

Thomas William Victor Richardson

Anzacs lived through the extreme experiences of war on the Western Front and demonstrated remarkable determination and courage. These trenches were unlike any battle field that came before. Over 29 million soldiers clashed on this blood-soaked land leading to 13 million casualties, including Thomas Richardson.

Thomas Richardson or Vic as he was known to his mates was born in Stepney, Adelaide in 1891. Educated in Payneham he began a boots repair apprenticeship at eleven. When Vic finished school, his principal offered to pay his tuition fees, but Vic pursued a sales career (Richardson Family, 2018). A keen footballer, Vic played SANFL level for Sturt. His sporting passion would later provide respite from the horrors of war (Sturt, 2018).

Inspired by heroic stories of Gallipoli, Vic enlisted with eight footy mates on 3.9.1915, aged 24 (National Archives of Australia, 1915). He trained in Egypt as part of the AIF Second Division in the 106th Howitzer battery (Image 3). Postcards and diary entries share his excitement at travelling from Australia for the first time (Richardson, 1915).

In the First World War artillery played a vital role in breaking down the deadlock of trench warfare. It targeted defensive structures forcing the evacuation of enemy trenches. Accurate artillery strikes were critical for a successful offensive. Due to the artillery's value they were in demand across the front, moving constantly, allowing little respite for the gunners.

Vic's diaries show that he had a talent for statistics and using numbers to describe situations (Richardson, 1915-16-17- 18). I suspect he was chosen for the role of a Bombardier as he could make quick calculations and conduct accurate strikes whilst under fire from German artillery. Image 2 shows a photo of the 14th Field Battery which would be almost identical to Vic's unit.

Having completed his training, (National Archives of Australia, 1915-16) Vic travelled to Marseille to begin his campaign on the Western Front in the Summer of 1916. Nothing could have prepared him for the horrors of the Somme.

On the 29.7.1916, Vic transferred to Poziere as part of the Somme offensive. The goal, to capture strategic positions for the allies to conduct an attack on the German strongholds north of Thiepval. Australian gains by the 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions led to the Germans concentrating the bulk of their artillery on this area. Vic fired at the enemy relentlessly, operating the massive guns, often throughout the night without adequate lighting. (Image 4 shows the prolific Allied and German bombardment at Poziere, which was some of the heaviest in the war).



(Rslvirtualwarmemorial, 2018) image 1
T.W.V Richardson



Image 2 Photo of 14th Battery of Australian Field Artillery (Rslvirtualwarmemorial, 2018)



Image 3 Photo of the 106th Howitzer Battery Vic is 1st on the 2nd row on the left (Richardson, 1916)

On the 9.8.1916, Vic lost many of his mates when a shell hit his battery. “An eleven inch shell penetrated our C gun pit and buried the gun. Exploded all the ammunition which was about 200 rounds. It killed Brigadier Bight, gunners Page, Martin and Egan and Cromwellan and wounded Lieutenant Mc Donald and gunners Manning, Wade and Berry who have since died of their wounds. The crater made by the explosion of the ammunition was 11 yards in diameter. And 10 feet deep” (Richardson, 1916).

I cannot imagine the deep mental effects of witnessing such an event and living with constant risk to your life. Somehow Vic persevered. The next day his artillery moved to fight the battle of Mouquet Farm. There he fired artillery pushing the Germans back during the Battle of the Somme.

By January 1917, Vic endured his first European Winter in boggy, lice infested trenches on the Somme floodplains. He describes this Winter as the coldest and bloodiest in Northern France since 1870 (Richardson, 1917).

During February, Vic’s battery were assigned to move their artillery through the night to avoid the eyes of German Intelligence. “We were taking up guns on light railway, pushing the trucks and slushing through the mud. Arms and legs tripped us up during the trip and the gun tipped up, she was an all-night job” (Richardson, 1917).

