

Trooper Herbert James Teather

Rod Martin

Fundamentally, the Australian Light Horse was composed of mounted infantrymen who carried their rifles across their backs, travelled by horse to their destinations, dismounted and then acted as riflemen/infantry. The organization had been formed during the Boer War of 1899-1902, modelled on Boer methods of defending territory similar to that of the Australian outback. In the early part of World War One, however, light horsemen travelled with other members of the AIF to the Middle East, trained in Egypt and were used as infantry at Gallipoli in 1915. They earned fame – and suffered horrendous casualties – in the suicidal charge at the Nek in August of that year.

By the end of 1915, Gallipoli had been abandoned and the Australian forces were back in Egypt. Several sections of the Light Horse were then sent to the Western Front as mounted corps. The remainder, including a proportion of the original 4 Light Horse Regiment, stayed in Egypt and took up monotonous security duties in the Suez Canal zone. In December 1916, 4 Light Horse was merged into the Imperial Camel Corps and given the new name of 3 Camel Regiment. Their mounts changed shape (and temperament!) and they had new skills to learn!



Light Horse members of the Imperial Camel Corps, Jordan, 1918
(<http://www.lancers.org.au>)

This explains why, when twenty-five year-old carpenter Herbert Teather (pronounced as in 'leather') joined up in October 1916, he was initially assigned to 4 Light Horse but that was then crossed out on his attestation form and replaced with '3rd Camel Regiment'. After training at Broadmeadows, Herbert embarked for the Middle East on A44 HMAT *Vestalia* on 15 December 1916, bound for the Middle East. By the time he arrived at Suez in January 1917, he had become a cameleer – probably unknowingly!



HMAT *Vestalia*, Port Melbourne December 1916
(AWM PB0776)

Herbert's changed status was short-lived, however. Just one month after he arrived, 3 Camel Corps was merged into a new 4 Light Horse Brigade, becoming, once again, 4 Light Horse Regiment. We do not know if Herbert began training with the camels soon after arriving. Even if he did, he was back on the horses by March, training at Moascar. He then moved in late April to Khan Yunis (in modern-day Gaza) to join 4 Light Horse Regiment.



4 Light Horse Regiment camp at Khan Yunis, 1917 (AWM J05999)

Nine days before he arrived, 4 Light Horse Brigade had participated in the Second Battle of Gaza, attempting to break the Turks' heavily fortified Gaza-Beersheba defensive line (about forty-eight kilometres wide). Like the first battle a month earlier, this assault was a very costly failure, causing as many as 25 000 Allied casualties, according to Paul Daley.



The Middle East at the time of World War One

(Bing.com)

Being designated as the brigade reserve at the time, however, 4 Light Horse Regiment took no active part in the fighting. Its turn was yet to come.

The Second Battle of Gaza had severe consequences. The British commander in Palestine, General Murray, was dismissed and replaced by General Sir Edmund Allenby. The force underwent significant expansion, with a new, combined Desert Mounted Corps being created, led by Lieutenant-General Sir 'Harry' Chauvel – the first Australian general to command an army corps.

All of this took time, and it was October 1917 before the force was ready to attempt the Third Battle of Gaza. Meanwhile, 4 Light Horse Regiment was based at places such as Tel el Fara, Kazar and the colourfully named El Buggar, conducting various operations against the Turks.



Bathing 4 Light Horse Regiment horses and camels at Marakeb, Palestine, 1917 (AWM J00425)

Herbert and his fellow troopers finally moved forward on 28 October, their task to circumvent the Gaza-Beersheba Line at its eastern end, where a sizeable gap in the Turkish defences existed. The gap was there for a reason: water supplies in the area were almost non-existent, reducing the chances of the Allied forces making major thrusts. The only water was at Beersheba, so that town had to be taken as quickly as possible or those forces would have the choice of retreating or succumbing to thirst. Travelling at night, 4 Light Horse reached the Beersheba area in the early morning of 31 October, ready for the attack later that day.



