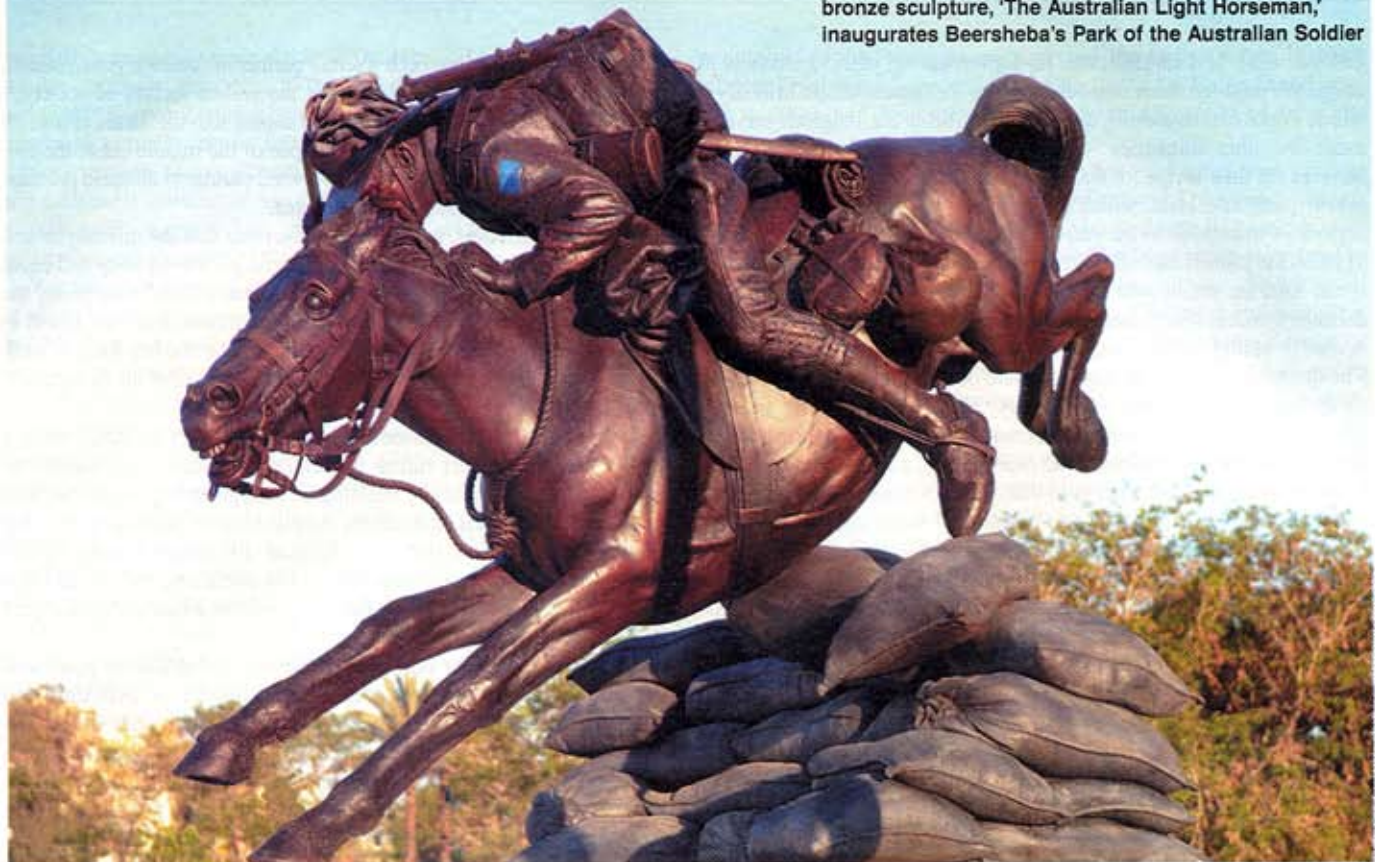


BREECHING THE BATTLEMENTS: Peter Corlett's bronze sculpture, 'The Australian Light Horseman,' inaugurates Beersheba's Park of the Australian Soldier



COURTESY PRATT FOUNDATION / EVA FROBEN

Charge of the 800

A new park and sculpture memorialize the legendary 1917 Battle of Beersheba and highlight Australia's role in the events that brought about the State of Israel

Joseph R. Hoffman

TO HEAR THE AUSSIES TELL it, their Southern Cross should appear next to the Magen David on the Israeli flag. No one actually made that suggestion in Beersheba on April 28 but the pride that many Australians feel over their contribution to the birth of Israel was evident at a ceremony marking the Battle of Beersheba.

