

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



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Here comes the cavalry

Dr David Cameron.

HERE COMES THE CAVALRY



The Australian Light Horse: cavalry or mounted infantry?



Australian light horse troopers on their famous Waler mounts : the Waler was undoubtedly the best horses in service during the Palestine campaign

Some Australian light horse troopers after Gallipoli found themselves assigned to the Imperial Camel Brigade/Corps to act as mounted infantry. Later the corps was disbanded and the troopers returned to their trusted Walers



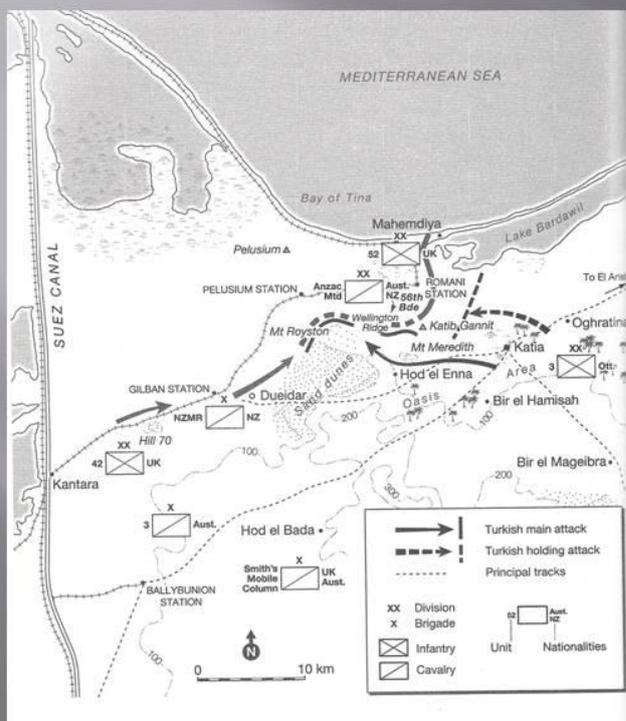
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ALH: Chauvel's troopers were not mounted infantry, as frequently stated, but cavalry.

- They conducted reconnaissance, screened infantry movements from the enemy, carried out forward outpost duties, patrolled, fought dismounted engagements, and conducted raids well behind enemy lines.
- These were not the usual roles of mounted infantry, who used their horses merely to get to the scene of battle and then dismounted to fight as a conventional infantry force.
- **ICB:** The only truly mounted infantry troops in this area of operations were those of the Imperial Camel Brigade.
- The ICB consisted of four infantry battalions made up mostly of Gallipoli veterans. It had 18 infantry companies. Ten of the companies were Australian, six were British, and the remaining two were from New Zealand.
- They rode camels to reach the enemy before dismounting and fighting on foot as conventional infantry.

Romani: 4 to 5 August 1916



Australian Major General Harry Chauvel commanding the Anzac Mounted Division



Burying an Australian trooper at Romani

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Anzac and British forces after being evacuated from the failed Gallipoli campaign in late December 1915 and early January 1916 turned their attention to the capture of Palestine and later the Trans-Jordan and greater Syria. The troopers were back with their trusted horses — the great Australian Whaler.

They took up a position at Romani to keep the Turks away from the Suez Canal — from here they planned to launch an offensive to recover the Sinai Peninsula which had been left to the Turks in 1915 — now they would spend a solid 8 month of hard fighting to take it back.

The battle of Romani: was fought between 3 and 5 August 1916 and finally put a stop to the Turkish threat to the Suez canal and marked the beginning of the British forces' drive out of Egypt and into Palestine.

The British defences were well established east of the town among a series of strongly held redoubts held by British infantry — to the south only a thin line of ALH troopers protected the approach among a series of scattered sandhills.

Australian Major General John Chauvel who commanded the Anzac Mounted Division directed the southern battle.

He specifically instructed his troopers not to reinforce the line as it was here he wanted the Turks to attack. The plan dictated that the ALH would conducted a supervised withdrew

towards the town. Meanwhile, British and Anzac forces positioned further west would slam into the exposed Turkish left flank and rear — beating the Turks in detail.

