

Trooper Albert 'Tibby' Cotter

The last test

The two adversaries faced each other from a little more than twenty metres. The sweat stung as it rolled down their brows and into their eyes. One contemplated his attack, the other his defence. One held a projectile in his hand, rolling it round until it was in just the right position. The Australian advanced, increasing speed with each step. Suddenly, he hurled his projectile toward his target at incredible speed. It found its mark; the crowd stood as one and cheered as the middle stump went flying.

Albert Cotter was born in Sydney on 3 December 1884.¹ He lived with his parents in the inner Sydney suburb of Glebe. From a young age, he answered to the nickname 'Tibby' and, like all boys, he enjoyed fishing and knocking about with his mates. But his one great passion was cricket.

Tibby was soon recognised as a natural. He could make the ball move off the seam at an incredible speed, baffling the batsmen who faced his deliveries. With his six-stitcher and incredible accuracy, the youngster would blast the fruit-box wicket apart. He was always the first to be picked for a side in the local test matches—played on the vacant allotments that dotted the back streets of Sydney's inner suburbs. A keen member of the local cricket club, his reputation, as well as his trophy collection, soon began to grow.

Tibby's introduction to representative cricket came in January 1904, when he made his debut against Victoria. In the first inning of that match, he took four wickets for a mere fifty runs.² He was selected to play against an all-English eleven the following year, again excelling, securing five wickets for 44 runs. There followed a succession of top class innings. His bowling prowess won him a place on two tours of England, and he was included in nearly every state team following his debut. He was no slouch with the bat either. A leading umpire of the day commented, 'It was either four or out when Tibby was at the crease'.

Though not among the first wave of young men eager to don a khaki uniform and go to war on the other side of the world, on 15 April 1915, Cotter reported to the local AIF enlistment office. The recruiting sergeant's eyes widened when he realised the man standing before him was the well-known cricketer. Tibby was allocated as a reinforcement to the 12th Light Horse Regiment and was sent to the Liverpool camp to begin his training.³

His tent mates were chuffed to have a celebrity among their ranks, and soon the newspapers were full of the news of Tibby's enlistment. However, the headlines were soon devoted to reports of the Australian and New Zealand landings at ANZAC Cove.



Tibby the cricketer.
(Mitchell Library)



Trooper Tibby Cotter.
(Sydney Mail)

Cotter embarked for overseas on the HMAT *Runic* on 9 August 1915.⁴ On 21 November, after additional training in Egypt, his unit was deployed to Gallipoli.

The trenches of ANZAC were no place for the faint-hearted, but Cotter adapted well to his new environment. With the mounting casualties, some of the troopers were reassigned to other regiments. Tibby was transferred to the 1st Light Horse.

One night, to seek comfort from the feeling of gloom, brought about by the prospect of dying on that God-forsaken peninsula, Cotter over indulged on the service issue rum. He was convicted of ‘When on active service being drunk on duty’—a serious offence in any man’s language. For his ‘crime’ he was awarded five days’ Field Punishment No 2.³



AWM G01289. Gallipoli Peninsula, 17 December 1915. A game of cricket was played while shells were passing overhead all the time the game was in progress. This game was an attempt to distract the Turks from the imminent departure of allied troops.



AWM P00133.001. Members of the Australian Light Horse at Giza, Egypt.

Following the evacuation of Gallipoli, Cotter returned to Egypt. He was transferred back to the 12th Light Horse Regiment, which had also just returned from the Peninsula.

Tibby met up with his older brother John, who had enlisted as a private in the 4th Battalion. The two spent every spare moment together, catching up on lost time. Tibby was enjoying himself so much, he decided to see a bit more of Cairo than his leave pass allowed. For this, he was awarded 14 days field punishment and fined £1.³

When the infantry sailed off to fight on the Western Front, the light horse remained in the Middle East. Their mission was clear—to drive the Turks and Germans from Sinai and Palestine, but this was easier said than done.

Confronting the troopers was some of the most inhospitable country on earth—searing heat in summer, bone-chilling cold in winter. In addition, the men had to survive on water from fetid Arab wells and a bland, monotonous diet of bully beef and biscuits. Worst of all was the sand. It penetrated every orifice and crevice—eyes, ears, noses, mouths, clothes, food, water. Everywhere. It was enough to drive the men and their horses crazy.

Tibby was selected to be a mounted stretcher-bearer. These were men who were perceived to be fearless. Unarmed, they would ride into the thick of the fighting

to pick up wounded troopers who had fallen from their mounts. Their only protection a white armband emblazoned with a red cross.

The 12th, having returned to its mounted role, spent the rest of 1916 as part of a force defending the Suez Canal—conducting patrols and participating in forays into the Sinai Desert.

In the same year, other light horse regiments saw action defending the vital outposts of Kartia and Romani. In pitched battles, much of it hand-to-hand, the troopers succeeded in stopping the Turkish thrust toward the Suez Canal, forcing them to retreat across the northern extent of Sinai, towards El Arish.

At dawn on 20 December, the light horsemen surrounded the town of El Arish, only to find the Turkish garrison had withdrawn, leaving only a token rear guard who were unwilling to continue the fight.

