

LCpl John Mann, DCM, MM

The Lewis gunner

In December 1916, a 37-year-old AIF recruit sat on his straw-filled mattress, deeply engrossed in the task at hand. As he tied off the last stitch, he considered the oval shaped piece of two-tone blue felt that now adorned his uniform. His chest swelled with pride. It was the colour patch of the 42nd Battalion, 3rd Australian Division and he was part of it.



Lance Corporal Jack Mann, DCM, MM (Author's Collection)

John Henry ‘Jack’ Mann was born in England. Yearning for adventure, he set sail from his home to see the world. After a stint on the South African goldfields, Jack worked as a crew member on a windjammer that travelled the route between the Cape of Good Hope and the west coast of Australia, where the promise of riches attracted him to the local goldfields.¹

It was here that Jack had his first taste of military life, serving for three years in ‘A’ Company, Goldfields Infantry Regiment based in Kalgoorlie.² He worked hard but the riches he sought eluded him and Jack was forced to look elsewhere to find work. He travelled to Queensland where he returned to his basic trade as a carpenter.²

The Australian newspaper headlines and radio broadcasts in 1916 were almost exclusively devoted to news of the Great War—the deeds of the ANZACs on the Western Front, the successes and failures of battles at so many places with strange-sounding names; and in the latter part of the year, the horrific conditions the Allied forces were suffering in Belgium and France, which were gripped in the worst European winter for forty years.

From the comfort of his chair in the warm Queensland sun, Jack read the headlines and listened to the stirring speeches. Australia needed fresh reinforcements and the propaganda tactics were not lost on Frank. He pondered his current way of life and his future and made a decision. He would enlist.

In February 1917, Jack Mann boarded the troopship *Wiltshire*, bound for England and the Allied training camps on Salisbury Plain in England.³



AWM P02321.059. Snow covering the ground and roofs of a long row of corrugated iron huts occupied by the Australians at the training camp at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain.

Absorbed into the ranks of the 11th Training Battalion, Jack was enthusiastic and paid close attention to his instructors, who in most cases were hard-core officers and NCOs tasked to train recruits while recovering from wounds received in combat. Many of the instructors wore a badge of distinction—a small brass 'A' on their colour patch, distinguishing the wearer as an ANZAC veteran of the Gallipoli Campaign.



AWM REL22612. A brass 'A' on a colour patch, identifying the wearer as a veteran of the Gallipoli Campaign.

In August 1917 Mann joined the ranks of the 42nd in their billets in the village of Remilly-Werquin.² Soldiers of another Allied army, the Portuguese, resided in an adjacent village but with the language barrier and many cultural differences the men of the two armies did not mix well and many a scrap took place. The Diggers gave as good as they got, facetiously referring to the neighbouring troops as the 'pork and beans'.⁴

In the first half of 1917, prior to Mann joining the battalion, the 42nd had seen action in major battles in the Ypres area of Belgium, in particular at Messines and Warneton. In early October, the 42nd again advanced to the front line. The weather was appalling. Rain lashed their faces, visibility was reduced and soon the ground became sodden and sticky, clinging to their boots and impeding their movement. Their orders were to attack and capture the high ground around the village of Broodseinde, as part of the Third battle of Ypres.⁴



AWM E00117. Men of the 42nd Battalion, just out of the line, washing the mud off their gumboots.

As the hands of watches ticked towards zero hour, hundreds of guns thundered into action laying down a rolling barrage a bare 300 metres in front of the assembled troops. The German artillery retaliated with a vengeance, causing heavy casualties in the rear sections of the massed Australian troops, but the Diggers had to hold their position until zero hour. Some sections moved to escape the red-hot shrapnel splinters, causing the entire 11th Brigade to be cramped into an area less than 100 metres deep.⁵ This was a recipe for disaster, but to break would be suicide.⁵

At exactly 6 am, the Australian shells bombarded the German trenches with ferocity and accuracy.⁵ The shrill screeches of whistles broke the air and to a man the remnants of the brigade rose and moved forward to attack.

The enemy held their line for several minutes but the advancing troops were not to be denied. By 6.20 am, the 43rd Battalion had reached and taken its objective. At 6.41 am, the 42nd leapfrogged through and continued the attack.⁴ It then was noticed that large numbers of the enemy were running towards the advancing Australians. They were engaged until it was realised they were not attacking but surrendering. These Germans were allowed to drift through the ranks of the 42nd before they were marshalled and escorted to the rear at a ratio of one Digger per twenty German prisoners.⁵ The 42nd took its objective and was then faced with the arduous task of consolidating its shell-torn and water-sodden position before the counterattack that surely would be launched.

