

THE BATTLE OF BEERSHEBA
SPEECH BY
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HOBART CENOTAPH, TUESDAY 31 OCTOBER 2017

Good afternoon.

I begin today by paying my respects to the Mouheneener people, the traditional and original owners of this land – those who have passed before us; and in acknowledgement of today's Tasmanian Aboriginal community, being the custodians of this land.

Distinguished guests — here representing:

- New Zealand;
- the Republic of Turkey;
- the Prime Minister of Australia, and Leader of the Opposition;
- the Premier of Tasmania;
- the Australian Defence Force, and Veterans' Affairs;
- The Tasmanian Lighthouse and event Patron;

—Ladies and gentlemen.

If ever a battle was unorthodox, daring, rode its luck and yet became history-making, it surely was the Battle of Beersheba, which was fought one hundred years ago today, in then-southern Palestine.

We are here to remember those who participated, and those whose lives were lost, on both the Allied and Turkish-German sides on that day.

We owe it to those soldiers to remember their selflessness in defending their countries and principles in what they believed were just causes.

At Beersheba 31 Australians were killed and 36 wounded. That seems a tiny number in comparison with the 60 thousand Australians killed in World War One. And indeed it has been said that, "With the main focus on the Western Front, the Middle East campaign was regarded as a sideshow."ⁱ

Yet the Battle of Beersheba was a significant incremental turning point in World War One. And it is the nature of that victory that continues to astonish and that is also why we need to remember it.

The wells on which the city of Be'er Sheva stand today – and where later hundreds of Australians will watch a re-enactment of the charge – can be traced back to the Book of Genesis; the etymology of the name translates as Seven Wells.

So that place in the desert has been valued for its water since time immemorial. It would always be worth defending; worth fighting for.

In October 1917 the Allied Forces had taken the all-important Suez Canal but were then badly beaten in trying to take Gaza further north.

Well-equipped Turkish forces held fast between Gaza and Beersheba some 46 kilometres inland.

The Allies therefore indulged in subterfuge, planning for an apparent attack on Gaza while stealthily gathering the Anzac Mounted Division, the Australian Mounted Division south and south-east of Beersheba and the British 20 Corp in the south-west.

Trooper Harry Langtip, of the 4th Light Horse Regiment, wrote: “We rode all night to get right around Beersheba ... It was a terrible ride in heavy dust all the way. The horses have still got the saddles on and I don't know when they will get them off.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The charge is rightly famous as an Australian-led victory but it should be remembered that the 800 Australian horsemen of the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments chosen for the charge in the late afternoon of October 31st did not win the Battle of Beesheba by themselves.¹

The battle had begun at dawn on October 31st and British infantry casualties amounted to nearly 1200. The ANZAC Mounted Division (the ANZACs) which included the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade along with the 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigade, which included the Tasmanian

¹ Jean Bou, ‘A remarkable feat of arms’ in Beersheba,, the Legeland of the Light Horse, The Weekend Australian, 28-29 October 2017, 17-21..

C Squadron, captured Tel es Saba, the hill to the east of the town well into the afternoon taking much longer than expected which threatened to prevent the capture of Beersheba with its vital water supply before dark.

Doug Wyatt will give you more details of the charge by the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments which swept into Beersheba and captured the all-important well.

Those young troopers charging through the stony Negev Desert were volunteers from New South Wales and Victoria, described as: “stockmen, ringers, jackaroos, bushmen ... They’d taken their own horses ... They did so well because they were used to galloping across the plains in the Outback and shooting wombats or kangaroos or pigs from the backs of their horses, so they were perfectly equipped.”ⁱⁱⁱ

They included Indigenous men who had worked in the pastoral industry droving cattle and sheep. In fact the Light Horse brigades had the highest number of Indigenous soldiers of all the different battalions and regiments.^{iv}

The Australian charge that we remember today was a remarkable feat of courage and skill and should be acknowledged as such. We have every reason not to forget the Light Horsemen involved. But we also should remember the many casualties not only the 31 Australians killed in the charge, the 36 wounded and the 70 horses that died but the many other casualties that day including the 1000 Turkish soldiers who lost their lives.

Thank you.

ⁱ <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/anzac-voices/sinai-palestine>, accessed 28 October 2017.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/anzac-voices/sinai-palestine>, accessed 28 October 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/10/26/australias-forgotten-victory-what-happened-battle-beersheba>, accessed 29 October 2017.

^{iv} <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/10/25/incredible-mystery-indigenous-soldiers-light-horse-brigade>