

## Lieutenant-Colonel John Eldred Mott MC and Bar

Rod Martin



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

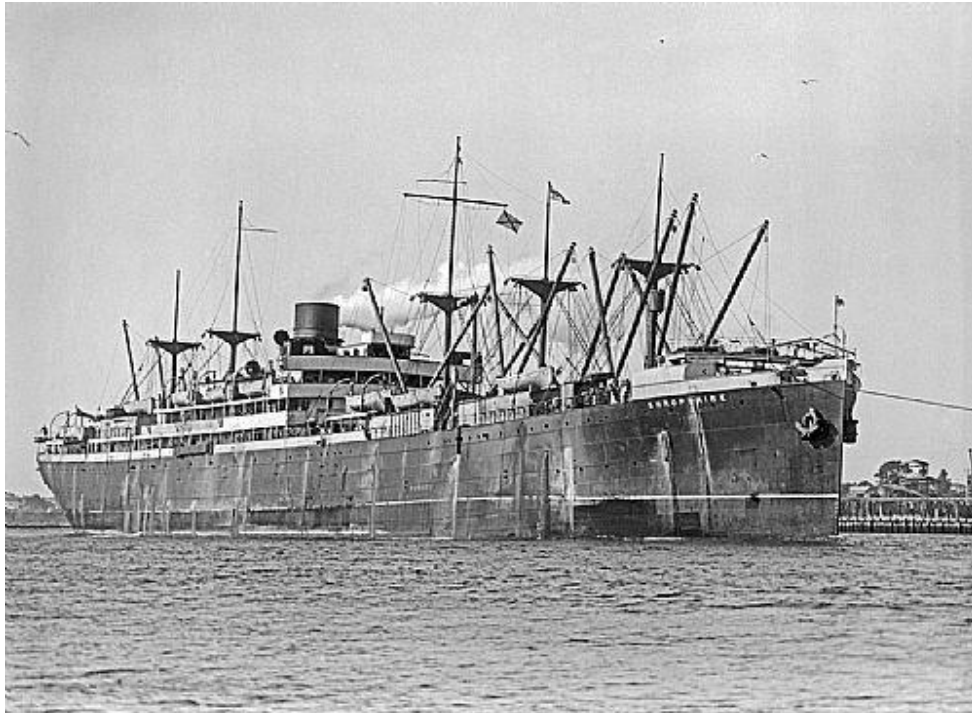
H05632

(AWM H05632)

John Mott was almost thirty-nine years old when he enlisted in the Australian Army on 12 August 1915. On his first attestation form he described himself as an engineer. On his second, he used the word 'mechanic'. There is some doubt as to just what his formal qualifications were. At the time of his enlistment he lived with his family in the small town of Norseman in Western Australia. His mother lived at 73 Salisbury Street in Moonee Ponds, and we can assume that the Essendon area was his domicile before he was married.

John was a strapping man for his time, standing almost 183 centimetres tall and weighing around seventy-eight kilos. He had no previous military training but, given his age, technical qualifications and experience, he was obviously considered to be officer material because his war record indicates that he was given the rank of sergeant almost as soon as he joined up and, by 21 November 1915, he had sat for and successfully completed the examination to qualify as a second-lieutenant. He applied for a commission in the army on 22 January the following year and was duly appointed to that rank.

Living in Western Australia, John was initially appointed to the local 16 Battalion. He trained in that state and, on 31 March 1916, he sailed from Fremantle in A9 HMAT *Shropshire*.



([www.birtwhistlewiki.com.au](http://www.birtwhistlewiki.com.au))

