

# Fighting son lost to battle after abrupt stint in field

## Newly-wed sniped at Dernancourt

■ Peter McLady

THE French village of Dernancourt was the scene of heavy fighting during the massive German offensive of March and April 1918.

The Australian 12th Brigade defeated a determined German attack on March 28 but suffered 137 casualties.

On April 5, the Germans launched a new attack near Dernancourt utilising the full force of two and a half infantry divisions.

Greatly outnumbered, the Australian 12th and 13th Brigades resisted strongly but were eventually outflanked by the Germans. Both brigades fell back to their support positions from where a counter-attack was launched later in the day.

The Germans advance was eventually pushed back and most of the lost ground was recaptured (AWM 2018).

The Australians suffered 1,230 casualties including three men from Stanthorpe. Private Robert "Rob" Watkinson and Private Arthur "Jerry" Davis were killed in action on April 5. Private Edmund "Ted" Stewart died in the fighting the following day.

Growing up, Robert lived with his parents, Joseph and Jane Watkinson, in the family home at Kingswood Orchard, Applethorpe. Robert attended Warwick Central Boys School and became an orchardist, but his wife Ida later stated Robert worked as a window dresser and a ticket writer. A ticket writer designed and painted advertising signs that were displayed in shop windows.

Robert enlisted in Toowoomba on February 14, 1917 after previously making five attempts to enlist only to be rejected each time on medical grounds. Robert married Ida Clarice Green, of Warwick, at Neil Street Methodist Church, Toowoomba, 10 days before he embarked for overseas on active duty.

The couple lived at "Lorna", Percy Street, Warwick, with Ida's parents.

Robert left Australia aboard HMT Miltiades on July 31, disembarking in Glasgow on October 2. He moved to Codford on the

Salisbury Plain for four months further training.

Robert attended and graduated from an Officer's School but as there were no officer vacancies, at his own request, he was drafted into the ranks. Robert proceeded to France on January 30, 1918, joining up with the 47th Battalion on February 9.

Private Robert Watkinson died at the Battle of Dernancourt on April 5, 1918 at the age of 27 years. On March 27, the 47th Battalion was ordered into action in an attempt to hold the line at Dernancourt. Together with the other battalions of the

the 47th Battalion gave the Red Cross further details regarding Robert's death:

"I know Watkinson was killed on April 5th at 5 o'clock in the afternoon - 600 yards on the south side of Albert and Amiens Road half way between Albert and Lavieville. He was shot through the forehead and died instantly. He was never buried as he was halfway between us and Fritz, there were about 50 others too. We could not get at them, but shortly after we were relieved by the 2nd Division, it is possible they may have been able to get the bodies in and bury them.

Private Charles May from Brisbane told the Red Cross: "I was near Albert on Apr 5/18. Watkinson was there. We were on open ground. We had just driven back the enemy and were holding on till relief. Watkinson was shot through the head by a sniper about 1 yard from me. He died at once. I cannot say if he was buried, as we left that night for billets. I have already written to his wife."

Private Robert Watkinson is mentioned in the book *Australia's Fighting Sons of the Empire*:

"He was attached to the 47th Battalion, and fell in the defence of Amiens on April 5, 1918. The Battalion suffered very heavily, and had to be disbanded owing to the lack of reinforcements. His mate, writing to his wife, said: "He had been fearlessly and bravely fighting by my side during the whole period, but we were up against overwhelming odds, and it was while what was left of our Battalion was making a good stand that poor Rob was shot by a sniper" (Jackson & Co 1919, 361).

On April 7, 1919, Ida Watkinson wrote to Army Base Records:

"Please advise me if any particulars have come to hand regarding the death and burial place of my husband R.S. Watkinson who was killed in France on April 5, 1918. I have never received any definite information as to where he is buried, or if his body was recovered by our own men. Up to date I have not received any of his personal belongings although his



