

Memorial Box 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wartime Service

Private Harry Murray



Private Harry Murray, c. 1917

Harry Murray was 30 years old and working as a stock and station hand in Taroom, Queensland, when he volunteered for service in the Australian Imperial Force in June 1917. He was assigned to the 11th Light Horse, nicknamed the “Queensland Black Watch” due to its high proportion of Indigenous servicemen.

Murray set sail for the Middle East in December 1917, where fighting had erupted nearly two years earlier over control of the Suez Canal and the Sinai Peninsula. Australian troops had helped to repel Turkish attacks around Gaza and Jerusalem, and by the time Murray joined the regiment in March 1918 Turkish resistance in southern Palestine had collapsed.

The light horse regiments fought a mobile war, often battling extreme heat, harsh terrain, and water shortages. Among the many horses that formed the light horse were those known as “walers” (short for “New South Walers”), which were prized for their strength, resilience, and ability to travel long distances with little water. The light horse usually fought dismounted, but in August 1918 the 11th Light Horse Regiment was issued with swords and trained in cavalry tactics to prepare for its next offensive.

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In late September Murray's regiment launched an attack on Semakh, a Turkish-German garrison situated on the southern shore of the Sea of Gallilee. With the order "Form lines and charge the guns!", the light horsemen drew their swords and galloped towards enemy fire. After overrunning the outer nest of guns they dismounted, and cleared the town on foot with rifle and bayonet.

This was the 11th Light Horse Regiment's last major action before the Turkish surrender on 30 October 1918. Harry Murray was in and out of hospital during his service, but eventually returned home to Australia in July 1919.

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Activities for research and classroom discussion

1. More than one-quarter of the 1,300 Aboriginal people who served in the AIF during the First World War did so with mounted units, including the light horse. What skills might they have needed for this role?
2. How might horses have been useful in fighting a desert war? What might have been some of the disadvantages?
3. Many Aboriginal servicemen enlisted in the Imperial Camel Corps as an alternative to the light horse. Why would camels have been suitable for use in the desert?
4. What is the purpose of this poster? Who is it designed for?



Lucy Kemp-Welch and David Allen & Sons, "Forward to victory: enlist now", c. 1915, poster, 70 x 48.8 cm

5. What kinds of symbols have been used in this work of art? What words would you use to describe the feeling the artist has attempted to capture? Compare this painting to the poster above: do you think either is an accurate portrayal of the light horse experience? Why or why not?

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Clifton Pugh, "Australian Light Horse", c. 1990, painting, 96.8 x 127.2 cm

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