



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



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# Sir Harry, His Horses And The Quiet Lady Chauvel

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General Sir Harry Chauvel's life had two outstanding passions underpinning his military service and the defence of his country, and in retirement his service in the community. They were his family and his horses.

Born in 1865, Sir Harry lived in the age where, particularly in the bush where he grew up, horses provided the main means of transport and they towed carts, ploughs, harrows, wool bales and stores. While during the First World War he had a staff car and he was to witness tanks being used for the first time during the Second battle of Gaza, horses were how the Light Horsemen did their reconnaissance and how they travelled to battle. Except for when they charged the enemy, Light Horsemen dismounted and gave their horses to horse handlers while they fought. For Sir Harry horses were central to campaigning. Sir Harry never owned a car and to my knowledge he never had a driving licence.

Horses were also a source of pleasure. As a young man Harry Chauvel aspired to become an amateur jockey and rode in various picnic race meetings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on the Darling Downs in Southern Queensland. In those lonely days of early settlement, horses were also seen as companions. This bond between man and horse was found on the Boer War battlefields and again during the First World War on Gallipoli and in Palestine. Horsemanship – that is riding with sensitive, responsive hands and a good seat and attention

to the horse's general health, grooming, fodder and stabling were all of paramount importance. These details were drilled into me by my mother Elyne Mitchell.

If country men had nothing else in common, they could always talk about horses and Sir Harry was often to be found discussing with his men their horses' attributes, their saddlery and how their horses managed the long distances over rough terrain, often irritated in summer by flies, heat and thirst and in winter with pouring rain and mud. Horses were the interface between home on the farm and life in the military. Sir Harry shared his passion for racing with his men and he knew how good Melbourne Cup news was for morale on Gallipoli. On 8<sup>th</sup> November, from Headquarters 1<sup>st</sup> Division, Chauvel wrote to his wife Sibyl, 'I am enclosing a copy of the "Peninsula Press" with the results of the Melbourne Cup in it. These were inserted at my instigation. We had a sweep in my Brigade, & we wanted the results as soon as possible, so I gave General Birdwood a hint that it would be taken as a compliment by the Australian troops if they were cabled for, & inserted in the "Press"<sup>1</sup>.

For the 1916 Melbourne Cup, Chauvel was on leave with his family in England and there is no account of how they spent the day. It would be hard to believe that they didn't somehow place a bet!

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<sup>1</sup> *Peninsula Press* (Monday, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1915, No.87, Official News, R.E Printing Section, G.H.Q., M.E.F) The entry records 'We have to thank the Eastern Telegraph Company for the following cable giving the results of the Melbourne Cup: (1) Patrobus, (2) Westcourt (3) Calita (4) Galin. Patrobus won by half a neck; the betting was 8 to 1. Westcourt (betting 50 to 1) was second by a length, Garlita (betting 7 to 1) was third by a length. The betting on Galin was 25 to 1.' *The Chauvel War Books* (Vol. I) p. 41

Betting amongst Light Horsemen wasn't limited to racing, Geoff Fethers who joined the Light Horse as a veterinary officer in 1918, describes how by the time he arrived in Cairo, the padre 'who would bet on anything'<sup>2</sup> owed him £40. He never saw the padre again.

Again describing horses and riding on Gallipoli, on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1921 Chauvel wrote to Sibyl, "I forgot to tell you in my letters the story of the horse-mail at Gallipoli. After the Suvla Bay landing in August 1915, we found it necessary to organise a despatch-rider service between Headquarters at Suvla & Headquarters at Anzac. The distance was six miles, & almost the whole of the ride was exposed to rifle-fire from the Turkish trenches on the ridges overlooking it. The mail used to leave Suvla in the morning and return from Anzac in the afternoon. It had to be done at the gallop, & the rider was fired at from the moment he left the shelter of Lala Baba until he reached the wide communication trench near Anzac, -- & yet all the Light Horsemen, Mounted Rifles & Yeomanry were tumbling over one another to get the job, & fortunate indeed was considered the Regiment which had to find the men for the duty! It was one of the daily entertainments. Everyone on the left of Anzac knew the moment the mail had left Suvla by the rattle of Turkish musketry which commenced on the extreme left, & continued along the line until the rider was safely in the communication trench. Strangely enough, this went on for nearly three months before either rider or horse was hit."<sup>3</sup>