Initially, only the 1st Light Horse Brigade was in position to meet the Turkish attack. Heavily outnumbered it was forced to fall back but as the day progressed both mounted and infantry reinforcements steadily arrived, allowing the position to be stabilized around a massive dune known as Mount Royston.

- As the Australian troopers lay low in the sand firing into the oncoming Turks, they were encouraged by the fearless ‘Gallop Jack’ [Brigadier John Royston] riding among them, a blood-stained bandage around a wound to his calf unravelling and trailing behind him.
- He yelled above the sound of battle, ‘Keep your heads down, lads. Stick to it, stick to it! You are making history to-day. . . We are winning now. They are retreating in hundreds.’ However, one trooper recalled something different: ‘I poked my head over the top, and there were the blighters coming on in thousands.’

Some of these actions resulted in hand-to-hand combat using the bayonet as the Australian troopers attempted to mount up. Sergeant Allan Campbell (2nd ALH) was in the thick of it recalling:

Finally our men rose up to get their horses just over the hill-top, but found Turks amongst them. The enemy had got around the hill. . . The frantic search for horses, plus wounded and terrified horses rearing and breaking away from other horses, produced an unforgettable scene.

When some of the men got into the saddle, they found a black form holding the reins, so they said, ‘Hop up behind!’ But the answer would be ‘Finish Australia!’ which would swiftly bring a rifle down on the head and so end the argument. As the enemy pushed our fellows back. . . their exhaustion was obvious, thank goodness!

My Major told my mate and I that we should ‘Get into the b—s with the bayonet!’ That readily chilled us! That huge black mass against our puny numbers! Eventually we got all our men away. Most were mounted, but some were double-banked, and some were hanging on to stirrup leathers.

- It was touch and go — as communications with the forces to the West quickly broke forcing Chauvel to consider launching his own attack against the Turkish flanks from east of Wellington Ridge. However, the British and Anzac forces to the West attacked just after mid day.

- The Anzac's held their positions throughout the night and before dawn the next morning the 1st and 2nd AH Brigades along with New Zealand troopers advanced on foot with the bayonet against Wellington Ridge. Turkish resistance collapsed at this point, and large numbers of prisoners were taken. At 6.30 am fresh troops of the 3rd Light Brigade were turned loose in pursuit of the retreating Turks.
- The way lay open to advance across the Sinai towards Palestine



The troopers and their horses were soon out of the deep sands of the Sinai — into Palestine proper.

British General Murray was now convinced he could break through and take Gaza and then sweep onto Jerusalem. He had managed to bring up water supplies from a water pipeline and railway track that had been built across the Sinai with the British advance there.

The battle for Gaza: The coastal city of Gaza was the heart of the main Turkish defensive position in southern Palestine. Three major battles were launched in 1917 by British forces to capture Gaza - only the third succeeded – known to most as the Battle for Beersheba.

The first battle of Gaza took place on 26 March 1917. Two British infantry divisions were to attack it from the south while the mounted troops of the Desert Column, commanded by

Major General Chauvel would cover the eastern flank and rear from any Turkish relieving force.

- Lieutenant **Darley** of the 9th ALH Regiment recalled on first seeing Gaza early in the morning before the main assault.

Ali Muntar stands out as a natural fortress on the south-east corner of the city and has played many important parts in the history of Gaza. It was on this hill than Samson was stated to have pulled down the pillars of the temple. Thousands of men in past ages had died on its slopes, and it was evident that many more were [now] doomed to the same fate ...

Lying behind Ali Muntar the town of Gaza could be clearly seen, with its narrow streets and flat-roofed houses, whilst clear and distinct the minaret of the mosque towered above all in its centre. A red crescent flag, which is the distinguishing flag of the Turkish Medical Service, flew from its top, no doubt with a view to securing its safety from our gunfire.

When the attack was launched the British infantry made slow progress but the mounted troops succeeded in capturing high ground to the north of the city. Concerned about the slow progress of the infantry attack, Chauvel and his troopers were now ordered to capture the city from their position east and north.

Not long after, Lieutenant General Dobell, the British officer commanding was still agitated by the lack of progress by the infantry. He was now misinformed that two large bodies of Turkish reinforcements were approaching from the north and east of Gaza.

