

2010 PREMIER'S ANZAC  
SPIRIT SCHOOL PRIZE

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The statue of a World War I digger stands on a plinth in the central park of the South Australian town of Naracoorte. He looks towards the West with a gaze of confidence and optimism, as if he may be anticipating a glorious adventure, or remembering a job well done. Underneath, among the many, is a name – John Mark Munn.

Was it an omen for John Mark Munn to be born on what would later become one of this country's most important dates in history?

John (Jack) Munn was born on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1895, to Henry and Elizabeth Munn, of Hynam, a small rural town in the South East of South Australia. By 1913, as a seventeen year old, Jack was a valuable team player in the local Hynam Football Club, together with his brother William. Jack already had a "team" as one of seven children in the Munn family.

Jack, aged 20, was working as a labourer when the call came to serve King and country. Together with cousin James Blacksell, he enlisted on 15 March 1916, eight months after James's brother William had enlisted. Jack was enlisted in the 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion with the rank of Private and James went to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion, also as a Private. They embarked from Adelaide on the 24<sup>th</sup> June 1916, on the transport ship HMAT Bulla, and arrived in Plymouth on the 24<sup>th</sup> August. Jack and James may not have known that their cousin and brother William had already been killed in action a month before they arrived in Plymouth. It is not known whether the two cousins' paths ever crossed again.

Just as young Australians do today, the enlisted men and women, departed Australia with a spirit of adventure. They too left behind their loved ones, but they embarked for all the unknowns of war. Jack and James would have heard of the losses at Gallipoli and the Western Front, but there were Australians in France and Belgium who needed their help, and they were not about to let down their mates.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1916, Jack was sent to France to join the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Division Base Depot at Etaples. He then joined the field 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October. Within a week, Jack had suffered a foot injury and was taken to hospital. There, Jack was to meet a remarkable group of Australian women who had volunteered to take their nursing skills to France and work close to the Frontlines. Following treatment, he rejoined his unit in the field some days later.

Jack was soon in the midst of battle and suffered a serious gunshot to his right arm on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1916. The attack in which Jack was injured was targeted at well-defended positions and took place in broad daylight as part of

the Battle of Gueudecourt on the Somme. In this battle, the 27<sup>th</sup> suffered the loss of 136 soldiers and 141 were injured. Once more, Jack found himself in hospital and under the care of the Australian and Allied nurses. Conditions in the hospital were difficult, but the ANZAC spirit of the nurses prevailed, no matter the danger, and were to assist Jack in making a recovery.

He was released from hospital, but not from duty, on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 1916. Jack fought on, and like the rest of the ANZAC's, he had asked for no favours while there was a job to be done.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> September 1917, during the Battle of Menin Road, a gunshot to Jack's other arm injured him yet again, and sent him back to hospital care. In this battle, the 27<sup>th</sup> again suffered losses; 33 soldiers were killed, and 147 were wounded. Although, Jack rejoined his unit just over a month later, on the 30<sup>th</sup> October.

One can only guess at what was going through the minds of these men and women as they continually saw friends and fellow soldiers killed. The horror of the conditions each had to endure is something we, back home, thankfully will never fully know. However, we do understand the determination the men showed in the trenches, and the duty the nurses showed in the face of constant death, agony, and suffering.

Jack was finally granted leave to England on the 25<sup>th</sup> November 1917, and came back on the 9<sup>th</sup> January 1918. We can imagine the relief Jack must have felt to be on quiet, horror-free soil for just six weeks.

Jack returned after his brief rest in England to the horrors of the battlefield in France. It was now 1918.

Later in the year, the Australians were highly successful in the Battle of Mont St Quentin from the 31<sup>st</sup> August to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September. They were attempting to hold the key high ground of Mont St Quentin, (overlooking the town of Peronne), a pivotal German defensive position on the line of the Somme battlefield.

Unknown to the Australians, there were just over seven weeks of the war remaining. Jack was alongside his mates of the 27<sup>th</sup> again, twice wounded and recovered, never daunted, and now part of a battle that was to help bring a close to the war.

“Uncle Jack”, according to a family descendant, had recently written a letter to a brother informing him he could have the use of his rifle. This was no small gesture, as Jack had treasured his gun above all his few possessions.

In the battle, 109 Australians of the 27<sup>th</sup> were killed and wounded.

Jack Munn was one of the fallen.

Australians have always been team players and have always helped each other out when the going gets tough, be it floods, fire, drought or war. When an Aussie is in trouble, his neighbours will be there to lend assistance in any way they can. This was again proved in the Black Saturday bushfires early this year. Jack Munn was one of the team players that helped out his country when it needed him the most.

All that came home after Jack’s death was a wallet, fourteen coins and, surprisingly, a rosary. Jack’s mother received all these items. It is to be assumed Jack’s family later received his Military Medal, British War Medal and Victory Medal. King George V approved the issue of a Memorial Plaque Medal, together with a Scroll to the next of kin of those who had fallen in World War One. The Medal and Scroll were intended as a solace for bereavement suffered, and as a memento. The Scroll had the following inscription:

“He whom the Scroll commemorates was numbered among those, who at the call of King and Country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardness, faced danger and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom. Let those that come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.”

An inscription of the soldier’s name and regiment followed the above.

Jack had served for two and a half years. If he, cousins William and James Blacksell, and 60,000 other Australians who had been killed, had not been willing to serve their country, Australia would not be as free as it is now.

What does the Spirit of the ANZAC mean? It was men and women helping each other in any way they could, never questioning the why or what of it all, laying down their lives for others and to the way of life we Australians have become accustomed. It was looking out for each other when called upon to embark on the most terrifying and deadly mission a King and country could ever request.

These Australians died so that future generations would not experience the wars that they had to endure for a free land. Did they know they were fighting for future generations?

Tragically, Jack Munn was one of those men to die in war without the chance of a final goodbye to his family. Jack would have known he was always in mortal danger, but he continued to fight for his country, and it is sad he was never able to return to the freedom that Australia enjoys, and that all of us know so well.

There is a memorial at Villers Bretonneux Cemetery with Jack's name on it.

Perhaps, though, the Naracoorte Memorial better sums up the ANZAC spirit – the digger's gaze showing a spirit of determination, and of faith in the future, through the spirit and sacrifice of the likes of Jack Munn, 1895-1918.

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John Mark Munn

