

# BEERSHEBA DIARY

Sam Lipski

Chips Rafferty never came to Beersheba. And he definitely never visited Be'er-Sheva, 'The Opportunity Capital of Israel'. Be'er-Sheva was the Hebrew Bible's name for Abraham's city and it lives again today. It means 'Well of the Oath'. Water and wells have always determined the city's viability. As they did nearly a century ago when Australian soldiers and their horses, the magnificent Walers, changed the course of world history. Of no other battle which Australians have fought, before or since, can this be said to the same extent.

The iconic, laconic star of *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940) and some 25 other Australian feature films may never have come closer to Beersheba than Cronulla's sand dunes where Charles Chauvel produced and directed the film's battle scenes. As much as anybody, however, I have Chips to thank for being in Mayor Ruvik Danilovich's board room in Be'er-Sheva. *The Lighthorsemen*, a 1987 film, may be a more authentic account of the legendary charge on 31 October 1917. Indeed, *The Lighthorsemen's* depiction of the gallant 800, galloping across six kilometres of open ground to overwhelm the Turkish defenders is among the most exciting and memorable horse-riding and battle sequences ever shot. But it was the Chips Rafferty version which I saw as a teenager which first told me that there was a connection between Australian soldiers and Israel's emergence in 1948. The connection had come three decades earlier. Although the war in Palestine dragged on for another year, the Australian victory at Beersheba in 1917 changed everything. It opened the road to Jerusalem and thus sounded the Ottoman Empire's death knell. Some six weeks later, on 11 December, Britain's General Edmund Allenby claimed the Holy City. But 31 October 2017 won't just mark 100 years since a great military victory. It will also be 100 years since the Balfour Declaration.

On the same afternoon that the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments (4th Light Horse Brigade) raced to the Beersheba wells to water their parched horses, Lloyd George's war cabinet



met in London. It agreed to support 'the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people... it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the... rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine...'

A few days later, on 2 November, Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild advising him of the British government's decision. Historians point to the Balfour Declaration's two-way bet and some blame it for the Arab-Israeli conflict. But more than any political event in 20 centuries since the loss of Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem, the Declaration changed Jewish history and greatly invigorated the embryonic Zionist movement. And for all of the British Mandate's sporadic perfidy which followed the Balfour Declaration, it paved the way for Israel's emergence 31 years later. Let's be clear. The Australian victory didn't lead to the Declaration. That had been in the works for some years. And the Light Horse commanders certainly weren't concerned with Zionist aspirations. But if the Turks had held the line at Beersheba, a real possibility, and if the first world war had ended with the decaying Ottoman empire still ruling Palestine, then the Balfour Declaration would have been meaningless. The Light Horse victory ensured that didn't happen.

So the Beersheba and Balfour stories had stayed with me since *Forty Thousand Horsemen*. Almost half a century later, in 2003, I asked the late Richard Pratt if he'd back an idea I had to build the Park of the Australian Soldier in Be'er-Sheva. I envisaged the park primarily as a tribute to the Light Horse, but also to all the Australians who served, first in Palestine in the first and second world wars, and

then to defend Israel against Saddam Hussein's Scuds in the first and second Gulf wars against Iraq. Richard quickly agreed and asked me to work with his life-long friend and a great Australian, Major-General (ret) Digger James. Richard and Digger had known each other since childhood in Shepparton, and their friendship was key to making the Park of the Australian Soldier happen. On 28 April 2008, Governor-General Major General (ret) Michael Jeffery and Israel's President Shimon Peres jointly dedicated the park's two features: Peter Corlett's striking bronze sculpture of a Light Horseman riding high over the Turkish sandbags, and a dual-purpose playground which caters equally for children with disabilities. Over the past six years the park has become a popular amenity for many thousands of Be'er-Sheva's families, and a destination for Australian visitors. But the Light Horse's centenary in 2017 means it's time for an encore. Which is why I and the Pratt Foundation's Israel Director, Peter Adler, are here talking to the young and energetic Ruvik. After his first five-year term, Beer-Sheva's voters re-elected him last year in a 92 per cent landslide. No wonder. The cranes are flying everywhere and transforming the Negev desert's booming capital. Orange juice and the ubiquitous pastries, without which no Israeli meeting can start, are laid out on the Mayor's table. His team explains the plans for restoring the old Turkish railway bridge, creating a new inter-active Light Horse trail along the paths they rode, and rebuilding the Ottoman wells.

Legendary the Beersheba victory may be for many. But for most Australians it's not as legendary as the Gallipoli defeat. For most Israelis, and many Australian Jews, the Light Horse's contribution to Israel's eventual establishment is virtually unknown. Come the centenary in 2017, Mayor Ruvik hopes to change awareness at both ends. He wants thousands of Australians and Israelis to come to Be'er-Sheva, not just to mark the 100th anniversary, but to honour and celebrate his city's permanent Anzac legacy. I am booking early.

*Sam Lipski is the Pratt Foundation's CEO.*