I remarked in my article for the General Sir Harry Chauvel Foundation *The Great War: Racing and the Great Ride*, 'The horse-mail was a strange form of racing – perhaps one in which fate determines who lives and dies.'

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<sup>2</sup> Fethers, Geoff, *An Elephant in My Garden: Recollection of an Australian Vet* (Carlton, Victoria: Queensberry Hill Press, 1980) p.7.

<sup>3</sup> *Chauvel War Books* (Vol. I), p.46

On 13<sup>th</sup> March 1917, General Sir Harry Chauvel wrote to his wife Sibyl, ‘We are having a race meeting at Rafa on Monday next, and I am giving a cup for the “Anzac Steeplechase”. There is also the “Syrian Derby” a cup given by Sir Phillip Chetwode; the “Promised Land Stakes”, the “Border Plate”; and the “Jerusalem Scurry” (for mules). I am also one of the stewards, and I’m running a horse in the Anzac Steeple. We are looking forward to a good day’s sport. If a ‘Boche’ plane comes over it will be rather puzzled as to what the crowd is!’<sup>4</sup>

Just over two months after the battle of Rafa on 10<sup>th</sup> January and less than a week before the First Battle of Gaza on 26<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> March 1917, General Sir Harry Chauvel wrote on 21<sup>st</sup> March, ‘We have had a great day today, - the races at Rafa—and I don’t know when I have enjoyed a day’s racing so much. The course was lovely—beautiful green grass in a large natural amphitheatre—right in the middle of the battlefield of Rafa! The Turk’s trenches and rifle-pits need a little dodging when laying out the course, but that was all, and the jumps were sandbag walls with brushwood on top. My division won five out of the six horse races, and out of the other three, one, the Anzac Steeplechase, was won by a 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse Brigade horse. My own horse, Bally, ran third in the Anzac Steeplechase. I ran him in my groom’s name, as I was giving the cup. I think the results were very creditable to our horses, considering there were so many English hunters and well-bred horses about.’<sup>5</sup> Bally was to remain with Chauvel throughout the Palestine Campaign, returning occasionally to the Remount Depot for his younger brother Allan to feed up!

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<sup>4</sup> *Chauvel War Books* (Vol. II), p.6

<sup>5</sup> *Chauvel War Books* (Vol. II) p.6

General Chauvel goes on to tell his wife that he's sending the programme which includes the 'Battle of Romani' by the Pipe Band. 'It is a beautiful thing', he explains, 'written by Lt Colonel Maclean, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who is A.A.&Q.M.G. with the Scottish Territorial Division (52<sup>nd</sup> Division) which was with us so long at Romani.'

Six months after the Rafa races, Chauvel and the Desert Mounted Corps were in a race of a different kind. Following the failures of the two battles at Gaza the previous spring, the Promised Land Stakes couldn't have been higher late in the afternoon of 31<sup>st</sup> October 1917 to the east of Beersheba. Describing the battle in February 1922, Chauvel said, 'The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade got off about half past four, trotted onto the plain, & then rode at the trenches, charging them mounted, & galloping straight on into the town which was in our possession by dark. By this mounted action, Grant had done in a few minutes, with two regiments & fewer casualties, what it would probably have taken two brigades, dismounted, a couple of hours to do. So far as I know, such a charge by mounted men against entrenched infantry is unique in the annals of cavalry.' Thirty-one men died in the battle or soon after as a result of their injuries. Some seventy horses perished.

