

Captain Clarence Smith Jeffries VC



Clarence Smith Jeffries was born at Wallsend on 26 October 1894 and was the only child of Joshua and Barbara Jeffries. Joshua Jeffries, was the superintendent of the Abermain Collieries.

Clarence was educated at various public schools and later entered the Newcastle Collegiate School, with his education being completed at the Newcastle High School. On leaving school he joined the surveying staff of the Abermain Collieries, and for some years was in charge of the collieries' survey department, at the same time serving an apprenticeship to his father as a mining engineer.

Jeffries' military career commenced when the Compulsory Training Act of the Commonwealth came into force. He enlisted as a Private in the 14th Infantry Regiment under Major Edward Nash, of West Maitland. A few weeks after the declaration of war he was called up for home defence, and later was engaged in instructional work at Newcastle and Liverpool AIF camps, with the rank of Lieutenant.

Clarence received a commission on the formation of the 34th Infantry Battalion at Maitland in February 1916 and sailed from Sydney on 2 May 1916 with the battalion. He entered the trenches at Armentieres with the 34th Battalion in November of the same year.

In the battle of Messines in June 1917, he led a party of fifty volunteers in a reconnaissance of the enemy lines, and shortly after going over the parapet was severely wounded by enemy machine gun fire in the thigh, but carried on, and secured the information required.

Returning to the 34th Infantry Battalion after recovering from his wounds, Jeffries was promoted to the rank of Captain.

The Death of Jeffries

The following extract from C. E. W. Bean's Volume IV of *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914 – 1918* gives a description of the circumstances faced by the 34th Infantry Battalion at Passchendaele which lead to the death of Jeffries.

Second Passchendaele - 12th October 1917

'The machine gun fire at the start came, on the 9th Infantry Brigade's right, from the ruined house near Defy Crossing; on its centre, from Hillside Farm; and, on its left, from Augustus Wood. The pillbox opposite the centre was supported from the rear by a trench in which were Germans with machineguns, and here occurred a delay, which threatened to wreck the whole attack.

It was not until an hour later after programme time that these places were rushed by the neighbouring portion of the 35th Infantry Battalion. The trench contained thirty five Germans and four machineguns.

Part of the line was also held up by a pillbox close to the Passchendaele road near the highest point of the ridge. Here there was practically no shelter for the attack but Captain Jeffries of the 34th Battalion managed to organise a party, with Sergeant James Bruce and another N.C.O. and a dozen men, and, outflanking it, charged the place from the rear, capturing twenty five Germans and two machine guns.

These actions set free the advance. The pillbox captured by Jeffries being not far short of the first objective, the 34th Infantry Battalion dug in there. Great loss had been incurred. The 34th Infantry Battalion had only three officers then left, and there were wide gaps in the line.

The hour was probably a little before that for the second advance. A German machine gun in the gap between the 9th Infantry Brigade's right and the railway immediately opened with deadly effect. Major Buchanan of the 36th Infantry Battalion, the senior forward officer of the brigade, was killed.

At this critical juncture Captain Jeffries (34th Infantry Battalion), again accompanied by Sergeant James Bruce, led out a few men from the first objective and made for the gun.

It was shooting in short bursts, and he was able to work up fairly close. Seizing a moment when it was firing to the north, he and his men rushed at it from the west. It was switched around, killing him, and sending his men to ground. But when its fire eased they worked around it, rushed the position, and seized twenty five Germans and two machine guns.

This gallant and effective action removed the chief danger to the advance along the crest, but as soon as the 35th Infantry Battalion crossed to the eastern side of the hill it became the target of a number of field and heavy guns which, from hedges and other cover in various parts of the landscape, fired over open sights.'



The headstone on the right marks the grave of Captain Clarence Jeffries VC. The remnants of one of the concrete pillboxes believed to have been captured by Jeffries can be seen behind to the right.

The final objective of the 34th Infantry Battalion was captured by Sergeant James Bruce, a 39 year old married coal miner, from Pelaw Main. Sergeant James Bruce was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions at Passchendaele and later promoted to the rank of Lieutenant.

Colonel Martin of the 34th Infantry Battalion, in a letter to Mr. Joshua Jeffries described how his son, Captain Clarence Jeffries, met his death on 12 October, 1917.

