

"I trust that I will not give you children the idea that war was a glorious adventure. It was never that, but was at all times the greatest tragedy of modern civilisation. To every soldier in the trenches the very idea of war was repugnant. Yet, to many an individual soldier war was the melting pot from which came refined gold."

Captain Oliver Holmes Woodward, in a letter to his children that forms the preface to his memoirs.

A miner's recollections of war

Oliver Woodward's story is one of courage and perseverance, on a journey that took him from Charters Towers in North Queensland to the infamous blast beneath Hill 60 in Belgium on June 17, 1917, that shook the German army to its core.

Captain Woodward, commanding officer of the First Australian Tunnelling Company, provided a vivid description of World War I miners in his memoirs, written after the conflict.

The Mining Advocate was given access to these writings by historian Ross Thomas and, in the lead-up to Remembrance Day on November 11, we use them to pay tribute to the little-known contribution of the mining industry to Australia's war effort.

Before Hill 60

Educated at the Charters Towers School of Mines, Captain Woodward was working at the Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company at its Laloki Mine in Papua at the outbreak of the war.

Because the mine produced copper - necessary in the manufacture of munitions - the staff were largely exempt from enlistment. However, Capt Woodward felt uneasy about not being on the frontlines and anguished by the actions of correspondents to the company.

"While there may have been a measure of fairness in these arguments (for exemption) they were never really comforting and when, in addition, practically each mail brought a white feather, symbolic of cowardice, I began to lose my self-respect," he wrote.

Capt Woodward enlisted for active service in September 1915 and was drafted into the fledgling Australian Mining Battalion because of his engineering experience.

He served in the Armentieres sector in France and the Ploegsteert sector in Belgium, and in July 1916 became the first tunnellers officer to receive the Military Cross, awarded for his actions in blasting a sniper post.

He was later awarded two bars for further brave actions.

Preparing for the blast

On October 16, 1916, Capt Woodward's First Australian Tunnelling Company relieved Canadian miners engaged in the work of tunnelling under the much-feared Hill 60, part of the Ypres Salient in Belgium.

The Australians found that additional mining and charging was needed in some areas. They also drove long tunnels into Hill 60 to intercept workings dug by the Germans, to keep them from discovering important galleries packed with explosive charges for the impending Hill 60 blast.

Capt Woodward wrote in his memoirs about one occasion when the Germans were discovered tunnelling too close for comfort to the Allies' Hill 60 system.

The Australian miners tunnelled beneath the enemy's position and placed explosives, but were concerned that explosion would set off the main Hill 60 explosives and so detonation was delayed until the situation became critical.

"Down went the handle of the exploder there was a dull boom a mild shock of an earthquake and to our joy the Hill 60 mine withstood the shock," wrote Capt Woodward.

"Observers of the surface reported that a huge tongue of flame leapt skyward from the enemy's line, and then all was deadly quiet. While at the time we did not know this was the position, we were certain that we had struck at a vital point as for almost three months no sound of enemy activity could be heard at depth."

"Zero day": June 1917

Capt Woodward was detailed to take control of the firing of the mines for the Hill 60 blast - a responsibility that lay heavily upon him.

"Even in civil life one would approach the task of firing such a large quantity of high explosive with a feeling of responsibility; and yet a failure could, in such a case, be assessed in terms of £. s. d (pounds, shillings and pence)," he wrote.

"On this occasion any slip on my part would endanger the success of the attack, and



Captain Oliver Holmes Woodward

increase the loss of human lives."

Despite his fears, the detonation was successful and its effects overwhelming: 45,700 pounds of ammonal explosive and 7800 pounds of gun cotton explosive under Hill 60 blew a crater 198 feet (about 60m) in diameter and 33 feet (about 10m) deep, and 70,000 pounds of ammonal explosive underneath the associated "Caterpillar" dump blew a crater 273 feet (about 82m) in diameter and 51 feet (about 15m) deep.

Capt Woodward was in a dugout when the mines exploded, but described what he saw during an inspection shortly after.

"Trenches were squeezed together so quickly and thoroughly that enemy dead were seen in a standing position," he wrote.

"Relatively few prisoners were captured from Hill 60 proper, and those of the enemy who were alive were nervous wrecks, a great number of them actually crying with fear.

"One can readily excuse the enemy breaking down under the strain of this hell on earth, as even to our own men, who anticipated the explosions, the sight was absolutely awe inspiring."

Armistice Day

Hill 60 was the last major tunnelling operation in World War I and with the task complete most Australian tunnellers served as infantry until the end of the war.

In his memoirs, Capt Woodward describes the mixed

emotions he felt after the armistice was announced to his company on parade.

"One would have expected that at this stage the field would have been filled with men carried away in a paroxysm of joy but it was not so," he wrote.

"Instead officers and men moved quietly about from one group to another giving and receiving a handshake among comrades. It was an occasion too great for words.

"In our mind we called to memory those of our comrades who had made the supreme sacrifice and we were forced to offer a prayer of thanksgiving that we had been spared to witness the close of the Great War of 1914-1918.

"Our individual reaction seemed to surprise us and we somehow felt disappointed that we had received this wonderful news in such a calm spirit. Yet it seemed that unconsciously

we had acted in the spirit of the occasion and personally I am glad that I have no story to tell of wild and uncontrolled exuberance."

Capt Woodward's return home was delayed when he was attached to a corps responsible for removing delayed action mines on ground handed over by the Germans.

He eventually arrived back in Sydney on May 17, 1919.

Capt Woodward returned to the Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company and later joined the Broken Hill Associate Smelters at Port Pirie in South Australia. From 1926 to 1947 he was general manager of North Broken Hill. In 1940 he was president of the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, and from 1951 to 1954 president of the Australian Mines and Metals Association.

Capt Woodward died in Hobart on August 24, 1966.



Beneath Hill 60 producer Bill Leimbach, executive producer Ross Thomas and writer David Roach display a poster for the movie. Photo: Stewart McLean

Silver screen tribute

Oliver Woodward's story is being turned into a film which will be shot entirely in Townsville.

Producer Bill Leimbach said he would like the movie to be financed in the same locality as well and he is calling for investors.

"We have divided the film into 20 equal units of \$275,000 each, making the total budget at \$5.5 million," he said.

"The units are available to sophisticated and professional investors from all over Australia but we want to try to finance it entirely from North Queensland."

Anyone interested in investing or knowing more about the financial package should speak to John Kerrisk at Maclean Partners Chartered Accountants in Townsville on (07) 4729 2222.