



Honouring the Memory of a Gallant Soldier



...determined to do his duty



VC Citation

FRENCH, Corporal John Alexander
2/9th Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F.

*4th September, 1942, at Milne Bay,
New Guinea (Posthumous Award)*

CITATION: *At Milne Bay on the afternoon of 4th September 1942 a company of an Australian infantry battalion attacked the Japanese position east of the Buna Mission* where it encountered terrific rifle and machine gun fire. The advance of the section of which Corporal French was in command was held up by fire from three enemy machine gun posts, whereupon Corporal French, ordering his section to take cover, advanced and silenced one of the posts with grenades. He returned to his section for more grenades and again advanced and silenced the second post. Armed with a Thompson sub-machine gun, he then attacked the third post, firing from the hip as he went forward. He was seen to be badly hit by the fire from this post, but continued to advance. The enemy gun then ceased to fire and his section pushed on to find that all members of the three enemy gun crews had been killed and Corporal French had died in front of the third gun pit. By his cool courage and disregard of his own personal safety, this non-commissioned officer saved the members of his section from heavy casualties and was responsible for the successful conclusion of the attack.*

(London Gazette 14th January 1943).

** This was in fact K.B. Mission.*

NCO “saved his section from heavy casualties”

When **Corporal John French VC** went into battle with the 2/9th AIF Infantry Battalion in North Africa and New Guinea he was driven by his devotion to duty and to his mates.

For it was the love of his family that dominated this unassuming soldier's thoughts, not personal concern for his prospects of survival or the chance of winning medals for valour. The picture of this conscientious, selfless hero from Crow's Nest, near Toowoomba, Queensland, emerges from the letters he wrote to his mother.

John Alexander French was a 25-year-old hairdresser when he became the first man from the local district to volunteer for service in the Second World War in October 1939. By the time he penned a few lines “at sea” aboard the *Mauritania* on 6 June, 1940 the 2/9th Battalion was sailing for England following a period of intensive training.

No regret and no terrors....

Unknown to the country boy from Crow's Nest, ahead lay the battlefields of North Africa, including Tobruk, which would see the battalion in action against the Germans and Italians, and the jungles of New Guinea, where he would win the highest of decorations fighting against the Japanese.

But he was already worried about his mother and family, especially if he was to be one of those who did not return. Acknowledging that “*the fate of our small force is very uncertain,*” he begged his mother:

Please reconcile yourself to the idea that ‘yours truly’ may be one of the unlucky ones. I have led an easy life and had a pretty good time, have no regrets and no terrors for what may come. Remember that it is our duty to think of those who may remain and those leaving this ‘mortal coil’ have done with all earthly troubles.

You will know, mother, the high esteem I have always had for you and your memory is the best thing I have.

After four months in England, the next report from the self-styled “*soldier on not-so-active duty*”, chronicled life as the men of the 2/9th gradually became used to their role as garrison troops preparing to meet the threatened invasion of Britain by German forces. They had little liking for guard duties or the wet and foggy weather but the food was good and they had a plentiful supply of coal.

Life in Egypt was very different. In January 1941, “Jack” French, as he was known to both family and friends, wrote twice more to his mother, describing their camp on the edge of the desert among barren sand hills. The nights were surprisingly cold and water was in short supply but, typically, the Australians could find things to joke about, especially their first experience with a sand storm....

It fills eyes, nose and mouth and is especially enjoyable at meal times.

There was also a humorous incident to relate about their camp at Alexandria, where a squadron of Hurricane fighters flying overhead reminded them of the Luftwaffe's raids on targets in England.

All companies had machine guns mounted for aircraft defence and, as the camp was not far from an aerodrome, we were able to see hostile planes making attempts to do some damage there and our lines were being continually crossed and re-crossed by RAF machines.

One morning, shortly after arrival, a German bomber flew over hotly pursued by a Spitfire — all hands with the machine guns opened fire resulting in the English fighter being riddled with bullets and having to abandon the chase.


Our camp, thereafter, was known to the air force as 'Hair Trigger Valley.'

Displayed "great courage" at Tobruk

By the time Prime Minister John Curtin, despite opposition from his British counterpart Winston Churchill, insisted upon the return of the 6th and 7th Divisions of the 2nd AIF to help defend Australia against the threat of invasion by Japan in early 1942, the men of the 2/9th were seasoned troops.

They had left Australia, according to Jack French's great mate, L.H. "Snow" Conlon, as raw recruits. They had witnessed the "blitz" on London and they had seen action against the Italians and the Germans in North Africa, including the Siege of Tobruk, where they were frequently bombed and strafed. According to "Snow" Conlon, the amiable Jack had "performed with great courage" at Tobruk.