"This was the day of the attack in the fifth phase of the Ypres battle. The objectives given us on that day were on a fairly wide front, and to a depth of some 2500 yards, with the village of Passchendaele and the neighbouring heights as the dominating features.

The task was a difficult one, and was made doubly so by the heavy rain which fell on the preceding night, making the approach march for the attack and the getting forward of field guns and ammunition almost super-human.

At 5.25 am on October 12 the attack was launched. Our artillery barrage was thin owing to the soft nature of the ground and the gun trails sinking, consequently many enemy strong points were left entirely for the infantry to deal with.

The behaviour of your son was gallant in the extreme; from strong point to strong point he led his men, and was successful in putting several enemy machine guns out of action and capturing many prisoners.

It was while leading a party against one of these machine gun emplacements that he was killed at about 7.00 am."



The headstone of Captain Clarence Jeffries VC, in Tyne Cot British Cemetery, Belgium. The epitaph reads: 'On fame's eternal camping ground, their silent tents are spread'.

The 34th Infantry Battalion's war diary entry of Captain Jeffries' death is contained in a document headed:

Copy of 'D'.16

**Captain C. S. Jeffries, (VC). 34th Infantry Battalion, AIF
Killed in Action, 12-10-17.**

The above named Officer was Officer Commanding B Company, in PASSCHENDAELE Offensive on 12-10-17. During the attack he was held up by the enemy machine gun post against which he led a party of 2 N.C.O's and 12 men capturing it and taking 4 machine guns and 35 men. Was later subjected to heavy machine gun fire from another enemy strong point. He led another party against this post, which resulted in capture of more machine guns and thirty prisoners, but was himself mortally wounded by machine gun bullet in the stomach. For this bravery he was awarded the Victoria Cross. The battalion afterwards consolidated in rear of this spot and no burial took place.

A. Gibson Farley Lieutenant & Adjutant for Commanding Officer

The citation for Captain Clarence Smith Jeffries' Victoria Cross reads:

JEFFRIES, Captain Clarence Smith
34th Australian Infantry Battalion, AIF
12th October 1917, at Passchendaele, Belgium
(Posthumous Award)

CITATION: *For most conspicuous bravery in attack, when his company was held up by enemy machine gun fire from concrete emplacements. Organising a party, he rushed one emplacement, capturing four machine guns and thirty five prisoners. He then led his company forward under extremely heavy enemy artillery barrage and enfilade machine gun fire to the objective. Later, he again organised a successful attack on a machine gun emplacement, capturing two machine guns*

and thirty more prisoners. This gallant officer was killed during the attack, but it was entirely due to his bravery and initiative that the centre of the attack was not held up for a lengthy period. His example had a most inspiring influence.

(London Gazette: 18th December 1917.)



The late Dr John Laffin reads the commemorative plaque at Abermain's Jeffries Park on 12 October 1997, the occasion being the eightieth anniversary of Jeffries' death.

Jeffries Memorials

Every town wanted a Victoria Cross 'winner's' name on their First World War memorial, and Jeffries' name appears on at least two, these being at Wallsend where he was born in 1894 and at Abermain where he lived, worked and enlisted from early in 1916.

The Wallsend First World War memorial in Wallsend Park has the name of the Hunter Valley's first Victoria Cross recipient (in lieu of 'winner') incorrectly spelt with Jeffries' name appearing as 'Jeffreys'.

The Abermain First War Memorial is situated within Jeffries Park and a cast bronze plaque commemorating Jeffries as well as a transcription of his Victoria Cross citation is nearby in a small grove of native trees.

Another memorial to Jeffries was dedicated on Saturday 24 June, 1919 in the survey room of the superintendent's offices at Abermain Collieries when Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Nash unveiled a full size portrait of the late Captain Clarence S. Jeffries, who at time of enlistment was in charge of the survey department at the colliery.

Those in attendance included the parents of the deceased soldier, the officials of No.1 Abermain Colliery and their wives, and the following gentlemen, well known in the mining world, who were the guests of the committee: Mr. A. E. Sellers, superintendent Bellambi Collieries; Mr. C. Jones, superintendent Neath Collieries; Mr. J. G. Hutton, Inspector of Collieries; Mr. J. Fallins, manager Abermain No. 2 Colliery and Mr. William McDonald, late under-manager Abermain No. 1 Colliery.

