179

Lea, John

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

John Lea was sent from England as an orphan at age 8 to Parkerville but made a positive new life for himself in WA.

He volunteered to enlist as soon as the war started but unfortunately, like too many, he did not return.



Plaque in May Drive, Kings Park

Rail employment information

Employer:	Western Australian Government Railways & Tramways
Branch:	Locomotive
Designation:	Labourer

Rail employment notes: Born 26/10/1894. Joined WAGR 15/8/1912 aged 17 as Junior Labourer, Midland Workshops.

Granted leave to join AIF 6/8/1914 (Service No.128). Died of wounds 2/11/1917.

Military service information:

Conflict:	First World War 1914-1918
Service:	Australian Imperial Force (AIF)
Military unit:	11th Australian Infantry Battalion.
Service number:	128
Date of death:	2 November 1917
Place of death:	Belgium
Age:	24
Rank:	Corporal

Burial/memorialisation: Nine Elms British Cemetery, Poperinghe, Flanders, Belgium

John Lea was an early enlistment into the AIF as is shown by his very low number. He enlisted on 26 September 1914 at Blackboy Hill Camp and his basic training was at the same camp. He nominated Sister Jane Ashdown, his guardian, of the Parkerville Children's home as his Next of kin and also nominated her as the sole beneficiary in his will. He had one year of service in the 88th Regiment of Infantry (volunteer militia) and was still serving at the time of enlistment. Following basic training he was allocated to 11 Battalion with the regimental number 128 and posted to HQ Staff. The Battalion boarded HMAT *Ascanius* at Fremantle on 31 October 1914 but did not depart until 2 November 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

© Rail Heritage WA

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. They suffered considerable casualties. Private Lea was untouched at the Landing but for reasons unknown returned to Egypt on 19 May 1915 aboard HMT *Suffolk* for duties with the rear details.

He returned to the Battalion on 7 January 1916 following its return from Gallipoli. On 23 March 1916 11 Battalion sailed from Alexandria and disembarked at Marseilles on 2 April 1916 to join the British Expeditionary Force. Private Lea participated in the battles at Pozieres and Moquet Farm. During a period at the end of 1916 and early 1917 he was appointed to be a Lance Corporal (6 December 1916) then promoted to Corporal on 10 March 1917. At some time during this period he had UK leave and had a studio photograph taken. A copy of this photograph is in the AWM collection as P11310.001 (online) showing him as a Lance Corporal.

The Battalion was committed to the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917. Corporal Lea was Wounded in action (WIA) on 1 November 1917 near Zonnebeke and evacuated to 44 Casualty Clearing Station which was then located at Poperinghe (now Poperinge) where he Died of Wounds on 2 November 1917. The Unit War Diary records that their lines suffered from very heavy shelling on 1 November 1917. Casualties were 4 Killed in action and 13 Wounded in action that day. Corporal Lea was buried at the Nine Elms British Cemetery (SW of Poperinge).

Additional/personal information:

John Lea was an orphan born in Southampton and sent to Australia at the age of 8 years, being placed at the Parkerville Children's Home – then an orphanage run by the Church of England (now Parkerville Children & Youth Care Inc. sponsored by the Anglican Church of Australia). His schooling was at the Parkerville home and he learned to write in a fine hand as is evident from his attestation paper.

Despite his unfortunate start to life he made many friends, the following being only some of the notices after his death.

> LEA.—Died of wounds in France, Corporal John Lea, late of Parkerville and Bayswater, dear friend of Mr. and Mrs. Nelson, Bayswater, and son of George, somewhere in France. He served his King and country for three years and gave his life. What more could he do? Deeply regretted.
>
> LEA.—Died of wounds received in France on November 2, 1917, Corporal Jack Lea, late of Parkerville and Bayswater, after three years on active service. Ever remembered. —Inserted by Mr. and Mrs. Cliff Derby, 307 Lord-st. Perth. Both *The West Australian* 4/12/1917p1
>
> LEA.—On November 2, 1917, died of wounds, Corporal Jack Lea, late of Parkerville, after three years on active service. Loving righteousness, he died in a righteous cause. —Inserted by his sincere comrade, Driver W.E. Roberts, late 11th Battalion. *The West Australian* 6/12/1917p1

Military historian Dr Michael Galvin comments after researching this soldier:

> As I worked my way through it I just felt that this man had been dealt a lousy hand in life but certainly came through well. I just wonder what he would have become if the War had not claimed his life. In the 21st Century you hear only bad stories about orphanages but this man had a positive experience and nothing shows this more than an orphan who has a memorial tablet in Kings Park dedicated by his friends, who chose for his tombstone in Belgium the single word MIZPAH, meaning 'bond'.

Army Records asked Sister Ashdown if she would accept his War Medals on trust should someone ever appear with a claim. Jane Ashdown signed that undertaking and received, on behalf of Parkerville Children's Home his 1914-1915 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal. Jane Ashdown died on 29 December 1921 at the age of 75 years before the final items were presented. The Memorial Plaque for Corporal Lea was then accepted by the Matron, Kate Clutterbuck ("Sister Kate").

Corporal Lea has a memorial tablet in Kings Park (M6) which was dedicated by his friends.

 © Rail Heritage WA

The ‘Rose Window’, which features in the historic St Michael and All Angels Chapel on the grounds of the Parkerville campus was dedicated to Sister Jane and each petal of the rose was dedicated to one of the six Parkerville boys who lost their lives in the Great War, including John Lea.



The Chapel of St Michael and All Angels on the grounds at Parkerville. The six ‘petals’ represent the six young Parkerville men who died in the First War.

Photo courtesy Parkerville Children & Youth Care Inc.

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----------

 © Rail Heritage WA