

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Corporal Frank Oswald MATT, DCM

(1893-1916)

Frank Oswald Matt, the son of Edward and Mary Hebden Matt (nee Webster), was born in Melbourne and enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) (No. 812) at Maribyrnong on 21 August 1914 and was posted to the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade (2nd FAB) at Broadmeadows, on 5 September 1914.

Prior to enlisting in the AIF, he was a professional soldier and had served four years with engineers, infantry, and No. 2 Battery, Royal Australian Field Artillery for the last 17 months. He was nearly 21 years old, single, a Methodist, 170 cm tall, weighed just 57 kilograms, and his father was his Next of Kin, his mother having died in 1900.

The 2nd FAB sailed from Melbourne in October and departed Albany, Western Australia, on 1 November 1914 disembarking in Alexandria, Egypt, on 5 December. After training in Egypt, the 2nd FAB embarked for Anzac Cove, via Lemnos, landing a portion of the headquarters and one gun on 25 April 1915. The remaining guns dribbled ashore over the next few days and weeks.

There is no record of when Matt went ashore, in what capacity, or with what sub-unit, but he was listed as a batman on enlistment and was transferred to the Heavy Battery on Gallipoli on 15 July as batman to Major C.G.N. Miles, the battery commander. And, Miles, a permanent officer with No. 2 Battery, had also joined the 2nd FAB as adjutant, so it is highly likely that Matt had been Miles' batman since enlisting in the AIF and went ashore with him either on the first day or soon thereafter.

The Heavy Battery was an improvised battery of two old 6-inch howitzers and a 4.7-inch naval gun commanded by Miles and one third manned by British garrison artillery, and two thirds by Australian field gunners.

Matt reported sick on 23 August and was admitted to hospital on Mudros but rejoined his unit on 6 October and remained there until the evacuation. Their last rounds were fired on 15 December. The two six inch guns were evacuated. The 4.7 inch gun was blown up and now resides in the Australian War Memorial.

Matt disembarked in Alexandria, ex Lemnos, on 4 January 1916 and was attached to the 8th Battery, 2nd FAB, later to the Divisional Artillery Headquarters, and then to 4th Battery, 2nd FAB, shortly before departing for France landing at Marseilles on 28 March.

On reaching the Western Front, each division was eventually issued with light, medium, and heavy trench mortars. The lights were issued to the infantry and the mediums and heavies to the artillery on the scale of one heavy and three medium batteries of four mortars each per division. Matt was posted as a mortar detachment commander to the X1A Medium Trench Mortar Battery in 1st Australian Division (X refers to battery and 1A to division). He was promoted to bombardier on 27 April and corporal (lance bombardier and bombardier respectively from 1924) five weeks later.

The 2-inch medium mortar fired a 23-kilogram spherical bomb to a maximum range of 570 meters. For a seemingly crude weapon, it was a relatively complex piece that required a cool head to operate in battle. It had the option of three propellant charges depending on the range to target, could be fitted with a silencer and flash suppressor, and had a crew

of five. With such a short range they were usually deployed in the front or support line trenches and so were just as vulnerable to enemy fire as the front-line troops.

Having such a short range, they were generally not included in artillery fire plans but were allotted targets by the infantry brigades and battalions to which they were attached. They were used for wire cutting, neutralizing machine gun and sniper posts, breaking down parapets, and against counter attacks.

The AIF was initially sent to a relatively quiet part of the front line around Armentieres where they held the line, trained their newly formed units and reinforcements, learned the skills of trench warfare, and encountered gas for the first time. An important part of the training was trench raiding to teach combined arms operations, gather intelligence, and create diversions.

The largest raid occurred near Sailly (about 8 km SSW of Armentieres) on the night of 29/30 June 1916. The raid comprised 248 raiders and a covering party of 64 supported by 8000 rounds of artillery and 1000 trench mortar rounds. It was an element in the British and French plan to draw attention away from the Somme before the offensive was launched there on 1 July. Matt's performance during the raid prompted a recommendation for the award of a Victoria Cross from Major General W.H. Walker, General Officer Commanding 1st Australian Division AIF. The citation read:

'During the raid on the enemy's trenches on the night of 29/30 June Corporal Matt was in charge of one mortar of X/1/A Battery. A bomb that had misfired from his mortar only travelled a short distance from the bore and fell on the duck board a few feet away with the fuse burning. The detachment went undercover except Corporal Matt who extinguished the burning fuse, unscrewed it, and flung it away. He then upended the bomb and threw it into the mud to dampen the exploder. He then dismounted the gun as there had been difficulty with the vent piece, inserted a tube, remounted the gun, and kept it in action until ordered to retire.

By his gallant action in removing the live fuse from the bomb he undoubtedly averted loss of life and injuries to the officers and men of the infantry who were in close proximity to the mortars when the incident occurred.' The recommendation was neither approved nor any lesser award granted.

Soon after, the AIF moved to the Somme and 1st Division took over a section of the front line on the southern outskirts of Pozieres on the night of 19 July. After intense preparations, the 1st Division began its attack on Pozieres in the early hours of 23 July. For his brief part in this battle Matt was recommended for the award of a Distinguished Conduct Medal by Major General Walker. The citation read:

'During the night of 23/24 July, near Pozieres, during terrific fire from the enemy on our left flank Corporal Matt showed the most heroic gallantry and courage by taking his gun [mortar] and detachment out into the Pozieres Road in "No Man's Land" and keeping it in action at the objective allotted to him, until all his detachment were killed and himself severely wounded.

On many occasions Corporal Matt has shown conspicuous bravery under heavy fire, (both in the service of his gun and in assisting the wounded).' Crossed out by Walker or his staff was a final sentence. 'I cannot too deeply deplore the loss of one of my bravest N.C.Os.' If not written, at least approved by, the Commander Royal Artillery 1st Division.

He died of wounds at the 3rd Casualty Clearing Station on the same day, 23 July 1916, and was buried at Puchevillers. Corporal Matt was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, DCM, posthumously on 19 August 1916. The DCM is the oldest British award for gallantry and was a second level military decoration, ranking below the Victoria Cross, until its discontinuation in 1993.

His elder brother and only full sibling, Lieutenant Edward George Matt, enlisted in mid-1915 and suffered a severe chest wound while serving with the 8th Battalion in France in 1917 and was repatriated to Australia.

In 2021, Corporal Matt and a contemporary, Lieutenant Thurnhill, were selected to be portrayed in a painting commissioned for the 150th Anniversary of Australian Artillery. Additionally, the Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery

requested, and had approved, the recognition of Corporal Matt at the Last Post Ceremony at the Australian War Memorial on 1 August 2021.



Gunner Frank Oswald Matt in the uniform of the Royal Australian Field Artillery (RAFA) in Victoria in 1913 or 1914.