Unfortunately, the war diaries of 16 Battalion from June 1915 to July 1916 are no longer available. However, we do know from his war record that John and his battalion arrived in Egypt around 20 April 1916 and were sent to the new Australian base at Tel El Kebir, south of Cairo. The unit underwent further training in the desert and then left Alexandria on 7 June, arriving in Marseilles on the fourteenth of that month. Just what John did between that date and 4 August 1916, when he was transferred to 48 Battalion, is very difficult to discern from the records as, indeed, is the reason for his transfer. Suffice it to say that, on 6 August, John joined 48 Battalion which, at that time, was located in a couple of old German trenches just outside the ruined village of Pozières in the Somme Valley. The Battle of the Somme, the greatest battle of the war, has begun with a combined Anglo-French assault in the Somme Valley on 1 July that year. A considerable amount of territory had been recaptured by 6 August, but at considerable human and material cost. On the first day of the battle alone, Britain had suffered 60 000 casualties, 20 000 of them deaths. As part of the extended battle, three Australian divisions were assigned to do what British forces had failed to do in the early stages of the general assault: take over the ruins of the village of Pozières and claim the strategic ridge on which they stood. Led by the impetuous British general Hubert Gough, keen to get a quick victory and impress the British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, 1 Australian Division attacked on 23 July, taking a foothold in the ruins. Two days later, when 2 Division stepped in, 1 Division had suffered 5 285 casualties. 2 Division began an attack towards the windmill in the centre of the ridge on the twenty-ninth. The men were unsuccessful at first but, after repeated costly assaults, finally took the ridge on 4 August - at the cost of 6846 casualties.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00013

Looking across the old German trenches, past the ruins of Pozières, towards the site of the windmill, October 1916 (AWM E0001)

On the sixth, 4 Division, of which 48 Battalion was part, was then ordered to consolidate control of the ridge and move towards Mouquet Farm nearby (a German stronghold), and the town of Thiepval behind it. From then until the fifteenth of the month, the men of 4 Division carried out several attacks on Mouquet Farm, being repulsed every time at horrendous cost.



The remains of Mouquet Farm by October 1916

(AWM H15927)

48 Battalion began taking heavy casualties from the night of 5 August. From the fifth to the seventh, six officers were killed and fourteen wounded, ninety-eight other ranks killed and 404 wounded. Seventy-six men were missing, most presumed dead.

In the midst of all of this on 6 August, as reported in the battalion's war diary, John Mott reported for duty. What a baptism of fire! The men that day were desperately trying to dig trenches in front of the farm, but they were constantly being blown in by German shellfire. We know that 4 Division battled on unsuccessfully until it was finally withdrawn on the fifteenth and replaced by 1 Division. In the ten days it had been attacking Mouquet Farm, 4 Division had suffered 4 649 casualties. 48 Battalion's totals between 12 and 15 August numbered twenty-three dead, sixty-four wounded and three missing.

However, the division's trials had not ended on the fifteenth. On 22 August, after losing a further 2 650 men, 1 Division was replaced by 2 Division, which actually reached the farm (a honeycomb of tunnels and fortified points) but could not hold it, losing a further 1 368 men before being replaced, once more, by 4 Division on the twenty-sixth. For its part, 48 Battalion returned to Mouquet Farm on 31 August, staying there in the trenches until relieved by 49 Battalion on 2 September. The men then moved back to billets in the town of Albert.

4 Division was relieved on 15 September, having driven the salient at the farm to its furthest extent. Its losses totalled 2 409 further casualties. In the forty-five days of the assault on Pozières and Mouquet Farm, the Australian casualty figure was 24 139. The gain? Pozières Ridge and the ridge behind it.



(ww1cemeteries.com)

On 15 September 1916, 48 Battalion was in reserve at Poperinghe. The men stayed in reserve until the twenty-sixth of the month, when they relieved 46 Battalion in the front line. The next morning the Germans heavily bombed the unit's trenches, doing considerable damage. Fortunately, no casualties were recorded. On 29 September,

the war diary recorded the use of ‘jam jars’ by the Germans - improvised bombs that evidently did quite a bit of damage to the trenches.



‘Jam Jars’. They were obviously used by both sides when grenades were in short supply.

(www.pinterest.com)

The next night, members of 46 Battalion carried out a raid on the German trenches, launching themselves from the ones occupied by 48 Battalion. The enemy retaliated with artillery fire on 48 Battalion, killing two and wounding two others.

On 1 October, while in the front line, John was promoted to first lieutenant. How long that decision took to get through to him, and the reason for it, is unknown. He probably would have been too heavily occupied that particular day to care as, after a quiet morning, the Germans fired ten high explosive shells into the front line. Only one did any real damage. It hit a dugout in the side of a trench, killing three men and severely wounding three others.

