

= John Whittle =

John Woods Whittle , VC , DCM (3 August 1882 ? 2 March 1946) 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 British Commonwealth armed forces . Whittle was serving as a sergeant in the First World War when he was decorated with the Victoria Cross following two separate actions against German forces during their retreat to the Hindenburg Line in 1917 . In the latter action , he attacked a machine gun crew , killing the group and seizing the gun .

Born in Tasmania , Whittle completed twelve months active service during the Second Boer War , before returning to Australia and enlisting in the Royal Navy where he served for five years as a stoker . Re @-@ enlisting in the army , he was posted to the Army Service Corps , artillery , and Tasmanian Rifle Regiment prior to the outbreak of the First World War . Transferring to the Australian Imperial Force in 1915 , Whittle joined the 12th Battalion in Egypt and embarked for the Western Front the following year . During an attack on the village of La Barque , Whittle rushed a German trench and forced the men from the position ; he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal as a result .

Wounded three times during the war , Whittle was the subject of two courts @-@ martial due to his unruly behaviour . In October 1918 , he returned to Australia at the invitation of the Prime Minister of Australia to assist in recruitment . Discharged from the military in December 1918 , he later moved to Sydney . In 1934 , Whittle was presented with a Certificate of Merit after saving a drowning boy . He died in 1946 at the age of 63 .

= = Early life = =

Whittle was born on 2 August 1882 at Huon Island , Tasmania , to Henry Whittle , a labourer , and his wife Catherine (née Sullivan) . He grew up in Hobart , and was living there when he enlisted as a private in the 4th Tasmanian (2nd Imperial Bushman) Contingent during 1899 , for service in the Second Boer War . The unit embarked for South Africa on 27 March 1901 , and arrived four weeks later . The contingent spent the following twelve months on active duty , which included action in the Cape Colony , before returning to Australia on 25 June 1902 .

Soon after his return to Australia , Whittle enlisted in the Royal Navy as a stoker . He spent five years as a sailor , during which time he was attached to various ships on the Australia Station , including HMS Challenger and HMAS Pioneer . Discharged from the navy in 1907 , Whittle joined the Australian Army and was posted to the Army Service Corps ; he was to serve in this position for three and a half years . During this time , Whittle married Emily Margaret Roland in a Catholic ceremony at the archbishop 's house , Hobart , on 23 July 1909 .

Following his marriage , Whittle transferred briefly to the artillery , serving with the 31st Battery , Australian Field Artillery . He was then posted to the Tasmanian Rifle Regiment , and remained with this unit until the outbreak of the First World War .

= = First World War = =

= = = Early war service = = =

On 6 August 1915 , Whittle transferred to the Australian Imperial Force in order to see active service overseas during the war . Allotted as a reinforcement to the 26th Battalion as a private , he embarked from Melbourne on 27 October aboard HMAS Ulysses bound for Egypt . Appointed acting corporal soon after arrival , he was reallocated to the 12th Battalion with the rank of private on 1 March 1916 , following a period of divisional reorganisation and expansion to the Australian forces which were now stationed in Egypt . Whittle was promoted to the substantive rank of corporal two weeks later .

Embarking for the Western Front , the 12th Battalion joined the British Expeditionary Force upon

arrival in France on 7 April 1916 . Eight days later , Whittle was promoted to lance sergeant . Posted to the Fleurbaix sector of France , the 12th Battalion was engaged in minor operations until July . During this time , Whittle was wounded on 18 June , suffering a gunshot wound to his right arm . Initially admitted to the 3rd Field Ambulance , the injury necessitated treatment in England and Whittle was transferred to the 1st Auxiliary Hospital , Harefield . He rejoined the 12th Battalion on 16 September following recuperation .

Following its involvement at Pozières from July to September 1916 , the 12th Battalion moved to the Ypres sector in Belgium , where Whittle was promoted to sergeant on 14 October . In late November , Whittle was admitted to hospital suffering from an illness ; on 18 December , he rejoined his unit , which had returned to action on the Somme .

