

The Beersheba Charge Photograph

A 100 Year old controversy is still alive: Is the photograph of the mounted formations of the 4th Division of the Australian Light Horse at high gallop on the plains of Palestine in 1917, really an image of the famous charge into Beersheba on the 31 October?



Today, we as a nation are commemorating the First World War battle in which British, New Zealand and Australian forces successfully attacked and took the city of Beersheba in Palestine, stubbornly held by a Turkish garrison who controlled the only available fresh water wells. It was not plain sailing for as the day of the action lengthened the affair seemed without resolution and an air of desperation arose in the attacking forces who had crossed a dry, barren and waterless desert to get there. The horses were in dire need of watering, and so as the sun was setting the last role of the dice was for the Australian mounted force held in reserve to charge across 4 miles of open ground and hope that the surprise tactic would confound the Turkish defenders, which it did. The rest is history.

Now it might be considered a heresy to devalue the above photograph which for so long was considered an original image of the charge into Beersheba, however, that it is a photograph of the 4th Australian Light Horse Brigade in Palestine - possibly only days later - is not questioned.

I worked for 23 years at the Australian War Memorial in photographic and art services and have printed this image from an original copy negative many many times over the years, and never was there black smoke puffs - presumably artillery bursts - visible in the sky, this is fakery.

As I have previously stated, the slow emulsion speeds of plate, sheet and roll film emulsions of that era with ISO equivalents 5 to 15, it is highly improbable that in the very low lighting conditions of so late in the day, exacerbated by a dusty atmosphere, would have allowed a high shutter speed to nearly freeze the action of the horses as is so evident in this photograph. Also, the angle of view of the formations is from the same direction as the setting sun shines, therefore, there ought not be any shadows on the front of the horses so obvious in the photograph. I also speak from more than 50 years experience at photographing landscapes in very poor smoky and dusty atmospheres late in the day with modern fast lenses and fast films.

The continuing discussion on the validity of this photograph might offend some people, however, if this image is to take its rightful place as a record of a significant historical event, then it stands untarnished (without the added smoke puffs) as an image of the surviving men and horses who took part in it, some days after the event. I must also state that the gentleman purporting to have taken the image (see below - even though he probably did use a camera on that day) did not indicate any follow through with the image processing, printing nor had he subsequently had a print in his possession or had seen the image until some years later. Provenance is lacking.

The following discussion is copied from the publication:

A HISTORY OF THE BRITISH CAVALRY 1816 to 1919

by

THE MARQUESS OF ANGLESEY
F.S.A., F.R. HIST S.

VOLUME 5
EGYPT, PALESTINE and SYRIA
1914 to 1919



LEO COOPER
LONDON

APPENDIX 2

NOTE ON THE BEERSHEBA CHARGE PHOTOGRAPH

(See p. 154)

This photograph purports to show the charge of the 4th Brigade at Beersheba. Grant who led it stated in 1920 that he could not 'take exception to the claim . . . that it is a photograph of the actual charge'. Members of his staff agreed with him. They all said that the terrain and the formation shown were correct. Ian Jones, many years later, spoke to thirteen men who rode in the charge, all of whom confirmed that the formation was as shown.

In 1967, however, the Director of the Australian War Memorial summarized the official view thus:

1. The formation in which the charge was made was different from that shown [contradicting Grant]. . . .
2. The ground was quite bare and the galloping horsemen quickly became enveloped in large clouds of dust. In the photograph the ground appears to be fairly well covered with herbage and there is practically no dust.
3. [The charge was made] in a westerly direction in the late afternoon so that the shadows would fall behind the horses.
4. The final stretch . . . was downhill whereas the horsemen in the picture are galloping uphill.'

Further, the AWM's view is that the photograph was taken during a later re-enactment staged for an official film cameraman at Belah on the coast of Palestine. Grant, however, stated that the terrain there did not match that at Beersheba.

With respect to paragraph 2 above, Jones states that 'reports of dust raised . . . came from men looking into the sun – a situation which exaggerated its density. Men watching from the side, with the sun over their shoulders, could see the action quite clearly. It also seems likely that the combination of reddish brown dust and reddish sunlight minimized the effect of dust in the photograph.

'Regarding the "herbage", a veteran of the action, Vic Smith, commented in 1981 that part of the charge lay over the stubble of a recently harvested Bedouin crop. Untrimmed copies of the photograph show traces of furrows in the foreground.'

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On the question of the direction of the sun Jones states that the charge was made to the north-west and not to the west. He adds that, according to the Curator of Astronomy at the Melbourne Science Museum, 'on that day at Beersheba the sun set sixteen degrees south of west. This placed it more than sixty degrees to the left of the charge, as shown in the photograph.'

On the fourth paragraph of the official statement, Jones says that 'the "uphill" effect in the photograph was created by a slightly tilted camera. With true verticals restored, the formation is heading down a very slight slope.' He adds that when he walked over part of the charge course 'and photographed the hills south-east of Beersheba' he found that 'in character and detail, they matched those seen in the photograph.'

The man who purports to have taken it came forward in 1967 with a formal statement. It reads as follows and has the stamp of authenticity:

'I, Eric George Elliott, state that on 31st Oct. 1917 I was a range finder with the 4th A.L.H. Brigade which was resting in reserve in a depression between two ridges about four miles east of Beersheba. At approx. 1430 hrs. I was called to H.Q. and instructed to accompany a party of officers and take some ranges and prepare range charts. The party moved out to the front on the Brigade position and halted behind a knoll approx 3,300yds from the town of Beersheba.

