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The Kelly Gang reborn

The first Australian mounted unit to see active service in the Second World War.

By Peter J Dean

In the pre-dawn chill the sentries shifted in their positions and stared at the rocky hills and mountains beyond their position. The camp stirred to the familiar smell of horse feed and the jingle of a bridle as the men, adorned in their distinctive slouch hats, prepared for their early morning patrol. Before them lay the vast expanse of the Middle East. The desert, rock and sands of Syria.

The Middle East; desert, sand, horses and slouch hats invokes the images of the triumphant Australian Light Horse of World War One. It brings to mind images and memories such as the charge at Beersheba and the ride to Damascus. But this was not 1918, but 1941. Most of the men who mounted these steady beasts had not been born as the Light Horse had conducted the last great mounted campaign in military history. In the intervening years the horse had given way to sounds and throbs of diesel engines, to armoured plate and the crack of high velocity cannon. So what were these Australian horsemen doing in Syria, a generation on from the Light Horse and light years on in technology?

The “Kelly Gang” as this Light Horse troop came to be known was the first mounted Australian unit to see active service in the Second World War. They formed part of the 7th Australian Division AIF (2 Brigades) under the command of Major-General John Lavarack who were responsible for the coastal and central sectors of the British invasion of Vichy French held Syria.

Although vastly outnumbered and outgunned by the opposing Vichy French forces the operations that commenced on 6 June, 1941 were initially successful. By the 14 June the Australians had reached the line of Sidon -Jezzine-Merdajayoun. The French command reacted by assembling their superior armoured forces to counter-attack the advancing Australian units. The coastal thrust was brought to a standstill and Merdajayoun recaptured.

The Australian forces around Merdajayoun had been weak and a continued Vichy French advance in this sector threatened to cut the Australian line of communications. Major General Lavarack ordered Brigadier F.H. Berryman, the 7th Division’s artillery commander (CRA), to recapture Merdajayoun. ‘Berryforce’ as it became known included a number of infantry and artillery units and the bulk of the 6th (mechanised) Cavalry Regiment AIF.

Berryman’s force battled hard to retake the town, but not even the bravery of Lieutenant Roden Cutler VC could inspire the Australian troops to overcome the superior French forces. While ‘Berryforce’ hammered away at Merdajayoun

the Brigadier was becoming increasingly worried about his right flank. Although impassable to armoured vehicles the French were making considerable use of their large numbers of cavalry in the rocky and mountainous terrain to harass the Australian positions.

To solve this problem Berryman decided to make use of the large number of French cavalry horses captured by the 2/33rd Battalion AIF. On the 22nd Brigadier Berryman informed Lieutenant Colonel D. Macarthur Onslow that his 6th Cavalry regiment was to form a horse troop to be used for flank security and outpost duty. Macarthur-Onslow selected C Squadron, many of whose personnel were immobilised due to the Regiment's losses in light tanks and carriers, to provide the personnel. The troop was officially activated 1500hrs and allocated on the unofficial code list as 'Kelly'. By 1900hrs it was simply known throughout the Regiment as the 'Kelly Gang'.

The Officer Commanding (OC) of C Squadron, Lieutenant Burt appointed Lieutenant A.B. Millard and Lieutenant C.A. Wade as the troop commanders and soon after the officers and men set about their work. The regiment had good foundations to draw upon for the horse troop. Being formed in 1939 in the rural areas of NSW many of its members had served in the pre-war Light Horse Militia regiments and many were the sons of World War I Light horsemen. They had been raised and trained as a mechanised cavalry regiment, but the men took to their task with enthusiasm and a great deal of improvisation. Sgt

Esler, the regimental cook became the Squadron Sargent-Major, Sargent Mechanic J.A. Wood became the troop farrier and Trooper A. Bell, normally a gunner, became the vet surgeon.

