

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



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Tall Tales, Mostly true

Dr David Holloway

When the first convoy carrying the AIF left Australia in late 1914, all including the original Light Horsemen on board expected to arrive in England in five or six weeks time. As we know, instead they were destined for Egypt, there to prevent any Turkish, or correctly Ottoman, attempts to take the Suez Canal.



HMAT Wiltshire carrying the 4th Light Horse departing Port Melbourne October, 1914

All units, including the horsemen spent the early months of 1915 in additional, demanding training in hot desert conditions. Occasional leave from the AIF camp at Mena, at the foot of

the pyramids, allowed visits to Cairo, a city described by one horseman as surely the dirtiest and smelliest in the world. Much more recently on a visit there one of my colleagues, recollecting that letter remarked: “not a lot has changed really!”

As far as the conditions went, in early March Corporal Clarrie Atkinson noted: “Started off at 10 am on a route march. We got out into the desert, the dust and sand made our horses restless”.



Following further training, the infamous “Battle of the Wozzer” in Cairo’s red light district and the Infantry’s departure for Gallipoli, the men of the Light Horse anxiously awaited their turn to show themselves in battle, since preliminary orders clearly indicated that they would soon join the AIF Infantry already reduced by an unexpectedly high casualty rate.

Without their horses the horsemen went to the Peninsula in May and stayed until evacuated in December, experiencing all the harshness of warfare there. After returning to Egypt it was rest, reinforcement and retraining for all until, beginning in March the Infantry and attached units sailed for the Western Front. For the horsemen, now enlarged to three brigades and by year’s end a fourth, there remained a seemingly forlorn hope of further combat as many of their ranks left to join the Infantry, Artillery, Cyclists or even the burgeoning Flying Corps.

Nonetheless, as 1916 progressed the horsemen were engaged, gradually pushing the Turks eastward across the harsh, dry Sinai desert towards the Palestine-Egypt border. This came

after the disastrous attack on 23rd April by the enemy on the British yeomanry regiments that had earlier occupied Romani. Those regiments, to quote Australia's Official Historian, Henry Gullett "moved in great comfort ... (they) included a number of young men of noble families and more who were heirs to great riches ... with slight exception ... all ranks were utter strangers to the desert" They were taken completely by surprise, some offered resistance, but many were captured or killed. Others simply fled leaving behind quantities of materials and supplies. Australians of the 2nd Light Horse Brigade, ordered up to help them and on half rations, were less than impressed.



Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel

After the Turks launched an attack on Romani in mid-July that was thwarted by (then) Major General Harry Chauvel's Anzac Mounted Division, Chauvel took the offensive. An intended

attack at El Arish proved unnecessary as the garrison had fled, but a presence remained nearby at Magdhaba which was taken after spirited fighting on 23rd December, the Ottomans effectively entrenched and the attackers forced to advance slowly over flat, open ground.

On 9th January Rafa, again with enemy entrenchments covering open ground, this time on a slight rise that added to the strength of the defence. Only a spirited attack by the New Zealand Mounted Rifles took one of the key redoubts on the high ground which in turn allowed the surrounding regiments of the Division to complete the attack.

At this time the Anzac Mounted Division's organization was altered, one brigade going to the newly created Imperial (soon renamed Australian) Mounted Division while a fourth Light Horse brigade was created with the reinforced 11th and 12th Regiments joined by the substantially reinforced 4th Regiment.

In March and again in April attempts were made to take the Ottoman stronghold at Gaza. For reasons many and varied, neither was successful. As Gullett later wrote: "There was not a single private in the British infantry, or a trooper in the mounted brigades, who did not believe that failure was due to staff bungling and to nothing else. The men were convinced that, owing to the almost unbelievable folly of the Higher Command, they had been robbed of victory they had actually gained."

Various photographs of this period show generally flat, open, treeless ground. Outposts, patrols and an endless search for water occupied each of the mounted divisions. Conflict between those Australians, British Yeomanry or Kiwi Mounted Rifles and the ever present but distant Turkish cavalry were rare.

