

Thomas Murray



The Great Harry Murray

David Chalk

Harry Murray enlisted as a private in 1914 and ended the First World War as the most decorated infantry soldier in the British Empire.

Lieutenant Colonel Harry Murray, VC, CMG, DSO and bar, DCM, Croix-de-Guerre, was known as Mad Harry, yet he had all those qualities you look for in a soldier: coolness under fire, tactical skill, respect for discipline, constant concern for the well-being and safety of his men, tireless energy, and an ability to act decisively and with stubborn determination when the moment demanded it.

To the men of A Company, 13th Battalion, whom he commanded in France from 1916 to early 1918, he was “The Great Harry Murray”. Yet, although he had such decisive qualities in the field, he was a genuinely retiring man who shunned the limelight. He was a soldier whom the men knew had earned his promotions, but he never seemed to forget that he was one of them. And in the life or death situation of front-line combat it was a great comfort to them to know they had a skipper of this calibre, who also demonstrated what makes a man move in combat. After the war Murray said to a cousin, “I was always frightened, but there’s only one way to beat fear, and that’s to walk right into fear. And then you go through it, and past it.” And just as the men drew courage from Murray, he also gained strength from them.

The man most often alongside him in the trench, and who became his best friend, was the famous Percy Black, a soldier who came to be known throughout the AIF for his cool courage and sheer nerve. They met each other at Blackboy Hill Camp, outside Perth, in 1914 when they both joined the 16th Battalion. As members of the machine-gun section they landed on Gallipoli on the evening of 25 April 1915; Murray was No. 2 on Black’s machine-gun. At Pope’s Hill, with their Maxim machine-gun, Black and Murray prevented a Turkish move to out-flank the 4th Brigade. In Murray’s words, “About fifty [Turks] ... got to within twenty-five yards of the

gun, but [Black] was as cool then as when on the range shooting a practice.” They were both awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.



Soon both Murray and Black were promoted to officer rank, and both arrived in France in June 1916 as company commanders. Murray had been recommended to Monash as “an ideal machine-gunner, and the class of man that is required to take charge of machine-gun work.” Decorated again, for their leadership in the desperate night attacks around Mouquet Farm in August 1916, the two friends were both wounded and evacuated to England. Returning to France in time to endure the miseries of the winter of 1916–17, in February they found themselves fighting round Gueudecourt.

Murray was now in command of 13th Battalion’s A Company. On the night of 4 February 1916 the battalion took part in an attack on the German lines at Gueudecourt. The right flank, which Murray held, was shelled continually; one of three counter-attacks involved five separate bombing assaults. Through the night and the next day the fighting strength of the company dwindled steadily from 140 to 48. The hand-

Above: Murray in a trench on Cheshire Ridge, Gallipoli, during November 1915. By this time Murray had been promoted to second lieutenant. (AWM J06502)



to-hand fighting was among the most vicious the men ever experienced; the freezing weather alone was a severe test. Murray was quite ill but had refused evacuation and stayed in the thick of the action, as his commanding officer wrote, “cheering his men, heading bombing parties, leading bayonet charges, or carrying wounded.” For this action, Murray was awarded the Victoria Cross.

After Gueudecourt war weariness crept into the spirit of the 1914 men. The first assault on the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt on 11 April 1917 nearly destroyed 4th Brigade. Tanks were used instead of an artillery barrage to make a path for the men, but they failed horribly: the men found themselves assaulting the heavily wired line unassisted. There were terrible casualties. Both Murray and Black were again an inspiration in leading the men through the wire. But after leading his men through the “hurricane fusillade” to the first line of trenches, Black was shot through the head and killed while looking for a gap in the wire on the next advance. The survivors who reached the second German line rallied around Murray.

As the sun came up the 4th Brigade was holding both German trenches in the Bullecourt re-entrant. But the position was over a kilometre from the Australian lines, and by midday it was impossible to hold the line any longer. Of the 3,000 men from the brigade who attacked, there were 2,600 dead and wounded. Murray escaped back across no man’s land; by mistake, the Germans had fired on their own men, giving Murray a chance to flee. He was lucky, for the

Germans took 1,100 Australian prisoners of war that morning. After the battle he hunted feverishly for Black’s body, but it was never found. Percy Black is listed among the missing on the Australian memorial at Villers-Bretonneux.

