



PICTURE IN TIME: A portrait of William Gawith from the Australian War Memorial Collection.



William Gawith's grave site at the Peronne Communal Cemetery Extension in France. PHOTOS: PETER MCLADY

The last of a few good men

Private Gawith one of three Stanthorpe boys to die in final offensive in WWI

■ Peter McLady

PRIVATE William James Gawith was one of three Stanthorpe men to die in the final Allied offensive that ultimately led to the end of World War I.

William died in heavy fighting in an attack by the 25th Battalion near Mont St Quentin on September 2, 1918.

Three days earlier, Private George Alexander was killed by enemy shellfire in fighting between Herbecourt and the Somme Canal.

George's best friend and business partner, Private James Scott, died in an attack on the Hindenberg Line, east of Peronne, three weeks later.

Scott was the last man from Stanthorpe to die in battle in World War I.

William Gawith was the son of Joseph and Henrietta Gawith, of Lyra, Queensland.

Joseph had emigrated from Hellifield, Yorkshire, England, while Henrietta was from West Maitland, New South Wales.

William was born on September 29, 1892 at Greenmount on the Darling Downs. His family later moved to Lyra where William grew up and attended school. He was working as an orchardist before joining up to fight in World War I.

William enlisted in Toowoomba in January 1917, joining the 19th Reinforcements of the 25th Battalion. He had had some military experience, having served for 33 days in the Citizen Military Forces at Newtown Park in Toowoomba.

William left Sydney on active service aboard HMAT *Wiltshire* on February 8, 1917, arriving in Devonport, England, on April 11. He

underwent six months further training at the Rollestone and Fovant Camps on the Salisbury Plain.

William left for the fighting on the Western Front on October 17 and one week later he joined the 25th Battalion, which was fighting in the Battle of Passchendaele.

“Yet another of our brave men has fallen in the battlefield fighting for liberty and freedom.”

— Stanthorpe Border Post, September 27, 1918

As part of the attack by the 2nd Division A.I.F., the 25th Battalion moved into the front line on the Belleward Ridge on the night of September 19.

The 2nd Division was at the centre of a 13km Allied front. The attack began at 5.40am and the 25th Battalion quickly captured its objectives, but lost 43 men killed and 128 wounded. (Doneley 1997, 99)

The Battalion was called into action again on October 4 in the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge. In the lead-up to the attack, the 25th Battalion had to withstand a German infantry attack. The Allied artillery barrage broke up the German attack, allowing the 25th Battalion to move forward with rifle-fire and bayonets, causing the German troops to retreat.

The 25th Battalion continued with its planned attack on the enemy lines, which included the strongly

held village of Zonnebeke. By mid-morning the 25th Battalion had captured its objectives, including Zonnebeke.

The 26th Battalion moved through its lines and went forward to capture Broodseinde Ridge. In this operation the 25th Battalion captured several hundred German prisoners as well as eight machine guns. But again the cost was high: 40 men killed and 195 wounded (Doneley 1997, 102).

The 25th Battalion suffered further casualties in the unsuccessful attack on the village of Passchendaele on October 9. When William joined the 25th Battalion, it was positioned in support lines on the newly captured Westhoek Ridge. Despite being in a support line, the Battalion was in range of the German artillery and casualties were suffered on a daily basis.

“Every night shells and gas came over. The Germans were now using mustard gas. In the short time in support, the Battalion lost six officers and 202 men gassed.” (Doneley 1997, 108)

On April 2, the 25th Battalion began an arduous journey to Daours on the Somme, arriving five days later. The Battalion took up a front line position at St Lawrence Farm which it held until relieved in early May.

On August 8, the Allied forces launched the Battle of Amiens, where all five Australian infantry divisions fought together for the first time. The role of the 25th Battalion was to support the other three battalions of the 7th Brigade.

The German forces were taken by surprise and the 7th brigade captured its objectives within two hours. In the attack, the 25th



Peronne Communal Cemetery Extension, France.

Battalion lost five men who were killed and 22 wounded. The Battalion continued the attack the next day south of the village of Framerville. Despite heavy opposition, the 25th Battalion captured 122 prisoners and 18 machine guns. (Doneley 1997, 146)

A further advance was planned for August 10 and the remaining men of the 25th Battalion moved forward with the 11th Battalion to inflict significant casualties on the enemy.

On August 28, the Battalion moved back to the front line to the west of Proyart. The 25th Battalion joined a planned attack on Peronne and the high ground to the north, Mont St Quentin, to prevent the Germans from destroying bridges across the River Somme and moving back to the heavily fortified Hindenberg Line.

On September 2, the 25th Battalion was engaged in heavy fighting in the vicinity of Mont St Quentin. The attack was planned to clear the eastern approaches to Mont St Quentin and to secure the flank of the British 74th Division that was advancing to the north. According to the War Diary of the 25th Battalion, the attack began at 5.30am with an artillery barrage but soon the barrage outpaced the attacking troops as they

were held up by enemy machine gun fire.

“The enemy machine gun fire by this time was extremely hot and the whole line was temporarily checked. All ranks showed great dash and initiative from now on.” (AWM 1918)

The Battalion advanced despite stiff enemy resistance. In one enemy post alone, the Australian troops found 17 machine guns and two trench mortars abandoned. Despite the ongoing efforts of the enemy, the objective was reached at 7.20am. At least 60 German prisoners were captured as well as 42 machine guns, three anti-tank rifles and two trench mortars.

German casualties were estimated at 50 to 60. “A big percentage were killed by artillery fire and the rest by rifle and Lewis Gun fire and a few with the bayonet.” (AWM 1918)

The casualties for the operation for the 25th Battalion were one officer and 29 other ranks killed and eight officers and 106 other ranks wounded.

Private William James Gawith, 25, was one of those killed. He was buried in an isolated grave in a shell hole near barbed wire just east of Mont St Quentin and 2km north of Perrone, France.

Company Sergeant Major Wallace McGregor, from

Bega, told the Red Cross:

I saw Gawith of C. Company wounded (don't know where) by machine gun bullet near to me about 6am at Haut Allaines. He was conscious and was taken back by stretcher bearers (don't know names) to dressing station where he died. He was in my platoon. Gawith was of medium height, stout build, sallow complexion, about 28 years [sic]. A very good fellow.

On September 27 the Stanthorpe Border Post reported William's death:

Yet another of our brave men has fallen in the battlefield fighting for liberty and freedom. On Monday the sad news came through that Private William James Gawith, son of Mr. J. Gawith, of Lyra, was killed in action on the 2nd September. No particulars have been received, but Private Gawith was on the Western Front, and had seen a good deal of fighting. Much sympathy will be felt for the parents, who are old and highly respected residents of Lyra.

In November 1919, Army Base Records informed Henrietta that William had been re-interred in Peronne Communal Cemetery Extension. According to the Army, the work was carried out with every measure of care and reverence in the presence of a chaplain.