The war diary of the 4th Light Horse Regiment, dated 25th June 1917 noted that "... the weather during this period was very trying, particularly as the majority of the bivouac shelters were composed of sleeping blankets. Added to this were the all-pervading dust and flies innumerable."

To understand something of the thinking of the boys in the Australian regiments, listen to Frank Burton's letter to his mother, dated 10th October 1917, sent from 'Tel el Fara:

"... Well dear mother you will indeed be very pleased to hear that since I last wrote to you I have had the good fortune of being promoted to 2nd Lieutenant which means that I am now an Officer ... I was promoted about a fortnight ago and have a troop in the same Squadron as I

was Sgt Major in. I must tell you dear mother that I am very pleased indeed for I have worked my way up from Trooper without any influence being brought into force ... I have a nice troop of boys and they are very good soldiers. I look after them and in return they play the game alright..."



Frank Burton (then Sgt), AWM Neg 05903

Frank was killed in the charge at Beersheba just three weeks later and he lies today in Beersheba War Cemetery.

Mention of Frank's death brings us almost to the battle at Beersheba itself on 31st October 1917.

Beersheba and its wells have been known since at least Biblical times. They are mentioned in Genesis, the opening book of the Old Testament. Hagar, the slave of Abraham is sent with her illegitimate son into the wilderness around Beersheba where she finds a well that gives her the water to save her dying son. Later Abraham also finds a well there and plants a tamarisk tree. Later still he settles in Beersheba. Further chapters of Genesis contain numerous mentions of wells at Beersheba. The importance of the town in 1917 was clearly well known for its water supply at least.

Meanwhile, after the Gaza battles the British High command was shaken up, its chief replaced by General Sir Edmund Allenby, nicknamed "The Bull" for his quick temper. Allenby redirected future operations not toward Gaza but inland on that Ottoman stronghold; Beersheba.



General Sir Edmund Allenby

Preparations extended over some time and ensured that a substantial force, well supplied and equipped but relying on a quick capture of the town and its water supply was in readiness. There would be British infantry to the west of the town, Camel Corps in the north-west, Light Horse to the north to cut off possible retreat and more of them to the east and south. New Zealand horsemen were tasked with taking the high ground due east at Tel el Saba (these days Tel Be'ersheva) beside the Wadi Saba. In reserve and to the south-east were the 4th Light Horse Brigade and the British 5th Mounted (Yeomanry) Brigade.

Amongst the riders in the 4th Light Horse Regiment were four boys from the Port Albert region of Victoria. Their father was Chinese; Chin Lang Tip. He had married a young English girl, Mary Ann Prout, and had later taken in her even younger, 16 year old sister, Betsy.

Between them they had 17 children, the four youngest boys – Henry (Harry), Ernest, Leslie & Bertie - thought to be brothers yet not all with the same mother, joined the 16th reinforcements to the regiment in January 1916.

Harry Langtip kept a diary and his notes in the lead up to the charge are illuminating:

Sunday Oct 28

We are ready to move out to attack Beersheba at a moments notice. We have had a lecture from the Colonel and he tells us that we are going 30 miles tonight & 30 miles again the next night ... got to Bir-el-Siani at about 10 and camped there all night.