He panicked and ordered the attack to halt — all troops were to retreat back to their starting off positions of that morning. However, by now the Anzac troopers and British infantry had actually captured the city!

- **On retreat:** When the brigadiers got the order to fall back, they were incredulous – and furious. New Zealand Brigadier Edward Chaytor refused to obey until he got it in writing. It reached the men just as the British infantry and dismounted Anzac and British troopers were meeting up in the eastern streets of Gaza.
- They couldn't believe it — again and again officers and men questioned it. Trooper Ion Idriess later wrote: 'Never will I forget the utter amazement of all troops – we simply stood gazing down the streets of Gaza — officers shrieking for signallers to confirm the order lest it be the work of spies. The sun was right down – repeated signal after signal came: "Retreat! Retire! Retire!"'

- All around the order to pull out and make their way back was being yelled, and soon the men were vacating their hard-won positions in and around Gaza, many angry and confused — the heads had surely stuffed up again!’
- New Zealand trooper Fred Sterling was blunter in his assessment: ‘Awful mess — somebody wants hanging.’

Second Gaza: 19 April 1917

The burnt out British tank ‘The Nutty.’ Its brave crew pushed on to help momentarily capture what would later be appropriately called: *Tank Redoubt*

ALH move out to attack during second Gaza

XX	Division	□	Aust.
X	Brigade	□	NZ
⊗	Infantry	□	Unit
⊞	Cavalry	□	Nationalities
⊠	Regiment	⋯⋯⋯	Trenches

Murray waited another four weeks before trying to break the newly heavy entrenched Gaza Beersheba Line – no flanks to be turned now — Western Front all over again

The second battle for Gaza took place on 17 April 1917. In the interim the Turks had extended and improved their defences. Dobell launched another frontal assault on the Turkish defences, which was supported by six tanks and gas shells.

The tanks and the gas were both dismal failures — although one tank ‘The Nutty’ did bravely help Australian and British troops for a time capture a redoubt in the centre of the Turkish lines later appropriately called ‘Tank Redoubt.’

However, the British and Anzac attacking forces could make little headway against well-sited Turkish redoubts. After a day of heavy fighting — sustaining significant casualties — the attack was called off, having gained no significant ground.

- Private Frank Reid recalled his commander making an unwelcomed appearance, not far from tank redoubt:

Just then de Lancey Forth came walking across the open as unconcernedly as if he had been strolling along a city street. If ever a man bore a charmed life it was this daredevil officer. Seeing us drop on the ground, he walked across to where we were lying with our faces buried in the grass. 'Are you all right, boys?' he said.

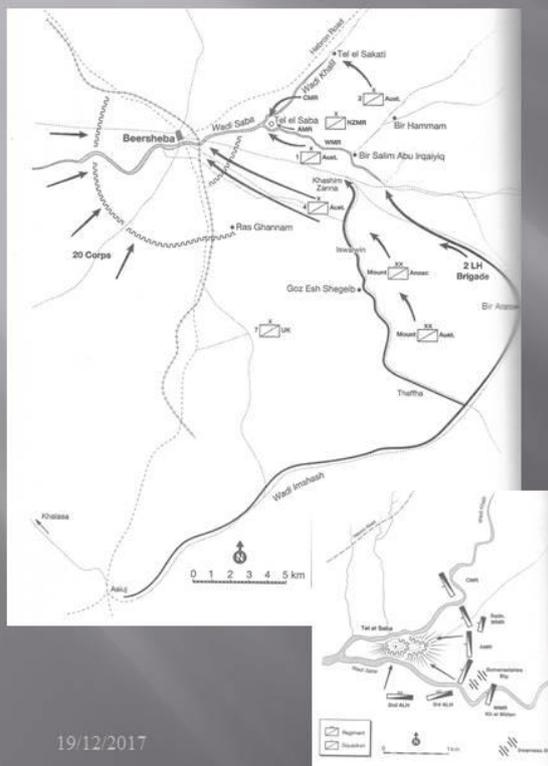
Once he stood near us, it was the signal for the enemy machine-gunners to concentrate their fire on us. I doubt if there was an inch of ground around us that was not disturbed by their bullets, and it was a miracle we were not hit.