**Watkinson was shot through the head by a sniper about 1 yard from me. He died at once.**

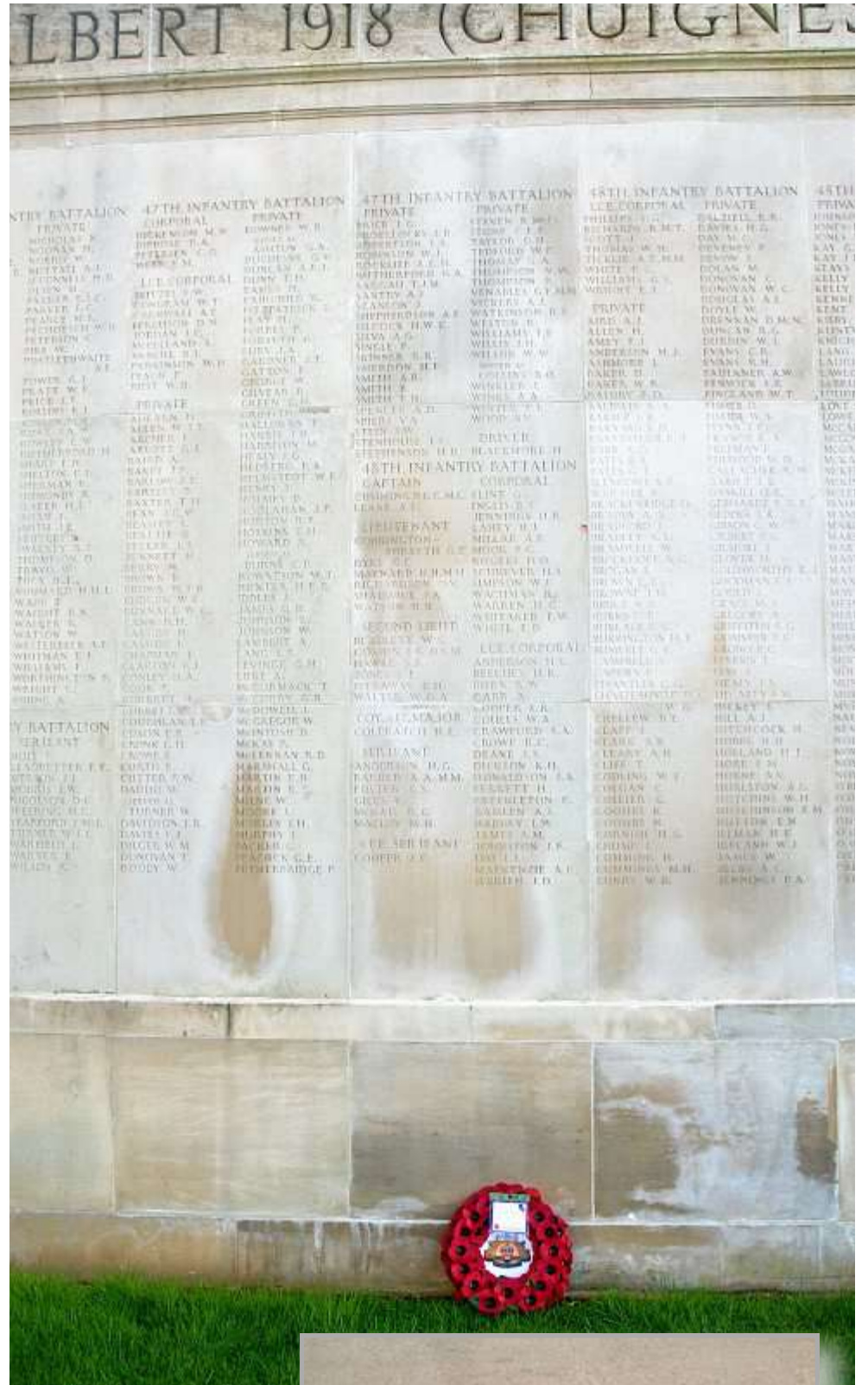
— Private Charles May

Australian 12th and 13th Brigades, they dug in, and despite being heavily outnumbered, fought off daily attacks.

The 47th Battalion held the line but on April 5 "unfortunately for the 47th, the numerically weakest battalion in the line, it would bear the full force of the heaviest attack ever made against Australian troops during the First World War" (Deayton 2011, 217).

The German attack broke through the 47th Battalion lines before the Australians forces were able to regroup and launched a heroic counter-attack against the advancing Germans. The disproportionate cost of the fighting for the 47th Battalion between March 27 and April 5 was a total of 503 casualties (Deayton 2011, 253).

Captain Charles Young of



**WALL OF HONOUR:** Stanthorpe's Private Robert Watkinson was killed in action during the battle of Dernancourt. PHOTOS: CONTRIBUTED

officer told me some would be forwarded. Any information you can supply will be greatly appreciated."

Ida never received Robert's personal belongings as they were lost at sea with the sinking of SS Barunga. While heading to Australia, SS Barunga was hit by a torpedo from a German submarine 240km south-west of the Isles of Scilly on July 15, 1918. There were 800 sick and wounded men onboard but all were rescued by destroyers.

Army Base Records wrote to Ida on July 4, 1922 that although they had said on August 3 that her husband had been buried in the Military Cemetery, Dernancourt Railway Line, Albert, overseas authorities now said it had not been possible to find his grave.

Private Robert Watkinson is remembered with honour on the wall of the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, France.

The Stanthorpe Border Post reported on Robert's brother Arthur Vernon Watkinson on April 27, 1917:

"A cable has just been received reporting that Lieutenant Verne



**A wreath pays tribute to Private Watkinson.**

Watkinson, serving in France with the A.I.F. is missing. This young soldier enlisted early in the war and was wounded on Gallipoli and after his recovery was ordered to the Western Front, from which centre this disquieting news has been received. Lieutenant Watkinson is the son of the late Mr. Joseph Watkinson, of Applethorpe, whose second son and son-in-law are now in camp. The two boys are nephews of Mr. & Mrs. J Warren, of Stanthorpe."

On April 11, 1917, Lieutenant Watkinson was fighting with the 15th Battalion in the Battle of Bullecourt. Wounded in the right arm, Verne was taken

as a prisoner-of-war and interned at Karlsruhe in Germany. Also fighting with the 15th Battalion that day was Private Albert Jolly, of Stanthorpe, who was also captured but died of his wounds in hospital in Germany. Private Edwin Hindmarsh, of Ballandean, also died in the fighting with the 15th Battalion the same day. Lieutenant Watkinson survived being a prisoner-of-war and was promoted to Captain in April 1919.

The book *Fighting Sons of the Empire*, carries a photograph of Private Robert Watkinson alongside two of his brothers-in-law from Warwick, Privates William and Herbert Green, who returned to Australia.