

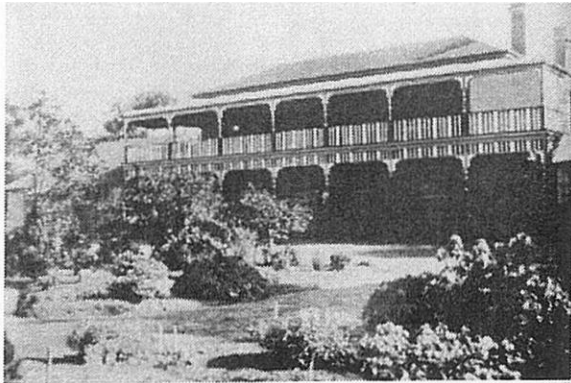
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A 9th Light Horseman Lieutenant Geoffrey Ochiltree Robertson ¹

by
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Geoffrey Ochiltree Robertson was born on 01 April 1896 at 'Mortat', Goroke, Victoria. The fourth of five children, his eldest brother James (J.O.) was my paternal grandfather. He received most of his education as a boarder at Scotch College in Melbourne from 1904 to 1914. He followed in the footsteps of his elder brothers, James, Francis and Gordon, by rowing in the Scotch College First VIII crew from 1912 to 1914.¹



'Mortat' (Photograph courtesy of Di Halmarick)¹

After completing school, he returned to 'Mortat', the family property, briefly before signing up for Army service on 07 January 1915 at Broadmeadows in Victoria.¹ Fair headed and blue-eyed, he was 19 years old, 178cm tall and weighed 72 kilograms on entry.² After initial training, Geoffrey Robertson was posted to the 9th Light Horse Regiment, a joint Victorian and South Australian Regiment.¹

The 9th Light Horse Regiment

The 9th Light Horse Regiment traces its origins back to 1854 when the Adelaide Mounted Rifle Corps was formed under the Volunteer Military Forces Act. In 1867, the unit provided guards and escorts for The Duke of Edinburgh during his visit to South Australia. During the Boer War, a squadron saw service in South Africa with the "Bushman's Contingent", first seeing action on 6th February 1900.

Battle Honours - 9th Light Horse
SOUTH AFRICA, 1899-1902
DEFENCE OF ANZAC
SARI BAIR GALLIPOLI, 1915
ROMANI
MAGDHABA-RAFAH
GAZA-BEERSHEBA

JERUSALEM JORDAN (ES SALT) MEGGIDO SHARON DAMASCUS
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Table 1: Battle Honours 3

After the Boer War, the unit expanded into two Regiments; the 16th and 17th Australian Light Horse Regiments. In 1914, the 17th became the 9th Australian Light Horse Regiment. The 9th Light Horse Regiment has one very unique distinction. It was the only unit to capture a battle standard of a Turkish Regiment during the First World War. This trophy now hangs in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. The 9th Light Horse Regiment Battle Honours are outlined in Table 1.3. It became part of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade in October 1914.

Gallipoli

The first four Light Horse Regiments sailed for England in a fleet of 36 transport ships on 01 November 1914, escorted by four warships.^{4,5} The convoy reached Aden at the end of November and the troops disembarked at Alexandria on 03 December 1914.⁵ These regiments were soon joined by a further six Light Horse Regiments, including the 9th, who departed Australia on 11 February 1915 on the *Karoo* and the *Annidale*.⁶ When the Australian First Division left for Gallipoli in April 1915, the Lighthorsemen initially remained in Egypt. By May 1915, however, the Light Horse Regiments had been identified as re-enforcements for the infantry in Gallipoli. Their horses were to remain behind in Egypt.⁴ On the 11 May, the Third Light Brigade were ordered to prepare to move out. The Brigade moved out on 14 May 1915.⁶

After the brief period in Egypt, Geoffrey Robertson arrived in Gallipoli onboard the *Menominee* on 20 May 1915 as a trooper.^{1,6} The 9th Light Horse was sent directly up to Walker's Ridge and on to Russell's Top, where they relieved the Auckland Mounted Rifles.⁶ On the 30 May 1915, the 9th Light Horse Regiment saw action at Walkers Ridge. Dug into trenches, they were ordered to keep up continuous fire at 1,400 yards range to win back No. 3 Outpost which was completely surrounded by Turks.¹



Geoffrey Ochiltree Robertson
1896-1916

(Photograph courtesy Di Halmarick)

Although the fighting in the trenches took a horrendous toll on the soldiers. The damp unhygienic conditions, coupled with monotonous rations and swarms of flies, fleas and lice, caused many to spend time away from the battle with various illnesses. These included dysentery, paratyphoid and non-specific diarrhoea.^{5,6} Geoffrey Robertson survived the battle but was admitted to the Hospital Ship *Grantully Castle* on 11 June 1915 with

'rheumatism', possibly rheumatic fever.¹ A week later (19 June) he was admitted to the Newmarket and was sent to the No. 1 Australian General Hospital (AGH) located in Heliopolis Palace Hotel on the northeastern edge of Cairo.^{1,7} Described as a magnificent building for a hotel, but not a hospital, this 520-bed hospital held 2500 patients by 9 June 1915.⁵ The hospital turned the Al Hayat Hotel and the Grand Hotel in Helouan into convalescent homes. It was at one of these that Geoffrey Robertson was to spend another week convalescing.¹