It was here in this desert city that 800 Australian Light Horsemen played a vital role in defeating the Turkish forces on October 31, 1917 when some 4,000 Turkish defenders were routed in a battle that was a crucial element in the British victory in the wider battle of Gaza. This victory by General Edmund Allenby's forces paved the way for ending 400 years of Turkish rule in Palestine, setting

in motion a juggernaut of events, beginning with the capture of Jerusalem 40 days later, the British Mandate and culminating in Israel's independence in May 1948.

The Beersheba event was timed to mark the country's 60th anniversary. It saw the inauguration of a Park of the Australian Soldier, which includes a larger-than-life bronze sculpture of a mounted Australian Light Horse soldier by noted Australian sculptor Peter Corlett (*see box on page 17*).

The statue and adjoining playground for children with disabilities was funded at a cost of \$3 million by the Australian-based Pratt Foundation, which supports charitable enterprises in Australia and Israel. Melbourne businessman Richard Pratt, founder and head of the Pratt Foundation, tells *The Report* that "the idea had been germinating for some time ... a tangible reminder of the bond between

Israel and Australia needed to be established."

Reportedly Australia's third richest man, Pratt was born in Danzig in 1934. Active in Australia's Jewish community, he is a donor to many Israeli causes and was one of the founders of *The Jerusalem Report*, 18 years ago.

In previous years, the battle was commemorated at the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery in Beersheba and, last October 31, through a reenactment performed by Australian soldiers.

The charge of the Australian Light Horse is regarded as the last great cavalry charge in military history. Its commemoration in Beersheba "rights the historical record," giving Australia its due importance in the birth of Israel, according to Pratt Foundation Chief Executive Sam Lipski, who claims the British "stole the thunder" from the Australians in the

days leading up to Allenby's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, on December 9.

On the very day of the charge – October 31, 1917 – another milestone in Zionist history took place, the signing of the Balfour Declaration in London. Dated two days later, November 2, 1917, the declaration stated that the British government "views with favor" the establishment in Palestine of "a national home for the Jewish people." Without the victory in Beersheba, Lipski maintains, "that document would have been merely a paper tiger." It was the Australian military victory, he asserts, that gave the British Balfour Declaration its teeth.

SUCH IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE Beersheba victory in Australian eyes that it will become, under the auspices of the Australian government and military, part of an annual three-day commemoration of Australia's role in World War I, celebrated from April 25-28, according to Lipski. ANZAC Day, April 25, records the day in 1915 when the ANZAC (Australia New Zealand Army Corps) fought a valiant but ill-fated battle to take Gallipoli from the Turks in WWI. April 26 commemorates a 1918 ANZAC victory over the Germans in the French village of Villers-Bretonneux, which ended the German offensive in France. General John Monash, a Melbourne Jew who became the first president of the Zionist Federation of Australia in 1927, was the senior commander of the Australian forces at Villers-Bretonneux.

The mission of the Australian Light Horse was to take the town of Beersheba from the

Turkish defenders. Under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel, the Australians were certain that a victory in Beersheba would lead to a domino effect that would bring about the capitulation of Gaza, Jerusalem and Damascus.

The attack was a do-or-die mission. Because the horses had been deprived of water for several days, the Australians had to

'The Aussies were charging at the end with such speed that many of their horses died from heart attacks rather than dehydration'

– Sam Lipski

attack on that very day or retreat about 30 kilometers to rehydrate their steeds. General Chauvel knew that within the fortifications of Beersheba were 17 wells around which the Turks had planted explosives. Therefore it was necessary to break through quickly before the Turks could set off the explosives.

Contrary to the legend, the Australian Light Horse were not cavalry but mounted infantry. The latter "would advance on horseback in groups of four with three soldiers dismounting and continuing on foot with the fourth soldier retreating with the horses. Cavalry, by contrast, attacks on horseback,"

explained Australian army reserves Capt. Arthur DeMain, who attended the ceremony, bedecked in a historic uniform, including a gun belt and emu-feathered slouch hat (one brim up, one down to avoid colliding with the rifle resting on the left shoulder when standing at attention).

The Turks, ill-advised by their German allies, believed that the Light Horse would dismount at a certain point and proceed on foot. They trained their artillery and fixed their rifle sights. But the Australian soldiers did not dismount. Under the battle cry of "Put Grant straight at it" (Brigadier General William Grant led the charge), the infantry attacked on horseback.

