

Artillery in support of Desert Mounted Corps operations, 1917

Notes on presentation for Artillery Firepower Series, July 2017

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Introduction

The following notes are provided to accompany the presentation (and slides) made at the Firepower Series event held at ADFA in July 2017. It outlines the role of artillery and other fire support in support of the Desert Mounted Corps in 1917, with some reference to events in 1918. It also outlines the role of the horse artillery at the Battle of Beersheba on 31 October 1917.

Slide 3 - Contexts: mounted rifles, cavalry and mounted infantry

In describing the use of the Australian light horse and other mounted troops in the Sinai-Palestine Campaigns of the First World War it is commonplace to find these troops described as 'mounted infantry'. The reason for this is obscure, but it probably stems from the simplification of the light horse's role set out in Henry Gullet's volume of the Australian official history. Regrettably this conception brings with it several connotations that lead to a misunderstanding of the light horse's organisation, purpose and, most importantly, military role.

Despite a certainly similarity to the words 'mounted infantry', the light horse, was created as what was known at the time within British Empire armies as *mounted rifles*. This term was used to differentiate these troops from what was understood to be mounted infantry. Mounted rifles were a form of cavalry, organised, trained, equipped and intended to fulfil the traditional cavalry role, but do so without the use of a sword or lance (often known at the time as the *arme blanche*). In essence they were a type of abbreviated cavalry and existed because it was thought a better model for part-time or other non-regular troops who did not have the time to master using the sword/lance and the associated tactics. The distinction between the light horse and cavalry proper disappeared for most of the Australian regiments in 1918 when the Australian Mounted Division equipped all its units with swords in mid-1918.

That the light horse and other mounted troops often used dismounted tactics was, as is outlined further below, simply a reflection of contemporary mounted troop tactics, which by the early Twentieth Century placed much emphasis on doing so.

Conversely, as understood in Britain's armies of the era, mounted infantry were traditional infantry made mobile by some form of locomotion (either temporarily or permanently). The only 'mounted infantry' to take part in the Sinai-Palestine Campaign were the troops of the Imperial Camel Corps. Hence, when

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examining artillery support of the Desert Mounted Corps in 1917, the discussion is one of field artillery support of a cavalry formation in a wider combined, all-arms environment.

Slide 4 - Contexts, the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF)

The EEF was established in early 1916 and being in a subsidiary theatre at a time when resources were relatively scarce, was created with whatever was at hand. Hence its structure, as well as those of its constituent formations and units, was frequently peculiar and had a definite air of the ad hoc. The Australian and New Zealand Mounted Division, for example, spent 1916 and the first months of 1917 structured with four mounted brigades, when the standard imperial establishments dictated that there should only be three such formations. Extemporisations were commonplace throughout the force and it also had to get by with minimal resources, and often older types equipment.

This situation was dramatically altered in mid-1917 by the arrival of a new commander, General Sir Edmund Allenby. Allenby brought with him the latest ideas and organisational principles being used on the Western Front (where he had recently been commanding Third Army), but more importantly the British government and military authorities increased the resource allocation to Egypt. Troop numbers in Egypt had been increasing in 1917, and with new and badly needed equipment arriving (modern aircraft, heavy artillery etc.), Allenby was able to reorganise his command. This process converted the EEF from what was largely an ad hoc colonial expeditionary force into a modern army with a modern structure.

What had been the all-arms Desert Column was reorganised to the Desert Mounted Corps, which, as the name suggests, was made up of horse mounted troops and their supporting elements (it was originally proposed to re-title it the 2nd Cavalry Corps, the 1st being in France.) The infantry was reorganised into two properly constituted corps and other troops, such as the Imperial Camel Corps Brigade, were made 'army troops', for allocation as Allenby saw fit. This structure was first employed during the battles of 3rd Gaza/Beersheba in October-November 1917.

Slide 5 - Contexts: Desert Mounted Corps, July - December 1917

Following Allenby's re-organisation the Desert Mounted Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel, was made up of three divisions; the Australian and New Zealand Mounted (often called the Anzac Mounted), the Australian Mounted and the Yeomanry Mounted. The corps, along with its constituent formations and units, was a 'triangular' organisation, divisible by three (unlike infantry formations of the war, which were typically 'square'). This reflected what was thought a reasonable span of command for mounted troops (four brigades in division was thought too unwieldy for a single commander, for example) and facilitated the temporary detachment of mounted troops and support services for independent or detached operations, which was not uncommon for cavalry.

The guns were all part of the 'divisional artillery' with an artillery brigade (equivalent to a modern regiment) allocated to each division. In turn each brigade was made up of three, four-gun, batteries. These batteries, depending on time, place and unit were equipped with 13- or 18-pounder guns.

Slide 6 - Contexts: cavalry tactics and the fire support 'system'

By the early Twentieth Century British cavalry tactics were 'hybrid' tactics which emphasised the requirements to use fire and movement and either mounted or dismounted action as the situation required. Though mounted actions caught the eye, both then and since, the emphasis on fire action and the demands of modern warfare meant that most fighting took place dismounted. This changed somewhat in Palestine in 1917-18 when it was realised that in the local circumstances a mounted attack was often quicker and less costly than a dismounted attack, but this was a change that mostly affected 'pursuits' and 'exploitations' - open warfare.

Cavalry and mounted rifles units were organised for use in mobile operations and were much smaller than their infantry equivalents. A light horse regiment's full strength in Palestine was about 400 men and 25 officers, whereas an infantry battalion had closer to 1000 men. Consequently, a mounted unit's 'rifle strength' was much less than that of an equivalent infantry organisation. This was all the more so as when fighting dismounted one in every four men acted as a 'horse holder', leaving just three men of each section to contribute to the battle directly. It took an entire light horse *brigade* to generate the same rifle strength as a single infantry battalion.

