

Colin Fremder's English Guide to Anzac Museum.

Every year, on 31 Oct. the Australian Embassy conducts a memorial service, in the cemetery, to commemorate the Battle of Beer Sheva. This ceremony usually attracts around 200 participants, mainly other ambassadors in Israel and VIPs including the mayor of Beer Sheva. At the ceremony in 2015, the Mayor of Beer Sheva proposed building the Memorial Centre to be opened in conjunction with the centennial celebrations to be held in 2017. Construction went slow. After 1 year nothing had started. 3 months before opening, nobody believe it would be ready on time. 3 weeks before opening same opinion. But by super effort it was completed on time. There were 3,000 invited guests to opening ceremony, mainly Australian. VIPs were upgraded to then Australian Prime Minister. N.Z. Governor General and Israeli Prime minister. At opening of center someone went around and whispered into guest's ears, not to lean against the walls because the paint was still wet.

The building was financed by the JNF, Australian Gov. and the Municipality of Beer Sheva. Some controversy on photo on wall as to if it was taken at the actual battle of Beer Sheva or at the re-enactment one year later.

3 soldiers. British, New Zealand and Australian. Main distinguishing features of the Australian trooper is his slouch hat. Turned up on the left so he can reach his weapon, and the plumes (feathers) on the hat.

A few relevant facts. The main body of the allied troops consisted of the Calvary. Calvary came in regiments of 1,000. They wear light armor and ride into battle on their horses using long swords to fight. Light horse come in regiments of 400, and wear no armor. They are actually infantry or foot soldiers. They are broken down eventually of sections of 4. They ride up to the battle where 3 dismount and go in on foot and the 4th tenders to the horses either advancing or retreating as the battle proceeds. Contrary to legend, 800 light horse men did not conquer Beer Sheva by themselves. They were aided by approx.50,000 allied forces who attacked Beer Sheva from the West, starting at dawn on 31 Oct.,

capturing areas around Beer Sheva but not the wells in Beer Sheva. After the allied forces had completed their task, it was up to the New Zealand Mounted Rifles to attack at Tel A-saba, now Tel Beer Sheba, which they took mid afternoon. Then it was up to the light horse to go in and capture the wells of Beer Sheva. It was the intention of the Light Horse brigade to charge Beer Sheva rather than dismount and go in on foot. In the movie you can see the German officer telling his men to hold their fire and to fire on orders after they dismounted. This did not happen and the Australians were over the top of them before they could adjust their machine guns and cannons. The Australians rode over the top of them and the battle was over in less than 1 hour.

The horses became a very important factor in the war. The horses are called Walers because they originated in New South Wales. They are a cross breed of horses, very intelligent and can carry heavy loads on their backs. Their main attribute is their ability to go long periods without food or water. In ideal conditions they can go up to 50 hours without food or water. In the desert they can go up to 24 – 30 hours without water. As the war progressed the Walers were taken from all over Australia. In all somewhere between 130-160000 horses were sent from Australia, about 29,500 to the Middle East and the rest to the European war zones. By the end of the war, only 1 horse was returned to Australia. His name was Sandy and he belong to a Major General critically wounded in Gallipoli whose dying wish was the horse be repatriated to Australia. The Australian Government refused to send the remaining horses back to Australia. Main reason given was quarantine but cost was probably the main reason. Any horse over 12 years old was put down. The army tried to sell off the remainder to both the British and Indian armies. In the Middle East several thousand horses were left and they were to be sold off to the locals in Cairo. The Australians were very upset about the whole deal. The horses had been such an important aspect in the lives during the war. Many of the troopers came from small towns in Australia. Now the war was over they expected to take part in victory parades, together with their horses, in their home towns. Step by step this was taken away from them and the last straw was selling them off to the locals in Cairo, who had a very bad reputation of cruelty towards animals. Rather than seeing their horses leading a life of cruelty, many of the troopers took their horses into the desert and shot them.

