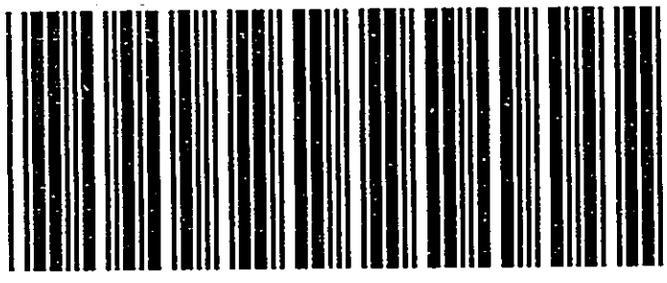
Australian Red Cross Society Wounded and Missing
Enquiry Bureau files, 1914-18 War
1DRL/0428

986 Private
William James Willis

5th Pioneer Battalion



2970706V

5th AUST. PIONEERS — W. J. WILLIS, 986

Killed 24.10.16 Det.D/B.

Willis was killed on this date while working in a sap at Turk Lane on Bapaume Front. One shell killed 4 of them and he was buried with the others near where he fell. Our own Battn. Parson buried them. He was well-liked among his fellow-men.

Reference: Pioneer L. W. Lapthorne, 103,
No.6 General, Rouen, 7.2.17

RAK.

M

5th Pioneer Btn.

WILLIS, W.J.
Pte. No. 986

Killed in action 24/10/16.

"I saw Casualty killed on the Tourchane Front on the Somme on the 24th October, 1916 by H.E. shell. Casualty was buried by his mates. I was present. He was buried in the trenches. The grave was marked with a cross."

Informant:- Pte. E. Mason,
No. 2513, 5th Pioneers.

Private address
Crescent Hotel,
George Street,
Sydney, N.S.W.

M
Ed.

H.A.B.
17/7/17.

AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS INFORMATION BUREAU-MELBOURNE.

5th Pioneers
A.I.F.,

WILLIS
W.J. 986

"Killed 24.10.16"

On 24.10.16 my platoon was working in a communication trench 100 yards behind the firing line and about mid-day a Sgt. and 3 men of whom Pte Willis was one were killed by a 5.9 H.E.shell, death being practically instantaneous in all cases. These men were buried together near the spot, 700 yards East of the ruined village of Eaucourt l'Abbay and later a cross was erected on the grave. For identication purposes I may mention that Pte Willis was a big well built man about 6 feet in height, dark complexion and dark brown hair; his next of kin according to our rolls is Mr.PWillis, Dennington, Victoria. I trust that these particulars will prove more satisfactory to your enquirers than the plain military motification of death.

Cert. by letter from Lt. John England.
France.
22.2.17.

I can personally endorse the foregoing statements, his identity is undoubted. Capt. G.W.Scott, O.C.A.Coy.
22.2.17.

London
16.3.17.

H..

A.I.F. 5 Pioneers.A.Co.

WILLIS
W.J. 986

KILLED 24.10.16.

986.

Pte. W.J.Willis was killed on the 24th. Oct.1916. I was beside him when he was killed, and I was one of a party of four and an Officer detailed to bury him. We buried him alone, side his three mates, sixty yards from the front line. We put a cross at his grave. He is buried in the field. We vacated that front shortly after, and could'nt state whether the cross is still there as at the time, the ground was getting cut up terribly by shell fire. Pte.Willis was a well made man I would say he was 5'10" a littel over 12 stone in weight, ~~fair~~ complexion, and inclined to be slightly cross eyed. This is about all I can give you. For further information enquire of Lt. J.England.A.Coy.5th. Pioneer Battn. A.I.F. France as he was in charge.

Cert.by Letter from. Pte.R.Simpson, A. Coy.
France. 5. Pioneers.
5/3/17.

LONDON.
28.3.17.

M.

5TH Australian Pioneers. WILLIS W. J. 986.

" K. Oct.24/'16. Det. D & B ".

Witness says soldier was buried just behind the front line of Turk Lane, at the entrance to Fleurs, in a shell hole with three others. Soldier was killed by a shell on the 24th and buried on the 25th Oct. '16. Witness was present when he was buried.

