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ALBERT JACKA – THE FIRST ANZAC HERO



“Only a fool is never afraid” Captain Albert Jacka

Albert Jacka was born on the 10th January 1893 at Layard in Victoria. He completed elementary schooling before working as a labourer, first with his father and then with the Victorian State Forests Department. Jacka enlisted on 18 September 1914 as a private in the 14th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, and trained at Broadmeadows camp. His unit embarked on 22nd December and spent two months training in Egypt before landing at Anzac Cove, Gallipoli Peninsula, on 26th April 1915.

Upon landing in Gallipoli, it did not take long until he experienced combat. On 19th May 1915, the Turkish forces launched a counterattack along the entire Anzac front. The assault led to a group of Turkish soldiers capturing a section of the trench which became known as Courtney’s post and is the location in which Albert Jacka won the Victoria Cross. Upon realising what had happened Jacka fired several warning shots to delay the Turkish forces and allow time for reinforcements to come.

Once reinforcements arrived, Jacka shouted his instructions, he and three others sprang out into the trench. All but Jacka were immediately hit, so he leapt back into the communication trench. A new plan was devised. Two bombs were lobbed at the Turks while Jacka skirted around to attack from the flank. Amid the smoke and the noise, he clambered over the parapet, shot five Turks and bayoneted two as the rest hastily retreated. “I managed to get

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the beggars, Sir", he reputedly told the first officer to appear. For this action, he received the Victoria Cross, the first to be awarded to anyone in the Australian Imperial forces.

Jacka instantly became a national hero. He was awarded £500 and a gold watch that the prominent Melbourne business and sporting identity John Wren had promised to the first Victoria Cross winner. His image was used on recruiting posters and magazine covers, and he received rapid promotions; first to Corporal on 28 August, to Sergeant two weeks later on 12 September, and then to Company Sergeant Major on 14 November. He became Company Sergeant Major of C Company and saw much fighting at Gallipoli where, during August at Chunuk Bair, Hill 971, and Hill 60, his battalion took part in an Allied offensive aimed at trying to break the deadlock around the beachhead. After nine months of fighting and 26,111 Australian casualties, the Allied forces began to evacuate the peninsula in December 1915, after which Jacka's battalion was withdrawn to Egypt. In Egypt, he passed through officer training school with high marks, and on 29 April 1916 was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant.

The 14th Battalion was shifted to the Western front and participated in several raids against the German trenches. Following devastating allied casualties at Battle of the Somme, the 14th Battalion was transferred to help replenish the allied line in the Pozières sector of the Somme offensive. After three days of bloody fighting, the Australian forces captured Pozières, though at the cost of 5,285 casualties. The fighting was said to be so fierce that the Australians could only identify their trenches by the bodies of their comrades showing their red and white shoulder patches.

On the 7th August 1916, German soldiers begun to overrun a section of the Allied line which included Jacka's dug-out who had just completed a reconnaissance mission and upon returning spotted two Germans who rolled a bomb down the doorway, killing two of his men. Jacka charged up the dug-out steps, firing as he moved, and came upon a large number of the enemy rounding up some forty Australians as prisoners. He rallied his platoon and charged at the enemy, some of whom immediately threw down their rifles. Furious hand-to-hand fighting erupted as the prisoners turned on their captors. Fifty Germans were captured, and the line was retaken. Australian war correspondent Charles Bean described the counter-attack "as the most dramatic and effective act of individual audacity in the history of the Australian imperial force". The entire platoon was wounded, with Jacka being wounded in the neck and shoulder and was sent to a London hospital. On the 8th September London newspapers carried reports of his death, but Jacka was far from done for. He had been promoted Lieutenant on 18th August, rejoined his unit in November and was promoted Captain on 15th March 1917 and appointed the 14th Battalion's intelligence officer.

Back at the front, the Germans had retreated to the defensive line known as the Hindenburg line. On April 8th, 1917, Jacka led a night reconnaissance party into no man's land to inspect the German defences before a major allied attack. Jacka's job was to lay tape along the ground to help guide infantry. Just as the work was near its completion, Jacka noticed two German soldiers who had spotted him and seen what he was doing. Knowing this could lead to many Allied deaths he took the initiative and rushed towards the enemy lines to capture them. Pressing on towards the enemy lines he pulled out his pistol, which misfired, therefore he continued on without a weapon and managed to capture them by hand. His

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quick thinking prevented Anzac units from discovery and probable disastrous bombardment; for this action, he was awarded a Bar to his Military Cross.

On the 8th July 1917, Jacka was wounded by a sniper's bullet near Ploegsteert Wood and spent nearly two months away from the front. On 26th September, he led the 14th Battalion against German lines at Polygon Wood and displayed "a grasp of tactics, and a military intuition that many had not given him credit for". In May 1918, he was severely gassed at Villers-Bretonneux and as a result saw no more action.

After recovering from his injuries he travelled back to Australia, disembarking in Melbourne. He arrived to a large crowd, including the Governor General who then proceeded to the town hall in a convoy of 85 cars with Jacka at its head. Arriving at town hall, he was welcomed by his old Battalion. He was demobilised in January 1920 and established an electrical goods importing and exporting business with two men from his former Battalion.

Throughout the rest of his life, Jacka suffered from the many wounds he had sustained while fighting which led to him collapsing after a meeting and eventually succumbing, in part, to the injuries he received during the war and died a month later dying on the 17th January 1932, one week after his 39th birthday.

Albert Jacka was a man who had no problem placing his life on the line to help his comrades. He might have risen higher in the Australian imperial force, but his blunt, straightforward manner frequently annoyed his superiors. "He said what he meant, and meant what he said", recalls one friend. As an Officer, he invariably won respect by leading his men by example and epitomised the Anzac creed of mateship, bravery, fairness and an absence of pretentiousness.

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