The Turkish fusillade fell harmlessly behind the attacking horsemen. By the time the defenders readjusted their sights, the Australian Light Horse were upon them. The walls were breached, the wells had not been exploded and the Australians won the day with a loss of only 31 soldiers. "The Aussies were charging at the end with such speed that many of their horses died from heart attacks rather than dehydration," says Lipski. It is said that of the 300,000 horses that had been dispatched from Australia to Sinai during the entirety of WWI, only one returned.

The Turkish missiles' inability to hit their targets was due to the horses' crazed gallop toward the water, which they could smell from miles off, suggests Michael Schultz, an amateur military historian from Sydney who was present at the ceremony. "The horses

LULL IN THE ACTION: Australian Light Horsemen relax during the Sinai Campaign of 1916-17



BATTLEFIELD BRILLIANCE: William Beckwith McInnes's 'Portrait of Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel,' who commanded the Battle of Beersheba, oil on canvas, 1938, 129 x 105 cm

were moving so fast that the Australian soldiers lost control of them and wrapped their arms around the horses' necks, clinging for dear life, thereby lowering their height in the saddle and causing the Turkish artillery to miss," says Schultz.

Their heroics have been recorded in "Forty Thousand Horses," a 1940 film by Charles Chauvel, cousin to Sir Harry Chauvel, and a 1987 film, "The Light Horsemen," directed by Simon Wincer.

Beersheba was not the only battle affecting Palestine in which the Australian armed forces were involved. The Australian 9th Division played a pivotal role in the Allied victory at El-Alamain. "During WWII," DeMain notes, "the Australian soldiers battled [German General Erwin] Rommel to a standstill at El-Alamain in North Africa, preventing the feared "Desert Fox" from advancing northward to Jerusalem and Damascus."

More recently, Lipski points out, a satel-

lite missile tracking system in Pine Gap, Western Australia, was able to track Scud missiles that Iraq launched at Israel during the first Gulf War in 1991. "Israel had six or seven minutes lead time that missiles had been launched and were therefore able to take defensive action, including alerting and calming the Israeli public," notes Lipski. In the current Iraq War Lipski adds, Australian soldiers were sent into Western Iraq to destroy Scud missile launchers.

The ceremony in Beersheba was held under a huge canopy at the Park of the Australian Soldier with the veiled Corlett sculpture waiting patiently for its debut. After the blue canvas was pulled away by a color guard of Australian soldiers and the Israeli police to reveal the statue, Israeli President Shimon Peres, Australian Governor-General Michael Jeffrey, Beersheba Mayor Ya'akov Terner and representatives of the Israeli and Australian armed forces placed wreaths at its base.

But the tribute that stole the show and hushed the exuberant audience for a moment before they burst into thunderous applause was the placement of a wreath by a representative of the Turkish Embassy. The vanquished had come to honor the victors.

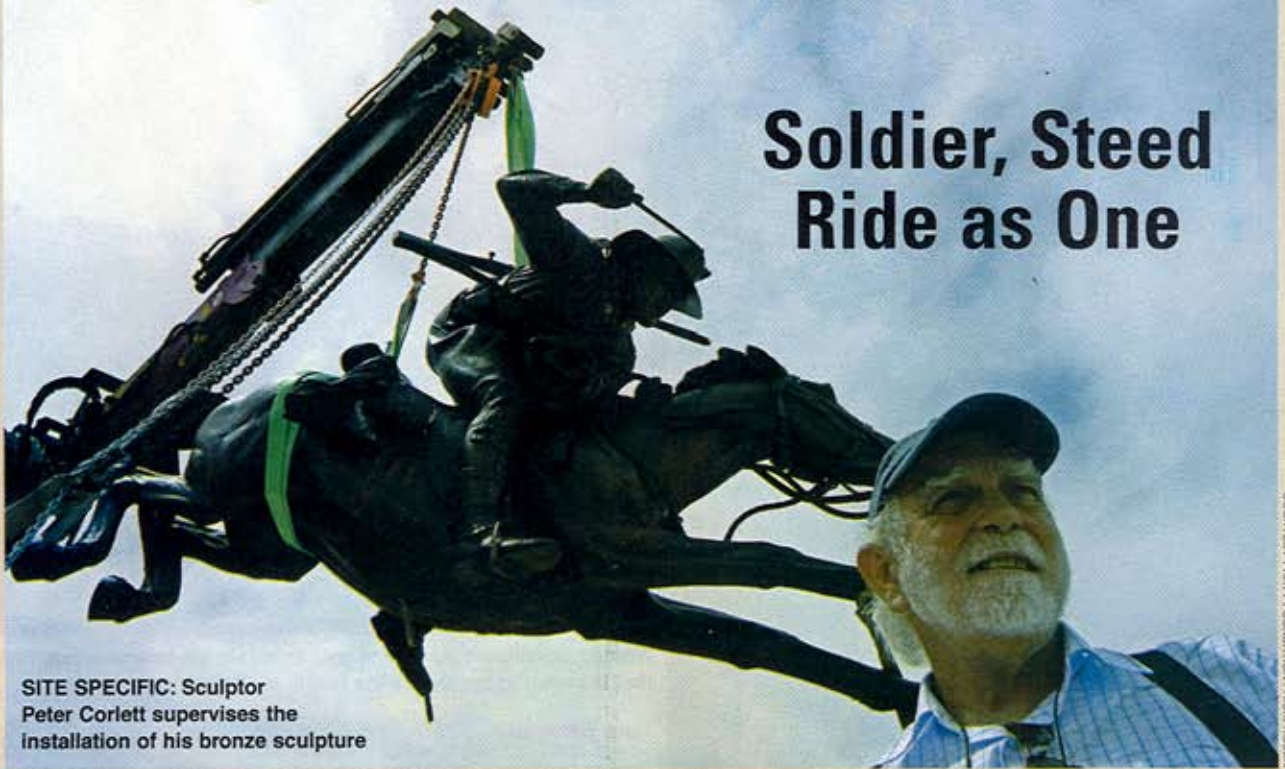
Present at the ceremony was Richard Chauvel, the 61-year-old grandson of Commander Sir Harry Chauvel. A professor of history at the University of Victoria, Chauvel said that the high-risk strategy of his grandfather cemented the legend of the Australian Light Horse as a courageous fighting company, forever changing the British perception of Australian soldiers as "bushmen in uniform." He noted that his grandfather's deeds are less studied today in the public school curricula than in the past, a lacuna he attributes to the anti-militarism pervasive in Australia following the Vietnam War. Chauvel stresses his hope that the tribute in Beersheba will "rekindle the national memory." ●



