

Major Percy Black, DSO, DCM

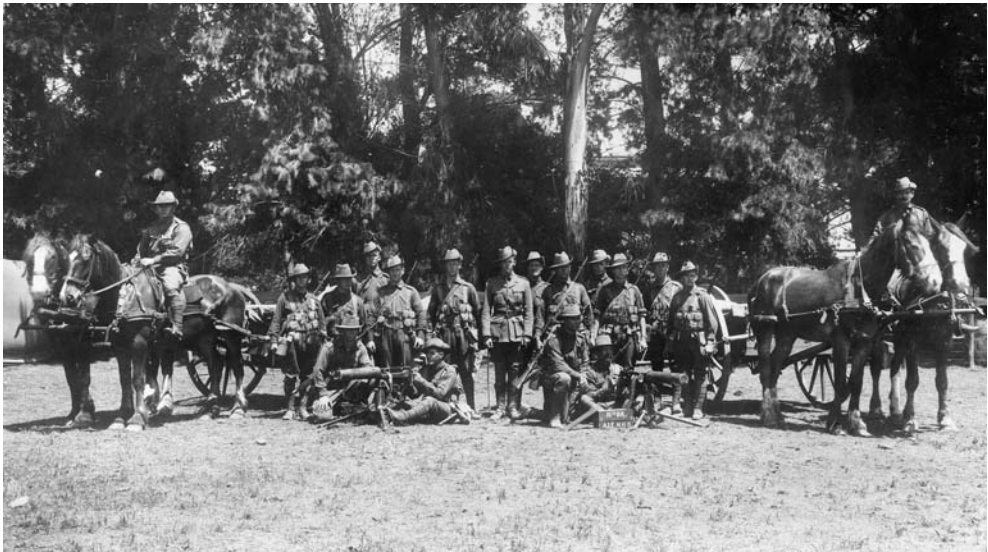
'...the bravest and coolest of all the brave men I know.'

When Australians were called upon to fight for King and Empire, men from all walks of life—professionals, tradesmen, clerks and labourers—queued at enlistment depots. One such volunteer was a prospector fresh from the West Australian goldfields.

Despite having had no prior military training, this man rose from a raw recruit to a company commander of the veteran 16th Battalion in less than 12 months. His reputation became legendary among the ANZACs and history records him as one of the AIF's most famous fighting leaders.

On 13 September 1914, Percy Charles Herbert Black, a 34-year-old Victorian, enlisted in the AIF in Western Australia where he had been prospecting for gold. He commenced his military career at the Blackboy Hill Camp near Perth as a member of the machine-gun section of the 16th Battalion.¹ It was here that he met his future wartime cobber, Private Harry Murray. Lieutenant Colonel Murray VC, CMG, DSO, DCM, CdeG and five times Mentioned in Despatches, Australia's most decorated soldier, was described by war historian CEW Bean as 'the most distinguished fighting officer in the AIF'. Black and Murray served together on the same Maxim machine-gun.

Within days of commencing training, Black had mastered many of the skills required of a machine-gunner, including being able to strip the gun in twelve and



AWM P01465.001. Blackboy Hill Camp, WA. Group portrait of some of the first recruits to the Machine Gun Section, 16th Battalion.. Percy Black is behind the Vickers Maxim .303 calibre machine-gun on the left hand side.

a half seconds (the standard was forty-five seconds). His instructor, a veteran sergeant major of the Instructional Corps, claimed that Black was the best gunner he had ever come across.²



Black, now a lance corporal, underwent his baptism of fire on the craggy terrain of the Gallipoli Peninsula in late April 1915. Black's gun was positioned at the head of Monash Gully—an area of ground strategically vital to both the Allies and the enemy. If it fell to the Turks they would be on the beach at ANZAC Cove in minutes, a horrendous reception committee for the Australian and New Zealand troops who were being landed there. The Gully post could be fired upon, not only from each flank, but from the enemy-held heights to the front.

Black stood his ground despite the fact that he was bleeding profusely from wounds to his ear and hand and that his bullet-ridden gun casing resembled a colander. At one point his gun was rushed by some fifty Turks. As the enemy soldiers advanced over an open patch of ground, Percy waited until they were at a range of about 25 metres, then opened fire. In one savage hail of bullets he killed them all. He was mentioned in corps despatches for his actions—performed at a critical time when the ANZAC line was seriously in danger of being overrun.²

In early May, the Turks launched a fierce counterattack; their aim was to push the ANZAC infidels into the sea. Turkish firepower bombarded the Australian lines with the gun crews bearing the brunt of the incoming barrage. As one loading number after another was killed or injured, Black moved in to replace them—continually calling for more ammunition. Suddenly Percy realised that he was on his own. He was surrounded by Diggers who were either dead or too badly wounded to continue the fight.

As the Turks sensed victory would soon be theirs and advanced to encircle the beleaguered post, Black began swinging his gun in even wider arcs to check the enemy's movements. This David and Goliath battle lasted for more than four hours. With his ammunition expended and Turkish bodies stacked like firewood in front of his post, an exhausted Black relaxed against the sandbags—he had survived and overcome what to most men would have been insurmountable odds.²

For his actions, Lance Corporal Percy Black was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. News of Black's feat quickly spread among the Diggers on the Peninsula. There was no doubt among the Allied troops that Black and his gun had prevented the Turkish advance down Monash Gully—a move that would have spelt disaster for the ANZACs.³

His mate, Harry Murray, later stated that Percy Black had the superstitions of a Highlander. One night at Gallipoli as the pair chatted over a hot brew, Black

stated, 'Harry, you and I will come through this. I cannot see either of us lying dead on the Turks' parapet'.⁴

