

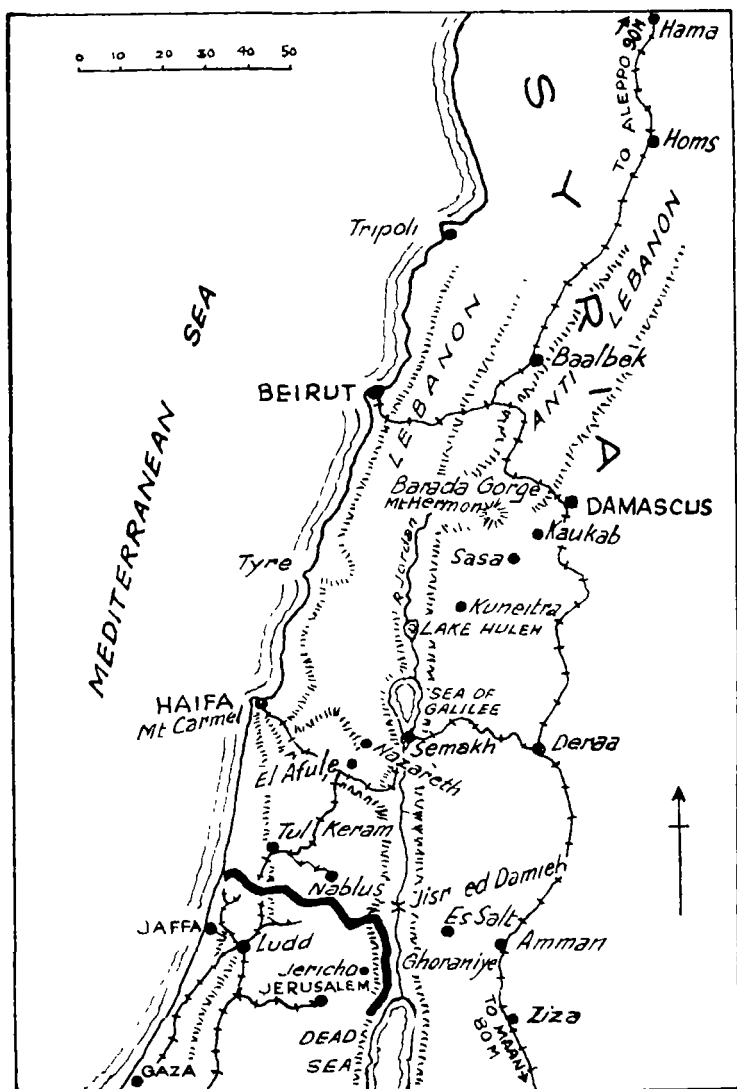
CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAST CAMPAIGN IN PALESTINE

It will be remembered that at the time of the capture of Jerusalem (9th December 1917) Mr Lloyd George was most eager for the Allies to direct their blows not at Germany direct, on the apparently impenetrable Western Front, but at her "props" in the Balkans or Middle East. His adviser, General Wilson, while chief of the Joint Allied Staff at Versailles, secured the Supreme War Council's conditional approval of an offensive in Palestine.

But at that time Allenby, harassed by the winter rains, which broke down roads and railway, wanted to undertake for the present only a much smaller task—to adjust his northern front on the one hand; and on the other to strike out across the Jordan to co-operate with Lawrence's Arabs, who were harassing the Turkish garrisons in Arabia by constantly attacking the pilgrims' railway by which these garrisons were supplied. Lloyd George, however, wanted a much more extensive operation, a thrust northward to Aleppo in Syria; this, he assumed, would cause the Turks to abandon their allies. Allenby was accordingly asked what force he would require for it. His estimate was colossal; but General Smuts, being sent to Palestine to advise the War Cabinet, suggested that, as a thrust from Palestine to Aleppo would incidentally cut Turkish communications with Mesopotamia, the campaign in Mesopotamia should be relaxed and part of the Indian infantry and cavalry there brought to Palestine.

