

A new documentary re-creates the amazing tales of the mounted brigades, writes **Pam Brown**

In to take Damascus, by horse



Around the stables: Men formed a strong bond with the horses.

Legend has it that Lawrence of Arabia swept into Damascus on October 1, 1918, to take the strategically important city but the truth is that a dentist from Narrogin beat him to it by several hours.

Lt-Col Arthur Olden had ridden into the city earlier that day with a detachment of men from the 10th Light Horse Regiment. They were part of the Australian Mounted Division which had helped drive the armies of the Turkish Ottoman empire from Egypt, across the Sinai and up to the outskirts of Damascus.

Lost in the narrow, meandering streets, they finally arrived at the town hall where Lt-Col Olden found himself taking the surrender of Damascus.

That story is one of the colourful horse-related tales told in a WA-made documentary, *Australia's Great War Horse*, which will be shown on April 19 on the ABC. What is remarkable is the makers tracked down the original surrender document, which had been hidden away for 97 years.

The show's director and writer Russell Vines said he had kept asking where the surrender documents were but no one knew.

"Then we searched for Olden's descendants and amazingly I found he had a daughter, who was 90-plus and living in the UK, but she was too old," Vines said. "Then we found his grandson, Bradley Olden, in Sydney."

"He said, 'I have a funny feeling I have seen some bits and pieces in my mother's boxes in Geelong. At Christmas I'll go and have a look for you'."

"He found some documents in Persian or Arabic and brought them to WA. We took them to the State Library where they were translated and turned out to be the actual surrender documents. We looked at them and thought,



Famed: Lt Guy Haydon on Midnight.

these are priceless. I think Bradley is trying to work out what he should do. They will probably end up in the Australian War Memorial or somewhere."

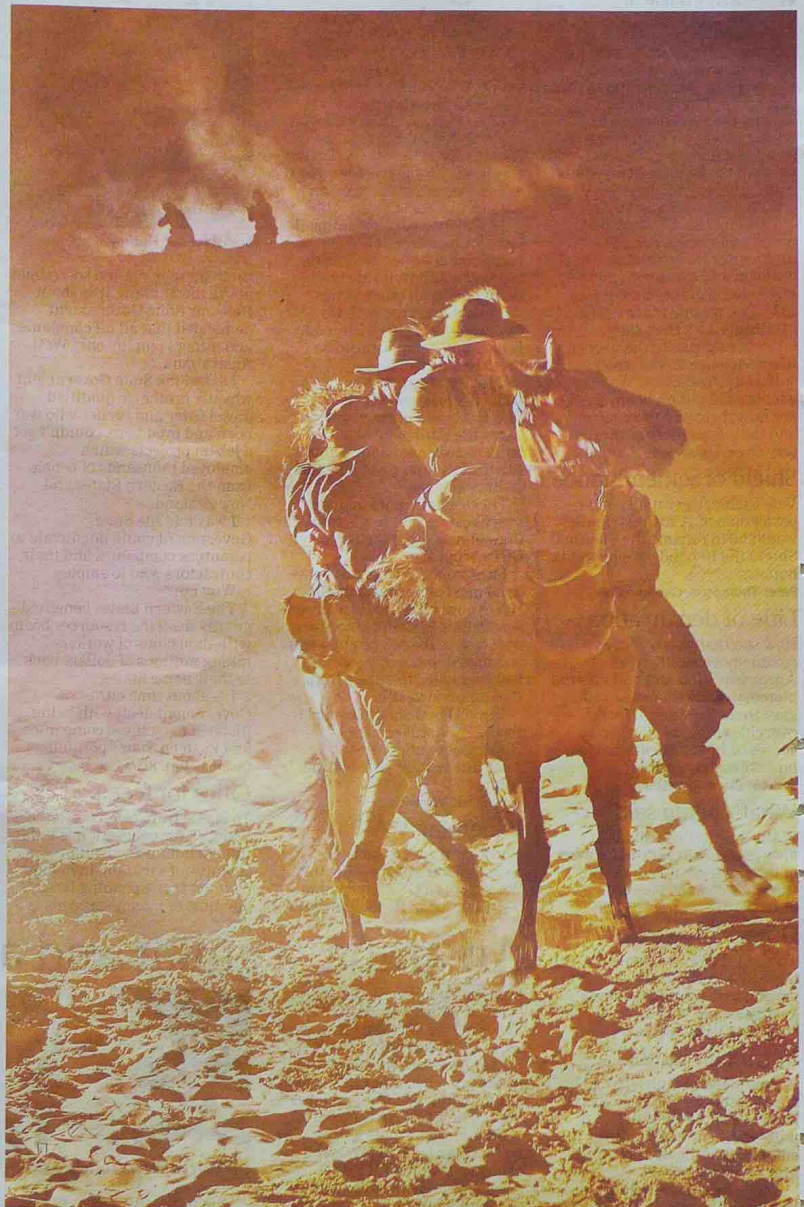
Australia's Great War Horse, made by Mago Films and produced by Marian Bartsch, looks at the role played by some of the more than 130,000 Australian horses set to serve in the war. Sadly, none of the horses were to come home.

