

Welcome to the Royal Air Force Museum podcast on the use of air power at the Battle of Megiddo, 1918.

Right from the outbreak of the First World War, Britain had found herself fighting in the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire, who controlled Turkey, Palestine, Jordan and Mesopotamia, were allied to Germany, and they threatened British territories in North Africa, especially Egypt and the Suez Canal, which was seen as the lifeline between Britain and her empire in the east.

As early as 1915, aeroplanes were being used to scout the vast empty tracts of the Sinai Desert, or track troops movements. Initially the British were very defensive in the region, concentrating her efforts on the war in France and content to beat off Ottoman attacks on the canal. In 1916 Britain and her Allies became more offensive, and started to push across the Sinai desert and into southern Palestine, where they were brought to a bloody halt in the first two battles of Gaza in the spring of 1917.

In the autumn of 1917, the 3rd Battle of Gaza began as the Allies again launched themselves north into Palestine. By the spring of 1918, the Allies had reached a line just north of Jaffa, running to the Jordan Valley. Here the Allied advance petered out, and each side consolidated their forces, and fought their central governments for reinforcements against the drain that was being created by the major battles waging in France.

3rd Gaza had been a stunning success, and air power had played a major part in the battle, with the Allies winning air superiority in the region for the first time in the late summer of 1917. This was partly due to the arrival of the new commander in chief for the Army, General Edmund Allenby, and his selection of Maj-Gen William Salmond as his air commander. Both were convinced of the value and versatility of a properly integrated and co-ordinated air arm, and would use the RAF to its fullest potential in the coming battles. Over the

summer of 1918, for example, these close support tactics would be repeated during the large scale raid across the Jordan Valley and into the mountains around Annam and Es Salt.

Not only were aircraft used for reconnaissance and ground attack, but then two cavalry divisions were temporarily cut-off in the mountains, the RAF were used to drop food and medical supplies to the trapped troops.

Perhaps inevitably, with the events taking place in France, the Allies received reinforcements before the German and Ottoman forces. By the late summer of 1918 they had come up to full strength of seven squadrons and three balloon sections. As in France, the squadrons were divided between Corps squadrons, mainly carrying out reconnaissance work for their designated units, and Army squadrons, with a more offensive and freelancing remit.

Increasingly these units were allocated more modern aircraft, particularly SE5as and Bristol F.2b Fighters. With these the RAF could take an increasingly aggressive stance and began actively pursuing the enemy air force. By the start of the next offensive in September 1918, these forces had been virtually neutralised, and the RAF enjoyed an unprecedented air superiority.

For this offensive, the RAF even received reinforcement in the form of a single Handley Page O/400 heavy bomber, flown out in stages from England via France, Italy and Egypt.

On the other side of the lines, the Ottoman forces were supported by just four squadrons of German aircraft. The limited reinforcements that they had received, in the form of two batches of aircraft, had both been destroyed on their way to the front. What was left in service were older types and in small numbers. The Germans would lose around 60 aircraft over the summer, and receive no replacements. By mid-September, the German commander of the

Ottoman forces, Liman von Sanders, was reporting that he had just five serviceable aircraft at his disposal.

Allenby had planned his next offensive, the Battle of Megiddo, to begin on 19 September 1918. The air forces were an integral part of the plan, and his air staff were consulted at each step. The head of these, Maj Gen Salmond, laid out four key tasks for the RAF during the build up and execution of the attack:

- Hide Allied intentions
- Mislead the enemy
- Destroy enemy communications
- Destroy retreating forces

Although to these, in hindsight two more can be added:

- Reconnaissance
- Aiding Allied communications

The first two on the list were more or less combined. Allenby's plan was to strike with a large cavalry formation up the coast, supported by infantry units further inland, hitting the Ottoman 8th Army, before sweeping inland to attack the 7th Army. The Allied formations were moved into camouflaged positions by night, while dummy camps were set up in the east, around the Jordan Valley. Allied air patrols not only protected the genuine camps by keeping enemy reconnaissance at bay, and testing the Allied camouflage schemes, but also allowed limited enemy reconnaissance over the dummy camps to reinforce the deception. Up until the day of the attack, the Ottoman high command believed that the main thrust would come in the east, up the Jordan Valley, against the Ottoman 4th Army.

On the day the offensive began, it was very much led by the RAF. Through the night and early dawn the RAF, including the HP 0/400, bombed Turkish aerodromes, communications centres and headquarters. Through out the day these attacks continued, and a standing patrol of two S.E.5a^s was maintained over the central German aerodrome at Jenin, preventing any enemy air activity.

As the first waves of troops advanced, aircraft from the Corps squadrons laid smoke screens, bombed front-line communications centres, and carried out artillery co-operation work, even though they had already plotted almost all of the enemy positions and batteries. 113 Squadron alone co-ordinated fire against 32 separate enemy batteries.

As the first day wore on, the Corps squadrons were increasingly using their wirelesses to help Allenby to maintain contact with the advancing Allied units.

