

A RAID TO AMMAN: ASSUMPTIONS CONTRIBUTED TO FAILURE

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On 22 March 1918, a large British raiding force (the Anzac Mounted Division, the British 60th Division, and the Imperial Camel Brigade) forged the Jordan River from the west to raid Amman. Their purpose was to sabotage the Hejaz rail line. A combination of poor weather and intelligence resulted in a costly failure. In part, it provides an example of a conundrum that exists when the perceived success of an operation entails the loyalty of a local population.

The strategic and operational picture

By 9 December 1917, British forces had taken Jerusalem from the Turks.¹ Their subsequent control of the Jordan valley from north of the Dead Sea denied the Turks access to the sea. It also fostered greater active cooperation with Arab irregular forces in their fight against the Turks around Maan, some 220km south of Amman.² Turkey's efforts there depended on resupply via the rail line from Damascus to Medina. The Arabs proved successful at destroying sections of the track. However, the Turks always affected quick repair. The Arabs had no ability to attack tunnels and viaducts, which the Turks guarded well.³

At Amman, the Damascus to Medina line traversed a viaduct and passed through a tunnel at Hejaz.⁴ In February 1918, the British decided to attack this infrastructure because its destruction would disrupt Turkish resupply. Further, if successful, it would temporarily isolate the Turks to the south of Amman,⁵ and draw them north from Maan thus easing pressure on the Arabs there.⁶

¹ Holmes, R. 1988. *The World Atlas of Warfare: Military Innovations that Changed the Course of History*, Mitchell Beazley Publishers, London, pp. 164-165.

² Gullett, H.S. 1923. *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine, 1914-1918* (Vol. 7). Angus & Robertson, Limited, p. 546.

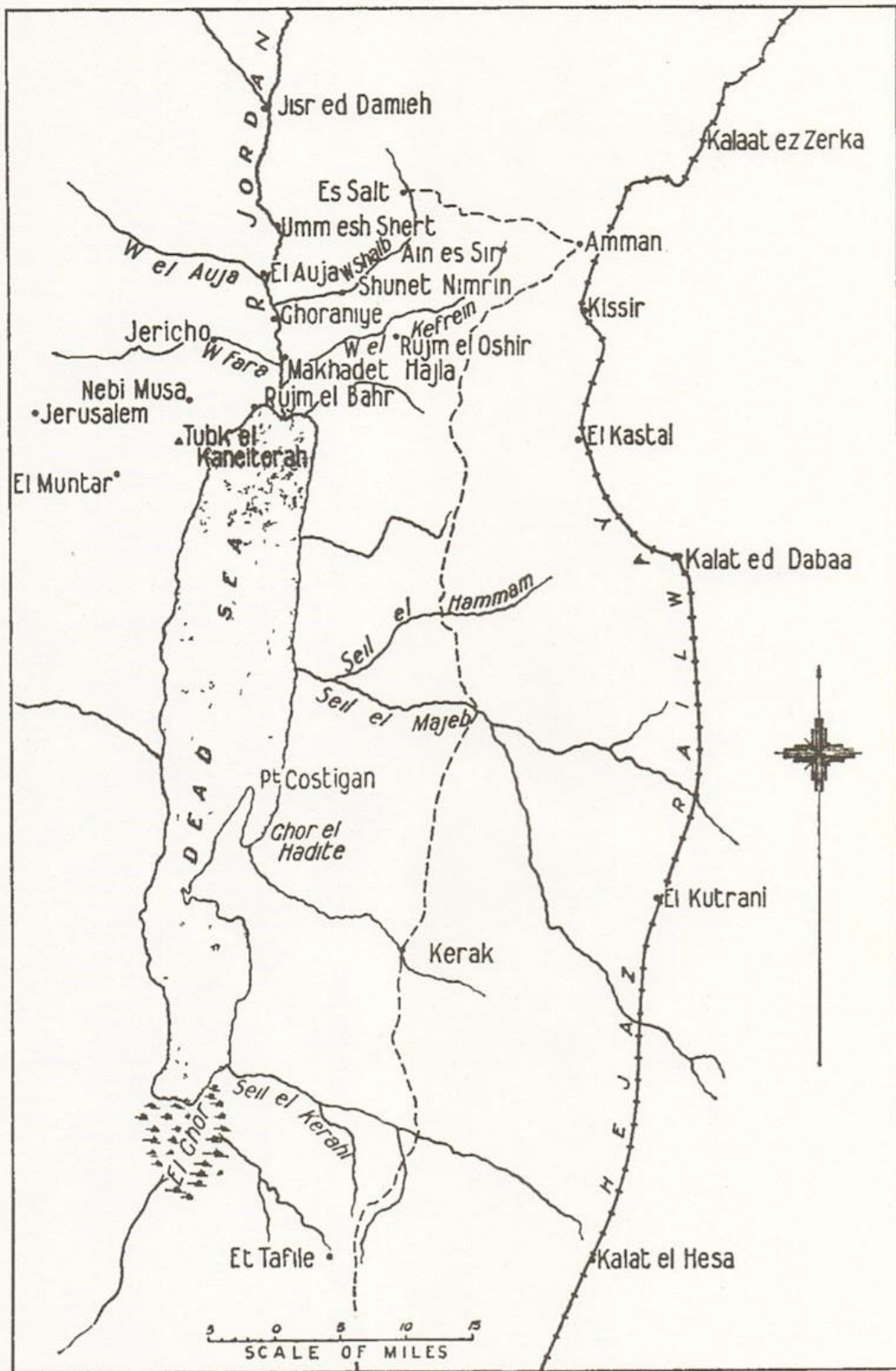
³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 547.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 546.

