



General Sir Harry CHAUVEL GCMG, KCB

(1865-1945)



Lieutenant-General Chauvel at Maribyrnong Camp, March 1923

General Chauvel was Australia's first Lieutenant General, the first Australian to command a Corps, and Australia's first ('full') General.

He was an active member of the United Service Club since he was a young officer.

Henry ("Harry") George Chauvel served in the Boer War, and in the Gallipoli, Sinai, and Palestine campaigns of the Great War. He was the first Australian to attain the rank of lieutenant-general and later general, and the first Australian to lead a corps. He was also a member of the United Service Club.

He was born on 16 April 1865 at Tabulam in northern New South Wales (about half-way between Lismore and Casino), second son of Charles Henry Edward Chauvel, grazier and cattle-breeder, and his wife Fanny Ada Mary, née James. Chauvel was educated at Sydney Grammar School but had a final year at Toowoomba Grammar before taking his place on his father's cattle-station on the Clarence River.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

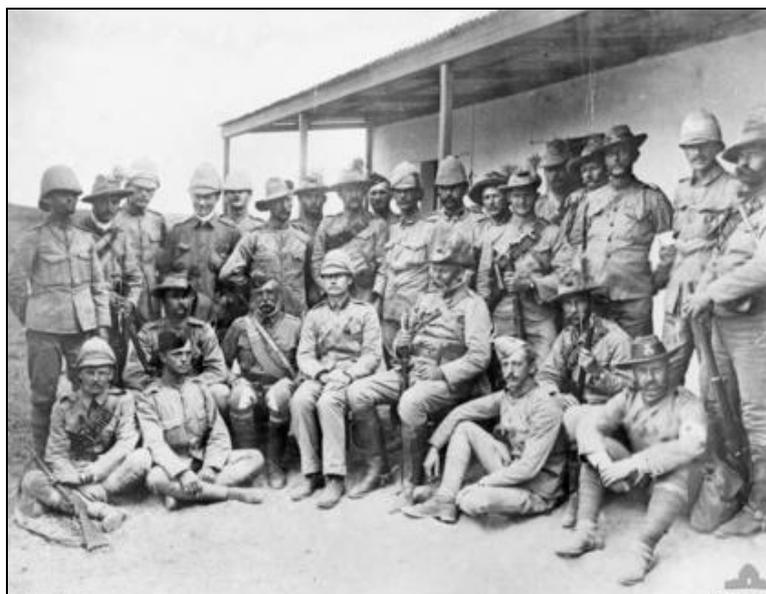
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In 1885, when the volunteer movement was reviving, his father (Major CHE Chauvel) raised the Upper Clarence Light Horse in which his son was commissioned the next year. Harry's ambition was to follow family tradition and join the British Army, there being little scope in the diminutive colonial forces, but his father's losses from drought made Sandhurst and the cavalry impossible.

In 1888 the family moved to the Darling Downs in Queensland. Harry was compelled to resign from the New South Wales forces, but he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Queensland Mounted Infantry (QMI) in 1890. He managed the Canning Downs South property for three years.

During this period, Harry and his friend Percy Ricardo (a fellow QMI Officer and a fellow USC member) popularised the wearing of emu plumes in the hats of the QMI.¹

He served during the 1891 shearers' strike and in 1896 he transferred to the Queensland Permanent Forces with the rank of captain and initially served as adjutant of the Moreton Regiment. He was selected as part of a 20-strong group of the Queensland Jubilee Contingent in 1897 to march through London in the Queen's Jubilee parade², staying-on in England for a year for courses and attachments to regular infantry.



A group of British and Australian officers in South Africa during the Boer War. Major Chauvel is squatting with rifle in the second row right of centre. Fellow USC members are also pictured: Lt Col Percy Ricardo seated with rifle slightly right of centre; and Lt Bill Glasgow standing with rifle between Ricardo and Chauvel.