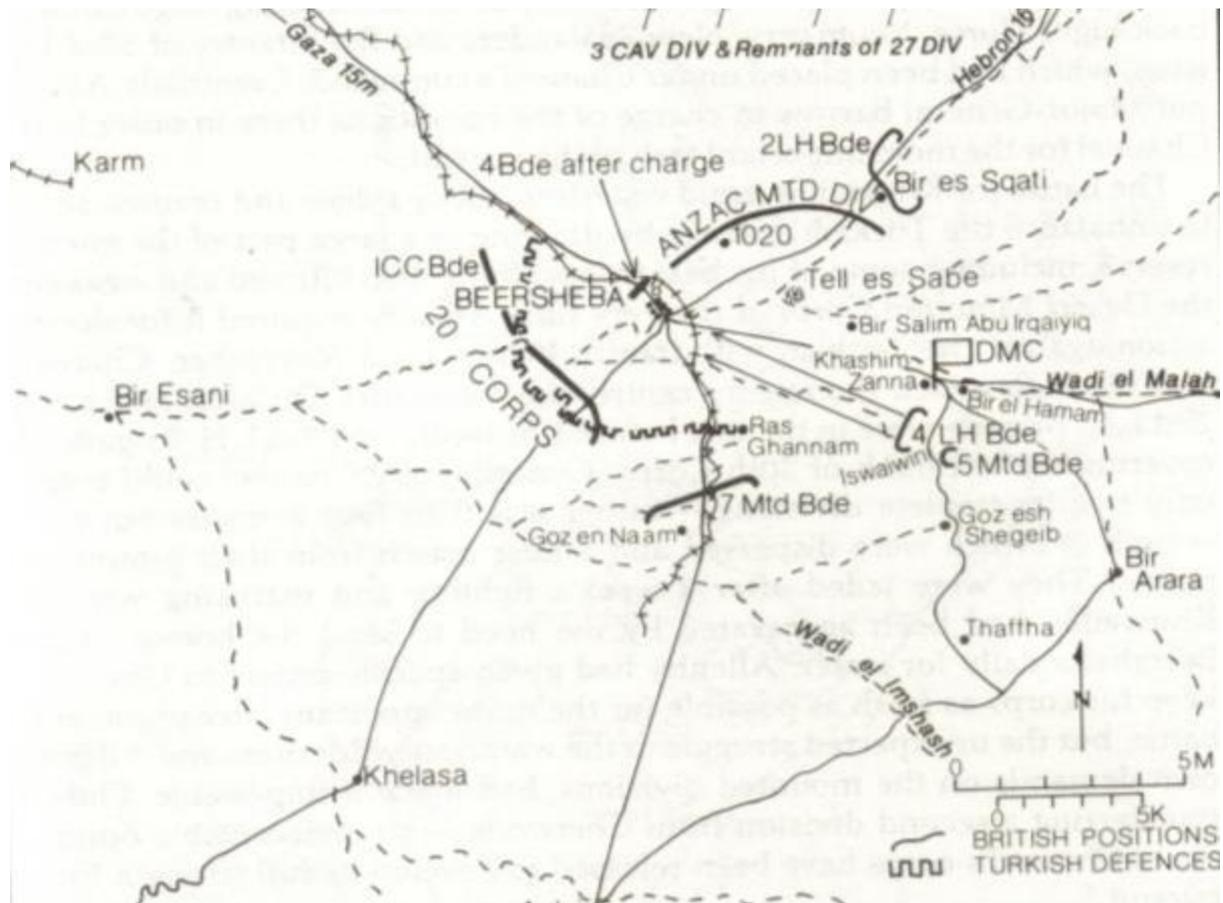
Monday Oct 29

Up at 6 o'clock ... We moved out at 6 o'clock PM & arrived at Khalasa at 10 PM after a terrible dusty ride. I had a good rest as I didn't have to go on piquet.

Tuesday Oct 30

Up this morning at 6 & are having a rest all day ready to move out tonight. Bert and Ern were called out last night to stand guard at some wells & I don't know if they will be in the scrap ...

We are moving out on a 30 mile ride.



The capture of Beersheba, 31st October 1917

Much later, in early October 1918 when Damascus had fallen, Lang Tip family folklore has it that Leslie, who had recently earned a DCM in action at Kaukab not far to the south, on seeing an oddly dressed British officer berating sick Turkish soldiers, called on him to stop. The Englishman duly ignored him so Les did what any fair minded young lad might do; punched him in the nose! He had never heard of Lawrence of Arabia.