Jack Mann had survived his first terrifying battle. He had put drum after drum of ammunition through his Lewis gun and he had been responsible for his fair share of enemy casualties. Now the line had to be held and held it was. The Germans launched repeated attacks against the entrenched Diggers but the line never wavered. Five days later, Jack and the remainder of the 42nd were relieved.⁴

On 13 October, on the eve of the battle of Passchendaele, Jack Mann became ill and was evacuated to hospital for a stay that was to last two months. As the heavy winter rains set in, the Ypres campaign ground to a halt and on his return, Jack found that although the battalion had been in a reserve roll it had paid a heavy toll at Passchendaele—particularly from gas attacks—losing more than a third of its troops. Its fighting strength had been reduced to 11 officers and 180 other ranks.⁴

A trickle of reinforcements arrived as the 42nd prepared for a return to the front—the battalion was to spend Christmas in the trenches. As the sound of carols sung in both English and German, drifted across the battle front, the soldiers settled to a Christmas dinner of stew and bully beef. When Boxing Day dawned, a savage German artillery barrage jolted the Diggers back to reality.⁴

With the collapse of the Russian Army, seventy additional German Divisions were released from duty on the Eastern Front and redeployed against the British

and French lines in the west.⁵ The Hun had adopted new tactics with specially trained 'storm troopers' heading up the push. Bearing the full brunt of the renewed attack, the British Fifth Army began to fold and amid the confusion, was soon in a headlong retreat. The Australian Divisions were rushed to plug the gaps—but would it be enough?

The roads were congested with an endless stream of French refugees—families pushing barrows full of hastily thrown together possessions, old couples in carts piled high with any goods they could salvage, and children leading the odd cow or two—all trying to escape the Germans.

For days the French citizens had stood by and watched silently and helplessly as their troops retreated. Now in astonishing contrast, they observed Australians in full fighting kit, bands playing, and khaki-clad Diggers singing, laughing and joking as they marched to the front—ready to face whatever the Germans had in store for them. With tears in their eyes the French cheered and waved frantically as at the tops of their voices they screamed 'Viva les Australiens'.

At the battle front, the Divisional Commander, General John Monash was in a state of anxiety, wondering if the desperately needed reinforcements would arrive in time. Monash breathed a sigh of relief when a convoy of thirty buses arrived crowded with soldiers of the Australian 11th Brigade.⁶ At Heilly, the brigade dropped its packs and moved out in 'fighting order'.⁴

Although the men of the 42nd had not had a hot meal in more than 48 hours, morale was high and the men were itching for a fight.⁴ They crossed the River Ancre and dug in near the village of Sailly le Sec, where the battalion was tasked to hold a front of more than two kilometres.

The ranks of the 42nd were bolstered by cavalry, stragglers from the Queen's Bays, and infantry from the 9th Highland Regiment.⁴ The Diggers remarked that the Scots were a little footsore but there was still a lot of fight in them. As the orders came down, their assertive chant rang in the Diggers ears—'we're here to stay and stay we will, we're here to stay and stay we will'. Attack after attack was launched and each onslaught was repulsed. The Diggers of the 42nd observed at least a brigade massing to its front. Mann reassured his No 2, 'We'll be right Digger, you just keep the ammo coming'.



When the Germans pitched their immense numbers at the line the

AWM P00826.010. Lewis gunners in the snow.

42nd was holding, the larrikin element among them was actually laying wagers as to which of them would take out a specified Hun. The morale of the Diggers had never been higher. For Jack Mann and the other Lewis gunners their job was to silence the German machine guns and this they did with surgical precision. Within four hours more than five hundred of the enemy lay dead in front of the line held by the 42nd.⁴

Heavy rain fell on day six of the battle, filling the trenches with knee-deep water. Another two days of relentless fighting under these conditions and the Diggers faced a new enemy—trench foot (the infection and swelling of feet that have been exposed to long periods of dampness and cold, sometimes so severe as to require amputation). An aggressive patrol programme was instituted and the Diggers of the 42nd soon established themselves as the masters of no man's land. By early May the German onslaught had petered out and the 42nd was withdrawn for a well-earned rest.⁴

On 24 May, Jack was manning the defences around Villers-Bretonneux. At about 5.30 pm he heard a heavy artillery barrage being fired from the direction of the town of Albert. Suddenly a dirty yellow cloud started to envelop the position occupied by the 42nd. 'Gas! Gas! Gas!' came the frantic warning as the men dug into their haversacks for their masks. The barrage lasted for a continuous 30-minute period, when it stopped as suddenly as it had started.

