

## **Richard Albert Howard**



Sapper (Spr) 3883 Richard Albert Howard enlisted in the 5<sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Company (Coy) in Melbourne on 25 February 1916. He embarked overseas on 25 May and disembarked in Plymouth on 18 July. He left England on 28 August and landed in France the next day, where he joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Division Base Depot on 30 August.

Spr Howard was subsequently transferred and taken on strength of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tunnelling Company, at the time engaged in ground water pumping, listening and guarding the shallow mining systems in the Armentieres area, on 29 September 1916.

He contracted influenza on 4 December and was treated at the 10<sup>th</sup> Australian Field Ambulance until 20 December, when he was transferred to the Divisional Rest Station until 1 January 1917, then rejoined his unit.

In late January 1917, the company moved its operations to the southern edge of the Ypres salient, where they took over from the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Tunnelling Coy. By necessity, they worked carefully as the area they occupied had been fought over since the start of the war, and the ground contained the remains of many men. The main role of the tunnellers was to ensure that the Germans did not breach the underground defensive system, and they performed this duty for the next five months.

On 16 June 1917, the company moved north to Nieuport Bains on the Belgian coast, the extreme left flank of the allied line, where the trenches riddled the sand dunes.

The area had been relatively untouched by the war and the tunnellers (the first “British” the locals had encountered) marvelled at the beauty of the village and its surrounds, despite their proximity to the front line. It soon transpired that the local French and German troops had adopted a pragmatic approach to warfare in their area, and pretty much left each other alone.

This all changed with the arrival of the British Army, and the departure of the French, just a week later. The artillery batteries immediately started registering on the Germans opposite, and vice versa, as preparations for a new British offensive in the area commenced.

The respective front lines were only about 80 metres apart in some places, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tunnelling Coy was tasked with mining under the German lines prior to the main attack, which was set for 8 August. The Germans, however, were not prepared to wait for the inevitable, and they attacked in strength, following an enormous artillery barrage which included mustard gas for the first time, on 10 July. The enemy attack was a success and of the thousands of British casualties incurred that day, two tunnellers were killed, seven wounded and 42 were taken prisoner.

Between 18 – 26 November, the company left the coast and travelled south to Metz, near Cambrai, where the snow was already thick on the ground. They were subjected to another mustard gas attack on 26 – 27 February 1918, the effects of which lingered for days and caused 51 casualties. They were bombarded with gas again between 12 – 15 March, with another 76 casualties sustained, six of whom died.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Tunnelling Coy was then caught up in the German Spring Offensive of 21 March and had to evacuate their positions at 4.15 am on 23 March as the British were overrun. The retreat was so general that the tunnellers were constantly on the move and lived off the land. They salvaged ten Lewis guns from various British units and fought a rearguard infantry action against the Germans at Le Transloy on 24 March, blowing up three bridges as they left.

They eventually reached Querrieu on 28 March, where they met up with some of the Australian infantry that had been rushed south to help stem the Germans. The tunnellers remained in this area for many weeks and were given responsibility for both the security, and/or demolition, of the numerous bridges in the region, whichever was required, until they left on 6 June.

When the allied offensive from Amiens commenced on 8 August the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tunnelling Coy provided tunnellers to advance with the infantry. They were tasked with locating suitable dugouts for brigade and battalion headquarters and clearing them of booby traps and mines. They continued in this duty as the Australians advanced east in pursuit of the retreating Germans, right up to the attack on the Hindenburg Line in late September and early October.

Spr Howard was granted leave in England from 7 – 27 October and returned to France to find the company had finally left the line. He came down with tonsillitis and was evacuated sick on 12 December. He spent a few days at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian General Hospital between 14 – 18 December and eventually rejoined the company on 13 January 1919.

He contracted venereal disease on 30 January and was treated at the 7<sup>th</sup> General Hospital at Wimereux from 4 – 25 February, then transferred to England where he was admitted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Dermatological Hospital at Bulford later the same day. After a further period of convalescence at Parkhouse Camp, he embarked for return to Australia on 7 July.

Sapper 3883 Richard Albert Howard disembarked in Melbourne on 5 September, where he was discharged from the AIF on 20 October 1919.

Name: Howard, Richard Albert	
Service Number	3883
Date enlisted	25 February 1916
Place enlisted	Geelong, Victoria
Rank on enlistment	Sapper
Initial Unit	5 <sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Company
Date and ship embarked for overseas	25 May 1916 HMAT A69 <i>Warilda</i>
Stated age/DOB (if known)	23 years 6 months
Place of birth	Ballarat, Victoria
Marital status	Single
Occupation	Labourer
Religion	Church of England
Next of kin and address	Howard, Mrs Lily, mother, c/- Leopold PO, Victoria
Permanent address	Leopold, Victoria
Appearance	Fair complexion, brown hair, brown eyes, height – 5 feet 5 inches, weight – 10 stone, chest measurement – 37 inches
Final Rank	Sapper
Final Unit	2 <sup>nd</sup> Tunnelling Company
Theatres of war served in	France, Belgium
Fate	Returned to Australia
Date and ship embarked for Australia	7 July 1919 HT <i>Chemnitz</i>
Date discharged	20 October 1919
Nature of discharge	Termination of Period of Enlistment
Honours/medals	British War Medal, Victory Medal
Notes	Died 1988. Also remembered on the Leopold & District Honor Roll, Leopold War Memorial and Shire of South Barwon Honor Roll.