Description. Hgt. 6ft. Medium complexion. Stout build. Nickname."Softy".

Witness. Mason E. R. 2513.
5th Australian Pioneers.
" A " Coy.

Weygret Camp,
WAREHAM.

March 13th., '17.
S. W. Verne Citadel.

5th Australian Pioneers — Willis, Pte W.J. 986, A. Company

(K. Oct. 24th/16. Det: D & B)

"On 24th Oct/16 at Turk Lane, Flers front W.J. Willis was engaged in clearing out a communication trench and with three other men, assisting, was caught by a large German shell and killed. Death was instantaneous in all cases. As there was no cemetery within a distance of three to four miles, a grave was dug about fifty yards from the spot where they were killed and the four men were buried therein. There was no Chaplain present, but I offered a few words of prayer over the grave myself. About three weeks later a-C an old Calvary or wayside cross which had been found standing against a German dug out was repaired and erected on the grave, the names of the four men having been inscribed on it."

Eye-witness: Yes

Description: Tall, handsome finely made man, described by Informant as a splendid specimen of Australian manhood.

Informant: Cpl A.E. Koop, 1818, 5th Aust. Pioneers, A.Coy, Kitchener's Hospital, Brighton.

Home address: Hampton Rd, Keswick, Adelaide, Aust.

13.3.17.
H. Hargreaves.

5th Australian Pioneers

Willis W.J. 986,

(K. Oct. 24/16 Det. D/B)

Informant states that on Oct. 24th 1916 on the Somme W.J. Willis was killed. They were in the front line trenches and a shell blew him and 2 others to pieces. He had a decent burial behind the lines. A wooden cross had been erected over his grave."

Eye-witness: Yes.

Description: Height close on 6ft. Weight about 14 stone, age 24, fair, called "Lofty".

Informant: Pte. George A. Coster 790,
5th Australian Pioneers,
Sutton Red Cross Hospt.

Home address:
Mechanics Hotel,
Melbourne.

Mar. 7th 1916,
M. Hyslop.

Austr
5th Pioneers
A.I.F.,

WILLIS
W.J. 986

deceased "Killed Oct.24/16"

He was killed by a shell at Turk Lane. This was reported to witness (who was Coy Sgt.) by Pte J Bertie 1073 5th Austr. Pioneers (a mate of ~~mine~~) This Pte Bertie was detailed with others to act as a burial party and inter Willis. They afterwards, through Pte Bertie reported to witness. that they had performed their duty. Pte Bertie could give full particulars Re D/~~H~~B Willis as he was with the latter when he (Willis) was struck down.

Reference:- A.Bremmell 355 Sgt.
5th Austr. Pioneers.
Dartford Hospital.
6.3.17.

LLondon
13.3.17
A.R.McPhee

M.

5th Aust. Pioneers. Willis. W.J. No.986.
K. 24th October 1916. Det D/B.

Willis was in my platoon. I knew him well. I remember the 24th October which was our first day in the trenches on the Somme. Four men were killed by a shell, of whom Willis was one. The other three were L/C. Sawley, Pte Ford and Pte Garmall of A. Co 1V Pltn. Garm was an Englishman who lived near Nottingham. It was in a sap known as Turk lane about 1500 yards in front of Flers. I with three others went up the next day and buried all four close to the spot. There was only one grave and we put up a cross with the names, numbers etc.

Inf:- Cpl Koop No.1818. 1. Co. 1V Pltn.
H.S."Dieppe".
Calais. 1.3.17. RHL

Havre

Feb. 20th 1917

AUSTRALIAN PIONEERS 5 WILLIS W.J. 986

K.Oct.24/16

He was in A Co. IV pltn. We were working in Turk Lane on the Bethune front about 2 p.m. A shell burst in the sap and killed four. I saw this and went up to them with others and saw them laid out. I saw Willis buried with the other three just outside the sap where it happened. A big cross was put up with their names on it.

