

CHAPTER VII

THE TURKISH RETREAT TO NABLUS

THE victory of Gaza gave the British Jerusalem. For more than a month after that decisive battle the enemy was retreating to the Nablus hills, the nearest natural defence position in his rear. The Turks' immediate object was the removal of vast quantities of supplies collected around Junction Station, and here on November 10th No. 1 Squadron heavily bombed a number of loading trains. The light horse and infantry advance-guards soon afterwards occupied Junction Station and Ramleh, while the airmen, still bombing and reconnoitring ahead of them, found the enemy falling back on Jaffa, Ludd, and Jerusalem. The roads of retreat were littered with abandoned ammunition, exploded railway trucks, smashed waggons, and dead animals. One highly satisfactory feature of the advance was the enemy's serious loss of flying material, and the destruction of machines and stores, at his several aerodromes on the way up to Jaffa.

German documents subsequently captured afforded evidence of the serious demoralisation of the enemy in this retreat from Gaza. One of these, a report of the evacuation of the Bavarian Flying Squadron No. 304¹ from the aerodrome at Arak el Menshiye, is worth recording in some detail, both for its own story and because of the picture it draws of the disorganisation which accompanies a hasty retreat. At a conference on November 4th with Felmy (Commander of the German air force) it was decided that No. 304 Squadron (and presumably the others also) should move to a new aerodrome in rear of the Wady es Surar, near Junction Station. For three days this move was postponed "owing to urgent need of pilots." "On November 7th the moving of material and preparing of a new aerodrome at Wady es Surar was ordered by the squadron-commander, reported to headquarters, and their sanction obtained. Loan of transport from No. 301 and No. 302 Squadrons was asked for," but

¹ This was one of the new German squadrons. See note at end of Chapter VI.

was not available, as it was wanted for those squadrons themselves. That same day, November 7th, the excitement began. At 10 o'clock that morning (according to No. 304 Squadron's report) British cavalry was said to have broken through at Tel el Sheria and to be advancing northward, and an officer with a water column declared that he had been shot at by hostile cavalry two kilometres south of the Arak el Menshiye aerodrome. Machine-guns were placed ready on the aerodrome; aeroplanes were even drawn up at the squadron place of assembly, so that their armament also might be used from the ground in defence of the camp. At 11 o'clock the report that British cavalry were near by was stated to be false. At noon lorries borrowed from No. 303 Squadron arrived, were loaded, and began the trek towards Wady es Surar. Then came urgent orders to "start moving back at once," and panic revived. There was only one empty railway waggon at Arak el Menshiye station. For the past day and a half loaded trains had been standing waiting there. Then two machines went off to reconnoitre. One of them soon came back—with its observer shot in the stomach—from a machine-gun attack on British infantry camps.

Next day, November 8th, transport lorries returned from the first journey to Wady es Surar, and were again loaded and sent off. No. 303 Squadron at Et Tine promised to send its transport again to No. 304 Squadron, but it was held back because Et Tine also was threatened and the squadron there had itself to move. These squadrons seem to have been greatly impeded by the amount of baggage they possessed, for No. 304 Squadron is stated to have had on its strength fourteen three-ton motor-lorries. At 8 o'clock British cavalry were seen south of the aerodrome, and Felmy soon afterwards wired that yesterday's alarming reports were now confirmed. Nobody had any news of the Beersheba-Jerusalem front, or of any other front, except that the British were heavily attacking on the Wady Hesi, on the coast. At 10 o'clock British airmen were over Et Tine and Arak el Menshiye, and alarm gongs were sounded, but no bombs fell. These, however, came later from raids before and after noon, as has been already related. The first raid, according to No. 304 Squadron's report, wrecked two machines and ruined a precious

