

## ***U3A. AUSTRALIAN HISTORY.***

### ***The Australian Light Horse at Beersheba***

***31<sup>st</sup>. October 1917***

At Sunset on the 31 October 1917, the 4<sup>th</sup>. Australian Light Horse Brigade was ordered to gallop, under fire and capture the town of Beersheba with its water wells, from the Turkish Troops defending it.

It was one of the most daring and bravest battles ever seen in any War.

There were 500 young Australian Horsemen on their horses, wild eyed, yelling and swearing, charging over 1,000 well entrenched Turks who were armed with machine guns and artillery.

The Australians had their rifles slung over their shoulders and they were waving their bayonets like swords.

The 12<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment was led by Brigadier William Grant who came from Stawell in Victoria.

The 12<sup>th</sup> was the New England Light Horse.

The General in charge was Lt. General Harry Chauvel who knew that the British Army must capture Beersheba with its water wells before it could move on to capture Jerusalem, 35 miles to the north.

General Allenby was moving two Divisions of the British Army to attempt to capture the town but had failed in two attacks. He needed water as his 30,000 soldiers were running out of the precious supply.

Lt.General Chauvel decide to move his Light Horse Regiments through the desert for three days with only a limited supply of water and was sure that the Turks would not expect to be attacked from this area.

The Light Horse men were to have only what water that they could carry for themselves and their horses. They made sure that they gave their water to the horses.

When they arrived they were out of water and the horses were becoming distressed. Chauvel told his Brigadiers that there was only one battle plan;

***Grant will go straight in and Hodgson will make dust and be in reserve.***

The Turkish Troops were led by German Officers who made a huge mistake when they told their Troops that the Australians were Mounted Infantry who would dismount at the 1,500 yard mark and charge on foot with rifles and bayonets. They were to set their gun-sights at that mark

They felt that they were very secure as they had over 4,000 Turkish Troops, well dug in with artillery and machine guns. They had been attacked by Allenby's British Army, had held them at bay and forced them to retreat.

Grant ordered his men to;

***Form Squadrons 5 yard apart.***

A Trooper asked his Sergeant;

***What's goin' on Serge?***

The Sergeant answered;

***We're gunna bloody charge Beersheba Mate.***

Grant raised his arm and pointed towards Beersheba and 400 Horsemen, the biggest Troop in 100 years set off at a walking pace. On the left the 11<sup>th</sup> were making dust and on the right the 7<sup>th</sup> were also making dust.

The Troopers then let out a roar that would have done the Footie Finals at Melbourne Oval proud and the 12th and the 4<sup>th</sup> broke into a canter.

The German Officers realized that the Australians were not dismounting but there was no time to get the Troops to lower their gunsights.

The first rounds fell short but the Horses kept coming and the next salvos went over their heads.

800 yards from the trenches the machine guns and rifles started up and some men and horses fell.

The Reserve Brigades were riding in circles at the 1,500 yard mark and raising clouds of red dust and the Turks were sure that there were thousands of Australians coming straight at them. Many got up and ran out of the trenches.

The Light Horsemen were yelling and waving their bayonets like swords and they leapt over the entrenched Turks and attacked the artillery in the rear.

The horses could smell the water and they were going as hard as they could.

Trooper John (Chook) Fowler would later write in his diary;

*The artillery was heavy for a time but it went over our heads, Then the machine guns started and a few horses and blokes fell but it also went over our heads .I jumped over some Turks but they were big blokes and I did not want to tangle with them . A bullet hit my pack and I found two holes in my trousers.*

*I just kept my head down and the horse just kept going. No man kept as low on his horse as I did.*

Some of the Troopers leapt off their horses and attacked with bayonets and most of the Turks surrendered.

Most kept going and were soon in the town.

A young German Officer had been given the task of blowing up the water wells but when it came to the task he decided that he could not do such a thing and waited for the Australians to arrive and he surrendered.

He then helped them to remove the explosive charges.

The Australians then captured the guns and they then settled down to enjoy the food, beer and wines.

They made sure that General Chauvel and his Brigadiers Grant and Hodgson were found nice quarters and were served with a good meal with the best wines.

Two days later General Allenby marched the British Army into the town and they were cheered in by a lot of drunken Australians who shouted;

***Where have you buggers been, we've drunk all the good stuff?***

A British Officer complained to Chauvel;

***You do not appear to have much control over your men. They seem unable to salute an Officer.***

General Chauvel knew all about his men.

Lt. General Harry Chauvel would become the leader of one of the most potent Cavalry Forces in the British Army.

He would always praise his magnificent Light Horsemen and their wonderful Walers.

By Nightfall, Beersheba was in the hands of the Light Horse and they were rounding up the defeated Turks. There were over 800 other ranks and 58 Officers. There were 29 field guns and 30 machine guns along with many transport vehicles and a large supply of food and other supplies. The most important item was water.

The Australian casualties were; 31 killed and 36 wounded. 40 horses were killed and 45 were wounded.

A German Officer, captured at Beersheba wrote;

***We did not believe that they would actually charge.***

The Light Horsemen and their wonderful horses had carried out the most successful charge in the history of war. In the coming years there would be many stories written about this charge but is best summed up by a Trooper who wrote; ***It was the horses that did it. Those bloody marvelous horses. Where would we have been but for them?***

The fall of Beersheba swayed the battle against the Turks in Palestine and it would change the history of the Middle East.

The victory at Beersheba is almost forgotten today as Australians are inclined to think of Gallipoli as the most important event by its soldiers in WW1.

Gallipoli was a terrible defeat with over 9,000 dead. Beersheba was a great victory with only a small number of casualties.

In 2008 the Australian Government began to recognize this and it had a Memorial Park built in Beersheba to be used by children and a fine bronze statue was erected by Sculpture Peter Corlett. The park is named; ***The Park of the Australian Soldier.***

***LEST WE FORGET.***

*(John Imrie, October 2020)*