



BUSTING BEERSHEBA: AUSTRALIANS IN THE CAMPAIGN TO DEFEAT THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE



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THE BALLAD OF BEERSHEBA

Abraham was a Godly man,
A desert dweller with a perfect plan
To populate and promote his clan
To dwell at Beersheba.

He dug the well and he planted a tree
A tamarisk, for memory
Where the Patriarchs dealt with destiny
By the Well at Beersheba.

David and Solomon were God's right hand
They smote their enemies, just as planned
So God decreed they owned the land
From Dan to Beersheba.

The desert winds never cease to blow
Now they're facing a fearful foe
With tanks and guns where camels go
Cry woe to Beersheba.

From the youngest nation, but an ancient land
Comes a host of horse men, an ANZAC band
Of unsung heroes, at the Lord's command
To take the well at Beersheba.

Clear came the call "Fore the day is done
You'll gallop under Turkish guns
And take the enemy, one by one,
Win back the well at Beersheba.

On the wings of wind, like a rising tide
They swept the enemy guns aside
But some would fall, that the host survived
To capture Beersheba.

Mark where they fell, for tragedy
Tears at the heart of victory,
Will the wattle bloom with the Tamarisk tree
By the well at Beersheba.

Will the wattle bloom with the Tamarisk tree
By the well at Beersheba.

(By Margaret Higgins, Gloucester, NSW)

ARTILLERY AT BEERESHEBA

The British XX Corps were arrayed west of Beersheba in a ‘menacing’ role when the phalanx of Australian and New Zealand cavalry, led by its scouts and affiliated artillery batteries, took up their position six kilometres south west of the settlement. The Turkish front line of defence was at Tel el Sabe, and Essex Battery, RHA filled a gap to the east to support the New Zealand Mounted Brigade’s three regiments. The 7th Mounted Brigade’s artillery was 20th Brigade, RHA (Berks, Hants and Leicester Batteries). The Desert Mounted Corps was commanded by Lieut. General H. Chauvel. His 4th Light Horse Brigade, 11th, 12th and 14th Light Horse Regiments supported by 19th Brigade, RHA, A and B Batteries of the HAC (Honourable Artillery Company) and Notts Battery, to the SSE. The 3rd Light Horse Brigade was affiliated with the 18th Brigade, RHA, Somerset and Inverness Batteries. The enemy expected a two-division attack. The well of Beersheba was the objective so that the cavalry had an essential watering point after their long trek across the desert.

The British 21 Corps had halted on a line west of the town. Its artillery strength was approx. 100 guns of all types and calibres. The British force drew the Turkish fire. The German air force was active over the front causing worrisome casualties, as did the Turkish artillery fire.

The Turkish infantry occupying the Tel el Sabe area made good use of ground for the defence of the rough south east approach to the town. Notts and Inverness Batteries supported the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade in the battle for the rugged Tel el Sabe area. The Auckland, Wellington and Canterbury Mounted Rifles battled a strong Turkish defence line. This was one aspect of the strategy to take the town. That afternoon Lieut. General Chetwode ordered Chauvel to attack, whose orders made a legend - ‘Put Grant straight at it’ – at 1630 for a four kilometre mounted charge with his 4th Light Horse Brigade. The defenders fled after the charge began. Effective artillery support was attributed to “superior wits, resource and straight shooting”.

The charge became a ‘military classic’ in Commonwealth Military Historiography. Troopers used bayonets as swords and charged into the mosque. Here, a German engineer was captured by two troopers while he was setting charges to blow up the precious water source (400,000 litres) for the British force. He thought the troopers ‘were madmen’. 90 POWs were taken. Chetwode’s major casualties came from the effective bombing and machine gunning of the assembled force by German aviators. One foray killed Chauvel’s chief staff officer, Lieut. Colonel Maygar, VC. The British force on the western front suffered 1348 casualties.

Source: Allenby’s Gunners – Artillery in the Palestine Campaigns 1916-1918.
pp.131-135

THE ABU TELUL BATTLE.

This took place on 14 JULY 1918 as part of the strategic plan to deny the Turks the Jordan Valley that could have threatened the general advance northward toward Megiddo. The selection of infantry positions was critical to the overall defence plan, involving Chauvel himself. The 'infantry' was 2nd Light Horse Regiment (Queensland). They occupied a triangular area roughly 2-3,000 yards on the Musallabah Bluff. Artillery observers were with the infantry. The posts were 100 – 400 yards apart, with 'dummy' posts to mislead the Turks.

The artillery comprised A and B Batteries, HAC and Notts Battery, Hong Kong and Singapore Mountain Battery. The posts were connected by line. There were two howitzer batteries (C301 and C303 of the RGA). The artillery observers covered the front.

The battle began in the early hours of the morning with a force of 4,200 sabres, 2,500 infantry and 36 guns in support. The battle raged and some enemy elements nearly reached the gun line before being ejected. As the battle developed – and the enemy artillery fire was sustained. As the battle raged the enemy was held, and at 0330 Brigadier Cox ordered Granville's 1 Light Horse Brigade to eject the enemy, whose German 'storm troopers' occupied the western flank. The artillery support for the counter-attack was very close to the threatened posts. By 0900 the attack was over and the prisoners brought in. The Turkish elements withdrew but the German 'storm troopers' were deranged with thirst. They had attacked without their water bottles, and some attackers nearly reached the gun line.

The attack was over by 0900 and while the Turks withdrew, the Germans surrendered – their water bottles were empty and they were deranged with thirst. A chivalrous sequel to that was that when the enemy were lorried off they cheered their captors who had given them their water bottles. The enemy, despite their meticulous planning had forgotten about water. This was the last set piece battle of the campaign and thwarted the enemy design to occupy the Jordan Valley. Enemy casualties were c.1,000 KIA and 540 POWS. Own troops casualties were 69 KIA.

Source: Allenby's Gunners in the Palestine Campaign, pp.230-236