motor-lorry. The second destroyed one machine, slightly damaged several others, and wounded a number of Turkish soldiers. All telephone communications from the aerodrome were destroyed. No. 301 Squadron was again asked for transport, but without success. In the growing anxiety a staff officer of the Turkish Eighth Army drove up at 6 p.m. in a car and communicated orders for immediate retreat, since by 11 o'clock that night the rear-guard was required to be in position five miles north of Arak el Menshiye. No. 304 Squadron's report proceeds, in desperate tone: "A complete move was only possible if railway waggons could be placed at our disposal. . . . The request (to Arak el Menshiye station) that waggons loaded with corn should be set free for valuable flying material was met by the reply that the Army Group had ordered that it was of the utmost importance to send back provisions. Lieutenant Berthold thereupon threatened the military commissioner that the squadron would place the railway station under fire with machine-guns if waggons were not handed over. Without listening to any further contradiction, the squadron had a corn-waggon emptied, and loaded with flying material. The only lorry we had left, on account of this night loading, went into a trench; the axle broke, and the lorry became unserviceable. Thereupon the men had to carry to the railway heavy material and clothing cases. We held up the departure of the train by seizing the engine until the waggon was loaded."

During that night (November 8th) the situation became more threatening. To make the confusion worse, the squadron-commander, after landing in the Wady es Surar, was convinced that that place was useless for an aerodrome, and he selected a new site near Ramleh. The new orders were that machines should assemble at Et Tine and transport at Wady es Surar. But the lorries due to return to Arak el Menshiye for the last load of stores did not arrive; they were diverted to Et Tine by someone who said that the British had occupied Arak el Menshiye. After sitting up all night beside their machine-guns on the Arak el Menshiye aerodrome for the lorries which never came, the disconsolate officers and men were informed at 6 a.m. on November 9th that the British were in the hills close to Arak el Menshiye, that the Arak el

Menshiye station had been mined and was ready for blowing up, and everyone was ordered to make a speedy retreat. The officers of No. 304 Squadron accordingly began to set on fire their remaining material, and Arak el Menshiye station was blown up. The squadron marched to Et Tine. At 4.30 p.m. they had reached a well on the road south of that village and there halted, as they had had nothing to drink all day. "During this halt suddenly there occurred a flight of Turks in the direction of Et Tine, for which hardly any reason could be seen. To the question of the squadron-commander to Turkish officers galloping past, mostly no reply was given; only one officer shouted back, '*Nous ne serons pas.*'" On receiving this enlightening answer concerning the situation, the squadron continued getting water, until suddenly some shells, coming from the direction of Et Tine, whistled close over the waggons, and burst a hundred metres behind." The further march was delayed, as it was feared that the dust raised by the lorries on the road would bring them under fire again. About dusk they resumed the trek, and the wreckage of overturned vehicles along the road "bore witness," says the German report, "to the destruction which had ensued." Meanwhile, the machines assembled at Et Tine aerodrome had been again raided by the British and Australian airmen and had suffered serious damage.

Between 8 and 9 p.m. on November 9th some four air-force lorries and one car moved off northward again towards the Wady es Surar. At a railway crossing north-east of Et Tine the road was blocked by eight lorries, the foremost on fire and most of the others abandoned with engines running. The airmen salvaged some of these lorries, partly cleared the road, and resumed their journey towards the Wady es Surar. "The road to Wady es Surar," says the German report, "offered a sad spectacle with material strewn along the whole road, stationary lorries, broken-up carts, dead horses, camels, bullocks, and sheep lying around, with fugitives and wounded here and there." Soon after the German airmen on this wretched retreat had reached Ramleh "the order was received that we should go back to El Afule." Some of No. 303's waggons went off by the northern route, but became stuck in the sand, and those of No. 304 accordingly retired

viâ Jerusalem. Its men had to convey flying material by lorry with them, because at Ramleh a railway collision damaged two trucks and no new ones could be obtained. Such material as was worth salvaging from this new mishap was accordingly put on to lorries, and set on the round-about road for El Afule. On November 12th the unfortunate little column had reached El Lubban, south of Nablus, at 3 p.m., and was being collected for the descent of the steep hairpin bends, when the last lorry, "driving rather fast, went over the side of the road." It was completely wrecked and most of the men riding in it were killed. Finally the hard-trying remnant reached El Afule, the new aerodrome, on November 20th. Five machines only of No. 304 Squadron reached that place. They flew from Ramleh.

