Hailing the Jewish diggers OF BEERSHEVA

A number of Jewish soldiers played their part in the legendary Light Horse charge against the Turkish army, writes **Peter Allen**.

Major Eric Hyman.

"THEN Abraham reproved Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized ... And he said, You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well. Therefore he called that place Beersheva, because the two of them swore an oath there." (Genesis chapter 21 verses 25 -31)

FURTHER to *The AJN* article "Search for mystery Digger" by Peter Kohn and in particular Rabbi Mariner's final query, "I would love to believe that a Jew was among the 800 who rode in that last cavalry [charge] at Beersheva," as Ben Hirsh confirmed in his letter last week, the answer is "Yes, there was."

It is estimated that about 50 Jews served in the Australian Light Horse, including a few who died in the Gallipoli campaign in 1915 and some who participated in the action at Beersheva.

With the Australian Mounted Division's horses desperate without water for over two days, on October 31, 1917, approximately 800 officers and men of its 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments walked, trotted then galloped some 4km towards the Turkish lines at Beersheva, intent on capturing the town and securing the much-needed wells.

The most famous Jewish Light Horseman, Major Eric Montague Hyman, was raised in Tamworth and led the A Squadron of 12th LH Regiment. Along with at least five other officers, Major Hyman was awarded a Distinguished Service Order for his role in the charge on Beersheva. His original citation, which was for a VC nomination, read:

"This officer is recommended for conspicuous gallantry and dash in action. He led his squadron at full gallop against a Turkish redoubt, which was strongly manned with enemy machine guns and rifles. The enemy opened up with a very heavy fire but the charge was so vigorous and skilled that the enemy was overrun and his fire silenced in a few minutes, thus enabling the regiment to carry on the assault and complete the capture of Beersheba."

"Major Hyman, with his party, engaged the Turks in the trenches with rifle and bayonet; and not until the Australians had killed 60 of them – many of whom were shot by Hyman with his revolver – did the enemy surrender."

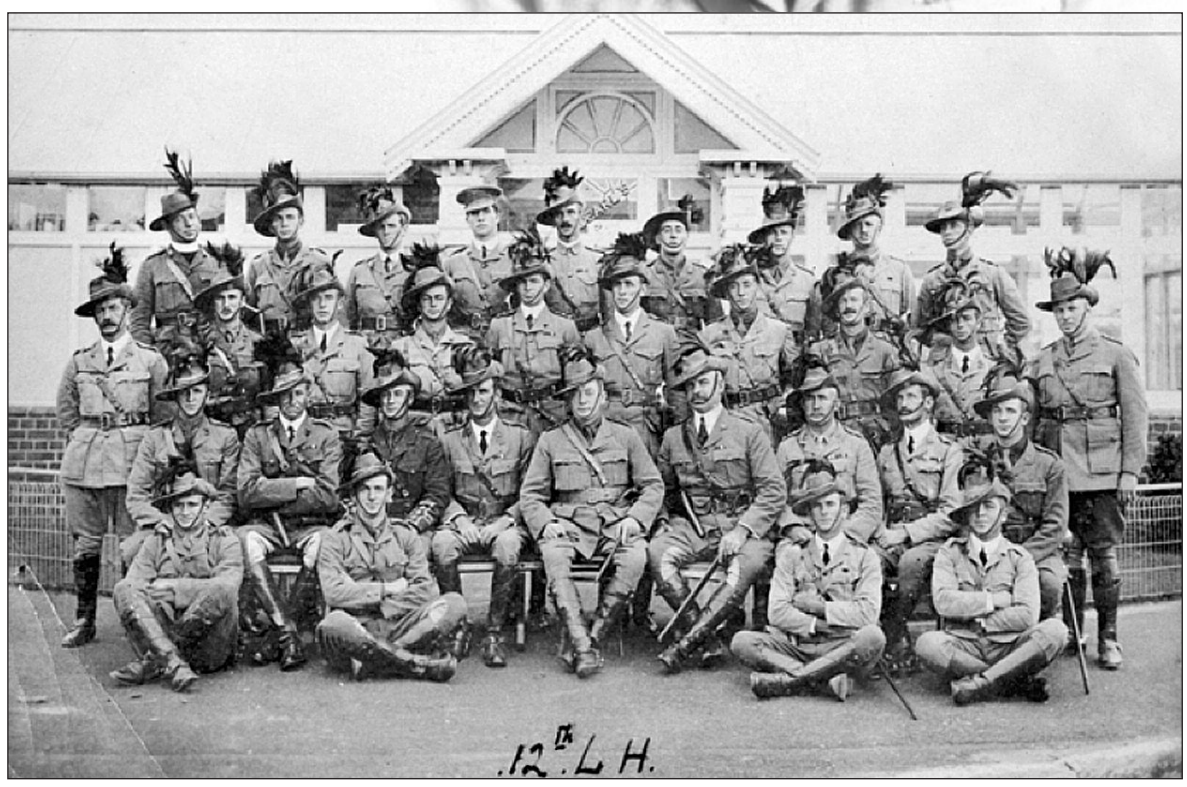
12th Light Horse regimental history

The regimental history goes on to say that "Major Hyman, with his party, engaged the Turks in the trenches with rifle and bayonet; and not until the Australians had killed 60 of them – many of whom were shot by Hyman with his revolver – did the enemy surrender."