After seven days leave back home in Queensland, however, it was time for the men of the 2/9th to re-train before facing the Japanese Imperial Army in defence of their homeland. Just days before the unit embarked for New Guinea, Jack French could joke about the impending action — but he also felt the need, once again, to reassure his mother and prepare her for the worst.



*If it is action we are heading for, Mum, even
a big chance of no return, I will have no
regrets as I have lived a pretty full life.*

— extract from Jack French's letter to his mother
written a month before he was killed in action.

In a letter dated 5 August 1942, Jack French wrote:

If it is action we are heading for, Mum, with a big chance of no return, I will have no regrets as I have lived a pretty full life. The past two years have been as good as ten so I should be considerably older than my years.

Within a month, Jack's big chance of "no return" would eventuate.

At Milne Bay on 4 September 1942, under constant fire he single-handedly wiped out three Japanese machine gun pits, killing all the enemy gun crews. His platoon found him dead in front of the third gun pit. For his "cool courage and disregard of his own personal safety" he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.



This is "Snow" Conlon's recollection of Jack French's part in that fierce engagement:

In our first battle our Company went into action against the crack Japanese Cherry Blossom Marines, who had ambushed us after our artillery had failed to dislodge them from their position. Despite terrific odds, Jack advanced with a Thompson sub-machine gun and hand grenades. Jack succeeded in blasting a gap through their lines which enabled the rest of the Company to mop up and destroy the enemy."

Jack French was not to know it, but his courage on the battlefield had contributed to the first defeat on land of the Imperial Japanese Army during the war.

Helped break spell of invincibility

Australian army, air force and navy units all fought tenaciously to defend Milne Bay against a powerful Japanese invasion force which included ships, tanks and some of the enemy's best infantry.

The battle, which lasted two weeks, ended on 6 September 1942, two days after Corporal French died.

The significance of their victory was not lost upon Field Marshal William Slim, commanding the British 14th Army in Burma, who cabled his personal congratulations to the Australians. Slim — the first man to rise from private soldier to the rank of Field Marshal — wrote in his book, "Defeat into Victory":

Some of us may forget that of all the Allies it was the Australian soldiers who first broke the spell of the invincibility of the Japanese Army; those of us who were in Burma have cause to remember.

Crow's Nest certainly has cause to remember Corporal John Alexander French VC. His deeds have been commemorated by the local district — and by the wider Queensland community — through the establishment of a Statewide educational scholarship for high school students in 1944 and through the construction of the Corporal John French VC Memorial Library more than 10 years later.

On 18 July 1958, Field Marshal Sir William Slim — now Governor-General of Australia — officially opened the new community library, built through the efforts of the Crow's Nest Sub-branch of the RSL, in honour of “*one of the bravest of all Australian soldiers.*”

Fifteen years later, students at John French's old school, Toowoomba State High School, in association with Crow's Nest State Primary and Secondary School, compiled a history of John French VC and published an illustrated booklet in his memory. The students' research project saw them collect information from former school friends of the VC winner, his family, his comrades in arms and historians.

This was a Man!

In a foreword to the booklet, Colonel (Rtd) Clem Cummings, DSO, OB, ED, who commanded the 2/9th at Milne Bay, said the VC posthumously awarded to Corporal John French recognised his conspicuous leadership and gallantry. Jack French's bravery and sacrifice, Colonel Cummings wrote, had made it possible for not only his Company but also the Battalion to achieve a very successful attack on the Japanese at Milne Bay.

Corporal French had also come to the attention of the CO from the regular reports of company commanders and from the CO's own observations. Had the quiet-spoken former Queensland hairdresser not been killed, said Colonel Cummings, he would have been “promoted... and sent to Officer Training School at first opportunity.”

Many tributes have been paid to John Alexander French, not least by Prime Minister John Curtin in a message to the fallen soldier's parents in 1943, in which he said that all Australians could be proud of Jack's achievement in winning the Victoria Cross “in Australian territory.”

Perhaps the most enduring tribute paid, however, will be the quotation chosen by the students who researched and wrote the commemorative booklet tracing his life from birth through to his death in defence of the country he loved so well. For the students, Shakespeare's words in “*Julius Caesar*” in which Mark Anthony pays tribute to Brutus, summed up their views on John French, who also fought against tyranny.

***His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him that nature might
Stand up and say to all the world,
“This was a Man!”***



Produced by the Defence Housing Authority to mark the official opening of the John French Estate and Memorial Park, Enoggera, Brisbane, on 10 April 2003.