

Speech to NSTE

Anzac Service 28 April 2017

by Peter Allen

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Rabbi/s , Ex-servicemen and Women, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of delivering the Anzac Service address at NSTE today. It was inspiring for Gloria and I to attend the Dawn Service in Perth in Kings Park and the subsequent Anzac Day commemoration at the WA Jewish War Memorial nearby, meeting both the Governor and Premier.

At the Carmel School the next day, these 4 Centenary Yahrzeit candles completed their journey to all 6 states, in anticipation of next year's National Jewish Remembrance Service in Canberra on 11/11/2018, the Centenary of the Armistice.

I was honoured to speak to the student assembly about the annual link between the festival of Pesach and Anzac Day: both of which demonstrate sacrifice, community and mateship – and meet Rabbi Coleman, now Emeritus, the Rabbi at my Barmitzvah at Central synagogue more than 50 years ago. He was proudly wearing his medals from WWII, in which he was a RAF gunner in Bomber Command, flying missions over Europe, before studying for his shmicha. I also had the rare privilege of inspecting and holding the wonderful Anzac Torah, presented to Chaplain Rabbi Freedman of the Perth Hebrew Congregation by the president of the Alexandria Synagogue in Egypt in 1915.

Before I speak in detail about the forthcoming Centenary of the Light Horse Charge on Beersheba, I want to briefly mention two of this year's 75th anniversary events from WW2:

One story is as harrowing as those of the Shoah and must not be forgotten: the massacre of 21 Australian Nurses by the Japanese. Vivian Bullwinkel (not Jewish) was born in Kapunda, South Australia, and trained as a nurse in Broken Hill, New South Wales. In 1941, aged 25, she enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service. She was posted to the 13th Australian General Hospital and sailed for Malaya. Faced with the Japanese invasion of the Malay Peninsula, the hospital shifted to Singapore Island in January 1942.

With the fall of Singapore imminent, it was decided to evacuate the nurses. Late on 12 February Bullwinkel was with the last group of nurses, along with patients and women and children, to sail from the doomed island on the SS Vyner Brooke. Next night Japanese bombers found the ship in the Banka Strait. It was attacked and sunk. Bullwinkel drifted for hours clinging to a lifeboat before she struggled ashore on Banka Island with other survivors.

After Japanese troops arrived, they gathered the 22 surviving nurses together and ordered them into the sea - where they machine-gunned them.

“The girls fell one after the other.”

Sister Bullwinkel, badly wounded and feigning death, was the only survivor.

After a long while Bullwinkel got back to the now empty beach. There she found a wounded British soldier from another massacre. They hid out for 12 days, and she cared for the man until he died. Eventually, she surrendered again to the Japanese, but made no mention of the massacre. She was interned with other nurses and endured a further three years of hardship and brutality before her release enabled her to tell her harrowing story.

Bullwinkel was active in military and civilian nursing after the war. She was involved in veterans' affairs and with philanthropic committees, married in 1977 and passed away in 2000.

Major General Paul Cullen, who was a founder of the Temple Emanuel in the 1930's, was awarded two Distinguished Service Orders for leading his battalion on the Kokoda Track in mid-1942 and subsequent campaigns in PNG - the first defeats of the Japanese. He was honoured last Friday night at the Emanuel Synagogue, where I also took these 4 candles for their Anzac service.

Turning now to the details of the Anzac Light Horse and the events that surround the battle of Beersheba: the story is so closely bound up with Egypt and Palestine/Israel and so very much a part of our Jewish and Australian history, it's incredible!

Egypt was of great strategic importance to England and France because of the Suez Canal linking the Red Sea with the Mediterranean. During WW1, the Ottoman Turks, then rulers of Palestine and assisted by Germany, sought to capture the canal.

The use of the light horse in that campaign was vital: they combined the mobility of cavalry with the fighting skills of infantry. But they were not true Cavalry, whose role was to charge and attack with swords and lances whilst mounted: the lighthorse normally fought dismounted, with rifles and bayonets.

Back in 1915, the ability to ride a horse was almost as basic as the ability to walk. So, despite the pleasant myth, there was actually an even mixture of townsmen and bushmen in the Australian Light Horse: a total of 8,000 men in 16 Regiments. Each regiment lived and fought as a series of four-man "sections". When they went into action, three men would dismount to fight as infantry while the fourth man led the four horses to cover until they were needed for a further advance or withdrawal. The effectiveness of this fighting method had been shown in the Boer War.

Their horses were called 'Walers', basically stock horses - not purebreds - named because they were originally sold through New South Wales, although they came from all parts of Australia. They were sturdy, hardy beasts, able to travel long distances in hot weather with little water.

In the First World War, 120,000 Walers were sent overseas to the allied armies, of which 40,000 served with the First AIF, mainly in the Middle East.

Everything the Light Horse trooper needed for living and fighting had to be carried by him and his horse. His extra clothing, food and personal possessions were in a canvas haversack carried over the shoulder. Across the other shoulder hung a one-litre water bottle, with his .303 rifle. As well as the 90 rounds of ammunition in his bandolier, he carried another 50 rounds in pouches on his belt, which also supported the bayonet and scabbard.

