



History and Heritage Series

Major Edgar Thomas Towner VC, MC

Sources include a speech by The Honourable Justice John Logan RFD and 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 to be suitable for academic or public use, Members are requested not to reproduce or distribute them outside of our membership.

Major Edgar Thomas Towner VC, MC

Overview

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

Born in Blackall in Queensland to a farming family on 19 April 1890, 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 1918, again commanding a machine gun section, he was involved in the Allied counter-offensive 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.

Towner returned to Australia and was discharged in August 1919. He was appointed a director of the Russleigh Pastoral Company. In the Second World War, Captain Towner VC MC re-enlisted and served in 26th Battalion as company commander and finally as Battalion 2iC with the rank of Major, until ill health forced his retirement in February 1942.¹

A keen geographer, and interested in the exploits of Sir Thomas Mitchell, 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.

Pre War Years

Edgar Thomas Towner was born on 19 April 1890 at Glencoe Station near Blackall in Queensland to a grazing farmer also named Edgar Thomas Towner and his Irish wife Greta (née Herley). He was educated at Blackall State School and in Rockhampton and 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 AIF and was initially posted as a trooper on the unallotted list of the Light Horse. Shortly afterwards he was transferred to the transport section of the 25th Battalion as a private and embarked aboard HMAT *Aeneas* from Brisbane on 29 June, disembarking in Egypt in August 1915. The battalion spent the rest of the month training in the desert before moving to the Gallipoli Peninsula in September 1915.

¹ The Commanding officer of the battalion was fellow Victoria Cross recipient and Australia's most decorated officer, Lieutenant Colonel Harry Murray VC CMG DSO DCM. (Murray moved from Tasmania after WW1 and lived in rural Queensland for the rest of his life.) It is probably unique in having VC recipients, and Australia's most decorated and Queensland's most decorated officers as CO and 2iC.

Towner did not serve in Gallipoli, remaining in Egypt to perform rear echelon duties with the transport elements. Following the evacuation from Gallipoli, the 25th Battalion returned to Egypt in December 1915 where Towner re-joined its ranks in January 1916.

He was promoted to sergeant on 1 February 1916, before departing with the battalion from Alexandria the following month to serve on the Western Front. When the 25th battalion disembarked at Marseilles, it was the first Australian unit 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 (near Flers) in October.

On 3 November 1916 Towner was transferred to the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion of the 2nd Division, and was allotted to the 7th Machine Gun Company². He was commissioned as a second lieutenant fifteen days later and assumed command of the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion's transport section. He was promoted to lieutenant on 24 February 1917.

He remained with 2nd Machine Gun Battalion for the remainder of the war and his service with the unit demonstrated sustained leadership, bravery and devotion to duty; in a two-year period he was mentioned in despatches twice³, awarded a Military Cross, and awarded a Victoria Cross.

Military Cross Action

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 infantry 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 *setting a conspicuous example*, Towner was awarded the Military Cross for his actions⁴. The announcement of the award and accompanying citation was published in a supplement to the London Gazette on 24 September 1918.

² Each Australian division had a machine gun battalion with each brigade being allocated a machine gun company to provide additional fire support to its units (in this case, 7th Machine Gun Company allocated to the 7th Brigade of the 2nd Division). Each machine gun company had a number of sections which were allocated as required to support either offensive or defensive operations.

³ The recommendation of 3 March 1917 read: *Devotion to duty and consistent good work with his transport section-at all times getting guns, ammunition, and rations forward when required*. The first MiD was awarded on 1 June 1917, and the second was recommended on 4 March 1918 and awarded on 28 May 1918.

⁴ The recommendation or the award of the Military Cross stated:

During the operations of South NORLANCOURT, near ALBERT, on the night of 10/11th June 1918, this officer was one of the first to reach the objective, and got his section of guns into action very quickly, thereby greatly assisting the Right company in gaining and consolidating the new position. He also set up captured enemy machine guns and brought them into action. When one of the posts hold by the Infantry on the morning of the 11th was badly blown in by shell fire, he went out in daylight, at great personal risk from machine gun fire and snipers, and helped to reorganise it.

By his cheerful and untiring attitude, this officer set a conspicuous example to the N.C.O's and men around him.

Victoria Cross Action

On 1 September 1918 Towner was in command of No. 3 Section of the 7th Machine Gun Company. Equipped with four Vickers machine guns, the section was attached to the right flank of the 24th Battalion during the attack on Mont St. Quentin near Péronne.

The principal objective of the attack 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 0600 behind an artillery screen with Towner's section covering a front of 1,400 metres. 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 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 Battalion as they assaulted a heavily fortified crater on Mont St. Quentin's summit and repeatedly reconnoitred the German position to report 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. For his actions during the battle Towner was awarded the Victoria Cross.⁵

The fullest account, from the recommendation that was eventually passed to the War Office through General Rawlinson the Commander of the Fourth Army (to which the Australian Corps was allotted), is at the Endnotes¹.