After England declared war, all Commonwealth countries were automatically at war. Australia, originally pledged 20,000 troopers. This quota was met in a few days. All in 341,000 Australians volunteered to join the army. Australian population at this stage was 5 million and this represented 7% of the population. In N.Z. the population was 1 million and 100,000 joined the army. This represents 10% of the population. There was no compulsory conscription in Australia and all were volunteers. Twice Australia held a referendum to see if conscription should become compulsory and twice it was defeated. In N.Z. compulsory conscription was brought in after 1 year. To join the army you had to be between the ages of 18 to 35, be at least 1.68 meters tall and a chest measurement of 85 cm. As the war progressed these conditions were greatly relaxed. Fathers and sons joined the army together, men up to the age of 60 were accepted. Many youngsters 15 to 18 joined the army. They were country boys who knew how to handle horses and weapons and very few questions were asked concerning their age. If questioned they were told that minimum age was 18. Walk around the block several times and return when they were 18. We take 1 typical Australian and follow him from the time he enlisted, thru to the Battle of Beer Sheva. The trooper's name is Randolph Earnest Cleaver. He came from a town called Sale in Northern Victoria. He was 29 when he enlisted and worked in the family butcher shop. We follow him across the boards seeing the correspondence he sent home on his journey to Beer Sheva.

Many of the troopers bought their own horses to the ports. The Aust. Army purchased the horses from them but where possible they were reassigned their horses where they tendered them on transports to the war zones.

Why did so many men volunteer to join the army and fight so far from home? Most were first or second generation Australians who still had strong ties with families in the U.K. Many were country boys who had never seen the big cities before. They believed the war would not last more than a few months and this was their opportunity to see the world. They were shipped to the Western Australian port of Albany where they left in convoys to the war areas. The original convoy of 37 ships with 30,000 troopers and 10,000 horses, set off to England. After leaving Australia, the Australian commander, Harry Chauvel, who was then in

England, realized there was not enough accommodation for the troops in England and diverted the ships to Port Said and Alexandria.

After initial training the troops were sent to Gallipoli, most without their horses, who stayed in Egypt where they were trained by around 100 trainers. (The head trainer was Banjo Patterson). The troops arrived in Turkey, on April 25 1915. This landing is commemorated in Australia and New Zealand on 25 April each year and is a public holiday known as Anzac Day. This is the first time the Australian and New Zealand forces fought together as one army known as ANZACs (Aust & N.Z. Army Corps). Gallipoli was a disaster for the allied troops. The commanding officer was the Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill. His aim was to sail thru the straits of the Dardanelles, up to Constantinople, which today is Istanbul, And then across to Europe, opening a 3rd front in Russia. From the start, the mission was a failure and after 8 months the allied forces pulled out. In all there were over 320,000 casualties and 55,000 dead. Of these there were 40,000 Australian casualties and 8,200 killed. Churchill was forced to resign because of this.

After returning to Egypt about half the Australians were sent to Europe. The remainder joined the allied troops under the command of General Archibald Murray. Murray was a hands-off commander and was not popular by both the British and Australian troops, in particular with the Australian Commander Harry Chauvel, who could not understand how Murray controlled a war whilst sitting in his office and relying on information by his officers. Whilst in Egypt the troops were given much time off enabling them to sight see and cause havoc in the red light district of Cairo. Two significant things they did whilst in Egypt was, one, to lay a water line from the Nile, across the Suez Canal and extended into El Arish in the Sinai thru to the Negev desert at Park Eshkol and too lay a railway line across the Suez Canal and extended into El Arish.

In January 1915, the Turks attempted to capture the Sinai which was held by the allied forces. The Turkish aim was to capture the Suez Canal and then move on to Cairo. Many battles were fought. We talk about 2 of them, the first which took place in Romani in August 1916. Romani was 37 kms east of the Suez Canal and was controlled by the ANZACS. The battle took place over 3 days. After 2 days the Turks were advancing into Romani. Australian reinforcements arrived on the 2nd evening and

the Turks were forced to withdraw on the 3rd day. A nice story was told by the Australian Prime Minister at the opening ceremony. It is about a special Waler called Bill the Bastard. Bill weighed 730 kg compares to about 500 kg of a normal horse. He could carry great weights on his back and had enormous energy. His only problem was that he would not allow anybody to sit in the saddle to ride him. He could be led into battle and carry wounded soldiers back to the camp. The record for riding Bill was held an ex English jockey who stayed on his back for almost 30 seconds. Many Australians tried to better this. Lots of money was wagered, and lost, and many broken bones were incurred. Average time on Bills back was between 4 and 12 seconds. An Australian major, Michael Shanahan, if alive today, would have been called a horse whistler, was determined that he could tame Bill. He led him around as a pack horse, giving him treats of licorice allsorts. He would groom Bill daily and would go swimming with him. They say that he also slept with Bill. In the end Bill gave in and allowed only Shanahan to ride him. Shanahan rode him into the Battle of Romani and came across 4 Tasmanian troopers who had their horses shot from under them. Shanahan picked them up, 2 across the saddle and one each holding on to a stirrup and together with their back packs, a combined weight of almost 800 kg, trotted back the 5 miles to the camp. After a short break Shanahan and Bill returned to the battle. Almost immediately Shanahan was shot in the leg. He continued for almost an hour before passing out. Bill sensing something was wrong turned back and trotted back to the camp. Realizing that Shanahan was seriously injured he took him directly to the vet office where he could be properly treated. He was transferred to the base hospital. Unfortunately gangrene had set in and the leg had to amputated. Shanahan was transferred to England where he saw out the rest of the war.

