

The 1909 'Battle of Greensborough'

Victoria had a long tradition of staging military exercises by enthusiastic volunteers, with army camps held annually at Easter from 1861. The number of participants varied greatly with the perceived level of threat of foreign invasion. A particularly large one held near Frankston on the Queen's Birthday in 1895 involved more than 2,000 men and 21 field guns.

These events continued after Federation and were held at places including Kilmore, Seymour, Ballarat and Heidelberg. In 1909 the focus was on the King's Birthday holiday in November. Two mock battles were fought, with one around the bridge in Lower Plenty.

The second and larger engagement was reported in The Argus and The Age newspapers as having taken place at 'Sugarloaf Hill in Greensborough'. A 50 strong skeleton force of Melbourne Light Horse and Mounted Cadets defended a position on the hill, which was attacked by 415 men of the 1st Battalion of the 5th Australian Infantry Regiment.

After telling off one in four of their men as horse holders, only about 36 dismounted horsemen defended the hill. They would have been spread out in a skirmish line, watching the approach of the opposing infantry who effectively outnumbered them 11 to 1.

Now you might think that a pointless engagement, however relative numbers weren't the point of the exercise. It was more designed to give the officers experience at manoeuvring bodies of troops in a fight.

Accordingly, approaching from the Heidelberg side of the hill, the infantry feinted with one company on the right, about 60 men, to pin the defenders in position. The main attack was then launched by four companies. Two companies were held in reserve. The position was taken with no difficulty. The Governor General then inspected the troops and all entrained at Heidelberg and returned to the city.

Lieutenant Colonel Sellheim, a senior officer who had accompanied the Governor General said of the day:

"Everybody seemed tremendously keen and interested ... I think they deserve every credit for spending their holiday in jolly hard work. It teaches men to get used to ground, and it exercises officers in the practice of initiative and resource."

So, where was Sugarloaf Hill? Well, not in Greensborough. The hill was within the eastern portion of Samuel Gardiner's estate called Bundoora Park.

The photo shows the military sanatorium in Macleod in 1917, with Sugarloaf Hill in the background. This building still exists in Springthorpe Boulevard, Macleod and is now called La Trobe House.

Sugarloaf Hill is now called Greswell Hill and sadly has a great many houses built on its lower slopes. While you can still access its crest, the area is heavily overgrown and presently not good for walking.

With thanks to Ian Bryant for finding Sugarloaf Hill and Chris Gibson for designing the map.

John Gibson

