

Lost to the Western Front



RESTING PLACE: Lance Corporal James Potts is buried in Derry House Cemetery No. 2, Belgium.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

■ Peter McLady

TWO of the six sons born to a Stanthorpe mining family died less than two months apart on the Western Front in the First World War.

The men had been born on the same February date three years apart but enlisted in different towns under different names.

Alfred Herbert Potts enlisted at Armidale, New South Wales, on January 4, 1916, and Walter James Potts enlisted at Bundaberg, Queensland, on August 25, 1916, as Roy William Smith. Walter and Alfred Potts were the sons of tin miner Joah de Lacy Potts and wife Ellen of Stanthorpe.

In 1917 they were both fighting on the Western Front in France and Belgium. In August, Walter was killed in action as the Anzacs prepared for their first attack in the Battle of Passchendaele. In October, Alfred died when the Australian 3rd Division attacked the Passchendaele ridge.

Walter's enlistment under an assumed name led to a series of misunderstandings and mistakes that would take his family more than six years to unravel. When he enlisted, Walter said he was born in Stanthorpe and his next-of-kin was his father, Joseph Potts Smith, who was still living there.

A few days after enlisting, Walter wrote to his parents to explain why he enlisted under a false name:

My Dear Father and Mother. Just these few lines to let you know where I am.

Hoping this will not give you any shock. I came into camp this morning. I gave my name as Roy William Smith. If you are going to disown me for doing it don't answer this letter. My reason for doing so was I did not know that Bundaberg was a final push so if the Doctor had passed me up this and sent me down here and got passed out I would have to pay my fare back. Bob Goodsall is in camp here. So if you do site (sic) address, Private Roy W. Smith, C. Company, Enoggera.

It appears Walter failed the medical examination at his first attempt to enlist. He travelled to Bundaberg to try again but feared that if he failed the medical again, the Army would make him pay the rail fare back to home. Therefore, he decided to enlist under a false name.

Walter joined the 7th reinforcements of the 47th Battalion. He left Brisbane on active service aboard HMAT Marathon on October 27, the same ship that had taken Alfred to England five months earlier. Walter arrived in Plymouth, England, in January 1917 from where he travelled to Codford Training Camp on the Salisbury Plain.

Following several months of training he left on May 3 for the Western Front where he joined his battalion in the field. Walter did not have long to adjust to life on the front line. On June 7, the 47th Battalion took a leading role in the attack on the first day of the Battle of Messines. Walter survived the fighting at Messines despite the battalion

suffering 463 casualties, including 126 who were killed in action, mostly on the first day of the battle (Deayton 2011, 154).

In August, after recovering from fighting at Messines, the 47th Battalion returned to the front line at Wytchaete, north of Messines. Here they relieved the King's Royal Rifle Corps who had their headquarters in a pillbox known as Derry House. After two weeks in the front line, the battalion moved back to trenches known as Torreken Farm.

On August 1, Walter James Potts was promoted to Lance Corporal. Eighteen days later he was killed in action at Torreken Farm and was buried at Derry House Cemetery. He was 25.

The Stanthorpe Border Post reported Walter's death on September 21:

The sad news reached Stanthorpe on Wednesday last that Private Walter Potts, of Stanthorpe, had been killed in action. Private Potts left Brisbane in October after undergoing training in Enoggera camp with the 7th Reinforcements of the 47th Battalion. We feel sure the sympathy of all will go out to the bereaved relatives in their sad loss. Mr. and Mrs. Potts have another son in France fighting for the Empire.

On the same day, Walter's father, Joah, wrote to Army Base Records in an attempt to have his son's name properly recorded.

Joah did not know his other son, Alfred, was killed in action at Passchendaele a week before he wrote the letter.



Potts was killed in action at Torreken Farm.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

In October and December 1917 there are notes in Walter's Service Record stating that documentary evidence had been produced showing his name to be Roy William Potts. The ongoing confusion appears to be partly as a result of the following letter sent by the Shire Clerk Edward Shelford to Colonel Luscombe on September 21, 1917:

Roy William Smith Killed. With reference to telegrams of 19th-20th re the above soldier, and any reply, I have to state that we have found out the proper persons required. Smith's name is Roy William Potts and his father's name is Joah (not Joseph although he generally is called Joe) Potts. The

Wesleyan Minister kindly went yesterday to break the news to him. It appears the young fellow tried to enlist in his right name but was turned down and eventually enlisted at Bundaberg, so I am informed as Smith. At any rate he is a native of Stanthorpe his parents have lived here over 40 years to my personal knowledge. As to his father appearing as Smith, I think that can be easily explained - when he gave his name as Smith and was asked his father name, probably the answer was Joseph Potts, and the recruiter may have thought those were Christian names naturally enough be Smith, same given by the deceased.

“A few days after, Walter wrote to his parents to explain why he enlisted under a false name.”

Mr. Potts naturally enough wishes the name put right. He has another son at the front - he also desires to know who the next of kin is. According to your last telegram the Allottee is Mrs. Alice Hyde, the Minister states she is the deceased sister, of that I have no personal knowledge. At any rate there is no doubt as to names - Mr. Potts address is Quart Pot Creek Stanthorpe and he would be very thankful to hear from your department on the above. Thanking you on behalf of the family.

Finally, in September 1922, there is a note in Walter's Service Record stating it has been ascertained that the correct name of Lance Corporal Roy William Smith was Walter James Potts. However, it was also noted that the Memorial Plaque and Scroll for Walter would be distributed in the name of Roy William Smith.

The inscription on Walter's headstone reads:
Walter James Potts served as 3033 Lance Cpl RW Smith, 47th Bn Australian Inf. 19th August 1917, Age 25. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away