Black received a field commission and was promoted to the rank of second lieutenant on 7 May 1915. By December 1915, as the ANZACs planned their evacuation from the Gallipoli Peninsula, Black had been promoted to temporary captain, commanding B Company, 16th Battalion—a promotion that came as no surprise to the Diggers under his command who greatly respected his inspirational style of leadership.⁴



Following a few months' sojourn in the desert training camps in Egypt, the ANZACs were deployed to the Western Front to face a new enemy, the German Army. Black—now promoted to the rank of major—initially was sent to the 'nursery' sector near Armentieres before the 16th was deployed to fight in the trenches at Pozieres.⁵

Many a Digger said, 'If there was a hell on earth, then Pozieres was it'. The Australian sector occupied an area a little less than two kilometres square. The Germans had their corps artillery—a thousand guns in all—ready and waiting to pound the Australians into the ground, which they did relentlessly for more than a month.



AWM EZ0098. An Australian fatigue party from the 7th Brigade (far left) carrying piles of empty sandbags to the front line through the devastated area near Pozieres. The structure on the left is the remains of a German observation post, which stood on the western end of the village and was nicknamed 'Gibraltar' by the Australians.

Soon after the 16th's first attack at Pozieres, in which they had taken and secured a German trench, the battalion was subjected to a fearsome barrage. An incoming 5.9-inch shell landed so close to Black that he was buried up to his neck in earth and rubble. As his men frantically moved to dig him out, Black calmly declared 'I can feel a terrible pain in my right shin'. He felt sure that his leg was broken, but was relieved to find the cause of his discomfort was a strip of hot, metal shell casing pressing against the skin of his lower leg. Black's dauntless manner of leadership against incredible odds served only to bolster his illustrious reputation.

At Mouquet Farm, Black was badly wounded by a gunshot to the neck.⁴ He was evacuated to a field hospital but the severity of the wound required specialist treatment in London.⁶ His heroism and action under fire had not gone unnoticed as now was evident in the ribbons he proudly wore on his left breast—the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) and the French Croix de Guerre (CdeG).³

While on day leave from the hospital, Percy and a mate went sightseeing in London. As they crossed Piccadilly Circus, dodging the double-decker buses as they went, Percy said to his friend, 'I'll be glad to get back to the battalion, mate. A man's not safe here'.



It was now 1917 and Percy was back with the 16th at the front, preparing to go into action as part of a force deployed to attack the seemingly impenetrable fortress known as the Hindenburg Line, at a place called Bullecourt. The plan seemed simple enough—to take the line by surprise using only infantry troops and their new 'secret' weapon, the tank. The commanders protested vehemently. To proceed on such a mission without the protection of artillery wasn't just a suicide mission, it was nothing short of cold-blooded murder. But the orders stood.⁷

The fortifications established by the Germans to protect their line were daunting—row upon row of lethal barbed wire entanglements supported by heavy logs and guarded by a series of concrete block houses shielding machine-gun emplacements, positioned to cover any breach in the wire.

A couple of days before the scheduled attack, Percy sat in a dugout with his good mate, Harry Murray. As they spoke, Black said, 'Harry, this may be my last fight, but I'll have that bloody German trench before they get me'. Murray knew Black well enough to believe that his superstitious friend was in deadly earnest.⁴

As the troops waited in the frosty predawn darkness, Black patrolled the lines, reassuring the Diggers with small talk about families, football scores back home; even a simple request of, 'Have you got a match, mate?' served to relieve the

tension. Reassurance from arguably one of the most famous fighting leaders of the AIF stirred the troops to believe there was nothing they could not conquer.

On 11 April 1917, Black led part of the attack on the German lines at Bullecourt. The Australians had no artillery support and the tanks that were supposed to breach the wire broke down or became bogged in the muddy, snow-covered ground. Black urged his men into action with a 'Come on boys, bugger the tanks!' as they charged towards the wire. Inspired by Black's lead, the men ferociously fought their way into the German trenches and in doing so became the first Allied soldiers to break through the Hindenburg Line.⁸

But their success came at a price. When they searched for Major Black to share their accomplishment, they found him dead on the wire. Sadly, it was Black's friend Colonel Murray, who saw him hanging from the barbed entanglement.

As predicted, when the battle was over and the cost was counted, the battalion was found to have suffered horrific casualties, losing more than three quarters of its men.



Major Percy Charles Herbert Black, DSO, DCM—declared by his famous friend, Harry Murray, to be 'the bravest and coolest of all the brave men I know'—now lies somewhere beneath the surface of a French field in an unknown grave.¹ His remains may be lost forever, but his name lives for evermore on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial. This memorial was erected as the Australian National Memorial to commemorate all Australian soldiers who fought in France



AWM ART03558. Wheeler, Charles, *The Death of Major Black*, painting-oil on canvas, 1923, Melbourne, 129.7 x 236.8 cm.

and Belgium during the First World War. It is also a Memorial to the Missing and lists the names of 10 982 Australians whose bodies were not recovered or could not be identified.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, Major PCH Black DSO DCM
- 2 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume I, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 3 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 4 Harry Murray, Article on Percy Black, *Reveille*, December, 1929
- 5 C. Longmore, *The Old Sixteenth: being a record of the 16th Battalion, AIF during the Great War of 1914-1918*, Perth: History Committee of the 16th Battalion Association, 1920
- 6 Bean, C E W, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume III, the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 7 Keech, G, *Bullecourt, Arras*, Pen & Sword Books, UK, 1999
- 8 Walker, J, *The blood tub: General Gough and the battle of Bullecourt 1917*, Spellmount, Staplehurst, Kent, UK, 2000