

Underbellydance: How a brush with the white slave trade sparked the first battle of the Anzacs

WAS an encounter with the “white slave trade” behind Australia’s first WW1 battle? Not on the shore of Gallipoli, but in the backstreets of Cairo.

-Frank Chung

SEX, drugs, drink and disease.

For some of the wild, wide-eyed, cashed-up young country boys preparing to sail off for Gallipoli in April of 1915, the level of depravity on offer in the brothels of Cairo’s infamous Haret el Wasser district quite literally drove them to the brink of madness.

But could a chance encounter with a sister forced into sex slavery have pushed them over the edge?

Women, men, girls, boys, even a donkey — Cairo in 1915 was a place where life was cheap. For soldiers of an occupying army with cash to burn, it was very cheap indeed.

“Cairo is a very immoral place,” AIF private Jack Jensen wrote in a letter to his aunt in August of that year. “In fact they say it is the worst town in the world.

“Some streets there are nothing but brothels and houses of infamy where every possible vice under the sun exists.”

For months leading up to April 2, 1915 — Good Friday — tensions had been simmering between the Allied soldiers and the locals.

Many had contracted venereal diseases in the brothels, some complained of overpriced or poor-quality alcohol, and there were even rumours of soldiers being stabbed by Egyptian pimps.



Many soldiers who contracted venereal diseases were sent home.

So it was 100 years ago to the day, Australian and New Zealand troops had their first taste of battle: the Battle of the Wazzir or Wazza, as it came to be known.

“The night before we left Mena there was a big row in the Wazza,” wrote Tassie digger [Archie Barwick](#). “Our chaps and the New Zealanders pulled and burnt half of it down, pianos, chairs, tables, women and all went out the window.

“As soon as they hit the ground, on the fire they went. It would have been a good thing if they had burnt every bit of it to the ground.”

Up to 2500 Australian and New Zealand soldiers were involved in the fracas, which kicked off in the afternoon and ran well into the evening, taking the combined efforts of the British military mounted police, Yeomanry and Lancashire Fusiliers to bring the mob under control.

In her diary on April 2, Anzac nurse [Alice Ross King](#), of Victoria, told of “terrible things doing in Cairo”. “20,000 troops are on leave — it being Easter,” she wrote. “They have got into the lowest part of town and are rioting.”



So was it a bit of harmless larrikinism, or something more sinister? While no one will ever be able to say for certain what caused the riot, Private Jensen's oft-overlooked account paints a different picture.

In the same letter to his aunt, the South Australian said that while "as a whole our chaps had a grievance" against the brothels, the final straw was much more personal.

"One of the Manchester soldiers who were also stationed in Egypt found his sister in one of them," he wrote.

"She had left England as a servant to some lady who had taken her to Egypt and left her there. I dare say you have heard of that sort of thing, it is called the white slave traffic here in England."

The girl, he wrote, "went from bad to worse until finally she was found dancing in what they call a Can-Can hall". That is, "a dozen or so women dancing perfectly naked in a big hall exposing their persons to every kind of indignity".

According to Private Jensen, the trouble started when the "Manchester chap" tried to get his sister away. "She was only too willing to go but the people she was with would not let her and

they threw her brother out of a window,” he wrote. “As a result he was in hospital for nearly a week.”



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When he got out, he came to the camp to get help. At first they could not find the girl again, but “at last she was found in a particularly vile house”, Private Jensen wrote.

“This was a day or two before Good Friday, and that day being a holiday about 500 of our chaps and some New Zealanders and English troops went in to raid these houses.”

Naturally they got drunk, he wrote, and were joined by a great many more, also drunk, “so the affair ended in a riot”.

“They got the girl out first and then set fire to the houses.”

Renowned World War I historian Dr Jonathan King says the story is quite possibly true. “I haven’t read about her personally, but I’m not surprised,” he says. “She might have even had clients who were Anzacs.”

According to Dr King, it's quite possible the girl was abandoned and was forced to work as a prostitute to make enough money to get out. "There was plenty of work around with the AIF in town," he says.

While the Anzacs were "probably the wildest of the lot", according to Dr King, it was [General Sir John Monash](#) — also featured in AnzacLive — who said it was this "maverick, irreverent character" that made the Australian soldier the best fighter in World War I.

"You can't get away from it, but that was the flip side of it. A lot of these fellas were wild country boys from the outback, and being in Cairo was a real culture shock. They lost their bearings and as a result they just ran amok."

Filmmaker and author Michael Caulfield, producer of *Australians at War*, is more sceptical of the story. "I would suggest that if it were true, it would have to be an unusual case, for the simple reason that it would be highly unlikely for a European woman to work in a brothel which had Egyptian and other Middle Eastern women in it," he says.

"But it is entirely possible that there was a brothel which specialised in European women."

Ultimately, no one really knows what started the Wazza, he says. "Like any large event that takes place that involves a lot of people and a lot of fractious behaviour, the memories are both selective and self-serving.



“The biggest reason of all is exactly the same reason you get trouble on George Street on a Saturday night: a lot of young guys, a lot of testosterone, a lot of booze.”

And what of the girl from Manchester?

“The girl who was the cause of all the trouble was sent to England,” wrote Private Jensen. The men in the camp collected over forty pounds to pay her passage and expenses back home, where she was taken charge of by the YMCA.

Suzi Browne, media manager for YMCA England, said while she couldn’t find any record of the girl in question, it was plausible.

“Given the YMCA’s extensive operations across the countries and regions you mention, and the fact that transport was a key element of our war work, we can well imagine that as a charity, we would have been trusted and would have no doubt consented to help a young girl who was in need of help to return home,” she said.

“In fact we can imagine that it would have been one of the safest and most reliable ways for her to travel that distance.”



A letter from South Australian digger Jack Jensen casts the riots in a new light.

The next day, she summed up the night's grim tally: "About three people were killed and a few dozen injured — the police were driven back by heavy missiles such as tables and big logs of wood being thrown. One officer who went down to try to quell the disturbance got very badly injured."

American-born NSW soldier [Charles Laseron](#) — who like Archie and Alice gives his account in ground-breaking social media project [AnzacLive](#) — described a serious incident, the "particulars of which ... being based on hearsay, are rather fragmentary".

"It is a great pity for the name of Australia, but it is a comfort to think that there was a goodly proportion of New Zealanders and Territorials among the crowd, and the blame is not wholly ours," he wrote.

"As far as can be judged, the trouble began as usual in the under world, and a crowd of some hundreds of soldiers, for what reason goodness only knows, commenced to wreck some houses.

"Eventually order was restored by the prefects after many attempts, but not before several shots were fired, and at least one man was killed and several wounded. About 50 were also arrested."



