Lieutenant Colonel H.W.Murray, VC, CMG, DSO (TWICE), DCM. CROIX de GUERRE

(1884 – 2001)

It was February, 1917 at a place Army records as "Stormy Trench, North-east of Gueudecourt, France." A war was going on. The worst war ever. And there - so very much there - was a 32-year-old Australian, an AIF captain - who really shouldn't have been there at all. He should have been in hospital. The Medical Officer said so - on February 3. But the AIF captain wouldn't hear of it.

"I'm not going," he said. "Not going?" said the Medical Officer. "You'll get pneumonia if you don't. I'm not certain you haven't got it already!" Pneumonia or not, I'm not going to hospital," said the captain. "I'm going to take Stormy Trench tomorrow." "Don't be silly. You're not fit. All you're going to take is a pill."

"I tell you," said the officer, I'm going to take Stormy Trench tomorrow; and what's more, I'm going to keep it. Bravado.....? Big talk......? Numbskulled recklessness.....?

Not this Time. In a smaller man, any of those things might have been true. But Captain Harry Murray was anything but a small man. In a violent period that produced many heroes he emerged as the giant of them all - the most highly decorated soldier in Australia's fighting history!

In 1915 he landed at Gallipoli as Pte H.W.Murray, 16 Bn. AIF. When shooting ended in Europe in 1918, after years of devotion to duty in the face of appalling risk, he was Lieutenant-Colonel Murray VC, CMG, DSO and Bar, DCM, and Croix de Guerre.

In January this year, Harry Murray died aged 81.

With respect, it can be said in effect that he died with his boots on - a sudden, violent death on a Queensland road far from the battlefields where he so often gambled with death and won, though the odds were so heavily stacked against him.

Take the action that won Murray his VC.

On February 4, 1917, he took 140 men into the attack to take Stormy Trench. When occupying that position, he was relieved at 8 o'clock on the night of February 5; he led only 48 men out again! In the hours between he had fought like a fiend. He was everywhere - encouraging his men, spurring on, setting an example of fighting leadership impossible to describe in detail.

He headed bombing parties, he led bayonet charges, and he rescued wounded men and carried them to safety. He crawled across the frozen waste of No-man's Land on fantastically perilous reconnaissance missions.

Once, on that fearful night of February 4, his company gave ground in the face of enemy fire power causing terrible casualties. They could have retired with honor, but in the words of the citation to Captain Murray VC:

" This gallant officer rallied his command and saved the situation by sheer valour......"

It is sadly true that Australia as a whole knew too little of Lieutenant Colonel Murray. Others, while richly deserving the fame that came to them as a result of spectacular deeds, fell short in terms of personal achievement when compared with the incredible Murray - the man who received more fighting decorations than any other infantry soldier in the British Army in the Great War! - the man immortalised by C.E.W.Bean, Australia's official war historian, as "the most distinguished fighting officer in the AIF....."

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Henry William Murray was born near Launceston, Tasmania, on December 30, 1884, and had his first taste of service life in six years of training with the Launceston Artillery.

From Tasmania he went to Western Australia, where he led a lonely and rugged outback life in wild country - the kind of country where only the physically tough can survive.

When he enlisted on October 13, 1914, he gave his occupation as "timber-getter."

Private Murray moved into Blackboy Hill Camp, near Perth, where 16 Battalion was forming. There he met a young chap named Percy Black. Both were posted to the battalion machine-gun section and quickly became mates. Both were destined to distinguish themselves as fighting men and outstanding leaders.

Both landed at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915. And within a month both had been decorated with the Distinguished Conduct Medal. (Murray also got a mention in Corps Orders.)

By May 13, 1915, Murray was Lance-Corporal. Three months later he rose from Lance-Corporal to Sergeant and was appointed 2nd lieutenant - all on the one day. And it was being said of him: "He'll get a VC, or be killed." Twice wounded on Gallipoli, Murray was promoted to Lieutenant in January, 1916, and to Captain two months later. So the man who landed at Gallipoli as Private Murray, left there less than a year later as Captain Murray DCM. He was bound for France - and for the career of fighting leadership that was to distinguish him forever.

It is worth pausing at this point and returning to the early Gallipoli days to have a look at Murray and his mate Percy Black: the two had so much in common that each was to some extent a reflection of the other. Historically they first came under notice early on April 26, 1915, when the Gallipoli campaign was only one day old - and dawn saw the Turks launching a counter-attack.

The men dug in on what was known as "Pope's Hill" were well entrenched to meet a frontal assault, but soon men at the rear of this unit - 16 Battalion - were being killed by rifle fire. It was then realised that khaki clad figures seen earlier stealing through the scrub at the rear were not New Zealanders, as had been thought - the Turks were attacking from the rear!

Lieutenant-Colonel Pope, commanding 16 Battalion, ordered his entrenched troops to fire to the front and moved his two machine guns to the rear to deal with the infiltrating Turks. One of these guns was manned by Lance-Corporal Percy Black ("Number 1") and Private Harry Murray (" Number 2"). Both won a DCM that day They fought until their gun was literally smashed to pieces by Turkish bullets. Black, one arm disabled by Turkish fire and later shot through one ear, refused to leave his gun. It wasn't necessary, he said. "That's the beauty of these guns," he told his colonel. "You can work them with one hand." Black said it, but in its spirit of determination and devotion to duty it could just as easily have been Murray speaking: they were two of a kind if ever there was such a thing.

