

Battle of Beersheba Centenary Address

Christ Church South Yarra

Sunday 15 October 2017

By Philip J. Powell

In the 1960's when there was a festive service at this Church on say, Christmas Day or Easter Sunday, the choir would gather at the baptismal font at the back of the Church to prepare for an opening processional hymn.

For young choirboys this gave us the chance to look at a sword that was mounted on the south wall and to read the plaque that told us that this was the sword of Sir Harry Chauvel, "*Commander of the Desert Mounted Corps in Palestine and Syria*". You can imagine what images that stirred up in us young lads.

The Vicar has given me the honour of talking about Sir Harry, the sword and the battle of Beersheba - and has given me ten minutes. So, I have a tough task in front of me, but hopefully I can do all three topics justice at a respectable canter rather than a gallop.

On the back of the service booklet is a short biography of Sir Harry sourced mainly from the Australian War Memorial. There are references to other web sites that you might care to look at when you get home. A glance at the biography shows here is a man for whom ten minutes is not enough to cover his life in detail.

What strikes me is that Sir Harry's life stands up to current-day scrutiny. There is hardly any scope for negative revisionism on this man. In fact, on the contrary, my reaction is "Wow!" with 60 years of outstanding military service, there is more to him than just the commander at Beersheba and his famous words of "*Put Grant straight at them.*"

As with any commander in the field, not every day was a success and some actions failed; but his ability to limit losses and regroup his forces was remarkable.

I believe I am amongst friends, so I can say that his military record is the equal of General Sir John Monash. Perhaps over refreshments later, I suspect some might even go further than that; in particular noting that he was appointed a Corps commander and made a Lt-General in 1917 prior to Monash's appointment in 1918.

Of notable interest is that Sir Harry's Desert Mounted Corps was a multinational force, numbering at times around thirty thousand. We know of the Australians and New Zealanders, but also there were British, French, Indians, Egyptians, Arabs and other nationalities under his command. It is a very powerful vision of one of the greatest mounted military forces working its way through a richly historical area and defeating an Empire that had existed since 1453.

After the war, he brought his family to Melbourne to take on his new senior administrative position in the Australian Army. They initially rented a flat just across Toorak Road prior to moving to Murphy Street a couple of years later.

In March 1921, Sir Harry became a Warden of this Church (thus being effectively a trustee of its property). He held that position until his death in 1945.

So, perhaps this evening, a reflection on a specific feature of Sir Harry should be on his strong faith.

Shortly after Sir Harry's death, Crayton Burns in an article published in *The Age* wrote the following sentence about him: "*He began the day in prayer, said grace before his meat and never willingly missed Divine Service.*"

There is no doubt that as his troops moved into what they referred to as the *Holy Land* his Bible was never too far away. Familiarity with Old Testament texts such as the one read in this evening's lesson would have been strong.

In a letter dated 17 November 1917 he wrote:

"[The Padre] is nearly crazy with excitement. For Communion Service yesterday he produced some very black bread, & some very nice but rather syrupy wine which he declared were identical with the bread & wine used at the Last Supper."

In St Paul's Cathedral, a memorial plaque notes his work in looking after the interests of returned men, both in his public roles and in his private life with the words "*whose Christian regard for his men continued undiminished during the years of peace.*"

The sword which has been re-dedicated tonight is a British General Officers Pattern 1831 sword.

It is a ceremonial sword, which was designed for full dress occasions and not for the field.

Some of you might be disappointed that it is not displayed outside of its brass scabbard but, in a Church, this is an important symbol that as a weapon it is sheathed as a sign of peace.

Of course, the Australian Light Horse of the AIF was not initially meant to be cavalry who charged into battle with swords drawn. They were trained as mounted infantry who were primarily expected to do their work off their horses with bayonet and rifle. And that brings us to the Battle of Beersheba, a 100 years ago, in October 1917.

The Turks had repulsed two earlier attempts to take Gaza. This fortress and the defensive line to Beersheba 40 kilometres away in the desert, barred the way to Jerusalem and Damascus.

The plan of General Allenby, the new Army Commander, was a surprise attack on Beersheba and to then roll up the defence line to take Gaza. Chauvel's troops had to ride overnight, flanking the eastern side of the town and then in one day, with the support of British infantry in the west, to take Beersheba as it held that most precious resource - water.

Let's not forget that the battle was a full day with work done by New Zealanders, British and other Australian soldiers. But by 3.30pm and with daylight soon to be lost, Beersheba, although its defences were weakened, had not been taken.

While Sir Harry was known to have withdrawn troops "to fight another day," I suspect he resolutely made up his mind on the necessary course of action. The British Empire had the right man, at the right time, at the right place.

After a brief discussion with his staff he issued the command "*Put Grant straight at them*" and the 4th and 12th Light Horse regiments undertook a charge of horse and men on a scale against trenches and artillery that had never been attempted before and arguably never since.

Success at Beersheba was not the end of the war. But it was an important part in shaping the rest of the campaign that resulted in the fall of Jerusalem in December 1917 and Damascus by October 1918.

It was a victory – won with relatively low losses, and in comparison to the recent events in Belgium on the Western Front was a victory that could be celebrated.

You don't have to be a young choirboy to have your imagination filled with the vision of 800 horses and men at full charge.

Crayton Burns in his 1945 article wrote that every notable World War One General had written a book about their experiences. He went on to say, that he had asked Sir Harry why he had not written a book. His response was "*These things will come into focus in time.*"

Well Sir Harry, I believe we can now say, that the time has come, and you and the Light Horse are well and truly in our focus.