Vic endured this devastating, unrelenting offensive then on the 3.5.1917, he was involved in an attack on the Hindenburg line to capture the town of Bullecourt. He worked tirelessly throughout the night shelling enemy positions. The campaign at Bullecourt eventually led to a successful capture of the town, at a cost of 7000 Australian casualties (awm.gov.au, 2018). Despite this victory the line advanced only 1km and they captured no major strategic positions.

Between battles, soldiers organised sports at the front. These matches reinforced mateship and distracted Anzac’s minds from the horrors of war. Vic, who had played at SANFL level for Sturt, enthusiastically participated and often talks about sport in his diaries. He played Aussie Rules as well as soccer with the Tommies (British) and Boxed (Richardson, 1916–17- 18).

The Battle of Passchendaele was a 6 month long battle in Flanders which aimed to capture ports vital to the Germans along the English Channel and North Sea. Vic’s exemplary service contributed to his promotion to Sergeant on the 3.5.1918. On this day the Spring offensive began as the Eastern front closed, leaving 50 divisions free to join the Western Front. Vic was deployed to fight in Amiens and then Fresechencourt (near Dernancourt). These significant battles aimed to prevent German soldiers capturing the rail head at Amien thus threatening Paris. Key locations captured within these battles would eventually win the war.



Image 4 (Australians on the Western Front, 2018)

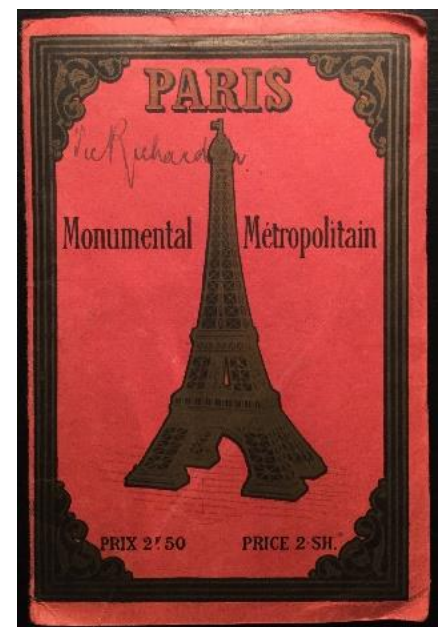


Image 5 Vic’s Map of Paris (Richardson, 1918)

On 17.7.1918, Vic was finally given leave in Paris, a year after he applied. A relief from the trenches must have seemed a world away from the misery of war. Postcards home share his enjoyment (Images 5 and 6, Richardson, 1918).

Vic was deployed to Amiens on the 27.7.1918, then tragically on the 8.8.1918, he was shot in his left thigh. Evacuated to a tent hospital at Boulogne he received unsuccessful surgery, following which he was moved to Epsom hospital, London. Vic spent eight months in hospital enduring painful treatment. It proved too dangerous to

remove fragments from his leg and he was ruled invalid (National Archives of Australia, 1919).

Vic celebrated Armistice and Christmas in hospital before boarding the ship Marathon (Image 7) homeward bound on 19.4.1919. As excited as he was to see Australia and be reunited with family, there must have been a level of solemn, remembering fallen Diggers and gratitude that he had survived.

“On arising found we were passing Kangaroo Island, a very familiar sight, and a good look upon.....[family] gave me a right royal reception. Mother gave me a welcome home in evening and a great number of friends; and we had a real fine evening”

5.6.1919 (Richardson, 1919).

Vic lived out the rest of his life peacefully. He built a small business and raised a family. He was a humble hero who didn't celebrate his wartime achievements or even discuss the war. Like many others, he worked hard and built Australia into the nation it is today. He died in 1968 at the age of 77.

Part B – Vic's Perseverance

The Great War saw four years of constant horror and loss of life which pushed many men and women into insanity. Vic was abroad for three years and his dairies are testament that he encountered many challenges but ultimately persevered in overcoming adversity. It is his ability to use grit to continue to struggle which ultimately led to his success.

