

VICTOR JAMES MOCATTI - AN ORDINARY AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER



Figure 1. Victor in uniform.
Unknown photographer, in private
collection.

Who was Private V.J. Mocatti? What did he do in WWI and does his name on an Honour Roll represent just another soldier whose young life was tragically cut short? In 1992 when I first met Silvia Scott (nee Mocatti) (“Silvia”) my mother's first cousin, a throwaway line of Silvia's alerted me to the fact that her younger brother, Victor had been killed during WWI.¹ I wanted to learn what role he played.

Victor James Patrick Maria Mocatti (“Victor”), the second child and oldest of three sons of Annie Mocatti (nee Fitzgerald) (“Annie”) and Felix Rudolph Mocatti (“Rudolph”) was born on 26th May 1897 in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia.² According to Silvia's recollections, Victor grew up in a loving family environment, surrounded by the Italian community in Kalgoorlie.³

From 1911 it was compulsory for boys aged between 14 and 18 years to enlist in the Cadets.⁴ At some unknown date Victor joined the Senior Cadets, which involved taking part in “*weekend camps, drills, mock assaults, skirmishing and fire arms practice.*”^{5 6}

On the death of the father, Rudolph, in July 1911, the family dynamic changed.⁷ Victor and Silvia had to leave school early and help support the family.⁸

Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914 and Australia joined the call to support the Empire. A

few weeks prior to turning 18, Victor attempted to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force (“A.I.F.”) but he was rejected because of his undersized chest measurement.⁹ In March 1916 the minimum requirement was reduced and then Victor qualified.¹⁰ Annie signed the consent form for Victor's enlistment.¹¹

At the time of his enlistment in August 1916, Victor's description was that of a 19 year old Roman Catholic brewery worker; 5' 7" tall with a pale complexion, brown eyes and brown hair.¹² Following his enlistment in the 7th Reinforcements of the 48th Battalion, Victor travelled to Blackboy Hill Camp, Guildford ("the camp") for training which involved "*drill, digging trenches, learning to throw bombs, firing in the trenches, bayonet fighting.*"¹³ A camp souvenir was sent by Victor to Silvia.

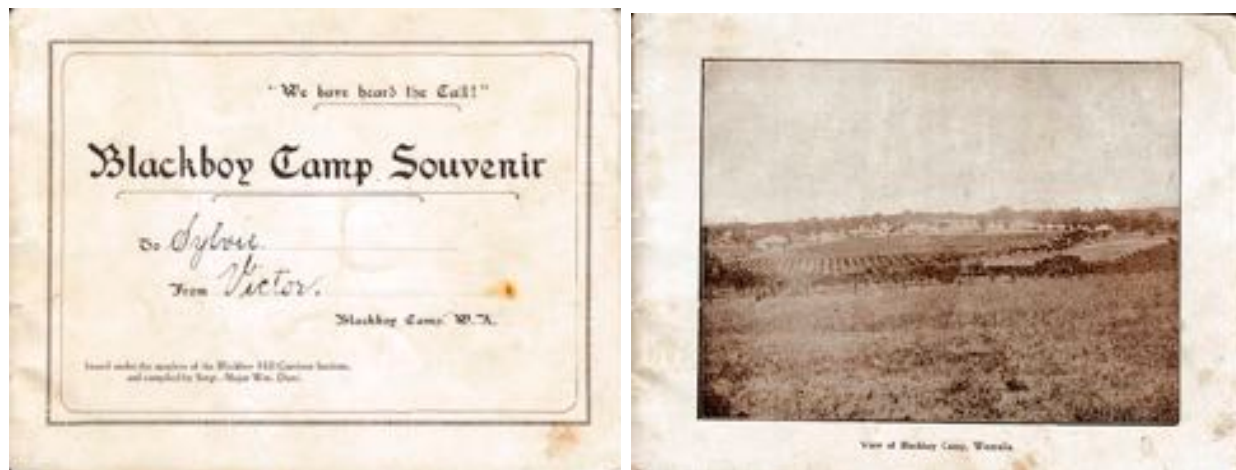


Figure 2. Blackboy Camp Souvenir.
Private Collection

Victor was hospitalised at the camp due to complications following vaccinations.¹⁴ Once he recovered, he resumed training until the date of embarkation.