Most of them were Walers, tough working horses unique to Australia with a reputation for speed and endurance.

After the Anzac forces were pulled out of Gallipoli in January 1916, some men were sent to fight on the Western Front, while others recovered the horses they had brought from Australia and joined in a desert campaign in the Middle East aimed at protecting the Suez Canal and defeating the Turkish Ottoman empire.

It was during this campaign that men of the 4th Light Horse Brigade made their legendary charge at Beersheba.

Vines has used a combination of historical photographs and live reconstructions to convey the heroic efforts made by those men and their horses. The horses, carrying 120kg packs



Big, bold, brave: A re-creation of the gelding Bill the Bastard carrying to safety soldiers who had lost their horses.

There has been a children's book written about Midnight.

Director Russell Vines

and their riders, had walked all night across the desert without water to get to Beersheba.

Footage was shot in the Lancelin sandhills with about 25-30 volunteer riders and then it was combined with footage shot by the team in Israel.

"You might see horses going across sand dunes in Western Australia, but in the deep background are scenes shot in northern Israel or the Sinai border," Vines said.

"Then we shot some other sequences in Sydney where we used horse wrangler Graham Ware Jr, because he already had some horses that could do specific things such as lie down like they were shot, jump a trench and collapse or carry the four soldiers. He was the horse wrangler Russell Crowe used for *The Water Diviner*."

The trench shot was vital to

tell the story of Lt Guy Haydon from the Upper Hunter Valley, who took his horse Midnight with him when he enlisted in 1915.

He survived Gallipoli and then with Midnight fought across the Middle East until at Beersheba on October 31, 1917, the pair were among the first in the charge to reach the Turkish trenches.

As they leapt over, a soldier below shot a bullet through Midnight and into Lt Haydon. The mare died and he was critically wounded.

"There are a few horses around that are kind of famous and Midnight is one of them," Vines said. "There has been a children's book written about her."

"Just as if you start researching anything around the Light Horse, you will also come across the Bill the Bastard story."

Bill the Bastard was a big gelding who earned his name by being uncontrollable. The only man who could ride him was Major Michael Shanahan of the 2nd Light Horse Regiment.

But during the battle of Romani in August 1916, Major Shanahan found four men who had lost their mounts and were being outflanked by the Turks.

Bill stood still while two of the men climbed on to his back and with another two on the stirrups carried all five for more than a kilometre through soft sand.

There are more personal stories about soldiers and their horses in *Great Australian War Horses*, along with material from the Australian War Memorial and national archives.

"There are also pictures from people's personal collections," Vines said.

"It is amazing, they talk about Vietnam being the first TV war but in a lot of ways World War I was the first images war."

"Cameras were around, men had those little Box Brownie cameras and they were taking photographs."

"Then of course you had (famous Australian photographer) Frank Hurley taking photographs as well."

Australia's Great War Horse is on Sunday April 19 at 7:40pm on the ABC

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