

Tom Roberts MC and Ivan Eldredge MM – two young ANZAC from South Australia

By Paul Roberts

This is the story of my Great Uncles, Thomas Roberts and Ivan Eldredge. Their story intertwines as they grew up on neighbouring farming properties in South Australia's north, joined the armed forces and served together in WW1 and returned from the war to see their families unite forever as Tom's younger brother married Ivan's younger sister. My Grandparents, Syd and Dorothy.

Much is taken from their service records and the Battalion Biography for the 43rd Battalion. Information is also drawn from papers at the time (Trove) and oral history from my mother Pat Roberts who knew both Uncles well.

At the start of researching their story I knew very little about them, just that they had fought in the war together and won medals for bravery. While I was familiar with the term "ANZAC" and "Anzac spirit" I had no personal connection to it. That now...has all changed for me and my family.

There is no one official meaning or definition of Anzac spirit but there are a number of characteristics that are often associated with it, things like:

- Mateship
- Courage and valour
- Endurance and perseverance in the face of real adversity
- Resourcefulness and ingenuity
- Indifference to titles and authority
- Looking out for and staying true to your mates
- Where despite our size and place in the world we pitch in and help others.

I knew Tom and Ivan had courage to win bravery medals, but I never expected to find that their story would have so many elements of the ANZAC spirit of WW1, a spirit that has become a part of our nations identity and passed into legend for the descendants that follow.

Before the War

Both Tom and Ivan were born on farming properties in the 1890's on the Blyth plains in South Australia. Tom was born into a big family with eight brothers and two sisters. The Roberts family was very successful raising sheep. They were the first to export fattened lambs from the colony to England and with that came a prosperity that would see them as influential members of society in the northern pastoral district. The family founded a new township that was named after the Roberts farm – Kybunga. In 1880, Tom's father, Lt Colonel Richard Roberts (simply known as 'the Colonel') was asked about the origins of the name and he was quoted as saying: 'I bestowed the name without a meaning'. When the railway line joined Kybunga to the Ports of Adelaide the family's future was assured.

The Eldredge Family were similarly prosperous farmers with a mixture of sheep and grain on their property that were drawn to the new settlement of Kybunga and all that it promised. Ivan was the eldest with two sisters and a brother.

All the Roberts and Eldredge men were members of the Blyth Rifle Club, which was started by the Colonel. Before Federation, rifle clubs were considered a local militia that could be called up to defend the colony should there be a need. Standing army regiments were quite small in the colonies and so the rifle clubs were seen as a type of army reserve.

The Blyth Rifle Club had a fearsome reputation and were all renowned marksman. In 1911 at the Dewar's Challenge their score of 505, and average of 101 per rifleman was considered a world Record. Competition between the various brothers in the district – especially the Roberts boys – saw the Rifle Club winning local rifle shooting

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tournaments for 30+ years. However, there was no argument that Tom was the best shot. In 1909 he won the “The Kings” at Randwick which was a competition held in Sydney where only the best marksmen in Australia are invited. It was reported in The Queenslander on the 23rd of October that

The winner of the King's was a young South Australian, Tom Roberts, of Blyth. The result was entirely unexpected and was due to his excellent marksmanship at the 1000 yards range. He secured one short of the [maximum] possible.

Tom had skills with a rifle that few could match.

Outbreak of War

When the war started in 1914, the age of recruitment for volunteers was 19-38. This meant that 6 of the 8 Roberts boys were eligible to enlist – Victor (36), Ivor (34), Oscar (32), James (28), Tom (25) and my Grand Father Syd (23). Ivan (23) and his younger brother Stephen (20) were both eligible.

All of Tom's elder brother were married with families and farms of their own. Their contribution to the war would be to send much needed food and supplies to England. Few knew at the start of the war just how important those supplies would be as the blockade of England by German U-Boats nearly starved the population and won them the war.

Tom and Syd were all set to join with Ivan and Stephen, but their parents conspired to ensure the youngest boys could not go. Tom's father, the Colonel, had received the Victoria Decoration for military service to the colony and his reputation in the military was such in the South Australia that, once he put the word out, no regiment would sign up Syd Roberts or Stephen Eldridge.

