

A Waler's Story

by E.L.D Husband
from "Australia in Palestine"

A record of who E.L.D Husband was has not been found, the closest in the WW1 records is a E.C.D Husband (Edwin Charles Douglas Husband) who was in signals and was in Egypt.



Of my early life I remember but little. I have a dim recollection of golden sunlight, of wide-sweeping plains, of a huge dam down by a homestead, of tall trees like some I have seen around Jaffa, and others with golden blossom, and of a long trip in a railway truck to Homebush -ah! you know the place? - where I was sold.

Since I have been in the Army my comrades have often taunted me with not knowing on what station I was born, and have called me a town-bred scrub; but I cannot help that. I will not bore you with details of my early career at Surry Hills as a "week-end" horse (I was then owned by a prosperous butcher), nor will I inflict upon you my first impressions of Army life at Moore Park; but I must say that I was at Broadmeadows, learning "Sections right," "Form troop," and "Walk march," before they would put me in a unit.

On the 20th November, 1914, our troop was taken down to a big dock and put on board what our masters called a transport. (I have heard them call it a ship, a tub - and other names as occasion demanded). We horses had a rough time all the way across; and judging by the manner in which our masters cursed when they came to feed us and perform their stable duties, or to lead us about the decks for exercise, I think they had a rough time, too. I remember a remarkable incident on our deck when we were somewhere in the tropics. (If you know anything about the tropics and about ships, you will know how we and our masters existed). Ginger, who never wore anything to speak of except a pair of shorts, shoes, and a grin, looked after the horses on my off side; he also used to hitch baskets on to a long rope, which disappeared through the deck above. "Haul away!" was all he ever said, and the basket disappeared. Later, a voice would echo from above: "Under below!" and Ginger would stand well back until it landed again. One day when the rope slipped, the chap up above forgot to say "Under below," and the

big basket fell down on Ginger and extinguished him. When he got clear, his conversation with the chap on top was so unrestrained and vivid that three horses broke out of their stalls and tried to climb up on deck. I did not mind - I had often heard the expressions Ginger used.



We reached Alexandria at last and were taken ashore. At first I thought that a peculiarity existed in the ground of Egypt, for it kept rocking and swaying under my feet like the movement of the ship; but this feeling went away in two or three days. We were taken to Gabbari, put into trucks, and rattled to Ma'adi, a pretty little suburb of Cairo. At Ma'adi we had plenty of feed, good stables which kept the sun off us during the day, and very little work while the boys were away at the Peninsula. Sometimes we went out on route marches and dummy stunts, and always on Sundays our masters used to take us out on to the desert behind the camp, to gallop us until we were tired. Those gallops were great sport. There would be horses all over the desert, some of them with riders clinging affectionately to their necks, others without riders, and all of them thoroughly enjoying the fun, and kicking their heels playfully into the air. We were at Ma'adi right up till February, 1916, and then we were pushed off to Serapeum and dumped in a camp close to the Canal. After the delights of Ma'adi, Serapeum came as a shock to me; and in a few days I was feeling very ill on account of the sand I had swallowed with my food. I could not stand, so I rolled about in agony. Up till then I had never had a day's sickness, so this experience was quite a new one. The farrier-sergeant visited me on the evening of my collapse, administered a "ball" to me, and told Bill (my boss) that I would be all right in the morning. A lot he knew about horses! He ought never to have left

that boot factory. He also told Bill to give me a bit more berseem. Bill stopped with me for a while, talking; then a whistle blew and he cleared out. "Good-night, Baldy" (that is the name I always got) he said as he departed, "you'll be O.K. at reveille." In the morning I was almost better, and by lunch time, when Bill gave me a big feed of berseem that he had pinched from somewhere, I was as good as ever again.

