

A STORY ABOUT A SWORD

In 2006 the University of New South Wales Regiment introduced a new annual award for the Second Class Staff Cadet who had displayed exemplary conduct and performance of duty. In the form of a sword of honour, the award also commemorates Lieutenant T.N.H. (Noel) Stretch, MC*, the original owner of the sword.

Born in Brighton, Victoria on 23rd December 1893, Noel Stretch was the son of the Rev John Francis Stretch, Anglican Bishop of Newcastle, NSW 1906-1919, and Amelia Margaret Stretch.

Educated at Geelong Grammar School in Victoria and at "TAS" (The Armidale School) in Armidale, New South Wales, Noel Stretch enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force on 17th August 1914 and embarked for overseas war service on 21st October 1914 as a Sergeant in the 5th Infantry Battalion, Australian Imperial Force.

He was discharged from the AIF on 5th April 1915 upon being commissioned as a Temporary Second Lieutenant in the British Army Service Corps, on 7th April 1915. The same year he purchased a Service Corps officer's sword from the Wilkinson Sword Company.

On 25th October 1916 Lieutenant Stretch was attached to the Regular Forces Machine Gun Corps (Infantry) and on 1st November 1916 was promoted to Temporary Lieutenant.



LT STRETCH – 1917

Lt T.N.H. Stretch (with officer's walking stick - 6th from the left in the front row) with his section of the 165th Company, Machine Gun Corps just prior to the Third Battle of Ypres, Flanders which commenced on 31st July 1917.¹ (Photo by courtesy J. Stretch).

¹ Formed on the 26th February 1916 the 165th Machine Gun Company was in the Order of Battle of the 165th (Liverpool) Brigade and was known as the 165th Brigade Machine Gun Company. The brigade was part of the 55th (West Lancashire) Division.

Lieutenant Stretch was twice awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty.

The citations prepared by the British War Office read:

Awarded the Military Cross

*Lieutenant Thomas Noel Heath Stretch,
165th Company, Machine Gun Corps.*

For conspicuously gallant leadership and skilful handling of his section of machine guns in the operations in the Ypres salient on the 31st July, 1917.

He successfully brought his four guns with the assaulting infantry up to the second objective and when there found that the right flank of the Brigade was exposed to attack from a party of the enemy still in the Pommern Redoubt.² He pushed two of his guns well forward on the flanks of the Brigade and was thereby enabled to bring covering machine gun fire to bear while the rest of the Brigade was advancing to take the final objective. He took two prisoners with the assistance of one of his gun teams, and then obtained an infantry bombing party to clear the trench of the remainder of the enemy.

Awarded a Bar to the Military Cross

*T/2nd. Lieut. (T/Lieut.)
Thomas Noel Heath Stretch, MC,
A.S.C., attd. M.G. Corps.*

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty from 20 to 22nd September, 1917, East of Ypres. He advanced with three machine guns to the first objective and got them into position. He then returned to the advanced company headquarters, and, despite heavy shelling, did splendid work in keeping up communication. On hearing that the officers of the forward sections had become casualties he supervised the working of those sections in addition to his own. His cheerful and courageous example greatly inspired his men.

Lieutenant Stretch was killed in action on 25th March 1918 during the Western Front German offensive of that year. He was a tall man and is believed to have been hit by a rifle bullet when momentarily exposed at a low point in a trench system that his section was occupying at the time. Lieutenant Stretch was aged 24 when he died and is buried at the Péronne Road War Cemetery, Maricourt which is located in the Somme department of the Picardy region, northern France.³

Related to the Stretch family, J.M.E. Highfield became the owner of the sword, probably in the early 1940s. Being aware of its significance he, as Major J.M.E. Highfield, MC, Royal Regiment of Artillery (Retd), donated it in 2002 to the Australian Army.⁴ This was arranged by Major Highfield in 2002 through the Australian High Commission in London which sent the sword to Canberra for use as seen fit by the Royal Military College of Australia.

As Lieutenant Stretch was a son of the Anglican Bishop of Newcastle and as UNSWR was associated with the City of Newcastle through its University of Newcastle Company, the College entrusted the sword to the Regiment for use as an annual award for a Staff Cadet who excels in training to become a commissioned officer.

2 The Pommern Redoubt was a German Army strong point near St Juliann (St Julien) approx 6 km north-east of Ieper (Ypres) in Belgium.

3 Stretch family private papers and discussions between Messrs J. Stretch and R. Stretch (nephews of the late T.N.H. Stretch) and the writer, 2006.

4 As a temporary Captain, James Martyn Eden Highfield was awarded the Military Cross during the Second World War (Supplement to the London Gazette, 24th January 1946, page 637). He passed away on 11th August 2006 in the United Kingdom. (Email Mr R. Stretch to the writer, 26th September 2006).

The sword was first awarded during a parade at Kensington Depot on 5th March 2006 as the Regiment's highest for the Second Class Staff Cadet who had displayed exemplary conduct and performance of duty. Engraved *T.N.H. Stretch - Machine Gun Corps*, the sword has been placed on permanent display in the Buckley, VC Club at the Regiment's Kensington Depot.



SWORD OF HONOUR FIRST PRESENTED – 2006

2Lt (formerly UO) K.J. Andrews (right) receiving the Lt T.N.H. Stretch, MC and Bar Sword of Honour from the Mayor of the City of Randwick, Cr T. Seng together with an accompanying book prize from the UNSWR Commanding Officer, Lt Col M.J. Abrahams, UNSWR Depot, Kensington, 5th March 2006. (Randwick City Council)



SWORD OF HONOUR – 2006

The T.N.H. Stretch MC and Bar Sword of Honour donated to the Australian Army by Major J.M.E. Highfield, MC (Retd) in 2002. The display case was donated to the Regiment by the UNSWR Association in 2006. (Regt Archives)

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