Map No. 6



THE COUNTRY EAST OF THE DEAD SEA, SHOWING THE HEJAZ RAILWAY

The Hejaz railway and country east of the Dead Sea. AWM. The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War, 1914-1918 Official History.

The raid

On 22 March, D Troop of the 1st Field Squadron Australian Engineers facilitated the construction of the first pontoon bridge across the Jordan River at Hajla.⁷ ⁸ By the 24th, the raiding force had crossed the river via four bridges at Hajla and Ghoraniye; and motorboats, launched on the Dead Sea, were carrying troops to the eastern side.⁹ Heavy rain made passage along the tracks to the initial objectives, which included the capture of Es Salt by the 25th, slow and difficult; made worse by an ascent of around 1,400 metres to the plateau on which the main objective lay.¹⁰ Coupled with incorrect intelligence that indicated that the Turks were contemplating evacuating Amman,¹¹ the intelligence as to the state of the tracks was misleading.¹²



The pontoon bridge at Hajla (March 1918)

Following heavy fighting, on the morning of the 27th the attack on the Hejaz railway began. The 2nd Australian Light Horse Brigade attacked from the north-west, the Camel Brigade (which included large numbers of Australians) from the west, and the New Zealand Mounted

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 553.

⁸ War Diary, 2nd Light Horse Brigade, PDF p. 6 <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1350598> [Accessed 7 Feb 2023].

⁹ *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine, 1914-1918*, pp. 555 – 558.

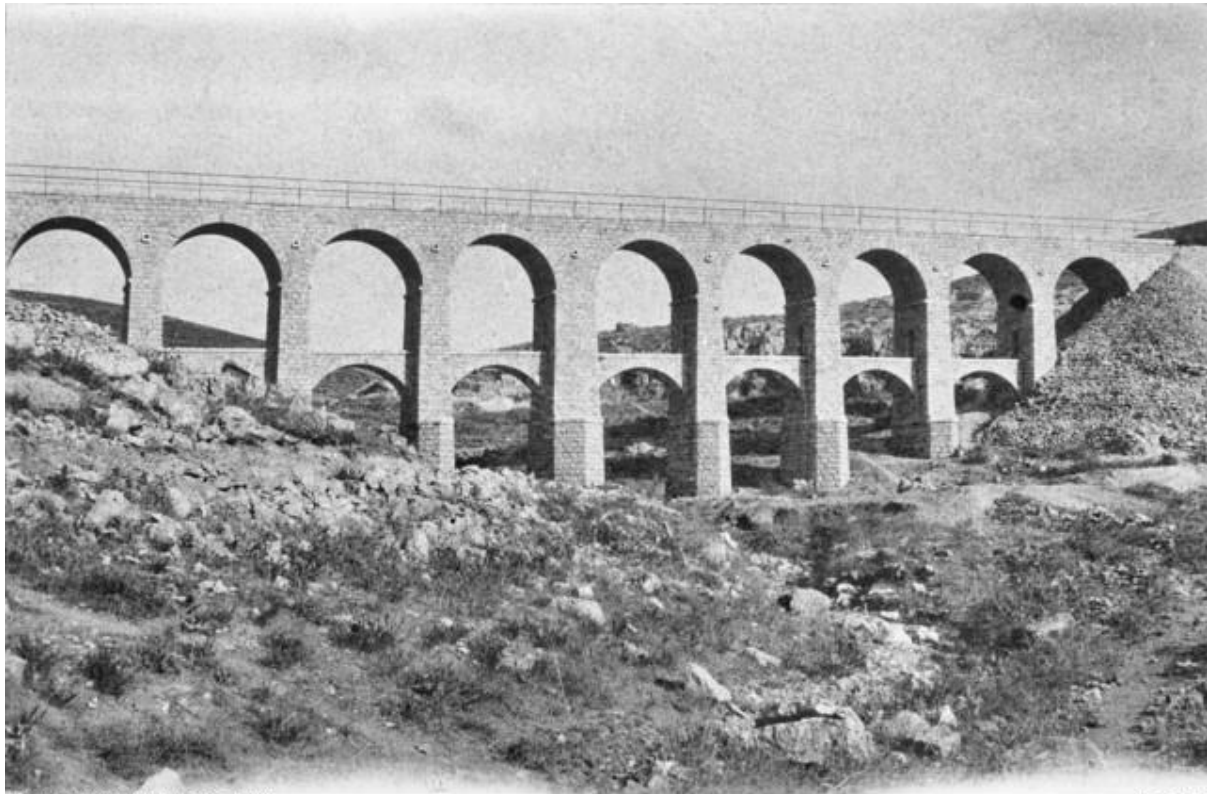
¹⁰ War Diary, 2nd Light Horse Brigade, PDF p. 11 <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1350598> [Accessed 7 Feb 2023].