Mr. John Jeffries, colliery manager, occupied the chair, and after the singing of the National Anthem, apologised for the unavoidable absence, owing to the influenza epidemic, of the directors and the general manager of the Abermain Company, and in calling upon Lieutenant-Colonel Nash to officiate, explained the object of the gathering, and took the opportunity of paying his personal tribute to the fallen hero, who was his nephew.

"The late Captain Jeffries, VC, was the only son of Mr. Joshua Jeffries, superintendent of the Abermain Collieries, and in civil life occupied the position of chief surveyor at the Abermain Collieries, a post he had held successfully for several years up to the time of enlistment for active service abroad.

His promotion on the field was rapid, and he took an active part in several of the big battles on the Western front in which the Australians were conspicuous, particularly the battle of Messines, in which he was severely wounded, and for his services in that battle he was promoted to the rank of captain.

He was eventually killed in action at Passchendaele on the 12 October, 1917 and for his service on that occasion was awarded the Victoria Cross. Captain Jeffries belonged to the 34th Battalion of the Australian Imperial Forces.”



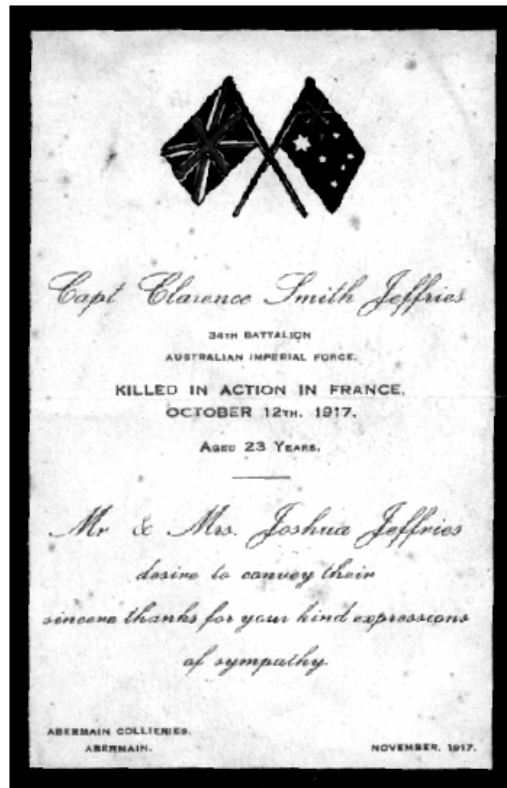
The Jeffries commemorative plaque at Abermain's Jeffries Park. Jeffries was the chief surveyor and in charge of the Abermain Collieries survey department up to the time of his enlistment in the AIF.

The chairman added that the officials, amongst whom the late captain was an honoured comrade, had decided, as the inscription indicated, to pay a tribute to his memory by having his picture permanently erected in his old office, and he had very much pleasure, though his feelings were very mingled, of calling upon Lieutenant-Colonel Nash to unveil the memorial.

In unveiling the memorial, Lieutenant-Colonel Nash said: *"I am deeply grateful for the honour of unveiling this memorial in memory of my late comrade, Captain Jeffries, VC, who at duty's call left home with its comforts and the fondest of parents, to go forth and assist in fighting the good fight for our liberties and freedom in defence of King and Empire. The late Captain C. S. Jeffries, VC, gallantly carried out the various duties entrusted to him, and the performance of them was such that he was awarded the Victoria Cross which speaks for itself. With all reverence and solemnity, I now unveil this picture to his everlasting memory. As I have said, he was awarded the VC, which is the highest and most coveted distinction awarded on the battlefield. It is an emblem of bravery, heroism, and good deed done, and is only awarded for noble and meritorious work. It was with extreme sorrow, that I first learnt of our brave comrade's end. I was not surprised later on hearing that he had won the VC.*

