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**ALLENBY**

**Making the Modern Middle East**

**C. Brad Faught**

**I. B. TAURIS**

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*In Memoriam Michael Bliss*

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## PREFACE

I am still puzzled as to how far the individual counts: a lot, I fancy, if he pushes the right way.<sup>1</sup>

T. E. Lawrence, 1930

The geopolitical map of today's Middle East bears the imprint in a significant way of the actions taken by both Britain and France immediately before, during and after the First World War. Although it is true that 'The Making of ...' has become a well-used (over-used?) trope of historians in recent years, one of the places where indeed it can be deployed accurately is in relation to the Middle East. And one of the most important names in this regard is that of Edmund Allenby. Viscount Allenby of Megiddo and Felixstowe, as he became later, was the principal British military figure in the region from 1917 to 1919. He then fulfilled a similar proconsular role in Egypt from the latter year until 1925. In these two roles Allenby's eight years in the Middle East were of great impact both then and long afterwards, and in probing his life an especially revealing window can be found through which to observe closely and understand more fully the history that has resulted in the terminal roil afflicting the Middle East and international affairs today. To paraphrase the words of the writer Saki, the Middle East has always produced 'far more history than it could consume locally'<sup>2</sup>

Born into the Nottinghamshire squirearchy in 1861, Allenby came of age in the mid- to late Victorian era and was shaped therefore by the prevailing British imperial verities of the day. Educated at the East India Company's Haileybury College, the young Allenby aspired initially to a career in the Indian Civil Service. But after failing the entrance exam twice, the prospect of life as a member of the so-called 'Heaven born' cadre of Raj administrators came to an abrupt end and he looked instead for what was understood to be a more prosaic career in the British Army. In this way, success at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst would soon follow, and after passing out in 1881 Allenby served as a cavalryman, spending much time in South Africa, culminating in service in the Second South African, or Anglo-Boer, War fought from 1899 until 1902. Later, as a major general upon the outbreak of the First World War in August of 1914, Allenby was given command of the British Expeditionary Force's Cavalry Division. Stellar, though undistinguished, service on the Western Front followed until, in 1917, he was put in charge of the British-led Egyptian Expeditionary Force and sent to Palestine to do battle against the occupying Ottoman Turks.

Dogged, aggressive and stentorian – a skein of qualities that were reflected in his nickname, 'The (Bloody) Bull' – Allenby found his leadership feet in the Middle East. Tasked with defeating the German-bolstered Ottomans in the region

and thereby usurping their rule and ultimately substituting it in part with Britain's own, he won several indispensable military victories, usually by employing various modes of attack that presaged a modern twentieth-century style of combined operations warfare. Beginning with a stunning victory in October of 1917 at Gaza in Palestine, Allenby continued his winning ways by taking Jerusalem that December, and then Megiddo in October of 1918. In the aftermath of this latter victory came a triumphantly climactic entry into Damascus. Shortly thereafter the 400-year-old Ottoman Empire in the Middle East would come to an end. Throughout the campaign Allenby had depended significantly upon the field intelligence and fighting success provided by a number of key operatives, many of whom were under the purview of the Arab Bureau such as its leading figure, the increasingly influential T. E. Lawrence. Intrinsic to the campaign's military achievements was the dependable fighting character of Allenby's British, Australian and New Zealander (Anzac), and Indian regular troops, as well as the determination and aspirations for freedom of the Arab Army, bolstered by its irregular comrades.

Once victory in Palestine and Syria had been achieved, Allenby was transferred in due course to Cairo as British (special) high commissioner for Egypt, a post he would hold for six years until 1925. As such, he would preside over Egypt as it pushed relentlessly for independence in the wake of its revolution of 1918 and the surge in political activism occasioned by the founding of the nationalist *Wafd* party, the first of its kind encountered by the British anywhere in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> Later, in 1922, Allenby would be successful in recommending that Egypt be declared independent, which, in practice, granted it a significant measure of national autonomy. Throughout his years as proconsul he faced both real and threatened nationalist uprisings, a chronic feature of Egyptian society since at least as far back as Colonel Urabi's army rebellion in 1881 and the British armed intervention at Alexandria that would follow the next year. Indeed, until the day Allenby left Cairo in June of 1925 for retirement in England he would remain at the centre of Egyptian political affairs.

