

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Corporal Bertram Gordon THOMAS, DCM, MSM

(1896-1956)

Bertram Thomas was born at Kapunda, SA, on 23rd January 1896 to Alexander Thomas and Ruth neé Chinner. The family subsequently moved to Laura Street, St Peters. He was a Post Office telegraph operator by trade and stationed at Moonta prior to his joining the AIF on 27 August 1915 at the age of 19. His enlistment papers describe him as 5 feet 6 inches tall, 130 pounds weight, fair complexion and hazel eyes and brown hair. Under the provisions of the Defence Act at the time, he had previous compulsory military service with junior and senior cadets before transferring to the 81st Militia Infantry Battalion.

Upon enlistment in the AIF, he was appointed to C Company, 2nd Depot Battalion, and then the 6th Field Artillery Brigade (FAB) draft on 1 November 1915 as a gunner (signaller). He embarked on HMAT (A32) *Themistocles* and sailed from Melbourne on 27 January 1916 and on arrival in Egypt was taken on strength of his brigade and posted to its headquarters. He went to France in March and in May was posted to 21st Battery, 22nd FAB, where he stayed until January 1917. His next posting was to 14th Battery, 5th FAB. In recognition of the valuable services rendered he was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal. His citation stated:

‘From 23/9/17 to the present date (6/3/18) this man has displayed great courage and devotion to duty. At times owing to heavy casualties, he has been in charge of the Battery Staff and by his persistency and courage maintained communications under very heavy shellfire’.

Promotion to temporary bombardier occurred in February 1918 and for action at Lavieville on 24 April 1918 he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal:

‘for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. During a very heavy gas and high explosive bombardment which cut all telephone lines this NCO worked for two hours in a small box respirator on the lines and succeeded in establishing communications. On returning to his battery he assisted in putting out fires and saving two guns from damage. His resourcefulness and courage set a fine example to all’.

Promoted bombardier in May 1918 he was wounded in action (gassed) on 1 June and admitted to hospital at Boulogne. After re-joining his unit he was transferred to 2nd Division Ammunition Column and thence to 15th Battery, 5th FAB, in July 1918. He was on leave in England in October 1918 and ill in hospital when the war ended. Postings with AIF HQ in the UK followed where under the AIF Education Scheme, he attended a Telegraphy course at the Central Telegraph Office, London. He was promoted corporal and returned to Australia on the ss *Orontes* in June 1920 and was discharged in 4 MD on 28 October 1920. His two decorations were not presented formally to him but posted to his mother on 3 June 1919.

Following his discharge, he moved to St Leonards in NSW where he married Agnes Florence Webster in 1921. It would appear that he gave up a career as a telegraphist and instead became a grocer. He followed this occupation in various localities in Victoria and finally lived at 2B Nyora Street, East Malvern, where he died as the result of an accident on 28 May 1956 and was cremated at the Springvale Crematorium. He was survived by his wife Agnes Florence. It would appear that the couple had no children.

Sources: *Cannonball*, Journal of the RAA Historical Company, No. 33, p.22, August 1998 (no 'byline'); Sunday Mail, 13 July 1918 p. 3; Adelaide Chronicle 20 July 1918, p. 40; AIF Record of Service held in the NAA; CAGs 173 of 7 November 1918 and 15 of 4 February 1919; Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Victoria; Australian Electoral Rolls 1903-1980; *The Age* 30 May 1956, p.19.