The horse was carefully fitted with a special military saddle, designed to carry a remarkable array of equipment with the least possible discomfort. When fully loaded, Walers often carried between 130 and 150 kilograms. And, in the years of war to come, they would have to carry these huge loads for long distances, in searing heat, sometimes at the gallop, sometimes without water for 60 and even 70 hours at a stretch.

In the first days of the war, even men who had owned horses since early childhood could hardly imagine the bond that would grow between man and horse as each came to depend on the other for their very lives.

After several successful battles by the allied forces through the Sinai, two defeats at Gaza in early 1917 led to a six month stalemate. The new British commander, General Allenby, decided instead to attack the Ottomans at the eastern end of the 50km defensive line: at Beersheba.

As it transpired, if Beersheba's famous 17 wells could not be taken by the 31st of October 1917, nearly 60,000 men and tens of thousands of horses and camels would be desperately short of water.

By late afternoon that day, the two strongpoints had fallen, but there were still heavily manned trenches protecting the town. Time was running out: the sun was almost setting and many of the horses had already been without water for nearly 48 hours. Brigadier Grant suggested that two of his three Light Horse regiments, the 4th and 12th, make a mounted charge against these remaining defences. Commander of the Australian Desert Mounted Forces, General Harry Chauvel, agreed.

But such a thing had never been heard of - picture for yourself - 800 Lighthorsemen trotted, galloped then charged across three kilometres of open ground against entrenched infantry supported by artillery and machine guns.

The German officers played into the plan: they expected the lighthorsemen to dismount at a distance before attacking on foot - and so held their fire until the Australians were too close for the artillery to be effective. The lighthorsemen rode beneath the trajectory of the Turkish guns and then used their bayonets as swords, some dismounting at the trenches to engage the Turks, others hurdling the trenches on their horses to eventually secure the wells and slake their thirsts by nightfall.

Some 31 Australians had been killed and at least 70 horses died, whilst many more Turkish defenders were casualties or captured. The 12th LH Regiment was led by Major Eric Montague Hyman, a Jew raised in Tamworth NSW. He was initially recommended for a Victoria Cross, but along with 5 other officers in the charge on Beersheba, was awarded a Distinguished Service Order.

Chauvel remarked as he walked over the ground the day after the charge, "*Words fail me, I cannot see how these horsemen were able to achieve what they did. Every rule of war says they should have been annihilated!*"

The fall of Beersheba swung the battle tide against the Turks in Palestine - and changed the history of the Middle East.

Australia, the youngest nation in the world, was therefore a vital key in opening the gateway to the ancient city of Jerusalem. On the same day as the Beersheba charge, the British Government drafted the Balfour Declaration, the foundation for the recognition of the State of Israel.

Now you can appreciate why, in October this year in Israel, there will be major centenary commemorations of the Australian Light Horse Charge at Beersheba.

And finally, these selfless men and women – these 'chava tovs' or good mates - will not be forgotten: we will remember them.

[show book]

As you might well know, after several years of enormous efforts, the key project of the CoAJP has seen the recent publication of this outstanding book, Jewish Anzacs, written by acclaimed author Mark Dapin, covering the history of Jews in the Australian Military from the First Fleet in 1788 through WW2 to the present day and whose legacy of a country of freedom, peace and tolerance, we enjoy.

This outstanding book also includes the names of 6800 Jews who served, the memorial details for the 342 who never returned and 50 marvellous images.

[show book]

I will conclude tonight as I did at Carmel School, and read from the Epilogue of Jewish Anzacs [open book and pretend]

'It is the Friday morning before Anzac Day 2015 at Mount Scopus Memorial College, a large Jewish day school in Victoria. Josh Fink, in his uniform and slouch hat, walks onto the stage to address the school assembly. He looks simultaneously assured in his role and awed by his responsibility. "I was asked to come here and talk as a man who has graduated from a Jewish school and served in the Australian Army," he says, "The values we are instilled, in attending Jewish high schools and primary schools, are part of the reason why I joined the army. The feeling of community, teamwork and mateship is there, but to a different degree."

"I graduated from Leibler Yavneh College and attended the Royal Military College Duntroon in Canberra 2007–2008. Upon graduation from there I was posted to 1 Armoured Regiment in Darwin, which is a tank battalion, serving as a lieutenant in charge of logistics ... Eventually I was deployed to Afghanistan in May 2013. My role there was that of a mentor to the Afghan National Army and police. This was a tri-service organisation in which a Jewish boy from Melbourne was in the heart of a Muslim nation, teaching them how to do their job better in order to defend their homeland and their interests. The contrast is one that should ring home to you now more than ever, now that we're sending our people back to Iraq ... We are providing mentors. We are instilling this teamwork and mateship into other nations which, frankly, don't even know we Australians exist half the time."

For a moment, he seems to be fighting back tears.

"And so tomorrow," he says, "we are commemorating 100 years of Anzac, the Australia/New Zealand Army Corps landing at Gallipoli. We are not glorifying the war, or sacrifice or bloodshed. We are commemorating the values that we as a nation stand for, and the army has maintained. What we do, why we do it, is for you – to stop these horrible atrocities from appearing at home."

"We go abroad to face this," says Josh Fink, to a hall packed with students, "so that you can attend a Jewish school, you can live your life and be free from fear." '

[Close book]

Thank you for listening:

'Lest we forget.'