

Doris's special memories help mark centenary of the Battle of Beersheba

By WILL MURRAY

ON October 31, 1917, the Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade was commanded to charge directly at Turkish forces defending the town of Beersheba, in what was then Palestine.

Described as one of the most brilliant cavalry operations in history, and the last great charge of its kind, the Battle of Beersheba has entered Australian folklore for its daring and success against the odds.

Despite Turkish gunners opening fire on the charging cavalymen, the riders came at such a pace that it was impossible for the artillery to readjust their fire quickly enough to be of any real use.

Protected from machine guns by British artillery, the light horsemen captured the enemy trenches using mostly bayonets and swords.

The victory at Beersheba resulted in the capture of over 700 enemy troops, and was a crucial part of the Palestine Offensive, which pushed Turkish troops back from British controlled territory.

This success came at a cost, however, with 36 killed and six wounded.

Among the dead was local Victoria Cross winner Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Maygar, who was hit by a grenade thrown from an enemy plane during the charge.

With 2017 being the centenary of the charge, the Israel Travel Bureau organised a luncheon last month to celebrate this district's connection to the famous battle.

One of the special guests invited to attend was Doris Johnson, whose late husband Major Neville Johnson was there at Beersheba nearly 100 years ago.

Neville and Doris were married in 1951, with Neville 26 years Doris' senior.

At 94, Doris is now the last remaining widow of a Beersheba veteran.

A resident of Amaroo Aged Care in Euroa, she admits her recollections of her husband's war service are not as strong as they once were.

"Those who came back from the war didn't like to speak about what they saw," Doris explained.

"My husband was part of the ambulance corps, and so went through after the charge to pick up the dead and injured.

"The injured would run toward the ambulance cart as they came by, desperate to be picked up."

Major Johnson was involved in many of the Middle East campaigns,



CENTENARY CELEBRATED: Rob Holdsworthy from Euroa RSL, Vicki Gonda from the Israel Travel Centre, Doris Johnson and Yvonne Devanny pictured at the 100 year commemoration of the Charge at Beersheba held at the Seven Creeks Hotel. PHOTO: Dale Mann

including Gaza and Suez before Beersheba.

Following the charge he was medically discharged with malaria, and would not return to war until it again broke out in 1939.

The Johnson's moved to the area in 1953 and onto their property 'Larneuk' in Gooram.

Those involved in the campaign formed a strong bond through their shared experiences. Often very young at the time war came, their experiences of battle would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

"When he returned from war he stayed in touch with others from the light horse," Doris recalled.

They also formed a strong bond with their horses.

Once the campaign had ended, most horses were to be left behind, likely to fall into the hands of locals with a track record of poor treatment, or forced to fend for themselves.

Doris explained that Neville's horse would be spared such treatment thanks to the fact that a family friend, a doctor who lived nearby, was able to adopt his trusty companion, which was of great comfort to him.

Major Johnson died in 1979 at the age of 82, and Doris has been supported by Legacy ever since.

The event at the Seven

Creeks Hotel to commemorate the charge, also celebrated their work, and that of the RSL.

Senior committee members representing the Ballarat, Euroa, Seymour, Shepparton, Tatura, Violet Town, Wangaratta and Werribee RSL Sub-branches were in attendance, as well as Wendy Lovell MP (Member for Northern Victoria Region), Neville Harris (Former Chairman of the Honouring our Heroes Committee responsible for the construction of the statues of Euroa's three Victoria Cross recipients), senior committee members from the Benalla-Euroa-Violet Town Legacy Group, as well as religious leaders and military historians.

Naftali Steg (all the way from Israel) and Vicki Gonda, from the Israel Travel Bureau, recounted the miraculous and audacious Charge of Beersheba, and overviewed the key events taking place in October this year to commemorate the Charge.

The Israel Travel Bureau also paid special thanks to Pierre Durand, Vice President of the Euroa RSL Sub-Branch and Past President of the Benalla-Euroa-Violet Town Legacy Group, who has been of great help in keeping the stories and history of the Anzacs alive.

Activities in Avenel

DUE to this Thursday being Easter, the monthly AVAG (Avenel Action Group) meeting will be held tonight (Wednesday April 12) from 7:30pm at the Avenel Primary School. Everyone most welcome.

Two of the most important heritage buildings in Avenel's nineteenth century 'new town' precinct- the Avenel Police Residence (built 1874) and the (2nd) Avenel Court House (built 1876) have had work on their verandah roofs. These works come in the form of repairs and repainting in original regency stripes and colours, giving increased longevity and returning them to their original stunning architectural visibility.

Congratulations to Avenel Neighbourhood House for their work on the project, the heritage painter and his team for the great rendition, and the AVAG committee for their commitment and funds.

Farewell and best wishes to Reshiko as Avenel House's book keeper and IT support as her family prepares to move elsewhere in Victoria. We have much to thank her for, her company - especially as part of the work team over four years.

Coordinator and committee member will be attending the Regional Strategic Plan Day at Violet Town on April 20.

Avenel's tribute on Anzac Day- Tuesday April 25- at 9:30am, Avenel Jubilee Park, beginning at the RSL cenotaph is always a significant and moving community event. Newcomers most welcome.

Avenel Neighbourhood House welcomes new programs; have you got skills you'd like to offer and/or learn? Contact Lynj 57962043.

It's also in search of volunteers to help raise funds for a much needed, all-weather verandah at the rear of its permanent base in Queen Street.

Avenel Golf Club's Twilight Golf begins in April.

Avenel's Monthly Market last Sunday was a great day for locals and long-distance visitors even though the rain added a piquant note.

Many thanks to the Shire for finding and fixing electrical matters that meant a fortnight of darkness at Avenel Jubilee Park's public toilets.

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Award Ceremony Dinner

Friday 1st September 2017

Details to follow.