The battalion was relieved the next day and moved back into support at nearby Ridgewood. The Germans shelled the camp on the tenth, but there were no casualties. On 14 October, the battalion went back into the front line, staying there under continuous bombardment until the twenty-third, when it moved into billets at Boeschepe.

On 12 November, the men headed for the front once more, this time settling in a switch trench, ready to move into the front line trenches. Being in such a trench was just as dangerous as being in a front line one. The battalion was bombed with high explosive and gas shells on a regular basis, and German planes were active with their bombs and machine guns as well, but one was shot down near the battalion’s trench on the sixteenth. On 19 November, after an overnight fall of snow (it may have been the first John had ever experienced), the battalion moved into the front trenches. The war diary reported that the ground was very difficult on account of the wet conditions, and the trenches were full of mud. The men faced at least three dangers as a result: enemy bombardment and possible attacks (eight casualties were caused that day, two of them subsequently dying); pneumonia as a result of the cold, wet conditions, and an affliction called Trench Foot - caused by standing in cold, wet mud for hours on end. It led to circulation problems, frostbite and possible gangrene. Many soldiers suffered from it during the war, and quite a few lost one or both feet as a result. Left untreated, of course, it could lead to death.

Over the next few days, the German artillery was quite active, a few men being killed and some wounded. On the twenty-seventh, a report was made to the effect that the Germans were working hard, reinforcing one of their strong points. The battalion commander immediately got on to the artillery:

*... and their response was quick and effective. Our Lewis [light machine-] guns stood by and when the artillery opened they swept the position with machine Gun fire, catching the Boche [an allied name for the Germans] as he ran for cover. When morning came 3 enemy dead were observed on parapet and a number in front of trench about 10 in all. Very Satisfactory indeed.*

The next day, the men were relieved by 14 Battalion and the men, after extricating themselves from the muddy trenches, marched about nine kilometres to huts at Mametz, walking through deep mud and over bad roads. When they finally arrived, their feet were carefully inspected and thoroughly rubbed with whale oil to soften the skin. The commander reported that "everyone" had colds, but that the spirit of the battalion was good - despite the men having experienced sixteen days in the switch and front trenches, under regular bombardment, and being soaking wet most of the time. Little did he know when he wrote that the coming winter was to be described as the worst on the Somme for forty years.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00154

A snowed up dugout, Mametz Wood, January 1917

(AWM E00154)

On 17 December the battalion moved to a camp at Flesselles. The men were still there on Christmas Day and received gifts from the Australian Comforts Fund and

puddings bought from battalion funds. The officers had a Christmas dinner in the evening.

On 2 January, the unit began moving towards its final destination at Guedecourt, reaching there on the sixth. It was slated to go into a support line at Brazentin, and did so the next day. On the eighth, the Germans shelled the trenches, killing four men and wounding another five. The commander reported that the trenches were in a very bad state but that the position was strong. However, it was not so strong that the enemy could not inflict further damage with his shells and, on 12 January, a dugout occupied by signallers was smashed, killing three and crushing two. One man was buried under debris for seven hours before he was dug out. The conditions at the front in January 1917 were extremely bad. The war diary recorded that

*Feet have given us more trouble this time than last. It is almost impossible for the men to keep their feet dry. We are holding the front line with posts and it means wading through deep mud to get to them. Despite the constant care given to this matter quite a number of bad feet have been dealt with.*