Murray was awarded a bar to his DSO and promoted to major. In March 1918 he was appointed lieutenant colonel in command of the 4th Machine Gun Battalion. The linking of the four machine-gun companies of each division into a machine-gun battalion was the last step in a gradual separation of the machine-guns from their original place in the infantry. Murray commanded this battalion through the long series of battles in 1918. The French awarded Murray the Croix-de-Guerre in October 1918, and after the armistice he was commended for the way he organised his machine-gun batteries during the attacks on the Hindenburg Outpost Line. In June 1919 he became a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George. At war’s end he was Murray, VC, CMG, DSO and bar, DCM, Croix-de-Guerre, and in all had been Mentioned in Despatches four times.

Murray came back to Australia on the *Ormonde* at the end of 1919, with Monash and Birdwood. It was quite a change for the machine-gun private who had left Broadmeadows Camp five years earlier. He received a hero’s welcome at Fremantle – he was after all their local hero – and was chaired through the town.

David Chalk is a freelance historian; he is currently writing a book about the 1,000 Australians captured by the Germans at First Bullecourt in April 1917.

Above: George Bell, *Lieutenant Colonel Harry Murray* (1919, oil on canvas, 61.4 cm x 51.6 cm, AWM ART00101)

Below: Charles Wheeler, *The death of Major Black* (1923, oil on canvas, 129.7 cm x 236.8 cm, AWM ART03558).





Harry Murray remembered

Mrs Ellen Waugh, who married Murray in 1927, and their two children, Douglas and Clementine. She remarried after Murray's death.



In the mid-1920s Murray established himself on a grazing property, Glenlyon Station, near Richmond in outback Queensland. He married and raised a family. During the Second World War he commanded the 23rd Queensland Regiment, but (much to his chagrin) he did not leave Australia. The isolation of station life seems somehow in keeping with Murray's character; Glenlyon was his great love. He died as the result of a car accident in 1966.

He was what you would call a retiring man. He didn't want to go into anything. People wanted him to go into parliament, but he wouldn't have lasted ten minutes. He would have spoken his mind! Definitely! ... He hated talking about the war. ... I think it had a big effect on him really. He didn't want to go in the Anzac marches. I think it was too emotional for him, even after all those years. He just didn't want to, and if he didn't want to do it, he didn't. He was a very strong character. ... He was very jovial. He was always telling jokes. He'd kind of lead you on. He was always joking about his medals, and telling funny stories about them. But he said that he had earned them to a certain extent, although he said, the men, they helped so much. He used to say, "I was the most decorated footsoldier."

Mrs Ellen Waugh, interviewed March 1989

Some of the first recruits to the 16th Battalion machine-gun section at Blackboy Hill, Western Australia, in November 1914. Harry Murray, then a private, stands third from the right. Percy Black sits behind the machine-gun on the right. (AWM P1465/01)

Percy was chosen for his strength, steadiness and reliability; Harry because he had a wonderful eye for ground, was quick in mind and body, and was as keen as mustard. It was one of the wonders of the war that such a tiny unit as that original gun section should include two men who were to do so much to create the traditions of the AIF. I was a staff instructor for several years, and handled many machine-gun squads ... but from no other could I get the snap and precision that I got from that little section. At gun work they were on their own, and before the teams were six weeks old they had broken records. "Action" with a Maxim in 12 seconds is slick work. The best trio in the section could do it in that time – twice out of every three attempts, and any three men picked haphazardly from the section could do it in 16. Those figures are not approximate; they are correct. Standard time in the manual was 45 seconds.

Cyril Longmore, Reveille, October 1936



Harry Murray remembered

Vic Groutsch



Murray was an inspiration at [Gueudecourt] that night! He was a tiger! A wonderful man! We were out on the right flank, and I was going from the frontline to headquarters all the time, concentrating on getting word back. The Germans counter-attacked many times. It was very confusing. ... They were very persistent, and they did a lot of damage too. ... It was a free-for-all with bayonets and boots and bombs. It was close contact, hand-to-hand. That's where the big strong men were so vivid in my mind. I could see what they were doing. They were bombing and shooting and kicking. Both sides were concentrating largely on bombs. That's a great weapon under those conditions. What Murray did! ... Any German who showed himself, he killed him.

Vic Groutsch, A Company runner, 13th Battalion, interviewed December 1985

Clarrie James



You never knew where Harry Murray was until he turned up. He was everywhere. A Company stood the brunt of everything, because as soon as something was on Harry Murray would put us in: "Oh, A Company can do that!" He was here, there, and everywhere. He was like a disappearing object, never stopping in one place for five minutes. He'd just stop to see how things were going for you, and then he'd be perhaps 50 yards down the trench to see what was doing there. ... He was on his own, that bloke. He had no fear. There was no doubt about it. He didn't give a continental.