We swore under our breath at de Lancey Forth for coming over to us, and drawing the enemy fire to the spot where we were concealed. He stood there, swinging a short cane in his hand, but all the time those half-closed eyes of his were glancing to right and left where men were still racing across the open toward the wadi where they knew they would be safe from the whining bullets.

'Seems a pity all this barley will be trampled and shot down before the day is over,' said Lancey, kicking a clump of green crop with his boot. 'Damn the flaming barley,' muttered the little sergeant lying beside me.

- Among the last to be killed that day from the 10th ALH regiment was Ric Throssell — the brother of Hugo Throssell VC — as recalled by Trooper Ernest McAulay: *On the afternoon of April 19th, during the second Gaza attack, right in front of the first redoubts, [I] saw Lieutenant Throssell lying dead. Rather on his left-hand side with his head on his left arm, he looked just as if he was sleeping. On looking at him closely [I] saw a bullet in the head killed him outright.'*
- On hearing that his brother had been killed, Hugo spent the night searching unsuccessfully for Ric's body, which was later recovered; Ric is today buried in the Gaza War Cemetery. Hugo Throssell VC never fully recovered from his brother's death and committed suicide using his service revolver in 1933, aged just 49.

Beersheba: 31 October 1917



Turkish trenches at Beersheba



Southern approach to Tel el Saba

General Murray was now replaced by General Edmund Allenby. Chauvel was now promoted to Corps command.

Australian Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel now commanded the largest British cavalry force ever assembled—the Desert Mounted Corps – 17,000 troopers.

Chauvel was also the first Australian to be promoted to such a lofty position — 12 months before Monash fighting on the Western front was promoted to corps command in mid 1918

The battle for Beersheba: After the two disastrous battles to break through the Gaza-Beersheba line in early to mid 1917 by attacking Gaza on the coast, the British turned their attention to the inland flank at Beersheba. Here they hoped to break through the strong Turkish defensive line and finally push into Palestine proper, in their advance to Jerusalem.

He would use two mounted divisions — the Anzac and Australian mounted divisions — and the British XX Corps consisting of three divisions — in his attack against Beersheba.

Beersheba was 40 kilometres inland and the only secure water source was in the town itself. If Beersheba was not taken before dark then a main part of the attacking force, consisting of Anzac troopers would have no water for their horses and most would die before making it back towards their starting off point just south of Gaza.

The attack was launched at dawn on 31 October, with the British 20 Corps attacking the Western approaches to draw Turkish reserves down upon them while the Anzac troopers were to approach the town from the south and storm it from the east.

The British infantry had captured all of their positions by noon — north and northwest of the town — and had succeeded in forcing the Turkish commander in Beersheba to commit the bulk of his force to that part of the battle — leaving the eastern and southern aspects of the town weakened of defenders.

The battle for Tel Saba: the Anzac troopers allocated to take the town from the east were soon embroiled in desperate fighting to take Tel el-Saba. This position needed to be taken before Beersheba could be attacked from the east as planned. The Turkish position was held by a significant Turkish force, supported with machineguns and artillery — any approach to it was exposed as it was surrounded by a flat desert plain — only intermittently was there cover provided by tributaries from the main wadi's screening the tel.

Battle for Tel el-Saba: The troopers of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles were the first to attack Tel el-Saba. However, they could make only slow progress.

Even so they bravely pressed on, but the wadi was quickly becoming a death trap as the Turkish machinegun fire from the tel swept the approach

Meanwhile the 2nd and 3rd ALH had been committed to support the attack against the tel.

The order now came for the New Zealanders to charge the slopes of Tel el Saba with the bayonet, with the Auckland Regiment in the lead. The Turkish artillery was still shelling the Anzacs, but all were keen to get the thing over with as soon as possible, as recalled by Lieutenant Moore:

The New Zealanders charged with fixed bayonets, pushing the attack home with great determination as they mounted the rising ground towards the enemy. The sight of the cold steel coming upon them was evidently too much for the morale of the Turks, for their fire died down as our panting men approached their trenches, and those that did not bolt soon surrendered

