When Intelligence Made a Difference

— EARLY 20TH CENTURY —

The Haversack Ruse of 1917

by Davi Ottenheimer

It was just before dusk on October 31, 1917, when allied victory in a seemingly remote operation in a mostly barren desert became famous as a turning point in World War I and forever transformed the Middle East. The Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade miraculously galloped through heavy Ottoman artillery and machine gun fire to achieve decisive control of Beersheba.[1] Just one week later, in early November, the long-standing Turkish defensive line at Gaza fell to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF).[2] Even more remarkable, within just another year the British had pushed Ottoman forces out of Syria, Southern Turkey, and Iraq.[3]

Such a decisive expansion of power and control is how WWI ended for the Allies, a geopolitical impact felt to this day. But how did the October 31 surprise cavalry attack come about? Victory in part must be attributed to an intelligence operation of simple deception. How such an operation succeeded may provide useful lessons today, even in the latest cyber battles.

After two failed frontal assaults of January and April 1917, suffering heavy casualties, the British military leadership seemed ineffective against the Turkish defenses of Gaza. By June 1917, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, frustrated by the lack of progress, appointed General Sir Edmund Allenby as the Commander-in-Chief of the EEF.[4] Orders were issued to revise the operation and crack through defenses holding Palestine.[5]

Prime Minister George didn't just pressure his new commander to charge forward a little, he requested "Jerusalem as a Christmas present for the British Nation."[6]

In political terms the three prior years of war were lowering Britain's morale, with deteriorating conditions at home and on the front. Increased civilian discontent certainly wasn't helped either by the French and Russians turning in their own failed campaigns. George thus pressed Allenby to deliver a symbolic victory to buoy sentiment all around.

One event in particular had the British public scared enough that the Prime Minister felt an urgent need for signs of victory: A sudden shift in German troops to Belgian coastal areas in August 1916 had led some to agitate that the conflict was deteriorating to the point that a German invasion of Britain seemed imminent.[7]

British agents had reported alarming movements and the public was worried, yet ironically this was a German redeployment that had been sparked by another British deception campaign. Bogus Daily Mail printings had been circulated with headlines falsely predicting Britain was about to invade north Belgium.[8] The goal of that disinformation campaign was to draw down German forces away from British front-lines. The success of false messaging about invasion from Britain led to German coastline reinforcements, which gave the impression of an invasion in reverse. Planners hadn't anticipated the public scare.

It was within this context Allenby knew disinformation could shift forces and he solicited a plan to deceive the Ottomans into building up their main Gaza line, to signal the third attack would be a repeat of the prior two.[9] In fact, he then intended to exploit less well defended and inhospitable territory on the flank and take Beersheba.[10] Then he would use its precious water wells to pivot back westward and north to attack Gaza on a new approach and cut-off or encircle the Turks to block retreat. It was a flanking plan perhaps reminiscent of the Elite Companion Cavalry tactics of Alexander the Great.

1. Sean McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1908-1923*, Ch. 15, New York: Penguin Random House, 2015.
2. Ibid.
3. Andrew W. Eddowes, *The Haversack Ruse, and British Deception Operations in Palestine During World War I*, Naval War College, 1994. *https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA279574.pdf*.
4. John D. Grainger, *The Battle for Palestine 1917*, Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2006. (The Gallipoli Campaign against the Ottomans had failed the year before with approximately 188,000 allied casualties. It was a significant factor in the British Prime Minister changing in 1916 from Herbert Asquith to David Lloyd George).
5. Ibid.
6. A. P. Wavell, *The Palestine Campaigns*, London: Constable and Co.,1928.
7. See "Deception Maxims: Fact and Folklore," Office of Research and Development, CIA, June 1981, p. 37-38. *https://www.governmentattic. org/18docs/CIAdeceptionMaximsFactFolklore_1980.pdf*.
8. See Ibid.
9. Eddowes at 5.
10. Ibid.

The head of EEF's Military Intelligence, Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, in September 1917 proposed to Allenby what became known as a "haversack ruse" to keep the flank vulnerable.[11] His idea was for an officer to ride on a purported reconnaissance mission and then drop a blood-stained bag containing mostly a soldier's personal effects (haversack) full of important-looking papers and fake battle plans targeting Gaza and deprioritizing Beersheba.[12]

Over the prior months, after the first two Gaza battles, it was common for horseback scouts to regularly ride out along lines and outposts for situational awareness.[13] Planes, automobiles and wireless interception also were quickly emerging at this time for innovation in surveillance, especially in desert areas considered high risk for horses and men (lacking water).[14] However, horses still were a mainstay of scouting and communications and thus more reliably used as bait.