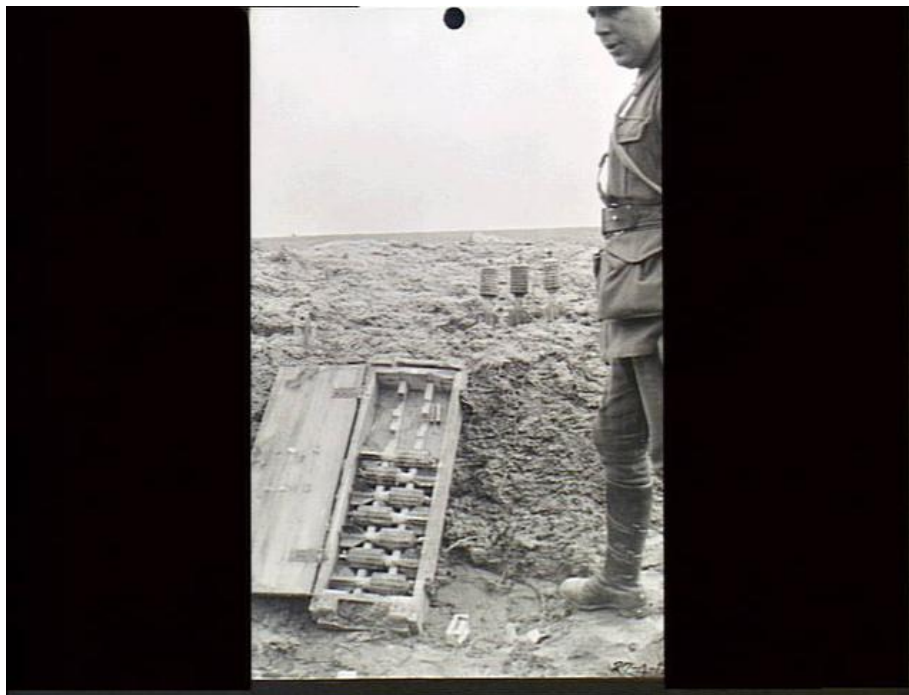
Somme mud

(AWM P05380.002)

On 16 January, after losing a sergeant plus five others wounded by shellfire the day before, 48 Battalion was relieved. It had been in the front lines for ten days and the men were cold, wet and exhausted. The end of the month found them a camp at Brazentin, having been employed on road and railway work since the twenty-fourth of the month. In what was an extremely bad winter, the men were suffering from the cold weather. The commander wrote that

The huts though good are extremely cold and not sufficient fuel is being supplied. It is seldom we get coal and the wood issued is green. Consequently smokes very much. Australians are not used to such cold conditions and it is very necessary that sufficient fuel is supplied to enable them to have a stove to warm their hut at night. The men had a wet trying time while in the trenches and it is necessary to keep them as warm as possible so that they will be fit for their next tour of duty.

On 16 February 1917, 48 Battalion move back to the front line. The Germans were quiet at first but, the next day, send over a barrage, mortar-type "Pineapple" bombs being prominent (so called because of their shape).



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P02321.060

Pineapple bombs ready to be fired.

(AWM P02321.060)

At the end of the war diary report for 21 February, the commander notes a change in the attitude and approach of the enemy. He reports that very few enemy patrols had been observed, and those that were and challenged did not wait around. The commander makes the prescient comment that the enemy morale had very much deteriorated - "*He will not stand.*" What the commander saw was probably the beginning of what was to become a large-scale German retreat back to its heavily fortified Siegfried ("Hindenburg") Line. This move took place in the early months of 1917 and was necessitated by German losses, which by that time were affecting the enemy's ability to maintain its hold on to advance lines, especially ones containing salients (protrusions). A move back to straighter, more easily defended positions would save on manpower and war materiel. However, the Germans were not just



leaving territory into which the allied soldiers could move easily. They set many booby traps as they retreated, and some turned out to be deadly. The feature film *1917* contains a representation of one of them.

For the time being, however, the enemy was still proving an effective and efficient opponent. An assault on the German lines beginning on 22 February was unsuccessful due to the strength of the opposition and the very rough, shell-pocked terrain the men had to cross. On the night of the twenty-fourth, however, they did take one enemy trench and that put them in a stronger position.

That position was handed over to 58 Battalion on that same night, and the men moved to Mametz Brigade Camp before moving to a "very dirty" camp at Becourt the next day. After reaching another camp at Henecourt Wood the next day (a distance of about eleven kilometres), the commander noted that the men were very tired and unfit, stating that they had continuously been in the front line area, either holding the front line or working behind it, from 7 January to 25 February. He noted further that the conditions for the whole time had been wet and cold.