Long considered by historians, as well as by many others, to be a kind of modern 'Crusader', or simply as an average general who got lucky in command in a peripheral theatre, or even as a mere accomplice of the more daringly heroic Lawrence, Allenby, it may be argued, is viewed best as a hard-headed man of war who combined – like his near-contemporary Lord Kitchener had done very successfully not so many years earlier in both India and Egypt – a pronounced quality of command with considerable skill as a government administrator and diplomat. In the aftermath of his military victories in Palestine and Syria, Allenby's voice was critical in influencing the controversial political outcome of them for both Arabs and Jews. His six years in Cairo would see him grapple further with the very essence of modern Arab (Egyptian) nationalism, based in large measure on the geopolitical decisions made by his immediate predecessor, Sir Henry McMahon, as well as by the major diplomatic events of the period, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Balfour Declaration, the Paris Peace Conference and the San Remo and Cairo Conferences. It is the purpose of this book to show that Allenby's impact on Palestine and Egypt was both decisive and positive. Had his legacy

been acted upon by a subsequent generation of British administrators in a wise and timely manner, it could have been even more far-reaching than it was and, arguably, helped to prevent much of the political violence and dysfunction that continues to disfigure the region today.

This biography of Allenby, therefore, aims to be modern, nuanced and concerned with capturing the totality of the man, most especially in relation to the years that he spent in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the Arab Revolt and its romantic portrayal first, in the 1920s, at the hands of the American publicist Lowell Thomas, and then later those of the celebrated British filmmaker David Lean in his award-winning 1962 epic *Lawrence of Arabia*, Allenby as a figure of vital importance in helping to create the modern Middle East became overlooked to some extent. The two best biographies of him, Field Marshal Archibald Wavell's *Allenby: A Study in Greatness* (two volumes, 1940 and 1943) and Lawrence James's *Imperial Warrior* (1993), though published over a half-century apart, nonetheless both lean towards the conventionally heroic, especially Wavell's, a view that I seek to modify in certain respects.<sup>4</sup> The attempt here therefore, by way of contrast, is to probe deeply and dispassionately the events and actions of Allenby's life, as well as to examine his thinking on both the British Empire and the post-First World War international order. The goal is to bring maximum clarity to Allenby's deep impact on British imperial policy in the making of the modern Middle East, and thereby on the long arc of the region's continuing and controversial place in world affairs.

Note: In spelling peoples' names, as well as that of place names, I have used the form common today – for example, Aqaba, rather than Akaba; Sharif Faisal, rather than Sherif Feisal. However, I have left untouched the spellings given to such names and places by contemporaries at the time that the events in this book occurred, unless doing so were to obscure their correct identification.



## Chapter 1

### BOY TO MAN

#### BECOMING AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN, 1861–99

In 1861, the year in which Edmund Henry Hynman Allenby was born, Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's beloved husband and consort, died. Albert's death that December from typhoid fever, aged just forty-two years, would plunge the Queen into what came to be an almost interminable period of mourning, at the end of which she would emerge, among other things, as a resolute, Tory imperialist. The British Empire over which the queen presided during the last quarter of the nineteenth century would become, for Allenby, the imaginative landscape that provided him with the main contours of his military vocation. And even though his signature feat of arms would not occur until many years later in 1917, and with it a triumphant entry into the holy city of Jerusalem after having vanquished the Ottoman Turks, what had occasioned it was the continuing geographical capaciousness of Victorian-era imperial Britain. In many respects Allenby would be the last in a lengthy line of leading British imperial commanders. But long before any of that would take place, Edmund Allenby was born on 23 April 1861 at his mother's Midlands home of Brackenhurst, in Nottinghamshire.

Edmund was the second child and eldest son of Hynman Allenby and his wife, Catherine Anne (Cane). Today, Brackenhurst is part of Nottingham Trent University and appropriately, given Allenby's lifelong love of flora and fauna nurtured as a child, houses the School of Animal, Rural and Environmental Sciences on a substantial tract of 200 hectares of land a short distance outside Nottingham near the town of Southwell. Catherine was the daughter of a Church of England parson, the Rev'd Thomas Coats Cane, and his wife Mary (Brettle). One of the leading men of the county, a 'sqarson' with a comfortable private income, Cane shot, bred livestock and lived well, while presiding over a large family of twelve children, Catherine being the third eldest.