This was accordingly done; but by then the great German "Michael" offensive of March 1918 in France



PALESTINE AND SYRIA, SHOWING THE BRITISH LINE (BLACK) IN FEBRUARY 1918, BEFORE THE RAIDS ON AMMAN AND ES SALT

had put an end to all plans for an early decision in Palestine. Instead 60,000 men—the 52nd and 74th Divisions and twenty-two British infantry battalions, as well as most of the Yeomanry (transformed to machine-gun companies), had to be sent from Palestine to France. Allenby had to reconstruct all his British divisions, cavalry and infantry, except the 54th, as Indian divisions, each with a British nucleus. Two new cavalry divisions, the 4th and 5th, were thus formed. The Australian Mounted Division was reorganised so as to become more completely Australian; the Imperial Camel Brigade was disbanded and its Australian members formed a new Light Horse brigade,¹ the 5th, under one of the finest Australian cavalry leaders, Brig.-General George Macarthur Onslow. The brigade (eventually completed by the attachment of a French colonial cavalry regiment) joined the Australian Mounted Division, which, differently from its sister division (the Anzac Mounted) was afterwards equipped with swords. In June a further call came from the War Office, for the 54th Division and half of the Australian Light Horse to be sent to France also—the Light Horse as infantry reinforcements. Allenby then made his first protest, and as some objection came also from Australian sources the proposal was fortunately dropped.

Meanwhile Allenby had begun his active co-operation with the Arabs. They were then harassing the Turkish garrison at Ma'an, sixty miles south of the Dead Sea, on the pilgrims' railway. He decided to destroy that railway where it passed along the high plateau east of the Jordan, at the squalid Arab town of Amman (once the flourishing Greco-Roman colony of Philadelphia).

In February the British front had been advanced eastwards through the desolate Judean wilderness into the Jordan valley, nearly 4000 feet below, and to the western

¹ This occurred *after* the raids on Amman and Es Salt. The six British camel companies continued to serve as such in the Arabian Desert. Australians were given horses and became the 14th and 15th LH Regts

shore of the Dead Sea. In this move the Anzac Mounted Division, working to the south of the infantry, had helped by outflanking the Turks, who thereupon withdrew from Jericho. The Light Horse had entered Jericho on February 21st, and the line had been established along the Jordan, whose normally dry, grim valley was just then blooming with its few weeks of spring flowers and greenery.

From this valley the raid on Amman was launched on March 22nd when some of the 60th (London) Division and Anzac engineers managed, with great difficulty, to swim the river which was flooded by rain, and build a bridge at Hijla. After twenty-four hours' fighting the main crossing at Ghoraniye on the old road to Amman was also seized and bridged. By the morning of the 24th the 60th Division and Anzac Mounted Division were pushing into the bare, precipitous hills rising to the plateau, 4000 feet high, on which Es Salt and Amman lay.

The force went by three tracks but at once found two of these impassable for any vehicle, and, in the rain which now recurred, almost impassable for camels despite the efforts of their Egyptian drivers. By the evening of the 25th Es Salt on the northern road was taken, and Ryrie's 2nd Light Horse Brigade and the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade pushed up the other tracks straight for Amman. By the morning of the 27th the mounted troops were attacking that township, which lay in a dip before them, New Zealanders from south, Camel Brigade from west, Ryrie's brigade from north-west. The railway was cut and blown up north and south of the town, and in two days' stiff fighting the New Zealanders captured a commanding height (Hill 3039) on the south. But the Turks and a battalion of the German Asia Corps, firing across the valley from the old Roman citadel on the heights east of the town and from other positions, stopped the advance, the British infantry, when part of it came up, also being held.

After constant attempts, on March 30th the force was ordered to withdraw. Retirement was more difficult because many of the Christian and other inhabitants of Es Salt, who had eagerly welcomed the troops, now had to flee, escaping with the troops as best they could. With the Anzacs covering the rear, the movement back over



THE ES SALT-SHUNET NIMRIN ROAD

*(The demolition in the distance was done by the
Turks when retreating in September 1918.)*

the Jordan ended on April 2nd. Only the Ghoraniye bridgehead was retained; the Turks attacked it on April 11th but were thoroughly beaten. A similar attack near the north-eastern shoulder of Allenby's front, where it turned westward from the Jordan valley along the Wady Mellahah, was twice repelled by the Camel Corps (not yet disbanded) on the same day.