The "Kelly Gang" was organised into a Troop HQ and HQ section, four horse sections of eight men under the command of a sergeant or corporal, and a wireless Bren gun carrier for radio retransmission. The "Gangs" original 18 members were formed at the village of Dan and that night moved to a flank position at Bnerqi to begin operations.

The men found the horses well trained and in excellent condition, but the French saddlery uncomfortable and in poor condition. To remedy this the enterprising Lieutenant Burt went to Sarafrand in search of equipment from a near by British cavalry regiment, the North Somerset Yeomanry. Burt was not received enthusiastically by the British cavalry, being promptly escorted from their lines and only after an appeal to the Regiments senior officers did Burt over come the Yeomanry adjutant's outrage and make his way back to camp with all the equipment that he could carry.

From 23 June to 3 July armed with rifles and Bren's the "Kelly Gang" roamed the hills to the east of Khaim. Here they carried out patrols in the area encompassing Bmeriq-Hamane-Kafr Chebba-Mazraat. There was plenty of work and action for the men as they cleared the local villages and patrolled the

surrounding hills. On three separate occasions they came under heavy and sustained enemy fire at Hamane and were forced to withdraw.

The Kelly Gang's task was not an easy one. During this operation they gathered information, including the location of enemy artillery positions, that was invaluable to Brigadier Berryman and the forces attacking Merdajayoun. In addition they provided flank protection to the Australian forces and prevented French patrols from discovering the Australian strength and dispositions. These patrols were carried out in terrain that was so difficult that, at times, the horses had to be left behind and patrols continued on foot.

By the 24 June 'Berryforce' had retaken Merdajayoun and the fighting continued into the hills to the north. On 29 June Lavarack, elevated to corps command and control of the operations in Syria reallocated his forces and the British North Somerset Yeomanry relieved the Kelly Gang on 3 July. The Australian command, realising the benefits the Horse Troop gave to Brigadier Berryman's forces, decided not to disband this rather unorthodox and temporary. The Kelly Gang were subsequently moved join A Squadron, 6th Cavalry Regiment in the coastal region of Syria, a trek of over 70 miles, and tasked to continue its patrolling and flank protection for the Australian forces. In this new patrol area the Kelly Gang were faced with a number of difficulties. The terrain proved to be even more difficult than the hills surrounding

Merdayoun and were also faced with the recurring problem of supplying water for their mounts.

During the final advances of the campaign the Kelly Gang became increasingly active in providing support and protection parties for the artillery forward observation teams. On one such occasion after spotting enemy artillery positions from Ain el Hour the troop escorted the artillery team forward over very difficult terrain to help silence the guns with counter battery fire.

The operations in Syria drew to a successful conclusion on 13 July, 1941 and the Kelly Gang moved to Foster Taata and was disbanded the following day. It is difficult to judge the full impact that this small unit had on the Australian operations in Syria, however they admirably and professionally carried out a difficult task under trying conditions. They were formed at short notice and due to a lack of formal training were forced to improvise doctrine, organization and operational procedures. Brigadier Berryman commented that the "activities of the Kelly Gang on the flanks were more important than we knew at the time.", while the CO of the 6th Cavalry Regiment, Lt-Colonel Macarthur-Onslow, declared that he could not "speak too highly of the personnel and their versatility...[the] long hours of riding in most difficult country, the nights broken by shelling coupled with the general uncertainty of enemy night activity had made their task most trying...they lived up to the Regt's[sic] reputation of being able to adapt..."

The Kelly Gang certainly made a valuable contribution to the Australian success in Syria. All of the Australian forces in Syria had been pushed to the limit of their endurance. The demanding nature of this operation and the success that the "Kelly Gang" achieved was a testament to the skill and versatility of the men who made up the 6th Cavalry Regiment. Time and again they were asked to carry out varied tasks not normally allocated to a cavalry regiment including; manning anti-tank guns, providing Machine gun sections, laying mines and operating the horse troop. One of the Regiment's troopers was heard to say "God help us if someone captures a submarine."