Context of the Battle

The successful attack by the Australian Corps under Lieutenant General Monash on Mount St Quentin and Peronne was a highly significant event⁶. In the period from August to September 1918 the AIF, for the only time in Australian military history, took on the main enemy on the main field of battle and comprehensively defeated his forces.

Later WWI Service

Following his recuperation Towner was granted three weeks leave to England from 14 September 1918. He rejoined his unit on 12 October and was attached to the School of Instruction for six days. Following thirteen days leave in France during late November, he returned again to the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion on 12 December 1918. 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 HMT *Karagola*, bound for Australia. Disembarking at Sydney on 14 June 1919, he made his way to Brisbane and was discharged from the AIF on 16 August 1919.

⁵ The citation for Towner's Victoria Cross appeared in a supplement to the London Gazette on 14 December 1918:

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Victoria Cross to ...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 inspirited 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.

⁶ In August 1926 a former Chief of Staff of the Australian Corps, General Sir Cyril Brudenell White, wrote to another Australian general of the First World War, Sir Harry Chauvel. In his letter White nominated what he regarded as the four finest achievements of the AIF during the Allied offensives of August to October 1918. He listed the capture of Mont St. Quentin and Peronne in late August and early September as one and two respectively.

General Rawlinson would later state that the Australian victories were *the finest single feat of the war*.

The Australian Official War Historian, Charles Bean, wrote: *The capture of Mont St. Quentin and Peronne is held by many Australian soldiers to be the most brilliant achievement of the A.I.F.*



Lt Towner VC MC shortly after return to Australia (left) and c 1919 (right)

Post War

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 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.

World War II

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 which was drawn from Central and North Queensland. He may have lowered his age on his papers enable him to reactivate⁷.

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 and Australia's most decorated officer, Lieutenant Colonel Harry Murray VC, CMG, DSO, DCM. (Murray moved from Tasmania after WW1 and lived in rural Queensland for the rest of his life.)

Post World War II

Towner relinquished his appointment and 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 member 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, who had mapped and named parts of western Queensland and Central Australia, including Glencoe. In 1946 he successfully lobbied the Australian Government to issue a postage stamp commemorating the centenary of Mitchell's discoveries in central Queensland.

⁷ His birth date as given on the WW2 Service file is 8 May 1893. This would nominally have made him aged 46 at the time of his return to the Active List. His actual age on 8 August 1939 was 49, which was probably over the compulsory peace time retirement age for officers of the rank of major and below.

He addressed the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia in Brisbane in 1955 and was awarded the James Park Thomson gold medal for his geographical work the following year. Towner's address was published in 1956 as a booklet entitled *Lake Eyre and its Tributaries*.

Towner never married. On 18 August 1972 he died at Longreach Base Hospital at the age of 82.

His funeral took place three days later. Following a service at St Andrew's Church he was buried with full military honours at the Longreach Town Cemetery, with a large number of Longreach citizens lining the streets to see his coffin pass by atop a gun carriage.

He remains the highest-decorated serviceman from Queensland. In 1979 the Soldiers' Club of 4RAR was renamed the *Edgar Towner VC Club*.



*Grave of Major E T Towner VC MC at Longreach Town Cemetery.
Inscription reads Loving memories of our dear Brother and Uncle –Our Hero is not alone”
(source: J.A. Logan)*

His Victoria Cross, his Military Cross, and his other decorations and medals had passed out of his family after his death in circumstances which were somewhat controversial.

A medal dealer (a Mr Truswell) appealed a decision by a Commonwealth Minister under Moveable Cultural Heritage legislation not to permit the export of Edgar Towner's Victoria Cross from Australia. In 1996 the Administrative Appeals Tribunal concluded that his decorations and medals should not be lost to Australia and so affirmed the Minister's decision. They remain in Australia but not yet in public hands.

He was accepted as a member of the United Service Club in 1934 and was awarded Life Membership of the Club on 4 May 1956.

The Man

Towner was life-long bachelor who died at 82 years of age.

The author of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*⁸ remarks of him in relation to his pastoral endeavours: *He took on the bush just as he had accepted the challenges of battle and stuck it out through hard times, preserving his stock as best he could.*



When interviewed for a documentary concerning him and the offering for sale of his medals Sir Roden Cutler, himself the holder of a Victoria Cross, had this to say about Towner:

*He was physically a strong man from outback Australia; a man who had worked hard all his life. He had simple principles in which he believed strongly – loyalty, friendship, doing his best no matter what the circumstances were and never complaining. He was a man who was well liked by his friends. I think he could be a determined and even a stubborn opponent. He had that streak of stubbornness in him that wouldn't let him give up; but he was the epitome of the pioneer stock*⁹

Statue: *Towner's Call*

At twilight on Friday 24 April 2009, a statue of Towner crafted by Melbourne sculptor William Eicholtz was unveiled in his birth town of Blackall. The local community, inspired by the essay by a young Blackall student, Ronan Robinson, raised \$80,000 to commission a monument in Towner's memory.

