



GOVERNMENT HOUSE
SYDNEY

Speaking Points

Rona Tranby Trust

**Reception for Indigenous Descendants of
Battle of Beersheba Veterans**

27th April 2018

Government House

FULL SPEECH

I would like to, firstly, respectfully acknowledge our traditional owners, the Gadigal of the Eora Nation, and their Elders, past and present, to whom I pay my respects. I would also like to pay my respects to all Indigenous men and women who have served our nation since the Boer War, throughout two World Wars, and later conflicts, and I welcome all here present to Government House.

On October 31st, 1917, as the First World War raged in the trenches of the Western Front, history was unfolding over the course of one day in the desert sands of Palestine. The Australian Light Horse Brigade had dug deep in the desert sands before mounting a surprise charge on the Turkish stronghold and capturing Beersheba before sunset.

In breaking the Turkish line, this battle in the Sinai-Palestine campaign was a historic moment, a pivotal battle in our history and our first major breakthrough and victory in the First World War. Beersheba helped to bring the Middle East campaign to an early close as the British, Australian and New Zealand troops broke Turkish lines near Gaza a week later on 7 November 1917, and advanced into Palestine, rolling back the Turkish Gaza defences.

On October 31st 2017 – 100 years later - history was again made.

Joining the guests at the Centenary service for the Battle of Beersheba in southern Israel last year were 12 descendants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Light Horsemen who fought in this battle.

These descendants – and I thank those here present today - represented their families to honour the service of their forbears. For the first time, too, the Australian Government agreed for a wreath-laying by an Indigenous descendant of a soldier during the ceremony. This was a moving moment and one which provided recognition for the service of over 1000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the First World War.

The Light Horse had the highest number of Indigenous soldiers of any formation in the AIF in World War One.

Among the 800 Australian light horsemen who charged the heavily fortified Turkish stronghold across the dry, waterless desert, it is estimated approximately 100 were Indigenous.¹

At that time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were neither recognised as Australian citizens, nor included in the census and, ‘officially’, were not permitted to serve.

¹ http://alh-research.tripod.com/Light_Horse/index.blog/1853730/aboriginal-light-horsemen-servicemen/

The fact that they did serve, despite these factors, lending their skill and horsemanship to this Battle has been, up to now, a mostly untold and neglected part of our history within our ANZAC commemorations.

Fortunately, this is about to change through the initiative and the work of The Rona Tranby Trust.

The Rona Tranby Trust was established in 1991 from a bequest in the will of Thomas and Eva Rona, Holocaust survivors, who requested that the bequest be used for the purpose of oral history recording and preservation of Indigenous culture.

Since the establishment of the Rona Tranby Trust, some 25 diverse and fascinating oral history projects from across Australia have been supported through the Awards administered by the Trust, recording stories that otherwise may have been lost.

Many Award recipients have used the Award to travel out to country areas for oral history recordings.

Those involved have spoken about the powerful and transformative experience of those interactions.

Some projects centred around one person, others around a group or a community.

Some were completed in a few months, others in a few years. Six of the recording projects have developed into books, one contributed to a website, and one of the projects became a museum exhibition and a play that ran for 4 years.

Not all projects have resulted in something published for the wider community.

For the recipients, the important benefit of the Award was the process of filming, making the recordings and making the links with Country, with the past and with other community members. These recordings are also held for the benefit of their communities.

The Beersheba project has resonated widely following the location of Indigenous descendants of soldiers who served in the Australian Light Horse in Beersheba during the First World War.

As a result of this first contact, the Rona Tranby Trust raised funds from the community so that 12 descendants from applications received from around Australia could participate in the Centenary Commemorative service for this Battle in Beersheba in Israel.

Several generous individuals and organisations have supported this project and I thank them this afternoon:

- The Australian Departments of Veteran Affairs and Social Services;
- The Australian War Memorial;
- The Centenary of Anzac Jewish Program;

- Executive Council of Australian Jewry;
- JNF Australia;
- NSW Jewish War Memorial;
- NSW Jewish Board of Deputies;
- The Pratt Foundation; and
- The Family and Individual Donors:
Schoulal Family, Deirdre Bear, Roland Gridiger, Judith Kaye,
Sylvia Leeser, John Roth and Jillian Segal.

The Rona Tranby Trust Australian Light Horse Project is a unique and exciting project that will have positive and ongoing benefits for all those involved, either as participants, organisers or supporters. This project has - and will - make a significant contribution to our Centenary of ANZAC Commemorations ...

.. and, beyond this, to the historical and cultural record of World War One, to the achievement of national Reconciliation and, on a more deeply and personal level, to the lives of families of those Indigenous servicemen.

Taking part in the project are several descendants whose ancestors rode and fought in the Charge at Beersheba and at least one whose ancestor died in action and is buried at the Beersheba War Cemetery.

I understand, through the SBS-NITV-commissioned documentary, four of the Rona Tranby participants, in Australia and in Israel, have been filmed and this documentary will be screened on NITV later this year.

Through the interviews conducted with descendants, this film also provides strong insights into the impact of their service and their later experiences back home in Australia.

On behalf of the people of New South Wales, I thank the descendants who participated in the oral record of this important part of our history.

This has significantly added to the canon of our Australian Defence Force history over the past 100-plus years.

I also thank the Rona Tranby Trust; the film producer, Tanith Glynn-Maloney, and all those here who have supported the making of this documentary, *Truth be Told: Lest We Forget*.

The often-repeated four words used to describe the spirit of ANZAC are *Courage, Endurance, Mateship and Sacrifice*.

These ANZAC qualities were borne out by the Light Horse Brigade at Beersheba, and through the service of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to our nation.

Over the past few days, and the past four years, we have said *Lest We Forget* many, many times.

The Rona Tranby Trust has taken these three words one step further and created a powerful medium for their message.

Truth be Told: Lest We Forget ensures that we cannot forget and we will not forget their service.

Lest we forget

END

This speech may be uploaded to the GH website