

Major Harold Charles Howden MC & Bar 13th, 45th and 48th Battalions

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Harold Charles Howden was born in Preston, Victoria, to Charles Alexander and Lily Margaret Howden in March 1890. He was raised and educated in Northcote, Victoria, before entering the workforce. When Harold enlisted in the AIF on 22 December, 1914, he was aged 24 years and nine months and working as a commercial traveller for a Victorian dental firm. Harold named his mother of 55 Cunningham Street, South Northcote, as his next of kin. Harold had an older sister, Vida Constance, born in 1888, who married Mr F Garner in 1910, and a younger sister, Gladys, born in 1893.

Prior to the war, Harold had one year's military service with the Victorian Scottish Regiment, and had general business training in Victoria, New Zealand and NSW. In his Will completed before embarkation, Harold left all his property, effects and money due to Mr E Crosbie Goold of 29 Bligh Street, Sydney, for Crosbie Goold to distribute as arranged.

Harold was medically examined on 22 December at Liverpool Camp, as he was working in NSW at the time. Howden stood 5'8½" tall and weighed 10st 10lbs with an expanded chest measurement of 37". He had medium complexion, blue eyes and brown hair, and was of Presbyterian faith.

Harold entered camp on 22 December, 1914, and was given the regimental number of 1452 and the rank of private. Following initial training, Harold was allocated to the 3rd Reinforcements to the 13th Battalion, 4th Brigade, on 4 February, 1915. On the day Harold embarked at Sydney on the *Seang Choon*, 11 February, 1915, he was promoted to voyage-only corporal, meaning he would revert to private on disembarkation. This was the first sign that his potential to command others had been recognised.

Howden proceeded to join the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force on 12 April, 1915, and landed at Anzac Cove with the 13th Battalion on the morning of 26 April. On 3 May, Harold was promoted to corporal, replacing **Corporal 711 George Henry Bright** [KIA 3/5/15]. On that day the 4th Brigade had charged the Turkish trenches at Deadman's Ridge and Bloody Angle. Due to a lack of support on the flanks, the 13th Battalion had to retire from the trench they had won on The Chessboard. At the end of the day, the 13th Battalion's strength was down to nine officers and 500 other ranks.

Corporal Howden appears in *Bean Vol. II* as being one of two NCOs who led the 13th's charge on 29 May to recapture part of the front line at Quinn's Post that had been seized by the Turks after they detonated a mine. If it wasn't for the decision by the Turks to leave their trench to attack the left of Quinn's at the same time that the 13th charged, then it was very likely that Howden's life would have ended at that point, as the Australians had been facing a storm of Turkish machine-gun and rifle fire up to that time.

Harold reported to the 4th Field Ambulance on 10 June with a septic wound to the hand. He was discharged to duty five days later.

Harold must have shown substantial leadership and fighting abilities, as on 25 August, whilst resting at Mudros, he was promoted to 2nd lieutenant in the field, replacing **2nd Lieutenant William Sutherland** who was killed in action on 21 August in the 13th's attack on Hill 60. **TA White** [Capt Thomas White MC, 13th Bn], the battalion's historian, wrote in 'The Fighting Thirteenth' (1924) that Howden 'had done splendid work and had more to do ...'.

From 10 to 13 September, Howden was ill in hospital on the Peninsula.

Howden remained on Gallipoli until the Evacuation and returned to Alexandria on 3 January, 1916. On 20 January, Harold was promoted to first lieutenant at Moascar. In February he attended the 11th officers' course at Zeitoun near Cairo.

On 2 March, 1916, at Tel-el-Kebir, the 4th Brigade was divided to form the 12th Brigade, comprising the 45th, 46th, 47th and 48th Battalions. In the case of the 13th Battalion, 'B' and 'D' Companies were handed over to form half of the 45th Battalion, giving the new unit 300 officers and men with Gallipoli service. Unlike the daughter battalions formed from the 1st Division, the 4th Brigade and the 12th Brigade both became part of the new 4th Division, so mother and daughter remained together. The 45th retained the two blues of the 13th Battalion's colour patch, but shaped to form a circle, light blue over dark blue.

