

= Frederick Birks =

Frederick Birks , VC , MM ( 16 August 1894 ? 21 September 1917 ) was a Welsh @-@ born Australian First World War soldier and 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 forces . Born in Buckley , Flintshire , Birks served in the Royal Artillery for three years before emigrating to Australia in 1913 . After serving as a non @-@ commissioned officer during the landing at Gallipoli and the Battle of the Somme , Birks was commissioned as a second lieutenant on 4 May 1917 . On 20 September , while advancing in Glencorse Wood , Ypres , Birks , alongside a corporal , forced a garrison to surrender and captured sixteen men in another attack . His actions were later recognised with the Victoria Cross . The following day , Birks was killed by a shell while attempting to save some of his men .

= = Early life = =

Birks was born in Buckley , Flintshire , Wales , on 16 August 1894 to Samuel Birks , a groom , and his wife Mary , née Williams . The family lived at Garden Cottage , Lane End . The youngest of six siblings , Birks was five years old when his father died in a coal @-@ mining accident . He attended the local Anglican school ( St. Matthews ) in Buckley and was awarded a medal there for 11 years " without ever being absent or late " . He was known to be adventurous , being active in boxing and association football as well as the local Church Lads ' Brigade . Birks left school at fourteen , before entering the workforce as a labourer and steel rollerman in nearby Shotton . During 1910 , Birks is thought to have enlisted in the Royal Artillery , staying in the service for three years . On 29 August 1913 , Birks migrated to Australia with two friends Emrys Edward Jones and William Gray ( both from Buckley ) . They sailed from London on the SS Otway disembarking in Melbourne . He went on to work in Tasmania where he stayed with a Herbert Jones ( a friend of his brother ) , South Australia and Victoria as a labourer and later , a waiter . In late March 1914 , at the age of nineteen he started a relationship with sixteen @-@ year @-@ old Susan Gelven who lived in Largs Bay . Susan kept in contact with Birks throughout his service , although she apparently lost contact with him for some time in mid @-@ 1917 . He is known to have lived in Norwood , a suburb of Adelaide where he lodged with a Mrs E. Cornelius , and in Hobart .

= = First World War = =

Birks enlisted into the Australian Imperial Force on 18 August 1914 , a few weeks after the war started . He trained at a camp in Broadmedows , and was assigned to the 2nd Field Ambulance of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps . The 2nd Field Ambulance boarded the HMAT A18 Wiltshire in Melbourne on 19 October 1914 , and set sail for Egypt . After stopping in Albany , the unit arrived in Egypt on 10 December .

= = = Gallipoli Campaign = = =

Birks ' unit was incorporated into the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and was sent into action at the landing at Anzac Cove , providing medical support for the 2nd Infantry Brigade . The 2nd Brigade were also sent to Cape Helles , where they assisted in the attack on Krithia . During the battle , Birks was carrying wounded under heavy shell and rifle fire , in areas where stretchers were unable to reach . His " devotion to duty and good work " earned him his first Military Medal recommendation . On 26 June 1915 , Birks was wounded by shrapnel but returned to service the next day , remaining on Gallipoli until 9 September .

= = = France = = =

Birks unit was sent to Marseilles , France , as a part of the British Expeditionary Force . He was

promoted to lance corporal on 21 April 1916 , and served as a stretcher bearer during the Battle of the Somme . On 26 July , Birks was engaged in duties at Pozières , as the Australian and British forces fought for supremacy of the village . Throughout the day , Birks " continually led his squad of stretcher bearers " through the village and Pozières Wood to the frontline , all the while being " exposed to heavy shell fire " . Commended for his " constant good services " , Birks was recommended for the Military Medal . The announcement of the decoration was promulgated in a supplement to the London Gazette on 14 November 1916 , and he was later presented with his Military Medal by Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood .

Birks was promoted as a temporary wagon orderly corporal on 5 August 1916 , and the rank was made substantive five days later . After his unit moved away from the front line , Birks had an opportunity to return to Buckley . There , he visited his old school and gave them a Turkish flag that he has attained while in Gallipoli . Following his return to France , Birks was hospitalised for five days with pyrexia . He rejoined his unit on 14 February 1917 .

= = = Commissioning = = =

Birks took classes at the Australian 1st Division school in France , and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the 6th Battalion on 4 May 1917 . He had served with the battalion earlier while a stretcher bearer , and began serving as an infantryman at Passchendaele . Passchendaele was characterised by the mud of the battlefield , and has been widely used as an example of attrition warfare ? both the Commonwealth and German forces were suffering heavy casualties . When the Fifth Army was failing to make any appreciable headway , Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig put General Herbert Plumer in command of the offensive .

= = = Victoria Cross = = =

Birks ' battalion were ordered to attack and capture the German line parallel to them , and the men moved towards their positions from Zillebeke on the night of 18 September , coming under some fire from gas shells . 19 September was incident @-@ free , with the battalion preparing to attack the next day , in what would become known as the Battle of Menin Road . Early in the morning of the 20th , a " light drizzle " fell over the battlefield and at 4am the Germans sent barrages in front of and behind the battalion 's position . At 5 : 40am , the battalion advanced .

The first resistance was met by Birks and a corporal , taking two machine @-@ gun positions as another group of officers rushed a strong post . They were attacked with bombs , and the corporal was seriously wounded . Birks continued on alone . Reaching the rear of the pillbox , he forced the occupants to surrender . Birks then led an attack a series of dugouts and pillboxes on the edge of Glencorse Wood , and fought against machine gun and bombs . He also assisted in the reorganisation and consolidation of Australian men who had drifted away from their unit .

The next day , 21 September , enemy shelling in response to the movement of Allied artillery had buried some men in Birks ' platoon . Birks attempted to dig out these men , " standing exposed " , but another shell aimed at the C Coy post killed Birks , and four others , before he could save them .

= = Legacy = =

For his actions at Ypres , Birks was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross , the announcement of which was gazetted on 8 November 1917 . His citation read :

War Office , 8th November , 1917

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

2nd Lt. Frederick Birks , Late Aust . Imp . Force .

For most conspicuous bravery in attack when accompanied by only a corporal , he rushed a strong point which was holding up the advance . The corporal was wounded by a bomb , but 2nd Lt. Birks

went on by himself killed the remainder of the enemy occupying the position , and captured a machine gun .

Shortly afterwards he organised a small party and attacked another strong point which was occupied by about twenty @-@ five of the enemy , of whom many were killed and an officer and fifteen men captured .

During the consolidation this officer did magnificent work in reorganising parties of other units which had been disorganised during the operations .

By his wonderful coolness and personal bravery 2nd Lt. Birks kept his men in splendid spirits throughout . He was killed at his post by a shell whilst endeavouring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a shell .

Birks ' grave is in the Perth Cemetery ( China Wall ) near Ypres . A memorial was constructed at his old school in Wales in 1921 , funded largely by contributions from local people . When the school was demolished the Memorial was moved to outside St. Matthews Church where it stands now . On Remembrance Sunday the local branch of the British Legion continues to place a wreath of poppies on the Memorial . A portrait of Fred is on display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra , alongside his Victoria Cross . He is also remembered in the Museum in Ypres , Belgium ( Cloth Hall ) . His service during the war earned him the 1914 - 15 Star , British War Medal and Victory Medal .