After having a good rest period, in which the men were involved in training as well as recreation, the men moved on to a camp at Fricourt on 23 March. By that time, John had been a captain for two months and was no doubt showing very good leadership qualities. On 28 March, the battalion moved to Eaucourt. Not long after, the men were on the move again, ending eventually at a place called Noreuil, very close to an area whose name would become infamous among Australians in the First World War: Bullecourt. Following on from the general German retreat, the British command decided to test the strength of the Hindenburg Line, and chose to do it at Arras and Bullecourt. If the troops could break through at the latter spot, they could then swing north in support of the attack at Arras. The Australian 4 Division, commanded as part of the British 5 Army, led by the impetuous cavalry general Hubert Gough, was slated to take part in an unorthodox attack. Instead of the usual multi-gun barrage designed to "soften up" the enemy, it was planned to stage a surprise attack, using a number of tanks - a new weapon introduced on the Somme by the British the previous year. The tanks would lead the way across No Man's Land and towards the German line, paving the way for infantry to follow after. Gough planned to use twelve tanks in the attack. When the day came, however (11 April), only three tanks were available, and they made so much noise clattering along the roads towards the battlefield that the element of surprise was completely lost. When the attack began, two of the mechanically unreliable tanks were quickly out of the action and the attacking troops, crossing flat, open land, were left to the mercy of the German machine gunners. As Richard Travers puts it, Gough's impetuosity had cost the Australians dearly at Pozières. He was now to repeat the dose at Bullecourt. The irony was that some men actually reached the first German trench, as did the sole remaining tank. The men then moved on and actually captured the second German trench. However, they could not hold it unless the artillery supported them with a barrage that would stop the German reinforcements from getting through. However, reports from aerial spotter planes indicated that the Australians were moving forward from the second trench, so it was decided not to endanger them by shelling that area of land. Australian reinforcements did not reach the men in the second trench in time for them to consolidate the position and, in face of Germans staging a

counter-attack, the survivors were forced to retreat. In his own words, John described the attack:

Our orders were to advance with Tanks covering us and take the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> ‘Hindenberg[sic] Lines’, but the Tanks were knocked out of action by shell fire, and never reached the lines, therefore we were exposed to a murderous machine gun fire as we advanced. We could not be reinforced nor could ammunition be sent up. The enemy massed in rear of their lines during the morning and counterattacked in great force, taking the few of us who were left.

The attack ended with the loss of some 3 000 casualties, 1 300 of them being taken prisoner.



One of the tanks at First Bullecourt, knocked out by the Germans just short of their trench lines  
(AWM G01534J)

John was among the 1 300. He was initially reported as being wounded in the hand, arm, chest and neck. Evidently, this happened before the Australians had reached the first German trench. Survivors who made it back to the starting line after they had taken the trench and then had to retreat because there was no adequate reinforcement (only 150 out of the 1 100 members of the battalion who initially charged made it back to their lines) reported that they laid him in a former German dugout before they retreated. One reported to the Red Cross that John ‘was so cool and as game as a lion’ The Germans subsequently informed the Australian headquarters on 6 May that he had been taken prisoner and sent to a hospital in Germany.

Describing his capture in a report he wrote later, John commented:

During the attack I was shot in several places, and finally got one in the neck, striking the spine as it passed through. I fell into the trench unconscious, and

was in a helpless condition, when the Germans came over, and unable to even make an attempt to get back to our own lines and so, much to my disgust, found myself a Prisoner.

After a period recuperating in hospital, John was transferred to an officers' prison camp at Ströhen, north-west of Hanover and about 160 kilometres from the border with The Netherlands. Probably some time in September 1917, John staged a daring escape from the camp. In his own words, he and another officer managed to slip from the camp and then spent time marching, hiding in sewers and bushes, swimming rivers and crawling past sentries. The other officer was recaptured, but John managed to keep going, reaching the Dutch frontier in early October. He then had to bolt past a sentry and then crawl across open country and through an outpost line composed of bloodhounds before finally straggling across the border. The Netherlands remained neutral in the First World War, so he was free! The Dutch officials placed John in a quarantine camp and from there he sent a telegram to the Red Cross, informing them of his escape. This was probably around 6 October.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A03035

John seen after his arrival in The Netherlands (AWM A03035)

John was the first Australian officer to escape from German imprisonment during the war. When he was transported to England later in October, he was received by King George V at Buckingham Palace to be congratulated on his daring escape. Back in Australia, the news was happily received by his family, his wife and three children having moved back to Victoria in May 1917. On 16 October, the *Warrnambool*

*Standard* was one of many newspapers that recounted the story of his escape and commented:

Mott is a fine specimen of an Australian and is not boastful. He has recovered from the effects of his hardships, and is applying to rejoin his unit.

