Cox, William James

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



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

William Cox was one of the first WA railway employees to enlist for the 1914 war and served throughout, tragically dying of disease a month before the formal end of hostilities.

Rail employment information

Employer: Western Australian Government Railways & Tramways

Branch: Traffic

Designation: Junior Worker

Rail employment notes: Born 1/6/1895. Joined WAGR 16/9/1912 aged 17 as Junior Porter, Midland Junction. ("Porter" was a very general category in the WAGR and Midland, a busy junction station and terminus of suburban passenger trains, probably had at least 10 porters – "junior porter" simply meant that he was under 21 years and could be paid on a proportional scale)

Granted leave to join AIF 30/10/1914 (Service No.47). Died of illness 13/10/1918.

Military service information:

Conflict: First World War 1914-1918

Service: Australian Imperial Force (AIF)

Military unit: 2nd Field Squadron.

Service number: 47

Date of death: 13 October 1918

Place of death: Damascus, Syria

Age: 23

Rank: Driver

Burial/memorialisation: Damascus Commonwealth War Cemetery, Damascus, Syria

William James Cox aged 19 ½ years enlisted in the 10th Light Horse Regiment (LHR) on 31 October 1914 and was allocated to the Machine Gun Section as a Driver with the regimental number 47. He reported that he had served for 2 ½ years in the Senior Cadets. William must have had considerable skills as horse rider as many applicants, at this early stage, failed the riding tests and were directed towards the infantry or logistic units. Training was conducted at Claremont Showgrounds and the exercise area at Rockingham. He departed Fremantle aboard A47 HMAT *Mashobra* on 8 February 1915 and disembarked in Egypt where the Regiment undertook training both as mounted troops and infantry. The shortage of infantry reinforcements resulted in 10 LHR crossing to Gallipoli to serve as dismounted Light Horse troops with the horses remaining in Egypt.

He departed Alexandria on 8 May 1915 and saw highly significant action on Gallipoli before being evacuated with the diagnosis of "Influenza" on 29 August 1915 aboard HMHS *Ionian* where he transferred to HMHS *Huntsland f*or England. In England he was admitted to the Southern General Hospital, Birmingham. He finally returned to Egypt on 15 April 1916 and was taken on strength of

3rd Light Horse Brigade Training Regiment. On 28 February 1917 he was transferred to 2 Field Squadron (Australian Engineers) of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) as a Driver/Machine Gunner. He had a short admission to 5th Mounted Field Ambulance in Jul 1917 but returned to duty on 4 July 1917. Early in 1918 he was hospitalized for one month with a septic foot infection.

When Australian Forces reached Damascus in early Oct 1918 there were epidemics of influenza, malaria, cholera and bacillary dysentery raging. He was admitted to the former German Hospital of Damascus on 10 October 1918 with dysentery but died on 13 October 1918. He was initially buried in the cemetery attached to the German Hospital but his remains were later transferred to the Damascus Commonwealth War Cemetery.

Additional/personal information:

William was born in St Leonards on the Bellarine Peninsula, Victoria, the son of Frederick J R Cox and Ellen S Cox (nee Pigden or Pigdon) (Vic BDM 18124/1895). His full name was registered as William James Sydney Robert Cox, although the military only recorded the first two names. At least three siblings were also born in Victoria, Alice E. Cox, Frederick N Cox and James H V L Cox.

The family appear to have moved west early as William attended school in Middle Swan, WA and further children are recorded in WA births. (There was very significant immigration to WA from eastern states from about 1892-1906 following gold finds and development of mining in the Eastern Goldfields and the Murchison.)

He was thus in a large family with at least one other brother enlisting and serving in France:

> KILLED IN ACTION. COX.—Driver William James Sydney Robert Cox, late of the 10th L.H.B., the dearly beloved second eldest son of Fred. and Ellen Cox, of Newcastle-road, Middle Swan; loved brother of Fred. and Jim (on active service in France); also Alice, Sarah, Victoria, Ellen, Ferdie, Dorothy, Irene, and Ethel; aged 23 years and 4 months. No one knows the silent heartache, Only those can tell Who have lost a darling son and brother Without a last farewell. Inserted by his sorrowing parents, brothers, and sisters. *The West Australian* 9/11/1918p1

His father described his work as a ‘number taker’, a common job for junior staff, and also noted that he was previously in the Volunteer Cadets, then the 10th Light Horse.

Historian Dr Michael Galvin comments:

> You can’t help but feel great sorrow for a young man who enlists right at the start of the War (regimental number 47) and dies of illness just as Turkey signs the Armistice. He truly was a “First to Last”. He was present at the most ferocious fighting ever encountered by 10 LHR…. The really sad part is that he was entitled to “1914 Leave” which Prime Minister Hughes introduced some months before he died. Instead of the final push to Damascus he should have been on a boat headed for Australia.

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----------