

BEERSHEBA AND THE ART OF DECEPTION

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The British victory at Beersheba in Palestine on October 31, 1917 was a part of the Third Battle of Gaza. It is popularly remembered in Australia for the actions of the Australian 4th Lighthorse Brigade.¹ Their charge across nearly six kilometres of ground drove their Turkish enemy from Beersheba, secured the precious desert water wells there, and set the conditions for the securing of Gaza one week later.² Less popularly remembered is the operation's deception plan that was pivotal to the victory. The lessons learnt from that deception still hold true today.

The operational picture

In 1917, two Turkish armies held the Gaza-Beersheba line, blocking the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force's access to Palestine from Sinai.³ In February, the British War Cabinet authorised a Palestine campaign, its objectives the capture of Gaza and then Jerusalem.⁴

Following two failed frontal assaults against Gaza in March and April, the third successful attack in November was different. It involved pinning the enemy at Gaza, while horse and camel-mounted infantry who manoeuvred around the eastern flank of the line at Beersheba supported direct infantry attacks on Beersheba.⁵ By the conclusion of Third Battle of Gaza, the road to Jerusalem was open to the British.



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The Anzac Receiving Station camp at Rashid Bek the day before the attack on Beersheba.

¹ Coulthard-Clark, CD. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin. Crows Nest, p 134.

² Dawson, C.J. 2017. The third battle of Gaza, October-November 1917. *United Service*, 68(3), p. 27.

³ *Ibid.* p. 25

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

Deception plan

A key to British success was the deceiving of the Turks. They were led to believe that the main attack would again be centred on Gaza.⁶ The perception created was that this time the aim was to take the Turks from the rear.

One enduring deception myth however must first be dispelled, that of the Haversack Ruse and the involvement of British Major Richard Meinertzhagen. The well-known ruse involved, at great peril, the dropping from horseback of a haversack close to the Turkish lines for the Turks to recover. It contained false information designed to trick the Turks into believing that the next assault would be on Gaza later than October.⁷ Meinertzhagen claimed to be the ruse's conceiver and implementer. However, by 2007 it was proved that he was not the architect and nor did he personally execute it, and that even its effectiveness was in doubt.⁸ Rather, a James Belgrave suggested the ruse and it was more likely that the British Captain Arthur Neate rode the horse and dropped the haversack.⁹

Aside from the Haversack Ruse, five key elements underpinned the successful deception plan.¹⁰ First, four days prior to the attack British artillery on the left of the line bombarded the Gaza defences. The shelling increased in intensity from day to day, giving the impression that it was an extended preparatory barrage.

Secondly, two simulated preparations were made for an amphibious landing to the north of Gaza. At the same time, deceptive wireless messages supported this notion while reinforcing the idea that any attack on Beersheba would be a feint later in the year.¹¹ A camp was established on the island of Cyprus to the north of Gaza. Buoys were laid down to direct transports, the local population was asked about supplies for a large force, and Cypriote speculation and gossip was promoted. The navy also appeared to take soundings, a fleet of small craft were made to look busy, and battleships provided a bombardment in unison with the artillery.

Thirdly, well before the assault the horse and camel-mounted infantry, often a division strong, conducted regular reconnaissance close to Beersheba. Their purpose was to accustom the Turks to such demonstrations.

Fourthly, all troop movements from their camps to their starting points occurred in the dark, while during the day efforts were made to maintain cover and silence. The evacuated camps were left standing, and fires lit in them at night, and lights burned in the tents.

Finally, with air superiority, in the final week of October constant air patrols were conducted during the day. The patrols gathered intelligence and ensured that the enemy observed little or nothing of the British Army's movements to Beersheba.

⁶ Bean, C. 1941. *First World War Official Histories*, Volume VII - The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine, 1914-1918 (10th edition), p. 373.

⁷ Coyle, G. & Wilson, A. 2014. Haversack Ruses: From Leather to Digital. *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence*, pp. 157 – 158.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 158.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 158 – 159.

¹⁰ Bean, pp 374 – 375, p. 377.

¹¹ Eddowes, A.W. 1994. The Haversack Ruse, and British Deception Operations in Palestine During World War 1. Naval War College, Newport RI Department of Operations, p. 6.

Lessons learnt



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The 4th Light Horse Brigade's 4th Regiment on the way to take part in the attack on Beersheba.

The advantage of deception is that it is difficult for an enemy to counter, and it affords surprise. Conversely, deception is not an elixir. Adequate combat power is still required to win the battle, and it can be difficult to know if the enemy has been deceived; let alone to know, if, you are deceived.

Third Battle of Gaza provides an example of the elements of deception that hold true today¹²:

- good intelligence and security
- knowledge of your enemy's perceptions and expectations
- deception and operational planning integration
- adequate time to both plan and execute operational deception
- air superiority or the ability to control your enemy's reconnaissance of your forces
- creativity in blending these elements into a clever and innovative plan.

The British deception plan during Third Battle of Gaza was pivotal to their victory. It set a foundation for the broad and successful integration of deception and operational planning during the Second World War and beyond.¹³

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* p. ii.