



The late glory of the New Zealand cavalry over the conquest of Tel Aviv



The headquarters of New Zealand fighters near Jaffa, around 1917

Australian War Memorial

The soldiers from the island state were the first to cross the Yarkon, but their people did not bother to preserve their heritage of fighting in the Land of Israel. The Scots soldiers have picked up the glory, and now two Israeli researchers are trying to redress the injustice

By Ofer Aderet

Every morning, on his way to work, Shmuel Giller passes by Hill Square in northern Tel Aviv. In the center of the square, on the top of a sandstone hill surrounded by dense vegetation, stands an old, hidden memorial pillar commemorating a historical event that is now 100 years old.

In December 1917, the Scottish soldiers commanded by John Hill, after whom the square was named, marched the nearby Yarkon River in a campaign to conquer the land from the Turks in World War I.

From a hundred years away, very few residents of the area bother to climb the little hill to read the inscription on the memorial page. Giller, an architect and researcher of the history of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, did so and was disappointed by what he discovered. The caption describes how on the night of December 21, 1917, the Scottish soldiers passed the Yarkon River "on light bridges and rafts" on their way to conquer another target that was in the hands of the Turks.

There is no doubt that the friendly Scots deserve respect for their fighting in the area, Giller says, but there is no justification to exclude the New Zealand soldiers who were the first to cross the Yarkon a month before their skirts-clad colleagues.

This memorial page is not the only one that ignores the role of the soldiers of the Wellington Armed Riders unit in conquering the city. Some of Tel Aviv's local history books also read that "the first to enter Tel Aviv" were Hill's cavalry, with total disregard for the New Zealanders who preceded them.

Eran Tirosh, chairman of the World Heritage Organization in Israel, believes that the responsibility lies primarily with the New Zealanders themselves, who did not bother to preserve their combat heritage in the Land of Israel, as did their colleagues, especially the Australians. It's a little bit their fault, "he says," only now, from a hundred years away, did they start to wake up. "

Tirosh: The New Zealanders were not commemorated because, unlike the Australians, they did not bother to preserve their heritage of fighting in Israel



New Zealand Warriors in Cairo, World War I Australian War Memorial

Tirosh has a significant part in the awakening of New Zealand. "I rocked them terribly," he says, and says that about a year ago he conducted a comprehensive tour of the delegation from New Zealand on their main battlefield sites in Israel. "I told them about their glorious battles," he says.

The New Zealanders' part in the conquest of the land from the Turks began on October 31, when they participated in the conquest of Beersheba. Two weeks later they took over the battle of a road and read about the area of the Hebrew colonies of Rehovot, Ness Ziona and Rishon Le Zion. On November 16, the New Zealanders entered Jaffa on horseback. "They were happy to see the oranges, and they got drunk from Sharon's nearby wine," says Tirosh.

However, one battle was overshadowed by success, which is partly responsible for the fact that after 100 years in northern Tel Aviv, the New Zealanders are no longer remembered. On November 24, New Zealanders were given a new mission: to cross the Yarkon River from south to north, and to tail in the Turks. "They ran up the river, and crossed it with a success that was above and beyond what was expected," says Tirosh. Then the New Zealanders arrived to Sheikh Munis, now the Ramat Aviv neighborhood, in an operation that the organization's chairman calls "brilliant."

But success was only temporary. The Turks, who were "under atomic pressure," as Tirosh said, pushed the New Zealanders the next day - and so the success of the first day turned into a painful defeat on the second day. According to Tirosh, the defeat left "a lot of heroism and not a few casualties."

Giller, impressed by the stories of the New Zealanders, feels they have been wronged. "The celebrations that are being held in Be'er Sheva, Jerusalem and other places are reminiscent of other soldiers, especially the Australians, but the New Zealanders, who shed blood when they crossed the Yarkon River, have completely forgotten," he says.



Giller at Hill Square in Tel Aviv, in September

Dudu Bachar

"But I also have to be fair and say that despite the noise they have been making here in recent days, they were no more than 10-15 percent of the Allenby army," Tirosh says.

Recently, the researcher from Tel Aviv contacted the distant island state and succeeded in locating a 100-year-old historical relic. In the archives of a local college in Wellington, the flag was recently raised by the New Zealand soldiers in Jaffa after the conquest of Jerusalem. The person who deposited him there in the middle of the last century was one of the commanders of the New Zealand forces in the country, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Powers, who returned to New Zealand from World War I with some decorations, and published a book documenting the history of his soldiers in the Holy Land.

Giller deepened his investigation of Pavels, and thus became acquainted with the story of another forgotten New Zealand heroine: his mare, Bess, who was the only one of the New Zealand war horses who returned safely to their country after the war. After her death, in 1934, Pavels buried her in a coffin and erected a monument on her grave that became a pilgrimage site to mark the bravery of New Zealand war horses.

Bess's grave, a forgotten New Zealand heroine, has become a pilgrimage site to mark the bravery of New Zealand war horses



New Zealand soldier mounted on the mare, 1917 Australian War Memorial

A few weeks ago, a package arrived at Giller's office, located near the site where the New Zealanders had crossed the Yarkon River. When he opened it, he found the flag sent him by his new friends across the ocean. The giant flag, which is in danger of disintegration, is being sent to a conservation laboratory and will be displayed next month in the exhibition "General and Gentleman - Allenby at the Gates of Jerusalem" at the Tower of David Museum.

Even before that, on November 15, Giller and Tirosh will tell about the New Zealanders' share of the conquest of Jaffa and Tel Aviv at the 100th anniversary of the first Yarkon crossing, to be held at the Independence House. Thus, they hope, a small historical injustice will be corrected, local and forgotten, and honor will be restored to the New Zealand soldiers and horses who were the first to cross the Yarkon in north Tel Aviv.