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Fleming, James

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



Plaque in Kings Park

Rail employment information

Employer: Western Australian Government Railways

Branch: Chief Civil Engineer (CCE)

Designation: Repairer

Rail employment notes: Born 28/3/1906. Joined WAGR 6/1/1928 aged 21 as Repairer, Norpa. Transferred to Wurarga 1/4/1929, Perenjori 18/2/1931, Norpa 17/8/1932 and East Perth 6/9/1940.

The Chief Civil Engineer's branch of the WAGR was responsible in the 1940s for construction and maintenance of track, signalling and most buildings.

("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. Many were located at very small settlements or in tent camps.)

Enlisted in AIF 25/2/1941. Died 14/9/1944.

Military service information

Conflict: Second World War 1939-1945

Service: Australian Army

Military unit: 4 Reserve Motor Transport Company

Service number: WX10963

Date of death: 14 September 1944

Place of death: Died at sea (*Rakuyo Maru*)

Rank at time of death: Private

Age: 39

Buried/commemorated: Labuan Memorial, Labuan, Malaysia

James Fleming enlisted in the Australian Army on 28 February 1941, and quoted his wife Katherine Ivy Fleming as his next of kin.

He was allotted to 4 Reserve Motor Transport Company and this unit was in Singapore and southern Malaya by August 1941.Major J Harris was in command and writing in the unit diary (AWM) indicated that they were working day and night with up to 50 trucks moving supplies and men on the island.

But the Japanese forces were rapidly moving south capturing Malaya then attacking Singapore island with heavy fighting and on 15 February 1942 the Allied forces, now surrounded and with water supplies cut off, surrendered.

Private Fleming was among the men taken prisoner of war, held initially in the Changi area of Singapore. The Japanese forces soon began dispersing the prisoners to work on various projects. Some men were sent to the notorious Burma railways, some kept in Singapore, others to Borneo. Later the Japanese authorities began shipping captives to Japan to work in factories there.

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On 4 September 1944 a convoy set off from Singapore to Japan including two ships carrying POWs from Singapore. The convoy, which also included freight and materials, was attacked by US submarines and on 12 September the *Rakuyo Maru* carrying over 1300 prisoners was torpedoed by USN submarine *Growle*r. Most prisoners died over the next few days, including James Fleming.

Fleming was not the only railwayman to suffer this fate – Edward John Doran (WX10551) was a POW for 2½ years and died in the sinking of Japanese transport ship, *Tamahoko Maru* on 24/6/1944.

Additional/personal information:

James Fleming was born in Wick in Scotland, a son of Alexander and Mary Fleming. When he enlisted he was married to Katherine Ivy Fleming (nee Pearce) but it is not known whether they married in Scotland or in Australia. It appears from family notices in the newspapers that he had a daughter Elizabeth, however neither the marriage nor the birth are available in WA public records for more details.

> FLEMING.-In proud memory of Jim. late WAGR. taken POW, Singapore, now missing. Presumed dead. Inserted by his loving wife and daughter. Babs and Elizabeth.
>
> FLEMING.-In memory of our dear Son-in-law. taken POW, Singapore. Now missing, presumed dead. Inserted by Mr and Mrs H. Pearce (Merredin). Both *The West Australian* 21/11/1944p1
>
> FLEMING (James).-In proud memory of our son-in-law, died September 14. 1944, whilst POW. Inserted by Mr and Mrs Pearce. *The West Australian* 15/9/1945p1

His widow remained in Perth and died at the age of 69 in 1973.

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. Family information and collation by G.Higham.

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