The Wells of Beersheba didn't yield all the water that was needed and in the days following the charge at Beersheba, General Freidrich Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein (1870 – 1948) kept the Desert Mounted Corps busy to the north of the town. On 15<sup>th</sup> November Sir Harry wrote to his wife, 'I wrote to you last from a place called Huj, north-east of Gaza. Since then I've had no time to write as we have been moving so quickly, & fighting all the time.'<sup>6</sup> In Chauvel's letters it seems that the 1917 Melbourne Cup results were lost in the fog of war,

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<sup>6</sup> *Chauvel War Books* (Vol.II) p.42

having given way to a much bigger race – the British Prime Minister wanted Jerusalem as a ‘Christmas present for the British people’. Some called it ‘The Great Ride’ that finished a year later in Damascus. Meanwhile among my grandfather’s letters in the *Chauvel War Books*, I have so far found no reference to the Jericho Cup run on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1918, the day of the Battle at Megiddo.

Unfortunately there are no statistics that might indicate the extent to which the Light Horsemen’s wellbeing benefitted from their relationship with their horses. Were they better off than infantrymen who didn’t have horses? What extra benefit would it have bestowed on Light Horsemen had they been able to bring their horses home? Perhaps the Light Horsemen knew something that contemporary psychology has overlooked. In many ways for today’s Light Horse, armoured vehicles might make a poor substitute for horses, yet for all that military people are adaptable and resourceful. Sir Harry had to adapt to changing circumstances too.

Other race meetings were included wherever and whenever possible in Chauvel’s calendar. As well as other like-minded military commanders, Chauvel realised the benefits of equine entertainments and sports days on his men’s morale and general fitness. After the First World War and following his return to Melbourne in September 1919, Chauvel’s horse Digger was brought around to his house in Murphy Street in South Yarra, and Chauvel rode along the Tan to Victoria Barracks and probably to the nearby Remount Depot where his horse was stabled. Chauvel and his wife were keen race goers attending race meetings at Flemington and at Moonee Ponds. He and Elyne also hunted with the Findon Harriers.

Even as late as March 1940, Chauvel argued, ‘Cavalry training is still the best training for any soldier. It creates wideness of outlook and encourages resourcefulness, individuality and enterprise.’<sup>7</sup> Perhaps in the latter years of his life, Sir Harry lacked the prescience to realise that mechanised units would replace horses, despite as he said, ‘the question of the supply of motor fuel, which will become increasingly difficult as the war goes on.’<sup>8</sup> Even today, Sir Harry’s words still have a certain unsettling ring – have we become too dependent on technology and mechanisation?

For all General Sir Harry’s love of horses, his wife Sibyl didn’t ride. As a young girl living with her family Newmarket near Brisbane, she was taught to ride side saddle, but I don’t have any record of her having ridden a horse again following her marriage. And yet, she was interested in Sir Harry’s horses and took an interest in her offsprings’ dreams and equine exploits. In April 1919 when she and Sir Harry were touring some of the battlefields, she explained in a letter to her twelve year old son Ian, ‘I took photographs for you of three of his horses. Aristocrat; Duchess, the old mare who carries his pack; & Dolly, his thoroughbred chestnut mare. Bally has just gone off to England with Colonel Farr.’<sup>9</sup> Sibyl went on to explain that there were no horses going home to Australia so he wouldn’t be able to have a foal from one of his father’s mares. Such was the depth of feeling in the family that the news might have been a disappointment for a young boy of twelve who might have dreamed of riding some of the progeny of his father’s horses on his return home to Australia.

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<sup>7</sup> Chauvel, General Sir Harry, ‘The Horse Still has his Place in War’, in *Saddle Tales*, (Vol 1. No 2., Saturday, March 16<sup>th</sup> 1940) p.1

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.1

<sup>9</sup> Sibyl to Ian Chauvel, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1919, p.9



So what was the quiet Sibyl's role in Sir Harry's life and career?