As the troopers rode into the town, the local inhabitants heralded them as their saviours from the evil Turks. However, there was some dissension between the tribal sheik, who proclaimed he was *giving* the town to the light horsemen, and the troopers, who were adamant they had *taken* the town.

Following the capture of El Arish, the Allies crushed Turkish resistance at Magdhaba, then advanced into Palestine. After the battle for the heavily defended border town of Rafa, the mounted troops launched an attack against the Turkish bastion of Gaza—a see-sawing battle, lasting most of the day, as the Allied horsemen fought their way to the edge of the town square. On receiving news that capture of the town was imminent, the German commander ordered the destruction of his ammunition reserves, communications post and headquarters.

Just as the men could sense victory, the inconceivable happened. The British commanding general ordered his force to retire. 'But we've got Gaza!' his commanders argued.⁵ Many of the British units reacted immediately, but the ANZAC leaders demanded again and again that the directive be verified, to no avail. Reluctantly they gave the order to pull back. Realising his mistake, the British commander tried to retake the lost ground, but it was too late.

In April 1917, the 12th moved to Palestine to join the British forces—just in time to take part in the second attack on Gaza on 19 April. In an attempt to guarantee success this time, the Allies planned to utilise two new weapons. Tanks and two thousand gas shells were to be used for the first time in the desert campaign.

However, these weapons did not meet expectations. The tanks moved too slowly in the soft sand—a mere six kilometres per hour—turning them into 'sitting ducks', to be picked off at will by the Turkish and German gunners. As the gas shells burst, the chemical vapour burnt off quickly in the high temperatures and dissipated in the strong sea breeze. Despite this setback, the men gave their

all. They continued to push to the edge of the town till they became bogged down in a series of savage street fights among the mud huts.

Whenever a fellow trooper fell, Tibby would be there to drag the man to safety. Bullets and grenade splinters fell all round them, creating eruptions of sand as they landed. Cotter worked tirelessly, carrying his patients to the dressing station where he collected fresh bandages and dressings before making his way back to the firing line to collect another casualty. Like the earlier attack, the Allied forces again suffered the disappointment of having to retreat when the second attempt to capture Gaza was abandoned as, once more, the order came to retire.

Later that night, the commanding officer wandered the tent lines. He found Cotter sitting alone, his head in his hands, trying to make sense of the day's battle. As the officer stopped, he put a hand on the exhausted Digger's shoulder. 'You did well today, Tibby', he told him. Straining to open his eyes, the trooper could only mutter a humble, 'Thanks, Sir, but we lost a lot of good friends today, didn't we?'

Tibby was promoted to lance corporal on 26 May 1917, but the responsibilities of rank were of no interest to him and, less than six weeks later, he asked to revert to trooper.³ It was later that year, in October, that Tibby was notified his brother had been killed on the Western Front.

After two frontal attacks had failed to take Gaza, the high command devised a plan, not to take the stronghold in the first instance, but instead to use a wide out-flanking attack via Beersheba, a fortified town some forty kilometres from Gaza. 'Z' Day was 31 October 1917 and more than fifty thousand troops were committed to the action.

At dawn, the allied attack was launched. Taking Beersheba and its vital water wells was a tough mission for the men of the light horse. They had the most difficult task—to travel the furthest and to attack from the desert. Into the bargain, their beloved Walers had been without water for up to 48 hours.

The men of the 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments, as the Divisional Reserve, spent most of the day sweating out the battle in a dry wadi.⁴ With their water bottles all but empty, both the Diggers and the horses were keen to get in and get the job done.

As the shadows lengthened and the sun began to set, the town and its wells had still not been captured. If their objective could not be reached by nightfall, the attack would have to be abandoned, and the troopers and their thirsty mounts would face a 24-hour march to the nearest water.

General Chauvel assembled his senior staff and outlined the situation. Brigadier Grant, the commander of the 4th Light Horse Brigade stepped forward and stated that, if given a free hand, he could take the town. His proposed plan was a mounted charge against the eastern defences with two regiments, the 4th and 12th.



AWM J00960. Guns captured at Beersheba.



AWM P02279.003. Beersheba, Palestine, 31 October 1917. The dead bodies of Australian soldiers killed in the charge on Beersheba lie in a row on the ground. The dead men were members of the 12th and perhaps the 4th Australian Light Horse Regiments. The body marked with an X is that of 924 Trooper (Tpr) Albert Cotter of the 12th Light Horse Regiment (12ALH).

who were close at hand and ready to attack. After careful consideration of Grant's plan of action, Chauvel gave approval to proceed.

As the brigadier and his two commanding officers searched for a suitable forming-up place for the charge, the squadron sergeant majors galloped along the wadi marshalling the horsemen to take up their formations.

The Diggers tightened their saddle straps and whispered words of encouragement into their horses' ears. Cotter put his foot in the stirrup and hoisted himself into the saddle as the mounted stretcher-bearers took their places in the line.

The two regiments took either side of a dirt road, the 12th on the left and the 4th on the right. Ahead of them, six kilometres away across an open plain, lay Beersheba. Three kilometres to their front, and between the horsemen and the town, stretched the Turkish trenches.