On 26 June, he was discharged to Base Details at Zeitoun, near Cairo. He returned to the action at Gallipoli, probably several weeks after reporting to Base Details, given usual practices.¹ He was probably not involved in 8th and 9th Light Horses' repelling of the Turkish attack across the Nek on 30 June 1915.⁶

The Nek

On 7 August 1915, the 3rd Light Horse Brigade, including the 8th, 9th and 10th Regiments were to make a dawn charge across a narrow ridge called 'The Nek'.⁴ Inexplicably, the preceding barrage both missed the main Turkish trenches and finished too early. The Turkish troops were in a good position and when troops from the 8th and 10th Light Horse Regiments charged they were cut down by lethal small arms fire. Within minutes, 800 Australians lay dead or wounded.⁵ The 9th Light Horse, held in reserve, was fortunately spared the carnage of this futile attack. They prepared for the expected counter-attack which fortunately never came.⁶

The 9th Light Horse, unfortunately, was not to continue to be spared. On 21 August 1915, the 9th and 10th Light Horse attempted to improve the link between then Anzac and Suvla positions by taking Hill 60. Despite heavy losses, they maintained their attack over the next 8 days and tried to renew the attack on 29 August but were ultimately unsuccessful.^{6,9} 2nd Lieutenant Hugo Throssell was awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallantry during this battle.

Geoffrey Robertson survived but several of the officers were killed, including the Regiment's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Reynell, Captain Callary and Lieutenant Cameron.⁶ On 7 October 1915, Geoff Robertson was promoted to Lance Corporal. On 3 November 1915, he was further promoted to 2nd Lieutenant. On 10 November 1915, he and his contingent were withdrawn along with the surviving members of the 1st Australian Division to Mudros on the island of Lemnos, a staging port approximately 80kms from Gallipoli.¹ They had been replaced in the line by the Australian 2nd Division, led by Lieutenant General J.G. Legge. On 20 December 1915, the entire ANZAC contingent was withdrawn under the cover of darkness with only two casualties. On 27 December 1915, 2nd Lieutenant Geoffrey Robertson disembarked with his Regiment from the ship '*Caledonia*' at Alexandria in Egypt.

Egypt

Reunited with their horses, the Lighthorsemen watched as the Australian Infantry, the 13th Light Horse Regiment and part of the 4th Light Horse Regiment left for France. General Sir Archibald Murray, British commander in the Middle East, had resisted this move as he expected the Turks to advance against Egypt and he could only resist the enemy with battle hardened Australian troops. When he received word that the Australian Light Horse units were to be transferred to France, he refused to let them go. Three Light Horse Brigades and one New Zealand Brigade were formed into the Anzac Mounted Division under General Chauvel in March 1916.^{4,5} Even as General Murray fought to retain the troops, the German General, von Kressenstein, was slowly moving his Turkish force through Palestine, intent on taking the Suez Canal¹⁰

On 24 February 1916, various units of the Anzac Mounted Division, including the 5th and 9th Light Horse, were to proceed to Serapeum on the Suez Canal.¹¹ While there, Major W.H. Scott was ordered to proceed with a squadron of the Regiment, under Captain Wearne, to capture the enemy position, destroy the well- sinking machinery on which the enemy was reported to be working, and generally observe the country.¹ There is no record of contact with the enemy.

By April 1916, General Murray knew the position was serious. He ordered Chauvel and his Anzac Mounted Division to prepare to halt the large Turkish force. Chauvel, a great strategist and leader of mounted troops, spent days surveying large areas of desert before finally deciding on his battleground, the Romani tableland. Chauvel dispersed his forces around Romani while the enemy was still many miles away to acclimatise them to the fearful heat and reduced water rations.¹⁰

In late April 1916, a strong body of Turkish soldiers struck at Oghratina and Katia but had withdrawn by the time the Anzac Mounted Division arrived.⁵ By 28 April, Geoffrey Robertson had been promoted to Lieutenant and during May 1916 was sent to the School of Instruction at Zeiton. He returned to duties with C Squadron, one of the three 9th Light Horse squadrons, on 25 June 1916 and was part of the advance into Romani, which commenced at the end of July.¹

At the time the British front in this area ran from Mahamdia on the Mediterranean south to the rail line head at Romani and onto to Katib Gannit. The line then consisted of a series of strong posts to protect the light railway from Romani to the British Headquarters at Kantara.^{1.5}

Battle of Romani

In July 1916, the Turkish column of 16,000 troops set out across the desert towards Romani. General Chauvel had already disposed of his Light horsemen so they could envelop any Turkish force attacking Romani.⁵ In late July, mounted Australian patrols began a series of hit-and-run raids on enemy bivouacs. These were disregarded by the Turks who rolled on towards Romani.¹⁰ At 1 AM on 04 August 1916, the Turkish forces attacked.⁵ The assault fell on the main body of the 1st Australian Light Horse Brigade, which had been waiting on Romani's slopes. For three hours, the Light Horse Brigade repulsed one massed attack after another. Then, as they withdrew slowly under orders, the Turkish forces struck with renewed vigour. Hidden on the flanks, however, and waiting for Chauvel's command were his 2nd and 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigades, including the 9th Light Horse.¹⁰

As the Turkish Forces advanced, Chauvel sprung his trap. The 1st Brigade stopped their withdrawal and, after joining up with the New Zealanders, held a firm line. The 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Brigades moved in from the flanks, compressing the enemy into an area covered by the British artillery, who opened fire. Despite Turkish counter-attacks throughout the day, the Anzac line held firm.