Lt. Col. Richard Roberts.



The Victoria Decoration



Tom and Ivan joined the Army together on the 4th April 1916. They joined the newly formed 43rd Battalion and as mates from the same town they were put together in C Company. The 43rd was part of the 3rd Division of the AIF and would see all of its service on the Western Front.

During the initial muster of the regiment, where they were gathered at Morphetville Racecourse both Ivan and Tom were made Lance Corporals. This is an intermediate appointment that recognizes a soldier's potential before promotion to Corporal, who are in charge of 10 men in the company.

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At 2pm, 9th June 1916 the Battalion left outer harbour at Port Adelaide on the S.S Afric. They disembarked at Marseilles on the 20th of July. From there they made their way by land across France to cross the English Channel to England. They made their final camp at Lark Hill on the 24th July.

Tom and Ivan's time in England was a period of intense training and learning. A problem that was identified was the lack of trained leaders within the Regiment. Tom had finished Highschool with 2 years of boarding school at Prince Alfred College and so on the 14th March 1917 he was selected to train as an officer at Trinity College in Cambridge.

After three months He returned to his regiment (still a Lance Corporal) as it made ready for France. Tom's next lot of Officer training would be in the field. Tom and Ivan left England for the Western Front on 25th November 1916.

The Western Front

Tom fell sick with the mumps on Christmas Eve 1916 which had been contagiously spreading through the Division since they arrived in England. He did not re-join the Regiment for a month and so missed the very first time his comrades entered the trenches on the 29th December.

The next few months saw action on and off for both of them as the 43rd took its turn in the trenches. Ivan was wounded receiving a gunshot wound to the eye on the 31st July at the Battle of Messines. Taken to hospital he was lucky and returned to his unit on the 3rd August 1917.

Ivan had shown great leadership potential, was promoted to Sergeant and received extra training with the Lewis machine gun. The machine gun, which so came to dominate and even to personify the battlefields of World War One, was a fairly primitive device when general war began in August 1914. The Lewis gun was a heavy machine gun decidedly ill-suited to portability for use by rapidly advancing infantry troops. Ivan's size, strength and courage made him ideal for this role.

Ivan was fiercely protective of his men and they all had a great affection for their Sergeant – with many regularly reuniting after the war. It was this empathy and care for his men that saw Ivan charged with the crime of "Conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline". Ivan was guilty of writing home to his parents, describing the stupid way men's lives were being wasted in trench warfare during the battle of Messines where 24 were killed and 97 wounded. In particular it was the few days before they were going to be taken off the line where working parties were ordered out into the forward trenches to repair them where most of the men were killed or injured. The biography of the 43rd Battalion would describe this time

"The repairing of defences after the battle of Messines will long live in the memories of all who were present in the Battalion, the strain and hardships endured frequently formed a topic of conversation in later months, the period being referred to as the "The Eighteen Day Stunt."

For his crime Ivan would be demoted back to Lance Corporal

Tom had gone back to England for 3 months to finish his Officer training and re-joined the Battalion as the 2nd Lieutenant of D Company in time for the battle of Ypres (4th October 1917). Here I discovered that Tom had to take over command of D Company because His Captain and 1st Lieutenant had been killed during intense bombing by the Germans. It was while he was in command of D Company that he was wounded with a gunshot wound to the shoulder which would put him in hospital for the winter of 1917/18. He knew he was lucky because he was sent back to England to get better.