Hynman Allenby himself was the second son of a prosperous solicitor and country gentleman, Hinman Raddish Allenby, and his wife Elizabeth (Bourne). He and Catherine were married in 1859. They then went to live at Dartmouth in Devon where their first child, Catherine Mary (known as Kitty), was born the next year, and where Hynman could pursue his passion for sailing. Edmund's birth would follow in 1861. Four more children – Elizabeth, Claude, Helen (called Nell) and Alfred – would be born, the last of whom arrived in 1871. By that time the Allenbys had removed themselves to live permanently in the Suffolk coastal town of Felixstowe, which would remain the family seat until the death of Catherine at the age of ninety-one in 1922.<sup>1</sup>

Life at Felixstowe Hall (or House, to which it is sometimes referred) for the growing family and the young Allenby was nothing less than idyllic.<sup>2</sup> In those days, Felixstowe was a tiny town – nothing like the bustling coastal city of over 25,000 people today, which contains the largest container port in Britain – and Allenby spent much of his childhood outside dirtying his hands in the abundant natural world that lay at his doorstep. To add to the wide-eyed wonders of birds, small animals, insects and plants of the meadows and streams of his immediate surroundings, his father also had purchased an estate of about 2,000 acres near West Bilney in the neighbouring county of Norfolk, to which the family removed regularly, especially in autumn and winter. Apart from a few childhood maladies – including an especially bad bout of whooping cough – Allenby grew up strong of body. His first education lay in the hands of a governess, Miss Simpson, and then, at the age of ten, in those of an obliging vicar of the High Anglican variety, the Rev'd Maurice Cowell, of Ashbocking, a village located some 15 miles from Felixstowe. Beginning therefore in 1871, Allenby was educated in the rudiments of the classics, along with mathematics and botany. Altogether, he seems to have been a singularly happy and well-adjusted child: dutiful, content and confidently Christian. 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,' his devout mother read to him in the cadence and language of the Revised Standard Version, 'do it with thy might' (Eccl. 9.10).<sup>3</sup> No words were ever more thoroughly inwardly digested – as any properly catechized young Anglican was enjoined to do, and it would appear that Allenby lived by them for the rest of his life.

From the age of ten until fourteen Allenby's life was spent under the amiable tutelage of the Rev'd Cowell, and within the bosom of his family and its varied country pursuits. Riding, shooting, sailing – Hynman Allenby's sailboat, the *Water Witch*, figured prominently in their recreation – and rambling, all were engaged in readily, as was skating in wintertime. Notwithstanding these recreational and sporting endeavours, however, the young Allenby himself was never much inclined to participate in formal games. The full-flower of Dr Arnold's influence emanating from Rugby School was just beginning to transform the English public school sporting ethos, only to be skewered later by Kipling as 'oafish' in light of the manifest disaster of the Second South African War.<sup>4</sup> But neither at Ashbocking nor later at Haileybury College would Allenby go in much for team sport. That said, he was always 'painstaking and thoroughgoing' and demonstrated a 'high ideal of duty', according to James Welldon, a frequent visitor to Ashbocking vicarage and very much the sportsman who later would become Winston Churchill's headmaster at Harrow, and then later still, bishop of Calcutta.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Allenby might well be considered the embodiment of the Victorian 'muscular Christian', a type that until Lytton Strachey's satirical demolition of it in *Eminent Victorians* published in 1918 at the end of the First World War, had been lauded as a cultural ideal.<sup>6</sup>

In the spring of 1875, having just turned fourteen, Allenby was enrolled by his father in Haileybury College in order to complete his adolescent education in a more formal setting. Haileybury, while not in the front rank of public schools such as Eton, Harrow and Winchester, was considered nonetheless to

be entirely respectable and had been re-founded just thirteen years earlier as a modern successor of its original iteration as the training ground for servants of the East India Company. In most respects, Haileybury was a perfect setting for the adolescent Allenby. He breathed deeply of its imperial service-oriented air, a feature that would long remain a part of the Haileybury experience, as the future prime minister Clement Attlee recalled admiringly of his own days at the school a generation after Allenby's.<sup>7</sup> And while the sporting ethos was pronounced, it was not (yet) pervasive. Dutifully, Allenby would play rugby for his house, but apart from that he was not an athletic 'hearty'. But in other respects he was the ideal anvil upon which to hammer home the principles of duty, service and loyalty that, altogether, spoke of the character-building necessary for imperial responsibility and stewardship to come. Haileybury belonged to Tom Brown's world and Allenby's own aspirations came quickly to intersect squarely with its main features.<sup>8</sup>