The disorganisation of the enemy's air scouting and fighting force was plainly perceptible in the absence of patrols or any opposition from the air to Allenby's advance. The British and the Australian scouting machines flew out into the blue towards Nablus and Tul Keram, and each fresh rear-guard which they reported was dislodged and thrown back by the advancing cavalry. On November 17th, the day after Jaffa was occupied, the Australian airmen found on the main road from Jerusalem to Nablus the first signs that the enemy was abandoning the Holy City. The road was crowded with transport all going northward.

The cavalry pushed forward towards this road about Bireh, and No. 1 Squadron bombed that village ahead of them on November 22nd and 24th. On November 28th a combined force from No. 1 and No. 111 Squadrons attacked the enemy aerodrome at Tul Keram, and here at last again met the German airmen. One S.E.5.a from the British squadron was missing after the action, and a B.E. and an R.E.8 from No. 1 Squadron were forced to land behind the British lines on the way home. The German machines, while not venturesome in the daytime, had at evening been bombing and machine-gunning British camps near Ramleh. On both sides air bombing suddenly revived. Tul Keram was again attacked by a combined force of eleven machines on the morning of November 29th, and about the same time a British pilot in a



THE "HAIRPIN-BEND" ROAD IN THE HILLY COUNTRY SOUTH OF J. L. LAUREN

Several bombs can be seen hanging to the left of the village

*Just H at Museum Original Photo No B3320
Taken 6th March, 1918*



JERUSALEM, FROM THE AIR, SHOWING THE MOUNTAINOUS COUNTRY
AROUND THE CITY

Lent by Capt A T Cole No 1 Sqn AFC

Bristol Fighter and Lieutenants Austin and G. Finlay² (observer) in an R.E.8 met six German scouts and shot down two of them out of control. The Germans that day were also bombing; they raided Julis aerodrome and hit No. 113 Squadron's orderly room. Tul Keram, in reprisal, was promptly attacked again in a night-raid.

Tul Keram presently became famous and was a favourite landmark of Australian airmen.³ It is notable especially in the record of one of them, Captain Drummond, a Western Australian boy, who, after enlisting in the A.I.F. straight from school, had joined the Royal Flying Corps and qualified as a pilot early in 1916. Thence he was attached to No. 1 Australian Squadron in its early days, and about this time (the end of 1917) was transferred as a flight-commander to No. 111 Squadron, and subsequently to No. 145 as squadron-commander. On December 12th Drummond was flying a Bristol Fighter of No. 111 Squadron, with an air-mechanic as observer, in escort of an Australian patrol of two slow two-seater machines. Near Tul Keram three German Albatros scouts suddenly appeared over them and prepared to attack. Drummond at once flew over alone to meet the enemy, regardless of the odds against him. He shot down one Albatros, which crashed, and chased the other two; one of these, severely damaged by Drummond's fire, broke up in the air while manœuvring to escape, and the other, chased down very low and seeking to land in a hurry, flew into the side of a hill and was smashed to pieces. Drummond thus destroyed all three single-handed.⁴

This was an example of what British and Australian airmen, when once they were adequately equipped, could do against hostile aircraft. The arrival of the Bristol Fighter and the S.E.5a in Palestine marked the end of the German airman's reign of superiority in the sky. His new squadrons⁵ were equipped with Albatros D.3 single-seater scouts and A.E.G. two-seaters. But, as has been previously explained, when the enemy technically held the superiority, he never

² Lieut G. Finlay, D.F.C.; No. 1 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Woolclasser; of Glebe, Sydney, and West Perth, W. Aust.; b. Glebe, 7 Sept., 1893.

