

WALERS



AWM B01507 Men of the 1st Australian Light Horse Brigade watering their horses at Esdud in Palestine in January 1918. The Walers were astonishingly tough animals, able to travel long

distances and go more than two days without food or water.

STORY BY

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THE HARSH CONDITIONS OF DESERT WARFARE WERE A BRUTAL TEST, BUT AUSTRALIA'S LIGHT HORSEMEN WERE LUCKY TO BE RIDING 'THE FINEST CAVALRY MOUNTS IN THE WORLD'

WE ARE AT THAT TIME when horses gallop into the public conversation, even make the front pages of newspapers, as everyone, from millionaires such as Lloyd Williams to once-a-year \$2 punters, tries to work out which nag will win the Melbourne Cup. One week before this year's Cup, however, comes another thoroughbred date that deserves our attention, out of respect for the horses and the men who rode them: the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Beersheba.

Australia sent 130,000 horses into battle during World War I, shipping them to Europe, the Middle East, Africa and India. The backbone of this equine force was the Waler, a wiry, resilient horse that derived its name from its main breeding ground, New South Wales.

"There was no doubt," wrote RMP Preston in his 1921 book *The Desert Mountain Corps*, "that these hardy Australian horses make the finest cavalry mounts in the world". Not bad, coming from an English cavalry officer. Lieutenant-Colonel Preston had been up close and personal with the horses he was writing about.

Walers carried more than other horses—130kg, including the rider, was regular—and went for longer without water, up to 60 hours. No surprise then that back home they had been favoured by bushrangers, police and explorers. For a good backgrounding on their wartime contribution there's the ABC TV documentary *The Waler: Australia's Great War Horse*. It first screened in 2015 but is available on DVD.

In the Middle East, an Australian major better known as a journalist and poet was in charge of an important horse breaking and training division at Moascar, not far from Port Said in Egypt. Andrew Barton Paterson's job was to ready the horses to carry infantry into battle. Usually, the soldiers would dismount and fight, but there were times, including at Beersheba, when men and horses did what was fast becoming old-fashioned: charged like cavalry, bayonets in hand, rifles

slung over the back. The Ottoman soldiers defending the garrison town heard the clack of them coming.

The Australian novelist Ion Idriess saw a lot of action during the war. At Gallipoli he was spotter for the crack sniper Billy Sing. In the Sinai and Palestine he was a trooper in the 5th Australian Light Horse. He did not take part in the charge at Beersheba but watched it from an observation post and, as was his daily habit, took notes. His account, published in his 1932 book *The Desert Column*, is an evocative witness testament of the glory and the gore of the battle. Here he is on the opening day's assault by the 4th Australian Light Horse:

“At a mile distant their thousand hooves were stuttering thunder, coming at a rate that frightened a man—they were an awe-inspiring sight, galloping through the red haze—knee to knee and horse to horse—the dying sun glinting on bayonet points. Machine guns and rifle-fire just roared but the 4th Brigade galloped on.”

Idriess's war diaries are well covered in Paul Daley's fine 2009 book *Beersheba: Travels Through a Forgotten Australian Victory*, which has just been reissued in a centenary edition. Idriess's take on the horse-led attack was backed up by 4th Light Horse commander Lieutenant-colonel Bouchier. In his report on the battle, he said “a dismounted attack would have resulted in a much greater number of casualties”. The morale of the enemy, he continued, “was greatly shaken through our troops galloping over his positions, thereby causing his riflemen and machine gunners to lose all control of fire discipline”.



Of course, there were losses. As Ross McMullin points out in his superb 2012 book *Farewell Dear People*, the war cut short brilliant Australian lives. Les Carlyon, author of the landmark *The Great War*, reminds me that Australian Test cricket fast bowler Tibby Cotter, the Dennis Lillee of his time, joined the Light Horse even though he knew little about horses. He was a stretcher bearer at Beersheba and was shot dead. Leslie Maygar, who was awarded a Victoria Cross for a heroic rescue during the Second Boer War, also died at Beersheba.