Allenby accepted Meinertzhagen's ruse for a decoy rider with a haversack. Materials were prepared with enough money and secrets to persuade anyone finding the "lost" bag that it had to have been accidental. In one touch of brilliance, even cipher codes were included, which were meant to later allow Turkish intelligence to decode bogus British wireless communications again reiterating that Gaza would be attacked in a frontal assault.[15]

Fake papers, carried by the decoy, also included internal complaints to make British leadership seem obsessed with repeating a frontal assault until it worked. A map with big arrows pointing at Gaza, and orders to attack Gaza, were included. Other papers included communication and thoughts about the Beersheba line being untenable, and about to be scaled down due to water shortages and transport logistics, emphasizing how the British were unable to sustain a large force there. The haversack also contained fictitious identity information to cement the idea that these plans were carried by an officer, with details about a wife and newborn child.[16]

The decoy then was sent to ride out along lines close to Beersheba to be most conspicuous. The first two attempts did not gather enough attention and were considered failures. The Colonel then took his plan into his own hands such that on the 10th of October,

he personally mounted a horse and rode it aggressively towards an enemy patrol as if to intercept them, even dismounting to accurately shoot his rifle at them.

Once the Turks, finally motivated and gave chase, he rode away under fire and dropped the blood-stained haversack along with his rifle, also stained with horse blood. It was all planned to be as convincing as possible such that even his water bottle was dropped.[17]

The plan was finally executed as intended, and Meinertzhagen carefully observed his pursuers to make sure they took the haversack. The deception bait was quickly sent up the ranks all the way to General Friedrich Siegmund Georg Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein, the German commander of Turkish forces.[18]

Given a history of two prior frontal assaults, and this bogus plan for a third assault arguably "keyed to enemy preconceptions,"[19] General von Kressenstein reacted almost exactly as the British had hoped. He directed his men to prepare for a frontal Gaza assault.[20]

In the last week of October, with the deception working as planned and Turkish forces reinforcing their Gaza line, Allenby staged the third and final battle line elsewhere.[21] He deployed his Twentieth Corps eastward towards Beersheba, leaving the Twenty-first Corps near the coast facing the Gaza forces to keep them occupied. The Twenty-first Corps started artillery to pound Gaza on October 27th aiming to falsely signal their imminent advance, increasing by the 29th with additional firepower from British and French navy. All this was to ensure Ottoman forces would be drawn away from actual attack soon coming upon Beersheba.

Then on the 30th the EEF troops rode their horses in complete silence with limited visibility across a brutal 30 miles of barren desert and set up for an incredibly fast charge the next evening "fighting for water."[22]

The Twentieth Corps started the attack on Beersheba by engaging Ottoman artillery and machine

11. Ibid. at 6-7.
12. Ibid.
13. Eddowes at 6.
14. Yigal Sheffy, *British Military Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign 1914-1918*, Routledge, 1998, p. 237.
15. Eddowes at 6-7.
16. Ibid. at 6.

17. Ibid. at 7.
18. Ibid. at 10.
19. "Deception Maxims: Fact and Folklore," Office of Research and Development, CIA, June 1981, p. 8. *https://www.governmentattic.org/18docs/CIAdeceptionMaximsFactFolklore_1980.pdf*.
20. Eddowes at 7.
21. Ibid. at 7. The British had discretely moved forces from Gaza to Beersheba through low-visibility dust storms at night, their equipment completely wrapped in cloth for silence.
22. "The charge of the 4th Light Horse Brigade at Beersheba," Australian War Memorial, October 30, 2007, *https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-charge-of-the-4th-light-horse-brigade-at-beersheba*. "General [William] Grant gave the order personally to the 12th Light Horse Regiment: 'men you're fighting for water. There's no water between this side of Beersheba and Esani. Use your bayonets as swords. I wish you the best of luck'."

The charge of the Australian Light Horse at Beersheba (1917), painted by George Lambert (1920), at the Palestine Gallery in the Australian War Memorial. Wikipedia.

guns. Then the approximated 800 mounted troops, expert Australian Light Horsemen (many of whom were Aboriginal), started to trot across the open desert expanse of four miles heading straight towards Turkish dug-in defenses.

Once Turks started firing artillery at the horses a full gallop began. As horses closed distance from the East they began to spread out and weave unpredictably. Turks opened up with machine gun fire but their weapons struggled to track fast moving targets. Over the last mile horses charged with bayonets. The Turks paused fire expecting a frontal dismount and assault, yet again were deceived. The mounted troops quickly began leaping over trenches to engage Turks from behind in brutal hand-to-hand combat. Soon after the water wells and the city itself were captured (as signaled by an abrupt end to its wireless broadcasting).