Clarrie James, A Company, 13th Battalion, interviewed February 1986

Jack King



He was a man as well as a soldier. He would talk to anybody whether you were a private or a colonel, it didn't matter. He was just one of the boys. When we were on the march, even a route march, the commanding officer of each company had a horse to ride. But Murray would never ride his horse. He'd always put someone else on it, somebody who was half-lame with foot trouble or crook in the legs. Murray would always walk. He always thought of his men.

Jack King, A Company, 13th Battalion, interviewed December 1987

Percy Black



When we landed we had to wade through water up to our necks under heavy shrapnel and rifle fire. But we got here and all the Germans and Turks in Europe won't shift us. We got about one and a half miles inland the first twenty-four hours, and on the second day, the 26th April, the enemy brought up strong reinforcements and tried to drive us back into the sea. But they had our machine guns to contend with. I fired thirty-two thousand rounds out of my gun in thirty hours. I came off fairly light, a bullet through the hand and a couple through the coat. The ones through the coat might as well have been a mile away. They say the odds against us were about seven to one. They had another try on the 2nd of May. Our Battalion lost fairly heavily on this occasion. I got a bullet through the ear this time. You will always know me now. I am well earmarked. They thought they had us this time, but they could not stand the bayonet.

Percy Black, 16th Battalion, letter to his niece, 23 June 1915

Harry Murray



Just a few lines in a hurry as you will doubtless know that I have been sent from the front sick. I'm not at all very ill, although I had dysentery for nearly three weeks before I left Gallipoli. I had just about got rid of it when I left. More than anything I require a rest and change, both of climate and food, and the darned English authorities are sending all colonial officers to Cairo to rot on their arrival from Gallipoli. I have been 22 weeks at the front. I would give anything for a comparatively cool climate away from sand, dust and disease. But all we colonials are getting sent to Cairo. If ever I do get back I will not try to battle a day against wounds or sickness, but clear off the base at every opportunity which is exactly what a lot of their officers do. The less said about some of them the better. ... I don't suppose the censors will pass this now, but he can only defer, never suppress, the inevitable truth. I do absolutely detest the idea of Cairo. It has been a curse to our men from the first. Now I've had a growl, I feel somewhat ashamed of myself. Usually I accept all that comes along without comment and make my men do the same. But Cairo, and I'm not well! How I would love a few days in dear old Tasmania. A few days would do and then I would be as keen as ever.

Harry Murray, letter to his sister, Annie Cocker, 29 September 1915

Harry Murray : The near jingoistic language of this letter contrasts sharply with that of Murray's other letters to his sister and especially with the letter to Cyril Longmore, breaking the news of Percy Black's death.



The Germans' hands are very full now, but it will be a long time yet before they are finally beaten. ... I had a hand-to-hand struggle with five of them, after they had wounded me and knocked my two companions out with two grenades. My steel helmet saved me from one at the outset of the struggle. He hit me on the head with a knobkerrie, but I had a revolver and he did not get time to hit twice, and the other four tried to escape after they saw their comrade fall. Fancy five of our fellows running from even five Germans! There's no fear of anything like that!

Harry Murray, letter to his sister, Annie Cocker, 29 September 1916

Harry Murray



I'm sorry, I have very bad news for you. Percy Black was killed on the morning of the 11th, shot through the head by a machine-gun whilst getting his company through the Hun wire between the front and support trenches of the Hindenburg Line right in front of his men and in the teeth of the heaviest MG and rifle fire that ever I have experienced. I was in close support and had my chaps knocked about frightfully; but there's no denying them; they got through and in conjunction with the few of the 16th that were left, took the trench and killed a huge lot of the Huns. Our Lewis guns got them running off in mobs, as did our bombers and riflemen. I believe the performance is without parallel in the history of the war. But our Australian boys are splendid; so long as they know what they have to do, it will be done, and their confidence in and fidelity to their officers makes me feel that we don't do half enough for them, or half deserve it. I'm sorry to say only 18 of my company got out unwounded. I was the only unwounded officer, but that's easily explained; I don't take the risks they do! I'm frightfully grieved about poor old Percy; the very best of us, the bravest and coolest of all the brave men I know, and he would have been the first to deny it. He was unselfishness itself. His loss is a heavy one. My getting the VC was all rot and I'm seriously annoyed about it. I hate people booming a chap that is in no way entitled to it, and for god's sake, if you see anymore about me in the press don't believe a single word of it.

Harry Murray, letter to Cyril Longmore, 26 April 1917