To this service-oriented end, nothing in full-orbed school experience matched being appointed a prefect. And Allenby was duly made one in the Sixth Form, his last year of three at Haileybury. According to one of his prefectorial peers, he was 'sane, simple, and direct in all he did; he had no difficulties with discipline, which he exercised without harshness and with absolute justice.'<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as a thumbnail description of Allenby, this one is near perfect. And as a supervisory training ground for someone who would eventually become a career military man, a year as a public school prefect lording it fairly benignly – 'he was always noble and fair' – over his younger peers was equally ideal.<sup>10</sup> However, in the midst of this rather halcyon period of Allenby's young life sadness and disruption made an unwelcome entry upon the death of Hynman Allenby in February of 1878. In his sixty-seventh year, Allenby's father was not especially old, even by the standards of the latter nineteenth century when life expectancy first began to lengthen significantly. But at seventeen years of age, Allenby's character was not yet fully formed, and with his squire-arch father now gone, and as the eldest son, it fell immediately to him to think more clearly about a professional career. In light of Hynman Allenby's death, the family was forced to retrench financially, meaning that the Norfolk properties at West Bilney were sold and more than ever Felixstowe House became their focal point.

One of the main ways in which Haileybury continued to embody its former educational ethos was in setting before the boys the possibility of a career in British India, especially as a member of the augustly regarded Indian Civil Service (ICS). The ICS believed itself to be – and certainly was considered by most to be – the elite of the British colonial services. The ICS's relatively small membership – only some 1,200 at its late Victorian, Edwardian-era height – its esprit de corps, which was pronounced, and its sense of superiority were supreme.<sup>11</sup> Upon Hynman Allenby's untimely death the young Allenby was in the Lower Sixth Form with a year left to go in the Upper Sixth in order to complete his full time at Haileybury. He was not to stay on, however. His father's passing provided an unwelcome but necessary impetus to start to make his way in the world, and this meant an attempt to enter the ICS and with it the potential establishment of a comparatively well-paying, prestigious and covenanted career. Of course these were the very features

of life among the so-called Heaven born that made the entrance examination so highly, even legendarily, competitive.

Accordingly, at the conclusion of the summer term in 1878, Allenby departed Haileybury and was duly enrolled at an ICS crammer's called Wren's, located in London's Bayswater, in order to study intensively for the daunting entrance examination. Using a crammer was standard practice for a service exam, and Allenby did so, accompanied by his close Haileybury friend, Henry McMahon. He will, as we shall see, come to figure prominently in Allenby's later life in the Middle East. Together, they and a number of other students sat under the tutelage of Mr Wren in Greek, Latin, French, English composition, mathematics and chemistry.<sup>12</sup> The course of preparation was highly demanding, the other boys were equally bright and driven and the chance of examination success was minimal. Allenby duly took the examination in the summer of 1879, and failed. Not to be put off he tried it again during the following summer, but failed once more.<sup>13</sup> In both years the ICS admitted just 50 candidates out of 356 who wrote the examination, a stringency akin to the rate of undergraduate entrance at Oxbridge today.<sup>14</sup>

Allenby's initial acute disappointment over his failed attempts to join the ICS was softened by what was all along, however, probably the better option for a young man of his disposition and talents: the prospect of a British Army career made possible by admission into the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Consequently, he enrolled in a different London crammer, this one run by a Mr Adams who specialized in readying candidates for the Sandhurst examination, which is recognized widely as considerably less demanding than that of the ICS. In December 1880, aged nineteen and after another intensive experience of cramming, a determined Allenby proceeded to ace the examination, passing fifth into Sandhurst out of a class of 110.<sup>15</sup> Easier the Sandhurst entrance exam may have been, but no matter for the prospective young cadet. Allenby had found his vocation and he duly went off to the academy, arriving for his first day on 10 February 1881, feeling both happy and relieved.<sup>16</sup> So likewise did his family welcome this success, especially his mother, who had wondered about her eldest son's future from the moment her husband had died almost exactly three years earlier. Now, thankfully, the answer had been found in the form of Queen Victoria's Army.

The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst had been founded in 1801 under the auspices of Major General John Le Marchant in order to train 'Gentlemen Cadets' for the infantry and cavalry regiments of the British Army, as well as for the East India Company's presidency armies that were stationed in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta.<sup>17</sup> Located initially in Buckinghamshire, it had relocated to Sandhurst, Berkshire, in 1812. Together with the Royal Military Academy Woolwich, which trained artillerymen and engineers, Sandhurst provided for the professional needs of Britain's Victorian-era military. Sandhurst was a physically rigorous, if not especially intellectually challenging, place, although Allenby was being over-modest when he remarked later that he had gone there in light of his ICS examination failure "because he was too big a fool for anything else."<sup>18</sup>