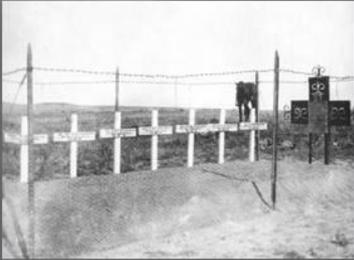
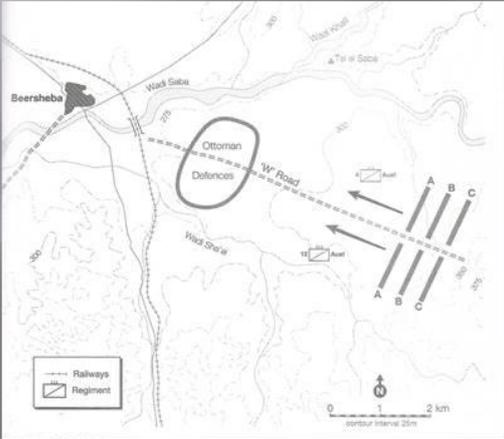
- Lieutenant Ernest Picot of the Auckland Regiment brought his two machine guns into action at close range to provide covering fire for the advancing New Zealand troopers. With his men he moved forward to smother the Turkish forward trenches on the tel with fire, enabling the Aucklanders to get into the trenches with the bayonet. Not content with this, he captured a Turkish machine gun by himself and turned it against the enemy. Simultaneously, Major Dick's squadron of the 3rd ALH Regiment advanced across the wadi.

- The Aucklanders were the first to reach the Turkish trenches, and as they scrambled up the mound, the garrison of around 130 Turks surrendered en masse, including four machine-gun crews. A party of Turks fled towards Beersheba, but troops of the 2nd and 3rd ALH regiments gave chase and cut them down. An enemy force was then observed moving out from Beersheba, threatening a counterattack, but it was quickly driven off by the same Australians. While the tel was now in Anzac hands, there was no way with the available light that these exhausted troopers could conduct a charge into Beersheba.

Beersheba: The Charge



Troopers of the 4th ALH ride under viaduct - Beersheba



Graves of Australian troopers Beersheba

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Chauvel realised that this forces to the east of the town could not possibly capture Beersheba before dusk and stop the Turks from blowing up the wells. He was now forced to commit elements of his reserve.

At Chauvel's headquarters was Brigadier Grant commanding the 4th ALH Brigade and Brigadier FitzGerald of the British 5th Mounted Brigade.

There was a tense but brief discussion as both FitzGerald and Grant pleaded for the honour of the charge. Fitz-Gerald's yeomanry had their swords and the brigade was close behind Chauvel's headquarters, while Grant's Australians only had their rifles and bayonets, but they were closer to Beersheba.

After a moment's thought, Chauvel gave the lead to the light horsemen. "Put Grant straight at it" was his terse command to Hodgson; and Grant, swinging onto his saddle, galloped away to his brigade to prepare his assembled regiments.

Chauvel had always been careful not to show preference for the Australian light horse over the British yeomanry, but he later admitted: 'if I did ever favour the light horse it was at Beersheba, when, in giving the lead to Grant, I was perhaps influenced by a desire to give a chance to the 4th and 12th Regiments, which up to then had seen very little serious fighting'.

- The only way for Beersheba to be captured before dusk and save the wells and pumping station was for a quick cavalry charge.
- The Australian troopers of the 4th and 12th ALH regiments now assembled and prepared to conduct a 7 kilometre charge to the Turkish trenches and into Beersheba itself. The Turks could not believe their eyes as around 400 horsemen began their charge.

The Charge:

- Twenty-one-year-old bank clerk from Melbourne, Trooper Arthur *Moon* of 4th Regiment recalled his part in the charge, while mounted on his charger 'Jerry' as they charged towards the Turkish lines:

The pace is getting hotter and Jacko realises that there is something doing. We can hear his rifle and machinegun fire, but it does not seem to be coming anywhere near us.

I have a hazy recollection of a plane badly missing us with bombs. Tim Healey of C Troop is about 50 yards in front, acting as ground scout'.