By the dawn of the 20th, the Ottoman 8th Army was finished as an effective formation. Not only that, but the 7th Army on its flank, due to both effective mis-information largely due to the RAF, and the destruction of communications centres, had absolutely no idea what had happened. The Allied advance had been so swift that the RAF was now operating advanced units out of the aerodrome at El Affule, which 30 hours before had been 65 km behind enemy lines.

The day continued with further bombing and ground attack work, attacking convoys or troop concentrations largely as targets of opportunity presented themselves. Unfortunately, with Allied units advancing faster than had been predicted, occasional episodes of friendly fire occurred. At least one British cavalry unit, advancing on the outskirts of Nablus, was strafed when they neglected to show the required identification markers.

By the end of this day the 7th Army had also disintegrated, partly from the unrelenting external pressure on the ground, but also from the internal

damage inflicted by the RAF, and was in full retreat to the east, hoping to cross the Jordan, link up with the Ottoman 4th Army and regroup.

So far, the RAF had taken an integrated and innovative approach to the offensive, arguably adopting methods and achieving successes that would not be equalled until the Western Desert in the Second World War. However, it would be on the 21st September that they would give their most dramatic demonstration of what one pilot called ~~the~~ the destructive power of war's latest weapon.

Before the offensive, the ground behind the enemy had been carefully photographed, and possible escape routes for the beleaguered Ottoman forces towards the Jordan Valley had been identified. Standing patrols had been mounted over all of these, which given the terrain were few.

Just after dawn on the 21st, a patrol of two Bristol Fighters from 1 Squadron AFC spotted what a later arrival described as a ~~great~~ great, greyish-black snake, nine miles in length, moving along the road through the Wadi Fara. This was the main body of the 7th Army.

After reporting their position by wireless, the Australians dropped their 16 bombs and began strafing the column, hitting the front and rear to hem the rest in. With a steep incline upwards to the right of the road and downwards to the left, the Ottoman forces were now trapped, and half an hour later more Bristol Fighters arrived to add to the destruction. From 8am to noon, a steady stream of aircraft of all types bombed and strafed the trapped forces. A pair of aircraft were scheduled to arrive every two minutes, with a further formation of six arriving every half an hour. In all, nine and a quarter tons of bombs, and 56,000 rounds of ammunition were used in the Valley, causing the destruction or abandonment of nearly 90 field guns and a thousand vehicles for the loss of two aircraft to ground fire. Human casualties were simply too high to count, but by midday it is true to say that the Ottoman 7th Army had ceased to exist.

Such was the destruction, it even began to hinder the British advance. Major the Lord Hampton, at the head of the advance of XXI Corps with the Queens Own Worcestershire Hussars, was one of the first British officers to arrive on the scene:

Down this gorge the road disappeared into a succession of hairpin bends with a wall of rock on one side and a precipice upon the other. For the last few hundred yards progress had been considerably impeded by numbers of abandoned guns and wagons. A few minutes later the advance guard sent back word that the road was completely blocked and that it was impossible to get any further down the valley. A few hundred feet below us the main road wound down the gorge and, as far as the eye could reach, it was blocked by guns, wagons and motor lorries. Many had fallen over the precipice and lay shattered in the wadi bed. Dead or wounded animals lay thick between the wagons and added to an indescribable tangle. Vehicles representative of every means of Turkish Transport lay about on the road, on the narrow open spaces bordering it, and down the banks to the wadi bed.

They were, or had been, fully loaded with the hastily gathered baggage of an army, ranging from valuable artillery instruments, telephones, wireless apparatus, drums of cable, camp furniture, cooking utensils, down to clothing, rations and the thousands of details of kit and equipment which are necessary to an army in the field.

All along that road the terrible havoc wrought by the R.A.F. impressed itself upon our nostrils, and in many places it was only with great difficulty that a way could be found through the litter of guns, carts, dead animals, and men. Dead Turks lay thick under the banks by the side of the road and up amongst the big boulders on the hillside where they had fled in a vain attempt to escape the rain of bullets from our planes overhead.+

The offensive carried on, but the main Ottoman field armies had been shattered. Over the period of the 19-26th September, the seven RAF squadrons logged a total of 1500 hours in the air, and later both General Allenby and Liman von Sanders acknowledged their enormous contribution to the offensive. Von Sanders would recall in his memoirs how

When the troops could no longer retreat on a broad front and had to enter successively the narrow road between the mountains to Bett Hassan and Beisan, they were subjected to incessant attacks by the British flying squadrons which wrought terrible havoc and impaired the morale of the troops. The feeling of defenceless exposure to the enemy fliers had a paralyzing effect on officers and men. The columns of what little remained of the artillery, the autos and other vehicles blocked the road in many places, with their demolished vehicles and dead horses and men.

For all that one senior British officer, viewing the scene at Wadi Fara, would turn and accuse Salmond and his men of being butchers they had demonstrated the way of things to come and arguably fought the first modern aerial battle. The Battle had been a complete success for the Allies, largely due to the RAF contribution, and a few weeks later the Ottoman Empire, her armies destroyed, surrendered. Air power as a war-winning weapon, and indeed the Royal Air Force itself, had come of age.