

# Private Richard Warne, MM

## *Within sight of home*

*The World War I soldier was so familiar with the fear of death, the pain of wounds, and the anxiety of potential infirmity that he almost regarded these as campaign companions. Yet, having endured the unmitigated horror that is war—and lived to tell the tale—many a Digger discovered to his cost that fate had not finished with him and still had a cruel and bitter blow in store.*

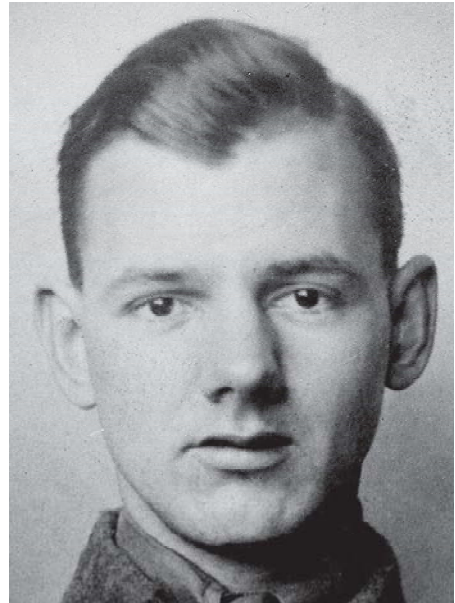
Richard Warne was born to simple country folk in Maryborough, Queensland, in 1898. A boy of the land, he worked hard on the family farm at Owanayilla in support of his family's endeavour to eke out a living. He was bright at school and did well, but with little leisure time on his hands, sport took second place. When the opportunity did arise, he enjoyed a hard game of tennis.<sup>1</sup>

On his enlistment in the Australian Imperial Force in March of 1916, he was one of a select group of recruits commonly known as 'the fair dinkums'. These were men who knew only too well that this was not the great overseas adventure that had prompted so many to join up when war was first declared.<sup>2</sup>

Richard Warne was first posted to the ranks of the 41<sup>st</sup> Battalion. He enjoyed his life in the military and adapted well to the rigours of training. In May 1916 he boarded the troopship *Demosthenes* in Sydney, bound for training camps in England, where the Diggers would be instructed in the skills required for the war on the Western Front.<sup>3</sup>



In late 1916, Warne received his orders to embark for France; he was being assigned as a reinforcement for the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion which had suffered heavy losses in actions in the Somme Valley. On 17 November, the battalion was engaged in heavy fighting at Flers, their objective a system of heavily fortified trenches known as 'the maze'.



*Private Richard Warne, MM.*

As the Diggers advanced towards the enemy line, no part of their training could have prepared them for the conditions they were about to experience. France was entering the worst winter in 100 years. The troops were enveloped by

freezing cold, relentless damp, knee-deep mud and the constant presence of death, a scenario they could never have imagined in their wildest dreams. The Australians succeeded in capturing some of the trenches, only to lose them again in counterattacks a couple of days later.<sup>4</sup>

In February 1917, Warne was on a ration-carrying party supplying the front line. As the party wove its way forward, the scream of incoming artillery shells pierced the night. Diving to the ground, Warne and his carrying partner sought safety in the mud, but as the shells exploded, a piece of shrapnel shattered the urn they were carrying and drenched Warne's feet with boiling water.

As the young soldier was carried to the dressing station, he pleaded to stay with his mates, but the medics knew the burns Warne had suffered would require specialist treatment in England. On 8 February 1917, Warne was admitted to the Norfolk War Hospital where he received treatment for the next eight weeks.<sup>2</sup>

On his release from the hospital, Warne was assigned to remain in England to assist with the training of new recruits. As he read news reports of the casualties and the heavy losses—particularly disturbing was the loss of so many mates—he pestered his superiors to post him back to the front. In October 1917, his request was granted and he returned to his battalion in France.



*Postcard sent to Warne's sister dated 8 Oct 17 from Hurdcott, Wiltshire. Warne is in front row left marked with X. (Family collection)*

In November of that year, Richard experienced his first taste of military discipline. He was charged with the serious crime of stealing—not for taking a mate's money or possessions but for pinching two kilos of apples which he had given to members of his section. He was found guilty and sentenced to one day's detention.<sup>2</sup>



The Australians held their ground through the great German Spring Offensive of April 1918—finally the tide was turning and they had 'Fritz' on the run.

Richard showed his worth at Morlandcourt, where, on the night of the 28-29 July 1918, he volunteered to act as a stretche-bearer to retrieve wounded from a captured position. Despite fatigue and lack of food, he worked all night and most of the next day, under heavy machine-gun and shell fire, until all the wounded had been brought in. He was awarded the Military Medal for his bravery. In part, the recommendation reads, 'His splendid contempt for enemy artillery set a wonderful example to all...'