On the morning of the 5 August 1916, Chauvel rallied his troops to make a final onslaught against the Turks. General Chauvel applied pressure right along the line. It was too much for the Turks, particularly when the artillery opened up. They turned and fled, leaving 5000 dead on the battlefield. In the pursuit that followed, the enemy lost many more men before finally falling back to their main position across the Sinai Desert.

Brave Men

It was during the aftermath of the Battle of Romani that Australian Light Horse patrols were searching for water. A small area called Hod Bayud, near Bir el Abd, was held by the Turkish forces. It had been captured by the 11th Light Horse, British Yeomanry and two companies of the Imperial Camel Corps and was held overnight before being recaptured the following day by the Turks. While waiting for the turning movement to be carried out, Major Darley wrote of the events surrounding the wounding of Lieutenant Geoffrey Robertson on 09 August 1916:¹²

"At sundown, the enemy made a most determined attack on our (9th Light Horse Regiment) position, and four men of "A" Squadron were captured. During this attack, the enemy advanced within 200 yards of our position, and as a result of heavy fire brought to bear on them, a party (of Turks) opposite "C" Squadron put up the white flag.

On seeing these flags. Lieutenant G.O. Robertson, after ordering his men to cease fire, stood up and went forward to take the surrender, but as he approached, a heavy cross fire was opened by the enemy on the flank,

when he was about 100 yards from the enemy, he fell badly wounded. On seeing the Officer fall, No 84 Corporal Titan Barrington, of "A" Squadron, a big and powerful man, ran forward with great gallantry and determination, and in spite of the fact that Lieut. Robertson weighed over 13 stone (approx. 83kg) picked him up and ran with him to our line.

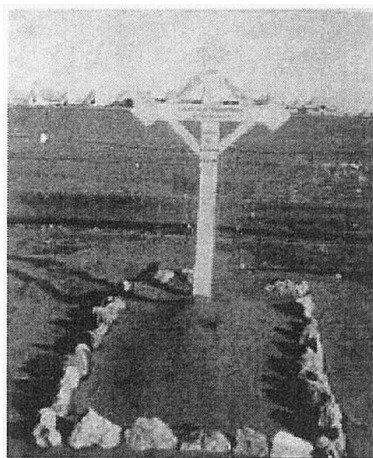
During the whole of this proceeding, the enemy maintained a heavy fire, and a number of Turks rushed out in an effort to capture him, yet in spite of his heavy load, and that he had to cover a distance of nearly 100 yards, he succeeded in reaching our lines in safety. No. 462 L-Corp. Neyland had, in the meantime, brought up Lieutenant Robertson's horse, and took the wounded officer to safety under intense fire. The officer, it is regretted to state, succumbed to his injuries shortly after his arrival at Kantara Hospital.

Cpl. Barrington was recommended for the Victoria Cross on the evidence of Lieut. Robertson, Major McLarin, and Lieut-Colonel L.C. Maygar, V.C. of the 8th Light Horse who were eyewitnesses, whilst L.-Cpl. Neyland was recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal, but no awards were made. It is an astonishing fact that one of the bravest deeds of the war should thus pass unrewarded and the two gallant men were not even mentioned in dispatches for their splendid work."

On 10 August, Lieutenant Geoffrey Robertson was evacuated to the convoy by the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance, and the next day was admitted and transferred to Romani for Kantara by the New Zealand M.R. Field Ambulance.¹

A letter written (date unknown) by Dr White, who attended Geoffrey Robertson at the time he was wounded, to his friend, Miss Northcote, notes:

"Young Geoff Robertson came in desperately wounded in the abdomen and thigh. He had no chance, poor chap, and knew it. I made him comfortable with large injections of morphia and I have never seen anything like the cool calm way in which he gave his last message home and calling us all by our nicknames; truly the youngster of 19 was a hero. He recovered so much next morning that I was able to operate on him and close up his wound, later on we sent him towards the base in our best sand cart with our best nurse. He reached the base hospital but died two days later. game. I know, to the end."



Lieutenant O.O Robertson
Grave at Kantara Military Cemetery Egypt
(Photograph courtesy Di Halmarick)

On 13 August 1916, Lieutenant Geoffrey Ochiltree Robertson died of wounds at 26th Casualty Clearing Station at Kantara. He was buried in grave No. 30 by Chaplain W.M. McMillan in the Kantara Military Cemetery, Egypt.¹

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