During the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line , Whittle took part in the 12th Battalion 's attack on the villages of La Barque and Ligny @-@ Thillooy as a member of Captain James Newland 's A Company on 26 ? 27 February 1917 . At Bark Trench , a position on the north side of the centre of La Barque , the company encountered a German strongpoint and Newland was wounded . Rallying his men , Whittle rushed the post and started bombing the occupants with grenades . He then chased the Germans as they began to retreat down the trench line , before they were forced from the position . For his efforts during the assault , Whittle was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal , the recommendation of which cited his " ... conspicuous gallantry in the presence of the enemy " . The announcement of the award was published in a supplement to the London Gazette on 26 April 1917 .

= = = Victoria Cross = = =

By early April 1917 , three German @-@ held outpost villages remained between the area to the south of the I Anzac Corps position and the Hindenburg Line . An attack to capture the villages of Boursies , Demicourt and Hermies by the 1st Australian Division was formulated to commence on 9 April , the day the British offensive opened at Arras . For his gallantry in two separate actions during this engagement , Whittle was awarded the Victoria Cross .

On 8 April , the 12th Battalion was tasked with the capture of the village of Boursies . The attack was to act as a feint in order to mislead the German forces on the direction from which Hermies was to be assaulted . Whittle had been placed in command of the left platoon in Newland 's A Company for the attack , which commenced at 03 : 00 . Advancing , the company was subjected to heavy machine gun fire from a derelict mill approximately 400 metres (440 yd) short of the village and began to suffer heavy casualties . Gathering a party of men , Newland led a bombing attack which was able to dislodge the Germans from the position and secure the area . Continuing their advance , the company was able to reach its objectives , where Whittle was placed in command of a post just beyond the mill .

Throughout the day , the Australians came under heavy shellfire from the Germans . At 22 : 00 , the German forces launched a severe counter @-@ attack against the mill under the cover of an intense barrage of artillery and bombs . Advancing down the main road , they managed to enter the trench Whittle was holding . Gathering all available men , Whittle charged the Germans and was able to restabilise the position . Newland arrived soon after , and the two men worked together until the position was re @-@ established . The 12th Battalion was relieved on 10 April by the 11th Battalion , having succeeded in capturing Boursies at the cost of 240 casualties , of which 70 were killed or missing .

Following a four @-@ day reprieve away from the frontline , the 12th Battalion relieved the 9th Battalion at Lagnicourt on 14 April . Around dawn the following day , the Germans launched a fierce counter @-@ attack against the 1st Australian Division 's line . Breaking through the Australian line , the Germans forced back the 12th Battalion 's D Company , which was to the left of Newland 's A Company . Soon surrounded and under attack on three sides , Newland withdrew the company to a sunken road which had been held by Captain Percy Cherry during the capture of the village three weeks earlier , and lined the depleted company out in a defensive position on both banks . Establishing his platoon in position , Whittle noticed a group of Germans moving a machine gun into

position to enfilade the road . As the gunners began to set up the weapon , Whittle , under heavy rifle fire , jumped from the road and single @-@ handedly rushed the crew . Using his bombs , he succeeded in killing the entire group before collecting the gun and taking it back to A Company 's position .

As reinforcements from the 9th Battalion began to arrive , Newland was able to repulse a third attack by the Germans . Reorganising the 9th and 12th Battalions , a combined counter @-@ attack was able to be launched and the line recaptured by approximately 11 : 00 . The 12th Battalion had suffered 125 casualties during the engagement , with 66 killed or missing . Whittle and Newland were both subsequently awarded a Victoria Cross for their actions that day ; the pair were the only two permanent members of the Australian military to receive the decoration during the war .

The full citation for Whittle 's Victoria Cross appeared in a supplement to the London Gazette on 8 June 1917 , reading :

War Office , 8th June , 1917 .

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

No. 2902 Sjt . John Woods Whittle , Inf . Bn . , Aus . Imp . Force .

For conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty on two occasions .

When in command of a platoon the enemy , under cover of an intense artillery barrage , attacked the small trench he was holding . Owing to weight of numbers the enemy succeeded in entering the trench , and it was owing to Sjt . Whittle personally collecting all available men and charging the enemy that the position was regained .

On a second occasion when the enemy broke through the left of our line Sjt . Whittle 's own splendid example was the means of keeping the men well in hand . His platoon were suffering heavy casualties and the enemy endeavoured to bring up a machine gun to enfilade the position . Grasping the situation he rushed alone across the fire @-@ swept ground and attacked the hostile gun crew with bombs before the gun could be got into action .

He succeeded in killing the whole crew and in bringing back the machine gun to our position .

