

2173 CPL Ernest Alfred Corey 20 December 1891 - August 1972

A story of valour about an everyday Australian; bravery beyond belief, not a shot fired but many lives saved, his bravery was not spontaneous nor was it forged in anger or the heat of the moment. It was a deliberate act without any regard for his own safety on many occasions. A truly brave man in the true sense of the word.

2173 Corporal Ernest Albert Corey MM and three Bars

(The only soldier in the British Commonwealth to be awarded the Military Medal four times.)

Ernest Albert Corey was born on December 20, 1891, in the tiny settlement of Numeralla, NSW, on the slopes of the Southern Alps near the town of Cooma. Educated at Thirbegal Public School, about 20 miles from Cooma he left school to become a blacksmith's striker at Martin's Smithy in Cooma – where he was working when the Great war erupted in 1914.

When the "Men from Snowy River" recruiting march left Delegate for Goulburn, in January 1916 the group numbered 30. By the time they had covered the 220 mile march, by way of Nimmitabel, Cooma, Thredbo, Michelago, Queanbeyan, Bungendore and Tarago, their strength had increased to 144 – Corey joined them in Nimmitabel. At the time of his enlistment he was described as being 5' 7½" tall and 154½ lbs.

Following training at Goulburn camp, Ernie Corey left Australia in September 1916 on board the Port Sydney bound for England with the 4th Reinforcements for the 55th Battalion (5th Division). After spending three months with the 14th Training Battalion at Hurdcott, he left for France to join the 55th Battalion at Montauban, on the desolate moorland of the old Somme battlefield. He was posted to the grenade section of "C" Company, and his first introduction to the front line was in the Guedecourt sector, shortly before the Germans withdrew from their Winter positions in front of Bapaume.

On April 2, Corey took part in his first battle, the capture of Doignies, one of the villages held by the Germans in front of the Hindenburg Line. Shortly afterwards the 55th and other units of the 5th Division were withdrawn for a well-earned rest, but a few weeks later the Division was recalled to the front to relieve the 1st Division near Bullecourt where heavy fighting had been taking place.

In the early hours of May 15, the Germans launched their seventh and final counter attack of the battle in an attempt to drive out the Australians and the British on their left. The attack, preceded by a shattering bombardment of heavy and light trench mortars, reinforced later by guns of all calibre, was repulsed by one of the 55th's sister battalions, the 54th, which was holding the right flank of the Australian position.

Losses on both sides were heavy, and during the morning, the Commanding Officer of the 55th, Lieutenant Colonel P.W. Woods, then in support, called for volunteers with a knowledge of first-aid, to assist the stretcher bearers to clear the wounded. Thirty men, including Private Ernie Corey, responded and went into no-man's land, working up to the German wire, and carrying the wounded back about a mile-and-a-half to the dressing station. For 17 hours they laboured without rest. Later the Commanding Officer of the 54th wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Woods expressing his appreciation of the splendid work.

For their courage and devotion to duty, Corey, Jack Buckley, Frank Groutsch, Leslie Jackson and Alex Thompson were awarded the Military Medal – all Immediate Awards granted by General Birdwood – and four other soldiers were mentioned in 1st Anzac routine orders.

Corey's citation read:

“During the enemy attack on front line facing Queant on 15th May 1917, Pte Corey, whilst acting as a stretcher bearer, showed great courage and devotion to duty. Although under direct enemy observation, he carried out his duties continuously for 17 hours without rest, and in a manner worthy of the highest commendation. Although an untrained stretcher bearer, he, together with the rest of the bearing party saved by first aid the lives of seriously wounded men. The Commander of the 54th Bn wrote an appreciation for the help given, and specially mentioned the stretcher bearing party for their good work.”

After Bullecourt, the 1st, 2nd and 5th Australian Divisions enjoyed a long rest of some four months preparing for the Ypres campaign. Ernie Corey decided to become a regular stretcher bearer, and when the Battalion moved up to take part in the Battle of Polygon Wood at the end of September, he was a member of the bearer section, under Lance-Corporal Dawson. After the battle, Corey was recommended for a Bar to his MM for the coolness and bravery he had shown throughout the operation.

The citation for his first Bar read:

“This stretcher bearer showed great courage, devotion to duty and untiring energy during the attack on Polygon Wood on the 26th September 1917. The greatest danger did not deter this man from doing his duty when his services were required, and he tended the wounded and carried them to places of safety continuously throughout the engagement, often under very heavy artillery and machine gun fire. Throughout the whole operations he set a fine example of bravery and coolness to all ranks.”

During the winter of 1917-18 Ernie Corey served in the Messines sector. He went on leave to the UK in February 1918 and soon after became ill and spent 90 days in hospital before rejoining his unit in July 1918. In August and September he took part in the victorious advance along the Somme, and it was at Peronne on September 1 and 2 that he won the second Bar to his MM. Threading his way through shell and machine gun fire with characteristic determination, he dressed and cheered the wounded of several units and helped them to safety. Never sparing himself, Ernie Corey worked continuously until all the wounded in his sector were cleared.