Sibyl met Sir Harry at a tennis party in 1904 when she was only sixteen and he was 39!

Initially her parents Bertha and George Keith Jopp thought that Harry Chauvel was courting their elder daughter Dora (Theodora), but this was not the case. At the time of their meeting, Harry had served with distinction in the Boer War reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel; he had been mentioned in Despatches and had been appointed Companion of St Michael and St George (CMG). In short, he was well established in his career with the fledgling Commonwealth Military Forces.

Harry and Sibyl married on 16<sup>th</sup> June 1906 when Sibyl was eighteen and Harry was forty-one. While I've never seen any wedding photographs, detailed descriptions of the bride's and her attendants' wedding apparel and flowers seemed to fulfil a role played by photography today. Rather unkindly my grandparents were sometimes referred to as beauty and the beast. As a young woman, Sibyl was tall and willowy, yet she doesn't seem to have been sporty and I have no evidence that she ever played tennis again. Their elder son Ian was born in 1907 so Sibyl was a mother at nineteen. They came from different stock – Chauvel had a Huguenot background from the Loire Valley in France while Sibyl's family, the Keith Jopps, came from Aberdeen. A branch of the family had a property in Jamaica where they owned a house called Keith Hall.

When I lived in Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, a relative phoned asking if I knew that I lived within two hundred yards of the house where my great-great grandmother Eleanor lived? Did

I know that there is a memorial to her in Christ Church Cheltenham? After I'd located the addresses where Eleanor had lived and the memorial high on Christ Church's west wall, the relative phoned again and told me to go out to St Lawrence's in Swindon Village outside Cheltenham, where if I scraped back some of the moss and ivy I'd find where the family was buried. Recently on the TV programme Grand Designs I discovered that there is another Keith Hall, this time a stone cottage near Beechworth. According to the current owner of Beechworth's Keith Hall, its architect came from Aberdeen and lies buried in the local cemetery. I have more to research... Sibyl's relative Stuart Keith Jopp lost an eye and an arm in air combat during the First World War and being made of sturdy stuff, he went on to fly with the Air Transport Auxiliary in the Second World War. Meanwhile Betty Keith Jopp, also serving the in ATA, ditched in the Firth of Forth and releasing herself from the harness and the cockpit of her aircraft, managed to float to the surface.

My mother Elyne said that her parents' marriage was a love affair right from the beginning, but that as her mother was so young, her father was able to mould his young bride into the sort of wife he needed... I wonder how that observation would wash in contemporary society? Yet for all that, I don't believe that their marriage was in any way an unequal partnership, or even seen to be as such by Sibyl. As she was a quiet, yet highly intelligent and methodical person who undoubtedly was made of sturdy stuff like her relatives Stuart and Betty, it was more likely that their relationship was a meeting of minds, with her qualities complementing her competent husband's. From the outset she assumed an administrative role in their marriage. For all that, it was Sir Harry who ensured they caught public transport and attended engagements on time. Among her grandchildren, the tales of Sibyl's lack of punctuality are legendary, but perhaps she felt that having supported her husband and brought up her family through some difficult times, she couldn't be bothered any more with

punctuality! I suspect she might have cherished and relished the independence and extra time her own 'flaw' gave her!

During their early years of marriage, the Chauvels lived in Brisbane, in Gregory Terrace and not far from Sibyl's family in Newmarket. After Edward was born in 1909, the Chauvels engaged Barbara Ramsay from Scotland as nanny to their growing family. Two years later in 1911 they moved to Melbourne where the recently promoted Colonel Harry Chauvel took up his position in Army Headquarters, Melbourne as Adjutant General and Second Member of the Military Board. Meanwhile the Chauvel family lived in a nearby boarding house. Two years later, in Williams Road, Toorak their third child Elyne was born on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1913, just eight months before Harry Chauvel was posted to London. There is no evidence that Sibyl kept a diary, or any form of written record of the early years after their marriage. It could have been that until Barbara Ramsay arrived, she simply didn't have time.

