

Two Great Australians who helped bring WW1 to an end - Monash and Chauvel

1918 finally saw the end of four long years of War in Europe and the Middle East. It had cost hundreds of thousands of lives including 60,000 Australians. Two of the chief army generals that helped bring about the final outcome were Sir John Monash and Sir Harry Chauvel – both Australians. Monash's brilliant strategies brought the final victory on the Western Front and Chauvel led five brigades of Light Horse troops to carry out Allenby's breakthrough plan and end the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.

General Sir John Monash – GCMG, KCB



Monash was born on June 27, 1865 in West Melbourne. His father had migrated from Prussia in 1854. The family was Jewish and had changed the spelling of their name from Monasch to Monash. After his father's business suffered great loss, the family moved to Jerilderie in New South Wales. John attended school there and displayed a high intellect and an extraordinary talent for mathematics.

His family returned to Melbourne where he attended Scotch College in Glenferrie and became equal dux of the school, excelling in mathematics, before going on to study engineering, arts and law at Melbourne University. He was not a good student in his first year, being distracted by the things of the world, bored in lectures and he preferred to study at the State Library himself and attend the theatre. He failed his first year but then put his mind to it and flew through with honours. In 1884, he joined the university company of the 4th Battalion, Victorian Rifles and rose to colour sergeant within fourteen months. He became an avid student of war strategy and modern artillery.

He had huge obstacles to overcome to rise through the ranks to the position he held by the end of the war. Firstly, he was Jewish. Secondly he was of Germanic heritage. As a child he learnt Hebrew, German and French, which became very useful in interviewing German captives and directing French troops later in his life. He built and designed bridges before the war (Princes Bridge was one of his first jobs), was in charge of construction of the Outer Circle eastern suburban railway-line, and became a very good negotiator in legal matters, which also stood him in good stead for the future. Not being a career soldier was his third obstacle to overcome, but in his army service he refined his organisational and administrative skills. By the end of the war he had been given great power and had the respect of many leaders in Britain and beyond. The fourth obstacle he faced was the jealousy and bias of those in power in Australia – namely Prime Minister Billy Hughes, influential journalist Keith Murdoch and official war historian, Charles Bean.

When the war broke out he was appointed to command the 4th Infantry Brigade of the Australian Imperial Force, and was engaged in Gallipoli, including at such vulnerable places as Pope's Hill, Quinn's Post and Hill 60. Here he defended his troops as best he could under some atrocious decisions from British Command which seemed to see human life as expendable, especially those from the distant colonies. It was at Gallipoli that Harry Chauvel

met Monash, as his troops were sent to relieve Monash's brigade after three weeks of relentless warfare. Being a horseman, Chauvel was not familiar with trench warfare when he arrived at Gallipoli and Monash remained and trained Chauvel until he was competent to take over.

After the withdrawal from Gallipoli, Monash was left to re-train his battered 4th division which was sent to France where they served in the Armentières sector. Monash was soon promoted to major general in command of the new 3rd Division as part of Godley's II Anzac Corps and General Sir Herbert Plumer's Second British Army. They served in the battle at Messines by which time Monash's reputation as an intricate battle planner was growing. On October 4, 1917 at Broodseinde, he led his troops to the greatest victory to that point on the Western Front, but despite Monash's objection, Haig insisted on sending the men into Passchendaele in pouring rain, which resulted in terrible and unnecessary losses.

Monash's philosophy was different. He believed in using all available weaponry to cover his men and used a holistic approach to battle. The success of this strategy came to the fore more and more, where the terrain allowed – which it sometimes didn't. During the March 1918 German offensive, as the Australians were sent in to relieve the spent British troops, Monash managed to halt the German advance to Amiens. After this, he was finally given command of all the Australian corps and promoted to lieutenant-general, meaning that he now had more power to plan the attacks and use his men as he saw fit. He then demonstrated his strategic genius and turned the tide of the war.