Yet, according to Lawrence in his book, "Seven Pillars of Wisdom", he was slapped across the face by an Australian major. Was it that Lawrence could not bear to have been mistreated by a mere NCO and a colonial at that?

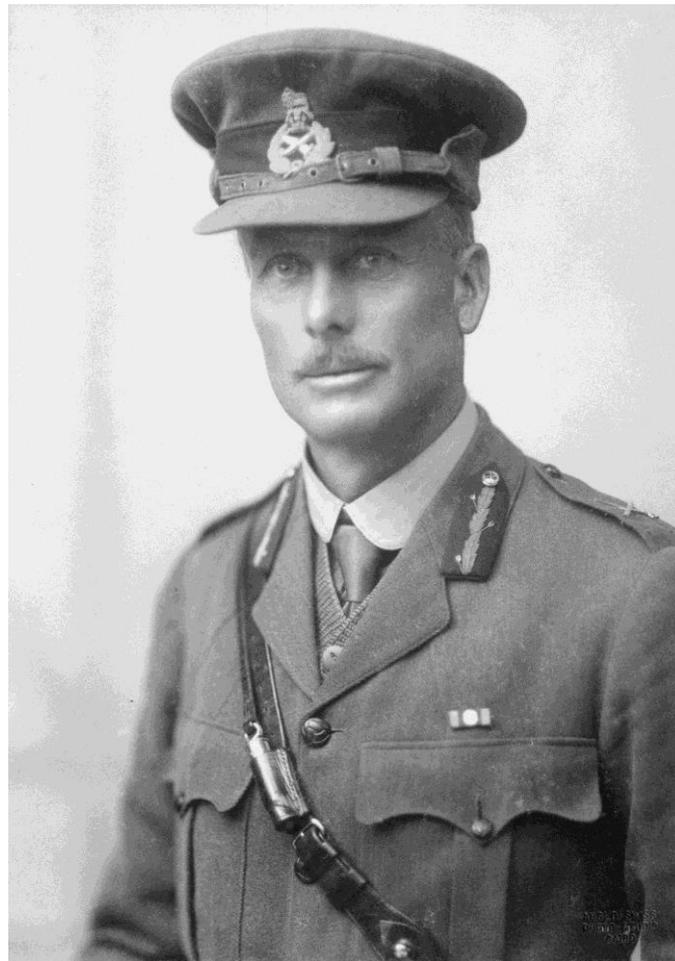


Leslie Langtip, DCM AWM Neg B01167

Now to turn to the stories of a few other Light Horsemen who participated in the charge.

Beersheba, Be'er sheva in 21st century Israel, lies at the foot of the Judean Hills in the Negev Desert, there since biblical times, probably even earlier. It was the base from which the Ottoman army had launched its earlier advances into the Sinai Desert. In October 1917 it was surrounded, as I outlined by British, Australian and New Zealand troops, but stubborn resistance came from Tel el Saba, the feature that dominated any advances from the south-east.

Only once the Tel was taken at about 3.00 pm by the Kiwis with a little help from some of the Light Horse, could an attack come in from the south-east. After conferring with divisional commander, General Sir Henry Hodgson and the two brigade commanders, William Grant of the 4th and Percy FitzGerald of the Yeomanry, Chauvel ordered “Put Grant straight at it.” In a later interview Chauvel, who had always been scrupulously fair in deciding which troops did what, said: “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.”



Brigadier General William Grant, CMG, DSO and Bar

Grant hurried to his regiments, spread out and unsaddled, the 11th too far away to be ready in time. Shortly after 4.00 pm the 4th and 12th were ready to be assembled in extended line abreast in alphabetical order of squadrons – A, B, & C – roughly 500 yards between squadrons. They began to move forward, the 12th on the left and the 4th on the right of the so-called W Road that led into the town. The minaret of the town’s mosque was their guiding point.



