



## Major Blair Anderson WARK VC, DSO

[1894 - 1941]



**Major Wark was not a member of the Club, however as the Victoria Cross that he was awarded is in the possession of the Club (courtesy of Mrs Jenman), it is appropriate to record his story.**

### Overview

Major Blair Anderson Wark VC, DSO was born on 27 July 1894 at Bathurst, New South Wales, and died on 13 June 1941, aged 47 years. He is commemorated by a plaque at Woronora Cemetery, Sydney.

Blair Wark 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 (18<sup>th</sup> North Sydney Infantry), he was promoted to corporal in early 1913. He received a commission as a second lieutenant on 16 August 1914, and for the subsequent year was assigned to full-time defence duties in the port of Sydney.

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 in 1917, 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.

He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his outstanding actions with the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion during the period 29 September to 1 October 1918 at Bellicourt to Joncourt, in France.

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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion (City of Sydney's Own Regiment), but died suddenly at Puckapunyal Camp, Victoria, of coronary heart disease at the age of 46.

Although he was not a member of the Club (he never lived in Queensland), in 1998 the Club received a most generous donation of his medals, including the Victoria Cross, from Mrs Jenman. They are on display in the ante-room, outside the Glasgow Room.

## **World War I**

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

He attended an infantry school at Liverpool in Sydney before training at the Royal Military College, Duntroon. On 9 November, the 30<sup>th</sup> 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.



*Captain Blair Wark circa 1916*

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

The 30<sup>th</sup> Battalion's first major action began with the outbreak of 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 pulled into the fighting.

Captain Wark commanded a company during the action, until being evacuated to the 7<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital with a gunshot wound to his leg. He was transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital in England three days later, and moved again to the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Auxiliary Hospital, at Welwyn, on 7 August.

Recovered by September 1916, Wark was discharged from hospital and granted leave before returning to France and the 30<sup>th</sup> Battalion later that month.

On 9 October 1916, Wark was attached to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, a posting that became permanent on 18 November. The 32<sup>nd</sup> 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 he was back with the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, and took part in actions at Sunray Trench during March. For these, and for 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 1917, and in June was granted six days of 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 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. 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 32<sup>nd</sup> 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 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which had played little part in repelling 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 1918 (known as The Hundred Days Offensive)<sup>1</sup>.

From 29 September to 1 October 1918, Wark assumed temporary command of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, leading the unit in the 5<sup>th</sup> 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 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion's final actions for the war, and it was during this period that Wark earned his Victoria Cross<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of this action, Major Wark was 24 years of age.

The 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to commence its attack at Bellicourt at 9.00am on 29 September 1918, 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 117<sup>th</sup> 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 11:30am, the battalion had taken the village, along with forty Germans as prisoners of war.

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 along 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 32<sup>nd</sup> 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 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion, together with some men from the 46<sup>th</sup> (North Midland) Infantry Division.

At 7.00am the next day, the 32<sup>nd</sup> 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 30<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the 32<sup>nd</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was resting and retraining away from the frontline when the Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918. 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 30<sup>th</sup> 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 Australian Imperial Force on 28 September 1919.

Two of Wark's brothers also served in the First World War, both in the 56<sup>th</sup> 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 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.

## World War II

On 17 April 1940, Wark returned to active duty in the Second World War, and was appointed to the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 center.*

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.

### Sources included:

- AWM sources
- NAA sources
- [www.anzacday.org](http://www.anzacday.org)
- Wikipedia
- Various web pages