The conditions on the Western front were some of the worst in history. During the Winter there were heavy rains in Northern France resulting in marsh and flooding which contributed towards poor health conditions. Vic describes on the 1.11.1917:

“Build dugouts very rough. All marsh and water everywhere. Had to sleep on ridge of road” (Richardson, 1917)

Vic also describes the biting cold of Winter and the monotonous daily routine of the trenches which in Vic's case was get up, shoot artillery, go

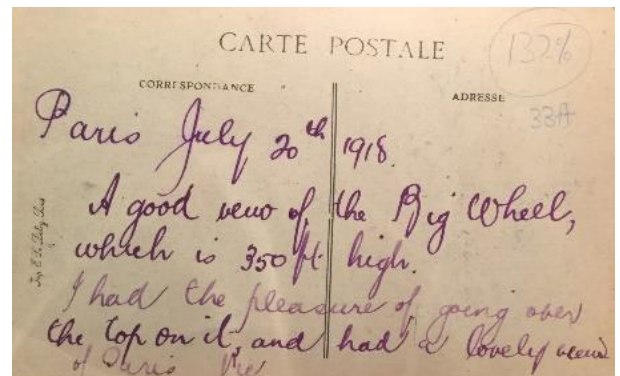


Image 6 Back of photo where Vic describes his day (Richardson, 1918)

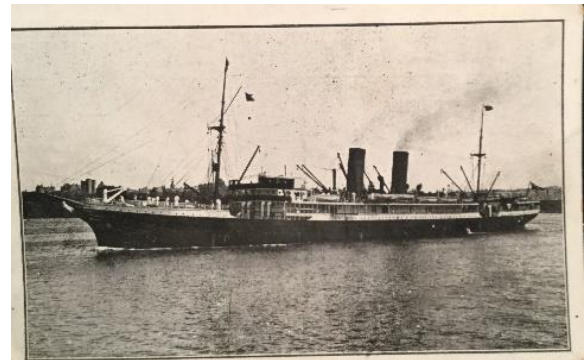


Image 7 SS. Marathon (Richardson, 1918)



Image 8 showing Vic after the war (Richardson, Post War date unknown)

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to sleep. These conditions were unbearable for all soldiers combining freezing cold, sensory deprivation and terrifying bombardment. Vic used his perseverance and tenacity to focus, function effectively and survive.

Vic's role as an Artillery man meant he got up early to fire heavy explosive shells in near darkness for hours. When operating the guns, mistakes could be fatal as the shells could explode inside of the gun. Vic describes mates in his regiment dying from such mistakes. He endured through this and showed persistence in the face of extreme adversity.

Vic never describes his accuracy and skill in firing the guns in his diaries, he was a humble man. On the 3rd of May 1918 he was promoted to Sergeant which meant he was second in charge in leading 24-48 men. Undoubtedly, Vic received this promotion by showing perseverance and strong leadership during great struggle.

Vic had a certain realist positivity that comes across throughout his diaries and letters home. During his three years of diary entries, Vic never complained about any element of his service, despite the tragedies he encountered. He was always positive and grateful for any occasion such as a good dinner, sports or other special activity. To persevere he appreciated and looked forward to small experiences which lifted his spirit.

Even after his debilitating injury Vic was in good spirits and broke his hospital treatment to travel to London. He was presented to Princess Alice (a member of the Royal Family) at Windsor and went on a sight-seeing trip to Glasgow. During this time Vic must have been in considerable pain and was ruled invalid, yet he persevered through this and made the best of every situation.

At every turn Vic Richardson embodied the Anzac spirit. His perseverance is truly remarkable given the awful conditions of the trenches of the Western Front and his resulting invalidity. He prevailed through indescribable horrors showing tenacity and an unwavering dedication to service.

History is like a mirror as we look at challenges in the past we can see parallels in our own lives. When looking at great men and women like Vic Richardson it is important we take away the spirit that they embodied to guide us as we go about our own lives. Lest we forget.

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