

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Coleman, Patrick Eugene (Johnny) (1892–1950)

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Patrick Eugene (Johnny) Coleman (1892-1950), public servant and army officer, was born on 8 December 1892 at Malvern, Melbourne, son of John Coleman, hotelkeeper, and his wife Ellen, née Shanahan, both Victorian born. Educated at the local state school and at South Melbourne College, Patrick—known from childhood as 'Johnny'—was a good scholar. On 1 July 1910 he entered the Commonwealth Public Service as a clerk in the Department of Defence. Enlisting in the Australian Imperial Force on 16 August 1914, he was promoted staff sergeant and posted to 1st Division headquarters for clerical duties.

Having taken part in the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, Coleman transferred in July to the headquarters of the 2nd Division, then forming in Egypt, and was promoted warrant officer. He was returning to Gallipoli in the *Southland* when she was torpedoed on 2 September; though the ship remained afloat, he narrowly escaped drowning in a lifeboat accident. Promoted honorary lieutenant in March 1916 and appointed superintending clerk at I Anzac Corps headquarters next month, he moved to France and in October became the A.I.F.'s deputy assistant adjutant-general. From January to August 1917 he filled the same post at A.I.F. administrative headquarters, London, before resuming duty on the Western Front. Described as a 'quiet spoken, courteous, and efficient young staff officer, always reliable and conscientious', Coleman was twice mentioned in dispatches. He was appointed O.B.E. in June 1918 and promoted major on 1 November; following the Armistice, he occupied several staff positions in London. On 21 April 1920 in St Robert's Catholic Church, Harrowgate, he married Doris Smith; they were to remain childless. His A.I.F. appointment terminated in Melbourne on 3 October.

Selected from 101 applicants, on 1 January 1921 Coleman was appointed secretary both to the Air Board and to the Air Council. He ensured that R.A.A.F. Headquarters functioned smoothly and enjoyed warm relationships with his uniformed colleagues. In time he became thoroughly identified with the running of the air force. His significant role was recognized in 1934 when he was nominated to attend the Imperial Defence College, London. On 13 November 1939 the War Cabinet decided to appoint a separate minister for air and to make Coleman permanent head of the new department; two weeks later, however, the position was given to **M. C. Langslow** and Coleman took the assistant-secretaryship. In September 1941 he accompanied Australia's special representative **Sir Earle Page** to England and remained in London as secretary to Page's committee of military advisers. By mid-1943 Coleman was back in Melbourne. He transferred to the Department of Defence in September 1946 and became one of **Sir Frederick Shedden**'s assistant-secretaries. Coleman was promoted first assistant-secretary in July 1948 and occasionally acted as permanent head.

A kindly man, with a keen sense of humour, he was 5 ft 8½ ins (174 cm) tall and had blue eyes, dark hair and a fresh complexion. Survived by his wife, he died of hypertensive renal disease on 13 April 1950 at his Elsternwick home and was buried in Brighton cemetery. **Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams** paid tribute to his hard work, ability

and experience.

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