THE LIGHTHORSEMEN

(Australian, 1987, 116 Minutes)

World War I was the first truly global conflict. Indeed, much of the instability and turmoil in the Middle East can be directly traced back to the disruptions of the war in the area. In *The Lighthorsemen*, it is 1917 and the British campaign against Ottoman forces in Palestine has bogged down in front of a Turkish line running from Gaza to Beersheba. Astute British intelligence officer Major Meinertzhagen devises a deception plan to convince the Turks to withdraw troops from Beersheba to face the expected main British attack at Gaza. In actuality, the major strike will be a bold flanking attack on Beersheba by a regiment of Australian mounted infantry.

Although a bit melodramatic, the film does a very good job of explaining the military challenges that faced British Commonwealth forces as they tried to force the Turks out of Palestine. In going beyond the Western Front in France, the film also gives a better sense of the importance of the Sinai, Gaza and Palestine to the overall Allied war effort.

This key attack, launched from across a waterless desert on October 31, 1917, helped to break the Turkish line and paved the way for General Allenby’s advance to Jerusalem and Damascus in 1918. *The Lighthorsemen,* like other contemporary Australian war films such as Gallipoli and Breaker Morant, also portrays some of the real antagonisms between Australian and British troops in World War I. Meinertzhagen actually fosters such feelings as part of his plans of deception against the Turks. An especially tragic aftermath for the Australians was the fate of their personal horses. Because of strict quarantine laws, only one of 14,000 horses returned to Australia after the war. The rest were sold on the Egyptian market or shot by their owners.