The young Allenby's ten months on course at Sandhurst were unremarkable in that he was not a high-flyer, set apart necessarily for greatness as some of his

comrades might have been. He made good friends – his best one, Henry McMahon, many years later to precede him as the top British official in Egypt – accompanied him there from the crammer's, and he participated fully in cadet life. But his natural seriousness of mind, together with his full adult height of 6' 2" and strong physical bearing combined to give him a presence more greatly pronounced than that of many of his peers. Still, he was in no way the centre of attention. As one of them recalled much later in life, Allenby was a 'very handsome, quiet young man, retiring in his ways. Probably he did apply himself to the Science of War, whereas I was more interested in polo and games.'<sup>19</sup> And while it could not be said that his upbringing had been cosmopolitan, Allenby just then had begun to travel on the Continent with both family and friends, and his increased exposure to the world in this way had had an important impact on his cultural maturation. Most especially was this true after he had spent a couple of months in provincial France learning to speak French. Altogether, by the time he passed out of Sandhurst in December of 1881 – having done so 'with honours' and ranking twelfth in his class – the twenty-year-old Allenby was an ideal subaltern, ready to find his way in the newly reformed British Army.<sup>20</sup> Just a short time later, therefore, in May of 1882, he was gazetted a commission in the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons, an Irish regiment stationed then in South Africa. A storied, if not especially fashionable (but therefore also less expensive to join) regiment, the Inniskillings had been founded in 1689, just before seeing action at the soon-to-be legendary Battle of the Boyne the next year.<sup>21</sup> As a regiment of heavy cavalry, that is, cavalry of the line, it would fight at Waterloo, as well as during the Crimean War at the Battle of Balaclava and in India at the time of the Mutiny (or Rebellion) in 1857. Later, in the aftermath of the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 in South Africa, the regiment would be sent to Natal as part of a reinforced British garrison stationed there, which is where it was serving when the young Allenby arrived at the port city of Durban in the late summer of 1882.

In joining the Inniskillings, Allenby had become part of a fighting regiment with a strong record of British imperial service and in that world there were few places more roiling than southern Africa in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Allenby's arrival in 1882 occurred between the two great mineral discoveries that did more than anything else to set the British on a final collision course with the resident Afrikaners, their chief rival for European dominance in the region. The discovery of what came to be called the 'Eureka' diamond in 1867 in the interior district of Griqualand had occasioned an onrush of mining, speculation and economic development, exacerbating the pre-existing cleavages between Boer and Briton. Into that volatile mix was added the presence of a number of indigenous African populations – principally the Zulu and the Xhosa peoples – who were scrambling to maintain their ethnic and territorial integrity against galloping and pervasive Europeanization. In 1886, four years after Allenby had joined his regiment at their camp located just outside Durban, gold was discovered to the northwest at Witwatersrand in the Transvaal, one of two Afrikaner republics, the other being the Orange Free State where diamond mining was now well underway.<sup>22</sup> The republics' stubborn existence – at least to the British – had been

fought over twice, the most recent occurrence of which had been just a few years earlier during 1880–1. In the aftermath of that war, an uneasy truce had settled over the Anglo-Boer relationship, the maintenance of which was a large part of the reason for the presence of the Inniskillings in southern Africa.

Prior to the mineral discoveries, the Boers and the British – the first having arrived at the Cape in 1652, and the latter in 1806 as a weigh-station on the route to India during the Napoleonic Wars – lived in an uneasy share-out of the territory. Neither the Transvaal nor the Orange Free State was wealthy or especially attractive to the British whose sea power was demonstrated and reinforced amply by its own colonies of the Cape and Natal. Both of these colonies contained excellent harbours, as well as thriving nodes of commerce and settlement, especially their leading cities of Cape Town and Durban respectively.<sup>23</sup> The two Boer states, on the other hand, were impoverished, almost wholly agricultural, and under the control – again as far as the British were concerned – of a stubborn Calvinist religious leadership verging on the theocratic.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, the various indigenous African peoples existed within this disputed European paramountcy in a kind of suspended state, occasionally resorting to armed resistance – such as had occurred recently in 1879 at Isandlwana when a British force was badly defeated by Zulu *impis* – but more usually giving ground to the almost irresistible advance of European colonial settlement and military power.<sup>25</sup> Thus it was that no one was surprised when just six months after their defeat at Isandlwana in January of 1879, the British firmly vanquished independent Zulu power at the equally lopsided Battle of Ulundi, a defeat from which the Zulu nation would not soon recover.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, following the British victory at Ulundi the Zulu would cease to be a territorial rival in any real sense and the focus of geo-strategic concern for the British became almost wholly the two Boer republics. The British had annexed the Transvaal (South African Republic) in 1880, sparking a war with the Boers which lasted until the following year.<sup>27</sup> This First Anglo-Boer War, as it would come to be called, proved to be both brutal and surprisingly difficult for the British whose superiority in weapons and tactics they had assumed were theirs. In particular, the decisive Boer victory at Majuba Hill in Natal in February of 1881 made it clear to the British that the Boers were not to be cowed in the way that the pre-industrial Zulu had been. Accordingly, in the aftermath of the war the Transvaal's formal independence was restored. But its position in this regard was always temporary as far as the British were concerned, especially once gold was discovered later in 1886.