Artist George Lambert's impression of the Charge, painted in 1920

Out in front of the 4th's A Squadron rode Boer War veteran Lance Corporal Alf Healey and Trooper Thomas O'Leary, each of whom variously shot or captured numerous Turks as soon as they reached the trenches. Each was awarded a Military Medal for their bravery.

O'Leary had had a troubled military career, frequently being charged for offences as varied as being AWL, being D & D, disobeying orders, missing parade, swearing at an officer and so on, yet, in a fight he was the man to be next to. Sadly, he never adjusted to civilian life after the war. A Queenslander he lived as a hermit on the outskirts of Townsville before committing suicide at the age of 72. He was buried in a pauper's grave. Recently the local RSL discovered his story and arranged a proper headstone and appropriate burial for him.



Lance Corporal Alfred Healey, MM

In contrast if you like, Major James Lawson who led A Squadron in the charge was a Yorkshire man who had served in the Duke of Lancaster's Own Imperial Yeomanry before migrating to Australia where he became a hotelkeeper at Rupanyup. He served in the Militia both before and after the war, rising to the rank of Colonel commanding Light Horse and early armoured car regiments in the 1930s and holding training appointments during the Second World War.

One of several men who should not have ridden in the charge was Trooper Randolph Cleaver, a butcher from Sale and the first man from that town to enlist in the AIF. He had written a letter to his sister, amongst other matters suggesting that some of the officers were intercepting and keeping packages meant for the men. In her letter in response she referred to

that and also asked if Randolph might obtain compassionate leave to return to Australia to see his dying father. Accompanying his request for that leave Randolph enclosed his sister's letter. His request was denied and he was killed in the charge, alongside his Troop Leader, Frank Burton.



Trooper Randolph Cleaver

Young Trooper Harold Wickham had only arrived at the regiment a month or so before the charge. His attestation papers showed his uncle Thomas Bell as his next of kin. In fact, Harold's real name was Harold Bell. Wickham was his mother's maiden name. Imagine the family's confusion when notified that a nephew they did not have had died of wounds. It took some time to sort out that it was actually their son whom they thought had gone droving.

One wonders that his physical appearance might have aroused the examining doctor's suspicions – he was a mere 5'- 4 ½" tall and weighed barely 8 ½ stone. Of course he was really only 16 years old when he died, probably the youngest Light Horseman to die in Palestine. Like the others who died in the charge Harold today lies in Beersheba's British war Cemetery.

The Regimental Sergeant Major, Alex Wilson was found after the charge, still astride his horse, dead, in the second trench line.



Wilson's headstone

Trooper John Reineke, a native of Finland, then under Russian domination, was another killed in the charge. His medals were never claimed by his mother, his next of kin whom, one suspects, was never aware of what had happened to her son in his distant land.