'I was given my points to range on by the M.G. [machine-gun] and Artillery officers in the party. This I did and reported the ranges verbally to each officer and noted them on a rough plan from which to prepare my range charts.

'The officers then moved back to Brigade area and left me to prepare my range charts and deliver them to the respective officers with a copy to Brigade H.Q. I was about half way through this task when I happened to look in the direction of the Brigade area and saw dust rising indicating that there was some movement taking place. I hastened to complete my job under the impression that this was what my charts were required for, at the same time keeping my eye on the Brigade area. To my surprise it seemed to be within minutes, I saw horsemen in extended order coming over the crest of the ridge. I packed my gear, and then came another line of troops in the same order. I then moved around to the other side of

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the knoll, and by this time the third line appeared. Bewildered by what was happening I just lay there and gazed in astonishment. As the front line drew nearer I saw that their bayonets were drawn and that they were approaching at a hard gallop. Having a camera in my knapsack I got it out and took a shot, got on my horse and went as fast as I could further out to a flank and then back to H.Q. There I learned that my charts were not now needed as the whole plan had been changed and that an attempt was being made to capture Beersheba with a Cavalry Charge by the 4th and 12th Regts.'

However, Jeff Cutting, the Administration Officer, Art Section of the Australian War Memorial, writing to the present author in 1993, states that he was 'told of a conversation some years ago with a Mr Pat Gallagher whose late father had ridden in the charge at Beersheba and in the re-enactment charge on the coastal plain near Dier el Belah.' On seeing the photograph he asserted that 'it was of the Belah romp [*sic*] and indicated where he could see himself in it.' Mr Cutting adds that the official file 'dealing with an inquiry into this affair' has eluded his search and that he feels that it is 'out of the normal records management system and not available'. He points out that Trooper Idriess, who observed the charge, writing in *The Desert Column*, claimed to have seen much dust and that the light was pretty poor. (Idriess, 251-2). Readers of the present work will remember that Idriess was writing a long time after the event and they may perhaps treat his evidence with caution.

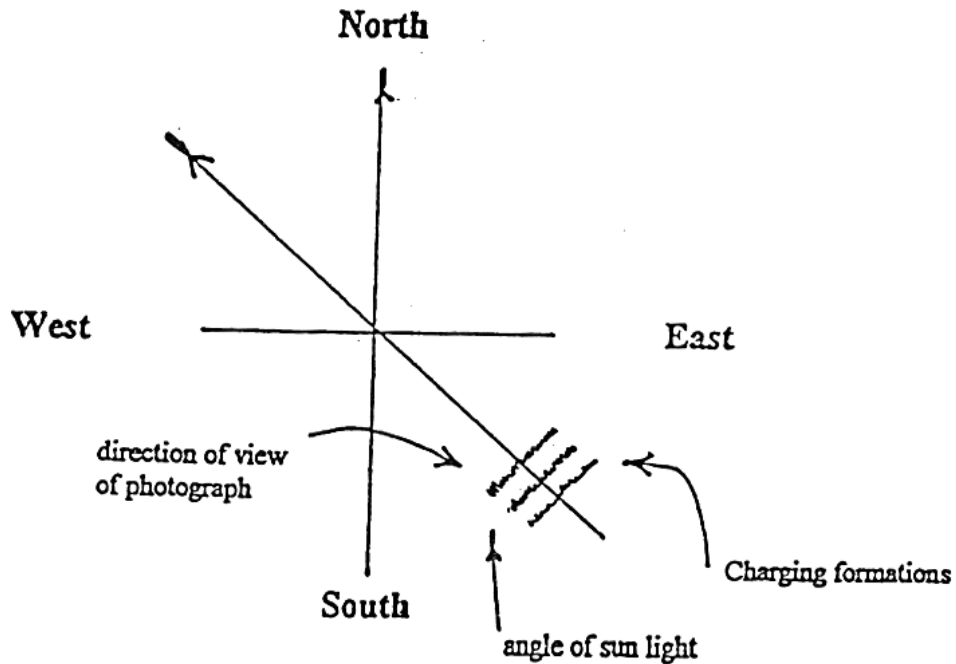
Mr Cutting goes on to say:

'You will observe in the alleged "Charge" photograph that dust is not a feature, furthermore, the sunlight, as evident from the shadows, is coming from the wrong direction if this formation was moving towards Beersheba in the north-west (the light is coming from the left rear of the horsemen i.e. South/South-East) and is too harsh and high in the sky for a sunset. [See diagram on p. 352].

'Also in this image there are no signs of casualties or of the bombardment by shrapnel shells and nothing can be seen of the road down which the charge was driven.

'Near or at sunset on a dusty day would produce a quality of light that would be semi-diffused and of such reduced

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intensity that the use of fast camera shutter speeds to record action scenes (as the “Charge” photograph does) would be near impossible. Even today with medium and fast film speeds and fast lenses (wide aperture) it would be a difficult task. The “Charge” photograph if it is purported to have been taken near dusk at the Battle for Beersheba with its rendering of fast galloping horses is a technical improbability.’

With so much conflicting evidence it is, alas, impossible to say with absolute certainty that this photograph is the only one ever taken of a mounted charge actually in progress against an enemy. Nevertheless, unless Elliott has invented his statement, the present author inclines towards the view that this is exactly what it is.