The situation in South Africa therefore was both fluid and tense at the time of Allenby's arrival in 1882. The Inniskillings were sent out as one part of what was required to reinforce the British military presence in the region. Based in Natal Allenby adapted quickly to the regimental life he found there. Thus he rode and shot; he drank, though moderately, and socialized infrequently. Characteristically, as we shall see, he was 'a bit brusque' in his treatment of the younger subalterns, but altogether gained invaluable formative service along a challenging imperial frontier that was in constant flux.<sup>28</sup>



Bechuanaland (today's Botswana) was the contested area of the frontier that would draw in Allenby and the Inniskillings during their first sustained period of service. An enormous tract of southern African desert, plain and swamp, which teemed with game, Bechuanaland was sparsely populated by the San people (the so-called Bushmen of the Kalahari), among others. The territory was coveted by both Boer and Briton, but for different reasons. For the Boers, Bechuanaland was seen as a natural northern extension of the Transvaal. Indeed, there was a rump Boer population of perhaps a thousand settlers living there already under the nominal suzerainty of two new covenanted statelets, the Boer republics of Stellaland and Goshen. For the British, on the other hand, the prospect of Bechuanaland becoming a beachhead for the extension of Afrikanerdom was in itself enough of a provocation for them to act in order to prevent such an eventuality.<sup>29</sup>

But there was more to the situation for the British than just an attempt to check Boer expansion. Another consideration was that expressed by John Mackenzie, a resident Scottish missionary, who feared that an increasing influx of Boer settlers into Bechuanaland would have a seriously deleterious impact on indigenous Tswana society. The best thing to do in light of this sure eventuality, he argued, was for the British to proclaim a protectorate over the territory.<sup>30</sup> Of equal import too, but taking a different form, was the persistent expansionism of the increasingly powerful and insistent Cape Colony politician Cecil Rhodes, whose grand vision of a strip of British-controlled territory in Africa stretching from 'Cape to Cairo' was fast taking shape. Bechuanaland was included in this vision as it lay on the old 'Missionaries' Road' – pioneered by David Livingstone in mid-century – to what was then called Zambesia, but would later take the name of Rhodes himself.<sup>31</sup> The fact that Rhodes called this road the Suez Canal of the South African interior gives an idea as to what he thought of its importance, and therefore of the necessity of a British protectorate being extended over the region.<sup>32</sup> Finally, complicating the picture even further was the recently established German presence at Angra Pequena, or Luderitz Bay, on the Namibian coast. The expectation that this tiny colony, which German trader Adolf Luderitz had founded in 1883 and then turned over to the German government the following year, would serve as the egg from which a broader German southern African territorial presence would be hatched was a lively one for the British. Altogether, with Bismarck having subsequently proclaimed Luderitz-Angra Pequena and the surrounding territory to be a German protectorate in August of 1884, there was much to be concerned about in geo-strategic terms in London.<sup>33</sup> Enough, indeed, that in November of that year the Gladstone government – notwithstanding its chief's earlier rejection of the 'prevailing earth-hunger' of late Victorian British imperialism – decided to check Germany's provocative move in southern Africa by calling for the creation and deployment of what would be called the Bechuanaland Field Force.<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, in late November, Allenby and the Inniskillings sailed out of Durban bound for the Cape in order to form the required cavalry regiment of the newly established BFF. The force was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Warren, a career engineer officer whose various commissions, commands and appointments would make him a remarkable Victorian type. He would be

appointed, for example, commissioner of police for London in 1886 and in that short-lived role preside over the gruesome Jack-the-Ripper case of 1888. But on 22 January 1885, however, Warren and his 4,000-man BFF marched out of Cape Town heading north. Warren was determined to succeed in this sensitive venture in imperial expansion. Little could he have known that at that very moment almost 5,000 miles to the north his fellow Royal Engineer Major General Charles Gordon was about to make his last fatal stand against the jihadist imprecations of the Mahdi.<sup>35</sup> That unmitigated disaster – which is how it would be understood by most of the country – would not be duplicated in Bechuanaland, however.

