

John Cecil ('Cec') O'Toole

John Cecil O'Toole was born in Bundure, Jerilderie NSW in 1890, the fifth child of James and Jane O'Toole. He joined the army in Sydney on 14 September 1915 and after basic training was given leave to say goodbye to family and friends before sailing to join the war overseas. Cec returned to Greghamstown near Blayney where a dance was organised to bid him farewell. The press clipping below records that he was presented with a periscope, wrist watch and fountain pen as a mark of esteem from the people of Greghamstown.

GREGHAMSTOWN SOLDIERS.
On Wednesday night, at the residence of Mr. L. J. Stonestreet, a farewell was given to Gunner J. C. O'Toole in the shape of a dance and presentation. The chair was taken by Mr. Hancock, who spoke in high terms of their guest.
Cr. Kelly said they had gathered together to bid farewell to their esteemed friend. The dark clouds are now over us, and he has realised his duty, which was probably more than we could say ourselves. Two of his brothers were already serving their country. One was wounded in that remarkable charge of the gallant Australians at Gallipoli on April 25. Gunner O'Toole is on the eve of his departure for the front, and we are confident he will prove everything he should be, and help to bring about peace and victory—peace brought about by fair terms; and I hope it will not be far distant when we shall welcome our guest back. Cr. Kelly then made the presentation, which consisted of a periscope, safety razor, wristlet watch and a fountain pen, being a mark of esteem from the people at Greghamstown.
In response Gunner O'Toole said he had never anticipated anything like what he had received. He hoped to see them all again when he returned. He thanked Mr. and Mrs. Stonestreet for their kindness and also all his other friends. If such a farewell was always given he would go to the war every night.

The *Leader* 31 December 1915 page 2.

Cec served his time in artillery. He was posted to the 14th reinforcements of the 3rd Brigade Field Artillery before leaving Australia for Egypt in mid January 1916. In Cairo on 13 February 1916 he was transferred to the 1st Divisional Ammunition Column (1st DAC). In early March he spent six days in a Cairo hospital with influenza before rejoining his unit.¹

On 26 March 1916 with his unit Cec joined the British Expeditionary Force in Alexandria and sailed for France, disembarking at Marseilles on 3 April 1916. Cec's

unit travelled by train to the north of France and then back south to the Somme Valley.ⁱⁱ

Cec served in the 1st Divisional Ammunition Column on the western front throughout the Somme offensive of 1916, marching from town to town receiving deliveries of shells and bullets and transporting them to artillery batteries and the infantry. At times these duties took him onto the frontline at the Somme and at other times he worked behind the lines. In September 1916 Cec's exposure to the frontline increased dramatically.

On 8 September 1916 Cec was transferred to the 1st Division Artillery, Trench Mortar Brigade (TMB). He was immediately sent north to the frontline at Ypres in Belgium where he spent the rest of September and all of October in the trenches, firing mortar shells at the Germans.



John Cecil O'Toole in uniform.

The major British offensive of 1916 finished in November and on the first day of that month Cec and his Trench Mortar Battery were withdrawn 100km south of Ypres to Meaulte in France for rest, training and maintenance of guns. The men were billeted in Meaulte and spent time building huts as well. The winter of December 1916 was one of the harshest on record. Extreme cold, constant rain, sleet and snow turned the

ground into a quagmire of sticky mud. 65,000 sheepskin jackets were imported from Australia to combat the cold, and duckboards were used to allow troops to walk along the trenches without sinking in the mud.

In late February 1917 the Germans withdrew to the Hindenburg line and in March Australian forces began their advance to that line, leaving the trenches for warfare in more open country. On 28 March 1917 Cec O'Toole was promoted in the field to acting Bombardier. This is a non-commissioned officer rank that is the artillery equivalent of Corporal in the infantry. On 7 July 1917 Cec and his Trench Mortar Battery returned to the front line in Belgium where they operated in the vicinity of Ypres at locations including Poperinge, Ouderdom and Zillebeke.



An Australian trench mortar battery preparing to fire a heavy trench mortar, August 1916 in France.

