

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Major John Carr EWEN, MC, DCM, MM

(1892-1951)

John Ewen was born at Digsbury, Manchester on 25 October 1892, the second son of Frederick and Marian (nee Fleetwood). Schooled at nearby Cheadle Hume he joined the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway and the Territorial Army before migrating to Australia in 1912.

Ewen bought a share in a horse and a dairy property on the Bellinger River in northern NSW. In 1915, he enlisted in the AIF four days before his twenty-third birthday and was allotted to the 5th Australian Field Artillery Brigade (FAB) on 21 October 1915. Gunner Ewen subsequently completed his training in Egypt with his unit before moving to France with the 2nd Division.

During one ferocious German bombardment at Pozieres on 3 August 1916, Ewen had to maintain two telephone lines under constant heavy shellfire. This earned him a Military Medal and promotion to bombardier. He was promoted to Sergeant in March the following year.

On 17 March 1917, Ewen's 13th Battery was the target of German counter battery fire in the Noreuil Valley. All the battery officers were wounded and Ewen took command, withdrew spare personnel to safety and brought his guns back into action. A subordinate, Bombardier Church, said that, 'Sergeant Ewen's coolness and bravery under fire was perfectly marvellous'. His superiors thought likewise and he was awarded the DCM and sent to the RFA Cadet Officers School at St John's Wood. He was commissioned a lieutenant and posted to 11th Battery, 4th FAB.

On 23 August 1918, Ewen was in charge of communications for the Observation Post (OP) party at Herleville. The observing officer was killed and Ewen took his place. Throughout the day with utter disregard for his own safety under heavy fire he moved around the captured positions sending back information on infantry positions and bearings of hostile batteries for them to be promptly engaged.

Four days later, Ewen was in his OP in support of British infantry at Vermandovilliers, near Starry Wood. His guns were 6000 yards behind him. When the Germans retired during the night, Ewen moved forward with the British, summed up the situation, and asked for a section of two guns to be sent forward. He reconnoitred the route, posted signallers as guides and selected the gun position. His use of ground to get guns and ammunition forward was exemplary. Ewen then engaged enemy machine guns at 200 yards range, after which the infantry occupied their objective, Kalmer Wood. He then directed his gunfire on to German batteries and set an ammunition dump alight. Ewen was awarded the Military Cross for his work at Herleville.

Soon afterwards Ewen suffered a serious wound to his right side between ribs and hip. The stretcher bearers assessed his wound – a gaping shrapnel hole – and decided he was beyond aid. They took his ‘dog tag’ to the Medical Orderly at the aid post who recognised it as that of Ewen and told the bearers to, ‘Bring him in, quickly’. Ewen survived, and was hospitalised in London. Before returning to duty on 31 March 1919, Lieutenant Ewen received his three awards at Buckingham Palace from King George V. General Birdwood also sent him a congratulatory letter. He was one of only six to receive the three awards. Back in France after the war he rescued a little black dog that became the battery’s mascot. He smuggled it back to England under his greatcoat where his mother and sister looked after it.

John Ewen was discharged on 24 July 1919 and in 1925 started a pest control business on Sydney’s north shore, a successful venture until his enlistment in the 2nd AIF on 1 April 1940. In September he was promoted captain and for a year was an instructor at Warwick Farm followed by appointment to 14th Field Regiment as part of the Newcastle Covering Force in command of 53rd Battery. He was promoted to major on 12 January 1943 and accompanied the regiment to New Guinea where his battery performed prodigiously in getting two guns forward to engage the Japanese at Iroribaiwa at the southern end of the Kokoda track. It was a young man’s war and he returned to Australia and did more instructing before being discharged on 13 March 1944.

His BSM, Warrant Officer F G Hopkins, wrote to him in these terms on his departure from the battery. *‘From the practical application of your experience in two wars you have unselfishly imparted to all interested a wealth of knowledge they will forever be thankful for. . . You may rest assured that the men who have served under you . . . appreciate your patience and devotion to duty. Above all, you have been an inspiration. They regard themselves, not as members of 53 Battery, but members of ‘Ewen’s Battery’.*’

After discharge, Ewen sold his home at Asquith and bought a dairy farm at Moss Vale. One Anzac Day he was too ill to march, so his gunners brought food and drink to his home, and had their reunion with their much revered commander.

There was nothing complicated about John Ewen. He was conservative, practical and led by example; saw something to be done, and did it. Decisions came easily to him and he made friends easily. He was a no-nonsense disciplinarian, firm but fair, and would brook no falsity or double-dealing. He had one other distinguishing trait about which many stories were told – he feared neither man nor beast. Ewen was a role model for his two sons, Ken (22nd and 2/7th Field Regiments) and his twin brother Derek (21st Field Regiment and Anti-Aircraft), and his daughters Betty and June. When asked to have his portrait painted for the Australian War Memorial collection, John said, ‘On one condition; one for you and one for my family’. Artist Balfour obliged.

John Carr Ewen married Gladys Hamson on 13 October 1919 at St Peters, Neutral Bay. He died on 20 November 1951 and was cremated at Northern Suburbs Crematorium.

Sources: Alan H. Smith, *Cannonball*, No.53, Nov.2003, pp.10-11; D Mc Carthy, *South-West Pacific Area First Year*, AWM 1962, p.246; Kenneth Ewen, family records.