

Centenary of WW1 - The Middle Eastern Campaign 1916-1918

Australian Curriculum Year 9 ACDSEH021, ACDSEH095, ACHHS164

HISTORY – Lesson 1 The ANZAC Light Horsemen and their Waler Horses – J Curry

In comparison to the well-known and highly commemorated World War 1 history of Gallipoli and the Western Front, the more successful part of the war fought in the Sinai Desert of Egypt, Palestine and Syria is less known but very significant. It unfolded from 1916-1918 with the most dramatic and pivotal battle at Beersheba taking place on October 31, 1917. These five lessons will give some insights into this campaign. The partnership of the ‘waler’ horses and their ANZAC riders were a major key to the successful achievements of this section of the war.

The Walers

There were over 136,000 horses that went to World War 1 and only one returned. The men and horses travelled to the Cairo by ship. When the soldiers went to Gallipoli, most of the horses were left behind in Egypt because the terrain was not suitable for horses. Some however were used to haul guns, carry mail, and carry the wounded down the steep slopes. In the Middle Eastern Campaign, after the soldiers were reassigned horses, the horses were the main form of transport for the troops.



The ‘Walers,’ as the horses were called, because they originally came from New South Wales, were Australian stock horses, not a particular bloodline, but suited to the tough Australian countryside. They had to be strong, as they carried up to 130 kg of luggage plus the rider in 50

degree heat in the Sinai desert, often having to go without water for up to three days. They had to walk and gallop in soft sand or hard stony ground and sometimes through slippery mud. In the Middle East there were also deadly scorpions, snakes, ticks, fleas, malarial mosquitoes and millions of flies attracted by the horses. It has been estimated that 12,000 horses produce 113,400 kg of manure per day, not to mention the camels and donkeys also used!!



One famous horse, called ‘Bill the Bastard’, because of his reputation for throwing off anyone who attempted to ride him, was particularly large and strong. In the battle at Romani in the Sinai, he carried his rider plus 4 stranded men to safety on his back and clinging to the stirrups through the desert sands. You will learn more about Bill in the

next lesson.

The men had to take good care of their horses by training them to obey every command, grooming them and exercising them regularly to keep them fit. They had to learn not to be scared by the sound of close gunfire or aircraft. A great bond developed between man and horse and the lives of each often depended on the other. They became their mates.

The troops were called Light Horse because they did not normally fight from horseback with long swords as did the cavalry. They were equipped with shorter bayonets and fought as infantry on foot. They worked in sections of four, rode to near the battle front, then one man would take the four horses, staying close enough to escape or advance as needed, and the others would go into action.

The ANZAC soldiers



The ANZAC soldiers were all volunteers. Before they could enlist in the Light Horse, the men had to be 18 years old, and pass a medical test and a riding and shooting test. Many faked their age and enlisted far younger. A blind eye was mostly turned to this, especially if they were good horsemen. They were given military training, involving such things as physical fitness, working as a team, discipline, obeying orders and military tactics. If the recruit came with a horse, he was most likely able to keep it, but it was purchased by the government and became army property. Most of the Light Horsemen came from country areas because the good horsemen were often working on the farms. Those who could not ride well could still serve in other capacities, as did 'Tibby' Cotter, a cricketer who represented Australia internationally, who volunteered for the 12th Light Horse and served as a stretcher-bearer. Those who volunteered left family, friends, their home and their jobs to venture into the unknown in a far away land with a high possibility of never returning. From a population of only five million at the time, over 400,000 men volunteered and 332,000 of those served overseas. Sixty thousand of these died and 156,000 were wounded, taken prisoner or gassed. Of these 32,000 men served in the Middle Eastern campaign with 1,394 Australians killed or wounded in three years of fighting. Almost everyone knew someone who went to war, especially in the countryside.

The Light Horse Hat

The most distinctive part of their uniform was the slouch hat with the emu feathers. The khaki hat was first used in the military by the Victorian Mounted Rifles in 1885. With the formation of a national army in 1903, the slouch hat, turned up on the left side became part of the uniform. Different units added different bird feathers. In the 1st World War, the rising sun badge was also in use on the hat. The



emu plumes were first given to the Queensland Mounted infantry as a reward for service after the shearers' strike of 1891. Some World War 1 Queensland units and the 3rd Brigade headed for the Middle East wearing the emu feathers. When they arrived in Egypt it caused a stir until it was decided that all units could adopt it. This became the trademark of the Light Horsemen in the Middle East and became a national symbol of the bravery and sacrifice of the World War 1 soldiers. The Arabs called the Australians the 'King of the Feathers', and the Aussies jokingly told the locals they were 'Kangaroo Feathers'!

A sad end

At the end of the War, the Australian government was not prepared to pay for the expense of repatriating the horses. It was also feared they could bring unknown diseases back to Australia. The best horses were sold to the British army and many went to the Indian army. Horses that were over 12 years of age or not in good physical condition were shot either by their riders or the Army vets. This caused more heartache for many of the troopers than the whole saga of war. Some horses ended their days sold to the locals who did not treat the animals well. A British lady living in Cairo, Dorothy Brooke, set up a veterinary hospital to look after many of the former Walers.



