Battle of Haifa

The Battle of Haifa was a decisive battle fought on 23 September 1918,, where the elements consisting mainly of Indian troops of the British Army engaged and defeated the forces of the Ottoman Empire and their German allies.

The battle was one of many during the Sinai and Palestine Campaign of World War I.

This article will further give details about the Battle of Haifa within the context of the IAS Exam .

Background of the Battle of Haifa

With World War I in full swing since 1914, the Western front (the European theatre of war) was in a virtual stalemate with armies often staying put in their territories. On the other the Eastern front, near particaluary the Middle-East involved a static army actively moving to take territory as quickly as possible.

The Ottoman Empire sought to defend and in the process expand its territory with a little assistance from the German Empire.

Such an army was a German-led Ottoman expeditionary force marching towards Egypt in order to seize the Suez Canal.

Taking the Suez Canal would cut off vital supply from British India, severely hampering allied efforts in other theatres of war.

The Sinai and Palestine Campaign began in earnest when a German-led Ottoman force invaded the Sinai Peninsula in 1915, then part of the British Protectorate of Egypt, to unsuccessfully raid the Suez Canal.

Following this several battle were fought in which the British managed to the retain most of their holdings

In January 1917 the newly formed Desert Column completed the recapture of the Sinai at the Battle of Rafa.

Following the successful advance and virtual encirclement of the Ottoman Seventh and Eighth Armies in the Judean Hills with the captures of Afulah and Nazareth, the Yildirim Army Group general headquarters was out of communication with its three armies.

The capture of Haifa was essential for any further advances by the Egyptian Expeditionary Force since the roads leading to the port were little more than tracks and its capture was urgently required for landing supplies.

Events of the Battle of Haifa

The 5th Cavalry Division were formed with three brigades, two of them composed of one British yeomanry regiment, and two British Indian Army cavalry regiments; one of which was usually lancers. The division's third brigade was the 15th (Imperial Service) Cavalry Brigade, normally comprising three cavalry regiments from the Indian Princely States of Jodhpur, Mysore and Hyderabad.

On 23 September 1918 the 15th (Imperial Service) Cavalry Brigade was ordered to capture Haifa. The area between the Nahr al-Muqaṭṭaʿ, also known as the Kishon River, and the slopes of Mount Carmel was well defended by Ottoman gun emplacements and artillery. The brigade's Jodhpur Lancers were tasked to capture this position, while the Mysore Lancers moved around to attack the town from the east and north.

A squadron of the Mysore Lancers and a squadron of the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, supported by B Battery, Honourable Artillery Company, attacked the Austrian battery of light field guns on the slopes of Mount Carmel at 14:00 hours.

The squadron of Mysore Lancers had moved into position by climbing up a steep track to capture and silence the guns, while the Jodhpur Lancers launched the main mounted attack on the rearguard of German machine gunners, which blocked the road 3.2 km on from the redoubt captured the day before by the Light Car Patrol.

The Jodhpur Lancers led a cavalry charge on the Ottoman position but came under withering artillery and machine gun fire. Moreover, quicksand on the riverbanks further hampered the momentum of their charge. But the lancers managed to move to the left on the lower slopes of Mount Carmel. The regiment secured the position capturing 30 prisoners and a host of other equipment.

The Jodhpur Lancers continued the charge into the town taking the defenders by surprise. The Mysore Lancers providing support also followed them into the town. Towards the end of the battle Haifa had fallen and the two regiments captured 1350 German and Ottoman prisoners

Their own casualties amounted to eight dead and 34 wounded. 60 horses were killed and another 83 injured.

Aftermath and Legacy of the Battle of Haifa

Soon afterwards the 13th Cavalry Brigade captured Acre, to the north, together with its garrison of 150 men and two artillery guns. On 26 September, the 300 strong remnants of the Haifa garrison arrived at Beirut and were ordered inland to Riyak, to the north of Damascus.

The Jodhpur Lancers' commander Major Dalpat Singh Shekhawat, who was Martyr in the battle, was posthumously awarded the Military Cross. The Jodhpur and Mysore Lancers are now represented by 61st Cavalry Regiment in the Indian Army and still commemorate the battle every year on 23 September as Haifa Day.

Every year on Haifa Day a memorial service is held to commemorate the fallen soldiers of the Jodhpur and Mysore lancers.