The Arab forces, which were to have found touch with the British after the Amman raid, now could not do so. But farther south they pushed on with their attack from three directions against the pilgrims' railway at Ma'an, and in mid-April destroyed it so thoroughly that it could not be repaired. Allenby was still anxious to co-operate with them, and also to rob the Turks of the wheat-crop on the Moab plateau, then about to be reaped, and some local Arabs offered to co-operate.

Accordingly, after a strong demonstration at Ghoraniye bridgehead (an action later regretted) and two bold reconnaissances to the assembled Arabs, he launched a second big sortie—the objectives this time being the foothills at Shunet Nimrin, and Es Salt on the plateau above. Allenby hoped, if these were taken, to strike northwards to Deraa, a vital railway junction. Both Anzac and Australian Mounted Divisions took part, and the command in the Jordan valley passed to Lieut.-General Chauvel.

The attempt began on April 30th. While the 60th Division attacked the Turks in the foothills, the leading brigades of the Australian Mounted Division dashed fifteen miles northwards on the east side of the Jordan to near the Jisr ed Damieh bridge. Here, after leaving the 4th Light Horse Brigade to hold back any enemy from west of the river, the 3rd Light Horse Brigade (Wilson) scrambled up the mountains to Es Salt, and by most vigorous action seized the town that evening.² Two other brigades and headquarters came up a parallel track farther south. The plan was for two brigades—Ryrie's and 5th Yeomanry—to descend from there on the rear of the Turks facing the 60th Division.

But two projects miscarried. First, the 4th Light Horse Brigade guarding the Jordan crossing was driven

² For this brilliant fight see *Vol. VII, pp. 610-13.*

back in hard fighting by Turks, some of whom then pressed on by that route towards Es Salt, in rear of the Australian Mounted Division—others pressed southwards, where a number of British guns, caught against the foothills, were lost. (The Turks were found to be also crossing by another bridge farther south.) Second, neither the 60th Division attacking repeatedly, nor the two mounted brigades, could dislodge the Turks in the foothills—the only chance had lain in surprise, which here failed. The Arabs—who, not unnaturally, considering how many of their people were at the mercy of the Turks, waited to see which side won—did nothing to help. On May 4th the troops had to be again withdrawn, many refugees from Es Salt again thronging the roads.

Of these two raids the unhappiest result, of which little has been recorded, was the fate of those villagers, Christians and others, who had welcomed the Allied troops but could not get away with them—a dreadful and ancient feature of war, but one which in 1914-18 was mainly confined to operations of the Middle East. But though generally unsuccessful, the raids had one result intended by Allenby. The new German commander (Liman von Sanders of Gallipoli fame, Falkenhayn having been recalled on March 1st) had his attention attracted to the inland flank, whereas Allenby intended, when the time was ripe, to break through near the sea. After an unsuccessful effort, on April 9th-11th, to improve the position there, the front was quiet throughout the summer while Allenby reorganised his divisions. During these most trying months the malarial Jordan valley—over 1000 feet below sea level—and its vital bridge-heads were held with as few troops as possible. To reduce numbers, mounted troops were used; and, as the British and Indian cavalry were then reorganising, this task—much the worst in that summer, as the

British Official Historian³ states—fell mainly on the Anzac troops. For the Light Horse, despite full measures against malaria, this was the hardest service in the war.

In midsummer, on July 14th, occurred a night attack by a powerful German detachment upon the northern angle of the line in the Jordan valley at the prominent hills of Musallabeh and Abu Tellul. That corner was most difficult to defend, but these two hills were held as a protruding bastion, Musallabeh forming the front, and Abu Tellul behind it protecting the vital stream of the Auja. The attack was expected, and it was known that a determined enemy could penetrate between the flanking posts into the valley between the two hills. The Light Horse leaders, however, were confident that the posts would hold out even though surrounded, and Cox's 1st Light Horse Brigade, which held the bastion, would there overwhelm the enemy with its reserve regiment.

