John (Jack) J.M. #2503 and Edward (Ted)Higgins (Higgins, E.H #2616 ) .

Jack and Ted Higgins were our mother’s uncles. Jack enlisted when he turned 16 and Ted when he turned 18. Both enlisted at different times in 1915 and both put up their ages. They were over six feet tall so they looked older than they actually were. They were farmers in the Pingelly district of WA. Both were reinforcements for the 11th Battalion and went to Egypt following training at Blackboy Hill W.A..  Jack served briefly at Gallipoli before being evacuated due to “deafness”. One can only speculate as to what caused his temporary deafness. Ted meanwhile was in hospital in Cairo with mumps which was a debilitating disease as antibiotics had not been discovered yet. They both transferred to the newly formed 51st Battalion.  In mid 1916 they travelled by train from Marseille to Belgium then marched to Fleurbaix and took up positon 800m from the village of Fromelle. The 51st did not participate in the disastrous attack (19 and 20 July). The 51st remained in that area south of Armentieres . Jack was severely wounded in action on 9 July and evacuated to England . He rejoined the 51st Battalion in France on 24 February 1917 when it was near Ypres, Belgium. On 12 July 1916 the 51st battalion was transferred south via rail to Vignacourt and route marching to Albert, France. On 5 August the 51st moved to just north of Albert. On 3 Sept. 1916 Ted was wounded in the hand during the battle for Mouquet Farm near Poziers, France . After four weeks he returned to his unit in the field.  Ted served also in the 13 Light Trench Mortar company and took part in the action at Flers and Gueuedecourt. On 2 April 1917 Ted was severely wounded during the battle for Noreuil and he was evacuated to England. The 51st was transferred back to Belgium to participate in the massive battle for the Messines Ridge. Jack was killed by artillery shelling on 10 June 1917. A Memorial Cross was erected in the Messines Ridge British Cemetary Memorial Plot Row B. However he has no known grave. His name is commemorated on the Menin Gate at Ypres, Belgium. Ted rejoined the 51st at the end of February 1918 when it was in Belgium. On his return to his unit after being granted leave, Edward was promoted to Lance Corporal in August 1917. He participated in the Battle of Polygon Wood which was part of the Third battle of Ypres. In March 1918 the Germans launched their Spring Offensive that pushed the British Armies back to positions it held in 1916. The 51st was rushed south to assist stem the rapid advance of the Germans. At Dernancourt ,just south of Amiens, the 51st participated in halting the German advance. The 51st was again hastily rushed south again to defend the town of Villers-Bretonneux.  During the morning of 25 April Ted Higgins was killed in action possibly clearing machine guns from Bois d’Aquenne a wood on the outskirts of Villers-Bretonneux. A Victoria Cross and Military Medal were awarded to two men of the 51st during this action. Ted has no known grave. His name is commemorated on the Villers-Bretonneux Australian memorial.

On February 20, 2015 The Australian War Memorial in Canberra honoured 2616 Lance Corporal Edward Higgins by devoting the nightly Last Post Ceremony to him, and to his brother 2502 Private John Murray Higgins. Video of this ceremony may be viewed on the AWM website by clicking on Roll of Honour, then seeking John Higgins, and by clicking the link in Objects.

Edward’s name is recorded on the Kings Park memorial in Perth, the Pingelly memorial and the Popanyinning Roll of Honour. We are fortunate indeed that photographs of Edward have survived. During the winter of 1916-17, the 51st Battalion camped on several occasions at Vignacourt, just north of the key railway junction town of Amiens. Whilst resting ‘behind the lines’ Edward took the opportunity to have his photo taken by Louis Thuillier and his wife Antoinette, a farming couple who had turned their hobby of photography into a profitable business.

Edward Higgins photograph can be found within the Thuillier Collection, and on page 193 of ‘The Lost Diggers’ by Ross Coulthart. Edward has chosen to have his portrait taken with his mate, an Aboriginal Australian soldier, as yet unidentified. Both men have a band on their right arms indicating that they are part of a three man trench mortar team. The trench mortal teams as well as the 13 Brigade Machine Gunners drew men from all infantry battalions (49th, 50th, 51st, 52nd Battalions) in the 13 Brigade.

Glen McAdam.