John's good work before the attack at Bullecourt had been recognised on 9 April when the British commander in chief, Sir Douglas Haig, mentioned him in a despatch. In May 1919, John was awarded a bar to his Military Cross in recognition of his gallant conduct in escaping from captivity - better late than never!



Military Cross and Bar

(emedals.com)

But how did he win the first Military Cross? On returning to England on 11 October, he was granted one month's leave in which to recuperate from his ordeal. On 16 September, John was mentioned in despatches for his meritorious conduct. Once back on duty, he proceeded to France on 3 February 1918. However, he remained at corps headquarters on a supernumary list for a while, perhaps because he had been so badly wounded at Bullecourt, and did not rejoin 48 Battalion until 24 June.

In late June 1918, 48 Battalion was in reserve, located at Sailly-le-Sec, east-north-east of the important communications and transport hub of Amiens, in the Somme Valley. On 21 March, the Germans had launched what was to be their final assault against the allied forces. In a move intended to divide the British and French forces and drive the British to the coast and destruction, an attack was made on the British Third and Fifth Armies, the initial aim being to capture Amiens and thus deprive the British of their materiel and reinforcements. The Germans advanced quickly, so much so that, on 25 March, the Australian 3, 4 and 5 Divisions, until then located in the Ypres area in southern Belgium, were called back to the Somme to reinforce their beleaguered British comrades. By 29 March, all three divisions were in position east of the village of Villers-Bretonneux, blocking the path towards Amiens. On 25 April, the fourth Anzac Day, 13 and 15 Brigades, the latter commanded by Brigadier 'Pompey' Elliott, staged a brilliant pincer movement at night to recapture the village, which had been lost to the advancing Germans the day before. The Germans were stopped, and the advance on Amiens was halted.

After Villers-Bretonneux, the British forces regrouped and began the task of pushing the Germans back to the Hindenburg Line. By late June, when John rejoined his unit, there was plenty of action in the Somme Valley. He moved back into the thick of it. On the day of his return two men of 48 Battalion had been killed by shellfire. The Germans were not giving up without a considerable fight. The battalion commander reported at the end of the month that, between 17 and 30 June, seven men had been killed and fifty-three wounded. In addition, the ranks throughout the month had been depleted by an epidemic of influenza. What the coming winter would bring could only be guessed at.

48 Battalion remained at the front at the start of July, losing three dead and four wounded in the first three days. On 4 July, the men supported a significant action on their right: the Battle of Hamel. It involved Australian soldiers of 4 Division along with some American forces, who were undertaking their first significant action on the Western Front after the United States entered the war in April the previous year. The attack was planned and coordinated by Lieutenant-General John Monash, newly appointed as the commander of the Australian Corps. As the commander of 48 Battalion wrote:

*All objectives were gained inside an hour and a half [ actually ninety-three minutes], and the men were delighted to see how excellently the tanks could work when worked by brave and resourceful soldiers. The barrage was perfect, and in no place was a leak observed. The enemy retaliation [sic] on our sector was very light which showed for the time being he must have been taken so much by Surprise that he was practically unable to deal with the situation.*



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART03590

Bell, George (1921): *Dawn at Hamel, 4 July 1918*

(AWM ART03590)

The next day, the battalion was relieved by 54 Battalion and the men moved into reserve. Later that same day, however, the men were ordered to support 45 and 46 Battalions, which were holding the front line. As a result, one man was killed and eight wounded before the relief was finally achieved at 1.30 am the next morning. The battalion had moved to Maire sur Corbie and taken over some barracks that were evidently in a filthy state. On 13 July the unit moved to another camp at Frenchencourt and commenced training activities. On the fifteenth, they received great news: the battalion had been promised a beer canteen! As the commander wrote,

*Every one will be pleased when this arrives as a little diversion is always welcome when the Australian troops are continually in the Forward area and obtain very little pleasure indeed.*

Sadly, the men's spirits were dampened again the very next day when a downpour washed them out of their billets. The commander commented that

*It seems a pity that after such a long period in the line and owing to the fact that we are out for such a short time the men are unable to obtain sufficient rest on account of inadequate accommodation. If all this discomfort could not be avoided all ranks would take it cheerfully, but no reason can be given to us showing how the Battalion straight from the front line should have to sleep in the open in heavy rainfall.*

The commander's comments about the Australian troops being continually in the forward area ring very true. By 1918, Sir Douglas Haig was of the opinion that there were two sets of troops upon whom he could rely: the Canadians and the Australians. He was on record as saying that he could trust the Australians to successfully carry out his orders. The result was that, in many conflicts during the year, the Australians were used as shock troops, never more so than on 8 August 1918, the day of the combined allied attack that began the long drive to force the Germans back to the Hindenburg Line.