Lieutenant Howden was now an original officer of the 45th Battalion; one of seven officers in the unit who had been promoted from the ranks on Gallipoli. On 12 March, 1916, Harold was promoted to captain. The 45th marched from Tel-el-Kebir to Serapeum in late March to take part in the defence of the Suez Canal and to continue their training. On 1 June, the 45th entrained for Alexandria, where the next day the battalion boarded the *Kinfauns Castle* for the journey to France. At this time Howden was the officer commanding 'C' Company.

The 45th Battalion arrived in Marseilles on 8 June, 1916, and entrained to Northern France, where they arrived at Meteren for billeting on 11 June. Captain Howden and **Regimental Sergeant Major 572 Ernest Vernon Tuson** (later MC, MM, MID) were the first men from the 45th to go on furlough to England, which at that stage of the war was only seven days leave. His period of leave does not appear in Harold's service record but was probably in late June or early July.

In Harold's file there is mention of him being admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital on 9 July with a hernia. The next entry states: *never admitted to above but doing duty with battalion in the field on that date*. According to a 1917 letter to Base Records Office from a friend, **Wallace Fyfe Henderson**, this notification was an administrative error. [Right: Staff Sergeant WF Henderson, Army Postal Corps, born 1871, RTA 1916.]



Between 4 and 11 July, 1916, the 45th Battalion had its first stint in the trenches at Fleurbaix in the Nursery sector near Armentieres. On 4 August, having moved to the Somme, the 45th bivouacked at Tara Hill, 3km east of Albert, and moved into the trenches at Pozieres on the evening of August 5th. There they occupied 600 yards of OG1 and OG2, from Munster Alley to the Bapaume Road. 'C' Company under Captain Howden was the centre company.

The battalion was subjected to heavy artillery bombardment and fought off a number of German counter-attacks during its three day stint in the line. On 14 August the battalion relieved the 46th in the front line, where it remained for two days. During its ten days in the Pozieres sector the 45th lost three officers and 76 other ranks killed and seven officers and 334 other ranks wounded.

The 45th completed its spell of duty in the Somme by occupying the front line between the Pozieres Windmill and Mouquet Farm from 28 August to 31 August. On the night of 1 September, a selected working party of five officers and 200 men under Captain Howden dug an assembly trench near Mouquet Farm for an attack to be made by another brigade.

The 45th Battalion then moved into Belgium for rest and front-line duties in the Wytshaete sector.

On 4 October, 1916, Harold was awarded the Military Cross for his conspicuous gallantry at Pozieres. His recommendation reads:

Near Pozieres, Captain Howden took over on the night of 5th August, 1916, an isolated position of the front line during a heavy hostile artillery bombardment; being warned by the Officer whom he relieved that he could expect a counter-attack at daylight he immediately set to work to strengthen his position, and when the counter-attack took place on the morning of the 6th, was successful in repulsing it. Owing to his thorough consolidation, that portion of the line, notwithstanding an incessant bombardment, was successfully held.

On 11 October, 1916, Howden was selected to attend a course of instruction in the duties appertaining to battalion command to be held at Aldershot, commencing 16 October and lasting about 2½ months. However, before he could depart for the UK, Howden directed a specially selected and well-trained raiding party on the night of 15 October, but he does not seem to have led the raid – that job being given to **Captain William Lancelot Young MC** [13th & 45th Bns, KIA 7/6/17].

