



History and Heritage Series

Major Blair Anderson Wark VC, DSO

Sources include various websites



These Background Notes have been prepared as 'bite-sized' light reading for our Members. The intention is to broaden understanding of selected aspects of the Club's rich history and heritage, and the remarkable people who have contributed to its development over the years. They are based primarily on a number of websites, with specific additional information in places. We acknowledge that there are probably errors and omissions. **Please contact the Club if you have additional information or comments that will assist to improve these notes.**

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed over time. They are intended as casual reading, for private use by Members only, and as they lack the rigor, attributions, and acknowledgements required for academic or public use, Members are requested not to reproduce or distribute them outside of our membership.

Major Blair Anderson Wark VC, DSO

Sources incl: www.anzacday.org and Wikipedia



Overview

Blair Anderson Wark was born on 27 July 1894 at Bathurst, New South Wales, and received a Grammar School and Technical College education. He worked as a Quantity Surveyor and served in the militia before volunteering for the AIF on 5 August 1915 to serve overseas in the Great War.

Wark arrived too late to serve at Gallipoli and after initially being employed in the defence of the Suez Canal, his battalion was shipped to the Western Front. It was in this theatre 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 in 1917, Wark was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1918 for his outstanding actions with the 32nd Battalion during the period 29 September to 1 October 1918 at Bellicourt to Joncourt. He was in temporary command of his battalion over a three-day period while conducting operations against the Hindenburg Line.

On his return 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)

While bivouacked at Puckapunyal Camp, Victoria, he died suddenly of coronary heart disease on 13 June 1941, at 47 years of age. He is commemorated by a plaque at Woronora Cemetery, Sydney

Although he was not a member of the Club (he never lived in Queensland), it is appropriate to outline his story in the series of History and Heritage Notes as his medals including the Victoria Cross are on display in the Club, a most generous donation by Mrs Jenman in 1998.

Pre-War

Blair Anderson Wark was born on 27 July 1894 at Bathurst (New South Wales) and received a Grammar School and Technical College education. Showing interest in the military, he served as a senior cadet from July 1911 to July 1912, reaching the rank of sergeant.

A quantity surveyor and member of the Citizens Military Force (18th North Sydney Infantry), he was 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.

World War I

When war broke out Blair was on fulltime duty defending the port of Sydney as a member of the 18th North Sydney Infantry. On 5 August 1915 he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force, and was posted as a lieutenant to C Company of the newly-raised 30th Battalion.

He attended an infantry school at Liverpool in Sydney 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 1915 (too late for service at Gallipoli where the evacuation was afoot), the battalion was tasked with the defence of the Suez Canal where Wark was promoted to captain on 20 February 1916.



Captain Blair Wark circa 1916

In June 1916 the battalion departed from Alexandria for service on the Western Front, arriving at Marseilles on 23 June.

The 30th Battalion's first major action was the Battle of Fromelles on 19 July 1916. The unit was originally tasked with providing carrying parties for supplies and ammunition during the battle, but was subsequently committed to the fighting.

Captain Wark commanded a company during the action until he was wounded and 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 at Welwyn on 7 August.

In September 1916 Wark was discharged from hospital 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 posting that became permanent on 18 November. The 32nd Battalion saw no major offensive action for the remainder of 1916, and on 2 January 1917 Wark gained admission to the Army Infantry School.

By February 1917 Wark was back with the 32nd Battalion during March when he took part in actions at Sunray Trench (at Gueudecourt near Flers in The Somme sector). For these, and for his 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 1917, and in June was granted six days' leave to Paris.

In late September and early October 1917, Wark commanded a company in the Ypres sector of Belgium during the Battle of Polygon Wood, (part of the Third Battle of Ypres). On 29 September 1917, the first day of the battle, Wark's men successfully repelled the leading waves of a German counter-attack and 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. His instructor referred to him as: *A cheerful, determined and reliable officer with lots of energy and drive. He is tactful and has very considerable ability and power of application. He learns quickly and thoroughly and is good at imparting knowledge. He has considerable initiative and handles troops well, and has done very well during the Course.*

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 1918.

Throughout June and July 1918 Wark temporarily commanded the 32nd Battalion. It had played little part in the repelling German's Spring Offensive but 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 1918 (known as The Hundred Days Offensive)¹.

From 29 September to 1 October 1918, Wark was in 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. (At the time of this action, Major Wark was 24 years of age.)

The battalion was to commence its attack at Bellicourt at 9.00am on 29 September 1918 and move south through the village. Visibility was poor due to mist and to smoke from a preceding artillery barrage.

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 American troops of the US 117th Infantry Regiment who appeared to be leaderless, and he attached them to his battalion.

A short time later, with visibility still poor, he *appropriated* armoured reinforcements (some nearby tanks) 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 11:30am the battalion had taken the village as well as forty Germans as prisoners of war.

¹ By this stage of the war, the Australian Corps, comprising all five AIF divisions and commanded by Lt Gen Monash, had established a reputation as the finest troops in the British Army through by their demonstrated mastery of military skills, both individually and collectively.

Shortly afterwards Wark observed a battery of German 77mm 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 3.00pm 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 5.30pm the Germans launched a counter-attack that was repulsed with the assistance of the 31st Battalion together with some men from the 46th (North Midland) Infantry Division.

At 7.00am the next day the 32nd Battalion attacked once more, advancing 1,500 metres (1,600 yards) 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 6.00am, 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 Beurevoir Line.



One of the 77mm guns captured by Wark on display at the Australian War Memorial in 2012

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

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 AIF was resting 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, Worthington, Sussex and ten days later, he boarded HMT *Port Lyttleton* to return to Australia where he was discharged from the AIF 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.

Post War

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 HRH The Prince of Wales at Government House, during the Prince'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.

Wark and Phyllis divorced in 1922. Five years later, on 10 December 1927, he married Catherine Mary Davis at St Stephen's Presbyterian Church in Sydney. The pair later had one son and two daughters.

World War II

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.



A group of senior Australian military personnel at Puckapunyal Camp, 1940. Lieutenant Colonel Blair Anderson Wark is in the centre.

While bivouacked at Puckapunyal Camp, Victoria, he died suddenly of coronary heart disease on 13 June 1941, at 47 years of age. The medical officer attending later concluded: *The cause of death in my opinion was ...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.