

# Sergeant Lawrence Barber, MM

## *Stand alone*

*Orders are orders and in times of war soldiers will carry out those orders, even when faced with certain death.*

Lawrence Walter Barber was born in February 1894 and some might say he was destined to be a soldier. He was raised in the Sydney suburb of Granville and joined the compulsory, military cadet scheme at the age of 12.<sup>1</sup>

Young Barber so enjoyed the discipline and mateship of military life that, in 1912, he enlisted in the local militia unit, the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion. By March 1913, he had attained the rank of sergeant and was promoted to colour sergeant in March 1914. By the time war broke out in September of the same year he had been promoted to Regimental Sergeant Major of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

In October 1915, Barber joined the Permanent Instructional Corps as a staff sergeant major, on a salary of three pounds a week.<sup>1</sup> He enlisted in the AIF with the rank of substantive sergeant in March 1917 and was posted to the 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

Barber arrived in France in February 1918 and joined his battalion on the Western Front in the stinking, mud-filled trenches of Messines, where the AIF had been bogged down in a stalemated winter campaign.<sup>2</sup> The Diggers had three priorities: stay dry, stay warm and stay alive. For all too many Australian soldiers these proved beyond their reach.

On 12 April 1918, the 34<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Battalions were holding the brigade front at Hangard Wood. The battalions' outpost line extended south from the wood, then eastwards around the northern flank of the jutting spur nicknamed '99'. At the southern foot of this spur lay the village of Hangard. The 165<sup>th</sup> French Infantry Regiment was positioned to the extreme right flank.<sup>3</sup> Opposing the Diggers and their French allies were three crack German regiments, supported by both medium and heavy artillery units.

The post, which lay astride the Australian/French boundary, was commanded by Lieutenant HM Colyer, a 31-year-old school teacher from Sydney—his second-in-command was Sergeant Barber. Each morning Lieutenant Colyer would visit his French counterpart at the next outpost and discuss the day's activities. One morning, as Lieutenant Colyer made his way back to his men, the Germans launched a devastating artillery barrage, which caught the officer stranded in the open where he was hit by a 5.9-inch German shell that blew him to pieces.<sup>3</sup> Sergeant Barber immediately assumed command of the post.<sup>4</sup>

As the German shells slammed into the Allied position, they showered the Diggers manning the post with red-hot splinters. Suddenly a shell scored a direct hit and as the smoke cleared the one lone survivor began to stir. It was Barber.<sup>4</sup> The

blast from the projectile had buried him under a deep layer of dirt, protecting him from the deadly metal fragments. As he recovered from the impact, he slowly began to dig himself free.<sup>4</sup>

He crawled to a battered Lewis gun nearby and mounted it ready for action. When the smoke in the valley cleared, Barber could see the German infantry swarming towards him from two different directions. He sighted the leaders of the first group and fired. In between bursts, he sent up the SOS signal, guiding the French guns to bring down a barrage of artillery fire on the advancing Germans. Barber's Lewis gun eventually stopped firing as a result of the damage it had sustained but the company commander, Captain Gadd immediately sent up his reserve gun with orders for Barber to hold his ground and keep firing.<sup>4</sup>

As the enemy split into small groups, the 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion attacked with a barrage of rifle and machine-gun fire. While they fired with deadly accuracy, further down the line, the Germans of *107 Regiment* successfully fought their way into Hangard village, causing the French posts to begin dropping back and exposing the Australians' right flank.

The French asked Barber to provide covering fire for their withdrawal from the village. Barber refused. 'The orders were not to retire except on the command of the Division', he told them. 'You dig in where you are and help us to beat back these Huns. We will give you all the support we can.'

Barber ordered his gunner to pour fire into the village, producing a rowdy reaction of much cheering and encouragement from the Australians. In response, the French rallied and advanced, retaking their positions behind the thick undergrowth. A company of the Royal West Kents moved forward to reinforce both the French and the Australians.<sup>4</sup>

The outcome had been in doubt, but with the arrival of the British troops the situation quickly stabilised. Barber's position had been subjected to a continuous onslaught from the German guns for 12 hours until a savage bombardment by the French artillery was directed on the tiny village. The German infantry withdrew in disarray.<sup>4</sup>

As the line was re-established, B Company, 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved forward. When Captain Gadd reached the beleaguered Lewis gun position, he found Barber slumped against the gun with his face in his hands, totally exhausted. He was the sole survivor.

The captain placed his hand on the sergeant's shoulder and accorded him a typical Australian soldier's tribute—'Well done, mate'. As a result of his actions at Hangard Wood, Sergeant Lawrence Barber was awarded the Military Medal in recognition of his devotion to duty and conspicuous bravery.<sup>5</sup>

The war against the German offensive had exacted a heavy toll on the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade. The number of reinforcements from Australia was dwindling and the

decision was made to disband one of the brigade's battalions to strengthen the other two. The 36<sup>th</sup> was selected and by 30 April 1918, its members had been re-located to other battalions.

Sergeant Barber continued to serve until August 1918 when he was severely gassed. The deadly vapour ruptured one of Barber's lungs and necessitated the warrior sergeant's repatriation to Australia.<sup>1</sup>



*AWM E04851. Gassed Australian soldiers lying out in the open at an overcrowded aid post near Bois de l'Abbe. They have been gassed in the operations in front of Villers-Bretonneux. These casualties should have removed affected uniforms. Lying on the ground with contaminated clothes and not wearing respirators means that they are inhaling quantities of vapour and adding to their injuries.*

Barber never recovered from the chronic and debilitating effects of the gas and he required frequent periods of hospitalisation until his death on 9 September 1934.

#### Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 3275 Sergeant LW Barber MM
- 2 History Notes 36th Battalion AIF, undated, author unknown
- 3 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume V, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 4 AWM 1DRL/0428, Australian Red Cross Society, Missing and Wounded Enquiry Bureau
- 5 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War