On 9 November 1916 Victor left Fremantle on board "*HMAT Argyllshire*".¹⁵ There are no letters from Victor regarding the voyage but another soldier travelling on board the ship commented in correspondence about the types of activities undertaken which included "*an hour's physical drill every morning, a lot of sport, ... boxing and other games ...*"¹⁶

Less than three weeks into the voyage, three minor disciplinary charges were laid against Victor.¹⁷ Perhaps he was just larking about, or maybe the NCO did not like him!

"*HMAT Argyllshire*" stopped at Durban and Dakar en route to England.¹⁸ Victor sent a postcard to his brother, John, commenting on the stopover in Cape Town and a game park he visited.¹⁹ After two months at sea, Victor disembarked in Devonport on 10 January 1917.²⁰

Victor was billeted at Codford on the Salisbury Plain for training at one of the 15 camps around Codford.²¹ According to a letter from another soldier: "*Reinforcements were only given basic training in Australia. Training was completed in training units in England. in the Salisbury Plain & surrounding areas ...*"²² The training involved "*Skirmishing, and attacking exercises.*"²³



Figure 3. Victor (seated) with two unknown friends.
Unknown photographer, in private collection.

“... more attention was paid to bayonet fighting, physical training, and route marching than to ... drill. The system proved very efficacious in preparing the troops for the most strenuous routine of the camps of the reserve units.”²⁴

If Victor did send any letters to his family, none have survived. Several undated postcards are all that remain and they contain little more than greetings but they are proof that he was thinking about his family and staying in touch.

Victor was hospitalised in Parkhouse VD Hospital for 19 days suffering from syphilis.²⁵ As many as 60,000 Australian servicemen had contracted VD by the end of the First World War.²⁶ *“Almost half of all VD cases were originally contracted in England by troops*

who were still in training or on leave.”²⁷

Victor left for France on 4 June 1917 and joined his unit in Etaples two days later.²⁸ Etaples was *“... a training base, a depot for supplies, ..., and a centre for ... sick and wounded, with almost twenty general hospitals”*.²⁹ *“Training in Etaples was, in some ways, the last line of preparation before the action. The notorious “Bull Ring” held a number of training exercises such as bayonet fighting, bombing (grenades), gas training, extended order and rapid fire”*.³⁰



Figure 4. Embroidered postcards sent home by Victor from France. Private collection

*"The 48th Battalion ("the Battalion") was raised in 1916 ... as part of the "doubling" of the A.I.F. Roughly half of its new recruits were Gallipoli veterans ... and the other half, fresh reinforcements from Australia. ... The new battalion formed part of the 12th Brigade of the 4th Australian Division."*³¹

Following its engagement at the Battle of Messines between 7 and 13 June 1917 the Battalion was on the move. On 13 June Lieutenant Colonel Leane wrote his Messines report.³² The Battalion had been posted to Ploegsteert and travelled there via Doulieu to relieve the New Zealand troops. It reached Doulieu on 21 June, on which date, according to Victor's service records, he joined the unit.³³ There is no reference in the unit diary to confirm this. The Battalion was having a few days' down time and reached its destination on 29 June 1917. According to a New Zealand commander:

*"A wise Commander knows just how long to keep his men under fire, when a few days' rest will restore them to their former high courage. ..."*³⁴

Ploegsteert is approximately 4km south of Messines and the positions were shelled with high explosives and gas, causing regular deaths and destruction behind the lines.³⁵

The unit diary entries for the two days prior to Victor's death noted the continual heavy shelling.³⁶

On 15 July 1917 Victor was killed near Underhill Farm.³⁷



Figure 5. Trench map detail of where Victor was killed.