In 1899 he commanded one of two companies of QMI in the Boer War. Chauvel served with distinction in the South African War as a major in the 1st Queensland Mounted Infantry, taking part in the relief of Kimberley, the advance to Pretoria and the battle of Diamond Hill. At the crossing of the Vet River he personally captured a troublesome machine-gun. For a time he led a mixed force, known as Chauvel's Mounted Infantry, in operations in eastern Transvaal.

¹ Major Percy Ricardo and Henry, after a weekend socialising together at Franklyn Vale station (part-owned by Percy), at Grandchester in the Lockyer Valley began to wear the feathers from a dead pet emu when they were serving in the West Moreton Mounted infantry. They later served together during the Shearer's Strike operations and encouraged the QMI troopers to catch an emu and wear the plumes in their hats. They are worn to this day, not only by troops in QMI, but by all Royal Armoured Corps personnel.

² Fellow officer and fellow USC member, Lt William Thomas Glasgow also marched in the Queensland contingent.

Returning to Australia in 1901 he took command of the 7th Australian Commonwealth Horse as a lieutenant-colonel, but the war ended before he reached Durban. For his services in South Africa, Chauvel was appointed CMG and mentioned in dispatches; he was also given the brevet of lieutenant-colonel.



Lieutenant Colonel Chauvel, 31 May 1902

When he returned to Australia he found himself an officer of the newly-formed Australian Army and remained in staff appointments in Queensland until 1911 (apart from a short period in South Australia reorganising the mounted troops).

During this period, he and Major Brudenall White regularly played tennis with the Jopp family at their home in Newmarket in Brisbane. Lieutenant-Colonel Chauvel married Sybil Jopp in All Saint's Anglican Church in Wickham Terrace (a few hundred metres downhill from our present club house and still surviving) on 16 June 1906.



All Saints Church c1910

In the next decade Chauvel established a reputation as a trainer, especially of officers; many who attended his staff rides were to distinguish themselves in the Great War.

In 1911 Chauvel became adjutant general and played a key role when the compulsory system was being set up and the Royal Military College was being developed at Duntroon. This work was only partly completed when, in 1914, he was sent to London to be Australian representative on the Imperial General Staff.

By the time he and his family reached England, Europe was at war and Australia was preparing an expeditionary force. Chauvel was appointed to command the 1st Light Horse Brigade³. He served usefully at the War Office until he went to Egypt in December. His visits to Salisbury Plain had convinced him that the camps would not be ready for the A.I.F. and his urgent representations to Sir George Reid, high commissioner in London, influenced the historic decision to disembark the force in Egypt.

During the Gallipoli campaign the three light horse brigades were quickly called-for as reinforcements for the infantry, but Chauvel and the other brigadiers stubbornly insisted that their brigades go as complete units, although dismounted. Brigadier-General Chauvel landed on 12 May, taking command of the vital sector around Pope's, Quinn's and Courtney's posts. He held these positions against all Turkish attacks. During that time, he became known for his coolness and courage.



Brigadier-General Chauvel outside his HQ in Monash Valley, Gallipoli

After two short periods in command of the New Zealand and Australian Division at Gallipoli, Chauvel was promoted major-general and took command of the 1st Division on 6 November 1915 and led it through the evacuation and the subsequent expansion of the AIF in Egypt. In December 1915 he was appointed commander of the new Australian and New Zealand Mounted Division.

In the first battle of Gaza on 26-27 March 1917, the newly formed Imperial Mounted Division was placed under his command. Immediately after the unsuccessful second battle of Gaza, 17-19 April 1917, Chauvel succeeded to the command of the Desert Column, thus becoming the first Australian to lead a corps. When General Sir Edmund Allenby became commander-in-chief in June 1917, he reorganized the army into three corps, giving Chauvel the Desert Mounted Corps of three divisions.

³ He was the only Australian regular officer, other than Major General Bridges, to obtain a senior command in the original Australian Imperial Force (AIF) – the remainder were volunteers from the militia.

