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Israel Honors WWI Australian Aboriginal Fighters at Center Near Sea of Galilee

A statue, 'The Aboriginal and His Horse,' was dedicated this week in Tzemach 101 years after the fateful battle, in honor of the Aborigine soldiers who fought and fell in WWI

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The dedication of 'The Aboriginal and his Horse' at Tzemach, September 25, 2019.
Credit: Kinneret College

The short and quick battle that took place 101 years ago this week at Tzemach, near Israel's Sea of Galilee, was unusual.

Under the cover of darkness, led only by the light of the moon, the Australian cavalry drew its swords and galloped toward the local train station, a strategic point in those days. The German enemy allied with the Ottoman Empire had barricaded itself in the stone station building. But the Australian cavalry, fighting for the British crown, was undeterred. They surged forward aloft on their steeds and, in keeping with the theory of war, fought face to face with bayonet and sword. The fighting ended at 5:30 AM, shortly after dawn. About 100 German soldiers were dead and many more were injured. Hundreds were captured. The Australians paid a price, too: 14 deaths, dozens of injuries and half their horses would never gallop again.

On Wednesday the battle made headlines again. Jack Pollard, grandson of one of the fighters, came to Tzemach to inaugurate a statue commemorating his grandfather: “The Aboriginal and His Horse,” dedicated to all the Aboriginal soldiers who fell during World War I.

The sculpture depicts Pollard holding a bible and bending over the grave of his brother in arms. The horse in the rear also bows his head towards the fresh grave. The statue was designed by an Australian artist and manufactured using a 3-D printer. Thus a 101-year-old event was commemorated using the latest technology.



'The Aboriginal and his Horse' was created using 3-D printing techniques. Credit: 3Dreams | e.s digital

The statue's inauguration is another stage in the historic correction that Australian society is undergoing in their relations with the Aboriginals. The Australian cavalry at Tzemach consisted of whites and Aboriginals who fought shoulder to shoulder. The Aboriginals were dubbed the “Queensland Black Watch” by the Australians. Though almost all Australian units included Aboriginals who fought, were wounded and won awards for bravery and died, their stories have largely remained shrouded in obscurity.

In light of the institutional racism that continues to plague the Aboriginal community, their exploits were often downplayed. Over 1,000 Aboriginals joined the Australian army during World War I and served superbly. Yet upon their return to their homeland they were denied equal rights, such as the right to vote, says Barry Rodgers of the Light Horse Association.

Much has changed since then, and not just in Australia. About two years ago, during the centennial of World War I, James Lingwoodock, grandson of one of the Aboriginal fighters, visited Israel. Alongside other descendents of the fighters, he participated in reenactments of the battles. “I can feel the spirit of our grandfather here,” said Pastor Ray Minniecon, alongside family members of other Aboriginal fighters at a reenactment of the battle in Israel. “I’m very, very proud to be here,” he said, and expressed his hope that the event will give the younger generation an opportunity to appreciate all that their ancestors did, achieved and accomplished.



A view of 'The Aboriginal and his Horse' at the dedication ceremony in Tzemach, September 25, 2019. Credit: 3Dreams | e.s digital

Kinneret College contacted some years ago the descendants of the Australian soldiers, “who fought thousands of kilometers from home on behalf of a country that was alien to them,” as Ziv Ophir, a vice president of the college, put it. The project was part of the restoration of the Tzemach railroad station. The dedication of the statue was one of the products of this relationship.

The battle that was memorialized there on September 25 was historic for another reason. “It was one of the brigade’s last cavalry battles,” explains Giora Goodman, a historian at Kinneret who specializes in the history of pre-state Palestine.

“Increasing mechanization on the battlefield in the 20th century was about to end the long, rich history of cavalries.” Even today, Australians study the legacy of these courageous horsemen. “The charge of the horsemen and the capture of Tzemach became a well-known story of heroism in the history of the Australian army during World War I,” Goodman adds. Now additional heroes of that battle are being discovered in Australia, and in far-away Israel.



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