How did Saladin gain victory against the Crusaders at the Battle of Hattin?

The Battle of Hattin was fought on 4th July 1187; it was the key battle that led to the Christian loss of Jerusalem and prompted the Third Crusade. The battle took place on and around the Horns of Hattin, a geographical formation on a volcano, near Tiberias, in present day Israel.

Putting the Battle of Hattin into context, it would be helpful to first explain what the Crusades were. The Holy City of Jerusalem, where Jesus Christ was crucified and buried (and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre built over these sites to preserve and venerate them), was also a major site of pilgrimage for the Muslim and Jewish faiths.

A fierce group of Muslims, called the Seljuk Turks, had taken control of Jerusalem from the Christian Byzantine Empire and, according to Pope Urban II, these invaders were persecuting Christians and preventing them from visiting the Holy City. Urban II therefore called upon the kings, princes and nobles from around Christian Europe to join together to create an ‘Army of God’ and take back control of Jerusalem. This was the First Crusade.

In 1099, some four years after Pope Urban’s decree, Jerusalem was taken back by Christian forces in a stunning victory. Many Crusaders returned to their homelands but others stayed to defend the Holy City and the Crusader States they had established (Edessa, Antioch and Tripoli). For many years, Christians and Muslims lived side by side and worked together, though with widespread resentment on the Muslim side. In 1144, Imad ad-Din Zengi, ruler of Mosul and Aleppo, and his Muslim army recaptured the City of Edessa and slaughtered the Franks (Crusader Christians) who lived there. When news reached Europe, a papal bull was issued and King Louis VII of France and King Conrad III of Germany set out on a Second Crusade. Unlike the successful First Crusade, the Second Crusade was beset with problems: logistic problems (Queen Eleanor and her entourage travelled with Louis VII, as well as the usual retinue required by Kings), poor leadership, troubled relations between the Crusaders and Byzantines (who had been supportive in the First Crusade) and the increasing military power of the Muslim forces. After less than three years, the Second Crusade was abandoned following the unsuccessful siege of Damascus and the kings returned home.

Zengi’s son – Nur al-Din – made it his focus to fight the Christians and he did this tirelessly over the years. When he died, Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (known to history simply as ‘Saladin’), the son of one of Nur al-Din’s generals, took power over the Muslim forces in a peaceful coup. Over the years he rose to become Sultan of Egypt and Syria. The real prize, however, was Jerusalem. With an army of 26,000 men, Saladin planned to attack the Christians and go on to take the Holy City.

Initially, Saladin’s efforts were unsuccessful. The young King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem was aided by the warmongering Crusader Raynald de Châtillon, recently liberated after sixteen years of imprisonment. With only a few thousand men and backed up by five hundred Knights Templar on horseback, the Christians took the offensive and surprised Saladin and his army, which was widely scattered. The rout at the Battle of Montgisard in 1177 was a huge blow to Saladin, whose nephew was killed in the fighting. Now Saladin would bide his time until he felt he could win a decisive victory against the Christians.
Meanwhile, the Crusader States began to weaken. The Crusaders could not simultaneously support an army and garrison all of its many castles due to shortages in men. In addition, Baldwin IV’s leprosy made him incapable of ruling; he was blind and paralyzed in his early twenties and had to be tied onto a horse to go into battle. He died in May 1185, aged just 23 and was succeeded by the sickly son of his sister, Sibylla. Baldwin V died the following year at the age of 9.¹

Guy of Lusignan and Raymond of Tripoli squabbled about who would succeed Baldwin V as King of Jerusalem. Guy of Lusignan had a claim to the throne of Jerusalem through his wife, Sibylla (he was stepfather to Baldwin V) whilst his challenger, Raymond of Tripoli, was from the established nobility of Outremer (the name commonly given to the Crusader States). Eventually, Guy was crowned King of Jerusalem later in 1186.

Meanwhile Saladin was becoming increasingly restless and bent on revenge. Raynald de Châtillon was attacking Muslim caravans on pilgrimage back and forth to Mecca, including one with Saladin’s sister in. He also attacked Medina, the second holiest city in Islam and the burial site of the Prophet Muhammad. This was the last straw for Saladin and he decided to attack the Crusader States.

Saladin devised a strategy: he needed to lure the Crusaders away from the stronghold of Jerusalem. He needed to confront them in open battle where his numerical advantage would be of greater assistance. His armies ranked about 30,000 men compared with the Crusaders’ 20,000 men. Saladin decided to lay siege to Tiberias where Eschiva, Raymond of Tripoli’s wife, was stuck.