And so it happened, although the attacking troops proved to be German battalions of the Asia Corps. It was their only attack. The posts held to the last—one under Lieutenant W. K. King was annihilated; the Germans were swept from Abu Tellul by counter-attack, 358 being captured as well as 41 machine-guns. On the Mellahah a German side-stroke was upset by a handful of the 5th Light Horse Regiment who, under Lieutenant J. D. Macansh, twice cleverly worked out among the enemy and then, shooting right and left, killed, wounded or captured about 100 in all. This German enterprise was part of a plan to drive the British from the Jordan valley; the Turks failed to support it, and the German catastrophe had strong reactions in the Turkish Army and among the inhabitants of Palestine.

The three Turkish armies—8th, 7th and 4th—now facing Allenby were known to be in very bad shape.

³ Captain Cyril Falls, *Egypt and Palestine*, Part II, p. 423.

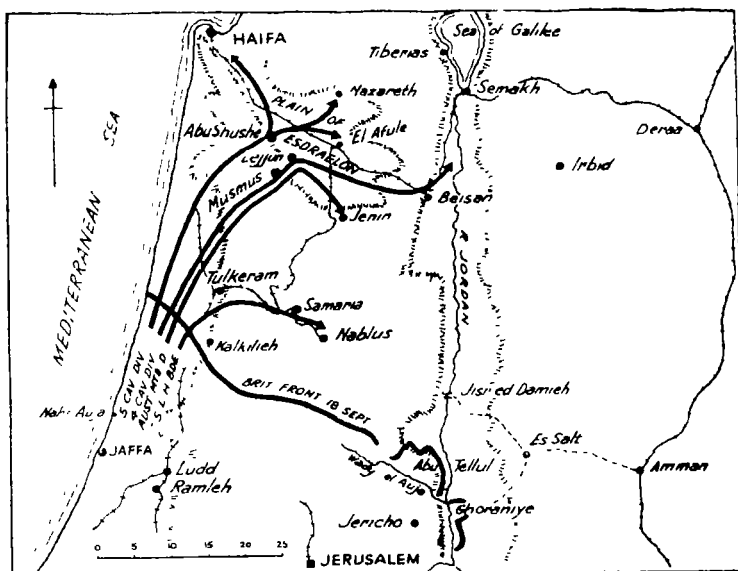
Allenby estimated their strength at 26,000 "rifles", 3000 "sabres" and 370 guns, against which he had 57,000 rifles, 12,000 sabres and 540 guns. The "ration strength" of his three army corps was 140,000 against the Turkish 103,500. Captain Falls thinks the Turks were probably rather stronger than Allenby estimated; but their morale had sunk—in one week fifty-two deserters came in.

Allenby had long before decided that, in order to avoid the rains of November and December, he must deliver his great attack in September. By September 5th the Jordan valley was held only by General Chaytor of the Anzac Mounted Division with a light force of mixed troops of which his division was the backbone. As other cavalry was withdrawn to the coastal flank, lines of rough trestles resembling horses were erected to give to air observers the appearance of horse-lines. Sledges driven along the powdered tracks maintained the dust cloud that normally filled the stagnant air. When on September 16th General Chauvel moved to the coast, his conspicuous headquarters camp on the Jericho road was kept standing and lighted. An officers' hotel in Jerusalem was requisitioned ostensibly for Allenby's advanced headquarters. All real moves were made at night, and the air force—by then much superior to the German—kept away German pilots. The result was that, though by September 18th Allenby had massed the bulk of his army on the extreme left, the Turkish intelligence on September 15th reported only "some regrouping" of cavalry units there, "otherwise nothing unusual to report". Meanwhile the air force was mapping the Turkish dispositions almost at will, the 1st Australian Squadron being conspicuous in this work.⁴