In a letter dated May 31, 1918, and written from "Australian Corps HQ, France," General Monash had this to say about the dauntless pair: "... You mention Lt-Col Murray. Of course he is one of the best known men in the AIF. He was originally a private in my 13th Battalion. He now commands the 4th Machine Gun Battalion. His faithful friend and colleague, Lt-Col Percy Black, a miner from Western Australia, who also started as a private, unfortunately lost his life last year at Bullecourt. There are few finer Infantry leaders than they......." (Australia's official war history records Percy Black as a Major at the time of his death. It also indicates that Murray was already commissioned when he was transferred from 16 to 13 Battalion. General Monash is quoted from a personal letter written from memory.)

From the time of his arrival in France, Murray took part in every major fight to which 13 Battalion was committed. Memorable among these, in addition to the Stormy Trench affair that brought him his VC, were Moquet Farm, Pozieres and Bullecourt. When Moquet Farm was attacked in August, 1916, the Germans resisted stubbornly. They were still there in strength when Murray, exhibiting the ferocious determination so characteristic of his fighting leadership and so inspiring to his men, stormed the smoking remains of the farm.

The enemy was there in overwhelming force. Murray fought his men back in a classical retirement that not only got them back safely, but also brought back a number of German prisoners. The extraordinary thing about this engagement was that Murray took less than 100 men into the attack and actually reached objective which was later unsuccessfully attacked by700 men and was finally captured by about 3000. For this remarkable feat Captain Murray was awarded the DSO (Distinguished Service Order).

In February, 1917, Murray's outstanding bravery at Stormy Trench brought him the VC. Two months later came the valiant disaster at Bullecourt. Here Australians faced a barrier of bitter memories - the Hindenburg Line. When the attack was launched Murray's unit followed directly behind 16 Battalion. He could see the 16th caught against the barbed wire and suffering terrible machine gun fire about 300 yards ahead. Murray's reaction was immediate - and typical. "Come on, men!" he shouted, "the 16th are getting hell!' If ever there was a trial by fire, here it was. It was planned that tanks would advance through the wire first, but they were soon knocked out. There was no artillery cover.

The Infantry had the suicidal task of forcing a passage through the maze of wire while the Germans poured machine gun and rifle fire into their ranks. Incredible as it seems, some troops did get through and into the first of two German trenches. Later they moved into part of a support trench 200 yards further on. Murray, up with the forward troops, surveyed the situation, sent back a message that the first and part of the second objective had been taken and asked for more grenades and ammunition.

He then added the laconic comment: "With artillery support we can keep the position till the cows come home", but the artillery support did not come. Confusion about the state of the advance kept the guns out of action.

The Germans had no such inhibitions. They retaliated powerfully. Heavy artillery wiped out a British force and laid down a terrific barrage. Small arms fire poured across the Australian position from three sides. Soon the line of communications was completely closed by continuous fire. Murray, the realist, could see the answer - the only answer." There are only two things now. Either capture - or go into that fire." In an every-man-for-himself movement, the Australians left the Hindenburg Line.

That was April 11, 1917. On that day Harry Murray received a bar to the DSO. On that day he was promoted to temporary major and on that day he lost his friend Percy Black. Black was killed early in the attack, leading his men in search for a gap through the wire. When Murray heard the news he responded with one brief comment: "The bravest man I ever knew."

When the war ended Lieutenant-Colonel Murray, was, it is worth repeating, the most highly-decorated soldier in the entire British force. But for him the war was over. He was content to move back and disappear quietly into civilian life.

He was a soldier who had done his duty to the best of his ability, and that was that. He was not anxious to discuss his AIF career and the distinction it had brought him. There was even some doubt that he would make a trip to London to attend the VC Centenary celebrations in 1956 with other Australian VC winners. But in the end he went, accompanied by his wife. It was the first time he had been abroad since 1919.

In the years after the war Lt-Col Murray had little to say about soldiering, but one thing he did say - in the magazine Reveille, in December, 1935 - is worth repeating: "Throughout history, great generals have always recognised the supreme value of discipline. It has been alleged that although Australian troops made good soldiers they lacked discipline.

This I could never agree with; because I maintain that it was the discipline, traditions and code of the AIF that enabled Australia to play a creditable part in the Great War. "Without discipline, one man can never have an army - nothing but a rabble..... For my own part, without discipline and training I could never have done my day's work, and it is to the system of discipline enforced by the AIF that I lift my hat, because it transformed thousands of men - nervy and highly-strung like myself - enabling them to do work which without discipline, they would have been incapable of performing.

On Friday, January 7, (1966) this year, Harry Murray and his wife left their 80,000 acre station, "Glenlyon," near Richmond, North Queensland, and were travelling along the Condamine Highway near Miles, in Queensland's Darling Downs. Mrs. Murray was driving the car when it turned over. The 81 - year-old colonel suffered a heart attack and died. Perhaps, somewhere, the ghost of Percy Black said simply: "The bravest man I ever knew."