It was the dying wish of Major General Sir William Bridges that his horse, Sandy, be returned to Australia. Bridges, the commander of the 1st Australian Division in Gallipoli, died on May 18 1915, after being hit by sniper fire. He had founded the military college at Duntroon. His wish was granted and in 1918 Sandy sailed from Liverpool and spent the rest of his days at the Remount Centre in Maribyrnong in Victoria.

Endnotes:

1. Taffy & Cpl Edwards – Light Horse WW1 <http://www.lighthorseart.com.au/Taffy-Waits/>
2. Bill the Bastard statue, Murrumburrah, NSW, Australia – <http://iwvpa.net/clifford-m/bill-the-.php>
3. Trooper Stephen Arbuthnot – 8th Light Horse, Killed at Gallipoli <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/H06442/>
4. Light Horse Hat – Jill Curry
5. Sandy – Major General Sir William Throsby Bridges, KCB, CMG, Commander of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and of the 1st Australian Division in 1914-1915, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P05290.001>

Some resources for further research:

Military History and Heritage Victoria website <http://www.mhhv.org.au/?p=830>

The Light Horse Hat <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/lhplumes/feathers/>
<http://www.lighthorse.org.au/resources/history-of-the-australian-light-horse/the-mounted-soldiers-of-australia>

<http://www.beersheba100.com.au>

To research names: <https://aif.adfa.edu.au/aif/>

Books:

Curry, J., *Victory! Beersheba 100th Anniversary*, Willdeer, 2016 Available at <http://www.beersheba100.com.au>

Mather, J., *War Horses, Hoof Prints in Time*, Bookbound Pub, 2012.

Mather J., *Forgotten Heroes, The Australian Waler Horse*, Bookbound Pub, 2012

Perry, R., *Bill the Bastard*, Allen and Unwin, 2012.

ABC Documentary *The Waler – Australia's Great War Horse*

Movie – The Lighthorsemen

Questions for Secondary age children

- Discuss why you think the volunteers were willing to leave their work and family to travel abroad. How would their departure affect the population of Australia?
- How did conditions in the Middle East differ from the campaigns fought in Gallipoli or on the Western Front? (*requires further research for students*)
- Why were the horses so strategic in the Middle Eastern campaign? (*requires some further research for students*)
- Did anyone in your family (or someone you know) serve in World War 1? If not, find an important soldier who came from your vicinity, city or state who served. Write a short biography of his or her contribution. Use the AIF website to find them.

Questions for Primary age children

- The Horse and Rider were a team in the Middle Eastern Campaign. How did they help one another? How would they feel when they were separated at the end? Draw or find a picture that would honour the contribution of the horses and men who served.
- What would a soldier who went to war have to give up in order to serve? Imagine a member of your family volunteered to serve in a war. Write a letter telling him or her how you feel about that.
- Find the name of someone who served in World War 1 in the Middle Eastern Campaign and write 1-2 paragraphs about their service. (Two are mentioned above).
- The slouch hat became the symbol of the Light Horse. What did this symbol come to mean and how did the Turks, the Arabs, the Israelis and Australians see the symbol?

Lesson Aims: To give a basic introduction to the main players in ANZAC Light Horse in the Middle Eastern Campaign - the horses and soldiers.

To introduce the crucial role of animals, especially horses in WW1.

To reflect on the concept of sacrificial service for both man and horse and how this affected both those who served and those who stayed home in World War 1.

To show that the little-known Middle Eastern campaign had some distinctive features that differed from the Gallipoli and Western Front battles.

To investigate any family connections or connect the students to real people who served.

To introduce the Light Horse hat as a symbol for the proud history of the Light Horse.

By the end of the lesson the students will:

1. Be able to define the term ‘waler’ and understand that the horses were crucial to the success of the Middle Eastern campaign.
2. Have internalized the important relationship between horse and rider
3. Have considered the physical and emotional sacrifice that was made both by the soldiers and their families.
4. Have identified ways that the Middle Eastern campaign was distinct from Gallipoli and the Western Front and had its own special characteristics mainly connected with the important role of the horses and its comparatively small loss of life.

Powerpoint:

1. Light Horse commemorative statue - Photo J Curry
2. Horses aboard transport ship <http://baroquehorse.com.au/100-years-for-the-anzac-horses-in-war/>
Loading horse onto ship <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/A01491>
- 3-4. Text only
5. Taffy & Cpl Edwards – Light Horse WW1 <http://www.lighthorseart.com.au/Taffy-Waits/>
6. Bill the Bastard statue, Murrumburrah, NSW, Australia – <http://iwvpa.net/clifford-m/bill-the-.php>
7. Best Mates – Jennifer Marshall <http://www.lighthorseart.com.au/Best-Mates.html>
8. Trooper Stephen Arbuthnot – 8th Light Horse, Killed at Gallipoli <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/H06442/>
9. Tibbie Cotter WW1 recruitment poster - <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P04366.001>
10. Slouch Hat with Emu Feathers – Jill Curry
11. Text only
12. Sandy – Major General Sir William Throsby Bridges, KCB, CMG, Commander of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and of the 1st Australian Division in 1914-1915, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P05290.001>