At dawn on September 19th, after a bombardment

⁴ The commander of the British Air Force in the Middle East, Air Vice-Marshal Sir J. Salmond, referred to this squadron as "perhaps the finest that ever took the air".

from air and ground, Allenby's infantry broke the Turkish line at its coastal end. By 9 a.m. the cavalry of the Desert Mounted Corps, commanded by Chauvel, was picking its way over the old trenches and through barbed wire cleared by its advanced parties, while the infantry wheeled north-east towards the hills to



THE CAVALRY THRUSTS IN PALESTINE,
19th-21st SEPTEMBER 1918

(The infantry thrusts which broke the line for these, and then pressed the retreating Turks, are not here shown. On September 23rd, after infantry action, the Anzac Mounted Division began a similar thrust from the Jordan Valley to Es Salt and Amman.)

attack Tul Keram and other positions. The two Indian cavalry divisions, going first, raced parallel along the coast and then, crossing the Carmel range by two passes, emerged before dawn of the 20th at Lejjun (near Megiddo) and Abu Shushé on the plain of

Esdraelon some thirty miles behind the Turkish front,⁵ just in time to stop some Turkish reserves from blocking the Musmus Pass.

The two divisions then raced eastwards for the vital points on the Turkish communications. They reached Nazareth that evening and almost captured General Liman von Sanders whose general headquarters was there, but who managed, with clerical staff, temporarily to fight off the attack.

The Australian Mounted Division was Chauvel's reserve in this drive. It had followed the more easterly cavalry division, the 4th, through the Carmel range, and then despatched one brigade (the 3rd, under General Wilson) south-east to Jenin, in order to catch in rear the main part of the retreating Turkish centre, which would there emerge from the hills. The brigade moving very fast reached the place by evening of the 20th, and swooped on it from the rear. Lieutenant P. W. K. Doig with his troop, seeing an outlying camp, instantly charged it, capturing nearly 2000 Turks and Germans. While the main body was seizing the town, the 10th Regiment went on southwards to encounter, in the night, the main force of retreating Turks. Actually the Turks were met by a troop under Lieutenant R. R. W. Patterson who, in the dark, struck the road farther south than others. On the suggestion of a Victorian trooper (T. B. George), Patterson opened fire and bluffed nearly 3000 Turks into surrender.

By morning 8000 Turkish prisoners were held by the 3rd Light Horse Brigade at Jenin. The 4th Cavalry Division seized Beisan through which Turkish communications led to the Jordan valley; the 5th captured Haifa, on the coast. Brig.-General Onslow's 5th Light Horse Brigade, attached to the British infantry at Tul Keram,

⁵ Lieut.-Col. W. J. Foster (formerly A.D.C. to Genl Bridges but then G.S.O.1 of the 4th Cavalry Division) wore himself out that night in successful search for a brigade that had taken a wrong track through the range. He reported to his chief, Maj.-Genl G. de S. Barrow, who then went on alone and saved the situation.

working in most difficult country, destroyed the railway line north of Samaria, behind the Turkish centre.

This overwhelming sweep was vitally helped by the air force. Flying the only Handley-Page bomber in the Middle East, Captain Ross Smith, with other pilots, during the hours immediately before and after the main attack bombed the Turkish signal centres, which the Australian airmen had carefully mapped out, at Tul Keram and Nablus (8th and 7th Army Headquarters), El Afule and Nazareth; it was largely through this that the Turks had no news whatever from their western flank, and in most cases the first intimation of the catastrophe was the appearance of the cavalry at these vital centres in their rear. The retreating Turks were also terribly bombed on the narrow roads through the passes. Their 8th Army, nearest the coast, was completely destroyed; and the 7th (under Mustafa Kemal) next to it was routed. But the 4th Cavalry Division after its great ride had left a gap of twenty-five miles along the Jordan between Beisan and the bridge at Jisr ed Damieh (which the New Zealand Mounted Rifles, from the Jordan valley, and British West Indians seized on September 22nd). Across this a considerable part of the 7th Army and 700 Germans escaped before the gap was closed on September 23rd.