On 5 November 1917 the head quarters of the 1st Divisional Australian Artillery called for 28 volunteers from its Trench Mortar Batteries '*to assist the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade on guns in forward positions owing to severe depletion in personnel. The required number promptly came forward and were despatched immediately.*'ⁱⁱⁱ One of the 28 volunteers to man the guns in forward positions was Cecil O'Toole.

The following day, 6 November 1917, he was officially transferred to the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade in Belgium and his rank reverted to Gunner. Not only had he volunteered to serve on the extreme frontline, he had also forfeited his NCO rank in the process.

5 0645 from 2/1A to 2/1A 134.
 1st Aus Divl Arty H.Q. called for 28 volunteers from T.M. Bks to assist 2nd F.A. Bn guns in forward positions owing to severe depletion in personnel. The required numbers promptly came forward and were despatched immediately. The Batteries contributing were V.I.A. 16 BR, Y.I.A. 7 OR & Z.I.A. 5 OR. X.I.A. were away on duty at Inferno Camp and the whole Brigade were willing to assist if called upon. Lt Johnson returned to billets after detaching 29 remounts with his party of 6 OR from T.M. Bks + 35 OR from 13th ALH.

The war diary of the 1st Australian Divisional Trench Mortar Batteries for 5 November 1917. It records that 28 volunteers were needed to transfer to the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade. Cecil O'Toole was one of the 28.

Cec O'Toole was wounded in action in Belgium on 16 November 1917 when he was shot in the chest. The bullet entered under his right arm, penetrated his lung and lodged near his heart. He had no recollection of being shot – the first thing he remembered was waking up on a stretcher.

Based on the unit diary Cec was somewhere between Ypres and Passendale at the time. On the day he was wounded, enemy artillery activity was above normal and several small Australian ammunition dumps exploded as a result of incoming shells. A transcript of the 2nd F.A. Brigade diary from 15 to 17 November 1917 is provided below. It sheds a little light on where Cec was and what was happening when he was wounded:

15/11/17 Harassing fire carried out in accordance 0038 [order number]. Heavy bombardment of Divn on our left. During day **Broodseinde Ridge** and back areas heavily shelled [by the Germans]. Batteries in J3c having particularly bad time - casualties to personnel and guns. Balloons were observed to be up on one front. Divisional barrage in accordance 0039 - object to thoroughly scorch area lying between *** and *** barrage line.

16/11/17 Harassing fire carried out 0040. Barrage in accordance 0041 carried out. **Enemy artillery activity above normal**. Visibility bad. Aerial activity NIL observed, several small dumps ammun exploded in J3c.

17/11/17 Harassing fire carried out 0042. Enemy activity above normal. **Broodseinde Ridge, Anzac Ridge, Zonnebeke** all heavily shelled during the day [by the Germans]. Aerial activity below normal.

Diaries and Intelligence
in F. S. Regs., Part II.
respectively. Title pages
uscript.

WAR DIARY
or
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY.

(Erase heading not required.)

Summary of Events and Information

Extracts from 2nd I.A.B 213.

Officers.	Ranks.	Local Horses	Mules
20	647	667	610
38			

Taken on Strength.
Lieut P de Leprovanche, from Hosp.
18 OR Ranks.

Struck off Strength.
Lieut H. C. Keene, KIA 16.11.17.
" P de Leprovanche transf'd.
Lieut Watson to Hosp Hd.
37 OR (4 K.I.A. - 29 Wd. - 3 Sick - 1 Transf'd)

