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Backshall, Walter James

A West Australian railway employee
killed while on military service for their country



Memorial at Railway Workshops Midland (D.Graham/panoramio)

Rail employment information

Employer:	Western Australian Government Railways & Tramways
Branch:	Traffic
Designation:	Head Shunter

Rail employment notes: Born16/2/1881. Joined WAGR 10/1/1900 aged 18 as Junior Porter, Fremantle. Promoted to Porter, Fremantle 23/3/1901 and North Fremantle 15/7/1902.
("Porter" was a very general category in the WAGR and Fremantle, a busy goods station and terminus of suburban passenger trains, probably had at least 10 porters)
Transferred to Shunter, Fremantle 9/10/1902 and then to Perth 1/6/1905. Promoted to Head Shunter, Perth 29/1/1906.

Granted leave to join AIF 26/10/1916 (Service No.2880). Killed in action 20/10/1917.

Military service information:

Conflict:	First World War 1914-1918
Service:	Australian Imperial Force (AIF)
Military unit:	48th Australian Infantry Battalion
Service number:	2880
Date of death:	20 October 1917
Place of death:	Belgium
Age:	36
Rank:	Lance Corporal
Burial/memorialisation:	Menin Gate Memorial, Ypres, Flanders, Belgium

Walter Backshall was enlisted in the AIF on 1 September 1916 (after being required to have dental treatment first). He trained at Blackboy Hill Camp, initially in 81 Depot Company and then with 7th Reinforcements to 48 Battalion. On enlistment he declared his wife Florence to be his Next of kin and stated that he had no previous military experience. Pte Backshall departed Australia on 9 November 1916 aboard A8 HMAT *Argyllshire* and disembarked at Devonport on 10 January 1917 and marched into 12 Training Battalion the following day. Following further training he departed England through Folkstone on 20 March 1917 to join the British Expeditionary Force at 4 Australian Divisional Base Depot. He left 4ADBD on 19 April 1917 and was taken-on-strength of 48 Battalion that same day. Pte Backshall was appointed to be a Lance Corporal on 4 September 1917.

The Battalion was heavily engaged in the Third Battle of Ypres (Ieper) during September and October 1917. L/Cpl Backshall died instantly when a dugout he was sheltering in on Zonnebeke ridge suffered a direct hit. His body along with 2 others was buried nearby and he was immediately classified as Killed in Action. The grave was unmarked. His Red Cross file holds several eye witness

accounts concerning his death. His body was not recovered at the end of the War and he has no known resting place and his name is recorded on the Menin Gate.

Additional/personal information:

Walter was born in Saddleworth, South Australia but moved to WA when young, as did many people after the gold finds in the west.

He married Florence M Baker in 1915, the union registered in the Subiaco district. It appears they did not have any children.

> BACKSHALL.—Killed in action, in France, October 20, 1917, Private W. J. Backshall (Wally), late head shunter, Perth station, beloved husband of Florence M. Backshall. A dearer husband never lived,
>
> Nor one so good and kind, His equal in this weary world, You very rarely find. His country's call he answered, The dear old flag to save, But now he lies in far-off France, And fills a hero's grave. — Inserted by his loving wife, Florence M. Backshall. *The West Australian* 15/11/1917p1

Other family notices indicate he had several brothers and sisters around Perth, and many friends.

For his service he was entitled to the British War Medal and the Victory Medal which were issued to his widow. His widow received a military pension of 40/- per fortnight with effect from 10 Jan 1918.

His widow remarried in 1926 to Frank M Deaves, in the Perth district.

Further information and/or photos may be added as available. Information may also be found on the Australian War Memorial website: *https://www.awm.gov.au/advanced-search/people*

Abbreviations: WAGR= Western Australian Government Railways (& Tramways at some periods); MRWA= Midland Railway of Western Australia; BDM=Western Australian Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages website; AWM=Australian War Memorial (Canberra and website); CWGC= Commonwealth War Graves Commission (including website). DVA=Department of Veterans' Affairs (including website)

Acknowledgements: Rail employment notes from WAGR Honour Roll and WAGR records held by State Records Office, Perth, transcribed by J.Austin 2019. Military information researched by Dr G.M.Galvin. Family information and collation by G.Higham.

----------Lest we forget----------