

= Edgar Towner =

Edgar Thomas Towner , VC , MC (19 April 1890 ? 18 August 1972) 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 . A lieutenant in the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War , Towner was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1918 for his actions during an attack on Mont St. Quentin on the Western Front .

Born in Queensland to a farming family , Towner enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in 1915 . Posted to the transport section of the 25th Battalion , he served in Egypt until his unit was sent to the Western Front . He then transferred to the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion where he was commissioned as a lieutenant and twice mentioned in despatches for his leadership . During June 1918 , Towner led a machine gun section in attack near Morlancourt and assisted the infantry in reaching its objectives under heavy fire , for which he was awarded the Military Cross . In September , again commanding a machine gun section , he was involved in the Allied counteroffensive that broke the German lines at Mont St. Quentin and Péronne . Fighting for thirty hours after being wounded , his " conspicuous bravery , initiative and devotion to duty " earned him the Victoria Cross , which was presented by King George V in April 1919 .

Discharged in August , Towner returned to Australia . He was appointed a director of the Russleigh Pastoral Company , and briefly re @-@ enlisted during the Second World War , when he was promoted to major . A keen geographer , he was awarded the Dr Thomson Foundation Gold Medal in 1956 for his geographical work . Unmarried , he died in 1972 at the age of 82 .

= = Early life = =

Edgar Towner was born on 19 April 1890 , at Glencoe Station near Blackall , Queensland , to Edgar Thomas Towner , a grazing farmer , and his Irish wife Greta (née Herley) . He was educated at Blackall State School and in Rockhampton , although he also received private instruction from his mother . After leaving school Towner worked on his father 's grazing property until 1912 , when he acquired land of his own . He named the property " Valparaiso " and worked on its development until the outbreak of the First World War .

= = First World War = =

On 4 January 1915 , Towner enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force . Assigned to the transport section of the 25th Battalion as a private , he embarked aboard HMAT Aeneas from Brisbane on 29 June , bound for Egypt . The troopship arrived in August , and the battalion spent the rest of the month training in the desert before transferring to the Gallipoli Peninsula . Towner , however , remained in Egypt with the army 's transportation elements .

Following the Allied evacuation of Gallipoli , the 25th Battalion returned to Egypt in December 1915 , where Towner rejoined its ranks on 10 January 1916 . He was promoted to sergeant on 1 February , before departing with the battalion at Alexandria the following month to join the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front . Disembarking at Marseilles , the unit was the first Australian battalion to arrive in France .

In July 1916 , the 25th Battalion took part in its first major Western Front action at the Battle of Pozières , part of the Somme offensive . The battalion suffered 785 casualties between 25 July and 7 August . It was briefly transferred to a " quieter sector of the front in Belgium " before returning to action on the Somme in October . On 3 November , Towner was transferred to the Australian Machine Gun Corps and was assigned to the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion of the 2nd Australian Division , and was allotted to the 7th Brigade 's Machine Gun Company . He was commissioned as a second lieutenant fifteen days later , and assumed command of the battalion 's transport section .

Promoted to lieutenant on 24 February 1917 , Towner 's service with his transport section earned him praise for his " devotion to duty and consistent good work " , and on 9 April he was Mentioned in the Despatches of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig . Towner was granted leave to the United

Kingdom in January 1918 . He received a second Mention in Despatches on 7 April 1918 , the notification of which was published in a supplement to the London Gazette on 28 May .

On the night of 10 / 11 June 1918 , Towner was in command of a machine gun section during an attack to the south of Morlancourt . One of the first to reach the objective , he deployed his section and got its guns into action " very quickly " . By using captured German machine guns he was able to increase his section 's fire and provide support to the company on his right as it advanced , seized , and consolidated its position . During the morning of 11 June , one of the posts held by the Australian infantry was blown in by German artillery ; braving machine gun and sniper fire , Towner went out in daylight to help reorganise the post . Cited for his " cheerful and untiring attitude " and for " set [ing] a conspicuous example " , Towner was awarded the Military Cross for his actions . The announcement of the award and accompanying citation was published in a supplement to the London Gazette on 24 September 1918 .

= = = Victoria Cross = = =

On 1 September 1918 , Towner was in command of No. 3 Section of the 7th Machine Gun Company during an attack on Mont St. Quentin , near Péronne . Armed with four Vickers machine guns , the section was attached to the right flank of the 24th Australian Infantry Battalion , whose principal objective was to seize the summit of Mont St. Quentin . To accomplish this , the battalion would have to advance through the village of Feuillaucourt before moving down to the Péronne road . The Australians began their advance at 06 : 00 behind an artillery screen , with Towner 's section covering a front of 1 @, @ 400 metres (1 @, @ 500 yd) . Visibility was limited by rain , and Australian casualties soon began to mount . Locating a German machine gun that was causing heavy losses among the advancing troops , Towner rushed the position and single @-@ handedly killed the crew with his revolver . Having captured the gun , he then turned it on the Germans .

Once Feuillaucourt had fallen , the 24th Battalion continued to the Péronne road . However , the Germans had occupied a copse of trees and put up strong resistance , halting the advance . German troops were observed massing for a counter @-@ attack , so Towner moved forward with several of his men , two Vickers guns , and the captured German gun , and brought the assembling Germans under concentrated fire , inflicting many casualties . Attempting to retire , a party of twenty @-@ five German soldiers were cut off by Towner 's guns and taken prisoner . Under heavy incoming fire , Towner then scouted over open terrain to locate advantageous positions from which his guns could offer further support . When he moved his section forward , the machine gunners were able to engage more groups of German soldiers ; their aggressive action enabled the advance to be renewed , and the battalion attained the cover of a sunken section of the Péronne road . However , on rejoining them Towner found that his section was growing short of ammunition , so he made his way back across the fire @-@ swept ground and located a German machine gun , which he brought forward along with several boxes of ammunition . This he brought into action " in full view of the enemy " ; his effective fire forced the Germans to retire further , and allowed one of the stalled Australian flanks to push ahead .

