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Weekend Australian, Australia

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Page 1 of 4

Friend in stead, a friend indeed

A new documentary looks at the wartime role played by Australia's stock horses, writes **Victoria Laurie**

At the battle of Beersheba, Australian Light Horseman Guy Haydon and his horse Midnight are among hundreds of mounted Anzac soldiers bearing down on the Ottoman trenches. As man and horse vault over the lip of the trench, their cowering enemy huddled below, one Turkish soldier points his gun upwards in self-defence and fires. The bullet passes through the horse's belly, the saddle and into Haydon. He is wounded but makes it back to camp. Midnight does not.

Australia's Great War Horse is that kind of documentary, full of action, emotion and historical drama. Just when you think there's not another Anzac angle to be covered, or a different story to be told, comes this 57-minute documentary with an uncanny appeal to even the most indifferent World War I observer.

"Beersheba was one of the great cavalry charges of all time," historian Brad Manera says about the 4th Australian Light Horse's famous role in the Sinai Desert. "It was insanely heroic."

So, too, it could be argued, was the ambition of Mago Films to re-create the Light Horse story, in particular the fate of those sturdy Australian stock horses, called Walers, that made up most Australian wartime mounts.

Filming scenes of charging steeds in summer sun in the sand dunes of Lancelin, a daunting ridge 100km north of Perth, was fraught with peril; like the original Anzacs, the production team had to grapple with heat, thirst and leg-breaking pitfalls in the sand.

Nearly 30 uniformed riders and horses charged, regrouped and charged again, until enough footage was captured to form a montage of hundreds of horses. The montage was then superimposed on footage shot in the Sinai Desert by Mago's deft director of photography Torstein Dyrting (four-time winner of the Australian Cinematographers Society Golden Tripod Award).

Yet even more impressive are the actual scenes from 1915, poignant stills and film footage that make the program worth watching

for them alone, skilfully interwoven into the narrative.

We see men on troopships lovingly grooming their horses, reassuring them and mourning their loss — nearly 15 out of every 100 horses died during the voyage to the Middle East, their

carcasses filmed being slung ignobly into the sea.

Australia's Light Horse saga is one that everyone has encountered in passing but few get to contemplate in a coherent narrative that contextualises the contribution of 130,000 Australian horses that served in the Great War of 1914-18, nearly 30,000 of them in the Middle East. Accompanying them was a small army of horse breakers, veterinarians, farriers, saddlers and feed suppliers, who were essential to keeping thousands of horses in the field and battle-ready.

With joint ABC and ScreenWest input, Mago Films has done the story proud. At a preview showing at Canberra's Australian War Memorial, moist-eyed MPs sat next to war veterans who praised the film; Australia's ambassadors in Washington and London were so impressed they scheduled VIP screenings.

Re-enactments are interwoven with pithy commentary from historians such as Manera, author Roland Perry, military expert Michael Tyquin and Turkish academic Mesut Uyar. But Light Horsemen history reaches down to connect with living Australia through the words of their descendants.

There's Bradley Olden, whose grandfather Major Arthur Olden took the surrender of Damascus on horseback, hours before TE Lawrence officially claimed the prize in history's pages. Horseman Peter Haydon, former polo horse manager for the Prince of Wales, talks about his great-uncle Guy Haydon and his grief at losing his heroic mount Midnight.

"History is emotional," observes the docu-

mentary's director and co-writer Russell Vines, "and this program certainly brings a tear to the eye." Vines (who directed *Shaun Micallef's Stairway to Heaven* and *SAS: The Search for Warriors*) admits the war era footage was "so strong that it was a challenge for us — it almost outshone our dramatised scenes".

Those dramatisations demonstrate Vines's approach, to meld fact, intelligent speculation and colourful dollops of folklore.

One vivid episode depicts the extraordinary story of 2nd Light Horse soldier Major Michael Shanahan and his giant horse, Bill the Bastard.



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Page 2 of 4

Standing more than 17 hands tall, Bill bucked every person off except his master. Yet during the Battle of Romani, horse and master saved five other soldiers by sweeping them all up on to Bill's broad back. Huddled piggyback, or hanging for their lives on the stirrups, the men and their muscular rescuer are pictured riding back to safety.

Where Australia's main Anzac obsession — the Gallipoli campaign — and the Australian Light Horse converge is when the men are ordered to dismount, leave their horses behind in Egypt and head off to Gallipoli's trenches.

"It breaks their heart but they decide to go to war dismounted and they fight in some of the most horrendous and bloody actions of the entire campaign," says Manera, who points out the riders were not trained as infantrymen.

