of Allenby's plan to have those wells intact.



One of the over dozen wells at Beersheba

The charge of the 4th Light Horse Brigade



General Chauvel had two available brigades of mounted men to quickly get into Beersheba and gain a victory, the British 5th Mounted Brigade and the Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade. Contrary to military reason Chauvel decided to release the Australians directly at Beersheba. They had never trained for a mounted assault, as they were essentially infantry being taken to the front line on horseback.

Nevertheless at about four thirty in the afternoon upwards of 600 Australian horsemen came onto the plain some six kilometers east of Beersheba and despite being under Turkish artillery fire, made their way across the plain, at the trot, then the canter and finally the gallop.

They rode so fast that they galloped under the Turkish artillery guns whose marksmen could not adjust the range quick enough. They then cleared the first Turkish trenches, dismounted and encountered stiff hand-to-hand combat. Some men also rode directly into the town and were able to stop the destruction of the valuable water wells.

By about six pm Beersheba was safely in the hands of the EEF and Chauvel had obtained the victory that Allenby had requested. Soldiers from Australia, Britain and New Zealand had captured Beersheba, the town associated with Abraham.

These men were in Beersheba because of the very same dynamics which put Beersheba on the map in the first place – trade routes and water. In this instance the trade routes connected Britain with India, Australia, New Zealand and the eastern Empire.

The War Cabinet decision

Quite amazingly at about the same time as the Light Horse were charging into Beersheba, the War Cabinet in London voted overwhelmingly for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. This decision later became known as the Balfour Declaration. All those who voted in favour were Gentiles, most of whom had an evangelical Christian heritage, a heritage due very much to results of the Protestant Reformation which had its official beginnings on 31 October 1517 - exactly 400 years previous.

Conclusion

The victory at Beersheba on 31 October 1917 opened the door to the conquest of Palestine, the land of covenant promise. Following the cease-fire with Turkey on 31 October 1918 subsequent discussions and peace conferences resulted in the dismemberment of the Ottoman Turkish Empire and the establishment in time of the Republic of Turkey, of five independent Arab nations – **and one very small Jewish nation named Israel.**

With this perspective in mind, we can indeed see that the Battle of Beersheba was more than just a military victory, and its grand finale, the charge of the Australian Light Horse was more than just an ordinary charge.

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More information on the subject matters discussed in this booklet can be found in the following publications and documentaries available from Heritage Resources:

31 October – Destiny's Date? – DVD

Gallipoli – The Road to Jerusalem - (Book and DVD)

Anzacs & Israel - (Book)

Anzacs & Israel – The Battle for Zion (DVD)

Journey to Beersheba

El Alamein – Halting an Impending Holocaust in the Middle East

Anzacs, Empires and Israel's Restoration 1798-1948

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