



Brigadier General William GRANT CMG, DSO*, VD

[1870 – 1939]



William Grant, grazier and soldier, was born on 30 September 1870 at Pleasant Creek (Stawell), Victoria, son of Scottish-born Edmund Craigie Grant, miner and later mine-owner and grazier, and his wife Elizabeth Ann, née Parkinson, from England.

He was educated at Brighton Grammar School and Ormond College at the University of Melbourne from which he graduated Bachelor of Civil Engineering in 1893 and received a rowing blue. He was employed on railway construction in New South Wales in 1894, but after his father's death that year he gave up engineering for the land and bought Bowenville station on the Darling Downs, Queensland, in 1896.

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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He married Eveline Ryan Woolcott at All Saints Anglican Church, St Kilda, Melbourne, on 21 July 1897; they had three sons and two daughters.

In 1901 Grant was commissioned as a Lieutenant in the Queensland Mounted Infantry (militia). He was old for his rank (31 years) but education and a flair for soldiering made up for this. 'He was a typical light horse subaltern', according to General Sir Harry Chauvel, 'tall, lithe and wiry, and full of dash and energy, and I early had my eye on him as a possible leader'. Promotion came quickly; as a Major he took command of the 14th Light Horse in 1910 and was made Lieutenant-Colonel next year.

In the reorganization of 1912 his regiment became the 3rd (Darling Downs) Light Horse. It was not until March 1915 that Grant was offered command of the 11th Light Horse Regiment in the Australian Imperial Force. The unit went to Egypt with the 4th Light Horse Brigade only to be disbanded and dispatched to Gallipoli late in August as reinforcements to other light horse regiments. Grant, with one of his squadrons, was allotted to the 9th Light Horse who were engaged in the futile struggle for Hill 60. When the commanding officer of the 9th was killed, Grant took command on 29 August, remaining with the regiment until the evacuation when it returned to Egypt.

He resumed command of the 11th Light Horse when it was re-formed early in 1916 but served under British command. That year he took part in a number of successful minor operations in Sinai where he quickly won a reputation for his 'phenomenal sense of locality and direction'. In a raid on Maghara in October he led the column across trackless dune country and through fog so accurately that 'as daylight was breaking, the advanced screen was fired on by a Turkish outpost'. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in December.

On 14 February 1917, Grant led the 11th Light Horse out from Serapeum on a mission to sweep the remaining Turkish troops from the Sinai Peninsula. Grant learned from a British pilot that the Turks were evacuating Nekhl, a significant town in the central Sinai, situated roughly in the centre of the Sinai, atop the desert ranges. His men entered Nekhl riding with fixed bayonets on 17 February. The light horse had travelled some 150 miles in seven days across steep and rocky mountain tracks. Only a few Turks and Arabs were captured, but the action marked the end of the campaign in the Sinai.

After the 4th Light Horse Brigade had been re-formed as part of the Imperial Mounted Division, Grant led his 11th Regiment in the abortive 2nd battle of Gaza in April 1917. In August he was promoted temporary Brigadier General and given command of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade but a month later transferred to the 4th Light Horse Brigade (as a Colonel and temporary Brigadier General) on the eve of the 3rd battle of Gaza.



The Desert Mounted Corps began its most famous campaign on the night of 30 October. The tactics were similar to those at Rafa and Maghaba, with the mounted troops making a surprise night march, enveloping the left and rear of the enemy's position at Beersheba and attacking it from the east while the infantry attacked frontally from the south. The ANZAC Mounted Division was held up at Tel el Saba, the hill overlooking Beersheba, where the defenders held on until captured by the New Zealanders late in the day.

Lieutenant General Harry Chauvel ordered Grant to attempt a mounted attack on Beersheba, his goal being to take the town wells, which were believed to be vital to any further advance of the Desert Mounted Corps, before they could be destroyed. Chauvel reportedly tasked the Brigade to attack with the words "Put Grant straight at it!". That bold thrust in the gathering dusk suited Grant's impetuous temperament and provided a chance for his brigade to prove itself. The light horse did not carry swords but had sharpened their bayonet points some days before in anticipation of such a tactic.

The 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments formed up with their squadrons in three lines, each about 300 to 500 metres apart. Wielding their bayonets like swords, they moved forward at a trot while the 13-pounders of the British Notts Battery suppressed Turkish machine guns. Grant initially rode in the lead, but dropped back to the reserve line once the column was headed in the correct direction so as to control their subsequent movements. Three Turkish batteries opposed the light horsemen, but they moved forward so swiftly that the Turks could not range on them. The light horsemen swarmed over the Turkish positions and swept into the town, capturing all but two of the seventeen wells before they could be destroyed, while the Turks fled in disarray. The charge was one of the most brilliant feats of the campaign. Driven home at no great cost to the Australians, it was completely successful. The commander-in-chief, General Sir Edmund Allenby, personally decorated Grant with a Bar to his DSO the day after the charge.

Grant was prominent in the battles of 1918. In the 2nd Battle of the Jordan (30 April–4 May) his task was to cover the left flank of the Desert Mounted Corps while other troops captured Es Salt and attacked the main Turkish position. In spite of a rapid advance, he failed to reach and seize the main crossing of the Jordan at Jisr ed Damieh. Next morning the Turks attacked him in overwhelming strength. His brigade fell back, losing nine of the twelve guns supporting it; however, when reinforced, it prevented the enemy from cutting off the rest of the Australian Mounted Division in Es Salt.

Allenby acknowledged that Grant's withdrawal was ably conducted but considered that his defensive layout had been faulty, blaming him for the loss of the guns - the only guns which Australians lost to the enemy in the whole war except for those deliberately abandoned in the evacuation of Anzac. Grant had been sufficiently concerned about his defences to ask for an additional regiment before the Turkish attack but owing to the shortage of troops his request was refused.

In the triumphant battles of September 1918, presaging the collapse of Turkey, Grant led his brigade with success, notably in the fight for Semakh. The village was held by a strong garrison of German and Turkish troops. Riding by night with less than half the brigade, Grant surprised the defenders, the 11th Light Horse charging in the moonlight with swords drawn. They were surprised in their turn by the obstinate resistance of the enemy, forcing them to clear houses with the bayonet room by room, an experience probably unique in the campaign. The garrison of over 500 was killed or captured except for a handful who fled.

Grant commanded the Australian Mounted Division from 15 December 1917 to 2 January 1918, and from 8 November 1918 to 24 December 1918. He was awarded the Order of the Nile, 3rd class, in 1918 and appointed C.M.G. in 1919; he was mentioned in dispatches four times.



William Grant, by George Lambert, 1918

Grant returned to his property on the Darling Downs in August 1919 and within a year was appointed to command the 1st Light Horse Brigade in the Citizen Military Forces. In May 1921 this was designated 1st Cavalry Brigade and he remained in command until June 1925. He was placed on the retired list in 1928.

Colonel P. J. Bailey, who knew Grant better than most, described him as 'one of nature's gentlemen, a fine soldier and a firm friend of all Diggers'. He was known for his fairness and reliability and for his attention to every aspect of his command.

Grant sold Bowenville in 1931 and lived in Brisbane but in 1934 he bought Corack, a property near Dirranbandi in southern Queensland. He died suddenly of heart failure at Southport on 25 May 1939 and was cremated with military honours in Brisbane. He was survived by his wife and children.

Grant's uniform is in the possession of the military museum at Fortitude Valley.

Sources included:

- Various web pages
- *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
- *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 9, (MUP), 1983 A.J. Hill