

How Young was too Young? – Jill Curry

Australian Curriculum, Year 9 – ACDSEH095

Harold Thomas Bell grew up on a farm in Walpeup near Ouyen in Victoria. He enlisted for the army under the name Harold Thomas Wickham in March 1917 at Mildura. His age was recorded as 21 but in fact he was only 16! He so wanted to volunteer that he ran away from home, saying he was going to Queensland to be a jackaroo. He knew his father would not allow him to join at his age so he had changed his name and gave his father's name as his next of kin as uncle. The minimum age was 18, but Harry was fit, could handle a horse well and shoot straight. He was accepted.

Harry did his training and headed off on a ship to Cairo in June 1917. He never received any mail because his family did not know his whereabouts. He also did not write much - and of course nothing about what he was actually doing. On arrival in Egypt, he was given a mount



and he soon befriended his new mate. He could not bring his own horse or his family would have become suspicious. The horses were called 'walers' because they originally came from New South Wales. They were Australian stock horses bred to withstand the harsh conditions of the Australian outback. They had excelled in the dry, sandy

terrain of the Sinai desert.

Harry joined the 4th Light Horse regiment just before the long night march to Beersheba. Each man was given three days' supplies of food and a can of water. The engineers had gone before to repair and prepare any wells along the route to Beersheba but the horses had to manage as best they could on little or no water. The wells had been the life-blood of the ancient city of Beersheba since the time of Abraham. Now the troops had to capture the city on one day or possibly die in the desert of thirst. They HAD to take those wells.

The 4th Light Horse was in reserve that day – as seemed to be their lot. They watched while the British forces pounded the city in the morning, and the New Zealand soldiers battled tenaciously in the afternoon to capture the well-fortified only high ground at Tel el Saba. It was already mid-afternoon and the sun would set in a couple of hours. Their commanders met for a discussion and General Chauvel made the decision for a cavalry charge of the city. He chose the 4th and the 12th Light Horse regiments to lead, which were the freshest of his tired troops. They would not dismount before the battle front as they usually did, thus



surprising their enemy. They lined up and awaited orders. Young Harry had never yet seen a real battle but now his heart was pumping.



800 horsemen set off at a trot, then a canter and finally a full-blown charge. Bullets whizzed past them. A German bomber aircraft zoomed overhead. Artillery and machine gun fire flashed and roared around Harry but he rode on. Then suddenly the gun fire smashed into his leg and he crashed to the ground in agony as he tried to roll to safety away from the thundering hooves. The horses charged on. Many jumped the trenches and galloped on into town to secure the precious wells which were beginning to be blown up. The parched horses

smelled the water and could not be stopped. Other riders dismounted and fought in the trenches. Thousands of back-up troops now swarmed into town. The city had fallen with the wells almost intact. Victory!

Harry was loaded on a stretcher and taken to hospital but he had multiple fractures and severe blood loss. As life drained from his body his final words to the padre were to make sure his name was right on the tombstone. They did, but his short career ended on November 1st, 1917, at just 16 years of age.



Pictures:

1. Taffy & Cpl Edwards – Light Horse WW1 <http://www.lighthorseart.com.au/Taffy-Waits/>
2. Disputed picture of the charge at Beersheba (or re-enactment) – Australian War memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/A02684/>
3. Abraham's well at Beersheba – J Curry
4. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P05693.003> Australian War Memorial. The mass graves of casualties from the 4th Light Horse Regiment (4LHR) who fell at Beersheba, Palestine, 31 October 1917. Three more died of wounds shortly after...One of these was Trooper Harold Thomas Wickham (Bell), who may have been the youngest light horseman to die in Palestine.
5. The cemetery at Beersheba today where Harry Bell is buried.

Powerpoint:

1. Writing only

2. Call from the Dardanelles – Australian War Memorial
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ARTV05167> Recruitment poster created by H M Burton, for The Defence Department of the Commonwealth
3. Best Mates – Jennifer Marshall <http://www.lighthorseart.com.au/Best-Mates.html>
4. Taffy & Cpl Edwards – Light Horse WW1 <http://www.lighthorseart.com.au/Taffy-Waits/>
5. Engineers repairing a well at Khalassa near Beersheba
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J02836>
6. Abraham's well at Beersheba (before renovations) – J Curry
7. Disputed picture of the charge at Beersheba (or re-enactment) – Australian War memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/A02684/> It was probably taken when two regiments of the 4th Brigade, Australian Light Horse, re-enacted the charge for the official photographer Frank Hurley, at Belah on 7 February 1918.
8. Watering the horses Beersheba <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P08548.001>
9. Horse drawn Ambulance Wagon <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/B00450>
10. Graves at Romani <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P05693.003>
11. Ambulances outside the Beersheba mosque Australian War Memorial
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P01668.004>
12. The cemetery at Beersheba today where Harry Bell is buried – J Curry