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The Battle of Romani 4/5 August, 1916

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Soon after midnight on August 4, 1916, the dim shadows of Turkish soldiers darted across the Sinai Desert towards the Romani tableland. Ahead lay the isolated outposts of Major-General Harry Chauvel's Anzac Mounted Division, which barred the way to their objective, the Suez Canal.

Towards dawn the Turkish army sighted the Australians. Charging forward, they sliced through the thin defences, annihilating the posts before any effective resistance could be organised. And thus began the bloody battle of Romani, a conflict which, after two days of murderous fighting, saw the Anzacs shatter forever the Turkish dreams of controlling the most vital man-made waterway on earth.

After the evacuation of Gallipoli, Australian infantry divisions were transferred to the Western Front in France, although General Sir Archibald Murray, British commander in the Middle East, had fought bitterly against the move.

Murray was not being pig-headed. Actually he expected the Turks to advance against Egypt at any moment and he felt he could hold the enemy only with the assistance of the battle hardened Australians. The general was still smarting under the loss of the Anzacs when he received word that the Australian Light Horse units still under his command must be transferred to France to replace heavy AIF battle casualties. To Murray, this was the last straw. Realising the mounted troops were the backbone of the force he was building up to stop the Turks, he flatly refused to let them go.

And even as General Murray was making his decision, the German General, von Kressenstein, was moving his Turkish force slowly down through Palestine, intent on taking the Suez Canal even if it cost him every man in his command. Treading the identical route that Napoleon had traversed in his ill-fated expedition on 1801, the Turks brushed aside and scattered British cavalry and infantry formations that tried to bar their advance. By April 1916, Murray knew the position was serious.

To meet the threat to the canal and Egypt, Murray ordered Chauvel and his Anzac Mounted Division to prepare to halt the rolling Turkish juggernaut. Chauvel, who was to prove himself the great strategist and leader of mounted troops of his era, spent days surveying large areas of desert before finally deciding on his battleground, the Romani tableland. While the enemy was still many miles away, Chauvel dispersed his Anzacs around Romani and kept them there until they became accustomed to the fearful heat and reduced water rations.

In late July, far-flung mounted Australian patrols began a series of hit-and-run raids on enemy bivouacs. But the Turks disregarded these pin-pricks and rolled on towards Romani until they approached the Anzac outposts situated some miles out from the tableland. Yet it was not until almost midnight on August 3 that Australian listening posts heard the sounds of troop movement to their front.

These posts were still trying to get news of the enemy's rapid advance towards Romani when thousands of Turks, who had crept to within yards of the Australian

outposts without being spotted, swept forward.

Next instant the whole desert exploded into action as wave after wave of fanatical Turks burst out of the night screaming, "Allah, Allah. Finish Australia."

The full fury of the assault now fell on the main body of the 1st Australian Brigade, 1st, 2nd & 3rd Regts, which had been waiting tensely on Romani's lower slopes.

Charging shoulder to shoulder in massed ranks with bayonets outstretched before them, the Turks ran straight into the point-blank fire of the Light Horsemen. Soon the crackle of machine-guns and rifles merged into a crashing crescendo of sound as whole lines of the enemy were wiped out only to be immediately replaced by others. For three hours the Light Horse threw back one massed attack after another. Then, still under tremendous enemy pressure, they were ordered to withdraw slowly.

Although the withdrawal was carried out according to orders, it was impossible to conceal the manoeuvre from the enemy. As a result, the Turks, convinced they had the Australians at their mercy, drove in with increased fury and even crashed through some parts of the Anzac line. Many died in those fearful attacks like the troopers who, with their horses bogged in the loose sand, could not defend themselves as the enemy swarmed over them.

Major M. Shanahan, DSO, seeing five of the men unhorsed and surrounded by Turks, galloped wildly through the enemy ranks, got one of the Australians up into the saddle with him and, with two others clinging to each stirrup, got clean away. In the thin light of dawn, an Australian sergeant thought he saw one of his men go down beneath a scrum of Turks. Roaring at the top of his voice, he wheeled his horse and charged into the shadowy confusion. Sweeping the man clean up on to his saddle, he galloped away to safety. It was only when he pulled his horse up that he realised the man behind him was a Turk.

As daylight flooded through the haze of battle, General Chauvel, watching the battle from a vantage point, could see his battered 1st Brigade still struggling against tremendous odds as it continued to retreat. Also, Turks were now sweeping in massed waves against the New Zealand brigade. But Chauvel made no move to reinforce his hard-pressed men, for the battle was going exactly as he had foreseen.

Hidden on the flanks waiting his command were his 2nd and 3rd Australian Brigades, while British cavalry and artillery units were already moving up into position. After more violent fighting, the Turks not only over-ran the New Zealanders holding Wellington Ridge, but many infiltrated right through the Anzac area. As a result, men began stalking each other in deadly hand-to-hand combat.

Then, suddenly, above the roar of battle, came a blood-chilling, eerie sound as 800 Turks in a solid mass flung themselves at Mount Meredith, screaming and chanting as they ran. Mount Meredith, a key point of the defences, was held by New Zealanders, who, opening up with a murderous rapid fire into the close-packed enemy ranks, sent the Turks spinning to the ground in their hundreds.

The slaughter was still going on when Chauvel at last decided to spring his trap.

First, the general directed the remnants of the 1st Brigade to stop their withdrawal and, after joining up with the New Zealanders, hold a firm line. Then he brought the 2nd and 3rd Brigades in from the flanks, thus implementing his plan to compress the enemy into an area covered by the British artillery. Finally, as the Anzacs dismounted and moved in a great mass towards the Turks, the British artillery opened up. Salvoes crashed right into the enemy ranks and great gaps appeared in the tight-packed force

preparing to counter-attack the advancing Australians.

The sand literally turned red. And the thunder of the guns was the death knell of Turkey's hopes of conquest.

Under a pitiless searing sun, the Romani tableland for the rest of the day shuddered under the violence of battle as the tide swayed back and forth with Australians and Turks locked in a fight to the finish. Helped by the never-ceasing artillery barrage, the Anzacs gradually clawed their way forward, throwing back desperate counter-attacks as they hurled the enemy from position after another. Elsewhere, the Turks still flung themselves forward in massed suicidal attacks, probing for a weak spot in the main Anzac positions. But the thin line held firm as groups rushed from one trouble spot to another.

Legend has it that South African-born Brigadier J.R. Royston, 3rd Brigade Commander, became known to his men as "Gallop Jack" by wearing out 14 horses in his wild dashes along the line rallying his men when trouble threatened. Royston had a long and distinguished military career, serving as a teenager in the Zulu War, 1879 and Commanding the 5th and 6th Contingent of the Western Australian Mounted Infantry during the Boer War.

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Peering over the escarpment's brink, they quickly picked off the Turks as they scrambled up the almost sheer sides. When the wall's base was high with dead, the survivors broke off the engagement. As darkness closed in, silence at last descended over the area. Men from both sides broke off the battle from sheer exhaustion and sank to the ground in their positions. It started all over again just before dawn when Chauvel, realising he must keep the initiative, got his gaunt and haggard Anzacs to their feet and ordered them to make a final onslaught against the Turks. The artillery, he said, would help by laying down another devastating bombardment.

Now the Australians and new Zealanders launched such a frenzied attack on the enemy still holding Wellington Ridge that the impetus of their charge drove the defenders back almost to the crest. But the Turks refused to retreat farther. So they stayed there and died to the last man.

After that, 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 was to lose many more men before finally falling back to their main position across the Sinai Desert. The battle of Romani was over.