

***THE BLACK COCKATOOS***

**By Mark Cornell**

For weeks now, I've had this nervous feeling in my heart. It's coming to the hundredth anniversary of my great Uncle Edward's death at Mont St. Quentin. He died of wounds September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1918. Edward would you recognise me as your younger brother Thomas's grandson? Would you recognise where you grew up in Mount Waverley, back then it was market garden country, now it's all suburbia. Edward your beautiful uniformed portrait dominated your brothers' home and impacted on my childish mind. It's now in my lounge room, we light candles every November 11. My fifteen-year-old son Thomas cried when we visited your grave back in 1914. On your gravestone your family called you, "Our beloved Teddie." I suggested we go to The Shrine 2<sup>nd</sup> September and lay roses for you.

You and a fellow soldier were carrying a wounded officer down the slope of the mountain to the dressing station, when you were hit by a shell. The other two died, the shrapnel ripped through your right thigh and head. You were unconscious when they carried on a stretcher to the dressing station. The wounds were fatal. Your death of a century ago flows across time straight into my heart. You and your mates had been chasing the Germans for over a month, blasting them out of their nests with rifle grenades, trench mortars, tanks and Lewis guns shot from the hip. This battle was like no other of World War 1, German morale had collapsed, due to the Allied embargo, the nation was starving, the soldiers ate saw dust for bread and drank acorns and chicory for coffee. The Australian soldiers came upon an increasing number of boys and old men in the enemy army. They started to surrender in droves, shouting "Merci Kameraden" as they stood up and tossed their weapons down. Then you and your fellow soldiers came upon the impregnable Mont St. Quentin, the last German stronghold of the Somme River. It was called the Gibraltar of the Somme. There was only twelve hundred Australian's left in this section of the front. They looked up to a hill bristling with tunnels and bunkers, the Germans had held it for four years. It was a perfect observation post and a vital strategic stronghold. I've seen it, blue and steep, jutting out of the countryside, it must have been a barstard of a hill to attack. Stood where you once stood.

Yet John Monash was determined to capture it. The Australians crossed the Somme River on the night of 31 August, and attacked Mont St Quentin at 5 am, from the surprise position of northwest. They had to fight uphill across open ground. The Germans were caught completely by surprise, not believing that such a small number of exhausted men would dare attack this stronghold. Monash ordered them to “scream like bushrangers.” Fighting in small groups by 7am, they somehow made it to the top of the hill. You were still alive Edward. Your lungs must have heaved, your mind race. Did you laugh or shed a tear? I wish to God I knew. Is this tightness I have in my chest a bit of what you felt? Maybe I have an idea of your thoughts, your brother Charlie survived the war, he was an angry, brooding man who loved a drink. When his son Teddie, wanted to fight in the Second World War Charlie tried to talk him out of it by describing the horrors he'd seen on the Western Front. It didn't work. Teddie was nineteen, the same age as my boy Thomas. Teddie fought in the Second World War for six years and didn't get a scratch. Although he came home moody like his old man. I've told Tom never to volunteer to fight for a war, and that I'd tie him to his bed if he did.

Five German divisions were shocked and dispersed, many fled. However, they quickly regrouped and launched a counter-attack, and the first day of September saw savage fighting and heavy losses. The Germans retook the mountain. The next day, your last day, Edward, the Australians took it back, much of the fighting was hand-to-hand combat. There were three thousand casualties. British Commander General Lord Rawlinson remarked that this feat by the Australian troops under Monash's command was the greatest of the war. The Germans withdrew eastwards back to their final defence the Hindenburg Line. Teddie. Staggering down the slope into the valley of death. Concentrating on your footsteps, supporting the body of a wounded comrade. Hundreds of yards away a German gun crew strain to load a shell hoping to blast the Australians back to kingdom come. Bullets, shells whistle around you Teddie. One had your name written on it. Did you suffer any pain as the shrapnel ripped through your flesh, or did the shock drag you straight into unconsciousness? Did you hear our voices as we visited you four years ago? Your blood flows through the veins of Tom and I. We have inherited your memory and pass it on to the future...dear Teddie.

We drive into a wall of black clouds. Thankfully the rain holds off as we head to The Shrine. We walk up the stairs. Kimberly shows the plaque devoted to Mont St. Quentin. I pat it, face west to France and say hello to Edward. We walk inside and place red roses on the floor. We've written a card to him to thank him for fighting for us. I'm on the verge of tears. You died exactly one hundred years ago. I asked Tom to wear your gold medal. The medal we believe was on your chest when you died. Kim and I watch footage taken in 1918. There it is, Mont St. Quentin, a huge grey hill littered with bodies, scarred with trenches and barbed wire. There's film of our soldiers lined up celebrating the victory, there's Monash looking a proud as punch. Then it concludes with images of our men burying their dead. Are you there somewhere Edward ? I hope and pray that somehow, we've sent a message to you, to thank you for making the ultimate sacrifice. Tom waits for us outside, anxious, texting his boss for more work. Melbourne broods below a soft September light. Flocks of black cockatoos circle us as we walk back to the car. I've never seen so many in the city before. We smile up at the Spring sky. They sound like trees creaking in the wind. At home Kim lights a candle to you and places another candle and incense in front of photographs of our fathers, Mark and Robert. It's our first Father's Day without you both. We toast our father's and Teddie. I drink and iron. Tom tells me not to dwell too much, something Edward probably might have said all those years ago too. The Indigenous people in this part of the land believe the black cockatoos are the elders, who come back to keep an eye on us all.

### **Bio**

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.