The battle of Hamel on July 4, 1918, was a showpiece of his brilliance. Monash's coordinated attack by infantry, tanks, artillery and air force, with the tanks protecting his men as they advanced, brought a swift victory in just 93 minutes. It was a small battle in the scheme of things, but it proved that Monash's tactics worked. There were still casualties of course, but most were wounded rather than killed. He encouraged his men with the scent of victory and began planning how to end the war before Christmas.

At the Battle of Amiens on August 8, 1918, the Australians spearheaded the attack by capturing the artillery guns clearing the way for the Allied troops following. The ensuing battles in September at Mont St Quentin and Péronne were more costly as it was harder to use the tanks, which meant a head-on infantry battle, but these were eventually won and Monash was proceeding towards his goal. He pushed his troops hard and the last battle for his exhausted soldiers was at Montbrechain – a small village that dominated the advance to the Hindenburg line. He planned the strategy that broke this last and final enemy stronghold though the actual fighting was left to other troops, as the Australians were finally given a break after three months on the frontline.

Monash had a brilliant mind, thought outside the box, valued life, used all available modern weaponry to cover his men and save lives. He was a clever problem solver and was a great strategist who planned every battle with minute detail. His ingenious plans, after he was given greater command, from Hamel to the breaking of the Hindenburg line, were largely

responsible for ending the war on the Western Front. He commanded 200,000 troops, including American troops – the only non-American ever to do so.

When the war was over, Monash was put in charge of repatriating the Australian troops. It was largely due to his strength of persuasion, and great ability to get things done efficiently that in only 8 months, he managed to get 160,000 Australian soldiers back home. Sadly, only a few months after he returned from the war to a hero's welcome, his wife Vic died.

On his return to Australia, he became General Manager of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria and developed the Yallourn power station, bringing cheap power to drive the development of industry. He oversaw the planning and construction of the Shrine of Remembrance and led the Anzac Day marches for many years, as well as many other community and returned soldiers' organisations. Monash had so much support from his former troopers that he could easily have risen to be Prime Minister, had he desired, which is exactly what PM Hughes was concerned about. For his services during the war, he was awarded a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath, and promoted to general by PM Scullin with his appointment as a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George in 1919. Though his character was far from flawless, Sir John remains not only a great military hero, but one of Australia's greatest founding leaders.

General Sir Harry Chauvel – GCMG, KCB



Sir Harry Chauvel, in contrast was from a military family. His father served in the British army and began the Upper Clarence Light Horse unit. Harry was born April 16, 1865 in Tabulam, northern New South Wales and educated at Sydney Grammar and Toowoomba Grammar schools. Growing up on his father's farm in northern NSW, he joined the Light Horse unit his father had established. By 1890, at age 25, he was commissioned as a captain in the Queensland Mounted Infantry. He led the A Squadron in the Boer War in South Africa, after which he trained up the Light Horse in Australia before being appointed as the Australian representative on the Imperial General Staff in London. In 1906 he married Sibyl and produced four children. Before he arrived in London, war broke out and he was appointed to command the 1st Light Horse Brigade of the Australian Imperial Forces. He led his troops in Gallipoli, relieving Monash's exhausted men in some of the most vulnerable parts of the peninsular. He earned a reputation as a quiet, calm, caring, cooperative and courageous leader who stayed close to his men.

After the evacuation of Gallipoli he was offered the choice of a post in France or to lead the Light Horse in the Middle East. Being an accomplished horseman, he chose the second. In 1916, he led the ANZAC Mounted Division to victory at Romani. This was the last stronghold in the Sinai desert before the Suez Canal which the Turks were trying to capture. His strategy of holding back troops to release fresh at dawn, successfully overcame a much

larger Turkish army which wilted exhausted in the hot, desert sun, forcing their retreat. The success of the Light Horse troops put them at the forefront of the battles through the Sinai. His ANZAC troops had even got into Gaza before the fateful order was given to withdraw. As they withdrew from Gaza, Chauvel ensured that even the Turkish wounded, who were unfit to march as prisoners, were left with a full bottle of water. He was the first Australian to rise to the rank of Lieutenant General (before Monash) and later appointed a General and he was the first one to command an entire Corps.

