After Gallipoli most of Australia’s mounted troops took part in the Sinai–Palestine Campaign, where between 1916 and 1918 more than 1250 men lost their lives. Though never approaching the savagery of the Western Front, the war in the Middle East had its own trials. Men fought through extremely inhospitable conditions, suffered from a range of illnesses, lived on a monotonous diet with water a constant problem and were often far from towns or villages in which to spend periods of rest or leave. This poster shows Australians riding through Jerusalem, which fell to the Allies in December 1917 after a year of hard fighting that included the battles of Gaza and Beersheba. The war in the Middle East continued until the end of October 1918.

Background

The Sinai–Palestine campaign began in 1916 after the Allied withdrawal from Gallipoli. While the majority of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) sailed for the Western Front, most of the mounted arms remained in Egypt to continue the war against the Ottoman Empire alongside soldiers from Britain and her dominions.

In August 1916 Ottoman forces advancing on the Suez Canal, Britain’s main maritime route to India and Asia, were stopped at Romani in the northern Sinai. The Battle of Romani was a pivotal engagement, signalling the beginning of the British advance across the desert towards Egypt’s eastern frontier. Victories at Magdhaba in December 1916 and Rafa in January 1917 ended the Sinai fighting, opened the way into Palestine and brought the war onto Ottoman territory.

British attempts to take Gaza on southern Palestine’s Mediterranean coast in March and April 1917 ended in failure. Rather than launch a third assault on the town, British forces sought a way around the flank, attacking Beersheba, 25 kilometres to the south-west, on 31 October. The battle was famously decided at sunset by a mounted charge made by the 4th and 12th Australian Light Horse regiments. With the way now open, British forces broke through the Ottoman line and captured Gaza in early November. Jerusalem fell on 9 December.

Although Ottoman troops were able to inflict local defeats on British forces, they spent much of the campaign on the defensive. Under constant pressure in 1918 they continued to retreat northwards through Palestine.

In September the British launched the offensive that ended the war in the Middle East, driving deep into enemy territory, splitting the Ottoman armies and pursuing the demoralised foe towards Megiddo, Haifa, Jenin and Nazareth. Over the weeks that followed, British forces continued their advance, attacking mercilessly from the ground and the air, destroying large concentrations of retreating Ottoman troops and continuing the drive towards Damascus, which was taken on 1 October. The Sinai–Palestine campaign ended when the Ottomans signed an armistice at Aleppo on 31 October 1918.

www.awm.gov.au/
Jean Bou, Australia’s Palestine Campaign, Army History Unit, 2010.
Teaching Activities

Use the posters, background information and websites listed below to answer the following questions:

1. a. Describe the people, landscape and buildings in the poster. Would these buildings be out of place in Jerusalem today?
   
   b. What does the poster text and background information add to your understanding of the image?

2. What does the word ‘Sinai’ refer to?

3. The photograph used in the poster was taken during the Sinai–Palestine Campaign in 1917. Australian troops had been supporting British Forces in pushing Turkish troops back from Egypt into Palestine, initially due to British concern about the threat to the Suez Canal. What is the Suez Canal and why was it so important to Britain?

4. Why did Australian troops use camels and horses to cross the terrain of the Sinai and Palestine?

5. a. What breed of horse was used by the Australian Light Horse regiments? Why was it a favourable breed for desert conditions?
   
   b. Why did Light Horsemen wear emu feathers on their slouch hats?
   
   c. What conditions did Light Horsemen and their horses face in the Sinai–Palestine campaign?

6. a. What was the main difficulty for the infantry and mounted troops in the execution of the attack on Beersheba?
   
   b. What were the two factors (one fact, one legend) that gave the false impression to the Turks that Gaza would be the focus of the attack, rather than Beersheba?

7. a. What was different about the way Light Horsemen fought during the charge at Beersheba on 31 October 1917?
   
   b. What problems did the Turkish gunners face as the Light Horsemen attacked at Beersheba?

8. a. Photographer Frank Hurley worked on the Western Front and in Palestine and took both images featured on this year’s Anzac Day posters. What did Hurley think was one of the differences for servicemen in the two places?
   
   b. By the time Hurley arrived in Palestine in late 1917 the charge at Beersheba and the Battle of Gaza had already taken place. The charge at Beersheba was re-enacted for Hurley, who took many staged photographs. What problems could taking staged photographs present?

9. Trooper Albert ‘Tibby’ Cotter was an international cricket player prior to his enlistment in 1915, and was shot at close range by a Turkish soldier following the charge at Beersheba.
   
   a. Despite having no great riding ability, he was able to join the Australian Light Horse – why do you think he was accepted?
   
   b. Tibby’s older brother John was killed three weeks earlier in Belgium, near Ypres. Sadly it was not uncommon for families to lose more than one son during the First World War. How do you think their deaths would have affected the Cotter family?
   
   c. Find out where the Cotter brothers’ names are listed on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial.

Websites


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    https://www.awm.gov.au/ then search