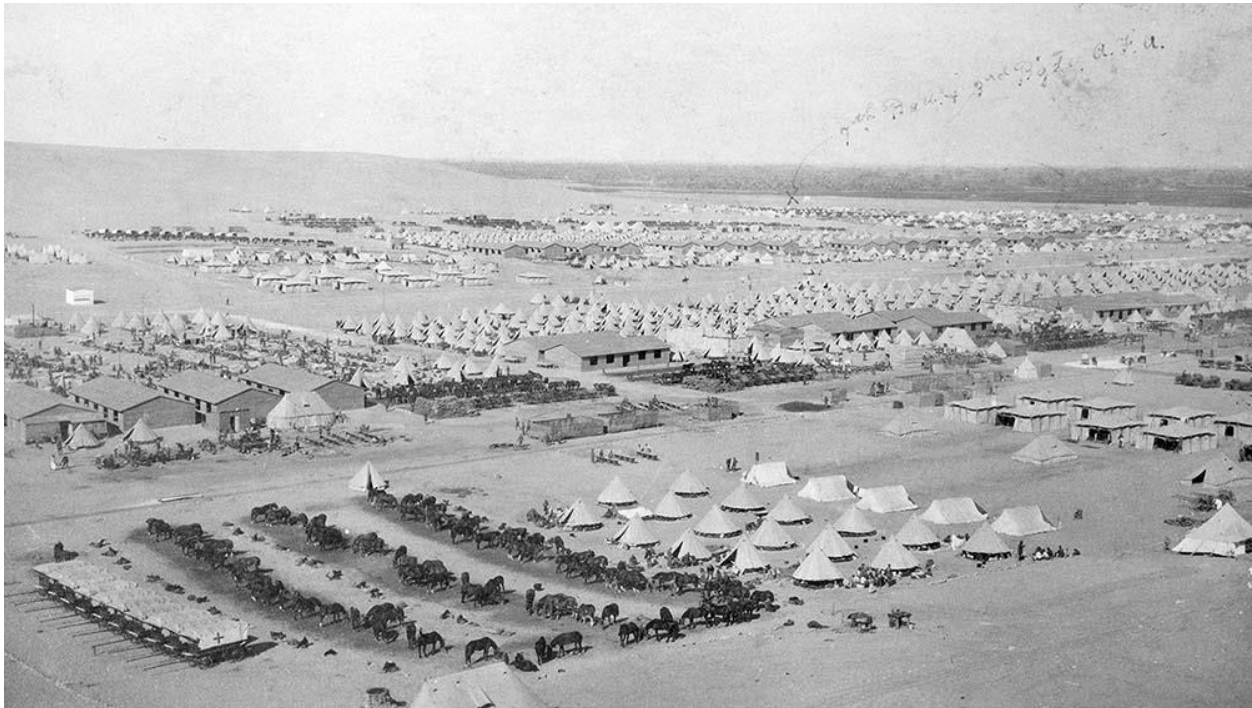
Eight years after Idriess's book came out, with Australia in another world war, the Light Horse victory at Beersheba was the climax of a film, *Forty Thousand Horsemen*, starring Chips Rafferty and directed by Charles Chauvel, nephew of the commander of the Desert Mounted Corps, Lieutenant-general (later General) Harry Chauvel. The desert scenes were shot at Sydney's Cronulla beach. The movie, designed to boost morale and encourage enlistment, was a hit at the box office. Its billing as being about "the last successful cavalry charge in history" was premature however, as Italian cavalrymen charged Russian troops in August 1942 and, despite heavy losses, did win the day.



AWM P01000.002 The horse is fine: many troopers taught their horses to lie down to give protective cover if under fire in the open

Beersheba did win another comparison with a famous—or perhaps infamous—cavalry charge in the 2013 book *Hell in the Holy Land: World War I in the Middle East*, by American historian David E. Woodward. “The honour and the glory of securing the town,” he wrote, “went to the 4th Australian Light Horse in a cavalry charge that in notoriety ranks with the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava in 1854.”

Notoriety is perhaps the right word there when it comes to that forever remembered moment of the Crimean War. While the assault lifted the reputation of the brave British light cavalry, the death toll was horrific, due to a miscommunication in the chain of command. Lord Tennyson wrote the still-read-in-schools narrative poem that was published six weeks after the battle.



AWM P00117.001 Horses at Mena Camp in Egypt in 1914. Only a fifth of the camp is visible in this photograph

It's worth noting, in this discussion of war horses, that Tennyson's six-stanza *The Charge of the Light Brigade* focuses, understandably, on the “six hundred” who ride “into the valley of Death”. It's not until the fifth stanza that their steeds are mentioned: “Cannon to right of them, / Cannon to left of them, / Cannon behind them / Volleyed and thundered; / Stormed at with shot and shell, / While horse and hero fell.”

While on Tennyson and movies, when Michael Curtiz made the 1936 epic *Charge of the Light Brigade* he used trip wires to bring down the horses in the charge scene, killing 25 of them, much

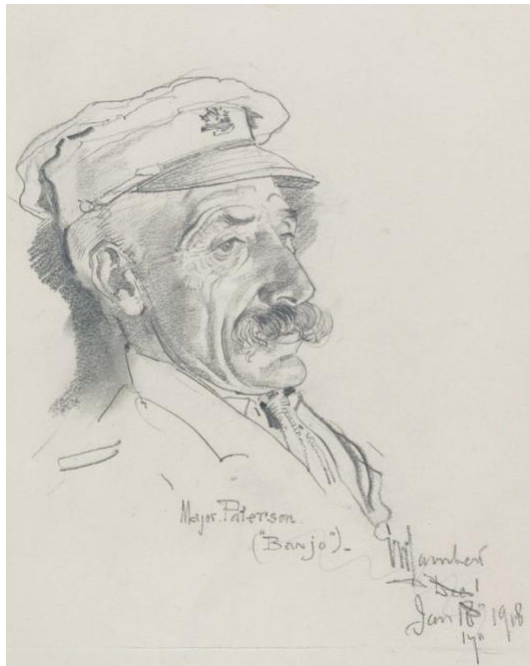
to the disgust of his Australian leading man Errol Flynn. The movie led Congress to tighten laws protecting animals used in films.