Meticulously planned by Sir John Monash, the attack achieved all of its objectives. The Germans ended the day in mass retreat. In the words of the German commander, General Erich Ludendorff, 8 August was the "black day" for the German Army.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H. Septimus Power (1930): *8<sup>th</sup> August 1918*

ART12208

AWM ART12208)

It was on that day that the now temporary major, John Mott, won his initial Military Cross. The citation reads:

**For his indomitable courage and devotion to duty on the 8<sup>th</sup> August 1918 during the advance on PROYART E. of CORBIE. Captain (Temp Major) J.E. Mott. was in charge of Tank Garrisons and personally went forward to the final objective under heavy Machine Gun, rifle and Artillery fire and selected routes for the tanks. On attacking the final objective Captain (Temp Major) J.E Mott went forward and directed the Tanks to commanding positions so enabling the Tanks to drop their garrisons in positions where they could best assist the advance of the Infantry. It was due to his utter disregard for personal safety, and his sound judgement, that many casualties were avoided in capturing the final objective.**

At 4.30 am on 8 August, 48 Battalion was ordered into battle at Fouilloy, immediately north of Villers-Bretonneux. Its first day target was Proyart, to the east. As the men moved forward, they followed nine tanks. By 9.25 am, four of the tanks were out of action due to heavy German opposition. By 2.30 pm, the battalion had captured 109 Germans plus nineteen machine guns, two anti-tank guns and one German aeroplane (the pilot had landed nearby, and then turned his machine gun on the advancing troops. He fled before the troops could get to him).

On the night of 9/10 August, just outside the heavily defended Proyart, the battalion was relieved, suffering only six casualties in the process. It moved to a bivouac area nearby. After spending several days on salvaging duty - the finding of certain supplies indicating that the Germans were running low on many necessary items - the men returned to the front on 19 August, relieving 45 Battalion at Rosières-en-Santerre,

just south of Harbonnières. After several days of fighting, the men were relieved by the French 83 Regiment, and the battalion headed for a rest area at St. Vast, not far from Harbonnières, on the twenty-fifth of the month.

In the first two weeks of September 1918, the battalion remained at St. Vast, practising battle techniques. One of the exercises involved a mock attack across 3 500 yards of ploughed ground. On the ninth, the battalion began moving, its destination being Beaumetz, immediately north of Vignacourt on the Somme. However, the best laid plans of mice and men being what they are, considerable confusion arose. The commander's comment in the war diary is priceless and has to be repeated.

*[Once arrived at Beaumetz and looking to be settled,] Our rest was to be short lived however for after being informed that we would not move sudden orders came through that we would move up and occupy positions vacated by the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Hurriedly we shook the dust of Beaumetz from our boots and in due course arrived at the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion Headquarters, and what a falling off was there my countrymen. We were like people who had paid for seats at a theatre and cant [sic] get in. For the only people who seemed ignorant of the move were the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion who hadnt [sic] moved neither did they want to. However, we managed to get a few platoons under cover and the remainder passed the night in cold and cruel air. This would be very nice for those homely people who usually sleep in the parks but we dont [sic] do that in the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion Headquarters, we took over a cellar in FLECHIN and it was waterproof but very wet and draughty.*

49 Battalion finally moved the next day and the men then got some more room to move. Their peace was short-lived, however. That night, a six-inch battery appeared and put its guns in the back yard. The commander commented:

*Very homely people the artillery. Of course, evry [sic] time the guns fired we suffered torment and of course all candles went out.*

This commander - Lieutenant-Colonel Stanley Perry - was a very funny man. On the thirteenth, he wrote that



*About 8 a.m. in the morning a terrific cloud of dust was seen moving down the HANCOURT Road and enquiring I discovered that it was caused by various old timers en routed for AUSTRALIA, by the rate they were going they should almost do the trip by nightfall.*

One more funny comment before we move on. On the fourteenth he wrote:

*[We are still receiving] a certain amount of concussion [from the guns in the back yard] and one gun particularly caused annoyance because the shell trying to make a noise like an 8 inch, was more like a Kerosene tin on a windy night and we are nothing, if not musical.*

A man like this who could see the funny (and not so funny) sides of situations was likely to be a very good leader. This writer wonders what John thought of him.