"And we remember the worst as being the charge of the Nek, August 7, 1915, where the 3rd Light Brigade was essentially wiped out."

Only one in every 10 men came out alive and unscathed.

Defeat saw the troops withdrawn and returned to Egypt, where there were heartbreaking scenes of men reunited with their horses and greeting others whose masters were lying in unmarked graves.

The men would move on to join the gruelling campaign that drove the Turks from the Sinai and Palestine, including 20,000 Turks advancing on the strategically important Suez Canal. Under the command of Harry Chauvel, they formed the Anzac mounted division of about 1700 horsemen.

"This turned out to be an important moment," says Perry, author of *Bill the Bastard: The Story of Australia's Greatest Warhorse*. "All those men wanted revenge in a broad sense. They were told: 'Right, it's going to be a different playing field here, the Turks are going to come at us, but we'll have our horses.'"

The idea for *Australia's Great War Horse* came when producer Marian Bartsch visited a schoolfriend at Juna Downs Station, a remote cattle station in Western Australia's Pilbara region. Captivated by the sight of wild outback horses, she was told that previous generations had been rounded up and sent to the Great War. Juna's station manager John Sanders speculated about the camaraderie that must have existed between men who rode their horses into the enlistment depot, "mates who'd grown up together, been to school together, worked together and enlisted together".

Bartsch was hooked.

The surviving Great War horses suffered the worst fates. Their masters hoped they would one day ride back down the main street of their regional towns, survivors both, but the cost of

repatriating thousands of horses put paid to that dream.

Many horses were handed on as mounts for foreign troops, some were sold off, and as many were led away in droves to suffer a bullet in the head. Trooper Bostock from the 10th Light Horse is recorded as saying: "Don't tell me the horses didn't know what was going to happen to them."

Says Perry of Australia's Light Horsemen: "If they came out with glory, it was because of the horses." But as the Great War drew to a close, that glory was overshadowed, as machines overtook animal power. "We went to war on horseback and ended it with tanks and planes and poison gas."

Uyar encapsulates the appeal of the Light Horse story.

"Australia had the potential to show their capacity of their bushmen, their love of their horses, their sturdiness," he says. "It was a perfect story."

***Australia's Great War Horse*, tomorrow at 7.40pm, ABC.**

OTHER ANZAC OFFERINGS

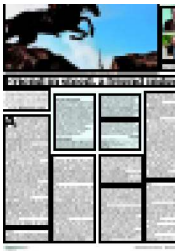
Why Anzac with Sam Neill

Sam Neill is an appropriate interlocutor for this topic, being born a New Zealander — one-half of the Anzac acronym — and also to a long line of soldiers. Tracing his family's history is a pastime many will relate to. Additionally, he says: "I loathe militarism and nationalism but honour those who serve," sentiments with which many will agree. In this documentary, he traces his ancestors who fought in World War I via letters, photographs and anecdotes: his grandfather, his great-uncle and his grandfather's first cousin, Guy Bridgeman, who landed at Anzac Cove — twice. Surprisingly engaging viewing.

Deadline Gallipoli

Whoever claimed the pen is mightier than the sword ought to see the look in the eyes of Joel Jackson as Charles Bean, storming the beach at Gallipoli with only the former in his hands.

This excellent production, by Australian director Michael Rymer (*Hannibal*, *Battlestar Galactica*) and written by Cate Shortland, Jacquelin Perske, Shaun Grant and Stuart Beattie, tells the familiar story through the less familiar eyes of the war correspondents. Sam Worthington stars as photographer Phillip Schuler, Hugh Dancy as Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and Ewen Leslie as Keith Murdoch. But it is recent National Institute of Dramatic Art graduate Jackson who is receiving



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Page 3 of 4

considerable attention for his performance as Bean. The cast also boasts Charles Dance, Rachel Griffiths, Bryan Brown, Anna Torv and Jessica de Gouw. This journalistic perspective may have an added appeal to journalists, but it is an effective way into a familiar story.

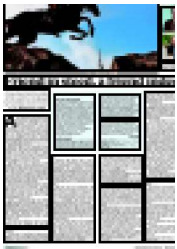
Justin Burke

Deadline Gallipoli begins tomorrow, 8.30pm, Showcase.

Why Anzac with Sam Neill airs on Tuesday, 8.30pm, ABC



Australia's Great War Horse, left; Joel Jackson in **Deadline Gallipoli**, top; **Why Anzac with Sam Neill**, above



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