Anyone knowing him as I did would expect him to gain some such distinction. Straight, upright, and manly, he stood from boyhood to manhood. In short, he possessed all the fine qualities that go to make a man and a gentleman. Kind, courteous, and considerate for others, yet with all punctual and diligent in the performance of all duties entrusted to him. I knew him, and can therefore speak thus of him. A better or more promising officer I did not know. He was highly respected by those serving under him and by his superiors. One can well imagine Captain Jeffries, on finding the enemy in a position doing considerable damage to his comrades, calling for volunteers to follow him, and with his small band going forward and destroying that stronghold, unfortunately sacrificing his own life in doing so to save his comrades. Actions such as this won the war, and helped in no small way to build up that fearless determination 'to do or die' always so prominent in the traditions of the Australian Army and so characteristic of the Australian soldier when he gets his back to the wall. I feel sure that I echo the feelings of all present when I say that we regret the necessity for this meeting, and the loss to every one of his comrades, and particularly to his parents, who have our sympathy.

They, however, are proud of their son's record, and what more noble is there for man to do than to give up his life for others. To fight with face to the enemy, and die on the battlefield is a death to be admired."



One of the many 'thank you' cards Joshua and Barbara Jeffries sent to the people who offered condolences after the death of their son. The card incorrectly states France as the place of Jeffries' death.

These remarks were supported by Messrs. A. E. Sellers, C. Jones, J. G. Hutton, J. Fallins, W. McDonald, A. Sanlavlille colliery engineer of No.1 Abermain Colliery, J. Moncrieff colliery under-manager, W. Hawthorne colliery electrician, J. Tucker on behalf of the deputies and W. J. Cogley clerk-in-charge, each of whom eulogised the many sterling qualities possessed by the late Captain Jeffries.

- Abermain Bowling Club have two framed portraits of Jeffries, one of which is the portrait mentioned previously which was in the Abermain Collieries survey office until its closure.
- Dudley Public School have perpetuated the name of their former one time pupil by naming the school's library the Jeffries-Currey Library. It also has Jeffries' death plaque, memorial scroll, and wrist watch on display.

The Jeffries Victoria Cross

Captain Jeffries' Victoria Cross and citation was presented to Mr. Joshua Jeffries at Admiralty House, Sydney on 4 April 1918, the same day that the 34th Infantry Battalion and the 9th Infantry Brigade were fighting it out with the Hun at the first battle of Villers-Bretonneux, the battle described as '*the battle that saved Amiens.*'

Today Captain Clarence Jeffries' Victoria Cross is housed in Newcastle's Christ Church Cathedral after being bequeathed to the Cathedral in Mrs. Barbara Jeffries' Last Will and Testament dated 3 October, 1950. In part, Mrs. Jeffries stated in her will: "*...I bequeath to the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church Cathedral Newcastle, New South Wales the Victoria Cross posthumously awarded by His Majesty King George the Fifth to my son Captain Clarence Jeffries VC who was Killed in Action in the Battle of Passchendaele 1917 the said Victoria Cross to be deposited and kept in the Depository in the Warrior's Chapel of the said cathedral. I bequeath the sum of two hundred pounds to St Luke's Church of England Wallsend to be expended in the erection of a Memorial in the said Church to the deceased Servicemen of that District and I declare that the receipt of the Priest-in-Charge for the time being of the said Church shall be a sufficient receipt and discharge to my Trustees for payment of the said legacy.*"

The original ribbon, which had faded with age, has been replaced after there had apparently been numerous complaints made about the 'shabby' state of the medal. "I wanted to make sure it was in pristine condition, to restore its lost lustre," the Dean of Newcastle was quoted to have said in a Newcastle Herald newspaper report on the replacing of the original medal ribbon.



St. Luke's Church of England erected a magnificent lead glass window on the eastern end of the church with the two hundred pounds (four hundred dollars) bequeathed by Mrs. Jeffries and it is still there today. The whereabouts of Jeffries' Victory Medal and Service Medal remain unknown.

Joshua Jeffries' Pilgrimage to the Western Front

Mr. Joshua Jeffries journeyed to the battlefields in and around Passchendaele in July 1920 in an endeavour to locate the grave of his son who had been killed three years before. This pilgrimage proved to be unsuccessful.

Finally, in December 1920 and through continued determination to find his son's final resting place, Joshua Jeffries wrote to the Australian Graves Services attached to Australia House in London requesting their assistance.