The second battle we talk about was in Rafah in January 1917. Rafah was held by the Turks. The New Zealand forces moved in to take it but as -they approached they were given orders by General Murray to withdraw. The New Zealanders, under the command of Brigadier-General Edward Chayton, ignored the orders and went on to capture Rafah. After capturing the town they were again given orders withdraw. They informed Murray that it was too late and the town had been captured. Feelings between Murray and the ANzacs were never good

but after these 2 battles, which were won by the Anzacs, most of the credit and medals were given to the British feelings were at their worst. But Anzacs being forgiving people, decided, several weeks after, to have a celebration party in Rafah which they invited the British, including Murray to attend, which they accepted. Murray was scheduled to arrive at noon. Troopers were sent out prior to arrival. Murray turned up late and after refreshments asked for a thoroughbred to go out and inspect the troops. He was informed that there were no thoroughbreds at the camp but they would make sure that he would be supplied with the best horse available. There was some mix up here and by mistake Bill the Bastard was bought out. Murray was very pleased after seeing Bill, such a large and fit looking horse, climbed up onto the saddle. Eight seconds later he was sitting on his backside in the sand. It took 2 hours for him to compose himself. The troopers claim that they would gladly stand in the desert for a further 2 days just to see the spectacle again.

From here the troops advanced towards Gaza. The idea was to capture Gaza with its water wells and move on to Jerusalem. There were 2 attacks on Gaza. The first in March 1917. The allied forces were told by General Murray, Who was very much a hands off General, if they could not take Gaza by late afternoon or early evening they were to withdraw.. On the day of the attack there was a heavy fog along the Gaza border. The troops did not move in until late morning. Heavy fighting took place and if it had continued for another hour Gaza would have been taken. Murray received orders that the allied troops were being defeated and ordered them to withdraw. He later got his orders right and ordered the allied forces to attack the next morning. By then the Turks had reinforcements in Gaza and the allied forces were forced to withdraw almost immediately. They waited 3 weeks before attacking a second time. Again the Turks were ready for them and they were forced to withdraw immediately. After the second attack on Gaza, Murray was sent back to the U.K. And was replaced by General Edmund Allenby. Allenby's background was similar to Murray but Allenby was in contrast was hands on man. He immediately shifted his headquarters from Cairo to the Sinai desert where the action was. He inspected the troopers in the trenches and communicated with his officers. He got on well with General Chauvel, the Australian Commander. Whilst doing basic training in the desert, with temperatures sometimes over 40 degrees, Murray

insisted that the troops train with their shirts on and their backpacks, weighing up to 50 kg., on at all times, causing some of the troopers to suffer from pneumonia and dehydration. Allenby changed that and allowed the troopers to train in their undershirts and without their backpacks. Officers were always permitted alcohol in their barracks. Allenby allowed the enlisted men to bring beer and whiskey into their barracks. With these changes the moral of the men improved dramatically.

Allenby arrived in the Middle East in June 1917. His mission was to capture Jerusalem by Christmas 1917. After summing up the situation, he decided, rather than to attack Gaza for a third time, he would work along the flank and spring a surprise attack on Beer Sheva, capturing their water wells instead of those in Gaza. Planning this attack took 4 months of secret preparation. During the preparation he was given tremendous help by the Jewish Underground Organization called Nili. Nili operated from the North of Palestine around the Atlit area. They were very pro- British. They numbered only around 30 members. The founders were Aeron Aeronson, a world renowned agronomist, his sisters Sarah and Hannah, and Hannah's fiancé Avshalom Feinberg. From March to October there was a locust plague throughout Israel. The Turks asked Aeronson to assist in eradicating the locusts. He agreed and insisted that he be allowed to work together with his sister Sarah and Avshalom Fienburg. They were given free reign throughout Palestine and were able to feedback information to the British as to troop movements and locations of water wells. Their means of communication was at first by beacon lights from and to a vessel around the Atlit area and after that became too dangerous, by carrier pigeons. They were eventually discovered when one of pigeons was shot down and a message was found attached to the pigeon's leg. The group was arrested and during interrogation were subjected to torture. Sarah knew she would not stand up to the torture and she committed suicide rather than reveal information to the Turks. The full history of Nili can be had by visiting their museum located in Zikron Ya'acov in the North of Israel.

