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Roberts, James Albert

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

Probably the last WA railwayman to be killed in the First War, only a week before hostilities ended.



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

Rail employment information

Employer:	Western Australian Government Railways & Tramways
Branch:	Way and Works
Designation:	Repairer

Rail employment notes: Repairer, Fernbrook,

("Repairer" was a track maintenance worker in a gang responsible for upkeep of an allocated section of railway line. A typical gang might include between 3 and 6 Repairers with one Leading Hand Repairer and a Ganger in charge. The WAGR Annual report for 1914/15 showed they employed 882 Repairers at 8 shillings per day, with many at very small settlements or tent camps.)

Fernbrook was a siding on the railway from Brunswick Junction to Collie.

Enlisted in 3rd Pioneers Battalion AIF 21/1/1916 (Service No.1243). Died of wounds 29/9/1918.

Military service information:

Conflict:	First World War 1914-1918
Service:	Australian Imperial Force (AIF)
Military unit:	3rd Australian Pioneer Battalion
Service number:	1243
Date of death:	29 September 1918
Place of death:	France
Age:	42
Rank:	Corporal

Burial/memorialisation: Doingt Communal Cemetery Extension, Doingt, Peronne, Picardie, France

James Albert Roberts enlisted in the AIF at the Drill Hall in Perth on 26 Jan 1916. On enlistment he stated that he had no previous military experience and that his wife Mary, resident in Victoria, was his next of kin. He transferred to Victoria but the name of the vessel is not recorded. He underwent training in Victoria together with soldiers from other states to form a Pioneer Battalion to support the new 3rd Division being raised in Australia. Private Roberts was assigned to D company of 3 Pioneer Battalion with the regimental number 1243.

The Battalion sailed from the Port of Melbourne aboard HMAT *Wandilla* on 6 June 1916 and disembarked at Plymouth UK on 26 July 1916 and immediately marched into the Pioneer Training Battaion. He departed the UK through Southampton on 24 Nov 1916 and crossed to France to join the British Expeditionary Force. He saw action at Messines and later in the Third Battle of Ypres. In the late phase of the latter he was promoted to Corporal on 30 September 1917. Cpl Roberts was returned to the Pnr Trg Depot in the UK on 1 March 1918 for instructional duties where he remained until 8 September 1918 when he left the UK through Folkestone and re-joined his Unit.

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In the final battles late in September and the first week of October 1918 General Monash was reduced to minimal soldiers. He had disbanded one Battalion in each Brigade and used those soldiers to bring the remaining Battalions up to somewhere approximating their establishment. (This caused a lot of unrest). While he was doing this, Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes introduced "1914 Leave" whereby soldiers who had enlisted in 1914 could receive 75 days leave in Australia. These tended to be the most experienced and senior soldiers and the effect was to seriously weaken the AIF. One of the counter measures that Monash introduced was to use Pioneer Battalions as Infantry Battalions. They were not trained or experienced in the role and suffered a significant number of casualties.

On 29 September 1918 Private Roberts suffered head injuries from a shell blast in the area of St Quentin and was carried to 41 Casualty Clearing Station but was dead on arrival and recorded as Died of wounds. An eye witness to his wounding was 2300 P Smith 3 Pnr Bn and his statement is on the Red Cross File. Corporal Roberts was buried that same day with the Chaplain attached to 41 CCS officiating. His place of burial was Doingt Communal Cemetery Extension just outside Peronne.

Additional/personal information:

James Roberts was born in Bendigo, Victoria and attended school there. At some stage he married Mary, and it appears they had three children. Unfortunately the details of this marriage and births have not yet been found in BDM records in Victoria or WA.

A family notice after James' death shows that he moved around, perhaps looking for work;

> ROBERTS.—Died of wounds, September 29, Corporal J. A. (Albert), No. 1243, 3rd Pioneer Battalion, beloved husband of Mary, and father of Alf., Mary, and Albert, of 51 Baillie-street, North Melbourne, late of Lawlers, Mt. Magnet, and Lunenberg, W.A. Rest in peace. The West Australian 23/10/1918p1

Lunenberg is an earlier name for Fernbrook on the Collie railway line, whilst Lawlers and Mount Magnet were gold mining towns..

His file contains nothing about a pension to his wife but there is another file (not available online) which closed in 1933 suggesting that she died around that time. For his service Cpl Roberts was entitled to the British War Medal and the Victory Medal and these were issued to his wife together with other memorabilia. His wife paid for the following inscription on his headstone: "Eternal Rest Grant Unto Him Oh Lord and May Perpetual Light Shine Upon Him".

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----------

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