The following letter from the Australian Graves Service was sent to the Officer in charge of Australian Base Records, Department of Defence, Melbourne, being dated on receipt 16 March 1921:

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

COMMONWEALTH OFFICES,

Any further communication should

be addressed to

OFFICER IN CHARGE,

AUSTRALIAN GRAVES SERVICES,

And the following No. quoted:

A.G.S. 44/M/26

AUSTRALIA HOUSE,

STRAND,

LONDON, W.C.2

29th January, 1921.

Officer i/c Base Records,
Department of Defence,
Melbourne.

Captain C.S. JEFFRIES, VC
34th Battalion, AIF
Killed in action 12.10.17

A communication has been received from J. Jeffries, Esq., Superintendent, Abermain Collieries, Abermain, New South Wales, the father of the above mentioned deceased officer enquiring as to the original place of burial of his son and also as to the means used in identifying Captain Jeffries remains.

A reply has been sent to Mr. Jeffries stating that his son's body was exhumed on 14.9.20 from map location Sheet 28.D.11.c.5.5. about 750 yards North West of point where the Ypres-Roulers Railway crosses the Zonnebeke-Passchendaele road; the remains are now interred in Tyne Cot British Cemetery. Mr. Jeffries was further informed that a set of Captain's stars, "AUSTRALIA" numerals and initials "C.S.J." pencilled on the ground sheet in which the remains were wrapped constituted the means by which the identification was arrived at. The fact that no other Australian Captain who bore the initials "C.S.J." was killed in the neighbourhood of Passchendaele further supports the conclusion that the remains were those of Captain Jeffries, VC

Mr. Jeffries has been placed in possession of this information as he spent much time and trouble last July in endeavouring to locate the remains of his son at Passchendaele and as a special case the details mentioned above have been given to him. Ordinarily it is not the practice of this department to supply such information to next of kin.

**Major
C.O. Australian Graves Services**

Further correspondence by Joshua Jeffries to the Department of Defence Base Depot and Records in Melbourne resulted in the following communique dated 31/1/24 being sent to Australia House, London:

**Pilgrimage to grave of the late Capt. C. S. Jeffries, VC, 34/Bn.
DESPATCH**

Secretary,

Referred. May consideration be given please to writer's application for letters of introduction to facilitate his traversing the battlefields in France and Belgium.

Mr. Jeffries previously visited the Passchendaele theatre in July 1920 in an endeavour to locate the grave of his son – this prior to the report of burial in the Tyne Cot British Cemetery – and it is evidently his intention on this occasion to embrace as wide an area as possible.

It is understood Major Allan is still an inspector of the Imperial War Graves Commission at Poperinghe. His whereabouts however, could readily be ascertained on enquiry at the office of the Area Superintendent.

Formal acknowledgement has been made to Mr. Jeffries.

**Captain
Officer i/c Base Records**

31/1/24

Joshua Jeffries retired from his position as the Superintendent of Abermain Collieries on 31 January 1924 and later, accompanied by his wife, Barbara, visited most of the leading coal mining countries in Europe. While in Belgium and France they toured the old battlefields and were finally, after many years, able to visit their son's final resting place at Tyne Cot Cemetery, Passchendaele.

*Author's Note: In time for ANZAC Day 2000 the Sandgate Cemetery Trust, near Newcastle, erected a memorial wall bearing the names of ex-service personnel buried in the cemetery as well as those killed overseas whose names are recorded on family headstones. The wall was named the 'Currey-Jeffries VC Memorial Wall' in memory of the *'two local'* First World War winners of the Victoria Cross, Private William Matthew Currey and Captain Clarence Smith Jeffries who were both born at Wallsend and attended Dudley Public School. Where as Jeffries became a mine surveyor at the Abermain Collieries and remained in the Hunter, Currey left at a very early age to live in Leichardt, Sydney from where he enlisted in the AIF on 9/10/16.

No mention was made of the other *'local'* Victoria Cross winner, Lieutenant Joseph Maxwell VC, MC and Bar, DCM in the naming of the wall. Joseph Maxwell was a 19 year old apprentice boilermaker at the J. and A. Brown Hexham workshops and residing at 5 Nicholson Street, West Maitland when he enlisted on 6/2/15 and afterwards seeing action on the Gallipoli Peninsula as well as in France and Belgium.

Extract from *'Coal Miner Diggers - Hunter Valley Coal Miners at The Great War'* by David H Dial OAM.
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