Smith, Alfred John

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



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

Such was the enthusiasm of young men to enlist, that Alfred Smith falsified his age to join up, but was tragically killed in France when aged only 18, before he was actually permitted to join overseas service.

Rail employment information

Employer: Western Australian Government Railways & Tramways

Branch: Traffic

Designation: Junior Porter

Rail employment notes: Born 16/1/1899. Joined WAGR 31/12/1914 aged 15 as Nipper, East Perth Power House.

Appointed Junior Porter, East Perth 13/12/1915. Granted leave to join AIF 20/3/1916 (Service No.293). Killed in action 11/4/1917.

"Nipper" is an uncommon designation in WAGR employee records, presumably meaning a young junior worker, and may have only been used in the Electricity Supply section. The appointment to Junior Porter was with a transfer from power station to railway operations - "Porter" was a very general category in the WAGR: East Perth, a busy junction station, would have had several porters.

(The power station at East Perth was in the management and responsibility of the WA Government Railways, Tramways & Electricity Supply at that time. The records of employees, including the honour roll after the war, reflected this combined operation.)

Military service information:

Conflict: First World War 1914-1918

Service: Australian Imperial Force (AIF)

Military unit: 4th Machine Gun Company

Service number: 293

Date of death: 11 April 1917

Place of death: France

Age: 18

Rank: Private

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

Alfred John Smith commenced his enlistment into the AIF on 11 March 1916 and was attested on 21 March 1916. On enlistment he falsely gave his age as being in excess of 19 years (19 and 2 months). His mother became his Next of Kin. He commenced his training at Blackboy Hill Camp in 56 Depot Company but shortly afterwards was assigned to 2nd 4 Machine Gun Company with the regimental number 293 and then departed Australia on 17 April 1916 aboard A60 HMAT *Aeneas*. He trans-shipped at Alexandria to HMT *Corsican* and disembarked at Plymouth on 29 May 1916. Pte Smith then entered the MG Training Depot where he remained until 1 December 1916 when he crossed to

France and was taken-on-strength of 4 MG Coy as part of the British Expeditionary Force on 4 December 1916. He suffered from several different illnesses and was unfit for duty between 29 December 1916 and 25 Feb 1917 when he rejoined his Company. 4 MG Coy was deployed in the assault on Bullecourt on 11 April 1917. He failed to answer his name at the post action roll call and was posted as Missing in action (MIA). There is no account of how he came to his end and there is no record of his burial, so he has no known grave. A Court of Enquiry on 9 October 1917 determined that he had been Killed in action and his records amended from MIA to KIA. He is remembered on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial and all records now show his correct age as 18 years.

Additional/personal information:

Alfred Smith was born in Geraldton WA but the family must have moved when he was young as he attended James Street State School in Perth.

Alfred John Smith was the son of Thomas Anson Smith (deceased 1905) and Margaret Smith (nee Campbell), born in Geraldton according to the registration at BDM 2172/1899.

Military historian Dr Michael Galvin comments:

"A real "false age enlistment". At the age of 18 years he should not have left Australia. In similar cases if their age was found to be less than 19 years they would be returned to Australia, if their parents did not consent to their original enlistment, or employed as mess orderlies or similar in England until they turned 19 years if there was parental consent to enlist. In Alfred's case no one discovered his true age so he just continued along until he was killed after just 2 months of active service."

Mrs Margaret Smith shows his age as 18 years on the AWM circular, confirming the WAGR records. For his service he was entitled to the British War Medal and the Victory Medal which were issued to his mother. Mrs Smith received a military pension of 40/- per fortnight with effect from 04 Jul 1917. There is a note from her originating in Sydney in 1922 but she vanishes from all available records after that date.

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----------