The horses fidgeted as they waited in the line. They flared their nostrils and sniffed the air—they could smell the water. As the line moved off at a walk, the troopers tightened their grip on the reins and pulled their hats down firmly on their heads.

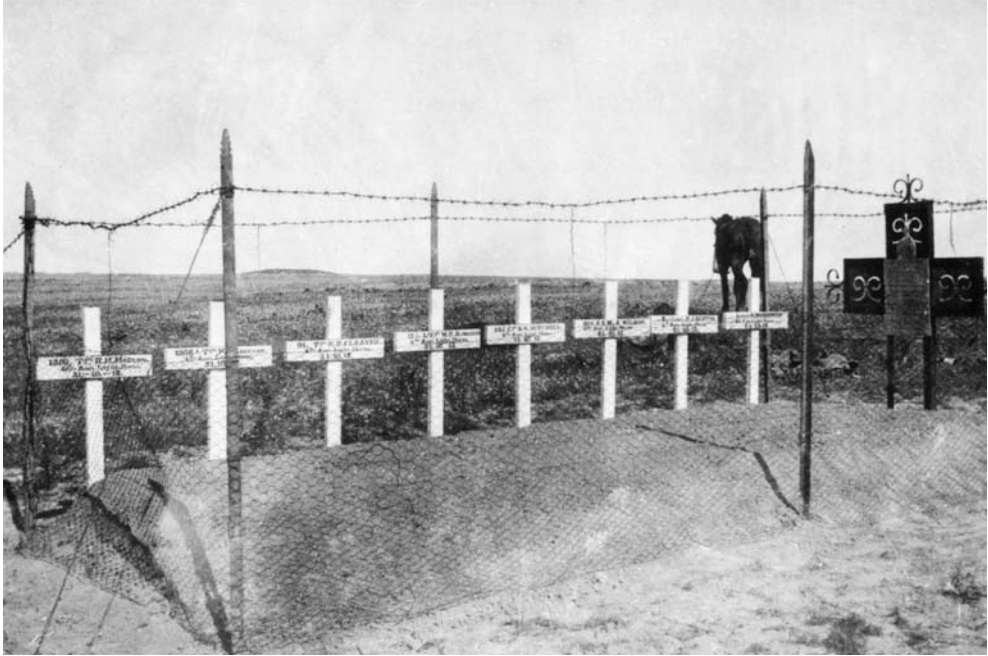
The pace quickened to a trot, increased to a canter, then the order was given to *Charge!* About two kilometres from the trenches, the Diggers heard the whistle of incoming artillery rounds. The shells exploded amongst the galloping ranks, cutting down both men and horses. Cotter swallowed hard as his troop approached the line of explosions. Putting his head down close to the horse's neck, he felt the shockwaves of the explosions and the heat of the metal splinters as they whistled past him. Suddenly, he was through. As he glanced back under his arm, he realized they were now below the trajectory of the guns.

Then Cotter observed a flickering orange flame coming from the Turkish trench lines—machine guns! He watched men thrown from their saddles, and horses falter and stumble, as the rounds slammed into their bodies.

His primary concern was survival as he ran the gauntlet of the deadly barrage. At breakneck speed, he passed the bodies of fallen mates. He did not hesitate as he spurred his horse to stay with the charge, leaving the casualties to be attended by the field ambulances.

On reaching the trenches, he was confronted by scenes of utter chaos. Diggers, both mounted and dismounted, were lashing out at the Turks amid rearing animals that were caught up in the melee. Cotter noticed a Turkish field gun, with its detachment of horses and men, retreating towards Beersheba. Though unarmed, he set off after them in an attempt to stop the gun. As he approached, the Turks threw down their weapons in a gesture of surrender, but, when Cotter leant down to grab the lead horse, one of the Turks produced a concealed pistol and shot him in the back of the head. His limp body fell from the saddle.⁶

Nearby, a number of Cotter's mates had witnessed the cowardly incident. They were incensed. Digging their spurs into their horses' flanks and with revolvers drawn, they galloped towards the Turks. Dragging the horse team to a halt, they grabbed the offenders by their collars, forcing them to dismount. Ignoring the pleas for mercy, the enraged light horsemen played judge, jury and executioner.⁷



AWM H15569. Beersheba. An iron cross and eight wooden crosses erected by the 4th Regiment ALH over the graves of their fallen comrades.

Beersheba was to be Albert Tibby Cotter's final innings in his last test—he gave it his all. Today he lies at rest beneath the immaculately kept grounds of the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, Beersheba.

Notes

- 1 Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW Attorney General's Department
- 2 Newspaper Headline, 'Trooper Albert Cotter, Noted Cricketer. Killed in Action', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 Nov 1917, page 4
- 3 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 924 L/Corporal A Cotter
- 4 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 12th Light Horse Regiment AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 5 Jones, I, *The Australian Light Horse*, Time Life Books, Sydney, 1987
- 6 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume VII, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 7 Sloan Bolton, *A Dream of the Past*, privately printed by the family