

A SOLDIER'S STORY



Service No.: 346
Name: William Bromell Drake BARBER
Nickname: Bill



Medals and Decorations

1914 - 15 Star
British War Medal
Victory Medal

Rank: Private
Service: Army
Enlisted: 30 Jul 1915
KIA: 20 Jul 1916

Bill was born on 29 Aug 1872 at Goolwa (SA) to William Barber and Elizabeth Barber (nee Hennessy). He was the fourth eldest of 7 children in the family, 6 boys and a girl. His family lived at Goolwa (SA) and Bill went to school there. Shortly after completion of schooling he moved to the Lipson area and worked as a labourer on Warratta Vale Station until his enlistment in the Army at Keswick at the age of 43. At that time he recorded his occupation as labourer.

On enlistment Bill was sent to 2nd Depot Battalion (Bn) at Mitcham for training before being allocated to 32nd Bn.

The 32nd Bn was raised on 9 Aug 1915 in Mitcham as part of the AIF and was initially made up of personnel from SA and WA; most of the recruits were miners and farmers. The Bn concentrated in SA and undertook basic training; Bill was taken on strength at this time. The unit embarked aboard HMAT "*Geelong*" at Adelaide on 28 Nov 1915 bound for Suez, arriving on 10 Dec 1915. It arrived amidst the aftermath of the failed Gallipoli campaign.

After a further training period the unit was on the move again, this time to Alexandria, before embarking aboard HMAT "*Transylvania*" on 17 Jun 1916, bound for Marseilles (France), arriving and disembarking on 23 Jun 1916.

The Bn immediately moved to the Western Front and was deployed into the Armentieres sector. The following month his Bn was committed to the front line for the first time on 16 Jul 1916. Three days after taking up position in the trenches, the 32nd took part in the fighting around Fromelles as part of the 8th Brigade's initial assault on the extreme left of the Australian front line, focussed around a position known as the "Sugarloaf". The Bn suffered 718 casualties—a third of the Bn total casualties for the

entire war—which equalled almost 90 percent of its effective strength. Bill was one of the casualties during this action, being posted as missing in action on 19 Jul 1916, three days after the arrival of his unit at the front.

On 24 Nov 1916 he was listed as a prisoner of war on advice from Germany. On 13 Mar 1917 his identity discs were returned from Germany with no particulars offered, other than the "soldier is deceased".

As a result of this information the War Office declared that: "the soldier was to be reported as Killed in Action at Fromelles Nord-Pas-de-Calais France on 20 Jul 1916", the day after he had been reported missing in action.

This must have been an extremely stressful time for his family as the series of letters between them and the Army would attest. His father died during this period and there was then difficulty determining who was the next of kin. Eventually in late 1922 it was determined that his medals and personal effects would be sent to his eldest brother and this was effected in late 1922, six years after the death of the soldier. However, it was also only effected after a terse letter from Army, stating in part: "I am holding this matter open for 21 days from this date, when if no reply is at hand, these mementos will be placed on the untraceable list." Not a very caring approach after 6 years of uncertainty!

Bill is buried in the Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery and his name is recorded on the Tumbay Bay Memorial.



1914-15 Star

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Dead Man's Penny



Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Cemetery, France