**William Henry BROWN**

**Service No:** 3356

**Rank:** Private

**Unit:** 60th Battalion, ‘C’ Company

**Born:** 5 Jan1888, Geelong, Vic, Australia

**Parents:** John Brown and Fanny Mitchell

**Occupation:** Porter, Victoria Railways

**Marital Status:** Single

**Children**: Two – both illegitimate

**Enlisted:** 18 June 1917, Melbourne, 29 yrs

**Assigned Unit:** 60th Battalion, 9th Reinforcements

**Embarked:** 16 July 1917, HMAT A16, Melbourne

**Theatre of War:** TheSomme,Western Front

**Major Battles:** German Spring Offensive

 Villers-Bretonneux, France

**Killed in Action:** 19 June 1918, Morlancourt, Somme, France.

**Buried:** 22 June 1918, Mericourt-L’Abbe Communal Cemetery Extension, Plot 3, Row C



What motivates a person to fight for their country? William Henry Brown enlisted in World War I in May 1917 at the age of twenty-nine, during a time when Australia had lost much of its enthusiasm for the war.[[1]](#endnote-1) Enlistment numbers had dropped significantly, decreasing from 124,352 in 1916 to 45,101 in 1917, following a peak of 165,912 in 1915.[[2]](#endnote-2) This decline resulted from a lack of enthusiastic young volunteers and the failed referendum to enforce conscription in Australia.[[3]](#endnote-3) Until this point, William had resisted all attempts by the Government to encourage enlistment, including the ‘Call to Arms’ in 1916.[[4]](#endnote-4) Ultimately, his decision to enlist would alter the course of his future, placing him in extreme danger and exposing him to unimaginable events and the loss of mates in the trenches.

Private William Henry Brown was born in 1888 in Geelong, Victoria, and was raised in Torquay, as the third son of John and Frances Brown.[[5]](#endnote-5) He had five brothers, two sisters and several half-siblings.[[6]](#endnote-6) His father was a hotel broker and wine merchant, while his mother grew up at Woolwich Barracks in London and came from a long line of British soldiers.[[7]](#endnote-7) His parents had both died in 1904 when he was just sixteen.[[8]](#endnote-8)

William enlisted on May 18, 1917, in Melbourne and gave his occupation as Railway employee and his religion as Church of England.[[9]](#endnote-9) He was assigned to the 1st Depot Battalion, Australian Imperial Force (AIF) training facility on May 23, 1917, before joining ‘C’ Company, 60th Infantry Battalion, 9th Reinforcements, under the command of Lt. Col. N. Marshall on June 18, 1917.[[10]](#endnote-10) The 60th Battalion was raised in Egypt on February 24, 1916, and formed part of the 15th Brigade of the 5th Division of the AIF.[[11]](#endnote-11) At the time of his enlistment, two of William’s brothers were already serving in the war. His youngest brother, Joseph, enlisted at the age of twenty in 1915, eager to join the war effort at its onset. He was captured in Fleurbaix, France, along with other soldiers from the 29th Battalion and became a prisoner of war in Germany for the duration of the war.[[12]](#endnote-12) An older brother, Albert, enlisted in 1916 and was fighting with the 58th Battalion in Ypres, Belgium.[[13]](#endnote-13)

So, what motivated William to enlist at that time? Was it guilt, fear of missing out, or social pressure? Perhaps he felt strong anti-German sentiments and a desire for revenge regarding his brother's captivity.[[14]](#endnote-14) Given his family's military tradition, could that have influenced his decision? These are all possible reasons, but his military records suggest another explanation. William had two illegitimate children born in 1915, so it’s possible that he might also have been attempting to escape his responsibilities.[[15]](#endnote-15)

William left Melbourne on July 16, 1917, aboard the HMAT 16, stopping in Sydney, and arrived in Liverpool two months later. On September 23, 1917, he joined the 15th Training Battalion in Hurdcott, Wiltshire, England. During his training, he was transferred to Codford. After spending three and a half months in England, William marched into Havre, France, via Southampton on January 18, 1918, where he was taken on strength with the 60th Battalion in the Beussent area of Calais, France.[[16]](#endnote-16)

On January 31, the 60th Battalion marched to Kemmel in Belgium and then to Wytschaete, near the front line. They spent the month of February primarily engaged in digging trenches, wiring, constructing shelters, as well as participating in military exercises and protecting the picquet line. The troops also had time to enjoy social activities, including football and cricket games.[[17]](#endnote-17)

On March 3, 1918, Russia withdrew from the war, which freed thousands of German soldiers to be redeployed to the Western Front. With American forces landing in Europe to support the Allies, the Germans launched a last-ditch effort to regain ground before the Allies strengthened their position. This offensive became known as the "German Spring Offensive."[[18]](#endnote-18)

On March 28, 1918, the Battalion relocated to Corbie in the Villers-Bretonneux area to protect a bridge following a German offensive. The area was subject to daily shelling and gas attacks.[[19]](#endnote-19)