At about 8.30 pm it began again, this time for a staggering three hours. With no breeze the mustard gas lingered for hours making sleep impossible. At 8.30 am the next day, the barrage was renewed for another three-hour period. By the time the 'All clear' was sounded the troops had been in their masks for some 18 hours.⁴ The soldiers quickly removed them and hungrily inhaled a long awaited breath of clean air. Exhausted, many then crawled into their bivvies to sleep.

As the day wore on, the heat of the sun drew out the fumes that had accumulated amongst the trees. A brisk wind had sprung up, which drove the gas clouds towards the sleeping men. The Diggers uniforms also had been saturated with the chemical and as they slept they inhaled the deadly fumes.⁴ Soldiers began to wake screaming and coughing as the gas burned their eyes and lungs, causing incredible pain. Conditions were so bad that the medical orderlies were forced to wear gas masks as they too became effected by the fumes as they treated the casualties.⁴ The effects of the gas put Mann out of action for three weeks and resulted in a chronic condition that would plague him for the rest of his life.

Soon the 42nd was again on the move, this time towards the fortified village of Hamel. A new corps commander, General John Monash had taken charge.⁵ He was out to prove that there was a better way to do battle and the Diggers sensed a change in the air. They went through a series of rehearsals for the approaching action. Surprise was to be achieved by not adjusting artillery barrage targets beforehand and hence alerting the Germans of an impending attack.

Detailed briefings were held at all levels of command and units participated in close training with two new tools—tanks and Yanks. The battle was scheduled for 4 July, American Independence Day.⁵

At the 11th hour the unbelievable happened, the American troops were withdrawn. The United States Congress had decreed that American troops would only fight under American command. Monash was furious. The plan was unworkable without them, but in some instances it was too late as units were already at their jumping off points.⁵ Also, the Australian commanders ignored the instruction or stalled it, awaiting confirmation of its authenticity. In addition, some American troops went in of their own accord and they fought with a tenacity equal to any Australian.

Again the French flag was raised over Hamel and news of the success of the battle reverberated through the very corridors of power. Forethought and planning were the keys to success and the blunders and ill-conceived ideas of 1916–17 would never be allowed to happen again.

Jack Mann was promoted to lance corporal on 15 July 1918, and to temporary corporal on 24 August.²

The great push was now on. The Diggers were in open country and advances that were unheard of a year earlier were now common place. At the end of August, the Australians approached the heights of a feature known as Mont St Quentin. It was here that the 42nd ran headlong into the cream of the German Army, the *Kaiserin Augusta Grenadier Guards*.⁴ They were the hand-picked elite and had been positioned in the line for one purpose and one purpose only, to halt the Allied advance.

The bombers and Lewis gunners were to be the linchpins in this see-sawing battle. They thrust forward only to be pushed back. They then would regroup, re-arm and push forward again—they fought like men possessed. During one of these sorties, Jack Mann's Lewis gun detachment came under extremely heavy machine gun fire.¹ His No 2 was taken out by a bullet in the chest and Mann wondered if the next one had his name on it. Jack brought his gun into action, attached a fresh drum of ammunition, stood up and, firing from the hip, engaged the opposing machine guns.⁷ His fire was devastating.

Suddenly the Germans counterattacked, rushing at Mann from three sides. Assessing his position as about to be overrun, he calmly dismantled the gun, scattered the parts, then withdrew, continuing to fire at the enemy with his rifle as he ran.⁷

He made his way to another post that had been knocked out. He extracted the Lewis gun from the dead gunner's hands, stood up and fired on the pursuing enemy. As the Germans scrambled for cover, Mann kept up his assault and called his mates forward. A platoon pushed through the position as the enemy fled in

headlong retreat.¹ Jack calmly applied the safety catch, placed the butt of the weapon on a sandbag and sat down—he'd done his bit for now.

In recognition of his actions, Jack Mann was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal—for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty.⁷

After the Mont St Quentin action, the battalion was given a brief rest out of the line. Then without warning the 42nd was ordered to disband to provide reinforcements to the other three battalions of the brigade. After living and fighting together for so long, the battalions became 'families' to the men and their sense of attachment and loyalty was extremely strong. To a man they agreed that to split up the family was not acceptable.

Secret meetings were held, Kings Regulations were studied and NCOs and others versed in military law drew up a plan which in due course was confided to every member of the rank and file.⁴ A resolute determination to stick together at all costs permeated the ranks of the battalion.

The momentous parade was scheduled for 21 September. The commanding officer addressed the assembled troops, regretting having to carry out the decision to disband, but mindful that reinforcements were dwindling and the need to strengthen the other battalions was now imperative.

