**Private Harry Washington Rolton, 18th/24th Battalion, AIF, WW1.**

I would like to introduce my great grand uncle Harry Washington Rolton, whose short life culminated with his death on the WW1 frontline battlefields in Belgium, on the 8th October 1917.[[1]](#footnote-1) This story will centre around his AIF WW1 service, primarily gained from historical records research of the Australian National Archives, Australian War Museum, Battalion War Diaries, and other secondary sources.

Harry Rolton’s story commenced with his birth in 1896 at Swan Hill, Victoria, having parents Walter and Mary (Carr) Rolton.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In 1916, Mary Rolton, with youngest son Harry, and her thirteen-year-old granddaughter Melba Peterson, (my grandmother) were living in Alexandria, Victoria, where Mary operated a laundry in the centre of the township, whilst Harry worked locally as a labourer.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Years ago, sometime in the early 1970’s, I had casual discussions with my late grandmother Melba Ghent about her early life, where she recalled that her memories of Harry were, - “that he was a caring young man- like a big brother- but he had sadly died in the war”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

On the 10th October 1916, Harry, now a twenty-year-old, signed his AIF Attestation of Person Enlisted for Service Abroad at the Melbourne Town Hall, Victoria.[[5]](#footnote-5) He had previously passed his medical tests at Mansfield on 28th September 1916, being declared fit for duty.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Private Harry Rolton, Service Number 6374, initially spent time with A Company, 23rd Infantry Battalion at the Royal Park Barracks, Parkville, being “kitted” out and given basic Army training.[[7]](#footnote-7) On the 15th November 1916, Harry was assigned to the 18th Reinforcements/24th Battalion.[[8]](#footnote-8)

There is no record of why Harry Rolton had volunteered to join the AIF. I tend to think that it may have been a combination of events such as - advertisements calling for more volunteers and newspaper readings about courageous efforts and sacrifices being made by fellow countrymen[[9]](#footnote-9)- the second marriage of his mother, in 1916 to David Wilson at Alexandria, Victoria, perhaps would ease his home responsibilities.[[10]](#footnote-10) In addition, his older brother David had enlisted on the 7th February, 1916, in the 24th AIF Battalion.[[11]](#footnote-11)

On the 23rd, November 1916, young Private Rolton boarded the *HMAT Hororata*, with his comrades at Princes Pier Melbourne for the voyage to England, to be readied for fighting on the battlefields of Europe.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Harry would have had mixed emotions of pride and excitement, and perhaps a fear of whether he would ever see his family again, whilst waving back to the huge farewelling crowd gathered on the pier.

The *HMAT Hororata*, was a ship owned by the NZ Shipping Company of London and leased by the Commonwealth until the 11th September 1917, during in which time it had made 6 trips from Australia to England carrying our troops.[[13]](#footnote-13)

After a voyage taking some ten weeks, Harry disembarked from the ship at Plymouth, England, on the 29thJanuary, 1916.[[14]](#footnote-14) Once on land again, Harry perhaps huddled on the pier with his mates in the cold English winter conditions - maybe sharing cigarettes and chatting about what lay ahead, whilst awaiting the train trip to Larkhill Training Camp.

Larkhill Camp, located at Salsbury Plains, Wiltshire, was a British Army training Camp for Commonwealth troops, where soldiers received intensive military training before being deployed to France or Belgium.[[15]](#footnote-15)

By now, Harry would have been accustomed to close quarter living conditions with soldiers, having completed the long voyage from Australia to England. Cramped quarters at the Camp would have led to many infections, with Harry contracting Mumps on the 14th February 1917and transferred to Parkhouse Hospital.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Once he had recovered from the Mumps, Harry would spend his time involved in daily drills, learning to build / defend trenches, and becoming competent in the use of his rifle and bayonet. Occasionally, he and his mates would have probably ventured into the nearby village of Durrington, to enjoy free time, and share stories with the locals over a few ales.

It was on the 4th June in 1917, when Harry and the 18th/24th, Reinforcement Battalion soldiers travelled to Folkestone, Kent, from where they were transported to the French port of Le Havre.

Folkestone, Kent was an important English port during WW1, with the harbour witnessing some 10 million troops either being sent across the Channel to the Western Front or being returned wounded / repatriated. [[17]](#footnote-17)

Once Harry had arrived in France, the battalion would have been sent to the 2nd Australian Division Base Depot (2 A.D.B.D.) located at Harfleur, near Le Havre for further training and await further deployment orders.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The AIF War Diaries daily records for the 24th Battalion, indicated that early in the month of June 1917, they had marched about 220 kilometres northwest from Harfleur Base Depot, and set up camp at the small village of Warloy-Baillon.[[19]](#footnote-19)

At Warloy-Baillon, daily life for Harry and his comrades continued with drills and the regular undertaking of mock battles in the local fields, woods, and villages. Perhaps he utilised some time to correspond with family back home? While there is no evidence of correspondence between Harry and his family in Australia, I feel sure that he would have sent and received letters from his mother.

During July 1917, much of the 24th Battalion’s time continued being spent on field training and preparation at camps, in and around villages, such as Le Transloy, and Villers-au-Flos, France. [[20]](#footnote-20)

It was on the 23rd July,1917, Harry first became sick with POU, (Pyrexia-fever of unknown origin), at Le Transloy.[[21]](#footnote-21) Initially, he was taken to Rouen 56 Central Clearing Station, then transferred via a unit from the 7th Australian Field Ambulance to Havre Hospital, to spend a month in recovery.[[22]](#footnote-22)

After rejoining the 24th Battalion at Wardrecques, he was part of the march past of the 2nd Australian Division AIF for the visiting Commander in Chief, Sir Douglas Haig taking the salute on the 29th August 1917.[[23]](#footnote-23)

By late September 1917, the battalion had moved up to the Bellewarde Ridge area, just east of Ypres, taking up positions in trenches that had been earlier vacated by the 28th Battalion AIF.

Unfortunately, Harry took ill yet again, with Trench Fever on the 24th September,1917 and was confined with the 7th Field Ambulance Brigade until rejoining his battalion on the 3rd October,1917, at De Knot Farm, near Zonnebeke, Belgium. [[24]](#footnote-24)

On the 4th and 5th days of October,1917, Harry and his comrades, struggling in terrible conditions, and knee-deep mud, continued to be engaged in fierce battle with the Germans at Broodseinde Ridge, near Zonnebeke.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Private Harry Rolton was killed in action, on the 8th October 1917.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In June 1920, Harry’s remains, (identified from his AIF discs) were exhumed from the area where he fell – the body’s location given the British war map reference D.28.b.60 x 70.- which I established, (2024) is now near the corner of De Patine, and Wolveestraat, Zonnebeke, Belgium.[[27]](#footnote-27)

His remains were reburied in 1920 at the Tyne Cot War Cemetery, Zonnebeke, Belgium in Plot 27, Row H, Grave number 24.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The Tyne Cot Cemetery is located on land, whereby at dawn on the 4th of October 1917, Australian battalions were in engaged in fierce fighting at the battle of Broodseinde Ridge - 1369 Australian soldiers are buried here, of which 791 remain unidentified.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Harry Rolton was just a young country man from Alexandria, Victoria. His short military service had been subject to multiple bouts of trench fever in horrendous wartime conditions. He had made the supreme sacrifice on the 8th October 1917, at the battle of Broodseinde Ridge, Belgium.

May he Rest in Peace.

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