

= Blair Wark =

Blair Anderson Wark , VC , DSO (27 July 1894 ? 13 June 1941) 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 other Commonwealth armed forces . A quantity surveyor and member of the Citizens Military Force , Wark enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force on 5 August 1915 , for service in the First World War . After initially being employed in the defence of the Suez Canal , his battalion was shipped to the Western Front ; it was here that Wark would be twice decorated for his bravery and leadership . Having received the Distinguished Service Order in 1917 for his actions at the Battle of Polygon Wood , Wark was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1918 for his leadership and gallantry when in temporary command of his battalion over a three @-@ day period , while conducting operations against the Hindenburg Line .

Returning to Australia after the war , Wark resumed work as a quantity surveyor and established his own business . A respected member of Australian society , he held several positions and directorships in various companies and charities , before re @-@ enlisting for service in the Second World War . Promoted to lieutenant colonel , Wark assumed command of the 1st Battalion (City of Sydney 's Own Regiment) , but died suddenly at Puckapunyal Camp , Victoria , of coronary heart disease at the age of 46 .

= = Early life = =

Wark was born in Bathurst , New South Wales , on 27 July 1894 , the fourth child of Alexander Wark , a gas engineer from Scotland , and his native @-@ born wife Blanche Adelaide Maria (née Forde) . He was educated at Fairleigh Grammar School , Bathurst , and St. Leonard 's Superior Public School before attending Sydney Technical College , where he studied quantity surveying .

In the twelve months prior to July 1912 , Wark was a senior cadet in the Australian Army Cadets , rising to the rank of sergeant within his unit . During this time , he was working as a quantity surveyor before he enlisted in the 18th North Sydney Infantry , Citizen Military Force . Promoted to corporal in early 1913 , he received a commission as a second lieutenant on 16 August , and for the subsequent year was assigned to full @-@ time defence duties in the port of Sydney .

= = First World War = =

= = = Enlistment , August 1915 , to Western Front , September 1918 = = =

On 5 August 1915 , Wark enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force , and was posted as a lieutenant to C Company of the newly raised 30th Battalion . He proceeded to the Sydney suburb of Liverpool , where he attended an infantry school before training at the Royal Military College , Duntroon . On 9 November , the 30th Battalion embarked for Egypt aboard the troopship HMAT A72 Beltana . Upon arrival in December , the battalion was tasked with the defence of the Suez Canal where , on 20 February 1916 , Wark was promoted to captain .

In June 1916 , the battalion departed from Alexandria to join the British Expeditionary Force in France for service on the Western Front ; they arrived at Marseilles on 23 June . The 30th Battalion 's first major action began with the outbreak of the Battle of Fromelles on 19 July 1916 . The unit was originally designated with providing carrying parties for supplies and ammunition during the battle , but was subsequently pulled into the fighting . Wark commanded a company during the action , until being evacuated to the 7th Stationary Hospital with a gunshot wound to his leg . He was transferred to the 3rd London General Hospital in England three days later , and moved again to the 5th Australian Auxiliary Hospital , Digswell House , Welwyn , on 7 August . Recovered by September , Wark was discharged and granted leave before returning to France and the 30th Battalion later that month .

On 9 October 1916 , Wark was attached to the 32nd Battalion , a position that became permanent

on 18 November . The 32nd Battalion saw no major offensive action for the remainder of the year , and on 2 January 1917 , Wark gained admission to the Army Infantry School . By February he was back with the 32nd Battalion , and took part in actions at Sunray Trench during March . For these , and further actions at Fromelles , Wark was recommended for the Distinguished Service Order , but the award was never made . He was promoted to major on 27 April , and in June was granted six days of leave to Paris .

In late September and early October , Wark commanded a company in the Ypres sector of Belgium during the Battle of Polygon Wood . On 29 September ? the first day of the battle ? Wark 's men successfully repelled the leading waves of a German counter @-@ attack and , with artillery support , drove off the remainder . Over the following three days , his constant patrolling and personal reconnaissance of the German positions enabled him to ascertain when they were massing for further counter @-@ attacks ; on one occasion he dispersed the assembling German troops with rifle fire and grenades . For his actions during the battle , Wark was awarded the Distinguished Service Order , the details of which were published in a supplement to the London Gazette on 3 June 1918 .

Granted sixteen days leave to the United Kingdom from 3 November , Wark was selected for a senior officers ' course at Aldershot , England , in January 1918 . On graduation he rejoined the 32nd Battalion in March as its second @-@ in @-@ command , and was Mentioned in the Despatches of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig on 7 April . Throughout June and July , Wark temporarily commanded the 32nd Battalion , which had played little part in the German Spring Offensive . The battalion took part in the Battle of Amiens on 8 August , and " was subsequently involved in the operations that continued to press the retreating Germans through August and into September " .

= = = Victoria Cross , September 1918 , to repatriation , September 1919 = = =

From 29 September to 1 October 1918 , Wark assumed temporary command of the 32nd Battalion , leading the unit in the 5th Division 's attack against the Hindenburg Line at Bellicourt , and the subsequent advance through Nauroy , Etricourt , Magny La Fosse and Joncourt . This series of battles became the 32nd Battalion 's final actions for the war , and it was during this period that Wark earned his Victoria Cross .

