084

Demasson, Hubert Peter

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



Plaque in May Drive, Kings Park.
(See text re different forename)

Rail employment information

Employer:	Western Australian Government Railways & Tramways
Branch:	Traffic
Designation:	Guard

Rail employment notes: Born 30/8/1880. Joined WAGR 7/1/1904 aged 23 as Porter, Midland Junction (now Midland). Promoted to Shunter, Midland Junction 4/1/1905 and Head Shunter 22/12/1909. Transferred to Guard, Wagin 23/12/1910 and back to Midland Junction 16/10/1911.

Granted leave to join AIF 4/7/1916 (Service No.6501). Died of illness whilst a prisoner of war in Langensalza, Germany 19/9/1917.

Military service information:

Conflict:	First World War 1914-1918
Service:	Australian Imperial Force
Military unit:	16th Australian Infantry Battalion
Service number:	6501
Date of death:	19 September 1917
Place of death:	Prisoner of War camp, Germany
Age:	37
Rank:	Private

Burial/memorialisation: Niederzwehren Cemetery, Niederzwehren, Germany

Hubert Peter Demasson, railway guard aged 35 years, enlisted in 16 Battalion with the regimental number 6501 on 23 June 1916 and joined the 21st reinforcements of the Battalion. Following basic training at Blackboy Hill Camp he sailed from Fremantle aboard A39 HMAT *Port Macquarie* on 13 October 1916. There is a degree of confusion over the ship as the AWM shows the 16th/16 Bn departed on A23 HMAT *Suffolk*. The individual soldier's records however show *Port Macquarie* on arrival in the UK. It is possible that they trans-shipped in Alexandria but the Unit history does not show that event.

They arrived in the UK on 12 December 1916 and entered 4 Training Battalion for a short time prior to crossing to France aboard the SS *Princess Victoria*. The reinforcements were taken on strength of 16 Battalion on 11 February 1917. On 11 April 1917 the Battalion, as part of the 4th Brigade, attacked the highly fortified villages of Reincourt and Bullecourt in France.

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In that disastrous attack 16 Battalion suffered huge losses in killed, wounded and missing. The losses were so great that the unofficial history of the Battalion recorded the names of the men who actually returned to the starting line instead of recording casualties.

The fighting around Bullecourt on 11 April 1917 was a Black day for the AIF.

The 16th Battalion was the worst affected - they went into the Battle with 20 Officers and 797 Other Ranks. At the post battle roll call they were missing 17 Officers and 623 Other Ranks (Reported by Capt C Longmore in the book "The Old Sixteenth"). Many were dead, while the German forces also had taken many prisoners.

The failure of the attack has been subject to endless analysis but it seems there was no preliminary artillery barrage and they relied on the new weapon "the tank" to crush a pathway through the enormous belts of wire – which didn't work.

The town of Bullecourt erected a memorial to those killed or lost on 11 April 1917. The memorial is that of an AIF soldier of that time in full field dress and equipment, as shown right. Photo Dr G.M.Galvin.



Private Demasson was amongst the Missing in action and much later the Germans revealed that he was a Prisoner of War. He was initially documented as a POW at Limburg Camp and later at Langensalza Camp. His health was poor and he was admitted to the Krieggs Lazarette (camp sick quarters) where he died of illness on 19 September 1917. He was buried with military honours in the cemetery attached to the POW camp. The Germans issued a Death Certificate to state that he died of inflammation of the kidneys and chronic inflation of the large and small intestine.

Additional/personal information:

Hubert Demasson was born in the Guildford district in 1880 and appears to have been the eldest of about 6 children of Peter Demasson and his wife Nora Maria (nee Hitchcock). Hubert married Lillian Blanche Minchin in 1903 and unfortunately he would leave behind a large young family, as noted in a family notice:

> DEMASSON.—Died of illness on September 19, 1917, whilst prisoner of war in Germany, Private H. P. Demasson (Bert), beloved husband of Lilian and father of Ronald, Colin, Kathleen, Bayly, and Jean Demasson, aged 37 years. *The West Australian* 16/11/1917p1

Following the Armistice, the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) decided to concentrate all soldiers of the Empire buried in Germany into 4 cemeteries to allow them to be adequately cared for. Burials from the Langensalza POW camp were assigned to the Niederzwehren Military Cemetery. At the time of transfer the remains of two 16 Bn soldiers could not be located. One of those was Pte Demasson. A tablet was erected at Niederzwehren, to the memory of those two, which bears the epitaph "Their Glory Shall Not Be Blotted Out". This was almost certainly composed by Rudyard

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Kipling who was a Commissioner of the IWGC and composed many items for use in Military Cemeteries around the world.

Private Demasson has a memorial tablet in Kings Park (M651) which was dedicated by his widow. The tablet refers to him as ‘Herbert’ Demasson, and was dedicated by his widow even though she named him ’Hubert’ Demasson on the Roll of Honour form completed in writing by Mrs Demasson after the war. Hubert is also used in Army records, WAGR records, and in WA BDM records.

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).

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

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