³ See note at end of chapter.

⁴ See note at end of chapter.

⁵ See note at end of Chapter VI

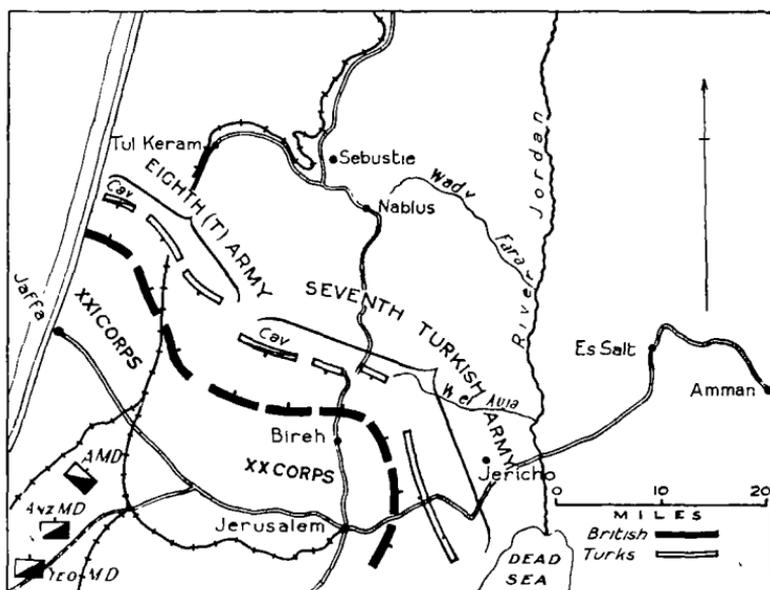
fully asserted it, and by the time his numbers were reinforced modern British machines had arrived and his opportunity had disappeared. From January, 1918, onwards he was gradually driven out of the air, until finally he was almost afraid to show himself in the sky at all.

In No. 1 Squadron the change from the mixed collection of R.E.8's, venerable B.E's, and Martinsydes was made gradually. Nieuports and S.E.5's arrived for No. 111 Squadron in ones and twos, and for each fighting scout thus acquired that squadron transferred a Bristol Fighter to No. 1 Squadron. The Australians in turn handed over their replaced R.E.8's to the corps squadrons of the 5th Wing, and the B.E's and Martinsydes to the new No. 142 Squadron. There was some difficulty with the Nieuports—French machines—which arrived without certain fittings and with the technical directions for assembling the machines written in French. Ultimately these were all replaced by S.E.5's. The R.E.8's were quite serviceable for tactical reconnaissance on the front line with the corps squadrons, but were unfitted for long strategical patrols over the enemy's rear areas. This was in future to be the work of the Army Wing. It was safer and more economical to use Bristol Fighters for distant reconnaissance than to send out older and slower machines escorted by the Bristols. The wisdom of this policy was amply justified.

Thus by the end of January, 1918, No. 1 Australian Squadron was equipped with nine Bristol Fighters, two R.E.8's, five Martinsydes, and five B.E's. By the end of March all older types had disappeared and the squadron comprised eighteen Bristol Fighters. The Mark I Bristol Fighters (190-h.p. Rolls-Royce engines) were gradually replaced during 1918 by Mark III type (260-h.p. Rolls-Royce). Thenceforth No. 1 Squadron, with these machines, carried out most of the Army's distant reconnaissances and all the photography for map-making purposes; it furnished frequent bombing patrols and special escorts, and its pilots sought out the enemy for combat as regularly as did the single-seater fighting scouts of No. 111 Squadron. Month by month the Australians' record of "number of hours' flying" always exceeded that of any other squadron. They

made and kept this proud position largely by virtue of their extra strength in flying officers.⁶

Jerusalem had been occupied on December 9th, after a strong attack by the XX Corps on the Jerusalem-Nablus road had forced the Turks to evacuate the city. The enemy was pushed rapidly out of the hills on the north and east. The weather was stormy and wet, and the airmen were able to afford little assistance to the operations on the ground. In a sunny two-days' interval No. 1 Squadron bombed the supply



dump and boats at Rujm el Bahr at the northern end of the Dead Sea. Then the rain-storms returned. Flying being mostly impossible, No. 1 Squadron devoted its energies to moving up from Weli Sheikh Nuran aerodrome to Julis, where No. 111 Squadron was already located. The heavy rains almost immediately revealed the worst features of the clay landing-ground, and No. 1 Squadron changed over to a better-drained site closer to Mejdal.