German machine gunners had occupied a commanding vantage overlooking the sunken road , and began to rain down heavy fire around Towner 's position . One of the bullets struck his helmet , inflicting a gaping wound to his scalp . Refusing to be evacuated for medical treatment , Towner continued firing his gun as the German pressure increased and the situation grew critical . Eventually the Australian infantry were forced to retire a short distance , but with all its crew having become casualties , one gun was left behind . Alone , Towner dashed out over no man 's land and retrieved the weapon . With this gun he " continued to engage the enemy whenever they appeared " , putting a German machine gun out of action with his accurate fire .

Throughout the night , Towner frequented the front lines and " continued to fight and ... inspire his men " . He provided supporting fire for the 21st Australian Infantry Battalion as they assaulted a heavily fortified crater on Mont St. Quentin 's summit , and repeatedly reconnoitred the German position to reported on troop movements . The next morning his section assisted in repulsing a large German counterattack before Towner was finally evacuated with exhaustion ? thirty hours after

being wounded . Initially admitted to the 41st Casualty Clearing Station , he was transported by train to the 2nd Red Cross Hospital at Rouen . For his actions during the battle , Towner was awarded the Victoria Cross ? the third of six Australians to receive the medal during the fighting around Mont St. Quentin and Péronne .

The full citation for Towner 's Victoria Cross appeared in a supplement to the London Gazette on 14 December 1918 , reading :

War Officer , 14th December , 1918 .

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

Lt. Edgar Thomas Towner , M.C. , 2nd Bn . , Aus . M.G. Corps .

For most conspicuous bravery , initiative and devotion to duty on 1st September , 1918 , in the attack on Mont St. Quentin , near Peronne , when in charge of four Vickers guns . During the early stages of the advance he located and captured , single @-@ handed , an enemy machine @-@ gun which was causing casualties , and by turning it on the enemy inflicted severe losses .

Subsequently , by the skilful , tactical handling of his guns , he cut off and captured twenty @-@ five of the enemy .

Later , by fearless reconnaissance under heavy fire , and by the energy , foresight and promptitude with which he brought fire to bear on various enemy groups , he gave valuable support to the infantry advance .

Again , when short of ammunition , he secured an enemy machine @-@ gun , which he mounted and fired in full view of the enemy , causing the enemy to retire further , and enabling our infantry to advance . Under intense fire , although wounded , he maintained the fire of this gun at a very critical period .

During the following night he steadied and gave valuable support to a small detached post , and by his coolness and cheerfulness inspired the men in a great degree .

Throughout the night he kept close watch by personal reconnaissance on the enemy movements , and was evacuated exhausted thirty hours after being wounded .

The valour and resourcefulness of Lt. Towner undoubtedly saved a very critical situation , and contributed largely to the success of the attack .

= = = Later war service = = =

Following his recuperation , Towner was granted three weeks leave to England from 14 September 1918 . He rejoined his unit on 12 October and , for six days , was attached to the School of Instruction . Following thirteen days leave in France during late November , he returned again to the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion on 12 December .

On 10 April 1919 , Towner attended an investiture ceremony in the ballroom of Buckingham Palace , during which he was decorated with his Victoria Cross and Military Cross by King George V. Three weeks later he boarded HT Karagola , bound for Australia . Disembarking at Sydney on 14 June 1919 he made his way to Brisbane , and was discharged from the Australian Imperial Force on 16 August 1919 .

= = Later life = =

Towner resettled on his property , but was forced to sell Valparaiso in 1922 after he was unable to raise sufficient funds to purchase livestock . He spent the next three years working as a jackaroo , until he entered into a partnership on Kaloola station , a property located near Longreach , in 1925 . Towner eventually bought out his partner and assumed another partnership with the Russleigh Pastoral Company , Isisford . He was later appointed a director of the company .

With the Second World War looming , Towner enlisted in the Citizens Military Force on 8 August 1939 and was appointed a captain to the 26th Battalion . After a period as a company commander he was promoted to temporary major and second @-@ in @-@ command of the battalion , under fellow Victoria Cross recipient Lieutenant Colonel Harry Murray . However , Towner retired from the

army due to ill health on 21 February 1942 , and returned to his property at Kaloola .

A keen geographer , Towner would often disappear into the bush for weeks on end , for study or exploration . As a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia and member of the Royal Historical Society of New South Wales , he took a particular interest in researching the life of the explorer Sir Thomas Mitchell . In 1946 , he successfully lobbied the Australian Government to issue a postage stamp commemorating the centenary of Mitchell 's discoveries in central Queensland . He addressed the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia in Brisbane in 1955 , and was awarded the Dr Thomson Foundation Gold Medal for his geographical work the following year . Towner 's address was published in 1957 , in a booklet entitled Lake Eyre and its Tributaries .

Towner never married , and on 18 August 1972 died at Longreach Base Hospital at the age of 82 . His funeral took place three days later , with a large number of Longreach citizens lining the streets to see his coffin pass by atop a gun carriage . Following a service at St Andrew 's Church , he was buried with full military honours at the Longreach Town Cemetery . By the time of his death , Towner had amassed an 80 @,@ 000 @-@ acre (320 km²) farm containing 25 @,@ 000 sheep . He remains the highest @-@ decorated serviceman from Queensland . On 24 April 2009 , a statue of Towner crafted by Melbourne sculptor William Eicholtz was unveiled in his birth town of Blackall . Inspired by an essay written by a local schoolboy , the community raised A \$ 80 @,@ 000 to commission a monument in Towner 's memory .