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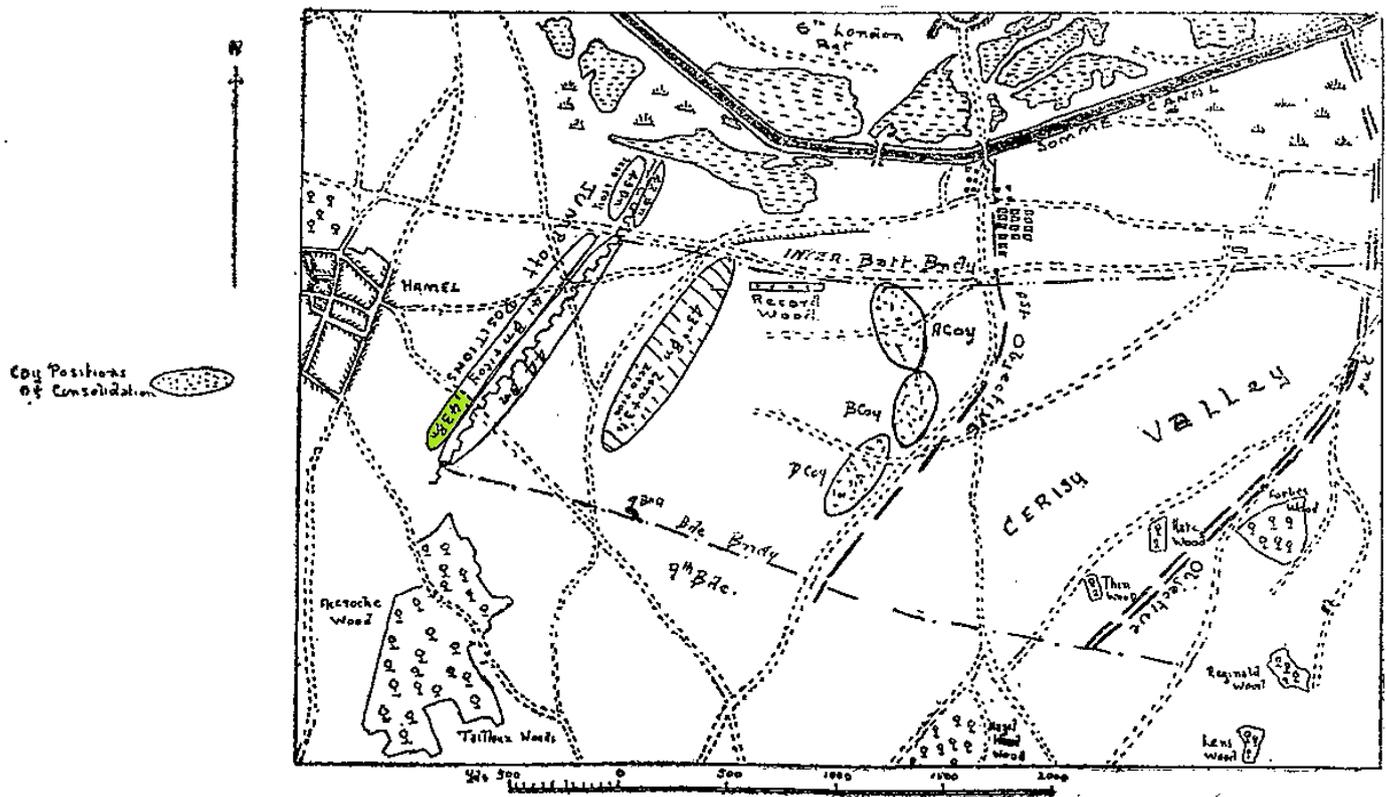
The many battles fought by the 43rd are mapped by the location of commonwealth war graves.

- Messines 1917
- Ypres 1917
- Polygon Wood
- Passchendale
- Some
- Ancre 1918
- Hamel
- Amiens

And there is no denying that Ivan saw more of the war than Tom, especially in 1917, but as hostilities commenced in the spring of 1918.....they were both in the thick of it.

Heroic Action

8 August 1918 - It was the opening day of "the Great Offensive" or what the Germans would call "The Black Day". Tom and Ivan's Company had been reassigned to the 41st Battalion to support them for this crucial attack. Their position is marked in green on the map below.



THE GREAT OFFENSIVE, August 8, 1918.

My father remembers talking to Ivan (who lived to be 93) about this day. He wished he was with the 43rd Battalion and not the 41st. His company had been given the hardest job, covering the most open ground, and were reliant on others to take out German machine guns on the high ground. The day had started well because the fog was so heavy you could not see your hand in front of your face.