Harold successfully completed the senior officers' course and was granted 14 days leave from 24 December, 1916. The confidential report on Howden by **Lieutenant Colonel W Wild** of the Northumberland Fusiliers could not have been more glowing, as revealed in these extracts:

- (a) **Character:** *a very able officer; young, very energetic, and keen, smart.*
- (b) **Capabilities:** *Possessing a quick brain, he learns very quickly, and appreciates a situation rapidly. Can be relied on to act with determination. Handles men well in the field and issues his instructions clearly and with decision.*
- (c) **Is he fit to be a second in command?** *Should be appointed second in command of a battalion with a view to obtaining the command of a battalion of Australian infantry in a short time.*
- (d) **Should he remain in command of a company?** *He should not return to the command of a company.*

Brigadier General RJ Kentish CMG, DSO, Commandant Senior Officers' School [later author of 'This Foul Thing called War'], added his thoughts on Howden:

I entirely agree with Lieut Col Wild. This is an officer of exceptional ability, who ought to be selected for the appointment of second in command at once, irrespective of seniority, and he would,

in quite a short time, command a battalion well. He has many attributes of the leader, and he is, above all, level-headed. To keep him in command of a company is waste of good material.

Howden returned to France on 6 January, 1917. While he was away in the UK, Harold fortunately missed being involved in the 45th's activities in the mud of the Flers-Gueudecourt sector in November, but on his return, found the battalion in the same desolate area of the Somme.

Despite the horrible conditions, Harold made time to write a thank-you letter, which was subsequently published in the 'Launceston Examiner' on 16 March, 1917:

The secretary of the Northern Tasmanian Patriotic Supply Committee at Launceston is in receipt of the following letter from Captain Harold C Howden, AIF, under date January 17, 1917, written from 'Somewhere in France':

On behalf of the battalion, I have to acknowledge the receipt of Case No. 100, containing 48 tins of milk. The circumstances under which the case was opened were rather novel. Five officers were around a brazier, when someone suggested a cup of something hot. We got hold of a sandbag of snow, and soon melted it in a dixie. What was the beverage to be? Someone suggested a drop of hot milk, and your case was discovered. Thanks very much for it.

It's cold here – mighty cold – and we are in a mighty warm part of the front! We have to be ready for any emergency, and consequently we are not allowed to have our greatcoats with us. That's where the hot milk comes in.

On 13 February, Howden filled in as battalion major while **Major Joseph Lee** [45th Bn] was seconded to staff training.

On 21 February, the 45th Battalion attacked and captured a portion of Stormy Trench still held by the Germans. Captain Howden is mentioned in the battalion history for special credit – his accurate appreciation of the situation on 20 February 'undoubtedly saved what was a brilliant little victory from being a regrettable incident'. Apparently, Harold Howden, in charge of the attacking party, did a thorough reconnaissance and recommended that owing to the condition of the mud and the consequent temporary exhaustion of the men, the attack should be postponed. Major Lee inspected the front line and agreed with Howden that the attack should be held over until the next day due to the impassable conditions of the trenches. (Howden realised that it would be impossible to re-supply the attacking party with grenades due to the state of the trenches.)

The next morning, 21 February, Howden led his attacking party of specially selected bombers and Lewis gunners, surprising the Germans, who quickly surrendered. The attacking party then bombed its way along 300 yards of trench, built a block and fought off a counter-attack. Some 30 Germans were killed, 50 wounded, and 29 prisoners taken, at the cost of one officer and seven other ranks slightly wounded.

On the night of 22 February, Captain Howden was again OC attacking party which captured 150 yards of trench and captured one trench mortar and 32 prisoners.

Howden received a Bar to his Military Cross for his work at Gueudecourt. His recommendation states:

For gallantry and devotion to duty in reorganising and carrying out two attacks on an enemy's strong point and trenches at Gueudecourt on the morning of 21/2/17 and night of 22-23/2/17. Owing to the abnormal wet state of the trenches these attacks were carried out under great difficulty and the success of both attacks was largely due to Captain Howden's organising ability and attention to details. On both occasions, immediately the trenches were captured, Captain Howden took charge and organised their defence. As a result of both operations nearly 500 yards of enemy's trenches were captured and held, and 60 prisoners taken.

