In the fading afternoon light on October 31st 1917, the mounted infantry division of the 4th and 12th Regiments of the Australian Light Horse took part in the Charge of Beersheeba, one of the last great cavalry charges in history. Guy Haydon and his mare Midnight were part of that momentous day, and their story has now been immortalised in a children’s picture book.

Information and photos: Peter Haydon and Walker Books Australia
The capture of the wells of Beersheba against a well-entrenched enemy was a glorious hour in Australian military history. The audacious victory held the key to the Middle East campaign of World War I, and led to the liberation of Jerusalem and the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

Midnight’s story began 12 years earlier on a clear night on 31st October 1905, when a much-awaited foal bounced awkwardly but strongly to her feet for the first time. There she stood, black like the night as she nudged towards her mother, Moonlight. On her forehead was a small white star with three little peaks like the petals of a tiara pointing upwards.

It was Moonlight’s first foal at Bloomfield in the Upper Hunter Valley of New South Wales. She had been retired to stud after a ridden career where she excelled in all that had been asked of her, from chasing brumbies in the high country to days mustering cattle and a long hard droving trip to the Gulf.

Moonlight was by the well-bred stallion Young Dover, by Dover. Thomas Haydon would ride the 92 miles on Young Dover from Bloomfield to Maitland to do his banking. While there he would enter the stallion in the Maitland races, on occasions winning three races in the one day before riding him home again back up the valley to Blandford.

Moonlight was joined to the Haydon’s top sire Tester, who was never beaten on the track and became the leading sire of his time. His stock were the undisputed champions of the then popular short distance “Bridle Spurs” when the winner received a bridle. Midnight luckily inherited her father’s speed combined with the stamina of her mother.

Moonlight had a strong place in the heart of Thomas’ son Bernard. For her now to produce this lovely black filly by his prized stallion Tester was cause for celebration. Given the hour and her colour he named her Midnight. Little did he know and it would have been incomprehensible at the time, that this filly would travel even further and achieve more accolades than her mother.

Bernard’s second son Guy Haydon was born on 24th April 1889. He was a strapping 16 year old when Midnight was born and they formed an immediate partnership. He handled her as a foal and started her in all her training.

He spent many hours riding Midnight doing his work around the properties, training her as he went about his tasks. On weekends they would compete in the local bushmen’s carnivals and campdrafts. In 1907 as an 18 year old he won the prestigious Northern Challenge Polo Cup at Quirindi, the youngest to do so.

When World War I broke out, 25 year old Guy enlisted along with his brother Barney. Although Barney was only 19 at the time, his parents relented and let him go since Guy promised to look after his younger brother. Their older brother Frederick was to stay home to run the properties.

The brothers selected homebred horses to take with them. Usually geldings would have been chosen, however with Guy’s attachment to Midnight they reluctantly agreed he could take the good mare. At nine years old she was in the prime of her life.

The brothers assembled at Holsworthy Army camp on the outskirts of Sydney. Midnight and the other horses had been transported to Sydney by train. They sat proudly on their horses while their official photographs were taken. Sam brown, hat, plums, leggings, spurs, rifle, saddles and bridles were all in immaculate polished condition and everything in its exact place.

The 12th Light Horse had a spectacular farewell parade through the streets of Sydney, riding in a long column between the cheering crowds. The streets were packed with well-wishers and Guy felt very proud to be riding Midnight on such a grand occasion.

They departed Australia on the steamship Suevic on 12th June 1915. After landing in Egypt they spent six weeks in training near Cairo. Under the backdrop of the Pyramids they practiced combat drills with their horses and their horse holders.

The brothers then had to leave their horses behind when they were sent to Gallipoli as re-enforcements on 28th August 1915, attached to the 2nd Light Horse Brigade. They fought there until the troops were withdrawn four months later. The
conditions were very tough, with freezing, sleepless nights and lice in the dugouts.

They were very relieved to hear it was time to depart and continue the fight against the Turks on another front. The 12th Light Horse were re-assembled and re-mounted in Cairo. They were allocated horses and Guy was so disappointed when another horse was assigned to him. He spread the word and his heart leapt when a fellow sidled up to him saying he had found his mare. He said he noticed the Haydon brand on her near shoulder.

Intense preparation, training and manoeuvres were enacted daily to prepare the light horse for the demanding desert campaigns that lay ahead. During this period an intense rivalry developed between the Australian and British Calvary about who had the best horses.

To settle the score a competition day was arranged between the two armies. With Guy and Midnight being the standout combination of the 12th Light Horse, they were chosen to represent Australia against the best of the British.

Three events were contested in what was dubbed the “Desert Olympics”.

The first event was a short distance sprint race over a quarter of a mile. Little did the British know that Midnight was by the champion sire Tester, whose stock were rarely beaten over short distances back in Australia. Guy and Midnight won the event at a canter, easing down at the finish after establishing a commanding lead. Australia 1, England 0.

The second contest was a utility flags event involving obstacles and using their swords to complete tasks against the clock. Again Guy and Midnight prevailed, winning the event with a clear round in the quickest time. Australia 2, England 0.