Several weeks before the attack on Beer Sheva took place, a British intelligence officer by the name of Richard Meinertzhagen carried out a mission called the haversack rouse. He rode his horse close to the Gaza border. After attracting the attention of a Turkish patrol and getting

them to open fire on him fell, unharmed, from his horse, remounted and escaped. He left behind his haversack which the Turks recovered. Inside the haversack were detailed plans as to a third attack on Gaza. To authenticate these plans, included in the haversack, were a pile of fictitious love letters, that he and his sister had written, to fictitious ladies in the U.K. this was to give the impression that he was on his way to the port to deliver the mail. At first the Turks, and particularly the Germans were very suspicious of these items but eventually believe in them and prepared for the third attack on Gaza.

On the 29 October the allied troops, numbering approx. 50,000 set off on the journey to Beer Sheva. It took 3 days to make the journey. They travelled only at night to avoid the Turks noticing the dust being thrown up by the hooves of the animals and also to avoid the heat of the day. On the 30 October they rested in a place called Bir Asjuj. Today this is a popular picnic area but in those days was nothing except water wells. This was the last watering hole before the attack on Beer Sheva. The attack on Beer Sheva was for one reason only and that was capture the water wells there. If it was to fail the mission would be a disaster. The horses would certainly perish and so too would many of the troopers. At dawn on 31 October, the British started shelling Gaza from the Mediterranean Sea. This convinced the Turks that the land attack on Gaza was eminent. At the same time, the allied forces began the attack on Beer Sheva from the west. Casualties were high, around 170 allied troopers were killed, whilst the Turks suffered over 500 dead and over 2,000 were taken prisoner. Fighting continued until mid-afternoon. The allied forces secured the areas around Beer Sheva but did not capture the town of Beer Sheva.

The Australians moved around to the eastern side of Beer Sheva. By mid-morning the New Zealanders entered the town of Tel El Saba, now known as Tel Sheva. Tel El Saba is about 1.5 kms from Beer Sheva and consists of several hills overlooking Beer Sheva. From here the Turks had their machine guns and canons positioned to defend Beer Sheva if it were to be attacked. The New Zealanders went in as light horse men, meaning on foot. The battle continued until mid-afternoon when the area was secured. It was now that the Australians were ready to attack. It was around 4.30 in the afternoon. Very bad time to start an attack. The sun was in their eyes and there was less than an hour of daylight.

left. It was imperative that the battle take place then as the Turks had already started to withdraw. They had already blown up 2 of the 19 wells in Beer Sheva. If allowed to withdraw at their own pace they would have either blown up or poisoned the remaining wells and the whole mission would have been a disaster. The Turks had not expected to be attacked from the rear and so very little in defense was established. The Australians, consisting of the iv and xii regiments, totaling 800 men charged using only their bayonets. The charge was led by Let. Eric Hyman. He led his division of 13 men into the battle where they were confronted by 100 Turks. Hyman and his men dismounted and with their hand pistols dispatched 60 of the enemy. The remaining were taken prisoners. This opened the way for the rest of the charge on Beer Sheva. The battle lasted less than an hour. Remaining 17 wells were taken intact. All told there were 34 deaths amongst the 800 light horse men, less than 60 were injured and around 90 horses perished. Casualties among the Turks is not known. Between 700 to 1000 were taken prisoners. Two days after the Battle of Beer Sheva the Balfour Declaration was presented to Lord Rothschild in the U.K. This was actually prepared before the Battle of Beer Shva but the British wanted a significant victory before presenting it to the British public.

After the Battle Of Beer Sheva a lot of the fight was taken out of the Turks. The allied forces moved across the Ottoman occupied Palestine and arrived at the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem 6 weeks later on the 14 December 1917. Here Allenby dismounted and walked thru the Jaffa gate declaring he had arrived as a liberator and not as a conquer. He was warmly received by both the Jewish and Arab population. This was virtually the end of the 500 year rule of the Ottomans over Palestine.