Harold fell victim to the extreme weather conditions on 24 February and was admitted to the 45th Casualty Clearing Station on 26 February with trench feet. The skin over his left instep and toes were blackened and he had lost some feeling in two of his toes. It was painful for him to walk further than one mile.

On 28 February, Harold was admitted to the Red Cross Hospital at Rouen. Two days later, Howden sailed for England on the Hospital Ship *St Andrew* and was admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth. After treatment, Harold transferred to Cobham Hall on 19 March and to Perham Downs on 2 April. The next day he was placed in the Drafting Depot from where he was moved to the Detachments Camp until 29 April, 1917, when Harold returned to France.

After a few days in the 4th Divisional Base Depot at Etaples, Harold rejoined the 45th Battalion on 4 May, 1917, thus he fortuitously missed the First Battle of Bullecourt in which the 12th Brigade was involved.

The 4th of May was a significant date for Harold, as on his return to the 45th he was immediately transferred to the 48th Battalion as senior major, and therefore second in command to **Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Leane CMG, DSO & Bar, MC**, one of the more famous commanders of the AIF. **Right:** Raymond ‘Bull’ Leane. AWM E02401.



The first battle for Major Howden to help organise was on 7 June, 1917, when the 48th Battalion and its sister brigade battalions went over the top at Messines. At one stage of the heavy fighting, two companies of the 48th came to the aid of Harold’s old unit, the 45th.

On 5 July, 1917, Harold Howden was wounded and died soon after. The Red Cross Wounded and Missing statements reveal how he lost his life.

Colonel Leane himself responded to a Red Cross inquiry and stated:

*He [Howden] was killed at Ploegsteert. He was shot in the neck and it cut the artery. Doctor came up at once. He lingered for an hour and was conscious almost to the last. He left no message. I took him to the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station and buried him there in the graveyard. We gave him a nice funeral. The **Reverend Father Devine** buried him with the Church of England service at Major Howden’s wish. He told me this was his wish if anything happened: Chaplain Devine was to bury him at Steenwerk Cemetery. His grave is the one next to **General Holmes**. I sent his mother a photo of the grave.*

The doctor who attended Howden was **Captain Archibald John Collins** [later Major, DSO, MC]. Collins wrote in a letter:



... Major Howden’s death occurred early in the morning. We were in support dug-outs at Hill 63, at the northern end of Ploegsteert Wood. Unfortunately, our men’s hut was not shell proof. The Major was seated at breakfast on the morning of 5th July when a shell burst outside the hut. I was just entering the door at the time and saw him holding his right arm.

I asked was he hit, and he replied ‘Yes’ and got up, walking towards me. After taking 5 or 6 steps he suddenly became very pale and collapsed on the floor. I undid his tunic and saw blood pouring in great quantities from a small wound just below his right collar bone. A small shell fragment had evidently passed up beneath his collar bone into the root of his neck, severing the large blood vessels situated there.

*I soon checked the external haemorrhage but by this time all hope of his recovery was abandoned, for he was bleeding internally. We carried him to the Advanced Dressing Station of the 12th Field Ambulance where **Dr Woollard** [later Lieut Col, Herbert Henry Woollard, AAMC, RTA 23/11/19] assisted me with him. He lived for about an hour, and retained consciousness until the end, surrounded by his friends. I never saw a man die more bravely.*

We decided to bury him behind the line, which we did at the beautiful cemetery of the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station. The funeral was carried out with full military honours, the 48th Battalion supplying the band and firing party. The

coffin was borne to the grave by 6 officers, 2 each from the 48th, 45th and 13th Battalions. A beautiful service was conducted by Padre Devine. There were very few dry eyes at the graveside.

By Major Howden’s death we lost a dear friend and a fine officer and we have never ceased to mourn him. Major Allen of the 45th Battalion has a photograph of the grave.

Above: Photo of Doctor Collins taken ‘after Passchendaele’. AWM P10688.031.004.