In August 1918, the battalion participated in the capture and liberation of the French town of Villers-Bretonneux and later, Bullecourt. At one point the 31<sup>st</sup> became bogged down and was driven back by accurate German artillery fire. The front was strewn with Australian wounded. With total disregard for their own safety, Warne and a friend—Private Richard Stutz, MM, also from Owanyilla—went out under heavy fire and dragged their wounded mates to safety. (Ironically, Stutz would go on to marry Warne's sister after the war.) For their selfless bravery that day, both soldiers were recommended for bars to their Military Medals, unfortunately, neither recommendation was successful.<sup>5</sup>

The battalion was later dispatched south to Amiens as part of the 5th Division to confront a full-scale German offensive. Soon, the Germans were retreating on all fronts, with the Allies hot on their heels. During an attack in September, the 31<sup>st</sup> again came under heavy German artillery fire.

A Lewis gun section, which included Richard Warne, sortied forward to locate the troublesome enemy gun battery. The section engaged it with accurate small arms fire and forced the Germans to temporarily abandon their guns. This respite from attack enabled the 31<sup>st</sup> to continue its advance. Warne's name was submitted for a bar to his Military Medal, but it was not approved.<sup>5</sup>

An armistice was declared on 11 November 1918 and the battlefield took on an eerie, ghost-like silence—finally the war was over.

Private Richard Warne, MM, would have to wait his turn to go home. He was sent to England on leave and took the opportunity to sightsee and participate in the post-victory revelry. Finally the order he had waited so long to hear finally came—HOME!



*On leave in England 1918. (Family collection)*

As the troopship neared the coast of Australia, Diggers swore they could smell the gum trees. Private Warne attended a final medical board in Brisbane on 22 August 1919 and was passed fit with no disabilities. He sent a telegram to his family advising he would catch the first available train from Brisbane, which was due to arrive in Owanayilla on the afternoon of 25 August.<sup>6</sup>

He intended to travel with Private George Black, also of the 31<sup>st</sup>. They had been the best of mates for the past 18 months and had looked out for each other, both in and out of the line. By a stroke of luck Warne was released on leave early and thought he would surprise his family by catching an earlier train—scheduled to arrive on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup>.

Having boarded, Warne was horrified to discover that this train would not be stopping at Owanayilla. He pleaded with the driver to make a special concession—an unscheduled stop. The driver refused, the best he could do was slow down to allow Warne to jump. At around 5 am, as the train reduced speed on its approach to Owanayilla, Warne hung out the window of the carriage; he could see the lights of his home and could imagine his mother cooking breakfast.

Black walked with Warne to the carriage door where they paused, shook hands and said their good-byes. As the platform came into view, Warne threw his kitbag from the train, watched to see it land safely on the platform, then, having carefully judged his timing, he jumped.

The sequence of events that followed can only be described as a horrible twist of fate. The train was going too fast. Warne completely missed the platform and bounced along the ground. He hit a large rock alongside the track with such force he was thrown under the wheels of the train. The lower portion of his right leg was shattered, he suffered head injuries, including a compound fracture of the skull, and he sustained multiple contusions to the rest of his body.

At about 7 am, Eva Lay, the wife of a local linesman made her way to the platform—her job was to open the gates. She noticed the kitbag lying on the platform, but on searching for the owner of the bag she found the platform deserted. Curiosity got the better of her so she checked along the track. To her horror, she stumbled across the bloodied and badly injured body of the young soldier. On closer inspection, she could see a slight rise and fall of his chest—was it possible that he was still alive?

Being new to the area and alone while her husband was away, she raced to the nearest farm for help—the property of the Warne family. On arrival at the scene, Richard and Clara Warne looked down at the battered form of the young soldier only to see that it was their own son, Richard. A series of phone calls clacked along the ancient telephone lines, urgently requesting that the ambulance be sent from Maryborough.

The attending ambulance officers did their best. They placed young Richard in the back of their vehicle with his mother cradling her son's battered head. The



*Warne's Funeral, Maryborough. (Photo courtesy J Kirk & Sons, Funeral Directors)*



ambulance sped towards Maryborough but as it approached the hospital, Private Richard Warne MM lost his final battle and died in his mother's arms.

The citizens of the Maryborough district contributed funds to have a memorial erected over the young soldier's grave. His grieving mother never recovered from the death of her first born and favourite child. She lived a further 41 years in anguish and torment, never coming to terms with the tragic loss of Richard. She finally found peace when laid to rest alongside him in 1960.<sup>7</sup>



*Memorial erected by the citizens of Maryborough, Queensland. (Family collection)*

### Notes

- 1 Author, interview with Mrs M Mason (niece), 1998
- 2 Adam-Smith, P, *The ANZACs*, Thomas Nelson Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 1978
- 3 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 797 Private R Warne, MM
- 4 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume III, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 5 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 6 *Maryborough Chronicle*, 26 August 1919
- 7 Author, visit to Maryborough Cemetery, 1998