The citation for his second Bar records:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during operations at Peronne on 1st and 2nd September 1918. This man who is a stretcher bearer, dressed and carried wounded of several units throughout the whole of the operation. Although the enemy artillery and machine gun fire was exceptionally heavy, this did not debar this man from carrying on. He worked continuously and arduously and was the means of saving the lives of many of the wounded. He was most unselfish throughout and cheerful at all times and under all circumstances. His careful handling of the wounded

and his knowledge of first aid helped greatly to relieve their sufferings. Throughout the operations he set a fine example of courage, coolness, determination and devotion to duty, under heavy fire."

Three weeks later Ernie was promoted corporal and put in charge of the regimental stretcher bearers.

The Battalion's next fight, north of Bullecourt on September 30, was its last operation of the war, and it was here that Corey, who had come unscathed through every battle of his unit in the past 18 months, received his first and only wound, and added the unprecedented third Bar to his MM. By this time his gallantry had become a by-word in the Battalion.

On one occasion he noticed two German stretcher bearers about 70 yards off, preparing to take a wounded Australian away on a wheeled stretcher. They beckoned to Corey, who went about halfway towards them and called out: "Can you speak English?" One of the Germans replied: "We have Australia. You take him. Too heavy."

Corey told them to leave the stretcher, and when they walked off he made his way to it and found that the man was Private Randall of the 55th, who had lain all night with a wound in the back, and had been bandaged by the Germans. Corey picked him up in his arms, carried him back 40-50 yards and placed him in a shell-hole, telling him that he would return for him later. Meanwhile the Germans came back for their stretcher and waved goodbye to Corey.

Corey continued dressing the wounded – there were many of them in the area – for a further two hours, after which he and his bearers began carrying the wounded to the rear. At about 11 a.m. when on his way to bring in Captain R.A. Goldrick, whom he had earlier bandaged, Corey was blown up by a high explosive shell, receiving wounds in the right groin and thigh. He crawled five or six yards to his first aid bag and put a tourniquet over his femoral artery to stop the bleeding. He then started to crawl back and had covered about 300 yards when Lieutenant Luther Chadwick and Sergeant Clark of his own battalion found him and carried him to a dressing station a mile away.

For his actions that day he was awarded the third Bar. The citation records:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty as NCO in charge of Battalion stretcher bearers during an attack on the Hindenburg Line north of Bellincourt on 30 September 1918. Although enemy machine gun and shell fire were intense, this gallant NCO directed the operations of the Battalion stretcher bearers with the utmost skill and bravery. Regardless of personal danger, he, on numerous occasions although the enemy were firing upon him and other bearer parties, attended to men and carried them from the most exposed positions. His efforts were untiring and he set a splendid example to all ranks until he was severely wounded. It was mainly due to his magnificent work that the wounded were safely removed from the danger zone."

From the dressing station Corey was sent to a casualty station where he was operated on, and was then transported to a general hospital at Le Havre, where he was again put under the surgeon's scalpel. He was later transferred to a hospital in Bristol, England.

Ernie Corey was repatriated to Australia on board the "Plassy" in April 1919, and was medically discharged at the end of June that year.

At the outbreak of the Second World War he joined the 2nd Garrison Battalion, which was sent to Port Kembla, and he served there for more than two years in the medical section.

In May 1971, Ernie Corey, then 85, was interviewed in the Queanbeyan Nursing Home. He was a small man, and as is often the case, he was what one could best describe as "a bit of a wag".

This unique man took immense pride in telling that he had won four bravery awards for saving lives, not taking them, and in a conspiratorial aside, he confided that he had never fired an angry shot at another man.

Ernie Corey said that the proudest moment of his life came during the victory march through Paris. "We had eight days leave in Paris," he said, "and I remember during the march that the French were shouting 'bon Australia' as we marched, and I recall that I had flowers on my bayonet." He said he was particularly proud to have been on that march because he was the smallest member of the Battalion and he had earlier

thought he may not have been selected because of his size.

Like so many brave men, Ernie Corey was humble and modest.

Ernie died in August 1972 and is buried in the Queanbeyan Cemetery.

This modest man's medals were donated to the Australian War Memorial by his relatives and it has ensured that the bravery and self-sacrifice of 2143 Corporal Ernest Albert Corey, MM and three Bars, will remain permanently etched into Australia's military history.

His medals are displayed in the Hall of Valour at the Australian War Memorial. It should be noted that the MM was awarded to other ranks of British and Commonwealth Forces from March 1916 until October 1993. It was replaced by the Military Cross, previously the domain of Officers, being awarded to all ranks of the British Forces. The MM was replaced in the Australian order of Decorations awards by the Medal for Gallantry (MG) on 15 January 1991.

This beautifully maintained Monument commemorating CPL Corey's heroism was built and is maintained by the proud residents of Cooma NSW.

The area also includes a magnificent diorama depicting a battle scene and the general idea of Ernest Corey's area of operations. Take the time to visit if you are in the area.