- Covering the left flank of the charge was, Sergeant Doherty of the 12th Regiment who later wrote in his diary:
After progressing about three quarters of a mile our pace became terrific ... we were galloping towards a strongly held, crescent shaped redoubt of greater length than our own line. In face of this intense fire, which now included frequent salvos from field artillery, the now maddened horses, straining their hearts to bursting point, had to cross cavernous wadis whose precipitous banks seemed to defy our progress. The crescent redoubt — like a long sinuous smoking serpent — was taking a fearful toll of men and horses, but the line remained unwavering and resolute'.

- Trooper John ‘Chook’ **Fowler** (12th ALH regiment) was now encountering the main Turkish trench system.

I urged my horse along, and it wasn't hard to do so as he was as anxious as I was to get past those trenches. I am certain my horse knew what those bullets meant ... No horseman ever crouched closer to his mount than I did. Suddenly through the dust, I saw the trenches, very wide with sand bags in front; I doubt if my horse could have jumped them with the load he was carrying, and after galloping two miles. The trench was full of Turks with rifle and fixed bayonets, and hand grenades.

About 20 yards to my left, I could just see as a blur through the dust some horses and men of the 12th Regiment passing through a narrow opening in the trenches. I turned my horse and raced along that trench. I had a bird's eye view of the Turks below me throwing hand grenades etc., but in a flash we were through with nothing between us and Beersheba, and the sound of machine guns and grenades behind

- Luckily for the Australians this part of the line was not wired, if it had been the charge would have failed.

Taking the trenches: Facing the charge was Turkish Gallipoli veteran Emin Çöl, who watched as the horsemen galloped and thundered down upon his position. He recalled how hundreds of Australian horsemen swept over the first line of trenches, forcing him and his comrades to take cover in order to avoid being crushed by the horses' hooves or killed by their riders with the bayonet or small-arms fire.

When the enemy troopers dismounted and attacked the trenches Çöl opened fire, but within seconds he suddenly lost his vision, even though he was still conscious. He had been wounded in the head and could feel blood pouring over his face. In the thick of the fighting his friends managed somehow to bandage his wounds and take him to a sheltered spot in the trench before surrendering to the Australians.

'They told me', recalled Çöl, 'that two [Australian] soldiers were approaching us. They took my hand and made me come out of the trench.' Çöl would regain his freedom in a year, but never his sight

Into Beersheba: It was now that the centre of the town was rocked by a series of explosions. The troopers must have been devastated, fearing for the wells and the pumping station – but what had been blown apart was an ammunition dump and rolling stock in the railway station.

- Trooper John Fowler was now entering the town and recalled:

Galloping horses behind, it was Captain Davies . . . swinging his sword. I had eased my horse to a slower gallop and said to him as I stroked his neck, “Steady old boy, you have done a great job, no sense in killing yourself now.”

Soon after this, Fowler saw some Turks ‘walking away; some of these were unarmed and I galloped after them. I stopped a few, and ahead I saw an armed and well-dressed officer riding a small pony.

We had been told a few Turkish words, but this officer wouldn’t stop, and I knocked him off his pony with a hit from the bayonet to the side of the neck, and told him to stop where he [which he did].

- Moments earlier, Trooper Sloan Bolton and his horse Monty had galloped straight into the centre of Beersheba with Trooper Ray Hudson. They saw a German officer through an open door in a building in the main square; he seemed to be working a switchboard.
- Bolton realised that he was ‘blowing up buildings of importance in the town (ammunition dumps, headquarters, etc.). We rode over to him and gave a yell upon which he immediately jumped to his feet, very much surprised that we were already in the town. We both pointed our revolvers at him with the order, “Hands up!” which he promptly obeyed. I covered him with my revolver while Hudson dismounted and searched him.’ Undoubtedly, the water supply was also wired for demolition using this switchboard. It was now saved, with 15 out of 17 wells intact and the pumping station soon operating.
- Within 30 minutes of the charge being launched the Australian troopers had captured the outer Turkish lines and had captured the town and its wells.

Aftermath: As soon as word came that Beersheba had been captured, the Receiving Station came up and occupied the Turkish hospital in the town – which was infested with vermin – while the Field Ambulance established itself in the Beersheba Town Hall.