We had been at Serapeum only a few weeks when I was taken up to Salhia, where I was promoted on the strength (I think that is the term) of a new Squadron. Bill came with me, so I had no complaints to make - not even about the *tibben*. Bill always was a good master, and he was never tired of looking after me. In heat, in dust, in mud; across the desert, over the plains, amongst the hills - anywhere at all - Bill always groomed me and saw that I got my full issue of tucker. We used to have long talks together and I really think he understood what I had to say to him. He was always considerate in the way he loaded my saddle, and rather than sacrifice my bag of grain, he would dump his own gear. He could not do enough for me; and, believe me, I could not do enough for him. Unfortunately, all masters are not like Bill, or (pardon my vanity) all horses like Baldy.

My first real stunt was from Salhia to Kantara across the desert; and I think that it will live as long in my memory as that Amman show. We travelled all night by short stages - Bill would ride for ten minutes, then walk beside me during the next ten, and then we rested for ten minutes. I had a fair load on the saddle, but this was Bill's first desert stunt, too, and he had not realized exactly how severe desert stunts can be. After that he always let someone else have the heavy gear, while he looked after the light stuff. That was in April, 1916. The long months from then until March, 1917, were one nightmare of bombs and sand, out of which our stunts - Romani, Bir el Abd, Mazar, Magdhaba, Rafa, and many minor ones - stood like the milestones I have seen along the roads at home. At the commencement of things in Sinai tucker was plentiful, and we waxed fat in the land and thrived on brackish water; now we no longer get the same amount - or so it seems - but the water is good. I did not notice the change until yesterday, when I had recourse to chew through my headrope so that I could visit the feed-heap while the piquet slept. Yet the change has been very gradual, and it has not been severe on me. I am still pretty sound in wind and limb, although I have seen old Bill look sorrowfully at me, and say, "Baldy, ten pounds of grain without fixings isn't much to offer a man's best cobber, is it? Never mind, old chap, we're coping very well - very well, you and I."

Once Bill was away for seven days; and when he came back I noticed that he was stable-guard for a whole fortnight. I thought it rather good of Bill to look after the horses for such a long time without a break. I heard all about it afterwards. Bill and the sergeant - a big, ugly bloke like a Gyppo - were talking near me, and I overheard Bill's final remark. "Yes," he said, "I'd be a stableman for a month if I could get those three days in Cairo again." Ah, Bill! what were you doing? While he was away in Cairo we had a little stunt to blow up a railway line; and because I was a good worker, the big Gyppo bloke passed me on for the occasion. The chap who rode me was a dopey kind of individual, and, although the stunt was only to occupy thirty hours, he loaded me up with all sorts of gear, and forgot my lunch-bag. We came home in the night time in a fog, tried to find Tel el Fara, and circled about all over the place until I got tired of it, and wanted to make for home and a feed; but my dopey rider kept with the column, refusing to be guided by me. On another stunt, I just side-stepped the "Killed in Action" return by a hair. Jacko sent across a few shells in our direction, and one of them landed right underneath a horse next to me and sent him West. Two others were as full of holes as a colander, but we got them home. Strangely, the horses on my side of the burst were untouched, and merely suffered from slight shock.

The summer of 1917 was what Bill called a 'snifter' - he also called it other things. Day after day, on those wind-swept, dust-covered plains of Southern Palestine, we stood in the heat and sweated from sunrise to sunset; during the night we shivered with the cold, and were wet with the dew and mist. Then there came rumours of a big stunt. It was good to hear that a big stunt was at last spoken about, not only because we got more attention prior to it, but because we would be leaving these sun-baked plains behind, and doing something towards earning our *tibben*. It was on 28th October that Bill loaded my saddle, and rode me away towards Beersheba with the Squadron. From there onwards to Jaffa we dodged shells and planes, and existed on a very scanty ration. (Even Bill complained now and again.) We went without water on more than one occasion for sixty hours on end; and we had many weary night marches. Just after we left Beersheba I lost a good pal. She was following the General's car, and had a despatch-rider in the saddle; and while doing a stiff gallop she stumbled, fell, and rolled over - dead. I think her death was due to lack of water, since she had had none for three days. She was a dear old thing, and I have yarned away many an hour with her. She died as I would like to die - a soldier.