Also on the fourteenth, Brigade informed the battalion commander that a ‘stunt’ (action) was coming off shortly. In consequence, the men spent the next three days gearing up with weaponry and other equipment. On 16 September the men relieved 51 and part of 49 Battalions, ready for the action on the eighteenth. On that day, after a preliminary barrage, the men moved off at 5.20 am. By 6.30 am the battalion had captured its objective, suffering sixty-one wounded and four killed. However, the men captured around 500 Germans, plus numerous weapons.

48 battalion was in action until the night of the twenty-first, when it was relieved and moved over a few days to a camp at Revelles, south-west of Amiens. It was there when the troops of 2 Division fought Australia’s last battle at Montbrehain on 5 October, achieving a quick victory. Those men were relieved by American troops on the evening of the fifth. Australia’s was over.

And what did John Mott do once the hostilities were over for his battalion? It would appear that he moved quickly to England to attend a senior officers’ school at Aldershot army base. While there, on 22 October, he was awarded the bar to his Military Cross for his daring escape from the German prison camp. He was still at Aldershot on 19 November when he was stricken down with influenza and sent to a hospital in Manchester. His illness could not have been too bad, however, because he was back at Aldershot by the twenty-fifth of the month.

John stayed at the training school until 15 December, when he was granted leave until the end of the year. On 6 January 1919, he returned to France and rejoined 48 Battalion. He stayed with his unit until 20 March, when he was transferred to the AIF Field Graves Battalion. The long and arduous task of finding and recovering bodies from the battlefields and relocating them to military cemeteries had begun.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A02498

Men of the graves detachment handling bodies exhumed near Villers-Bretonneux,  
April 1919 (AWM A02498)

On 27 May, while working in the graves unit, John was promoted to the rank of major. Very soon after, on 16 June, he was appointed to the rank of temporary lieutenant-colonel and give command of the Field Graves Battalion.

The [anzacportal](#) website describes the work of the battalion:

More than 1100 Australians served with the Australian Graves Detachment, which was formed in March 1919. Men in the unit worked in northern France where the AIF fought many of its battles. Their role was to:

- exhume the war dead
- identify bodies where possible
- re-bury bodies in central cemeteries

Kit for the men included rubber gloves, oil-skin overalls, hundreds of bars of soap, and creosol (an antibacterial disinfectant).

The work was distressing. Many of the exhumed bodies had been dead between nine and twelve months and were in varying stages of decomposition. One member of the detachment, typical of many, recalled having felt sick 'dozens of times'.

The challenging nature of the work, and the difficulty in maintaining and enforcing military discipline with the war over, led to poor behaviour. Incidents included:

- throwing live bombs that were frequently found on the former battlefields
- entering French houses in search of alcohol
- taking food and other items that belonged to French civilians



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P04541.001

Members of the graves unit loading bodies from a mass grave to be re-buried in single graves, 1919  
(AWM P04541.001)

It sounds as if John had his hands full with this lot! Despite these problems, however, between April and August 1919, the Australian Graves Detachment exhumed and re-buried almost 5500 men. They now lay in military cemeteries in France and Belgium. A similar unit also operated at Gallipoli at the same time, as illustrated in the feature film *The Water Diviner*.

The battalion was disbanded on 20 August and John's job with it was then at an end. For his work, he was granted the honorary rank of lieutenant-colonel in the following September. He returned to Australia in November 1919. His appointment with the army was terminated officially on 29 May 1920. He had fought a gallant war, been wounded in several places, escaped from captivity, received a military cross and bar, had an audience with King George V and been mentioned in despatches three times.

Just what John did after the war is beyond the scope of this story. We can only note here that he died in England on 27 July 1933. At that time, his family was still in Australia.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

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