- Other elements of the medical corps had to make do with tents, as recalled by Sergeant Patrick Hamilton of the 4th Australian Light Horse Field Ambulance:

Pitched operating tent and five bell tents, got gaslight going, operating stands fixed instruments and dressings unpacked, and first patient on the operating table in under 20 minutes.

Sand carts with wounded arriving all the time. The cooks did a fine job, with wood brought with us, fires burning and hot food and drinks available in quick time. All very thirsty.

The Padre came up and said, 'Sergeant, I want to help. Just tell me what to do.' 'Thanks, Padre, could you help with the drinks for the badly wounded.' Later, he was to perform the last rites for five of our patients who died of wounds. More work for the stretcher-bearers. The bodies, wrapped in blankets, were placed on one side . . .

In the operating tent our medical officers worked steadily and almost in silence. Continuous skilled surgery hour after hour. Anaesthetics, painkilling injections, swabs, sutures, tubes in gaping wounds, antiseptic dressing, expert bandaging. The medical orderlies did a fine job assisting. Two stretcher-bearers on either side would lift the stretchers and replace them with the nearest patient all within two minutes.

About 2 a.m., after six hours of dedicated work by all ranks, the last of our 45 wounded was put through. All patients by now were bedded down under canvas and made as comfortable as possible. Most slept through sheer exhaustion or under drugs. We arranged shifts and lay down on the hard ground fully clothed for a few hours rest.

- Unfortunately not all would be brought in that night, as recalled by Trooper John Henderson (4th ALH Regiment). He had ridden in the third wave and remembered the 'sobering task of being detailed the next morning to identify and collect the Australian dead'. His 'lasting memory was having found the still-warm body of a trooper who had just died from loss of blood. Apparently the wounded man had been missed by the Field Ambulance men following closely behind the chargers, and had lingered on the battlefield throughout the night.
- Of course it was not only the men who suffered as described by Trooper Ion Idriess of the 5th ALH who recounted to the death of horses from Turkish sniper fire when out on patrol:

We'd hear a heavy smack! and know a horse had been hit. The poor brutes mostly got it through the stomach. Some of them, apart from the shivering grunt, hardly moved; others shook themselves a little – it depended on where they were hit. One reared wildly and pawed the air. Another plunged yards forward on its knees, blood pouring from its nostrils as its head lay over on the sand. But mostly they were hit through the stomach and would just shake themselves a little. The owner would take the saddle off immediately, for it was always a case [a mortal wound]. The horse would nose around among his mates, shake himself, and five minutes later roll on the sand. It was the beginning of the end.

Within a month of the charge at Beersheba, Jerusalem fell without a fight and one year to the day of the charge — 31 October 1918 — the Ottoman Empire surrendered and slipped into history

The veterans who did not make it home



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Now came the worst trial for the troopers.

It was early 1919 when orders came down the line that none of the 30,000 Australian horses — or more than 140,000 sent to the Western Front — were to return home.

Each man's trusted friend was to be left behind because of fear of disease. There were just too many animals to be placed in quarantine argued the government.

Just as important from the Australian government's perspective was the financial bottom line: it was considered too costly to bring these faithful and trusted veterans back home. So from the rank of general on down, all horses would be left to their fate.

While some of these horses would be 'culled' due to illness and old age, many more would be sold to the British government, who passed most of them on to the Indian 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions.

However, fear still persisted in many soldiers about what would become of their trusted friends. Some troopers falsified the age of their horse so that, rather than have it suffer some

terrible fate, it would be shot humanely under strict supervision by the Australian Army Veterinary Corps.

An ALH officer and journalist from Sydney, 40-year-old Gallipoli veteran Major Oliver Hogue of the 5th ALH Brigade, expressed his and many others' feelings in 1919:

*I don't think I could stand the thought of my old fancy hack — Just
crawling round old Cairo with a 'Gyppo on his back.*

*Perhaps some English tourist out in Palestine may find — My broken-
hearted Whaler with a wooden plough behind.*

*No: I think I'd better shoot him and tell a little lie — He floundered in a
wombat hole and then lay down to die.'*

*May be I'll get court-martialled; but I'm damned if I'm inclined — To
go back to Australia and leave my horse behind.*

Like his horse, Major Hogue was destined not to return home; he died in London during the great influenza pandemic of 1918–20.