Cautious by nature and prescient in his meticulous planning, Warren ensured that the BFF would have enough water and be dressed in such a way as to resist the extremes of heat that the march through the high *veldt* and desert entailed. Equipment for drilling wells and piping water therefore was brought along. Sanitation in camp was insisted upon, as was the fact that the men would be dressed in corduroy or cotton khaki rather than in the usual scarlet woollen tunic and breeches. As well, in place of the traditional pith helmet the required headwear on the Bechuanaland Campaign would be a broad-brimmed slouch-style hat, excellent for reflecting the penetrating rays of the sun. In addition, the presence of three observation balloons – the first time they had ever been used by a British armed force on campaign – contributed to a state of comprehensive readiness by the BFF.

Three days into the march on 25 January, and with Allenby in command of the troop of cavalry that was escorting Warren, they met for a conference with the crusty and dogmatic president of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger, at an outpost called Fourteen Streams. The gruff Boer leader's reputation preceded him, and his deep distrust of the British was virtually an innate feature of his character. He would, of course, have much more about which to complain in the near future in his dealings with the British, but on this occasion he told Warren simply that he was responsible for law and order in Bechuanaland and therefore neither the presence of the BFF nor the extension of a formal British protectorate were required. Cecil Rhodes – in the capacity of recently appointed Deputy Commissioner for Bechuanaland – was present for these discussions also. Neither he nor Warren agreed with what Kruger had to say, however. In the event, Kruger's position was weak. He had no force of his own to call upon and no active engagement by resident Boers. Accordingly, he was in no position to do anything other than concede reluctantly that the British position was simply stronger than his own and therefore that he would have to submit to their plans. The moment of tension thus passed without recourse to violence by either side, but it was clear who the victor had been. Similarly, once the BFF moved on from Fourteen Streams and had arrived at Vryburg, the capital of the putative Boer state of Stellaland, the Boer settlers there chose not to resist either. Indeed, during the whole of the campaign, which included the occupation of Mafeking in March, scarcely a shot was fired, except for those heard during off-duty hunting by officers such as Allenby who went after the abundant game. In due course in September of that year the British claim of protectorate status was made official.<sup>36</sup>



For Allenby, a witness to high politics as well as to the mundane requirements of moving a force of men across unforgiving country at speed, the Bechuanaland experience was useful if not overly taxing introduction to active military service. Making and breaking camp; handling an armed force on the move; ensuring the health and efficacy of horses in the field. As skills necessary to his chosen vocation, Allenby could not have done better than the few months he had spent marching around southern Africa. And as a kind of bonus – although of course not to be recognized as such until later – was his making the acquaintance of the irrepressible Rhodes and even good-naturedly competing with him for a shared blanket while encamped on campaign.<sup>37</sup> As remembered by one of Allenby's colleagues, and in a style typical of the man, Rhodes pushed 'him [Allenby] out [of the tent] quite unconsciously, and it was merely the man's guiding instinct to push everyone else out of his way, which asserted itself even when asleep!'<sup>38</sup> By the end of the year, however, and with the campaign well-over Allenby had returned to Natal where he would remain until the summer of 1886, at which time he shipped out for England and a two-year regulation posting at the Canterbury cavalry depot. At twenty-five years of age, with promising prospects and a period of stellar African service of which to boast, Allenby settled happily into a brace of years enjoying the life of a young officer.

Thus it was that for the next two years Allenby fulfilled his regimental duties, engaged regularly in fox-hunting and was promoted captain. In the summer of 1888, he returned to Natal and shortly thereafter was named regimental adjutant, the latter a reflection of his natural leadership ability and gravitas when in command. Allenby's life during this period was rather uneventful, however, even if all-around him the turmoil in South Africa continued to build. In 1889, the ever-voracious Rhodes founded the British South Africa Company, which he would use to spearhead the penetration of Zambesia, as the territory north of the Limpopo River was called.<sup>39</sup> The BSAC's Pioneer Column to come would set in motion the delimitation of that territory, which in 1896 became known as Rhodesia. For Allenby, these and other large-scale geo-strategic events came at several removes, of course, and by the time he sailed for home with the rest of the Inniskillings in October of 1890 the machinations of Rhodes and his fellow 'Gold Bugs' would be left behind – at least for the moment.

