

Introduction

The Great War conflicts in France and Gallipoli gave Australia Anzac Day and its fighting legend. The Sinai Palestine Campaign confirmed that fighting legend and in addition, gave the world the Middle East chaos of today. The link between these campaigns was the Suez Canal.

Opened in 1869, the Suez Canal gave international shipping direct access from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea and cut weeks off the previous journey around the African continent before this Great War. Whoever controlled the canal in wartime would have a tremendous advantage and it should have been Britain.

The British had occupied Egypt and controlled the Suez Canal since 1882. During the war, the canal was strategically priceless to Britain; essential for the supply of men, materiel and millions of Australian gold sovereigns to Europe and the Middle East. German shipping, denied the canal, was deflected down the west coast then back up the east coast of Africa before accessing the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and their East African and Pacific colonies.

Control of the Suez Canal dominated British, German and Ottoman strategy throughout the war.

When England went to war so did Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, the West Indies and South Africa as British dominion countries. The Anzac dominions gave the British Empire its first victory of the Great War two years after it started, at the Battle of Romani in August 1916. Twenty-five miles from the Suez Canal, the Anzac's Sinai Palestine Campaign began. Anzacs then rode, flew or drove on for another two and a half years to forge an eternal national heritage.

The Anzacs' Sinai Palestine Campaign has not previously been explained in any detail, despite its greater influence on mankind than anything from this war or WWII.

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In those days, dominions were simply referred to as 'British'. Little recognition was given to national identity, even in their home countries. Domestic governments and media lived in a 'King and Empire' dreamland of subservience.

Throughout the campaign, some politicians and diplomats in England understood the need to hold the Suez Canal and provide the military resources to do so. Others, however, gave priority to the Western Front of Belgium and France while to them, Sinai Palestine became a sideshow. Political confusion often drowned military considerations and trained English soldiers were taken from the Middle East back to France, to be replaced by untrained citizens who had worn their uniforms for minutes, rather than months. This wretched replacing of experienced soldiers with shopkeepers and farmers plagued commanders throughout the campaign, extending its duration.

Only the Anzacs, led by Australia's Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel and New Zealand's Major General Edward Chaytor, provided continuity from beginning to end. The Anzacs gave stability to the British led Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF). They provided the warrior advantage to British commanders and likely saved the British Empire.

Coincidentally, an influential group of Arabs rose in revolt against the Turks at around the same time Chauvel's Anzacs won victory at Romani. From then on, the British and Arabs maintained a wobbly alliance. The campaign was then fought on two fronts with the Jordan River giving a fuzzy demarcation line that soldiers and Arabs crossed as needed. To the west of the river was the EEF; to the east was generally Arab territory. The coordinated aim became the destruction and expulsion from Palestine of the Turks. The British eventually provided the Arabs with weapons, instructors and liaison officers including Lawrence of Arabia, money, aircraft, ammunition, food and ships to motivate the Arabs in their role. The Anzacs operated on both sides of the river, supporting the British and the Arabs.

Lawrence of Arabia is one of the most recognised names from the Great War and books about him fill libraries

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around the world. Yet he was in a campaign area that is little acknowledged. Lawrence's exploits would have been doomed had he not received Anzac support for his Arab forces but this has never been explained or acknowledged until now.

During my participation on four Bristol University led conflict archaeology projects along the Hejaz Railway in southern Jordan, called the Great Arab Revolt Project (GARP), I discovered the significance of Anzac involvement there. I also discovered an absence of quality research and writings on the Sinai Palestine Campaign in general and Anzac involvement in particular. Sure, there were unit histories, official histories and books written by soldiers who were there. Written immediately after the war, these accounts were all subject to the restrictions of the writers who only saw their patch of turf and screened by the Official Secrets Act or belief in all things holy towards the British Empire. There was little analysis of the rights and wrongs of events or persons involved until Colonel E.G. Keogh's treatise *From Suez to Aleppo*, written for military officers or students of military history in 1954, nearly 40 years later.

Desert Anzacs is not a rambling description of one battle after another intended for academics and historians. It's the story of people and their roles, thoughts, emotions and recollections of events and mates, based on their letters, diaries, postcards, books and photos. It's a story for the people of Australia and New Zealand, England and its dominions, America and the world. These are soldier stories that have been hidden for 100 years, now revealed so they can be acknowledged as part of the Anzac legend. They are in every way as meaningful and lively as those who fought in France and at Gallipoli – and many of them did fight at Gallipoli before this campaign.