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Although disorientated they reached their first objective easily, but when the fog cleared, they entered the Cerisy Valley and were confronted with a section of German field Howitzers and several machine gun nests. Tom and Ivan's Company was held up and had to take the machinegun positions or be blasted by the German cannons.

Ivan never told my Father any more.

The Official History of Australians in World War 1 simply states the following of this encounter

"it was impossible to see one's own outstretched hand and any form of control except self-control was out of the question. But the troops knew well what was to be done and each man pressed on in the direction of the barrage."

"The 44th was naturally scattered - its full attacking strength gave only one man to every 23 yards of front - and when passing through its line on Gailly Ridge the 41st found a strong party of Germans there in the sunken roads known as "Spur Fork."

"The resistance met by the 41st at Spur Fork came from the headquarters of the line battalion, the III/g7th, whose commander, Capt. Schoning, sustained a brave fight against figures dimly seen in front, until he was mortally wounded by a shot from the rear."

During that action on the 8th of August three men in Tom's Company were decorated

Corporal T.E. Rose from was awarded the Military Medal for

'For bravery and devotion to duty. On the 8th August, 1918, during the operations east of HAMEL, his Section in attacking an enemy field gun was held up by machine gun fire. Lance Corporal ROSE rushed his Lewis gun to a flank and engaged the enemy machine gun at close range, completely silencing it and enabling his Section to capture the field gun. His bravery throughout the operation was an excellent example to the other members of his Section.'

Sergeant I. N. Eldredge was awarded the Military Medal for

'On the 8th August, 1918, during the attack east of HAMEL, Sergeant ELDREDGE showed much bravery and skill in the handling of his Lewis Gun Section. On his Platoon being held up by enemy machine gun fire, he immediately worked his Section to a flank, rushed and captured the machine gun and five prisoners. Seventeen of the enemy were killed and wounded by Sergeant ELDRIDGE and his Section during the capture of this strong point. He displayed great bravery and coolness throughout the operation.'

And Lieutenant Tom Walter Bain Roberts was awarded the Military Cross for

'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during an attack. When his platoon was held up by an enemy machine gun post he brought his Lewis gun into action, and with four men worked round the flank, rushing the post and capturing eleven prisoners. He displayed great courage and good leadership throughout.'

It was this outflanking maneuver by Tom's platoon and the courage shown by the machine gun section leaders, Ivan and T.E Rose that saw the end of the fighting at the Spur Fork.

Little did the allied forces know, but after this "Black Day" for Germany, there were less than 100 days left of the War.

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After the War

At the 11th hour on November 11, 1918, the war was finally over. By the 23rd of November, Ivan was in Paris celebrating with his men. Tom did not get his chance to get to Paris until January.....but the celebration was still going.

Winding up a war takes time. With lots of men idle or letting off steam. Ivan spoke of how all he wanted to do was to get back home to farming. Ivan was struggling and Tom could see it. There was an initiative where those men with farming experience could get paid leave to work on farms in England until their unit embarked for home. The shortage of men was so great. Tom made sure Ivan was given leave to work on an English Farm, in the village of Harley, located in Shropshire, Called Paradise Farm.

Tom left for Australia before Ivan in May 1919, while Ivan was on the farm, but he followed soon after in August.

Conclusion

I have only scratched the surface of Tom and Ivan's story, but I do know they were glad their younger brothers were not there with them. Everyone also knew that Ivan saw the worst of the trench warfare in 1917. With Tom either in Officer training or in hospital for much of 1917 it was Ivan who suffered the daily fear while in forward positions of mustard gas attacks and the horrible way a man dies when exposed. It was no surprise to anyone, that when WW2 broke out and Ivan's son Neville wanted to serve, Ivan made him join the Airforce.

In the end.....Tom and Ivan stood together with their comrades from South Australia, led by example and did everything they could when it counted to end the war with as many of their mates surviving as possible. Tom would say many times, that by 1918....."that's what they were fighting for".

The records of the 43rd Battalion show that the men served for 716 days and were on the front lines for 161 days. That doesn't sound long for 3 years of war but in that short time, 363 men died and 1381 were wounded.

Lest we forget.

Lt Thomas Roberts.



Sergeant Ivan Eldredge



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