Once having arrived in England, Allenby was quartered initially at Preston Barracks, Brighton, where he continued to serve as adjutant until 1893 when the Inniskillings were transferred to Shorncliffe, thence briefly to Manchester, and finally to Edinburgh.<sup>40</sup> Compared to much of his service in South Africa these years were quiet – 'I occupied myself peacefully in sunbathing & golf, at which game I improved a bit,' he wrote to his always attentive mother in August of 1893.<sup>41</sup> He followed dutifully the events of the day, especially in the late winter of 1894 when the six-decade-long career of W. E. Gladstone, the Grand Old Man (GOM) of British politics, finally was coming to an end: 'It seems pretty certain that Gladstone is resigning,' he wrote home.<sup>42</sup> Like most conservative military men in the years following the death of Gordon at Khartoum, Allenby had little time for Gladstone, who was blamed for having caused it. Indeed, Allenby met

the GOM's resignation on 2 March with approbation, not unlike that displayed by the Tory Party itself, as well as by the Liberal Imperialists whose party-political machinations had helped engineer it.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps, however, because of the relative somnolence of the period, which had not been made enjoyable by 'the great many balls & festivities on down here,' as he informed his mother somewhat sourly, Allenby's aspirations for career advancement came into sharper focus.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, after a period of cramming in London – much like what he had experienced in advance of the ICS and Sandhurst exams – Allenby attempted to win entry into the Army Staff College at Camberley in Surrey, which just then was beginning to assert itself as the embodiment of what a modern army required by way of the specialization of its leadership. Allenby's first attempt in 1895 resulted in a narrow failure, but he took the examination again, this time passing it successfully by coming twenty-first out of sixty-eight candidates.<sup>45</sup> He was the only cavalry officer to do so, and the first Inniskilling ever to gain admission to what rapidly was becoming a gold star appointment. In January of 1896, therefore, Allenby began what would be two years of close instruction in the finer points of modern warfare, as well as in those of military command. As might be expected, the role of cavalry in the swiftly changing environment of waging contemporary (industrial) war was of especial interest to him.

At Camberley one of Allenby's classmates was the young Douglas Haig, then a captain in the 7th Hussars. Haig was the same age as Allenby, and like him had failed at his first attempt to enter the Staff College. The two young officers were amiably competitive over the following two years. Allenby, better liked than Haig by his contemporaries, was elected by them to be Master of the Staff College Draghounds. Astride his trusted mount, 'Chisel,' Allenby won the annual point-to-point, 'Heavy Weight Cup' race, even though it was conceded by most that Haig was the better horseman.<sup>46</sup> Still, Allenby and Haig respected each other and many years later would emerge as probably the two most famous British generals of the First World War (Figure 2).

Promoted major in January of 1897, Allenby's increase in rank came just after he had got married on 30 December of the previous year. His wife was named Adelaide Mabel Chapman. She was twenty-eight years old and hailed from the Wiltshire gentry. They had met first in 1895 and, despite the initial misgivings of her father who was unimpressed both by Allenby's social position and career prospects, agreed with their wish to marry. The fact that Allenby was said to be 'the handsomest man in the Army in his time' had cut absolutely no weight with Horace Chapman.<sup>47</sup> But presumably the imprecations of the daughter convinced the father to relent and the ensuing marriage was to be warm and loving, made even more so by the birth of their only child, a son they named Horace Michael Hynman, in January of 1898. By that time Allenby had passed out of Camberley – 'he has energy, good judgement and rapid decision making ... the man I should choose to lead the Forlorn Hope,' stated his final report – in anticipation of taking up the post of brigade-major (or adjutant, as it was formerly called) of the 3rd Cavalry Division at the Curragh in Ireland.<sup>48</sup> For the next two years, therefore, the Allenbys would live a rather idyllic military life in the rural surroundings



**Figure 2** Allenby as a young officer at Camberley Staff College (second row from top, second from left) with an equally young Douglas Haig (third row from top, far right), 1896.

of the base at the Curragh in County Kildare. Happiness reigned, if punctuated occasionally by professionally mandated travel to the Continent: 'We do the Waterloo battlefield tomorrow ... I long to see you again,' he wrote to Mabel, who went by her middle name, in the spring of 1897. But soon enough this quiescence would come to an abrupt end when war, long anticipated by both Boer and Briton, broke out in South Africa in October of 1899.<sup>49</sup>