

A century on, an Indigenous family rides back into its World War I history

Tony Wright

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"Oh my," breathed Laura Bell. "Oh, my, my, my."

Here she was, surrounded by a couple of dozen members of her vast family, enjoying an outing beneath the gum trees on the little plot of south-west Victorian land where she had spent her youth, and down the track came a horse, the man on its back wearing the uniform of the 4th Light Horse Regiment from World War I, an emu plume fluttering from his slouch hat.



Laura Bell and her nephew Sergeant Ricky Morris, who is wearing the uniform of the 4th Light Horse Regiment from World War I. Photo: Morgan Hancock

Aunty Laura, as she is known among the Indigenous people of western Victoria, stood, her arms outstretched, bathed in leaf-filtered sunshine and a century's history.

Precisely 100 years ago, her father, Frederick Amos Lovett, was riding

the deserts of Palestine with the 4th Light Horse Regiment.



Sergeant Morris surprised his aunt with his horseback arrival to the family's 100-year commemoration. Photo: Morgan Hancock

He was one of five Lovett brothers from the Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission in western Victoria to sign up to fight in the First World War.

They and other men from Lake Condah had to battle for the very right to fight for Australia, for Indigenous men, who were not citizens and had no vote, were routinely denied their wish to join the armed forces at the time.

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There was, however, no denying the fighting Lovetts.



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The man on the horse giving Aunty Laura such a start on Monday, Sergeant Ricky Morris, is the 21st member of the Lovett clan to have fought in uniform for Australia. Pick a war – any war – since World War 1, and there have been Lovetts in the thick of it. Further back, their Gunditjmara ancestors fought white settlers in what was known as the Eumeralla War of the 1840s.



Laura Bell speaks to family members about her family's history. Photo: Morgan Hancock

Ricky Morris' war was in Afghanistan. He served with the 7th Battalion (engineers) in the Mentoring and Reconstruction Taskforce in Afghanistan during 2008–09.

He is among 12 Indigenous Australians chosen to travel to Israel this month to take part in the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Beersheba, sometimes called the world's last cavalry charge.



Laura's father, Frederick Amos Lovett, (third from right).

He was given a 4th Light Horse uniform for the trip but couldn't resist borrowing a horse to give his Aunt Laura a surprise before he left.

Other members of the family had more surprises. There was a framed photograph of Light Horsemen about to embark at Port Melbourne, bound for the Middle East, Private Frederick Lovett a small face in the crowd. There was his recruitment photo, and a box of his medals.



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Light horsemen about to embark at Port Melbourne.

"I just don't know what to say," said Laura, a woman who is rarely without a word or two.

Australian light horsemen, armed with sharpened bayonets carried as swords, mounted on horses half-crazed for the want of water after a long dusty march through the desert, famously charged the Ottoman Turks dug in around the town of Beersheba on the evening of October 31, 1917. The light horsemen won the town, famed for its wells and water.

Frederick Lovett had arrived in the Middle East more than a month before his unit, the 4th Light Horse, took part in the charge.

But when he returned to Australia, he never spoke to his family about his exploits in the war, and neither his daughter, Laura, nor his grandson, Sergeant Morris, are sure whether he took part.

"I know he fought right through Palestine and the Sinai, so I believe he was in the charge at Beersheba," Laura says.

All the Lovett men made it home to Australia from the Middle East and the Western Front in France, but no proper welcome awaited them. The Lake Condah Mission was split up for soldier settlement, but not a single Indigenous soldier from the mission was granted a farm.

Laura was born in 1936, and spent the first years of her life living in a tent with her family on what remained of the mission while her father eked out a living working on district properties.

Eventually, the family moved off the mission and settled in a little house among the gum trees on the bank of the Sunday Creek at Greenvale, north of Heywood. Another of the Lovett brothers, Herbert, had put two houses from the mission on sleds and dragged them 11 kilometres through the bush to Greenvale. Herbert and his wife, Emma, raised five children in their home and Frederick, with his wife, Mary, raised six boys and three girls, including Laura, next door..

There was no electricity, and water came from tanks that sometimes ran dry, leaving the families to rely on the creek.

When World War II came around, Frederick and three of his brothers

signed up for military service again. They were deemed too old to serve overseas and Frederick, who had worked for awhile as a shearer's cook, was drafted into the army's catering corps.

"Whatever happens to us, we still come back," Laura mused, her family gathered beneath the old trees of Greenvale.

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