Importantly, it also tells a story of the vanquished, normally overlooked when the victor tells the story. Here are Turkish and German points of view too for they were sons, brothers, fathers and friends with lives and concerns of their own. And those soldiers didn't start the war, their politicians and diplomats did.

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They were just the tools. However, access to Turkish archives is prohibited so official stories don't exist. Their soldiers' personal writings are revealing.

Arabs of the time wrote no English and little in Arabic. Their stories were handed down through generations around campfire dinners, accuracy now largely lost in the passing of time.

Universally acknowledged are the soldiers who formed the Anzac tradition in France and at Gallipoli. At long last, also acknowledged are those soldiers who performed to the pinnacle of the Anzac spirit in Sinai and Palestine. Now due recognition is given to the families of those soldiers because on many, many occasions in talking with people about this book they'd say 'Gee, my great so-and-so was a light horseman, is that where he was?'

Now they know.

Desert Anzacs tells the story of more than the light horsemen. Now we see cameleers as part of the mounted force. Australia was the only dominion country to provide airmen. Usually ignored are the logisticians and background crews, without whom the fighting men could not fight. So here we also have the story of the medics, veterinarians, armoured cars, engineers, rough riders and many others.

Gallipoli and France were septic affairs, submerged in the mud of water-engulfed trenches. Sinai Palestine was a fast, open style war that better suited the Anzac outdoorsmen. This was a new age war. Wellington and Napoleon, with muskets good for 50 yards and cannons good for 300 yards, were gone. Now, there were aeroplanes, tanks, high velocity guns, poison gas, hand grenades and armoured cars with machineguns. Many youngsters would get a horrible shock.

Because it was open and fast, there were fewer casualties than the absurd over-the-top charges from trenches; a good reason the media weren't interested and a home public denied this story. Nevertheless, all would discover that war is hell, no matter where it is fought, and one bullet finding its mark is as

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deadly as any other.

Anzacs went to Gallipoli and exposure to incompetent British generals and a determined Johnny Turk. Evacuated to Egypt, they would once more face incompetent British generals and a determined Johnny Turk as they crossed the heated sands of Sinai. They endured the worst environment Planet Earth could throw at human beings. Summer or winter mattered not; extremes of heat and cold, wind and dust, crawling and flying creatures, waterless, sickness and disease, little rest and recovery.

Harry Chauvel is one of the most brilliant leaders and military officers Australia ever produced. Now revealed is his story as commander of Anzac, British and dominion soldiers, the first non-British officer ever to do so. His story is a role model for military officers and personnel, business leaders and employees, sports coaches and players, parents and children and those who seek personal achievement and success.

Harry Chauvel guided the Anzacs through the Middle East that has been a cauldron of calamities since the last shots of the Great War. It has driven global tensions and decisions and perpetuated hatred, much more so than France and the Western Front arenas. Yet its significance has seldom been explained; it is now.

Further, this war would change world structures resulting in 'the wrecking of Europe, the destruction of four great empires (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman) and the fatal weakening of two others (Britain and France). And it would shape and influence events in the Middle East to our own time'.¹

Many in the Middle East and Arab world today accuse Britain and France of deceit and treachery about broken promises offered to attain Arab support and to reject the Ottoman Sultan's call for jihad. They believe they were promised the reward of an independent Arab nation. They

¹ Grey, J., *The War with the Ottoman Empire*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2015, p. 5.

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blame the accused for creating a Jewish homeland in their midst and making their lifestyles somehow worse. They blame those countries that attended supposed peace conferences after the Great War. These led to the League of Nations dividing Arab lands into mandates where supposed advanced countries provided tutelage to the undeveloped aborigines of the Arabs. They conveniently ignore the endless disputes between Arab leaders then and now.

Since those mandates, each Arab country has attained its own independence. But none have bonded to form an Arab nation of any continuance. Tribalism, sectarian divisions, ancient feuds, distrust over faith, those with the oil wealth over those without - and goodness knows how many other real or imagined issues have delivered an Arab Spring and radicalisation that has the world bewildered. Thinking Arabs and Muslims reject violence and seek a peaceful existence. What can be said, however, is that events and decisions from 100 years ago made a major contribution to the Middle East of today. This book tells some of that story to give a clearer and hopefully more balanced view of events and illustrate the forces driving the seemingly insolvable conditions of our contemporary world.

At the time, Anzacs were bystanders in the political scene. Soldiers just do their military job, made more difficult by politicians and diplomats in their throes of absurdity that ensures peace is never lasting.

Anzacs would again be called upon within twenty years.