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Harris, Ernest William (Lieut.)

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



Lieutenant Harris' plaque in Kings Park

Rail employment information

Employer:	Western Australian Government Railways & Tramways
Branch:	Accounts
Designation:	Clerk

Rail employment notes: Born 22/7/1889. Joined WAGR 3/4/1905 aged 15 as Cadet, Perth. Transferred to Perth Goods 1/8/1906 but then resigned from the WAGR. Re-employed as Clerk, Midland Junction 6/5/1913 and transferred to Perth 9/1/1914.
Granted leave to join AIF 4/1/1915. Killed in action at Bullecourt 5/5/1917.

Military service information:

Conflict:	First World War 1914-1918
Service:	Australian Imperial Force (AIF)
Military unit:	3rd Australian Machine Gun Company
Service number:	1463
Date of death:	5 May 1917
Place of death:	France
Age:	27
Rank:	Second Lieutenant

Burial/memorialisation: Villers-Bretonneux Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, Picardie, France

Ernest William Harris enlisted at the age of 25 years on 5 January 1915. He was allocated the regimental number of 1463 in 3rd reinforcements of 12 Battalion. He had previous military training of 4 years in the 11th Australian Infantry Regiment (parttime militia). Following minimal further training he departed Australia through Fremantle aboard A50 HMAT *Itonus* on 15 February 1915 for Egypt. The 3rd reinforcements were taken on strength of the Battalion on 7 May 1915. He was Wounded in Action on 20 July 1915 and evacuated to Malta aboard HMHS *Sicillia* that same day. Following hospital treatment and recovery, he returned to Egypt aboard HMT *Southland* on 21 August 1915 and then moved to Gallipoli on HMT *Karoo* from Alexandria to rejoin his Battalion on 10 September 1915. Following the evacuation from Gallipoli he returned to Egypt on 16 January 1916.

At this time the machine guns of each Battalion of a Brigade were amalgamated into a Machin Gun Company. (There is nothing on record but apparently, he was by then a machine gunner with the Battalion.) As 12 Battalion was an element of 3 Brigade he now served in 3 Machine Gun Companyy under the operational direction of the Brigade HQ. The Company departed Alexandria on 29 March 1916 for service with the British Expeditionary Force and entered France through Marseilles on 5 April 1916. The 3rd MG Coy participated in a number of actions during the Battle of the Somme of which the most vicious was Pozieres followed by the action at Moquet Farm. William Harris was

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detached from 3 MG Coy on 20 October 1916 for training with the MG Cadet Battalion in the UK. He qualified as a machine gun officer from that Bn and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Machine Gun Corps on 24 February 1917. He proceeded through the MG Depot in the UK and proceeded overseas to France on 19 April 1917 passing through the MG Base Depot before rejoining his Unit in the field on 3 May 1917. Two days later, at the age of 27, he was Killed in Action at Bullecourt. He remains were never found so he has no known grave but is remembered on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial.

The Australian War memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, France.

Australian soldiers killed in France, whose bodies could be found for relocation, are buried and marked by the rows of gravestones seen to left and right.

The wing walls to both sides of the central watch tower record, carved in stone, the names of Australian soldiers killed in France but with no known grave – tragically, more than 11 000 men. The largest number recorded from one unit is from 28th Battalion – some 365 West Australians.



Additional/personal information:

Ernest Harris was born in NSW but apparently came to WA when young as he attended school in Perth. The death of his father, George A Harris, was registered in Claremont in 1913.

> HARRIS.--=On May 5, 1917, killed in action .in France, . Lieutenant Ernest William Harris, 3rd Machine Gun Company,.3rd, Brigade, dearly loved fifth and youngest son of: the late G. A. Harris and Mrs. Harris, Claremont-avenue, Claremont, aged 27 years. Served through Gallipoli campaign with the 12th Battalion- 3rd Brigade. *The West Australian* 22/5/1917p1

He has a memorial plaque (M706) in Kings Park, see photo above..

Military historian Dr Michael Galvin comments: "Very nice photo at AWM H14062. This photo must have been taken pre-war as the uniform is not an AIF pattern and although he is photographed wearing a collar and tie such as a commissioned officer would wear, he does not have rising sun lapel badges. The only other explanation is that it might be a uniform that he had tailored whilst on Malta. He had come from Gallipoli so his AIF uniform would have been disgusting. I have seen a number of variants of what tailors on Malta thought an AIF uniform could look like!"

Harris' mother wrote after the war that he was "One of 15 cousins who served with AIF, of whom 3 were killed."

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----------