Lance Corporal 3021 Edgar Nankivell [48th Bn, RTA 5/4/19] of the 48th Battalion attended the burial service and mentioned *that there was some lovely wreaths sent and a cross is certain to have been put up, but I have not seen it.*

Private 2363 John Henry Lester [48th Bn, RTA Dec 1918] was still carrying a photo of Howden's grave in October 1917 and showed it to the Red Cross researcher – surely a sign of the respect in which Lester held Major Howden.

2nd Lieutenant George Deane Mitchell [48th Bn, author of 'Backs to the Wall', RTA 5/4/19] stated that Howden was *small, blue-eyed and very popular.*

Though he was no longer with the 45th, the battalion's unit history published in 1924 mentions Howden's death. (Note that there is an error in the chronology).

It was at Ploegsteert Wood that Major Howden, an officer highly esteemed by the whole battalion, was killed. After his splendid work at Stormy Trench, Gueudecourt [sic], he had been sent to Senior Officer's School, Aldershot, where he was strongly recommended to be a battalion commander. On his return he was transferred to the 48th Battalion as second-in-command, but on July 5th, at Ploegsteert, during breakfast, the officers' mess was shelled and this splendid young officer was killed. His promotion had been very rapid as he had been a private on Gallipoli in August 1915, but by his outstanding ability he had risen to major and second in command of a battalion in June 1917.

Today, Major Harold Charles Howden, MC & Bar, rests in the Trois Arbres Cemetery in Steenwerck, France, in grave I.U.7. His epitaph reads: *He died that we might live. Mother.* Harold is buried next to **Major General Holmes CMG, DSO, VD** [KIA 2/7/17], the AIF's most high-ranking officer killed in the war. [Regrettably, I was so focussed on Holmes' grave in 2010 that I missed seeing Howden's.]

Crosbie Gould received a package of Harold's personal effects on July 1, 1918, but two other parcels would be signed for by Harold's mother. Mrs Howden had moved to Sydney in early 1918 and her address was c/- Mr Hayes, Cambridge Street, Watsons Bay, when she received her late son's commission as a 2nd lieutenant. She would later move to 'Northcote', The Crescent, in Vaucluse.

Interestingly, in September 1920, Lily Howden advised Base Records Office that the whereabouts of her husband was unknown. Research by Heather Ford established that Charles Alexander Howden worked in the insurance industry after dissolving his real estate partnership in 1910. The Howdens seem to have separated by 1913 and Charles went to WA to work for some years before moving to South Australia.

There are several scathing news articles describing 'shonky' real estate practices by a Charles Alexander Howden in Perth in 1913 and 1921. He passed away in Adelaide in 1938, from pneumonia contracted after being hit by a tramcar. No divorce has been found for Charles and Lily, and Lily ensured that Charles' name was also on the IWGC cemetery register as a parent of Harold. Mrs Lily Howden was granted a pension of £3 a fortnight from 13 September, 1917. She placed an In Memoriam in the paper for her son each year into the 1930s [example **below**; note that she mistakenly believed Harold died in France – he is buried in France but died in Belgium].



Base Records Office received two letters from friends of Harold's requesting information on his reported death. W Fyfe Henderson wrote on 25 July, 1917, describing himself as an *old friend of the officer*. A Miss Holly Tarrant of Edgecliff made inquiries in 1917 'for a

friend' from New Zealand, who wished to know who Harold's next of kin was. Her request was unsuccessful, as such information could not be released without a satisfactory reason. Miss Holly Tarrant of Bellevue Hill married in 1928; her relationship to Harold is not known.