Informant Pte.L.W.Lapthorne 103
5th Aust.Pioneers A Co. IV pltn.
No.2 Gen.Hosp.(Casino)
H.P.G. Palais

M

AUSTRALIAN PIONEERS. 5. WILLIS, W.J. 986

K. Oct.24/16. Det: D & B.

Willis was killed at the end of October or beginning of November on the Somme - straight out beyond Montauban out of Turk Lane Trenches. We were digging saps and it was a dangerous place. I was with the party. A shell landed right in the sap and killed Willis and three others about 4 p.m. They were buried near where they fell and the Minister went out next morning to read the service over them. There is a cross over the graves.

Informant: Cpl.F.H.Underwood. 2387
No.5 B.R.C.S.Hospital.
BOULOGNE. 19.2.1917.

JT

M

Havre Feb. 8th 1917

AUSTRALIAN PIONEERS 5 WILLIS E.J. 986

K.Oct.24/16

Capt.Scott of A Co. 5th Pioneer Battn. should be able to give details of Willis' death and burial. He was buried by Lt.England of the same Coy. I cannot give any details personally but I knew Willis well and made enquiries when I heard of his death. Lt.England was in charge of the burial party the day that Willis was killed.

Interment Pte.T.E.Jolly 3376
5th Aust. Pioneers A.I.F.
C Co.
Dock Rest Camp
H.E.D.H.

M.

Written Capt Scott 14.2.17
Lt England

5th Pioneers.

W. J.

WILLIS, W.
Pte. No. 986

Killed in action 24/10/16.

"I was beside Casualty when he was killed at Turks Lane, together with Sgt. Sauley, Fred Sans and Oldham near Fleurs on the 24th October, 1916 whilst on fatigue about 1.45 p.m. He was killed by H.E. shell. They were all buried to-gether on the spot. A cross was put up."

Informant:- G.J. Johnston,
No. 233 5th Pioneers.

Private address
C/o Mrs. L.E. Johnson,
Toowong,
Brisbane.

Note:- I desire to make a statement to the mother of Casualty regarding his belongings, if she will kindly write to me.

H.A.B. AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS INFORMATION BUREAU-MELBOURNE.
21/11/17.

5th Pioneers.

WILLIS, W.J.
Pte. No. 986

Killed in action 24/10/16

"Casualty was killed on the 24th October, 1916 at Montauban on the Somme by a bullet through the abdomen. Casualty was buried properly."

Informant:- M. Mackie,
929 5th Pioneers.

Private address
G.P.O.
Sydney.

H.A.B.
24/9/17.

AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS INFORMATION BUREAU-MELBOURNE.

5th Australian Pioneers Willis, Pte W.J. 986

(K. Oct. 24th/16. Det: D & B)

"I was near Pte Willis when he was killed about 24th Oct/16. He was killed outright by a shell with three others (Sergt Sanley, Pte Gans and Pte Oldham) in a sap near front line off Goose Alley, just off Fish Alley, near Flers. An explosive shell killed all four at about 2.30 p.m. We found Pte Oldham just alive, but he died shortly after. The other bodies were not found at the time, but Lieut England went out the next afternoon with Pte (now L/Cpl) Bertie and, I think, Pte Bob Simpson, all of A. Coy and they buried all four in a shell-hole just off Goose Alley. A cross was fixed over the grave."

Note: (Informant is writing for more definite particulars about the cross and exact position of the grave. If these particulars come to hand they will be forwarded in a Supplementary report. P.L.W.)

Written Cpl Bertie & Pte Simpson 22.2.17

Eye-witness: No, see above.

Description: Was in A. Coy, rather tall, about 5'9", very fair, very quiet man, greatly liked, nicknamed "Lofty", age about 25 to 26.

Informant: Pte George James Johnston, 233, 5th Aust Pioneers, A. Coy,

Home address: Horton County of London Hospital, Epsom.

17.2.17. P.L. Waterhouse.

c/o Messrs. L & E Johnson, Cemetary Gates, Toowong, Queensland.

17th March, 1917.

Dear Sir,

We have to thank you for your letter of Feby.22nd. in answer to our enquiry for -

No.986 W. J. WILLIS 5th Pioneer Battn. A.I.F.

