

George Thomas Matthews

Private 707, 51st Battalion, Australian Imperial Force

George Thomas Matthews was born in 1885 in Amersham. He was the second son of Thomas and Elizabeth Matthews (née Elizabeth Sarah Mead), both natives of Amersham. In the 1891 Census the family were living in White Lion Road, Amersham. Thomas gave his occupation as house painter. Alice, the eldest aged 16, was recorded as being a school teacher. Charles (14), Rosa May (11), Daisy (9), George (6) and Ivy (3) and Francis (an infant) were all living at home. Charles, Rosa May, Daisy and George were all attending school.

By the time of the 1901 Census the family was still living in White Lion Road. Thomas, the head of the household, aged 52, was a house painter, as was his son, Charles (24). May (21) (single) was a post office worker and George (16) was a domestic gardener. The family had grown to include another son Edward (7). Ivy was 13 by this time and the youngest three were at school.

The 1911 Census finds few changes. Thomas continued working as a house painter at the same address and George aged 26 was still a gardener. May (aged 31) was single, not employed and living at home with siblings Frank and Edward. Frank (20) stated that he was a receiving clerk and Edward (17) worked for the government making helmets.

At some time between 1911 and 1914 George emigrated to Perth, Western Australia.

His sister Daisy sailed on 25 April 1913 to Fremantle from London aboard the SS *Otway* with the intention, according to the passenger manifest, of settling in Australia. She was aged 30 and gave her occupation as 'domestic'. She was one of many women on that ship in similar circumstances.

Prior to joining the armed forces, George Matthews was a 'fettler' working on maintenance of the Australian railways. A fettler was involved in placing small stones under the sleepers to provide a level track for the trains to run on. The level was measured across the rails and longitudinally along the rails. This was usually done by the 'Ganger' as it was a skilled task on the railway. The fettlers were essentially labourers who moved the ballast-stones from between the sleepers in readiness for the ganger to place the chippings (smaller stones) under the sleepers when the track had been lifted using mechanical jacks. In some cases it just involved ramming the stones under the sleepers using a pick-like tool or the end of a shovel.

George Thomas Matthews enlisted into the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in Perth and signed his attestation papers on 4 January 1916. His service began on 1 February 1916, and a file on George Matthews's military service is held in the National Archives of Australia. The file contains a large amount of personal information, including his attestation papers, medical records and Casualty Form - Active Service, and much of the information which follows has been extracted from these faded documents. George enlisted as Private 707 and was initially assigned to the 44th (Infantry) Battalion, but was later transferred to the 51st (Infantry) Battalion of the AIF. George was 31 years and 9 months old when he enlisted. He was described as having a fresh complexion, grey eyes and fair hair. He was 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighed 128 lbs. According to the nominal roll of 'D' Company, 44th Infantry Battalion, he had been working as a fettler at No 2 State Mill, Dwellingup, Western Australia.

Private Matthews, with some of the 44th Battalion, left Fremantle, Western Australia, on 6 June 1916 aboard the HMAT *Suevic* (A29) and arrived in Plymouth, Devon, on 21 July. He was transferred to the 51st Battalion and it was not until November that they completed training and embarked at Folkestone on their way to a base in Etaples, France. Most of the 51st had arrived in France on 12 June 1916, and moved into the trenches of the Western Front within a fortnight. The Battalion's first major battle was at **Moquet Farm** in August and September, and it suffered casualties equivalent to a third of its strength in both of the attacks (14 August and 3 September 1916). After Moquet Farm,

the battalion saw out the rest of the year alternating between front-line duty or training and labouring behind the line. This routine continued through the bleak winter of 1916-17.

Early in 1917, the 51st Battalion participated in the advance that followed the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line. On 2 April 1917 it attacked at Noreil, a village which had been fortified to delay the Australian advance. Records show that George Matthews was wounded in action in the field on 15 April 1917. His right arm was damaged and he was hospitalised in Rouen. This kept him out of action for a few weeks and he rejoined his unit in the field on 6 May.

This document is part of the attestation papers of Private George Thomas Matthews, who joined the Australian Imperial Force in February 1916, in Perth, Western Australia.

The original is held in the National Archives of Australia. It can be accessed via the Bucks Remembers website or directly through the National Archives of Australia website at www.naa.gov.au (Item Reference No. 8006175)

Reproduced here by courtesy of the National Archives of Australia.

51st Bn

D 34356 AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES.

AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.

Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad.

No. 707 Name MATTHEWS, George Thomas
 Unit 48 Depot
 Joined on 28.1.16

Questions to be put to the Person Enlisting before Attestation.

