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Wilkinson, Leslie George

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



Memorial at Railway Workshops Midland

Rail employment information

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

Rail employment notes: Born 21/1/1896. Joined WAGR 18/5/1911 aged 15 as Cadet, Perth. Transferred to Midland Junction 17/1/1916.

Granted leave to join AIF 17/3/1916 (Service No.1706). Killed in action at Messines Ridge 10/6/1917.

A "cadet" was generally a young man with a view to training for a clerical or accounting role but Mr Wilkinson enlisted before reaching 21 years of age. According to a friend's notice after Wilkinson's death, he was working in the central operating room, where all sorts of messages, telegraphs, daily report notes, etc, were received and transmitted.

Military service information:

Conflict:	First World War 1914-1918
Service:	Australian Imperial Force (AIF)
Military unit:	44th Australian Infantry Battalion
Service number:	1706
Date of death:	10 June 1917
Place of death:	Belgium
Age:	21
Rank:	Private

Burial/memorialisation: Menin Gate Memorial, Ypres, Flanders, Belgium

Leslie Wilkinson enlisted in the AIF on 20 February 1916. He nominated his father Henry Wilkinson of Bridgetown as his next of kin and stated that he had some military experience in the 88th Regiment (part-time militia).

After initial training he was allocated to the 1st Reinforcements to 44th Infantry battalion with the regimental number 1706. This Battalion sailed on HMAT *Suevic*, embarking at Fremantle on 6 June 1916 and disembarked at Plymouth on 21 July 1916 for continuation training on Salisbury Plains. The Battalion departed England on 25 November 1916 from Southampton and landed at Le Havre to join the British Expeditionary Force in the fighting against Germany in France and Belgium.

Private Wilkinson was killed in action near Messines in Belgium on 10 June 1917. According to the unit diary of 44th Battalion for June 1917:

> June 8th Ploegsteert 1 a.m. Battalion moved out to take that portion of the "Green line" between the La Douve River and Huns Walk on Messines Ridge. … The attack was very successful and we captured the green line about 4am with slight casualties. The hanging on afterwards was however very severe and before the Batt were relieved we suffered about 300 casualties. … On two occasions during the night the green line had to be temporarily evacuated by our men owing to them being shelled by our

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> own artillery. This was afterwards adjusted …. Battalion relieved on night of 11th/12th June by 43rd Batt. *AWM Accession number RCDIG1007496*

The 300 casualties (from a Battalion of typically about 1000 men) in the battle to hang on to this gained ground, amidst heavy artillery from both sides, appear to have included Private Wilkinson. His remains have not been recovered so he has no known grave but is remembered on the Menin Gate Memorial.

A photograph of Private Wilkinson in uniform may be seen on his page on the AWM website.

Additional/personal information:

Leslie Wilkinson was born in new South Wales in 1896, a son of Henry and Jane I Wilkinson (nee Opitz) who had married in NSW in 1891. An older brother Leonard had also been born in NSW, in 1892. The family then moved to Western Australia but the dates are unknown – brother 'Bert' (Albert Edward Wilkinson) died in 1957 aged 68, indicating he was born about 1889 but the location has not been found. Bert married Susan E May in 1912 and it is believed that the 'Susie' referred to in a family notice was this sister-in-law. (WA BDM 32/1912, NSW BDM 5064/1896 et al)

After his death, the family received notification quite quickly (often when the body had not been recovered it took up to a year for official confirmation):

> WILKINSON.-On . June 10, killed in action somewhere in France, Private Leslie George, loved nephew of C.E. and A. Opitz, Mount View, Keysbrook, aged 21 years and 5 months. - Inserted by his loving uncle, aunt, and cousins. Western Mail 20/7/1917p26

> BEREAVEMENT NOTICES.
> Mrs. J. I., and Mr. H. Wilkinson, parents, and Mr. and Mrs. Bert Wilkinson, brother and sister-in-law, beg to gratefully acknowledge the very many kind messages of sympathy they have received from public bodies, friends and residents of Bridgetown, Perth and other districts on the death of their son and brother, Leslie George Wilkinson, who was killed in action in France on June 10th, 1917. *The Blackwood Times* 27/7/1917p2

More details emerged in notices on the first anniversary:

> WILKINSON. —In sad and loving memory of our darling son and brother, Private Les G. Wilkinson, B Company, 44th Battalion killed in action June 10, 1917, somewhere in France. … —Inserted by his loving father, mother, brother, and sister-in-law, also brother Len., on active service in Belgium.
>
> WILKINSON. —In sad and loving memory of our dear nephew, Les., killed in action June 10, 1917, aged 21 years 5 months. … —Inserted by his aunt and uncle and cousins, E. and A. Dixon.
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> WILKINSON. —A loving tribute to the memory of my sincere friend Private Les. G. Wilkinson, 44th Battalion, killed in action at Messines, June 10, 1917. His duty nobly done. — Inserted by Marge.
>
> WILKINSON. —In loving memory my dear friend, Private Leslie G. Wilkinson, 44th Battalion, killed in action, June 10, 1917, late of Operating Room, Central Railway Station, Perth. —Inserted by C. H. Urry.
>
> WILKINSON. —In sad and loving memory of our dear brother, Leslie G. Wilkinson, killed in action on June 10, 1917, at Messines (late 44th Battalion). Sleep on, dear brother, In a grave we will never see. … —Inserted by his loving brothers (Len., on active service), Bert, and sister Susie and little nephews Harold and Leslie. All *The West Australian* 10/6/1918p1

Long before the era of cheap air travel, "in a grave we will never see" was sadly a normal thought.

Leslie's elder brother, Leonard Henry Wilkinson, also enlisted in the AIF. He also worked for the railways, as a locomotive fireman, and was allocated to Railway Unit, No.3 Section, with regimental number 1072. He survived the war and returned to Australia in 1919 as a Corporal, dying in Perth in 1970 aged 78.

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Further information

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 research by Dr G.M.Galvin. Family information and collation by G.Higham.

----------Lest we forget----------