This separation of horse and hero takes us to the tragic outcomes for the equine conscripts to human wars.

In the case of the Australian war horses of WW I, only one returned: Sandy, the Waler owned by Major General William Bridges, who was killed at Gallipoli. Bridges, a veteran of the Second Boer War (in which Walers also did their bit), helped establish the Australian Royal Military College at Duntroon in Canberra. When he died a day after being shot by a Turkish sniper—he was hit in the leg, but his femoral artery was cut—the then defence minister, George Pearce, made arrangements for Sandy to come home.

What happened to the rest is starkly detailed in Roland Perry's 2012 book *Bill the Bastard*. The titular character is Bill, a 730kg Waler, chestnut of colour and incorrigible of temper (Phar Lap, by comparison, was the same hue but weighed in at 600kg).

Bill was almost impossible to sit on—two minutes and 13 seconds was the record time he'd tolerated a rider—but, under the horse whisperer-like guidance of the one man who could stay on him, Major Michael Shanahan, he rescued four Anzac soldiers during the Battle for Romani in 1916. There's a bronze statue of him, and the men he saved, at Murrumburrah in NSW.





AWM ART02780 War artist George Lambert's portrait of his friend, Major Banjo Paterson, who commanded the remount unit at Moascar in northern Egypt; **AWM ART02798** Lambert's drawing of a mounted Light Horse trooper

Paterson, or Banjo as we now know him, was appalled when, with the war winding up, he received the orders from on high. It was impossible, for quarantine and financial reasons, to return the horses to Australia.

They would either be passed onto the British or Indian armies, sold (often to butchers, as almost happened to a British comrade-in-saddle in Michael Morpurgo's 1982 novel *War Horse*, filmed in 2011 by Steven Spielberg) or put down. As Perry recounts, Paterson had clear thoughts about the "mumbo-jumbo" from the "Horse Demobilisation Committee" in the War Office: "How would those bloody grey pommie bureaucrats understand anything about the bonds between the troopers and their mounts?"

But his complaint was in vain. In November 1918, Paterson and his offsider Aidan Sutherland led 128 horses into the desert. There, as Perry puts it, "they met the captain of a machine-gun squadron". Paterson said he felt like a mass murderer, and refused to stay to watch. After this the officers turned a blind eye to "hundreds of troopers taking their mounts into the desert and shooting them rather than see them sold or face an anonymous machine-gun firing squad. It was the most awful moment of the entire war for most troopers".

Eric Bogle focuses on this in his 2001 song *As If He Knows*. It's a piece that echoes Tennyson but is more thoughtful of the underlings ("We rode in and out of Hell/On their strong backs"). And in a typical Australian touch, the main horse in the song is called Banjo. "For the orders came/ No horses to return/ We were to abandon them/ To be slaves/ After all we'd shared/ And all that we'd been through/ A Nation's gratitude/ Was a dusty grave."



AWM J01081 Two Light Horsemen bathe one of their Walers in the surf near Romani in Egypt in 1916.

Bill the Bastard survived, though he never returned home. He saw out his days at Gallipoli, used to help collect and transport the belongings of dead soldiers and other bits and pieces left behind. In that sense he was one of the "lucky ones", to quote Banjo.

According to English author Jilly Cooper, about 8 million animals, mainly horses, donkeys, mules and camels, but also pigeons, dogs and cats, died during the war. That covers all sides of the conflict, not that any of the animals knew about that. Her 1984 book *Animals in War* inspired the Animals in War Memorial in London's Hyde Park.

The inscription there reads, “This monument is dedicated to all the animals that served and died alongside British and Allied forces in wars and campaigns through time.” The next sentence is in larger script: “They had no choice.”



AWM B01618 Each regiment operating in Palestine had a few donkeys which were ridden by batmen and grooms.

For me, a photograph that sums up that sentiment is of horses, German ones as it happens, wearing gas masks on the Western Front in 1917. In the longest battle on that front, Verdun, there was a day—one day—where 7000 horses were killed by shelling. And all of this reminds me of a far older war story, Homer’s *The Iliad*. Achilles’s immortal horses, Balius and Xanthus, stand motionless on the battlefield and weep after their master’s close friend (lover in some texts) Patroclus is slain.

Achilles chides them, suggests it was their fault and warns them he must not be the next to die. Xanthus speaks, having been allowed to do so by a god: “Dread Achilles we will indeed save you now, but the day of your death is near, and the blame will not be ours ... it is your doom to fall by the hand of a man and of a god.”

In other words, it's men, not horses, who start the fights. Yet when it comes to the desperate hour, well, Shakespeare puts it most plainly at the end of *Richard III*.

“A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!”