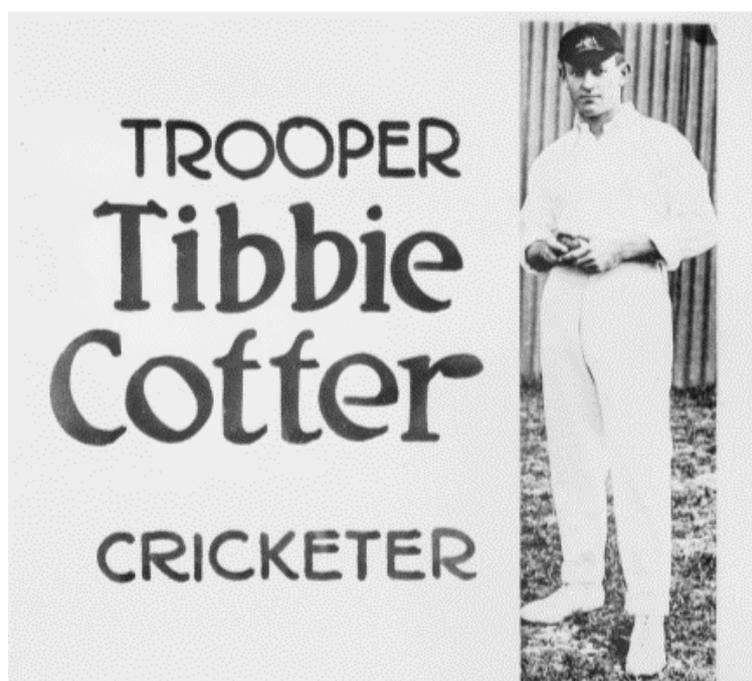
Reineke's headstone

Lieutenant Ben Meredith was shot by an enemy soldier who had previously surrendered. His men, led by Lance Corporal Arthur (Phil) Moon, had just dismounted. Screaming abuse, Phil and his companions hastily dispatched the remaining Turks, ensuring there would be no further duplicity.

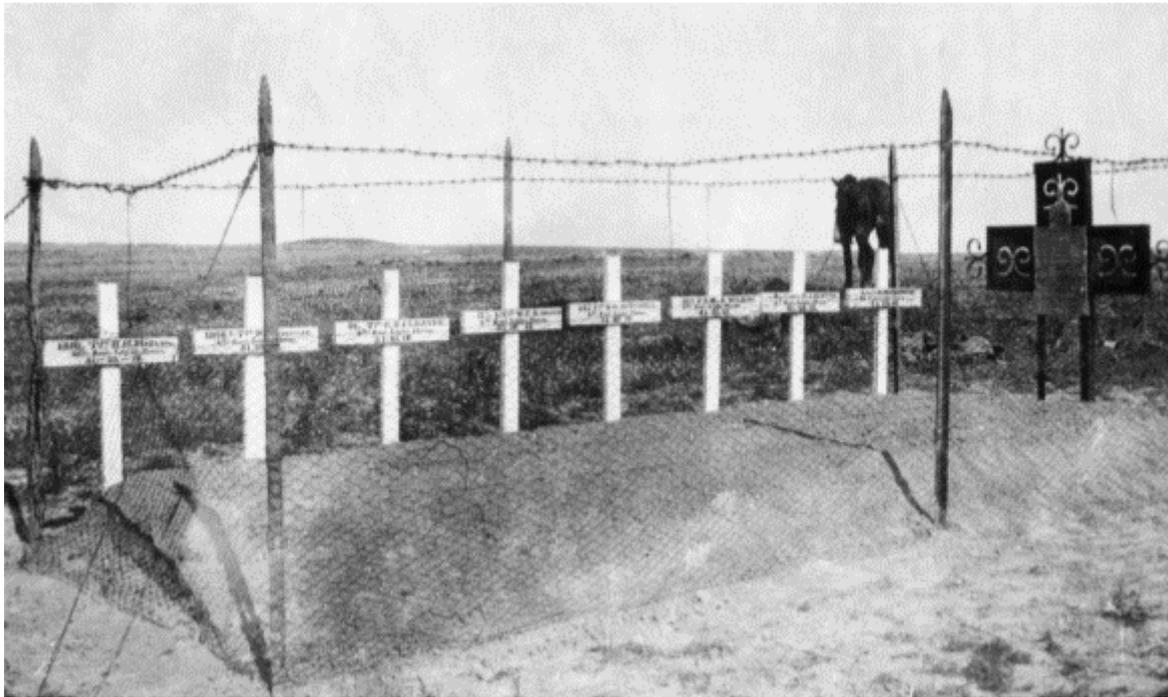


Ben Meredith's headstone

Stretcher Bearer, Albert "Tibbie" Cotter of the 12th had joined Lawson's squadron in the rush and confusion of the charge. He was shot at close range while attending to wounded men. It seems likely, although not confirmed, that the Test cricketer, the Denis Lillee of his day, was also killed by a Turk who had previously surrendered.