The third event was an equitation test involving the dressage movements which the British thought they had cornered, as at home they did a lot of this type of training. They thought the Australians with their laidback approach would be easily beaten in these more formal equine movements. Again they underestimated Guy and Midnight. Guy being a fine all round horsemen had trained Midnight in her early education while riding her back on the farm. She would move off his legs while performing the bush tasks such as opening gates, to stop, back, extend and to do flying changes. To the astonishment of the British he won the point score event but only by a narrow margin. Australia 3, England 0.

The Australians were jubilant to win all three events and to be the clear winners of the Calvary Desert Olympics. Guy and Midnight were the heroes of the Australian Light Horse. It created a cultural shift in the respect the British Calvary had for the Australians and as the desert campaigns evolved they acknowledged the tougher bush reared Australian horses had come into their own. In fact they rated the Walers to be some of the finest cavalry horses ever seen.

The Australians took great care in the welfare of their horses, making sure they were well groomed with particular attention to their backs. The Australians had very little back problems compared to the 70% incidence of sore backs suffered by their neighbouring English squadron. They made sure their saddles were evenly balanced and that their quart pots and water bottles were firmly secured so they did not rattle. They did long marches at night so their horses were not out in the oppressive heat of the day, taking advantage of the cooler temperatures at night. The Sinai Desert proved a harsh environment on both men and horses with its heat and ever blowing wind and dust.

Midnight displayed the stamina and endurance typical of the Walers when during the Gaza campaign she remained continually under saddle for seven days and nights. Guy only averaged three hours sleep a day and Midnight was still going well and held her condition. Often the men would fall asleep in their saddles, catching much needed rest as the horses followed along in procession.

The Light Horse were involved in many successful battles clearing the Turks from Romani, El Arish, Magdhaba and Rafa, but firm resistance slowed the Allied progress around Gaza.

With the resistance at Gaza they decided to perform an outflanking exercise on the Turks so they could capture Beersheba and in doing so enable their push north to continue against the stronger Turkish lines at Gaza. They had to capture Abraham’s Wells at Beersheba before they could be destroyed by the enemy, or they would face the unthinkable prospect of no water for their horses.
They rode all night in the moonlight headed for Beersheba. It was a full moon and so light you could read a printed page. Somehow the mood was different as they grasped the significance of what lay ahead. They halted and spread out along a wadi about four miles from the town and waited. They could see the white buildings of Beersheba and the tower of the mosque. The trees they later discovered were Australian gum trees.

It was the 31st October 1917. They waited and waited in the wadi. Light was waning and the horses had not had water for 36 hours. There seemed only one course of action: capture the wells at Beersheba or perish. The order came through to “Mount Up”, they had to capture the wells at “All Cost”. Five minutes later they were on their way, charging towards the Turkish lines and into history.

This was to be the closing chapter in Guy and Midnight’s 12 year partnership. Unfortunately, Midnight was shot and killed while jumping an enemy trench. The bullet went through the mare, through the saddle and lodged within centimetres of Guy’s lower spine. Guy returned home without his beloved mare, but she had surely saved his life.

I began a search for a story within the story—I was searching for a tale of one horse and one rider among those brave 800—a story that would give readers a sense of atmosphere and participation and excitement about that historic event.

And that’s how Midnight’s story found me! I visited Bloomfield homestead in the Hunter Valley where Midnight was born. I was graciously granted access to Guy’s letters from the trenches at Gallipoli and throughout the campaign in Palestine.

Then, together with Frané, we travelled to the scene of the famous charge and retraced the places where Guy and Midnight camped in the last few days leading up to the charge.

For me, going to the setting I’m writing about, where the historical event actually occurred, is one of the crucial stages in bringing history to life. It is a fascinating part of the process of writing about the past.

This story ends on a solemn note, but Midnight is a hero and her inspiring story is one that I hope many young Australians will read, just as we read about other heroes whose stories have contributed to our national myth-making.

History is about listening and sharing stories. I hope our Midnight will encourage readers to think critically about the tragedy of war. I hope the story will linger in the reader’s memory long after the book is closed.

Illustrator, Frané Lessac talks about the creative process behind Midnight: The story of a light horse

There can be no better way to research than to follow in the footsteps of your characters. With Midnight, the first step was contacting Peter Haydon at Bloomfield Homestead in New South Wales, where Guy Haydon grew up and where Midnight was born. Mark and I shared our ideas about making a picture book based on their family folklore. To say the least, they were thrilled that we wanted to bring their family history to life for children.

Ali and Peter Haydon warmly welcomed us into their home and generously gave us access to their archive room, where Guy’s war relics are preserved. We also walked through the fields alongside the Pages River where Midnight was born and travelled up to the high country where Midnight’s bloodlines still roam free. The Haydon horses have a unique claim of being bred by the same family on the same property since the early 1830s.

Then Mark and I headed off to Israel to follow the trail of the light horsemen and their various stops at wells for the three days leading up to the charge at Beersheba.

Midnight’s story captured my heart. My greatest challenge was to capture the devoted bond between Midnight and Guy. I hope my paintings reflect a deep reverence for a light horseman and his beloved mare.

Author, Mark Greenwood talks about the inspiration for his new children’s book, Midnight: The story of a light horse

The spark to write about the light horse and the charge at Beersheba came from a visit to a school in Queensland where I saw the famous photograph of the charge hanging in the school hall.

The photo and the controversy surrounding it instantly intrigued me. I’m drawn to little known slices of history where themes like courage and mateship play an important role in defining our past. So