Ordnance Survey / British War Office (G.S.G.S.), First World War Trench Maps, 1915-1918.

28.SW.4 (Ploegsteert) Scale: 1:10000 Edition: 5A Published: July 1917.

Trenches corrected to 18 July 1917

Victor's service record noted: "*KILLED IN ACTION FIELD 15 July 1917.*"³⁸ The unit diary entry for 15 July 1917 stated: "*Working party moving along road. Had 2 killed, 2 seriously wounded Shelling continued until midnight.*"³⁹ It could be assumed that the most probable cause of Victor's death would have been by enemy shelling. 58% of casualties in WWI were due to shelling.⁴⁰

The Battle of Messines preceded Victor joining the Battalion and the 3rd Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) commenced on 31 July 1917 after his death.⁴¹ In the meantime the position was under constant shelling from the Germans.⁴²

Victor was buried at Underhill Farm Cemetery, Ploegsteert, Wallonie, Belgium."⁴³



Figure 6 (left). Victor's original grave marker. Photographer unknown, private collection.



Figure 7 (right). Victor's current grave marker. Photographer unknown, private collection.

One cannot begin to imagine how the news of Victor's death affected his widowed mother and siblings.⁴⁴ Memoriams were placed in the newspaper by Annie following Victor's death.⁴⁵

Annie received the following undated letter some time later.

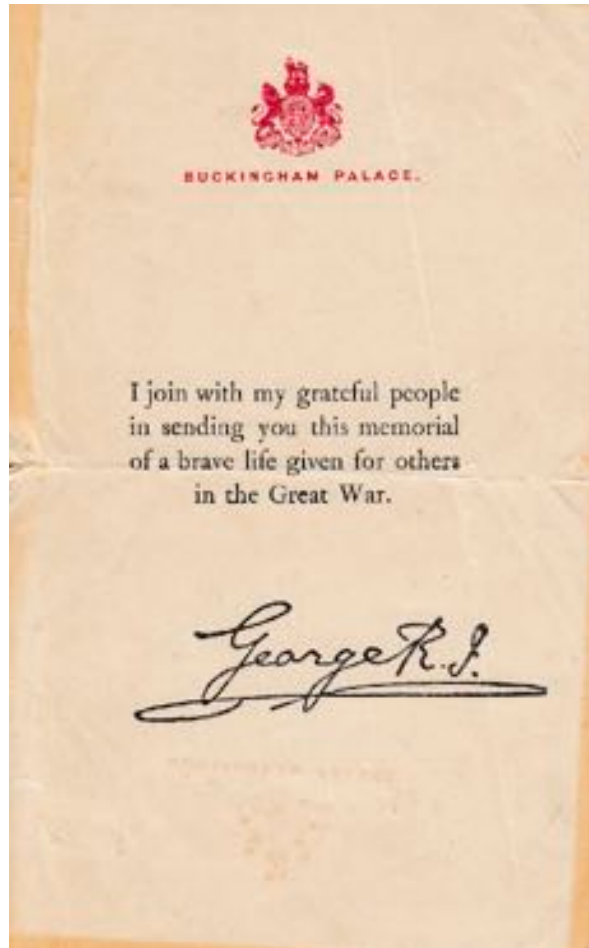


Figure 8. Letter of condolence from His Majesty King George V. Private collection.

How did Victor's experience of war compare with that of other Australian servicemen? Victor spent less than 3½ weeks on the Western Front, during which time he would have witnessed death and destruction all around him, been barraged by constant shelling and been surrounded by muddy trench conditions.⁴⁶ Victor was already partially trained when he enlisted. It took a further 10 months of training before he was finally sent to the Western Front. He was only at the front for a short period of time and was not engaged in any attacks or repelling the enemy. He was killed by shell fire some 5 km behind the front line whilst in a working party. Militarily, Victor was just a name on a board. Victor had volunteered to serve his country and paid the ultimate price.

To his grieving mother and siblings he represented so much more than just a name on an Honour Roll.

As the author of this story, I cannot but think what a tragic waste of a young life!