Altogether nine members of the 4th died either in the charge or soon thereafter, clearly sad but an incredibly low casualty rate for the reward gained and in no small way a consequence of the fact that the defences were incomplete and certainly without barbed wire. The 12th Regiment lost 20 men killed.



The original graves

The bravery of all was unquestioned, while some were singled out in particular, to be awarded decorations.

In the 4th the CO, Lieutenant Colonel Murray Bouchier,



*Lieutenant Colonel Murray Bouchier Commanding Officer, 4th Light Horse Regiment
his 2ic Major George Rankin*



Major George Rankin, DSO and Barr

and Major James Lawson each received a DSO.

Military Crosses were awarded to Adjutant Norman Rae,

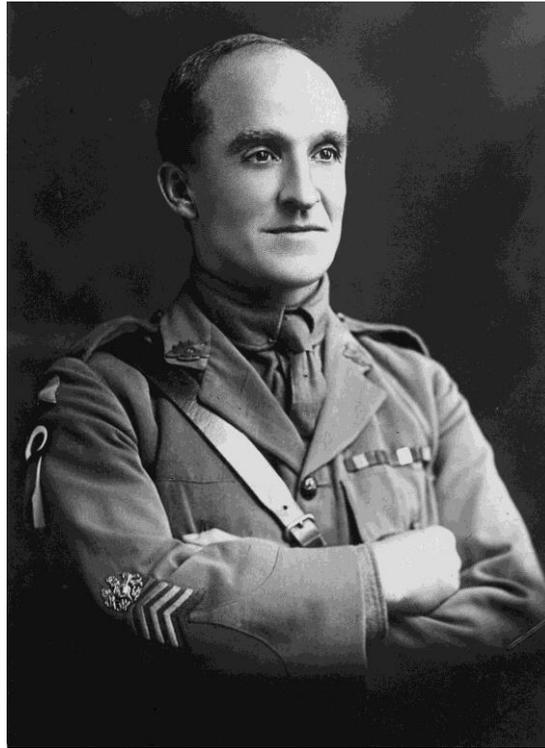


Captain Norman Rae, MC
and the OC "C" Squadron, Major A. David Reid.



Major A David Reid, MC

Amongst the other ranks Armourer Sergeant Arthur Cox and Trooper Sloan "Scotty" Bolton were each awarded Distinguished Conduct Medals for capturing enemy guns and numerous prisoners. Bolton was also instrumental in preventing most of the wells from being blown up.



Armourer Sergeant Arthur Cox, DCM



Trooper Sloan "Scotty" Bolton, DCM

Besides O'Leary and Healey, another five men, including stretcher bearer Trooper James Offord, were awarded Military Medals.



Trooper James Offord, MM

The 12th was similarly rewarded, earning three DSOs, two MCs, four DCMs and four Military Medals.

As one historian rather dryly put it, “not the sort of gongs you receive for just being there.”

There are many more stories, some sad, others heroic; even more simply the tales of ordinary Australian men (admittedly a lot of them were at that time “British” at least by birth) doing things both ordinary and extraordinary, ranging from an officer who became altogether too fond of an apparently talented and beautiful Jewish girl, to a trooper who sadly misunderstood the unreciprocated desires of an Arab girl and paid for his life with that misconception.

At this point it seems appropriate to end this part of the story of Beersheba with my favourite quote from historian Bill Gammage:

“The fierce individualism with which he fought Turks, Arabs and English staff officers lay close to the heart of the Australian light horseman. He lived under few restraints, and was

equally careless of man, God, and nature. Yet he stood by his own standards firmly, remaining brave in battle, loyal to his mates, generous to the Turks, and pledged to his King and country. His speech betrayed few of his enthusiasms, and he accepted success and failure equally without demonstration, but the confident dash of the horseman combined with the practical resource and equanimity of the bushman in him, moved him alike over the wilderness of Sinai and the hills of the Holy land. Probably his kind will not be seen again, for the conditions of war and peace and romance that produced him have almost entirely disappeared.”