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Howard, Edgar Joseph

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



Peace Memorial at Midland Workshops

Rail employment information

Employer:	Western Australian Government Railways
Branch:	Traffic
Designation:	Ticket Examiner

Rail employment notes: Born 25/6/1912. Joined WAGR 5/11/1928 aged 16 as Junior Worker, Traffic Branch, Perth. Transferred to Bunbury 8/7/1929 and appointed Porter 25/6/1933. Transferred to Perth 30/7/1934 and Harvey 4/2/1935. Promoted to Ticket Collector, Fremantle 31/7/1936 and transferred to Shunter, Perth Goods 18/2/1938, R&DG Porter, Wagin 9/6/1938 and Ticket Examiner, Bunbury 4/4/1939.

Enlisted in AIF 7/8/1940. Died 1/7/1943.

Military service information

Conflict:	Second World War 1939-1945
Service:	Australian Army
Military unit:	2/4th Machine Gun Battalion
Service number:	WX7628
Date of death:	1 July 1943
Place of death:	Thailand
Rank at time of death:	Sergeant
Age:	31

Buried/commemorated: Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand

Edgar Howard enlisted in the AIF 7/8/1940 and was given service number WX7628 in the Army. He named his wife Elsie as his next of kin.

Late in 1940 Australia had formed as 2/4th Machine Gun battalion, to be part of a proposed 8th Division and Edgar Howard was transferred to this new unit. It would turn out to be a tragic choice. This Battalion, of nearly 1000 men, was mostly formed of West Australians and trained initially at Northam then shipped to Woodside in South Australia. The Battalion was then taken to Darwin by a series of very slow trains and dusty road tracks. The next move was by ship, the *Aquitania*, but not direct – it sailed vis Sydney to collect more men then to Fremantle where it moored offshore and soldiers were denied shore leave, This caused a riot and numerous defections via barges and launches which came out with supplies. Eventually the ship sailed, with some of the men who had gone ashore – others were put on a later ship. The Battalion landed in Singapore on 25 January 1942. 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.

Sergeant Howard was among the men taken prisoner of war, held initially in the Changi area of Singapore. The Japanese forces soon began dispersing the captives to work on various projects.

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The 2/4th suffered very badly: according to the AWM website: “Between 8 and 15 February the 2/4th had 137 men killed or missing… by the war's end, another 263 men from the battalion had died as prisoners.” There was also great uncertainty, as families could be told only that their relatives were “missing”. The newspapers of 10 July 1942 carried a list from the military of 760 WA men “missing”, mostly from the fall of Singapore but confirmation of life or death would be a long time coming.

Sergeant Howard was sent to work on the infamous Burma-Thailand railway. Conditions there were harsh indeed, and he died on 1 July 1943 of cholera.

His remains were recovered and buried in the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery in Thailand.

Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, Thailand. Prisoners of war who died working on the Thai-Burma railway are generally buried or remembered here. Photo A.Tilley	

Additional/personal information:

Edgar Howard was born on 25/6/1912 in the Bunbury area. He appears to have been known in both family and army circles as “Tim”.

In 1932 he married Elsie B Pickersgill (BDM) and this couple had 2 children. Unfortunately his son died while Edgar was a P.O.W. and as communications with the prisoners were almost non-existant, he probably never knew:

> HOWARD.—On September 24, 1944, at Scarborough, as the result of an accident, Peter John, dearly loved only son of Tim (P.O.W. Malaya) and Elsie Howard, 179 Spencer Street, South Bunbury. Little brother of Pam. Aged 5 years 1 month. *Harvey Murray Times* 12/10/1944p7

The fate of most prisoners was really only known after the war ended and family notices were seen on the anniversary date:

> HOWARD. Sgt. E. J.(Tim). WK I638. A Coy.. 2/4th AL G. Battalion proud and loving memory of our dear husband and Daddy, Tim, died while P.O.W., Thailand, July 1, 1943. Cherished memories.
>
> HOWARD. Sgt. E. J. (Tim). WXIG28, . 2/4 M.G.B.--Died of illness. July 1, 1943, P.O.W.. Kanya. Thailand, dearest brother of Hilda, brother-in-law of Fred. Fond uncle of Valme and Russell (Shenton Park) O how we miss him, My brother Tim.
>
> HOWARD, Edgar J. (Tim).-- In loving memory of our dear son and brother WX7623. Sgt. A Company. 2/4 M.G. Battalion, who died whilst P.O.W., Thailand. July 1. 1943. Always remembered by his father mother and Wilfred. Fred and Hilda.
>
> HOWARD. E. J. (Tim), Set., WX7628. A Coy., 2/4th M.G. Batt.-In loving memory of our son-in-law, who died , while prisoner of war, Thailand. July 1. 1943. All *The West Australian* 1/7/1946p1

Further Information

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More detailed information on this battalion and the railwaymen among its soldiers may also be found on the website *http://2nd4thmgb.com.au/* including photos of Edgar Howard.

A readable account of the 2/4th and its formation, training, transport and captivity, by a survivor. can be found in the book "A yarn or two" by Don Lee, published by Hesperian press as ISBN 0859052788.

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----------