¹¹ *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine, 1914-1918*, p. 572.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 560.

Rifles Brigade from the south.¹³ In all, around 3,000 rifles were in the firing line, supported by a single battery of mountain guns. Opposing them were an estimated 4,000 Turks in well-prepared positions, supported by machine-guns and fifteen artillery pieces.

The raid failed. Only the destruction of a few kilometres of railway south of Amman was achieved in two days of solid fighting, which was quickly repaired by the Turks.¹⁴ Turkish resistance was impossible to overcome, and on 30th the raiders were ordered to withdraw.



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The viaduct of the Hajez railway near Amman, a primary object of the raid.

Here the allegiance of the local Circassian tribe was a factor in the success or failure of the raid. Prior to the raid the operation's orders mandated cooperation with the local clans.¹⁵

...as the general goodwill and assistance of the inhabitants east of Jordan is of first importance, all ranks must be warned to treat them with the greatest consideration...and all friction is to be strictly avoided...these [tribes] are of a very different class to those hitherto met with.¹⁶

The 2nd Light Horse Brigade's War Diary records that:

...a Sheikh and his followers, some mounted and others on foot, met [us] and gave assurances of their great pleasure at the British advent in the country. The Sheikh then

¹³ Clark, C. 2010. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*, Allen & Unwin, p. 137.

¹⁴ *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine*, p. 583.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 557.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

accompanied the Brigade to Kabr Mujahid where his village was situated and a short civic reception was held.¹⁷



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A well-known and 'friendly' sheikh of Es Salt and his favourite Arabian mare. [An oil with pencil on wood panel by George Lambert, 1918.]

In hindsight, undoubtedly the Turks were aware of British intentions.¹⁸ Around Amman, tribes were friendly to the Turks.¹⁹ News travelled fast among the nomadic local clans. The Circassians hedged their bets, not revealing their true support until a decisive moment.²⁰ They remained at a distance during the fighting and were quick to recognise the British failure. They joined the Turks to attack the retreating British.

Despite the British War Office claiming the raid was successful, General Shea, the British commander in charge, acknowledged its failure.²¹ The truth was that the viaduct and tunnel remained sound, the damage to the line was minimal, and the failure was costly. The raid accounted for around 1,200 British casualties, with 724 of those from the Anzac Mounted Division, of whom 118 were killed and 55 missing.²²

Lesson learnt

Any raid that lacks surprise has a slender chance of success, especially when the raiding party is operating far from its base. For a large raiding force, best assurance of the local population's

¹⁷ War Diary, 2nd Light Horse Brigade, PDF p. 7 <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1350598> [Accessed 7 Feb 2023]

¹⁸ *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine*, p. 548.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 583.

²² *Ibid.* p. 584.

allegiance is paramount. Disastrously, the British raid was founded in assumptions not fact. The British had no knowledge of the tribes around Amman.²³

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²³ *Ibid.* p. 556.