1. What is your Name? George Thomas Matthews
2. In or near what Parish or Town were you born? Amersham in or near the Town of Amersham in the County of Bucks. Eng.
3. Are you a natural born British Subject or a Naturalised British Subject? (N.B.—If the latter, Papers to be shown) Yes
4. What is your age? 31 yrs
5. What is your trade or calling? Wheeler
6. Are you, or have you been, an Apprentice? If so, where, to whom, and for what period? no
7. Are you married? no
8. Who is your next of kin? (Address to be stated) Mr Thomas Matthews, White Lion Hotel, Amersham, Bucks, Eng.
9. Have you ever been convicted by the Civil Power? no
10. Have you ever been discharged from any part of His Majesty's Forces, with Ignominy, or as Insubordinate and Wreckless, or on account of Conviction of Felony, or of a Sentence of Penal Servitude, or have you been dismissed with Disgrace from the Navy? no
11. Do you now belong to, or have you ever served in, His Majesty's Army, the Marines, the Militia, the Militia Reserve, the Territorial Force, Royal Navy, or Colonial Forces? If so, state which, and if not now serving, state cause of discharge no
12. Have you stated the whole, if any, of your previous service? Yes
13. Have you ever been rejected as unfit for His Majesty's Service? If so, on what grounds? no
14. (For married men, widowers with children, and soldiers who are the sole support of widowed mothers) Do you understand that no separation allowance will be issued in respect of your service beyond an amount which together with pay would reach eight shillings per day? no
15. Are you prepared to undergo inoculation against small pox and enteric fever? Yes

George Thomas Matthews do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and I am willing and hereby voluntarily agree to serve in the Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Australia within or beyond the limits of the Commonwealth.

And I further agree to allot not less than two-fifths of the pay payable to me from time to time during my service for the support of my wife, † and children.

Date 28.1.16 G. T. Matthews
 Signature of person enlisted.

* This clause should be struck out in the case of unmarried men or widowers without children under 18 years of age.
 † Two-fifths must be allotted to the wife, and if there are children three-fifths must be allotted.

Later in the year, the focus of the AIF's operations moved to the Ypres sector in Belgium. There the battalion fought in the **battle of Messines** between 7 and 12 June and the **battle of Polygon Wood** between 26 and 27 September. On the first day of the battle, Private George Matthews was killed in action. He was 32 years old. His body was one of many which were never identified and he is commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial.

According to the records, the Will of George Matthews, which he signed before leaving Australia, was in the custody of his sister Daisy Mathers [which could be a mis-spelling of Matthews] of 20, 8th Avenue, Maylands, Western Australia. Correspondence kept in the same file, however, shows clearly that Daisy was now the wife of Owen Richardson of that address.

They had married in Perth in 1915 and the 1916 *Electoral Roll* for Fremantle lists Daisy at 6 Stuart Street, Maylands, along with Wilfred Richardson, bricklayer, and William Pergamos Owen Richardson, builder, who must be her husband. The couple later moved to Merredin, Northam, Swan, Western Australia, where Owen was residing at 8 George Street at the time of his death in 1950.

The image shows a handwritten letter on aged, yellowed paper. At the top left, it is addressed to 'The Officer in Charge Base records'. The recipient's name is written as '20 - 8th Avenue Mayland Wa.'. A circular postmark in the center reads 'BASE RECORDS', 'P-3 JAN 18M', and 'RECEIVED'. The date '1-18' is written in the top right corner. The letter begins with 'Dear Sir' and requests certificates of the death of 'Pte G. T. Matthews' who was killed in action on 26 September 1914. The sender, Owen Richardson, provides his address as 'The barracks in Kaniara N. Perth.' and signs the letter 'Owen Richardson'. A postscript at the bottom asks for 'Paper Envelopes' as they are needed for writing under difficult conditions.

Image (Ref No 8006175) courtesy of the National Archives of Australia – www.naa.gov.au

In the *Bucks Examiner* of 26 October 1917 the following notice was published:

“Death of local soldier”

“Mrs Matthews of Amersham Common has received notification of the death of her son George on service. The deceased came over from Australia to serve and was home on leave a few weeks ago.”

George’s medals, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal, as well as the Plaque (known as the ‘dead man’s penny’) and memorial scroll were sent to George’s father Thomas Matthews in Amersham in September 1922.

George Thomas Matthews is remembered with Honour on the Menin Gate Memorial,¹ Ieper, Belgium, Panel 7-17-23-25-27-29-31 and on the Australian War Memorial, Panel 153

¹ For details of the Memorial and the engraving, see the chapter on the Memorials to the Missing.