After Gaza, he was given command of the entire Desert Column, which was reorganised and renamed the Desert Mounted Corps, with three divisions comprising 34,000 horsemen. This is thought to be the largest number of mounted troops ever under one command. In October 1917, he led the ANZACs to break the deadlock and conquer Beersheba. After a three night trek through the desert, and a tough battle by the British forces and ANZAC troops all day, the precious water wells, originally dug by Abraham, were still in Turkish hands and only an hour of sunlight remained. He gave the command for 800 Australian horsemen to charge into the ancient biblical city over 6 km of open, stony ground, in the full face of 4,400 entrenched Turks with artillery and machine guns, supported by German bomber aircraft. Against all odds, their speed and surprise, and with a good deal of divine help, they succeeded with minimal losses (31 dead, 32 injured and 70 horses) and captured the town with most of the vital wells intact. Chauvel was awarded a KCB (Knight Commander of the Bath). Almost a year later, under Allenby's final plan, he led five brigades of Light Horse and cavalry from Australia, New Zealand, Britain, France and India to a successful sweep to break the Turkish cordon north of Jaffa stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River and Amman and defeat three Turkish armies to end the war in the Middle East. He was awarded the KCMG (Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George), the GCMG (Knight of the Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George), the French Croix de Guerre and the Egyptian Order of the Nile. Chauvel was said to be a man who knew the capabilities of his troops and would never opt for victory at all human cost. He valued the lives of his men and calculated the risk in his decision-making.

Upon his return to Australia, Chauvel was appointed Inspector General, the army's highest position. He was promoted to Lieutenant General, then General in 1929. He battled governmental financial restraints, but was insistent on maintaining high standards, even when training a volunteer army. In his wisdom, he sent officers to Britain to study which meant that when World War II began they were well-prepared. He continued his practice of meeting the troops personally and observing their training. Even after his retirement, he never stopped his community involvement. He campaigned for veterans causes, was on the committees for the Australian and Victorian War Memorials, the Red Cross and Young Men's Christian Association. He was a man of integrity and sincere Christian faith. His ceremonial sword resides at Christ Church South Yarra, and there is a plaque to honour his memory at St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne. He led Anzac Day marches until 1938.

He was also sent a personal letter of thanks from the community at Rehovoth, now in Israel, after he left his headquarters there after a 5 month-long stay. He treasured this letter which read:

No statues, no monuments do we, wandering sons of Israel, exist in honor of the man we cherish, whose memories we are eager to preserve for our descendants. Being homeless, we possess no ground to build upon. All that we have is a book, - our history. In the annals of this history of ours we are anxious to have you inscribed among the friends and benefactors of our people. We trust you will kindly favor us by accepting this document as a token of our sentiments of love and gratitude.¹

He died in Melbourne on March 4, 1945 and was given a State funeral at St Paul's Cathedral. At Chauvel's funeral procession, this riderless horse followed the gun carriage to Springvale Crematorium. The riderless horse, with boots reversed in the stirrups, signifies a warrior has fallen in battle and will ride no more.

Conclusion

We can be thankful that Australia produced these fine leaders that helped to end the war. Monash and Chauvel were generals during the war, but also helped bring peace and build the Australian nation after the war. Unfortunately the war to end all wars did not do so, largely because the problems in the world are just a reflection of the problems in the heart of all of humanity. We all need a heart transplant so we can be peacemakers. May we also rise to the challenge of this great calling.

Footnote:

1. Letter, Committee of the Colony "Rehoboth" near Jaffa to Sir Harry Chauvel, Lt. General, Desert Mounted Corps, 14 August 1918. From the private collection of Richard Chauvel.

Pictures:

1. General Sir John Monash- Photo by Swaine. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/AO2697/>
2. General Sir Harry Chauvel in 1923 <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J00503/>