4 Light Horse Regiment on the way to Beersheba (AWM A02788)

The attack began in the early morning, involving artillery and infantry. It did not go to plan, however, and by late afternoon the town had still not been taken. The need for water was paramount (4 Light Horse's mounts had not had any for almost thirty hours) and the Turks would have the time to either reinforce the town overnight or retreat, blowing up the vital wells before they left. Chauvel decided to attack with horsemen and hopefully surprise the enemy. Being the nearest mounted forces to Beersheba, 4 and 12 Light Horse Regiments – approximately 800 men - were assigned the task. Wielding their drawn bayonets in the manner of cavalry sabres, they were to charge across almost seven kilometres of what Daley describes as 'open, bare ground, punctuated in parts by the shallow, dry beds of creeks and rivulets.'

And, at 4.30 pm on 31 October, they did it.



4 Light Horse Regiment moving forward at Beersheba
(AWM A02789)

At a cost of thirty-one deaths and thirty-six wounded, the men reached the first Turkish trenches, crossed them and then took on the enemy from the rear. Many Turks were caught by surprise and quickly defeated. They had expected the light horsemen to dismount in front of the town and take up firing positions. Many surrendered immediately. Most importantly, nearly all of the wells were saved. Thirty-eight enemy officers and 700 other ranks were captured. Afterwards, a captured German staff officer commented on the Australian troopers: 'They are not soldiers at all; they are madmen.'



Australian Light Horse monument in Beersheba (Wikipedia)

The capture of Beersheba opened the way first to Gaza, which fell to the Allies on 7 November and caused Turkish resistance in southern Palestine to collapse, and then to Jerusalem, which surrendered on 9 December. During this time, 4 Light Horse Regiment participated in what was effectively a chase, the Turks hurriedly fleeing before the Allied advance. At the end of December, Herbert and his compatriots were based at the tiny Arab township of Shilta, just south of Jerusalem.

The beginning of 1918 saw the men resting and training in the area of Gaza and close to the Egyptian border before they moved through Jerusalem in April and crossed into the Jordan Valley.



4 Light Horse Regiment troopers watering their horses at El Auja, Jordan Valley, May 1918 (AWM B00043)

Between 30 April and 3 May they participated in a raid at Es Salt, a town not far from Amman. Their intention was to capture a launching point for operations against a key railway junction. After fierce fighting, they succeeded in capturing the town, but Turkish counter-attacks forced them to withdraw and return to the Jordan.

The regiment spent the rest of May in the area around Jericho (described by the commanding officer as ‘a squalid village’ and a ‘very unhealthy spot’) and then moved west towards Jerusalem on 9 June. Herbert was not with his compatriots at that time, as he had been evacuated to Cairo with some form of injury or infection on his hand. By the time he rejoined them on 20 July they were back at Jericho, in conflict with the nearby Turks and building up the defences of El Auja.

In August, the regiment was issued with swords and trained in traditional cavalry tactics in preparation for a major offensive. The May raid at Es Salt may have been a failure, but it did have its value. It gave the Turks the impression that General Allenby intended to make his major offensive in the Jordan Valley. In fact, it was planned to take place along the coast of Palestine, aiming at the Syrian capital of Damascus. 4 Light Horse moved west in mid-August and based itself at Lud (biblical Lod or Lydda), just south of Tel Aviv, ready for the start of the attack on 19 September. Once underway, the mounted forces penetrated quickly and deeply into enemy territory, severing communication links. On 1 October, a patrol of 4 Light Horse Regiment was the first to enter Damascus. Four weeks later, while

the regiment was on its way to town of Homs as part of the next stage of the advance, the Turks surrendered. Their war was over.

By then, however, Herbert was dead. On 19 October, while in Damascus, he took sick and was transported to a hospital. He was diagnosed with ‘malignant malaria’, the most serious form of the affliction and one that is classified even today as being among the most extreme human infectious diseases. It can develop very rapidly and lead to severe illness and death. Herbert died on 24 October. He was buried the next day in the Damascus Military Cemetery.

Herbert was twenty-seven years old.



Damascus Commonwealth War Cemetery
(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Sources

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