The mounted charge and haversack ruse worked without question. Only 31 of the Allied troops and 70 horses died while killing 500 Turks and capturing 1,500.[23] Over the next two months during British flanking attacks on Gaza, the Turkish casualties rose to 25,000, and 12,000 were taken prisoner, while the British recorded 18,000 casualties. Beersheba was clearly the turning point. However, it also sat among the many factors contributing to Ottoman failures in Gaza, not to mention an array of other intelligence operations.

Meinertzhagen, for example, allegedly had been air-dropping opium laced cigarettes onto Turkish troops on the Gaza line to deflate morale and encourage desertion (i.e., poison their minds with dreams of Allies having abundant tobacco while in reality serving them opiates).[24] Meinertzhagen also managed to trick the Ottomans into executing their own top spy in Beersheba by sending bogus messages about the dangerous presence of a double-agent.[25]

Strong leaders in entrenched defensive positions have been deceived and defeated by
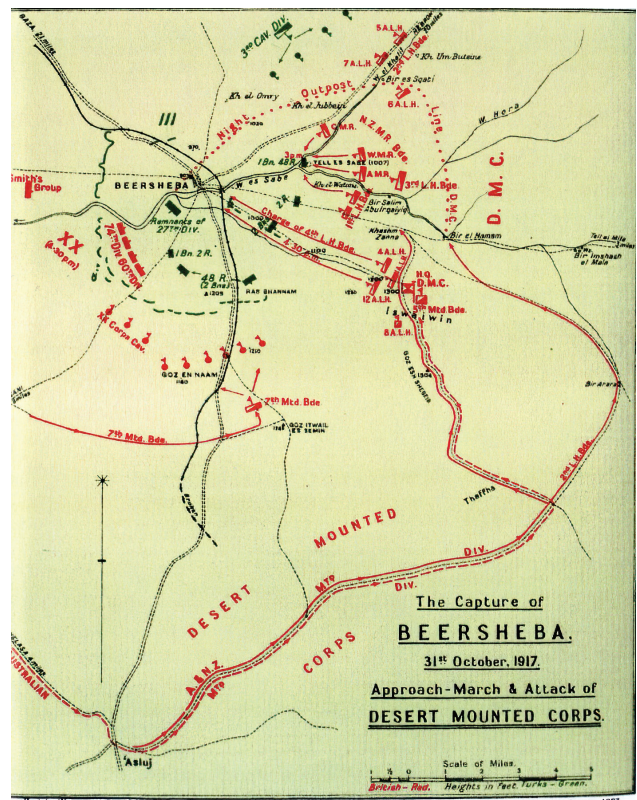
Falls Sketch Map 3 Beersheba approach marches and attack 31 October 1917 — Wikipedia—from Cyril Falls, A. F. Beck (Maps) - History of the Great War Based on Official Documents by Direction of the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence Military Operations Egypt & Palestine from June 1917 to the end of the War Volume 2 Part 1

23. "The charge of the 4th Light Horse Brigade at Beersheba," Australian War Memorial, October 30, 2007, *https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-charge-of-the-4th-light-horse-brigade-at-beersheba*.

24. James E. Kitchen, *The British Imperial Army in the Middle East: Morale and Military Identity in the Sinai and Palestine Campaigns, 1916-18*, A&C Black, 2014, p. 104.
25. John S. Craig, *Peculiar Liaisons: In War, Espionage, and Terrorism in the Twentieth Century*," Algora Publishing, 2005, p. 96.

clever ruses throughout history. Indeed, the haversack tactic may be most noteworthy today because it bridges older deception methods into modern warfare.

Arguably, the haversack tactic led to follow-on attempts of a similar nature in World War II. A better-known, and often told, story from 1943 had almost the same intention and consequences. The Allied Mincemeat Operation used a decoy (a dead "courier" floated off the coast of Spain) carrying papers that the Nazis believed and consequently started reinforcing Greece (even weakening their Eastern lines to do so).[26] Again, the ruse worked, with the Allies soon after invading Sicily against minimal resistance.

Given the 1917 horseman charging directly into what today still would be considered modern and superior warfare technology, it is hard to deny how deception played a decisive role in military planning for decades after. Beersheba was vulnerable enough to be quickly seized using elements of surprise and agility. It also was strategically important as a yarn that would unravel Ottoman control over Palestine. Allenby on December 11, 1917, entered the captured city of Jerusalem to wrap up the "Christmas present for the British Nation" as the British Prime Minister had ordered.

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26. For descriptions of Operation Mincemeat see Ben Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat*, London: Bloomsbury, 2010; Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004; and Anthony Cave-Brown, *Bodyguard of Lies*, London" W.H. Allen,1975.