

= Lewis McGee =

Lewis McGee , VC (13 May 1888 ? 12 October 1917) was an Australian recipient of the Victoria Cross , the highest decoration for gallantry " in the face of the enemy " that can be awarded to members of the British and Commonwealth armed forces . As a sergeant in the Australian Imperial Force , McGee was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions in the Battle of Broodseinde ? part of the Passchendaele offensive ? on 4 October 1917 . As his platoon came under heavy machine gun fire from a German pillbox , McGee rushed alone across open ground towards the emplacement . Armed solely with a revolver , he shot the gunners and captured the garrison . He then organised a bombing party , and led the group in the seizure of a second machine gun post .

Born in Tasmania , McGee gained employment as an engine driver with the Tasmanian Department of Railways . In March 1916 , he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force for service in the First World War . He was posted to the 40th Battalion , and completed training in Tasmania and the United Kingdom , where he was promoted to lance corporal . Transferring to the Western Front in November 1916 , McGee was rapidly promoted to corporal then sergeant , and took part in the Battle of Messines . He was killed in action on 12 October 1917 , eight days after his Victoria Cross exploit .

= = Early life = =

McGee was born in Campbell Town , Tasmania , on 13 May 1888 , the youngest of eleven children to John McGee , a labourer and farmer , and his wife Mary (née Green) . Three of McGee 's sisters had died in infancy prior to his birth , and ? when Lewis was aged only seven ? his mother succumbed to pleurisy . Following his wife 's death , John relocated his remaining family to a new farming property near Avoca . Here , Lewis gained employment as an engine driver with the Tasmanian Department of Railways . He also achieved a reputation as a " powerful athlete " , particularly as a cyclist with the Avoca Cycling Club . On 15 November 1914 , McGee married Eileen Rose Bailey ; the couple had daughter Nada the following year .

= = First World War = =

On 1 March 1916 , McGee enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force for service during the First World War . Allotted to the 40th Battalion as a private , he was initially posted for training at Claremont military camp with his unit for a period of three months . He was advanced to lance corporal on 22 May . On finalising its primary training , the 40th Battalion embarked for the United Kingdom on 1 July , with McGee aboard HMAT Berrima . Arriving seven weeks later , the battalion was dispatched to Salisbury Plain to complete an additional period of training in preparation of its deployment to the Western Front .

McGee proceeded to France , and the Western Front , with his battalion on 23 November 1916 , arriving the next day . The unit was ultimately posted to Armentières , where McGee was raised to corporal on 4 December . Five days after his promotion , the 40th Battalion was moved into the frontline , occupying a set of trenches just south of Lys . Over subsequent engagements , McGee gained a reputation as a " natural soldier " , which consequently led to his promotion to sergeant on 12 January 1917 . The 40th Battalion undertook various small @-@ scale operations and raids throughout this period until June , when it fought in the Battle of Messines . This was followed by a period in reserve behind the lines , before the battalion was shipped to Belgium in preparation for its service in the Passchendaele offensive .

= = = Victoria Cross = = =

As part of the third phase of the Passchendaele offensive , the 10th Australian Brigade ? of which McGee 's 40th Battalion was part ? was detailed to execute an attack on Broodseinde Ridge . The brigade was allocated four primary objectives to seize during the assault , one for each battalion ,

with the 40th Battalion to take the final target located on the ridge itself . The advance commenced at the predetermined time of 06 : 00 on 4 October 1917 , under the cover of an artillery barrage . The first three battalions were able to seize their objectives , though the fighting intensified with each stage . As the 40th Battalion set to advance towards the final objective , its progress became hampered by increasingly heavy machine @-@ gun and rifle fire , as well as by barbed wire entanglements and sectors of impassable swamp .

With McGee 's B Company heading the 40th Battalion 's advance , the unit was able to progress to a point approximately 270 metres (300 yd) in front of the crest , where it was confronted by a thick line of barbed wire and another bog , while simultaneously subject to the fire of ten machine guns in trenches and heavily defended pillboxes . The men of B Company struggled to within 90 metres (98 yd) of the battalion 's objective , when the severe fire of the German machine guns pinned them down in shellholes .

