

The Horse Soldier

Teachers' notes

Introduction

'Bandy jerked her head. I felt her shiver and neigh to the other horses. Then a hand went up in the distance, and the soldiers urged their horses into a slow canter.'

When the shadow of war descends on Australia in 1914, a boy and his horse set off for war in the Middle East. With water rations gone, they charge the enemy across six kilometres of open ground to reach the wells at Beersheba. In one moment of dash and bravura, both Jason's and Bandy's destinies are set as the battle unfolds, with heroic and tragic consequences.

The Horse Soldier follows the story of a young Australian soldier as he grows up on the Hawksbury River in NSW, developing a strong bond with his horse 'Bandy'. That bond is broken when the Australian army takes horses from the farm to serve with the 4th Light Horse regiment in Jordan. They are reunited when Jason enlists and they set off for war in the Middle East together.

Both Jason and Bandy suffer the same problem as other horses and riders in the desert: the lack of water. The town of Beersheba, which lies at the end of the Jordan valley, is not only strategically important but contains the only water wells for hundreds of miles.

With their water rations gone, and with only bayonets for weapons, Jason's regiment is ordered to charge across six kilometres of open ground, during a fierce dust and sand storm, cheating bombs, shells and bullets, to reach the wells of Beersheba.

Literacy

Research WWI and soldiers' experiences in the Australian Lighthorse. Write a short piece about the conflicts they were involved in and the now-famous Charge at Beersheba, the last mounted cavalry charge in history!

Written and illustrated by Mark Wilson
Published by Windy Hollow Books

What was so special about the Australian soldiers' horses, called 'Whalers'? (Answer: specially bred tough stockhorses. They were strong and had great endurance). Write a short piece to profile them.

Look up the website www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/boysoldiers.asp and write a short account of what you find. Note: Research how the authorities allowed young men to enlist.

Visit *Legends and Traditions of the Great War*

<http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/heritag2.htm>. Write a short piece on what you find there.

Research Anzac day and write a short piece about what you think it stands for today.

Mark Wilson's text is spare and suggestive. The horror of war is hinted at but it is not graphically confronting. How and where in the text has he done this.

Research and write a short piece on what happened to the Australian horses when the war ended.

Discussion Points

What does the term 'bravery' mean to today's youth? Compare with the term in the context of the story.





What might have been in the young soldier's mind as he rode into battle for the first time?

Discuss how Mark Wilson conveys a strong sense of place and character in the work.

Research and discuss the effect WW1 had on Australian society.

The Horse Soldier's story is told in simple language and the visual and written narrative conveys a strong sense of place and character, with maps, telegrams and order sheets bringing a detailed historical backdrop to the story. Discuss this narrative style.

Look up 'Words, Expressions & Terms Popularized 1914-1918' *The Legends and Traditions of the Great War*. <http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/wordswar.htm>. Discuss.

Visual Literacy

The illustrations are impressionist on some spreads, while others are stark and confronting. A sense of nostalgia is created through these images, as if we are looking at an old photograph book. Discuss.

Discuss the cover of the book and what it conveys about the story, particularly the setting.

How does the format and design of the book influence your reading of it? Discuss.

Do a drawing of a Lighthorseman with his horse and all his equipment.

The medium is mainly acrylic paint on canvas. Try to create your own painting in this medium (which can be

used on paper), showing the impressions of war you gained from the story.

Some illustrations are just pencil sketches. Discuss why Mark Wilson may have used this medium for particular illustrations, and your impression of them.

How do the colour themes on various pages affect your interpretation of this work?

The Australian War Memorial has much information on the charge by the Lighthorse at Beersheba, which you can research. Create your own Lighthorse Project Display.

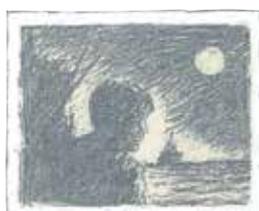
Further Research

The study of statistics relating to war, the loss of lives, and casualties, might also lend itself to related mathematics activities.

Research the work of Mark Wilson, particularly his historical fiction.

What were the lessons learned from WW1, which was called, at the time, 'the war to end all wars'.

The Australian Government has begun (?) four years of commemoration activities for the Anzac Centenary. (see <http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/index.htm>) They are implementing a public awareness and schools education program to celebrate not only the Anzacs who served at Gallipoli and the Western Front, but those who fought in all theatres of war, including the Middle East, in WW1. Research the themes and activities of these celebrations.





Conclusion

The charge by the Australian Lighthorse at Beersheba was the last daring act of a day-long fight by combined British Commonwealth forces to capture the wells at *Beersheba*. It was also a turning point in the Allies war against the Ottoman Empire. That the story has slipped through the cracks of history is almost as much a tragedy as the sacrifice of those young Australian soldiers and their horses who paid the ultimate price on that fateful day. This work should encourage students to read more widely about the Charge at Beersheba, WW1 in general and its aftermath. It should also remind them that the sacrifice of so many who have served this country should never be forgotten.

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Author/illustrator Profile

Mark Wilson is an award-winning author/illustrator with 24 books in print in 7 languages worldwide. He says 'Stories of our incredible history and magnificent wildlife need to be told', and those are recurring themes in his picture books and the workshops for young readers he conducts throughout Australia.

He won a 2014 WAYR Award (*Inside the World of Tom Roberts*), the 2014 CBCA Notable Picture book Award (*Vietnam Diary*), and *A Day to Remember* won a 2013 CBCA award. *Inside the World of Tom Roberts* was shortlisted in the Aurealis Awards 2013, *Angel of Kokoda* was a 2012 CBCA award winner and was also shortlisted in the 3rd CJ Picture Book Awards International.

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