The Crusaders marched north from Jerusalem to Saffuriya on the way to Tiberias. Here, they held a council of war. At the council of war Count Raymond (of Tripoli) convinced King Guy to shadow the movements of the Muslim army so that the Crusaders could fight at a place of their choosing. However, following the council, Gerard de Ridefort, Grand Master of the Templars, convinced King Guy to fight out in the open by saying “Sire, do not trust the advice of the Count (Raymond of Tripoli) for he is a traitor, and you well know that he has no love for you and wants you to be put to shame and to lose the Kingdom … let us move off immediately, and go and defeat Saladin.”³

Ridefort’s strategy was a mistake and the Crusaders were at a disadvantage from the beginning. The fifteen-mile march to Tiberias was across a dry and arid plain and they left their baggage, including their valuable drinking water supplies behind in an attempt to gain time and surprise. The Crusader army was also slowed by Turks attacking the Templars and infantry in the rearguard during the march. However, the Crusader army carried in its ranks the True Cross (believed to be made from the wood of the crucifix on which Jesus was crucified) and this, they believed, would bring them victory.

In preparation for the arrival of the Christian Army, Saladin’s men ensured that all of the wells on the plain had been poisoned and they had set fire to the shrubs and

¹ The Crusades (Byrom & Riley), page 101
² Holy Warriors (Jonathan Phillips), page 131
³ Idem, page 127
vegetation in the area.\textsuperscript{4} Not only did the heat of the fires add to the scorching July temperatures, the smoke choked the Crusader soldiers and horsemen and made it difficult to communicate and generally spread confusion. In spite of being parched and choking with smoke, the Crusaders employed their usual tactic of a heavy cavalry charge of the Hospitallers, Templars, Knights of St Lazarus and nobles. However, the Turks’ light cavalry wheeled their horses back and opened up a gap in their formation, to make sure they took as few casualties as possible; this manoeuvre meant few Turk casualties and isolated the heavy cavalry on the Horns of Hattin (the higher ground of the battle).

As the heavy cavalry charged back into the fray, they were initially successful, killing the larger part of Saladin’s personal bodyguard. Crucially, however, they failed to kill Saladin himself, a move which would have secured a decisive victory. Instead, the heavy cavalry found themselves outnumbered and cut off from their supporting infantry.

Saladin now ordered his army to reform and his horse archers surrounded the Crusader cavalry and infantry. Their hailstorm of arrows decimated the Crusader army, with only around 3000 of the original 20,000 surviving.\textsuperscript{5}

Meanwhile Raymond of Tripoli, seeing the heavy cavalry fail in their attempt to kill Saladin, fled the battlefield, taking his surviving personal cavalry with him. Defeat of the remaining Crusader forces quickly followed and the True Cross was taken.

The defeated Crusaders were put into a long line. The knights of the military orders amongst them - the Templars, the Hospitallers and the knights of St Lazarus - were executed.

Saladin called for King Guy and Raynald de Châtillon to be brought before him. To King Guy, he gave a glass of iced julep water, a sign of safe conduct. Guy passed the cup to Raynald de Châtillon but was rebuked by Saladin who had not forgotten Raynald’s attack on Medina and sacking of the Muslim caravans.\textsuperscript{6} Saladin grabbed Raynald and beheaded him, just outside the Emir’s own tent.\textsuperscript{7} King Guy was released when Saladin purportedly said “Kings do not kill Kings”.\textsuperscript{8} The remaining Crusaders were sold into slavery.

The Battle of Hattin left next-to-no-one to protect Jerusalem and it fell in a two-week siege. There was very little bloodshed. Saladin gradually conquered the remaining Crusader strongholds but he did not succeed in taking Tyre, the port to which the Christians had fled to seek refuge.

Saladin was the supreme ruler in Egypt, Jerusalem and Syria until his death in 1193. He was challenged for Jerusalem in 1189 by means of the Third Crusade directly prompted by the Christian defeat at the Battle of Hattin but it failed, as did the subsequent crusades over the following centuries. It was not until October 1918,
towards the end of World War I, when a British army, supported by their Arab and French allies, captured the Holy City from the Turks that Christian soldiers re-entered the city of Jerusalem. Today Jerusalem remains torn by religious differences and the countries of the Levant are troubled by the rise of ISIL Muslim fundamentalists who wish to recreate a Muslim-only land such as the one Saladin had created.

**Inspiration:**
Knight Crusader by Ronald Welch

**Bibliography:**
The Crusades – Jamie Byrom & Michael Riley
Deus Vult, A Concise History of the Crusades – Jem Duducu
The Crusades – Andrew Jotischky
The Life of Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem – Stanley Lane-Poole
Reference Classics, Crusades – Thomas F. Madden, General Editor
Wikipedia