⁸ Richard Gorrell, 'Towner, Edgar Thomas (1890 - 1972)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 12, Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp 247-248; online edition entry <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120275b.htm> (*Australian Dictionary of Biography Entry*)

⁹ Sir Arthur Roden Cutler, VC, AK, KCMG, KCVO, CBE (24 May 1916 – 22 February 2002), interview as recorded for *What Price Valour?*, Film Australia Video, 1985. This video became Exhibit 4 in *Truswell v Minister for Communications and the Arts* (1996) 42 ALD 275; [1996] AATA 154.

The Honourable Justice John Logan RFD, a Judge of the Federal Court of Australia, retired Major of the Australian Intelligence Corps, and a member of the United Service Club was guest speaker at the unveiling ceremony. He kindly consented to including some of his research, photographs, and extracts from his speaking notes within this document.



*Justice Logan delivering guest speaker's address prior to unveiling
(source: Mr Ron Tremmel, Trems Outback Pics)*

The sculptor, William Eicholtz has said about the statue:

'Towner's Call' is a representation of our nation's coming of age. This is not the standard format war memorial of a soldier posed with guns at the ready. Rather, it is the embodiment of the spirit that shaped and defended this country.

The moment Edgar Thomas Towner enlisted in 1915, at the age of 25, his future was changed forever. This memorial depicts that defining moment when a young man from central Queensland accepts his first folded uniform and, with it, the challenges of an unknown world and an unknown war.

The figure of Towner will be gazing towards the future and in the direction of the large military guns that sit within the park. He will stand as a portent of heroic deeds; a brave young man willing to serve his country with honour.

This memorial is about the innate bravery and heroism that formed this country. Towner is depicted first and foremost as a man, yet to be armed with a gun or adorned with military insignia. The Towner Memorial stands for every man who has accepted the call to serve his country...

...At 2100 mm high 'Towner's Call' is at once a larger-than-life bronze portrait of one of central Queensland's war heroes, and the embodiment of a young nation's spirit, so keen to take its place on the world stage and answer the call to arms.



*Unveiling by Messrs John and Geoff Towner (nephews of Edgar Towner)
and Master Ronan Robinson – 24 April 2009
(source: Mr Ron Tremmel, Trems Outback Pics)*

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Recommendation that lead to the award of the Victoria Cross to Lieutenant Edgar Thomas Towner MC:

On 1st September 1918, in the attack on MONT. ST.QUENTIN. near PERONNE, this officer was in charge of 4 Vickers guns operating on a front of 1500 yards. During the early stages of the advance an enemy machine gun was causing casualties to our advancing Infantry. Locating the gun Lieut. Towner dashed ahead alone and succeeded in killing the crew with his revolver, capturing the gun, and then by turning it against the enemy inflicted heavy casualties on them.

Advancing then past a copse from which the enemy were firing, he brought his guns into section, placing his fire behind the enemy and cutting them off. On their attempting to retire before the advancing Infantry, and finding they were prevented by his machine gun fire, the party of 25 Germans surrendered.

He then reconnoitred alone over open ground exposed to heavy machine gun and snipers fire, and by his energy, foresight and the promptitude with which he brought fire to bear on further enemy groups, enabled the Infantry to reach a sunken road.

On moving his guns up to the sunken road, he found himself short of ammunition, so went back across the open under heavy fire and obtained a German gun and brought it and boxes of ammunition into the sunken road. Here he mounted and fired the gun in full view of the enemy, causing the enemy to retire further and enabling Infantry on the flank, who were previously held up, to advance. Enemy Machine Gunners having direct observation flicked the earth round and under this gun, and played a tattoo along the top of the bank. Though one bullet went into his helmet and inflicted a gaping scalp wound he continued firing. Subsequently he refused to go out to have wound attended to as the situation was critical and his place was with his men.

Later in the day the Infantry were obliged to retire slightly and one gun crew with the first wave, having become casualties, the gun was left behind. Lieut. Towner seeing this dashed back over the open, carried the gun back in spite of terrific fire and brought it into action again.

He continued to engage the enemy where they appeared and put an enemy machine gun out of action.

During the following night he insisted on doing his tour of duty along with the other officers, and his coolness and cheerfulness set an example which had a great affect on the men.

To steady and calm the men of a small detached outpost, he crawled out among the enemy posts to investigate. He remained out about an hour though enemy machine guns fired continuously on the sector and the Germans were moving about him.

He moved one gun up in support of the Infantry post and patrolled the communication saps which ran off this post into the German line during the remainder of the night.

Next morning after his guns assisted the dispersing a large party of the enemy, he was led away utterly exhausted, 30 hours after being wounded.

The resourcefulness and courage of this officer undoubtedly saved a very difficult situation and was a very large factor in the success of the attack.

*(Sgd) Charles Rosenthal, Major General
Commanding 2nd Australian Division*