The 32nd Battalion was to commence its attack at Bellicourt at 09 : 00 on 29 September , and move south through the village . Due to mist and smoke from a preceding artillery barrage , visibility was poor . When the advance was held up by two German machine guns , Wark ordered a tank to neutralise them . On reaching the southern end of St Quentin Canal tunnel , Wark came across two hundred troops of the American 117th Infantry Regiment who appeared to be leaderless , and attached them to his own command . A short time later , with visibility still poor , he appropriated armoured reinforcements and began an advance on the village of Nauroy . As the fog began to lift , Wark organised his troops for an attack on the village from a southerly direction . By 11 : 30 , the battalion had taken the village , along with forty Germans as prisoners of war .

Shortly afterwards , Wark observed a battery of German 77 mm guns firing on his rear companies , causing heavy casualties . Collecting a party of his men , he rushed the battery and succeeded in capturing four guns in conjunction with ten crewmen . With only two men , he pushed forward and surprised fifty Germans near Magny @-@ la @-@ Fosse who subsequently surrendered . At 15 : 00 , he halted his battalion near Joncourt , and sent out patrols which found the town still occupied by enemy forces . The 32nd Battalion responded by withdrawing slightly and strengthening its line . At 17 : 30 , the Germans launched a counter @-@ attack that was repulsed with the assistance of the 31st Battalion , together with some men from the 46th Infantry Division .

At 07 : 00 the next day , the 32nd Battalion attacked once more , advancing 1 @, @ 500 metres (1 @, @ 600 yd) to a point just north of Etricourt . Under heavy shelling and machine gun fire , they established a line between Joncourt and Etricourt . On 1 October , at 06 : 00 , with a company attached from the 30th Battalion , the 32nd Battalion launched an attack that cut through Joncourt . Leading from the front , Wark dashed forward and silenced machine guns that were causing heavy

casualties ; this enabled the 5th Division to complete its task of forcing through to the Beaurevoir Line .

The full citation for Wark 's Victoria Cross appeared in a supplement to the London Gazette on 26 December 1918 , reading :

War Office , 26th December , 1918

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Victoria Cross to the undermentioned Officers , N.C.O. ' s and Men : ?

Maj. Blair Anderson Wark , D.S.O. , 32nd Bn . , A.I.F.

For most conspicuous bravery , initiative and control during the period 29th Sept. to 1st Oct. 1918 , in the operations against the Hindenburg Line at Bellicourt and the advance through Nauroy , Etricourt , Magny La Fosse and Joncourt .

On 29th Sept . , after personal reconnaissance under heavy fire , he led his command forward at a critical period and restored the situation . Moving fearlessly at the head of , and at times far in advance of , his troops , he cheered his men on through Nauroy , thence towards Etricourt . Still leading his assaulting companies , he observed a battery of 77mm. guns firing on his rear companies and causing heavy casualties . Collecting a few of his men , he rushed the battery , capturing four guns and ten of the crew . Then moving rapidly forward with only two N.C.O.s , he surprised and captured fifty Germans near Magny La Fosse .

On 1st Oct. , 1918 , he again showed fearless leading and gallantry in attack , and without hesitation and regardless of personal risk dashed forward and silenced machine guns which were causing heavy casualties .

Throughout he displayed the greatest courage , skilful leading and devotion to duty , and his work was invaluable .

The 32nd Battalion was resting and retraining away from the frontline when the Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 . On 5 January 1919 , Wark was granted leave to the United Kingdom , where he accepted his Victoria Cross from King George V on 13 February . Returning to his unit six days later , Wark was then assigned to the 30th Battalion , and sent back to England in preparation for demobilisation . On 31 May 1919 , Wark married Phyllis Marquiss Munro at St George 's Parish Church , Worthing , Sussex ; ten days later , he boarded HT Port Lyttleton to return to Australia , where he was discharged from the Australian Imperial Force on 28 September 1919 . Two of Wark 's brothers also served in the First World War , both in the 56th Battalion ; Alexander was a sergeant , while Keith , a recipient of the Distinguished Conduct Medal , rose to the rank of lieutenant .

= = Later life = =

On demobilisation Wark resumed business as a quantity surveyor in Sydney , later becoming a principal of Thompson & Wark , quantity surveyors . In June 1920 , he was in charge of ten fellow Victoria Cross recipients when they were introduced to the Prince of Wales at Government House , during the latter 's visit to Australia . Wark became a respected member of Australian society , holding several honorary public positions , including director of the Royal North Shore Hospital , life governor of the New South Wales Benevolent Society , and a councillor of the National Roads and Motorists ' Association of New South Wales . He was a committee member of the Hawkesbury River Race Club , as well as holding directorships in various insurance and petroleum companies .

In 1922 , Wark and Phyllis divorced ; five years later , on 10 December 1927 , he married Catherine Mary Davis at St Stephen 's Presbyterian Church , Sydney . The pair later had one son and two daughters . On 17 April 1940 , Wark returned to active duty in the Second World War , and was appointed to the 1st Battalion (City of Sydney 's Own Regiment) as a major . On 26 July , he was promoted to temporary lieutenant colonel and assumed command of the battalion . While bivouacked at Puckapunyal Camp , Victoria , he died suddenly of coronary heart disease on 13 June 1941 . The medical officer attending later concluded : " The cause of death in my opinion was angina pectoris , the fatal attack having been brought on by physical exertion during a night exercise under very cold conditions . " He was cremated on 16 June at Eastern Suburbs Crematorium ,

Sydney , after a full military funeral , and his ashes were interred at Woronora Cemetery , Sydney .
Wark 's Victoria Cross is currently on display at the Queensland Museum , South Bank .