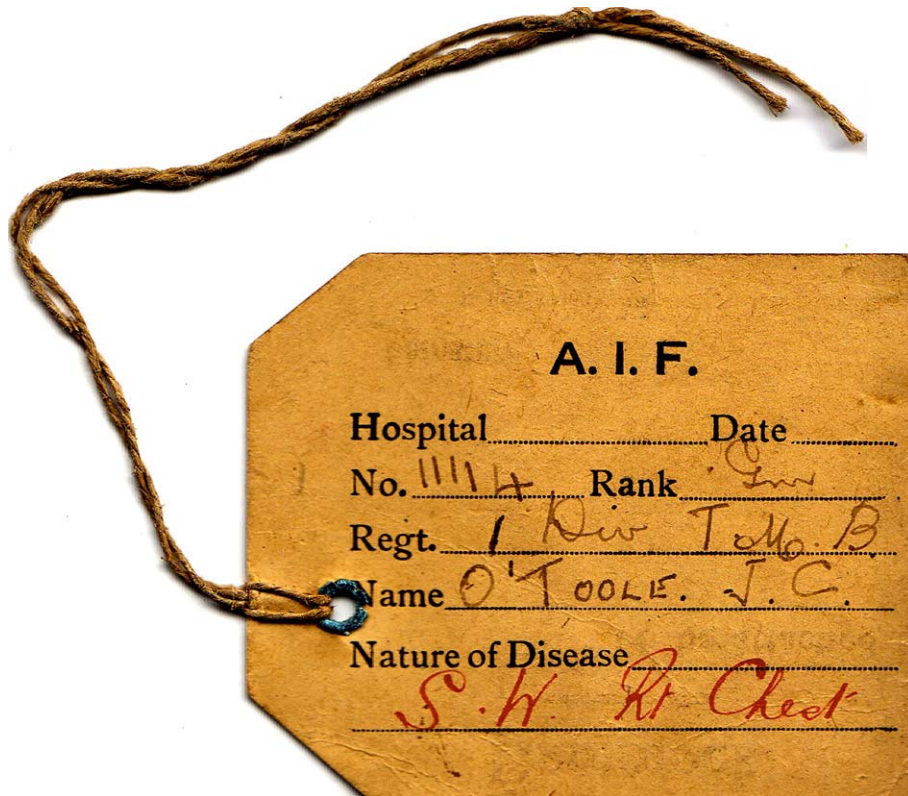
Honours & Awards
42nd Lt. Jaywell.
1167 Gnr. Benson.
1100

Shown above is part of the report from the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade for the week in November 1917 in which John Cecil O'Toole was wounded. Note the section 'Struck off Strength' (army jargon meaning 'removed from the unit') which shows 37 OR (other ranks) were lost from the unit during the week, consisting of 4 K.I.A (killed in action), 29 wd (wounded), 3 sick and 1 transferred. Cec O'Toole was one of the 29 wounded.

Cec was evacuated to England on 12 December 1917 and admitted to hospital in Bristol. Unbeknown to him at the time, the Bristol hospital where he convalesced was the former home of his future father-in-law Arthur Goldsmith.

Cec then convalesced in Dartford and finally in Weymouth before embarking for Australia on 7 June 1918 on HMAT *Essex*. He arrived home on 1 August 1918 and three weeks later a large gathering was held in Greghamstown to welcome him (see newspaper report on page after next). Another welcome-home function for him was held in Gosford.

Cec was discharged as medically unfit on 5 September 1918 and he carried a bullet in his lung for the rest of his life. Fortunately the wound did not stop him from becoming an orchardist, marrying and raising a family. He told his children a little about his time in the war. He said that, at one stage they were short of food before a battle but there was plenty afterwards as so few had survived to share it. He did not like walking on the duckboards (put there to make it easier to walk through the trenches in the mud) because there were bodies under the boards. Once he drank water from a well and then found out there were bodies in it.



Above: Cec's tag on HMAT *Essex*, the ship that brought him home. It shows he had a wound in the right side of his chest. Some of his records indicate it was a shrapnel wound (SW) rather than a gunshot wound (GSW) but the family is sure x-rays showed a bullet-shaped object in his chest.



Above: a 'Silver War Badge' like the one proudly worn by Cec O'Toole. It was issued in the first World War to soldiers discharged because of wounds or illness.

WELCOME TO GUNNER CECIL O'TOOLE.