Liman von Sanders had now decided to defend Damascus by holding the Yarmuk Gorge, east of the southern end of Lake Tiberias, and the southern and western sides of that lake. But Chauvel forestalled him by sending the 4th Light Horse Brigade straight for Semakh at the southern end of the lake. Here the railway station was strongly held by 100 Germans and a larger number of Turks, and its buildings, looking out over two miles of plain, made it a difficult place to attack without artillery. But it was charged from the east before dawn on September 25th by the 11th Light Horse Regiment, while part of the 12th, and the 4th Machine-Gun Squad-

ron, attacked farther west; nearly half their horses were hit, but by 5.30 the place had been taken. Most of the 100 enemy dead were Germans, and several hundred Turks were captured. A few hours later Tiberias, on the western side of the lake, was rushed by a joint attack through the hills and along the shore.

Von Sanders' intended defence line was thus broken. Moreover Semakh was less than forty miles from Deraa, the crucial junction on the pilgrims' railway, loss of which would cut off both the survivors of the 7th Army and all Turkish troops east of Jordan (now organised as the 4th Turkish Army).⁶ The Arabs under Lawrence boldly blew up this railway both north and south of Deraa just before the offensive. By September 23rd there were signs that the 4th Army was retreating, and Chaytor's force now advanced from the Jordan valley to Es Salt and Amman. The Anzac Mounted Division seized Amman after a hot fight on September 25th, capturing the 4th Army's rear-guard, 2500 strong.

The main body had escaped the day before, but the remnant of the Turkish army from Arabia, 5000 strong, painfully toiling northwards, was now hopelessly cut off seventeen miles south of Amman. Here on the 28th their commander intimated to Lieut.-Colonel D. C. Cameron of the 5th Light Horse Regiment that he would surrender provided the Australians could protect his men against the Beni Sakr Arabs, who were circling about his force at Ziza station, shouting and firing into the air, and ready to loot and kill as soon as the chance offered. Eventually, on Brig.-General Ryrie's arrival at great speed with the 7th Regiment, the Australians and Turks, together, held the trenches through the night. At dawn, on the arrival of the New Zealand Brigade, the Turks (except a few retained for escort duty) gave up their arms to the Anzacs.

⁶ This army was under Mohammed Djemal Pasha, but not the same Ahmed Djemal who originally commanded it in Syria and Palestine. On this point Vol. VII is in error.

In nine days Chaytor's force at a cost of 139 casualties had captured 10,300 prisoners and 57 guns.

Not till September 22nd, at Megiddo, did Allenby mention to Chauvel that he intended to continue the advance, to Damascus and Beirut. The task would be one for the cavalry, the Australian Mounted Division followed by the 5th Cavalry passing west of Lake Tiberias and thence across Jordan to Damascus, the 4th Cavalry pushing east of the lake to Deraa junction, and thence north along the pilgrims' railway to the same city. Colonel Lawrence with the Arab army from the country farther east would join in. The Germans had been hitting back at the Arabs with air raids which, however, ended when on September 22nd-23rd Ross Smith and other Australian pilots after visiting Lawrence's position shot down or smashed on the ground all the German machines at Deraa. The Arabs eventually sacked and looted Deraa, and hung on to the rearguard of the Turkish 4th Army, the 4th Cavalry Division, after several sharp fights, catching up with them near Damascus.

The Australian Mounted Division, converging from west of Lake Tiberias, struck a tough rearguard of German machine-gunners and Turks on September 28th at the Benat Yakub bridge over the Jordan south of Lake Huleh (The Waters of Merom). The plans to surround this rearguard failed, but it was driven back and was met again on the 29th at Sasa. Here again it was dislodged by the 3rd Brigade after a fight lasting till dawn. The 4th Brigade now (September 30th) taking the lead raced towards Damascus, cutting into Turkish and German parties as these streamed towards the city. At Kaukab a Turkish column, converging across the front, made a stand on a ridge. The 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments under Lieut.-Colonel M. Bouchier charged them, while Onslow's 5th Brigade brushed past their western flank and bypassing Damascus, made for the steep Barada Gorge along which the railway and road for Beirut lead

out north-westwards from that city. The enemy at Kaukab, being shelled by the horse artillery and seeing the conspicuous grey horses of the French cavalry with Onslow's brigade moving to their rear, broke before the charge of Bouchier's force.

