

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Lieutenant Colonel William Thornton WATSON, DSO, MC and Bar, DCM

(1887-1961)

Watson was a representative ruby union player and salesman and when WWI was declared he enlisted in the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force on 8 August 1914 and took part in operations in New Britain and New Ireland. Discharged in January 1915, he enlisted in the AIF on 19 March and, as a gunner, was posted as a reinforcement for 1st Divisional Artillery. He embarked from Sydney on 26 June, landed at Gallipoli on 14 August and two days later joined the 1st Field Artillery Brigade (FAB).

After service on Gallipoli and in Egypt, in March 1916, he proceeded with his unit to France where his temporary promotion to sergeant was confirmed on 22 April. During operations on the Somme from 26 October 1916 to 15 January 1917 Watson showed 'conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty' by going to the aid of wounded men under heavy fire. He was awarded the DCM and sent to England for officer training. Commissioned on 7 September, he joined 2nd FAB that month and was wounded in action in Belgium on 17 November.

Promoted lieutenant on 7 December, he returned to duty in April 1918 and was at Foucaucourt on 27 August, acting as forward observation officer with the infantry. When the advance was impeded by enemy machine-gun fire, Watson worked his way forward and directed three batteries barraging the German machine-gun posts. For his conduct he was awarded the Military Cross. At Nauroy on the night of 2-3 October Watson's battery was bombarded with gas shells; although gassed himself, he stayed with the unit and attempted to save the life of a wounded officer. His 'energy and devotion to duty' won him a Bar to his MC.

After the war he worked in New Guinea and moved to the US after marrying an American. At the outbreak of WWII Watson returned to Australia and won fame commanding the Papuan Infantry Battalion in the withdrawal along the Kokoda track and during the subsequent advance.

After the war Watson returned to the United States and was Australian vice-consul in New York (1945-52). Survived by his wife, daughter and son, he died on 9 September 1961 in the Veterans Administration Hospital, Brooklyn, New York.

Sources: A. J. Sweeting, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, M.U.P., Vol. 12, p.408.

For more information follow this link: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/watson-william-thornton-9007>