LIGHT HORSE DAY
COMMEMORATION SERVICE TO MARK THE CENTENARY OF THE BATTLE OF BEERSHEBA
SHRINE OF REMEMBRANCE

Tuesday 31 October, 2017

Colonel Stuart Dodds, Chair of the Victorian Veterans Council, representing the Honourable John Eren, Minister for Veterans

The Honourable Ted Baillieu, Former Premier of Victoria and Chairman of the Victorian Anzac Centenary Committee

Air-Vice Marshal Chris Spence AO (Retd), Chair of the Shrine Trustees and Life Governors and Trustees of the Shrine

Distinguished Service men and women

Members of the Consular Corps

Dr Robert Webster OAM, State President of the RSL and Members of all Ex-Service Organisations

Major Duncan Monroe, 4th /19th Prince of Wales Light Horse Regiment

Descendants of Light Horsemens, distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

Students

First, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we are gathering and pay my respects to their elders past and present and to any elders here with us as we come together this morning to commemorate the Australian Light Horse and the Battle of Beersheba: one hundred years ago to this very day.

In the last few years, there have been centenary commemorations of the many great battles fought during the First World War.
When we think of battles from that war, we often think of Gallipoli, where Australian soldiers first fought as ANZACs; or the Western Front – in France and Belgium – where muddy trench fighting continued across the entirety of the war.

But in the Middle East, a very different campaign was under way.

The Turkish Ottoman Empire was at war with Britain and her allies, and for two years Australia joined the Empire forces, trying to drive Turkish armies out of Egypt and back up through what was then known as Palestine.

No muddy trenches there! For the mounted troops of the Australian Light Horse Brigade, this was a campaign of flies and dust and tent camps pegged out on scrubby desert, of skirmishes and raids, and a never-ending search for wells to water thirsty horses.

By October 1917, the Australians had spent a baking hot summer held up outside the city of Gaza. But to capture Gaza, they first needed to capture the town of Beersheba, 40 kilometres away.

On the evening and night of 30 October, they rode, and they rode some more. At times, the dust was so thick they could barely see past their horses’ heads. They were desperately short of water. Many walked much of the way, just to give their horses a badly needed rest.

After many hours of fighting, on 31 October 1917, Beersheba had still not been taken.

It fell to two Light Horse regiments - about 800 men and their horses - to make a final attack on the heavily defended town, late in the afternoon.

At Beersheba, the 12th Light Horse Regiment, and the Victorians of the 4th Light Horse Regiment - led by Murray Bourchier, a farmer from Strathmerton - and all brandishing rifle bayonets as makeshift cavalry swords, made the last great cavalry charge in history.

The horses the Australians rode were not special cavalry horses. They rode to battle on their ‘Walers’ – stock horses that were not fast, but bred for tough bush conditions.
These sturdy horses, desperately thirsty, without water for more than a day, charged across six kilometres of open ground, galloping through machine gun fire and shell bursts, and unimaginable noise.

Soon the Light Horsemen were streaming through the town, capturing enemy positions. The surprise and sheer manic energy of the ANZAC charge overwhelmed the enemy.

It was an astonishing victory. The Turkish line was broken. In the following months, our troops and their allies would continue to push the Turks back through the Holy Land, taking Jericho and Jerusalem before moving into Syria, to capture Damascus and Aleppo.

But even in victory, there was a sobering price to pay.

Thirty-one men lost their lives that night at Beersheba: thirty-six were wounded.

In some ways, it's hard to feel that we know them, these young Australian horsemen we imagine trudging towards battle in the desert dusk a hundred years ago.

In some ways, it's hard to imagine what their world was really like a century ago.

It was obviously very different from today.

But still, in so very many ways, these soldiers were not so different from any of you young people here today.

Most of the Victorian Light Horse troops were farm boys because they were good riders and knew horses, although about one in five were young men from the suburbs of Melbourne.

Most of them had been civilians before the war. They were just beginning their working lives as farm hands, teachers, trade apprentices, clerks, shearers or salesmen.
Most of their hopes and dreams you would recognise in your own: to get a job and make a
decent living, to fall in love, to buy a home, maybe to start a family, perhaps to travel, or to start
a little business of their own.

And the hopes and dreams of their parents were much the same as the hopes and dreams your
parents hold for you.

From this distance, it can be hard to reconcile the achievements of the First World War with its
staggering cost: not just to those who served, but to their families at home - left damaged for
generations - and the communities robbed of so many promising young men.

And yet, it is from this distance that we can judge it best.

We can see that the sacrifice, the bravery and the sheer determination of the Light Horse men
is an indelible part of our nation's story. We can see that their service helped to protect the
freedom and democracy that generations before us and generations to come have enjoyed and
will enjoy.

And as we remember the Battle of Beersheba, we also remember that we still have men and
women of the Australian Defence Forces who are serving overseas at this very moment: still
working to protect the same values.

We thank them for their service. We hope and pray for their safe return. And it is why we must
never forget the service given on our behalves.