

Centenary of WW1 - The Middle Eastern Campaign 1916-1918

Australian Curriculum Year 9 ACDSEH095, ACDSEH096, ACDSEH097

HISTORY – Lesson 2 The ANZACs in the Sinai – J. Curry

As we saw in part 1 of this series, horse and rider were a team in the Light Horse troops. Nowhere is there a better example of this than at the battle of Romani. The waler known as ‘Bill the Bastard’ was a huge 730 kg horse taken to war to haul equipment, which he did not mind doing. BUT Bill would not tolerate having a rider on his back. He would buck, bite and kick anyone who tried to mount him, seemingly taking delight in throwing his charges off. However, Major Michael Shanahan saw the potential in the strength of this strong-willed animal and over time coaxed and trained him until Bill finally allowed him, but only him, onto his back.



After the withdrawal of the ANZACs from Gallipoli, in December 1915, the troops returned to Cairo where they were reunited with the horses, but mostly not their own. The Turkish



troops began marching down to attempt to take the Suez Canal from British control. Romani was the last oasis in the desert, on the ancient trade route, the Via Maris, 37 km from the Suez Canal. It had to be held at all cost. At 1.00 am on August 4, 1916, 12,000 Turkish/German troops attempted to surround the British and ANZAC forces. Fighting at night in the sand dunes, their boots filling up with mountains of soft sand, with no rocks or trees for cover, two Australian

regiments from the 1st Light Horse Brigade guarded the southern flank and took the brunt of the action. Outnumbered ten to one, they were forced to slowly retreat but their heavy resistance wore out the opposition and thwarted the Turkish plan. At dawn, General Chauvel called his fresh Australian and New Zealand reserves to reinforce the thin 5 km long line, which had been remained unbroken – a credit to his gallant soldiers.

Major Shanahan was riding up and down encouraging his troops in the hard-fought battle when he discovered four of his men cut off by the Turkish troops with no horses on which to escape. Shanahan, under Turkish fire, oblivious to the danger to himself, hauled two men on to Bill's back with him and the other two with a foot in each



stirrup. Bill cantered 1.2 km through the soft sand carrying his heavy cargo away from certain death, while Shanahan used his rifle to ward off the Turkish attackers. With his men safely delivered, and his horse rewarded with a good drink, Shanahan went back to the battle front and was injured shortly afterwards. He continued in the saddle for another hour until he passed out. Bill realized his rider was in trouble and gently took his unconscious master to hospital, albeit the veterinary one! Shanahan eventually had part of his leg amputated. He won a Distinguished Service Order for his bravery that day, while Bill gained new respect and fame amongst the troops for his efforts also. There is a statue to Bill at Murrumburrah in NSW.

As the scorching sun rose, the ANZACs, backed up by British artillery, were able to push back the exhausted, thirsty Turks eventually forcing their retreat the following day.

The Allied troops lost 202 men killed, with 882 wounded and 46 missing, with most being ANZACs. The Turkish toll was 1,250 killed, almost 4,000 injured and another 4,000 captured. Amazed at the ANZAC resilience, the British commander, Sir Archibald Murray said,

“The ANZAC troops are the keystone of the defence of Egypt”¹

The ANZAC success meant they were often called to serve on the frontline, especially through the Sinai, where the sturdy waler horses and their tough bush riders managed the hot, dry conditions (up to 50 degrees in the daytime, with minimal water and little shade) better than the British cavalry or infantry. Their success at Romani, changed the British thinking from defence (of the Suez) to attack (‘get Jerusalem’).



The battle continued till August 12, when the supply chains could no longer sustain their advance and the troops were too exhausted to continue. However, before Christmas they were moving forward again and reached El Arish only to find the Turks had abandoned it. After two sleepless nights in the saddle (since travelling by day would make them visible to the German planes), they were ordered to immediately move to take the outpost of Magdhaba, as any delay would give the opposition an advantage. The weary

troops arrived within sight of the outpost at 3.50 am on December 23, 1916. A fierce bayonet fight erupted and about 1,400 prisoners were taken. By 4.30 pm it was all over and the ANZACs had once again cemented their reputation and amazed their commander. General Chetwode commented that they had done with bayonets what he had never known cavalry (*with long swords*) to achieve². The ANZAC toll was 22 dead and 121 wounded.

To their horror, there was insufficient water for man and beast in the captured wells and after sleepless nights and fighting all day, the soldiers and horses had to trudge yet another night 45 km back to El Arish with only a can of water. Many fell asleep in the saddle, while others were hallucinating. Even General Chauvel himself took off chasing an imaginary fox.

In January 2017, the Allied troops took the city of Rafa on the border of the Holy Land and in March and April, there were two



unsuccessful attempts to take Gaza, even though on the first attempt the ANZACs had successfully fought their way into the town and secured the wells. They were given orders to retreat due to false information of reinforcements coming for the Turks. After this, a plan was devised to deceive the Turks that a third attempt would be made on Gaza after the summer while actually planning to attack the other end of the line at Beersheba. We will look at this battle in the next lesson.

