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Philp, William Hawkesley

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
Branch:	Traffic
Designation:	Checker

Rail employment notes: Born 17/12/1907. Joined WAGR 14/10/1936 as Labourer, CCE Branch, Collie.

Enlisted in AIF 12/8/1940. Died of illness as a POW 18/9/1943.

Military service information:

Conflict:	Second World War 1939-1945
Service:	Australian Imperial Force
Military unit:	2/4th Machine Gun Battalion
Service number:	WX7902
Date of death:	18 September 1943
Place of death:	Thailand
Rank at time of loss:	Private
Age:	35

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

William Hawkesley Philp enlisted in the Australian Army on 13 August 1940, nominating his wife Violet Philp as his next of kin. He was allotted service number WX7902. At the time he was resident in Collie.

Late in 1940 Australia formed as 2/4th Machine Gun battalion, to be part of a proposed 8th Division and Bill Hawkesley 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. After some further training 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.

Private Philp 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.

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

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"missing". The newspapers of 10 July 1942 carried a list from the military of 760 men "missing", just from WA and mostly from the fall of Singapore.

Prisoner Philp was sent to work on the infamous Burma-Thailand railway. Conditions there were harsh indeed, and he died on 18 September 1943 of illness.

His body was 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:

William Philp was born in Mount Barker WA in 1907. In 1930 he married Violet Adele Maude Lehrke in Perth, although his wife called herself Verna) and the couple had at least three children. There was negligible opportunity for correspondence with the prisoners so it was along time of uncertainty before deaths were confirmed.

> PHILP, W. H. (Bill), 2/4th MG Batt, died of illness. September 19, 1943, while POW. Thailand; loved son of Mr and Mrs W. J. Philp, of Claremont; loving brother of Molly (Mrs J. R. Grlffiths, Lake Grace) and Jack (Sydney). The West Australian 18/9/1945p1
>
> PHILP. W. H. (Bill). 2/4th MG Btn. Died of illness while POW, Thailand. September 19, 1943; beloved husband of Verna, loving Daddy of June, Wendy and Richard. …
>
> PHILP. W. H. (Bill). late Collie, died of illness while POW. Thailand. September 19. 1943. Ever remembered by aunty Kittle and Connie.
> Both The West Australian 21/9/1945p1

Further information

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

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