In August 1917 he became the first Australian to attain the rank of lieutenant-general and the first Australian to command a corps.

For his part in the successes at Beersheba, the Plain of Philistia, and Jerusalem, Chauvel was appointed KCB.

In the reorganization in the spring of 1918, a fourth division was added to Chauvel's corps, which now consisted of the Anzac and Australian Mounted Divisions and the 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions.

The next British major offensive was launched 19 September, beginning on the Mediterranean flank, near Jaffa. The battle of Megiddo was one of the most completely successful operations of the war; only the Turkish army beyond the Jordan escaped the catastrophe and it was harried across the desert by the Anzac Mounted Division and the Arabs.

Giving the Turks no time to recover, Chauvel destroyed their forces around Haifa and Lake Tiberias and made plans for the pursuit to Damascus; then having forced the passage of the Jordan north of Lake Tiberias on 28 September, he drove the enemy across the Golan Heights and rode for Damascus with two divisions while his third entered Deraa and drove the Turks northwards with Arab help. He entered Damascus on 1 October and after a short pause he was ordered to march on Aleppo, 200 miles (322 km) to the north.

Aleppo fell to an Arab force on 25 October. There had been little fighting during the advance; this was fortunate, for Chauvel's tired divisions were melting away, ravaged by malaria and typhus. Six days later the war in the Near East came to an end.

Many reasons may be adduced for this overwhelming success but not the least was Chauvel's planning of his successive thrusts, his co-ordination of his widely spread forces, and the special care that he gave to the logistical basis of all his operations.



1919

Returning to Australia in September 1919, Chauvel was appointed Inspector General (then our most-senior post) in 1919 and from 1923 he was concurrently Chief of the General Staff.

In November 1929 Chauvel was promoted general (ie 'full' general), the first Australian to attain this rank. His retirement next April was almost a national occasion; large public dinners were held in his honour in Melbourne and Sydney.

Retirement was for Chauvel a fruitful experience; directorships in three important companies gave him new interests and he now had time for ex-servicemen's causes. He was for many years chairman of the trustees of the Australian and Victorian war memorials, a senior patron of Melbourne Legacy, and active in the work of the Australian Red Cross and the Young Men's Christian Association.

In 1937 Chauvel led the Australian Services Contingent at the coronation of King George VI.

In World War II, General Chauvel was in uniform again and on the move around the country, serving as Inspector-in-Chief of the Volunteer Defence Corps.



General Chauvel (centre) inspecting training with Owen guns.

In 1944 his health began to fail and he died in Melbourne on 4 March 1945, survived by his wife and children. He was cremated after a state funeral.

As a soldier, Chauvel's courage and calmness were matched by his humanity which was extended to the enemy as well as his own men. He was always well forward in battle; in the field he lived simply, sleeping in his greatcoat on the sand when his force was on the move. Loyalty was one of his chief characteristics. Chauvel seemed shy and reserved, in Birdwood's phrase 'very retiring', so that some found him aloof. In reality he was a warm, uncomplicated man, with a keen sense of humour. He rarely sent written orders of the day but he made a point of visiting and addressing troops who had done well or had suffered heavy casualties.

As an active member of the United Service Club in his younger days, Chauvel is mentioned several times in our history book⁴, including delivering educational lectures (for example, in 1910 Lieutenant Colonel Chauvel delivered a lecture entitled 'Staff Rides'). We have a print of a portrait of Chauvel and his commanders in 'Light Horse Corner' of the ante-room in the club house. Several of the commanders were also members of the Club.

Sources included:

- Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 7, (MUP), 1979
- Various web pages, eg <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/chauvel-sir-henry-george-harry-5569>; www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/fiftyaustralians/7; <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/1093510>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Chauvel; <https://loredanacrupi.wordpress.com/2015/04/16/harry-chauvel-a-born-cavalry-officer/>
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents

⁴ *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton