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Slight, John Walter

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



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

Rail employment information

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

Rail employment notes: Born 26/7/1894. Joined WAGR 31/3/1914 aged 19 as Cleaner, Bunbury. ("Cleaner" in this case was a position in the Locomotive branch, cleaning locomotives and otherwise employed at the locomotive depot whilst training to be a Fireman, the next step up the ladder.)

Transferred to Bridgetown 8/7/1914.

Granted leave to join AIF 14/4/1916 (Service No.6581). Died of influenza whilst a prisoner of war in Germany 12/12/1918.

Military service information:

Conflict:	First World War 1914-1918
Service:	Australian Imperial Force (AIF)
Military unit:	16th Australian Infantry Battalion
Service number:	6581
Date of death:	12 December 1918
Place of death:	Posen, Poland
Age:	24
Rank:	Private

Burial/memorialisation: Berlin South Western Military Cemetery, Germany

John Walter Slight, a railway fireman, enlisted in the AIF on 15 April 1916. He had no previous military experience and nominated his father as his Next of kin. His basic military training was at Blackboy Hill Camp where on 3 June 1916 he was allotted to 21st Reinforcements to 16th Battalion with the regimental number 6581. The AWM records shown that he departed Fremantle on 13 October 1916 aboard HMAT *Suffolk* although his personal records show the ship as the *Port Macquarie*. He disembarked at Plymouth on 12 December 1916 and marched into 4 Training Battalion that same day. On 8 February 1917 he departed the UK through Folkestone aboard the SS *Princess Victoria* and was taken on strength of 16 Battalion in the field. He entered frontline service at the disastrous First Battle of Bullecourt on 11 Apr 1917. After the Battle he was posted as Missing but this was later amended to Officially a Prisoner of War. That day was truly the "Black Day of the AIF" for deaths and POWs.

It is unknown if he was one of men treated by the German Army as "Prisoners of Respite" and held at Fort MacDonald. [Prisoners of Respite were a retaliation by the German Army on the belief that German POWs were being used as labour within range of German shells.] Pte Slight was registered as a POW in the huge compound of Limburg and assigned to a farm work commando and held at Schneidemuhl POW Camp.

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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 in 1917. The memorial depicts an AIF soldier of that time in full field dress and equipment, as shown right.
Photo Dr G.M.Galvin.



He became ill with Influenza in early December 1918 and was admitted to the Camp sick quarters. (The "Spanish flu" pandemic was then spreading across Europe) He died on 12 Dec 1918, from Influenza, and was buried in the POW cemetery attached to the Camp in what is now Posen, Poland.

At the time of his death he was actually no longer a POW as the War had ended with an armistice on 11 November 1918 and the Red Cross Organizations of Holland, Switzerland and Denmark were actively repatriating the men who had been POWs to Ripon in England. Private Slight was buried on 15 December 1918 in the POW cemetery attached to the camp. He was given a military funeral.

Additional/personal information:

John Slight was born in Victoria, however his family appear to have moved west during the 1890s gold rushes as he attended school in Burbanks, a long-abandoned town 10 km south of Coolgardie.

An Official Certificate of Death was issued on 01 Aug 1919 by the German civil authorities, by direction of the Berlin Office of the Red Cross. After the War the Imperial War Graves Committee discovered that servicemen of the British Empire were buried in 147 sites throughout Germany which made care and management virtually impossible. The decision was made to locate all soldiers of the Empire to just four cemeteries. Private Slight's remains were re-buried at the Berlin South Western Military Cemetery which remains under the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. For his service Private Slight was entitled to receive the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. His service medals and other memorabilia were subsequently issued to his father.

AWM records prepared after the War show him as "Fireman" although his railway records do not include this promotion – employees often passed their tests to step up the ladder but had to wait for a vacancy in the higher grade.

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

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----------