Meanwhile, in continued rain, the XXI Corps on the Mediterranean flank attacked again, crossed the Wady el

⁶ See page 74, Chapter VI.

Auja north of Jaffa, and drove the Turks to further retreat. Despite rough weather, all four air squadrons on the front bombed these retiring Turks. The enemy made several serious attempts to retake Jerusalem. His loss of it was also a grave loss of prestige; indeed, captured documents described it as a political calamity. But all his counter-attacks were beaten off; their result was only the pressing forward of the British line nearer to Jericho.

The end of the year 1917 marked also the end of the drive forward from Gaza. The Turkish armies had been broken into two parts; one force of about five wasted divisions had halted in the plain north of Jaffa and Ludd, and another, of approximately six divisions, on the eastern side of the mountains of Judæa in the region of the Jordan Valley. By degrees the enemy's line of battle was adjusted so that the Turks had their XXII Corps occupying the coastal sector, their XX Corps at the head of the Dead Sea,⁷ and their III Corps in the hilly centre before Nablus.

Note.—Not long afterwards, on 27th March, 1918, Drummond fought a most gallant engagement with six German scouts over Tul Keram. Drummond has told the story in Australian newspapers. "We were just sitting down to breakfast," he said, "when news came of a German machine over the lines, wirelessly. Two pilots were ordered out to deal with him. One could not get his engine to start, so I took his place and went out in my machine, a Nieuport. It had only one gun, firing through the roof. We chased the German back from the lines north of Jaffa to his aerodrome at Tul Keram, where I got a good burst into his tail, and his observer dropped down hit into the machine. The other pilot was chasing him down to the ground, but I stood off, as I had just seen six enemy machines coming in from the north. My mate did not see them, followed the first German machine down, and went off in ignorance of the danger. I had a stiff fight with the six new enemy scouts, shot down one for certain, and sent another down in a spin. But the remaining four were making the fight too hot, and attacking me from underneath, where I could not get at them with my gun. They forced me down lower and lower, my engine was not working too well, and I was nearly done. I had had no breakfast—it is a bad thing to go up without breakfast. I dropped towards the enemy aerodrome in a spin, thinking I was beaten, and it was better to be captured than killed.

"I landed there on their aerodrome, and some men came rushing out. Suddenly I found my engine picking up, and determined to give

⁷ It is a curious point that two of the Turkish Corps, and also several of the divisions within those Corps, had the same numerical titles as British Corps and divisions opposed to them.

them another run for it. I took off from the ground and got about half-a-mile's start from the four Germans above, who had also concluded that the fight was over. I skimmed the hangars, and made for our lines. Here and there infantry tried to shoot at me. I was flying very low, only a few feet above the ground, and simply went straight at any men on the ground, and forced them to lie down. I landed four times altogether in Turkish territory—whenever my engine failed or a hill appeared—once in the middle of a cavalry camp at Mulebbis. Here they came up to take me again, and one fat man actually laid a hand on one of my wings, but again my engine picked up, and I fired a few more frantic shots and flew on skimming over their heads. I carried away a line full of washing with my undercarriage as I left this camp. The four German machines kept on behind and above me, but at last only one was left in the chase, and he, we found afterwards, was Felmy. I finally got home and landed just inside the Australian lines on the side of a hill. I fell unconscious when I got out of the machine—an evil effect of no breakfast."