FROM BEERSHEBA TO JERUSALEM: A Regiment of the Australian Light Horse marches to Jerusalem in 1917

COURTESY OF THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

Soldier, Steed Ride as One



SITE SPECIFIC: Sculptor Peter Corlett supervises the installation of his bronze sculpture

APPROACHING THE "AUSTRALIAN LIGHT Horseman" bronze sculpture from the front, one sees the moment when the horse and rider jump over the sandbags, breaking the Turkish defenses. The soldier is bent over the horse's mane, holding a saber in his left hand, the reins in the right, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. The horse's teeth are bared, its nostrils flared, and its eyes gaping, giving it a maniacal look as it approaches the water it has been deprived of for several days.

The bronze equestrian sculpture by Peter Corlett is the centerpiece of the Park of the Australian Soldier, inaugurated in Beersheba on April 28, to commemorate the Australian role in the Battle of Beersheba on October 31 1917 [see main story on page 14].

The rider wears a similar wild expression as he presses his mount on, lifting himself slightly out of the saddle, his legs taut within the stirrups. When the work is seen from the front, the spectator can imagine being right in the line of fire, since the rifle slung over the soldier's left shoulder points directly at her/him. The spectator has the same point of view as the hapless Turkish defender.

From the side, the statue is a marvel of realism. With great attention to detail, Corlett renders reins, saddles, canteen, sleeping bag, shoelaces, belt buckles, ropes, weapons, feathers and veins of the horse's underbelly, each endowed with its own textural integrity.

"I gave my rider a demented look, one who believes in his own invincibility," explains Corlett, 64, one of

Australia's foremost sculptors. "The Australian Light Horsemen were formed when they went to South Africa as volunteers to fight in the Boer War. They came from a tradition of individuality and an unorthodox way of fighting. They were completely gung ho, like the American cowboys. The British called them 'rabble,' but they were great warriors in their day," says Corlett.

For this work, which took 16 months to complete, Corlett tells *The Report* "he needed to feel the energy of the horse, his musculature and proportions." He researched hundreds of photographs and frequented horse fairs, especially the "Man from Snowy River Festival," where he studied horsemen doing tricks like jumping and racing without holding the reins. "I knew I had to get the details just right or I would be criticized. I remedied that by asking the experts. The trouble starts when the experts don't agree," says the cheerful Corlett, with his short, neatly trimmed white beard framing a suntanned face with flashing, smiling eyes. "For example, one person criticized the piece because the horses' hooves had no letters and numbers on them, which determine whether a horse was a pack or combat animal."

He created the base as a triangle, symbolizing the three religions of the Middle East. "They are all part of the same base and must live in harmony and reconciliation. Yet the sharp points look outward, away from one another, suggesting conflict."

J.R.H.