Endnotes:

1. Australians in World War 1: Australian Light Horse, Dept of Vets Affairs 2007, 10
2. Idriess, I., *The Desert Column*, The Discovery Press, 1932, 165

Pictures:

1. Bill the Bastard statue, Murrumburrah, NSW, Australia – <http://iwvpa.net/clifford-m/bill-the-.php>
2. Map produced by Geographx with research assistance from Damien Fenton and Caroline Lord. Map of 'Sinai campaign 1916 map', <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/sinai-campaign-1916-map>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 14-Aug-2014
3. Michael Shanahan in hospital – <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P03088.008>. 2nd Australian Light Horse, Cairo Sept 1916
4. El Arish – Jill Curry
5. Australian War Memorial photo B00860. A cross marks the grave at Magdhaba of 2154 Trooper (Tpr) Percy Butcher, 14th Company, Imperial Camel Corps (14th Coy ICC from QLD), and 7/1321 Tpr E Garland, Canterbury Mounted Rifles, New Zealand Expeditionary Force). Both died as result of the battle at Magdhaba. Butcher was 21 years old.

For further research:

Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/>

Gullett, H., *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918. Vol VII, Sinai and Palestine*. Angus and Robertson, 1923.

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

Staunton, A., *Australians in World War 1, Australian Light Horse*, Department of Vets Affairs, 2007.

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

Questions and activities for older students:

1. Research more into the life of Major Michael Shanahan, 'Gallop' Jack Royston, Brigadier Charles Frederick Cox or another military medal winner in WW1 in the Sinai. Write 500 words about their life and service.
2. Research why the first and second battles for Gaza failed. Write 500 words about these battles and what was done to correct the problems that led to this failure. What does this teach us about leadership and strategy in life?

3. Women also played an important part in the war. Research what place they played. Write 500 words about the contribution they made to the war.
4. In war, rewards were given for selfless actions, courage, and willingness to sacrifice for your mates. How are these values important in life? Are they evident in the way you act? Where do these values come from?

Questions and activities for younger children:

1. How did Major Shanahan display the ANZAC characteristics of Courage, Sacrifice, Endurance and Mateship? What have you done that shows these qualities?
2. Make a poppy or other memorial to remember someone who died or was injured in the war. Write a short thank you to them for their sacrifice.
3. The sacrifice of the animals is often forgotten. Bill the Bastard saved several people's lives at Romani. Find 5-10 pictures of animals that served in WW1 and what they did. Write a short explanation of each picture.

Lesson Aims:

1. To provide a short overview of the battles in which the ANZAC Light Horse were involved in the Sinai Campaign.
2. To give examples of the ANZAC values of courage, mateship, endurance and sacrifice in action in WW1, and encourage the students to exhibit these in their own lives.
3. To demonstrate how horse and rider depended on one another in crucial battles in the desert in WW1.
4. To reflect on the concept of sacrificial service and endurance in the tough desert conditions in the Sinai, and encourage thankfulness for those who served.
5. To research the lives of real people who served and why they were awarded medals, in order to give the students role models who selflessly put their lives on the line for others.
6. To appreciate the victories achieved by our soldiers not just the losses.

By the end of the lesson the students will:

1. Have an understanding of the sacrifices made by our soldiers in the desert.
2. Be familiar with examples of the ANZAC values of courage, endurance, sacrifice and mateship and how they were acted out in war
3. Have reflected on the importance of the ANZAC values in relation to their own lives
4. Have considered the important relationship between horse and rider

Powerpoint:

1. Light Horse commemorative statue – Picture J Curry
2. Sinai desert – J Curry
3. Bill the Bastard statue, Murrumburrah, NSW, Australia – <http://iwvpa.net/clifford-m/bill-the-.php>

4. Map produced by Geographx with research assistance from Damien Fenton and Caroline Lord. Map of 'Sinai campaign 1916 map', <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/sinai-campaign-1916-map>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 14-Aug-2014
5. Michael Shanahan in hospital – <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P03088.008>. 2nd Australian Light Horse, Cairo Sept 1916
6. Text only
7. El Arish – Jill Curry
8. Text only
9. Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B00860> A cross marks the grave at Maghaba of 2154 Trooper (Tpr) Percy Butcher, 14th Company, Imperial Camel Corps (14th Coy ICC from QLD), and 7/1321 Tpr E Garland, Canterbury Mounted Rifles, New Zealand Expeditionary Force). Both died as result of the battle at Maghaba. Butcher was 21 years old.
10. Text only
11. Distinguished Conduct Medals: Trooper C H Livingstone, 6 Light Horse Regiment, AIF <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/REL/18153.002> Awarded for his actions on Nov 3, 1917