On April 23, the 60th Battalion was sent to the front line to join the 57th Battalion. The Germans were becoming increasingly active. The weather was wet, cold, and foggy, and constant shelling and gas attacks necessitated that the soldiers always wear their gas masks. Lt. Col. Marshall described their mission as consisting of “raiding parties that will enter enemy trench systems to destroy works and emplacements, obtain prisoners and identification, and inflict casualties. Raiding parties will penetrate as far as indicated in reconnaissance to destroy emplacements in that area.”[[20]](#endnote-20) The troops did not sleep for three days but were described as in great spirits, unaware of what was to come.[[21]](#endnote-21)

In the early morning hours of April 24, the Germans captured Villers-Bretonneux, prompting immediate orders to recapture the town. At 3 pm, General Sir Brudenell White directed the 5th Division to come under the III (British) Corps.[[22]](#endnote-22) The Battalion was ordered to move north of Villers-Bretonneux to join the 8th (British) Division as part of a larger Allied operation that included Frenchmen, Algerians, Tunisians and Russians.[[23]](#endnote-23) The Allies encircled the Germans and drove them into the woods, capturing many in the process.[[24]](#endnote-24) This attack continued into April 25, coinciding with the third anniversary of the Anzac landings at Gallipoli and has now become almost legendary in Australia. An Anzac Day Dawn Service is held each year at the Australian National Memorial, near Villers-Bretonneux.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The Allies may have won this battle, but the war continued, and the 60th Battalion was about to face its most devastating conflict. On April 26 at 8 pm, the Battalion advanced to the front line. After a failed initial attempt to break through the German line, the Battalion launched a smaller attack. At 6:10 am on April 27, a substantial body of German troops unleashed a very heavy barrage, resulting in many casualties for ‘C’ Company, leaving them without any Officers, who were all killed or wounded by machine gun fire or shelling.[[26]](#endnote-26) William survived this battle physically unscathed, but one can only imagine the psychological trauma that it caused.

After some time to regroup, the Battalion continued to defend the front line.[[27]](#endnote-27) On the evening of June 15, they relieved the 21st Battalion in the right support near Morlancourt. ‘C’ Company was divided into three groups along the front line, engaged in vigorous patrolling to maintain control of “No Man’s Land”, the area between opposing armies and trench lines.[[28]](#endnote-28)

William was on fatigue duty in ‘No Man’s Land’ just after midnight on the June 19, amidst rain and foggy weather, when he was struck in the back of the head by shelling, killing him almost instantly.[[29]](#endnote-29) The Red Cross holds testimonies of nine witnesses that give accounts of his death and confirm his identity. Witnesses state that he was part of a wiring party returning home from Morlancourt in “No Man’s Land”. The party was back in the reserves, and it was their duty to dig trenches in the front line. The Germans began sending over gas shells, and William was hit when a shell exploded. He died within a few minutes.[[30]](#endnote-30) Private William Henry Brown was buried on June 22, 1918, at Mericourt-L’Abbe Communal Cemetery Extension, Plot 3, Row C, four miles east of Corbie, France.[[31]](#endnote-31) He was thirty years old.

William’s brother, Charles Brown, in Melbourne, received word of his death within weeks and notified the papers on July 6, 1918.[[32]](#endnote-32) The AIF received correspondence from Charles and their sister, Ada, requesting a photo of his grave and ‘any little thing to remember him by’.[[33]](#endnote-33) William’s brother, Albert, was severely wounded in September of 1917 in Ypres, Belgium and had returned home in April 1918.[[34]](#endnote-34) His brother, Joseph, was released from the German POW camp once the war was declared over and made it home to Australia in March 1919.[[35]](#endnote-35) By the end of the war Australia had suffered over 60,000 deaths and 150,000 wounded soldiers.[[36]](#endnote-36) The Brown family, like many others, had given so much.

In 1919, the AIF received a letter from the Neglected Children and Reformatory School, enquiring as to William’s whereabouts, as they were caring for one of his illegitimate children.[[37]](#endnote-37) The AIF was unaware of the existence of any children when it received this letter. Further enquiries revealed the existence of a second illegitimate child.[[38]](#endnote-38) Considering the existence of children, the AIF held onto his medals while they attempted to locate them.[[39]](#endnote-39) Unfortunately, they were unable to find the children, and after fifteen years of searching, they gave up and returned the medals to the Melbourne Barracks in May 1938.[[40]](#endnote-40) It is unclear if the medals were ever given to another family member.

Although we cannot be sure why William decided to join the war years after Australia had lost its appetite for it, perhaps a clue lies in the final words of the death announcement that his family placed in *The Age* newspaper. The announcement concluded with the words “Duty nobly done”.[[41]](#endnote-41) William may have felt it was his duty to join his brothers in the war, his duty as a member of the Brown family, his duty as a man, and his duty as an Australian. Whatever his motivations, it was undoubtedly a duty nobly done.

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