The information you have sent will be of great assistance, knowing as we do how much comfort the relatives will derive from your statement that death was instantaneous and that Pte. Willis had been buried by men of the regiment and a cross erected on his grave.

Might we ask you to convey to Capt. Scott our thanks for endorsing the information you so kindly sent.

Yours faithfully,

V.D.

SECRETARY.

Lieut.J. England,
5th Pioneer Battn.,
A. I. F.

March 15th.1917.

Pte.R.Simpson.
A.Coy.
5th.Pionsers.A.I.F.
B. E. F.

Dear Pte.Simpson.

Very many thanks for your letter of March 5th in answer to our enquiry for 986.W.J.Willis,5th.Pioneers.A.I.F.

The information you have sent is of much assistance and we thank you for supplying the name of his officer, Lt.England,to whom we might write for further information.

With best wishes.

Yours faithfully,

V.D

SECRETARY.

Rec. F.M. 13.3.17

5/3/17
France

Dear Sir,

In answer to your letter re W. J. Willis 986 was killed on 24th Oct 1916. I was beside him when he was killed and I was one of a party of four and an Officer detailed to bury him. We buried him along with his three mates, ninety yards from the front line & put a cross at the grave. He is buried in the field. We erected that grave shortly after, and could not state whether the cross is still there as at that time, the ground was getting cut up terribly by shell fire. Pte Willis was a well made man & would say he was 5ft 8in, a little over 12 stone in weight, fair complexion, and inclined to be slightly cross eyed. This is about all I can give you. I have written, and am writing under difficulty's, Allow me to remain,

Your Obedient Servant

Pte R. Simpson A Co
5 Pioneers

P.S.

For further information enquire of Lt J. England A. Coy 5th Pioneer Batt'n AIF France, as he was in charge

986 W. J. WILLIS 5 Pioneers

IR 24.10.16

Ack
F.M. 14.3.17

986 W. J. WILLIS 5 Pioneers A.I.F

K 24.10.16 1 M. (Suff Cd)

France.
22.2.17.

The Secretary
Wounded & Missing Enquiry Bureau.
Red Branch R.C.

Dear Madam

Re 986 Pte Willis W. J. of whom you inquire in yours of 16.2.17.

On 24.10.16 my platoon was working in a communication trench 100 yds behind the firing line & about mid-day a shell burst, of whose Pte Willis was one, four killed by a T.M.B. shell, death being practically instantaneous in all cases.

We three were buried together near the spot, 700 yards east of the ruined village of Bancourt & later a cross was erected on the grave.

For identification purposes I may mention that Pte Willis was a big

well built man about 5 ft 10 in height
dark complexion & dark brown hair, his
next of kin according to your note is
Mrs R Willis Rannington Victoria.
I trust that these particulars will prove
more satisfactory to your inquiries than
the first military notification of death.

Yours sincerely
John England Lt.

I do personally Endorse
the foregoing statements, his identity
is undoubted

Lieut. J. S. Scott Capt
D.C.A.P. Corps
22.2.17

Rec'd letter
Wednesday
WILLIS.

14th February /7

Lieut. England,
5th Pioneers, A.I.F.,
B.E.F.,

986 W.J. Willis, 5th Pioneer Battalion, A.I.F.,
reported Killed 24/10/16

W.J.Willis P.M for F.M

14th February /7

Captain Scott,
A.Co., 5th Pioneers,
A.I.F.
B. E. F.

986 W.J.Willis, 5th Pioneers, A.I.F.,
reported Killed 24.10.16

W.J.Willis P.M 7.11.

28th February /17

L/Cpl Beetle,
A.Company,
5th Pioneers A.I.F.,
B. E. F.

986 Pte W.J.Willis, 5th Pioneers, A.I.F.,

reported Killed 24/10/16

Pte Willis P.A. for E.M.

17th Feby., /7

Pte Bob Simpson,
A.Company,
5th Pioneers, A.I.F.
B.E.F.

986 Pte W.J. Willis, 5th Pioneers, A.I.F.

reported Killed 24/10/16

Pte Willis P.M for F.M