The 5th Brigade skirting the garden groves of Damascus—that most wonderful of oases—reached the Barada Gorge just as a column of Turks streamed along the slender main road beside the railway and river, far below. With heavy fire from the rocky heights the Australians, presently joined by the 3rd Light Horse Brigade (Wilson), turned the head of the column, which before dusk was irretrievably jammed and cut to pieces in the narrow passage. Meanwhile the rest of the cavalry and the Arabs harried the Turks struggling into Damascus.

Brig.-General Wilson with the 3rd Light Horse Brigade had been ordered to cross the Barada Gorge and make his way over the farther heights to the Homs road, leading north-east from Damascus, the only other escape-route for the Turks. The country, however, was so rough that he decided the quickest way to reach the Homs road was to wait for morning, and dash to it through the enemy in Damascus.

At 5 a.m. on October 1st, believing that Damascus was still in Turkish hands, the 10th Regiment headed by the brigade scouts and Major Olden, after making its way through the terrible debris in the Gorge, galloped into the great and ancient city. They were greeted by a fusillade of shots, but mainly from excited Arabs firing into the air in friendly demonstration. Clattering over the bridge they found a crowd at the Serai. Inside the building was a gathering of Arab notables, who had taken control of the city. It was with difficulty that the Australians disengaged themselves from the Arab welcome; but, having obtained a guide to the Homs road, by 7 a.m. Wilson and his brigade were soon clear of the cheering, shooting crowd.

Though without sleep for two nights, and though the German machine-gunners always stoutly opposed them, Wilson's light horsemen clattered on, and overtook and captured two bodies of Turks and Germans, 750 in all, but just failed to cut off a column of 2000 before it reached the pass at Khan Ayash, fifteen miles from Damascus, into which the few Australians could not follow it. Early next day (October 2nd) the 9th Regiment, seeing another column of Turks making for this pass, cleverly outflanked and rushed them, capturing 1500 and the colours of the 46th Regiment. A little later eighty-five Turks under a German officer, while getting into action a machine-gun, were rushed into surrender by two Australian signallers (a jockey and a station foreman) who overpowered the officer and turned his revolver and machine-gun on his men.

These were the last actions of the Light Horse in the war. That afternoon Damascus—a city of 300,000—till then in ferment of looting and lawlessness, was quietened by Chauvel with the age-old method of an impressive parade of his battle-stained mounted troops through its streets. The shops reopened. But two dreadful legacies of war remained in the crowds of sick, dying and dead left behind in the appalling Turkish hospital, and in the onrush of malaria and pneumonic influenza that now mowed down the divisions of the Desert Mounted Corps. Their recent passage through areas swarming with infected mosquitoes and unequipped for prevention struck down a great part of the force. As for the Turks, Lieut.-Colonel T. J. Todd of the 10th Regiment, a sick man who himself died a few months later, was given charge of 16,000 Turkish sick organised in camp at Kaukab, and heroically fought for their lives against the apathy of the Arab authorities.

Meanwhile Chauvel, with the 5th Cavalry Division now in the lead, after conference with the Arab King Feisal, pushed on through Lebanon and Syria—past

Baalbek, Homs and Hama to Aleppo—the infantry marching up the sea coast to Beirut and Tripoli, and the Arabs making touch with the cavalry's right. Half the surviving Turkish Army had been destroyed at Damascus. Aleppo was abandoned by it on October 26th, the Arabs rushing in as the rearguard withdrew. An Australian armoured car detachment, in Ford cars, was the only fighting unit of the A.I.F. in this advance. But at Aleppo, through sickness in the other divisions, Chauvel had to wait for the Australian Mounted Division to come up from Damascus. It was nearing Homs on October 31st when its commander (Hodgson) received news that on the previous day Turkey had signed an armistice.