At Greghamstown on Friday night there was a very large gathering to welcome Gunner Cecil O'Toole, who is on six months' furlough. Visitors were present from Blayney and Millthorpe. The chair was taken by Cr. J. Kelly. The proceedings opened with the singing of the National Anthem. The following musical programme was rendered: Pianoforte solo, Miss Whear Roberts; solo, "When You Come Home," Nurse Harris; monologue, "Whe! a Maid Marries," Miss Ivy Stonestreet; solo, "My Land," Mr. C. Davis; recitation, "How Maginty Counted the Eggs," Miss C. Ezzy; solo, "Tom O'Devon," Mr. Salter; solo, "Advertisements," (comic), Mr. Watson, and for an encore gave "A Toast to Anzacs"; solo, "God Send You Home to Me," Mr. W. Astridge; solo, "On the Shores of the Aegean Sea," Nurse Harris; solo, "Joan of Arc," Miss C. Aplett, and for an encore gave "Just You"; recitation, "Charge of the Light Brigade," Miss Whear Roberts; solo, "Flight of Ages," Mr. Salter; recitation, "Little May," Mr. W. Fisher.

The chairman said they had met to welcome Gunner O'Toole who left the district 2½ years ago. He regretted they had not a larger hall for such functions. Their guot enlisted when the war was very black-looking for us. To-day, as the result of the noble stand of such men as Gnr. O'Toole and his comrades the Germans were being driven back. He was one of a true British family. Four brothers had joined the colors. Two had made the supreme sacrifice and another had been returned invalided. Though Greghamstown is a small place our lads have answered well and when they were going forth our people resolved that those whom God spared to return would be

suitably welcomed. To-night I am proud to have to present o Gunner O'Toole the gold medal which each returned lad will receive, accompanied with the best wishes of his friends for his future welfare. As you all know, we are losing two very estimable friends shortly—Mr. and Mrs. Davis. Therefore, advantage has been taken of the occasion to mark our esteem by making them a presentation at the close o the evening. He then called upon Sergt. Benson to present Gunne O'Toole with a wallet of bank notes from the residents of the district.

Sergt. Benson said it gave him great pleasure to be preser at a welcome home to a returned soldier. It did one good to find so many true British families. At presnt it is everyone's duty to help insome way to win the war. Don't make the mistake of thinking because of the present successes that the war is won. We have not won yet. Years of work and sacrifice may yet be necessary to secure victory and a lasting peace. He asked, was it fair tha men like Gunner O'Toole, who had done 2½ years fighting, should be asked to go back while there were thousands of eligible shirkers about? What do you think a returned man's feelings are when he strikes an experience such as I did when I returned badly wounded? This is how I was greeted one day by a strong, ole-bodied shirker, "Oh! Hello, old nan; how are you? How long befor you will be able to go back?" Lite wonder the returned men have nthing but contempt for that class of people. He then asked Gunner O'Toole to accept on behalf of his friends of the district a wallet of bank notes.

Hearty cheers were give for Gunner O'Toole.

Gunner O'Toole thanked his friends for the hearty welcome and presents. He had only done his duty and hoped to get to the front again soon. There was work to be done and someone must do it. He again thanked them.



One of John Cecil O'Toole's welcome-home medals. The inscription on the back reads 'Presented by Citizens to Bdr J.C. O'Toole, Gosford 1918'.



Medals like those issued to John Cecil O'Toole. Left to right: 1914-15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal.



The Greghamstown Roll of Honour for those from the district who served in World War 1 (now located in the Millthorpe Museum). It includes the names of Austin and Cecil O'Toole, although it is not entirely accurate. A ** means killed and * means wounded, so there should be a * after Cecil's name.



Memorial gates at the entrance to a park in Millthorpe. It includes the name of Cecil O'Toole but omits that of Austin.



Above: The certificate awarded to Mrs Jame O'Toole in recognition of her services to the Red Cross in the years she waited anxiously for news of her four sons serving overseas during the first world war.

ⁱ official army service record for John Cecil O'Toole, service number 11114.

ⁱⁱ War diaries for the 1st Australian Divisional Ammunition Column, Australian War Memorial.

ⁱⁱⁱ War diary for the 1st Australian Divisional Trench Mortar Officer, Australian War Memorial.