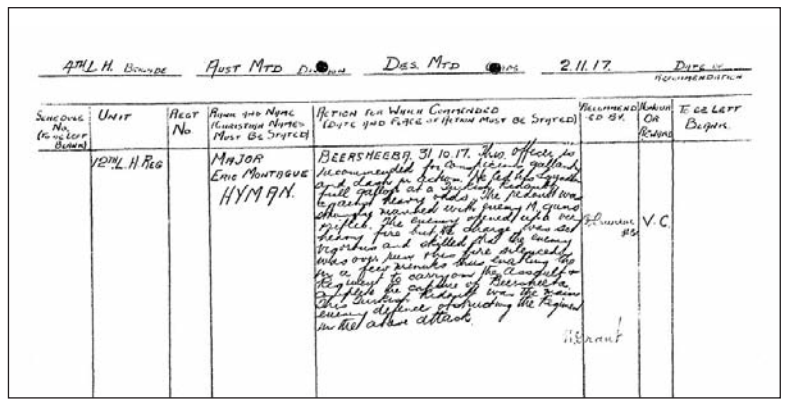
Hyman subsequently sought leave to return to Australia, where he married his fiancée, who had been waiting over three years for him. He then went back to Egypt in 1918 to rejoin his unit, was mentioned in Dispatches and was hospitalised with malaria before his safe return home.

Thirty-one Light Horsemen were killed in the charge and 36 were wounded. At least 70 horses died. The Turkish defenders suffered many casualties and between 700 and 1000 troops were captured.

Jewish Trooper Jack Rosenthal (Bega) of 12LH was probably also in the charge at Beersheva, whilst Transport Sgt. Albert Samuel (Sydney) of 12LH, Cpl Maifred Lazarus (Melbourne) and Driver Edgar Harris (Sydney) of 4LH were likely involved as support troops.



The 12th Light Horse regiment. Major Eric Hyman is sixth from left in the top row.



4th L.H. Brigade — Aust Mtd Division — Des. Mtd Corps — 2.11.17.

Surname No. Rank & Christ Names	Unit	Regt No.	Rank and Name (Christian Names Must be Spelled)	Action for which Commended (Date and Place of Action Must be Stated)	Recommended by	Award or Reward	If Left Blank Reason
	12th L.H. Reg		Major Eric Montague HYMAN	BEERSHEEBA. 31.10.17. This officer is recommended for conspicuous gallantry and dash in action. He led his squadron at full gallop at a Turkish redoubt. The redoubt was strongly manned with enemy M. guns and rifles. The enemy opened up with very heavy fire but the charge was so vigorous and skilled that the enemy was overrun and his fire silenced in a few minutes thus enabling the regiment to carry on the assault and complete the capture of Beersheba. This officer is recommended for the Victoria Cross.	Chauvel #3	V.C	

The document recommending Major Eric Hyman for the VC.

IT is important to appreciate that the Australian Light Horse were not true cavalry – they were mounted infantry. That is what was so amazing about the charge at Beersheva and why the Turks were caught out: they expected the Australians to dismount and then attack on foot, as was the Light Horsemen's role. At Beersheva, the Australians continued to ride, beneath the range of the Turkish artillery, charging towards the guns and overwhelming their defences – an incredible, almost reckless action.

Is it any wonder that the next day, Lt. General Harry Chauvel, the Australian commander of the Desert Mounted Corps, remarked as he walked over the ground where the charge had taken place, "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!"

Saddler Sgt Sylvester Browne of 1LH claimed to be the first Jewish soldier of the Imperial Forces to enter the ancient Land of Israel He was one of four Browne brothers in the AIF – father and uncles of Wesley Browne, who served in the RAAF in WWII and is immediate past President of FAJEX.

Coincidentally, on the very same day as the Beersheva charge, 31 October 1917, the British government drafted the Balfour Declaration, the foundation for the recognition of the State of Israel.

So Australia, one of the youngest nations in the world at the time, was a vital key in opening the gateway to the ancient city of Jerusalem.

In recognition, the Australian Light Horse were the first to ride into Jerusalem, being the honour guard to the British General Allenby at the Tower of David. This was the first foreign army in the history of Israel to take Jerusalem and immediately hand it back, giving freedom to the Jewish people and not taking it for themselves.

The Australian Jewish Historical Society's Russell Stern has also been trying to find record of the subject of the *AJN* 14/03 article, Uzi Cohen's great uncle. Jonah Cohen-Gloeberman probably changed his name on arrival in Australia and/or enlistment as the four Jewish Cohens in the Australian Light Horse (all in the NSW 7LH) do not match his details. Unfortunately, to date the search has been unsuccessful – but not yet exhausted.

As part of the Centenary of Anzac Jewish Program, which will be detailed in future editions of *The AJN*, we are keen for descendants of Jewish servicemen and women and others with information or an interest in Jewish military history, to contact us at www.najex.org.au.

Peter Allen at a Light Horse Beersheva commemoration in Sydney last year.

Peter Allen is a NAJEX board member and national co-ordinator of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry's Centenary of Anzac Jewish Program.