Eulogies were published for Harold Howden in the 'Preston Leader' on 20 October, 1917. **Colonel** [later Brigadier General] **Sydney Charles Eric Herring CMG, DSO**, under whom Harold had done most of his soldiering, described Harold as *a brilliant soldier and a brilliant leader.*

When writing the Foreword to the 45th Battalion history, Herring said that in it he did not propose to mention the merits of any particular officers or men. However, several sentences later he wrote: *I would like to mention Major Howden MC and Bar. In August, 1915, Howden was a bombing corporal in the 13th Bn and in February 1917 a major in the 45th Bn, and but for his untimely death he would have commanded a Bn a few months later; a brave and gallant soldier whose death was mourned not only by the whole Bn but the whole division.*



Brigadier General James Campbell Robertson, then in command of the 12th Brigade [later 6th Brigade], wrote to Harold's mother, telling her:

Major Howden has been associated with this brigade since its inception. He was responsible for some great achievements, and, had he lived, would have had in a short time the command of a battalion. His death, not only in his battalion, but throughout the brigade, has been universally felt and I can truly say that no officer was more esteemed and respected than your son. His life has not been wasted. He has done splendid work that has helped greatly in the successes that have followed the British arms in this mighty conflict.

Captain Arthur Samuel Allen, of the 45th Battalion [later Lieut Col, DSO, 48th Bn] wrote:

Harold was a most brilliant officer. His courage, thoughtfulness, kind-heartedness, cheerfulness and ability, won for him the respect and confidence and love of everybody he had the pleasure to command. I speak feelingly, for I have known him a long time and been in action with him. In fact, I have almost worshipped him and I am not the only one. His loss has cast a gloom over all.

Captain Allen also gave particulars of the military funeral and burial near Steenwerck. It was:

a most impressive service, which he would never forget. Every battalion in the brigade was represented, in addition to Harold's old battalion, the 13th. The 48th supplied the band and firing party. 150 men from the 45th and 150 from the 48th, as well as about 140 officers, ranking from 2nd lieutenants to generals, were present.

Chaplain William Devine MC [RTA 15/5/19], who buried Harold, said at the grave-side:

Only 27 years old, this boy-major was but 18 months ago a corporal. Yesterday he was in the proud position of second in command of his regiment. Major Howden did not die in vain. His life inspired and influenced much good among all who came in contact with him and I who received the last flickering gleams of intelligence will ever be inspired by the memory of his death.

Captain Dewars Goring Cumming [MC & Bar, 48th Bn, RTA 3/5/18], told Mrs Howden:

It is a great loss to the service and an irretrievable loss to us. Though so young he was a very sound and efficient soldier.

Lieutenant Robert Samuel Pickup [45th Bn, RTA 1/7/19], wrote:

Not a day passed without strengthening the feeling of respect and admiration I had for him ... He rendered much valuable service, but, in my opinion, the greatest of all his services is the splendid example he has left with us. Quite a number of young officers in this battalion, in trying to fit themselves for their work, look to Major Howden as their ideal.

Lieutenant Guy Martin [4th MG Bn, RTA 16/9/18], wrote to his mother at St Kilda, urging her to find Mrs Howden in order to tell her that her son, Major Howden:

... was the most popular officer and also man among the rank and file. I really believe that he was one of the bravest and best-liked men in the AIF. The old Melburnians and this brigade absolutely worshipped him. He was the only man in the Army I have never heard a bad word about. His death was out of the line. He was hit by a fragment of shell, which, in ordinary times would not have made a man leave his battalion, but unfortunately it got him in the main artery in the neck, and the bleeding could not be stopped.

Ten minutes after his death my men came to me for permission to buy and place a wreath on his grave. They had £12. Most of the men are on a 1/- a day.

Harold Charles Howden was one of those men who demonstrated their true character and potential while on active service. He not only rose from private to major, but from commercial traveller to a high-ranking army officer. The crucible of war could not only destroy men, physically and psychologically, but it could also allow them to achieve great things that might never have happened in a purely civilian life. Indeed, men like Harold may not have even known themselves what they were capable of, until they went into battle and revealed their fighting, decision-making and leadership skills.

Harold Howden certainly seems to have been a top bloke and a damned good soldier. He deserves to be remembered as one of the AIF's best officers.

Note: This article was the basis of the author's presentation at the WFA lecture afternoon on 10/11/18.