= = = Later war service = = =

In late April 1917 , Whittle spent three days in a field hospital receiving treatment for psoriasis , before embarking for England on attachment to a training battalion . Joining the unit on 6 May , he once again underwent an eight @-@ day furlough in a military hospital later in the month . During this time , Whittle attended an investiture ceremony in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace on 21 July , where he was decorated by King George V with his Victoria Cross and Distinguished Conduct Medal .

Re @-@ embarking for France on 25 August , Whittle rejoined the 12th Battalion which had subsequently moved to Belgium in preparation for another offensive at Ypres . On 1 October , he was the subject of a General Court Martial in the field , charged with two offences committed on 27 September : 1 . Drunkenness while on active service ; 2 . Conduct to the prejudice of good order and Military Discipline while on active service , in that when the commanding officer was addressing a parade he called out words to the effect of : " But we are good soldiers though " . He was found guilty of both offences , and sentenced to be reduced to the rank of corporal . Following four days detention during the trial , Whittle re @-@ joined the 12th Battalion on 8 October .

The 12th Battalion spent the next two months engaged in minor operations in Belgium , before once again transferring to the trenches in France during December . During this time , Whittle was re @-@ promoted to the rank of sergeant . With the commencement of the German Spring Offensive of 1918 , the 12th Battalion assisted in repulsing the assault in the months of March and April . While engaged in this operation , Whittle was wounded on 19 March and admitted to a field hospital suffering shrapnel wounds to his right hand . Recovering from the wound , he returned to the 12th Battalion in April . Later that month , Whittle was charged with conduct to the prejudice of good order and Military Discipline a second time for mutilating his pay book ; he was reprimanded by the battalion 's commanding officer as a result .

In June 1918 , Whittle was posted to the 2nd Army Central School for a five @-@ week stint . Returning to the 12th Battalion in mid @-@ July , Whittle was wounded in action for the third time ; suffering shrapnel wounds to his right elbow , he was admitted to the 3rd Australian Field Ambulance on 25 July . Evacuated to England , he was admitted to the Central Military Hospital , Eastbourne , before transferring to the 3rd Australian Auxiliary Hospital , Dartford , two weeks later . During this time , Billy Hughes , as Prime Minister of Australia , invited several of Australia 's Victoria Cross recipients of the war to return to Australia and assist in a recruiting drive ; Whittle was among a group of ten who accepted the offer . The party embarked aboard HMAT Medic on 24 August , bound for Melbourne . Arriving seven weeks later , Whittle returned to Tasmania and assisted with recruiting on the island during the last few weeks of the war . Following the Armistice , he was discharged from the Australian Imperial Force on 15 December 1918 .

= = Later life = =

After his discharge from the Australian Imperial Force , Whittle re @-@ settled in Hobart with his family . He briefly re @-@ enlisted in the 40th Battalion during 1921 , before moving to Sydney , New South Wales , where he gained employment as an inspector on the staff of an insurance company . Whittle later worked in several other jobs , including a period of service with Tooth 's Brewery in Sydney . On 11 November 1929 , he attended the New South Wales Dinner for recipients of the Victoria Cross in Sydney , before briefly re @-@ enlisting in the Australian Army once again the following year .

On 7 February 1934 , Whittle was walking through University Park when he was accosted by a small boy who said that his younger brother had fallen into the lake . Rushing to the area , Whittle dived into the weed @-@ choked lake and began searching for the boy . Finding him unconscious , Whittle brought the boy to the bank and applied artificial respiration for approximately half an hour ; the child later came around and was taken to hospital . Whittle left the scene and proceeded home in a taxi without leaving his name , but his identity was subsequently discovered and he was presented with a Certificate of Merit by the Royal Life Saving Society . Whittle himself was ill for a fortnight due to swallowing some of the foul water in the ornamental lake .

During the Second World War , Whittle 's son , Ivan Ernest , served as a private in the 2 / 33rd Australian Infantry Battalion . He was killed when the B @-@ 24 Liberator aircraft he was travelling in crashed into a marshalling yard at Port Moresby , New Guinea , on 7 September 1943 . At his home in Glebe on 2 March 1946 , John Whittle died of a cerebral haemorrhage at the age of 63 . Survived by his wife , a son and three daughters , he was buried in Rookwood Cemetery .