This was to change with their posting to London, perhaps because Sibyl realised that with the outbreak of war they were witnessing twentieth century history unfolding. Explaining the reason for their posting, Sibyl wrote, 'When war broke out, we were on board the Blue Funnel liner "Ulysses", on our way to England where my husband was to take up the appointment of Australian Representative on the General Staff at the War Office. We were three or four days out of Capetown, & the first news we got was an intercepted wireless message from the German station at Suraksmund saying that Great Britain had declared war on Germany. Our Captain had received instructions from Cape Town that, in the event of war, he was to sail direct to Liverpool, avoiding Las Palmas which was his ordinary port of call. This was because two German ships were suspected to be in the vicinity, the cruiser "Konigsberg"

which had left Cape Town a day ahead of us, & the auxiliary cruiser "Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse", either of which would be watching for any British shipping they could intercept.'<sup>10</sup> Sibyl left no record of how she, as a young mother of three, felt with the prospect of war. It was as if her feelings were subsumed to those of her husband from the beginning, and yet Sibyl made a contribution to history herself, as Chauvel's wartime correspondent and his devoted record keeper. During the war she had kept his letters and in the 1920s, she began transcribing them into two large scrapbooks into which she affixed accompanying photographs, newspaper clippings and other memorabilia Sir Harry had been given and which he sent home. These bound scrapbooks, together with other volumes of scrapbooks which Sir Harry put together with the help of their younger daughter Eve and then continued by Sibyl after his death, constitute much of the valuable primary source material about Chauvel in the Australian War Memorial.

When Alex Hill was researching his biography of Chauvel, it was to Sibyl that he turned. She gave him access to the Chauvel War Books and to the family scrapbooks and correspondence. Despite her failing health, she filled airmail writing pad after writing pad with notes for Alec. At much the same time Elyne was researching the same material for her children's book *Light Horse to Damascus* (1971) and *Light Horse: The Story of Australia's Mounted Troops* (1978). I see these books as the beginning of an upsurge of interest and writings about the First World War. Essentially *Light Horse to Damascus* tells the story of the Sinai and Palestine campaign but from the horse Karloo's point of view in a beautifully written children's book. 'The General' in the story is no other than Elyne's father Sir Harry.

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<sup>10</sup> *Chauvel War Books* (Vol. I) p.1-2.

Elyne used to express concern that her mother had never had time for her own interests. What Elyne meant was that her mother hadn't been a published author, artist or career person. Elyne perhaps forgot from time to time that her mother was the family chronicler; the lady who put the Chauvel family history together after a French diplomat and distant relative visited Melbourne in 1922. It was Sibyl who was the much-loved family letter writer and the communicator who was often a quiet moral compass for family members, the kind relative who looked after her family visiting from the country and whose offspring needed somewhere to go for exeat weekends from boarding school. In addition to her family role she was the only woman on the Shrine fundraising committee. In the 1930s she was four times President of the Alexandra Club. She was a Victorian Guide Commissioner for which she was recognized with an OBE in the Queen's Birthday Honors in 1939. For all that, she wasn't a person who demanded recognition. She had a wide circle of acquaintances and friends but beyond her family, she had few very close friends. In latter years her sister Dora lived close by, but they were very different with Dora having a wonderful taste for fashionable hats and social life.

There is a saying that behind a great man there is often a strong woman. Of course, I am partial as her granddaughter, but I'd say that behind Sir Harry was a great woman who was his inspiration, his confidante and bedrock. As I never knew my grandfather, I can't begin to speculate what sort of man and leader he would have been without my grandmother. In this age of accountability there are some human qualities that we can't quantify. The inspirational power of love and the deep understanding that can come with it, are two of those great qualities. Anyone who wishes to understand General Sir Harry Chauvel has to get to

know his wife too, as behind his leadership were his passions: a lifelong love affair; and of course his love of horses.

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