

## BILL THE BASTARD AND ROMANI – Jill Curry

### Australian Curriculum, Year 9 – ACDSEH095

‘Bill the Bastard’ was a huge 730 kg waler (Australian stock horse used in WW1 by the Light Horse troops) with a cantankerous nature that did not like to be ridden. In fact, Bill disliked human cargo so much that he would buck, bite and kick anyone who tried to mount him, seemingly taking delight in throwing his charges off. He was only taken to war to haul equipment, which he did not mind in the least doing.



Major Michael Shanahan was a horse whisperer before such a term was known. He was impressed with the strength, intelligence and determination of this strong-willed animal and saw his potential. Little did he know that one day his life and the lives of others would be saved by the exact characteristics that moved him to slowly coax and train Bill until he 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 their horses. The Turkish troops began marching south to wrest 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, a thin 5 km line of two Australian regiments from the



1<sup>st</sup> 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.

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from certain death, while Shanahan used his rifle to ward off the Turkish attackers. After a good drink, this herculean horse was pawing the ground for more action. Shanahan, unwilling to leave his squadron without their leader, returned to the battle front. Shortly after, Shanahan was hit by a bullet in his leg. He continued in the saddle for another hour until blood loss caused him to pass out. Bill, receiving no orders from his master, realized he was in trouble, so gently took his unconscious charge to hospital, albeit the veterinary one! Shanahan 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.

As the scorching sun burnt the sand, the ANZAC reinforcements gained the advantage over the exhausted, thirsty Turks eventually forcing their retreat. The Allied troops lost 202 men, mostly 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 called the ANZACs, “the keystone of the defence of Egypt”.<sup>1</sup>

The ANZAC success saw them called to 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’).

This was the first time the Turkish advance had been reversed. The ANZACs went on to play a pivotal role in the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, which re-wrote the political map of Middle East and led to the creation of the nations of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

#### Endnotes:

1. Australians in World War 1: Australian Light Horse, Dept of Vets Affairs 2007, 10

#### 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

#### Powerpoint:

1. Romani Diorama by Wallace Anderson (sculptor) and, Louis McCubbin (painter). Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ART41024/>
2. Corporal Daniel O’Keeffe of the first Remount Unit. Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P00358.032>
3. Michael Shanahan [http://alh-research.tripod.com/2nd\\_light\\_horse\\_regiment\\_aif/q126091914p23\\_2ndLH\\_Officers\\_SH\\_ANAHAN\\_M\\_1qaa1.jpg](http://alh-research.tripod.com/2nd_light_horse_regiment_aif/q126091914p23_2ndLH_Officers_SH_ANAHAN_M_1qaa1.jpg)

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. Carl Valerius' statue of Bill the Bastard, Murrumburrah, NSW, Australia – <http://iwvpa.net/clifford-m/bill-the-.php>
6. Michael Shanahan in hospital – <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P03088.008>. 2nd Australian Light Horse, Cairo Sept 1916
7. Returning to Romani from Katia. Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J06076/>
8. Text only
9. Graves at Romani – Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J02256/>; Horses of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Light Horse regiment killed by bomber aircraft at Romani. Australian war Memorial - <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J05572/>
10. Bill the Bastard's grave at Gallipoli between two pine trees below Walker's Ridge. Picture: Anne Flood <http://www.hardenexpress.com.au/story/4073524/romani-an-historic-victory-videos-photos/>