Given these relative disadvantages the light horse and other similar mounted troops had an in-built requirement to maximise their firepower, which affected their own tactics through an emphasis on getting every available man into the firing line and seeking to quickly achieve fire superiority. It was very much about 'winning the firefight' and if this was not achieved quickly the mounted troops were to break off and use their mobility to reengage more advantageously.

At the regimental level the limited rifle-based firepower had been augmented in early 1917 by the addition of Hotchkiss portable machine-guns, of which one was allocated to each troop (one four-man section in each troop was made a Hotchkiss section, with 6 horses to carry the men, gun and ammunition). This was a significant and important change that facilitated greater capacity for fire and movement at the lowest tactical levels. It was found in 1917-18, however, that there were limits to their utility in mounted actions as accompanying the assault meant the guns rarely had time to get into action. As a result, in mid-1918 all Hotchkiss sections were trained to detach and concentrate in squadron or regimental fire support groups if the circumstances required it.

In addition to this each brigade had a Vickers gun equipped machine-gun squadron, each being made up of three four-gun sections under the command of a lieutenant (making them a platoon/troop equivalent). These guns could be concentrated for use *en masse*, or detachments made as necessary. Highly skilled at getting in to action quickly, these squadrons often had elements well forward in

columns to provide heavy fire support in the event of contact, and were also often used for flank guard duties

Lastly the horse artillery batteries provided the highest rung of the fire-support ladder, which frequently proved invaluable. The greatest restrictions they faced were the limited ammunition reserves that could be carried on the move, and the relatively light firepower (and flat trajectory) of their field guns, which reduced their effectiveness against dug-in troops.

Slide 7 - Contexts, equipment, 13- or 18-pounders

The batteries that supported the light horse and other mounted troops used varying types of guns depending on the time and place in the campaign. The batteries of the Honourable Artillery Company seem to have mostly used 18-pounders, while the Territorial Royal Horse Artillery Batteries mostly used 13-pounders, but there is also evidence of batteries changing between the types at certain times to carry out certain tasks. It is, therefore, wisest not to generalise about which guns were in use and do some historical digging to see which guns were being used at a given moment. Alan Smith's recent book, *Allenby's Gunners* is a good starting point in this regard.

Slide 8 - Beersheba, overview

Though the famous charge is the best known episode of this battle in Australia, there were several episodes that made up the day. In broad terms there were four main actions that should be kept in mind:

1. The British infantry and artillery assault to the south-west of town. Mostly ignored in Australia this large attack began early on 31 October 1917 and continued until early afternoon. It was entirely successful, but contested enough by the enemy that the British suffered 1200 casualties and a Victoria Cross was won. This attack was the responsibility of Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Chetwode's XX Corps;
2. The cutting of the Beersheba-Hebron Road by the 2nd Light Horse Brigade at Tel el Sakati;
3. The battle for Tel el Saba to the east of Beersheba; and
4. The charge by the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments at the end of the day which took the town. These attacks by the mounted troops were undertaken by the Desert Mounted Corps, under Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel.

I will focus on the action at Tel el Saba as this highlights a difficulty in using mounted troops and their field artillery fire support against prepared enemy defences. I will then briefly outline the use of artillery during the charge.

Slides 9 and 10 - Tel el Saba

Tel el Saba was a large steep sided hill found at the confluence of two wadis to Beersheba's east. It dominated the open ground around it and not surprisingly the Ottomans had built defences on it. Though there was little or no barbed wire, there were several terraced trench lines that overlooked the approaches to the hill. For the mounted troops who were to take Beersheba from the east, seizing Tel el Saba was vital.

While the 2nd Light Horse Brigade was fighting around Tel el Sakati to the north-east, the New Zealand Mounted Rifles (NZMR) Brigade was sent to take Tel el Saba. It proved a difficult task and it was mid-afternoon before they took the hill. The reason was that here, as had been the case in previous battles at Magdhaba and Rafa, the dismounted horsemen lacked the firepower to seriously damage the enemy's defensive positions. With just field artillery and machine-gun support, which could only suppress the defenders, the New Zealand horsemen had to edge their way forward under covering fire. To do so and get into positions that would allow a final assault took many hours and with time running short Chauvel, sent parts of the 2nd and 2nd Light Horse Brigades to assist. Eventually the New Zealanders got close enough that, helped by the artillery and machine-guns, they were able to launch a final assault and take the hill. By which time it was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon

Slide 11 - the charge

With the day drawing to a close Chauvel had to capture the town and the wells there so that the water could be used to support subsequent operations. With little time left before the sun set, Chauvel opted, probably at the urging of the commander of the Australian Mounted Division, Major-General Henry Hodgson, to make a mounted attack. As is well known, the 4th Light Horse Brigade, which was the closest uncommitted brigade, was given the job and the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiment formed up side-by-side in three ranks and commenced a mounted attack astride the 'W' road, which led to the remaining Ottoman positions east of the town and then into Beersheba itself. The brigade's third regiment, the 11th, was unable to form up in time as by the time it got the message it was too dark to easily pass the signal on to its squadrons.

The attack was aided by several batteries of horse artillery whose gunnery helped considerably. Soon after the charge moved off an Ottoman machine-gun opened fire from across the wadi on the left flank. This threatened to enfilade the 12th Light Horse Regiment's ranks, but the Nottinghamshire battery galloped into action, unlimbered and promptly opened fire on the offending enemy position. They found the range with their second shot and soon silenced the enemy. Its standing as an excellent example of field gunnery is only enhanced by the fact that it was too dark to use the optical rangefinder and the battery had to judge the range.