He gave the commands, 'Attention. Slope arms. Form fours, right'. All of these orders were carried out with a precision that would rival the Guards. He then gave the order 'Quick march', but to a man they stood fast.⁴ He gave the order again and again—the men refused to move.

The parade was dismissed. Routine training under the NCOs was carried out over the next few days and on the 25th, the battalion was again assembled and again the order was given to march into their new battalions. The men once again stood their ground.⁴

The following day, the 42nd went through an internal reorganisation. Companies were reduced from four to three platoons each consisting of 21 men and the battalion equipped and prepared to return to the front. They were to be a part of the force that was to take and hold the supposedly impregnable Hindenburg Line.⁴

Two American Divisions were to assault the line and the Australians were to push through and exploit the support areas. A massive artillery barrage, unprecedented in the war, bombarded the belts of barbed wire, concrete blockhouses and machine-gun posts. The Americans launched themselves into the thick of it, but lost their way and failed to mop up the defences of the enemy as they swept over the positions.⁴ When they bogged down, the Australians moved forward to break the deadlock.

As the 42nd wound its way through the maze of barbed wire, it came under the heaviest of fire before the German troops surged forward, launching a savage

counterattack. Mann moved his Lewis gun section forward to a favourable position and, standing in full view of the enemy, he engaged a number of machine guns, inflicting heavy casualties.

The tide was turning, with Mann securing superiority of fire. This allowed the Australians to lift their heads and bring down fire on the advancing Germans. The enemy counterattack faltered and ground to a halt. Jack surveyed the battlefield, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stepped down into the shell hole. For his actions, Jack Mann, DCM was awarded the Military Medal—for bravery in the field.⁷

This was to be the last battle for the 42nd. The recent actions had depleted the strength of the battalion to a level that necessitated their withdrawal. As the 42nd entered their billets, a call again came for their disbandment. The men continued to rebel but when they were dismissed from the parade they found that their cooks had been taken away. The hierarchy had lost patience with them.

In addition, each time a 42nd man reported sick, no matter how minor the complaint, he was sent to a hospital in either England or Paris. The Diggers realised that any further effort to resist would be but a token gesture. The men yielded and on 22 October 1918 the remnants of the proud 42nd became B Company of the 41st Battalion.⁴

Three weeks later, at 11 am on 11 November 1918, silence befell the battlefields of Europe—the war was over.

Thoughts quickly turned to home and loved ones. The troops were informed that they would not be returning to Australia as intact units but prioritised according to length of service. Hence those who had served at Gallipoli would be among the first to go.

As Jack had not arrived at the front till 1917, it would be some time before it was his turn to sail. Rehabilitation and training programmes were put in place to keep the troops busy. Jack applied for and was granted leave in England to attend a course in paint mixing. On 15 November 1919, Corporal Jack Mann, DCM, MM, boarded the troopship *Ypiringa*, his next stop Australia where he disembarked on Boxing Day.²

Jack returned to the obscurity of civilian life but never lost his fighting spirit. Whilst enjoying a quiet drink in the bars of many an outback pub, if the topic of conversation turned to politics as it often did, Jack would insist there was only one opinion or point of view—his. To disagree with Jack invariably resulted in a fistfight, with Jack the victor.¹

He never married and during the depression years Jack offered to be made redundant to free his job for a married man who had the added responsibilities of a family.¹ In later years, the effects of the mustard gassing compelled Jack to enter hospital. As a consequence of the damage to his throat, his speech became

affected and the difficulty he experienced when trying to communicate with the hospital staff caused him to become frustrated and angry.

The doctors felt that maybe he was developing dementia, and perhaps he should be committed to an asylum. Jack was having no part of this and packed his swag and threatened to leave.¹ The doctors relented and allowed him to remain in hospital. Jack Mann died on 16 November 1957 and was laid to rest in Perth's Karrakatta Cemetery.¹

Today the Rockhampton-based 42nd Capricornia Battalion, Royal Queensland Regiment, enjoys the facility named The LCPL John Henry Mann DCM MM Soldier's Club, which stands as a tribute to this admirable Australian hero.



Notes

- 1 *A concise history of Lance Corporal J Mann*, provided by the Committee of the LCPL John Henry Mann DCM MM Soldier's Club, 42nd Battalion, Royal Queensland Regiment, Rockhampton
- 2 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 3077 Lance Corporal John Henry Mann, DCM MM
- 3 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 42nd Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 4 Brahm's V, *Spirit of the Forty-Second*, WR Smith & Patterson Pty Ltd, Brisbane, 1938
- 5 Bean, C E W, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume IV, the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 6 Congratulatory card, Sir John Monash
- 7 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War