McGee 's platoon was suffering heavy casualties from a particular machine gun 50 metres (55 yd) in front of his position , which was set in a recess atop a concrete pillbox and firing directly at his men . Armed solely with a revolver , McGee dashed alone towards the post across the fire @-@ swept ground . Shooting the gunners , he captured the remaining soldiers in the garrison as prisoners and seized control of the pillbox . On returning to his unit , he reorganised his men and led a bombing party in the capture of a second machine @-@ gun post . McGee 's actions reignited the 40th Battalion 's advance , with McGee himself " foremost in the remainder " of the action . By 09 : 12 on 5 October , the 40th Battalion had seized its objective and held complete control of the Broodseinde Ridge , having captured 300 Germans as prisoners in the process .

As a result of his actions at Broodseinde , McGee was awarded the Victoria Cross , one of two Australians to be so decorated that day . However , he never saw the announcement of the award . On 12 October 1917 ? eight days after McGee 's Victoria Cross action ? the 40th Battalion returned to the frontline , in an attempt to exploit the success of the previous week . The battlefield was drenched in rain , turning the ground into a quagmire that was additionally dominated by several German pillboxes . McGee ? who had been appointed acting company sergeant major of B Company that morning ? led his unit into the attack . As the men of the company advanced forward , a machine gun began firing upon them from the front , before a second opened up on their flank . Men ran to take cover in shellholes as the German fire inflicted several casualties . McGee , however , made a rush towards the guns in an apparent effort to silence them . As he ran towards the pillbox , a bullet struck him in the head , killing him instantly . McGee was later buried in Tyne Cot Cemetery ; he was one of 248 members of the 40th Battalion killed or wounded during the Battle of Passchendaele . McGee 's fellow Australian Victoria Cross recipient from Broodseinde , Lance Corporal Walter Peeler , was also severely wounded on this day , receiving a bullet wound to his arm .

= = Legacy = =

The announcement and accompanying citation for McGee 's Victoria Cross was promulgated in a supplement to the London Gazette on 26 November 1917 , reading :

War Office , 26th November , 1917 .

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Victoria Cross to the undermentioned Officer , Non @-@ commissioned Officers and Men : ?

No. 456 Sjt . Lewis McGee , late Aus . Imp . Force .

For most conspicuous bravery when in the advance to the final objective , Sjt . McGee led his platoon with great dash and bravery , though strongly opposed , and under heavy shell fire .

His platoon was suffering severely and the advance of the Company was stopped by machine gun fire from a " Pill @-@ box " post . Single @-@ handed Sjt . McGee rushed the post armed only with a revolver . He shot some of the crew and captured the rest , and thus enabled the advance to proceed . He reorganised the remnants of his platoon and was foremost in the remainder of the advance , and during consolidation of the position he did splendid work .

This Non @-@ commissioned Officer 's coolness and bravery were conspicuous and contributed

largely to the success of the Company 's operations .

Sjt . McGee was subsequently killed in action .

McGee 's wife , Eileen , was presented with her late husband 's Victoria Cross by the Governor @-@ General of Australia , Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson , at an investiture ceremony in Launceston 's York Park during October 1918 . Additionally , Eileen McGee was later gifted an Iron Cross that her husband had captured from a German officer at Broodseinde , which was enclosed in a letter of condolence written to her by an officer of the 40th Battalion .

Prior to his Victoria Cross action , McGee had been noted in the 40th Battalion for his leadership qualities , and had attained a " famous fighting record " . In addition to his decoration , McGee had been recommended for a commission as a result of his actions at Broodseinde , with an officer in his battalion declaring " had he lived his commission would have been assured " . His original company commander , Major Leslie Payne , noted McGee 's " sterling qualities as a leader " and stated : " His ability in the carrying out of certain important tasks early in the year was most marked and ... there is in my opinion , and the opinion of many others , no more gallant and capable non @-@ commissioned officer in the battalion . "

McGee is commemorated on a war cenotaph located in Ross , Tasmania , and his name was given to the McGee Soldiers ' Club at Anglesea Army Barracks , Tasmania , which was opened in 1956 . During the 150th anniversary celebrations of the town of Avoca in March 1984 , the Governor of Tasmania , Sir James Plimsoll , unveiled a memorial plaque on the Returned Serviceman 's League cenotaph honouring McGee ; his widow and their daughter attended the ceremony . McGee 's Victoria Cross and other medals are held in the collections of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery , Tasmania .