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Brabner, Harold James

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

Another family which lost two brothers in the war



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

Rail employment information

Employer:	Western Australian Government Railways & Tramways
Branch:	Locomotive
Designation:	Apprentice, Painter

Rail employment notes: Born 25/5/1894. Joined WAGR 28/5/1909 aged 15 as Apprentice Painter, Midland Workshops.
In this era, the "Locomotive" branch of the WAGR, which would later be named the Chief Mechanical Engineer's branch, included the major workshops at Midland (then Midland Junction) employing a wide range of tradesmen to work on locomotives, carriages and freight wagons as they were built or passed through for repairs. The Workshops was also a major training ground for apprentices.

Granted leave to join AIF 14/8/1914 (Service No.274). Killed in action at Bullecourt 17/9/1917.

Military service information:

Conflict:	First World War 1914-1918
Service:	Australian Imperial Force (AIF)
Military unit:	11th Australian Infantry Battalion
Service number:	274
Date of death:	17 September 1917
Place of death:	France
Age:	23
Rank:	Warrant Officer Class II (Company Sergeant Major)

Burial/memorialisation: Menin Gate Memorial, Ypres, Flanders, Belgium

Harold James Brabner enlisted in the AIF at Blackboy Hill Camp where he also underwent his basic training and was appointed as a Lance Corporal on 2 September 1914. He nominated his father, James Brabner, as his Next of kin and stated that he had previous military experience in 88th Regiment of Infantry (a WA part-time volunteer regiment) and was still serving. Following training he was allocated the regimental number 274 of 11 Battalion.

The Battalion boarded HMAT *Ascanius* at Fremantle on 31 Oct 1914 but did not depart until 02 Nov 1914. *Ascanius* then joined the first convoy which had earlier departed from Albany with a substantial Naval escort to provide cover against the German Light Cruiser *Embden* which was thought to roaming the Indian Ocean. *Ascanius* later suffered minor damage in a collision with Shropshire and was required to enter Aden for repairs before proceeding up the Red Sea. Suez was reached on 5 December 1914 and the troops disembarked the following day and established camp at Mena with other elements of the 3rd Brigade. Training continued

in Egypt until 2 March 1915 when the Battalion moved by rail to Alexandria, boarded HMT *Suffolk* and sailed for Mudros on Lemnos Island.

There was a delay of 7 weeks while the troops practiced the use of scrambling nets and maintained fitness with route marches on the Island. On 25 April 1915, 11th Battalion as part of the 3rd Brigade landed at Anzac Cove and suffered considerable casualties. Harold Brabner was promoted to Corporal but in the confusion of Gallipoli the date was not recorded. On 22 August 1915 he reported sick with Influenza and the following day admitted to 1st Stationary Hospital on Lemnos. It was 21 October 1915 before he was passed fit for duty, re-joined the Bn and was made a Temporary Sergeant and later on 11 November 1915 this was changed to substantive rank of Sergeant. After 19 December 1915 the Battalion returned to Egypt as the Gallipoli campaign was aborted.

In Egypt the Battalion took on reinforcements and prepared to move to France. Departure from Alexandria was aboard HMT *Corsican* on 29 March 1916 and the Bn disembarked at Marseilles on 5 April 1916 to join the British Expeditionary Force. Sgt Brabner was promoted to CSM (Warrant Officer Class II) on 14 April 1916. On 25 July 1916 he was WIA at Pozieres and evacuated to England where he was admitted to the 5th Northern General Hospital at Leicester. It was 11 November 1916 before he was returned to full duty.

Over the severe winter of 1916-1917 he was troubled with Scabies and later a septic thumb that took him to medical care between 15 Jan 1917 and 20 April 1917. He participated in the Third Battle of Ypres and as 11 Battalion approached the front line at Polygon Wood he was Killed in action on 17 September 1917 when a shell burst at his locality and he died instantly. There are a number of accounts of his death on his Red Cross File including one by 7045 Plimmer of 11 Bn. He was buried on the field and his grave marked with his particulars. After the War the Graves Registration Unit were unable to locate his remains, he has no known grave but he is remembered on the Menin Gate at Ypres (now Ieper).

Additional/personal information:

Harold Brabner was born in Warracknabeal, Victoria before the family moved west and he attended a state school in WA. His parents James & Georgina (nee Sherwill) had been married in Victoria in 1891 and the births of 3 children are recorded in Victoria - Harold James, George Alexander and Nellie – by 1899.

> BRABNER.—Mr. and Mrs. James Brabner and family, of "All British" Camp, Kurrawang, late of Bellevue, wish to sincerely THANK all kind friends for letters and cards of sympathy during their sad bereavement re the death of their eldest son, Harold James Brabner.
> *The Swan Express* (Midland) 30/11/1917p2

Others chose to wait until the first anniversary of his death:

> BRABNER.—In memory of our gallant comrade, Company Sergeant Major Harold J.Brabner, (Anzac), who fell at Ypres, September 17, 1917. Inserted by his comrades of the W.A.G.R. Paint and Trimming Shops, Midland Junction.
>
> BRABNER.—In affectionate memory of C.S.M.H. J. Brabner, 11th Battalion, killed in action September 17, 1917. Inserted by his friends at North Perth.
> Both *The West Australian* 17/9/1918p1

For his service he was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal which were issued to his father along with other military memorabilia. His personal file contains a recommendation for a bravery award on Gallipoli made after he was promoted to CSM. There is no evidence that this recommendation was ever considered by higher authorities and he received no award.

His brother 7442 Private George Alexander Brabner served in 11 Battalion after enlistment on 17 January 1916 and was Killed in action on 9 March 1918.

It has not been possible to trace his father or his mother after 1923 as they appear to have moved away from Perth or interstate.

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----------