Winter caught us at Jaffa, and the rain came down unceasingly day and night. Here I had a lot of trouble with our labour corps the mules. They were a hungry

lot of cannibals, and, not being satisfied with a ration of grain, they used to break away from their lines at night and eat our rugs. Some of them even gnawed the hair and tail off a sick pal of mine - he did look a wreck in the morning! Another inconvenience was that I shivered so much that I always shook the rug off, no matter how careful Bill was about putting it on. The early part of 1918 was a time of wind, cold, rain, rocks and mud, and stunts amongst tremendous hills. We had a most exciting time then, and I often wonder how it was I kept out of hospital. Later on, when we stopped in the Valley, I tried to "swing it" a bit, and succeeded in bluffing the Sergeant; but the vet knew too much for me, and so I remained. Fortunately, we moved back to Bethlehem, where the bracing hill air, and the sight of the olive trees, made a new horse of me.

Our last big stunt was rather pleasant, as well as most profitable. (Bill agreed with me in that.) We again went to Amman, and this time captured all the Jackos in that part of the world; it was quite a different affair from that first Amman stunt, when I slipped on the muddy track and almost went overboard into a wady some hundreds of feet below. After we had collected all the gear which Jacko had left behind, we turned our heads west, came through Jericho, and passed up into the hills. We stopped for a day at Jerusalem, and then travelled down to the coastal plains near Jaffa. We returned to Richon to recuperate, and to await further developments.

Now our masters are talking of going home, and I hear them whisper in the lines - "Yes, they'll remain behind" - "Ah! They've done their work bravely and well" - "I wonder what will happen to them?" Bill is going home; to-day he came to me and told me so. "Good-bye, Baldy, old comrade. You've been a good pal to me," he said; and then he was gone. Here at Richon I would like to stay with Bill, and end my days. Richon, with its trees, its vines, its orchards, recalls my early life in some strange way; its fertile fields and pleasant surroundings make the desert days seem but a bad dream of long ago; and in its shady lanes, the toilsome hills and the rain, and the dust of the Valley, are forgotten. But Bill is gone! I must stay behind! Let them shoot me - and quickly - for I would go to that land of eternal sunlight, there to wait until Bill calls to me. Then together we shall gallop forever over the plains.



Note:

Tibben referred to in the Waler's feed is finely cut straw made from various crops – wheat, barley, lentils, chickpea.



AWM B01328 Harvesting Tibben on the Nile Delta

Palestine Poppies

Extracted from "Palestine Poppies" by Charles Barrett in "Australia in Palestine". 1919.

From the hills to the sea, a scarlet trail of flowers in the spring, when the little grey larks are singing and all the low country is green with barley. Wild flowers everywhere, yellow and purple and butterfly- blue - but the poppy is our choice. It glows on Australian graves in the plains and down by the sea where the surf croons all day long; it makes beautiful old battle-grounds, and flakes the wady's brown banks with scarlet. The blood-red poppy is Palestine's flower. At the wind's touch petals fall from the slender stems to lie softly in the grass, as if some rare and lovely bird had shed its plumage there. The red poppy is our flower of War, and in the tranquil days of Peace will be our flower of Memory.

Among the sea dunes white lilies grow, and they, too, will have power to win us memories of Palestine, unclouded by sorrow; memories of the blue Mediterranean, serene as a summer sky, or flinging ramparts of foam alongshore.



Gallipoli
Wildflowers by
George Lambert.
1919. AWM

Answers to Crossword

Across: 4. Affrays. 8. Banjo. 9. Uttermost. 10. Limit.
11. Hamburger. 13. Easter. 15. Steaks. 19. Armadillo. 21. Motor.
22. Banjoists. 23. Obese. 24. Tirades.

Down: 1. Abalone. 2. Animals. 3. South Head Road.
4. Autumn. 5. Fergus Thomson. 6. Among. 7. Satyr. 12. Elk. 14.
Air. 16. Aunties. 17. Shirley. 18. Flasks. 19. Abbot. 20. Manor.