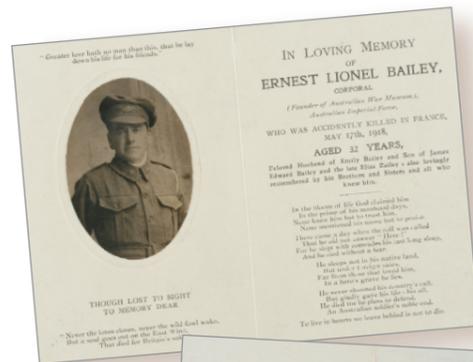


FIRST WORLD WAR 1914–1918



ERNIE BAILEY

'FOUNDER' OF AUSTRALIAN WAR MUSEUM

A memorial plaque reminds us of our predecessors. **By Peter Stanley**

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In the spring of 1918 Corporal Ernie Bailey was at the Australian War Records Section depot at Ailly-sur-Somme, where he was working on relics destined to form the collection of what was to become the Australian War Memorial. However, he was never to see the museum he helped to create.

When the Memorial's historians re-occupied the recently-refurbished Military History Section office, we hung a plaque on the wall

which would have been familiar to many readers in the old Memorial Library. It had hung on a pillar there until a refurbishment banished it to storage.

The plaque commemorates Ernie Bailey's death. Bailey was one of 17 members of the Australian Salvage Corps who died in the Great War, but – surprisingly, perhaps – was the only member of the Salvage Corps known to have been killed accidentally.

Bailey was a Londoner who had migrated to Australia aged 23 about 1908 and worked as a gold assayer on the Western Australian goldfields and as an engine-driver. Was he one of those members of the first Australian Imperial Force who had enlisted as much to score a trip home as to serve King and Empire?

He joined the AIF in 1915, in remote Meekatharra in Western Australia, as reports of the August offensive on Gallipoli appeared in Australian newspapers. Making his way to France via Egypt and Britain, Bailey served through the dreadful “Somme winter” of 1916–17 with the 51st Battalion, but in January 1917 he transferred to the Salvage Corps.

The Salvage Corps, based on its British precursor, mostly comprised men graded unfit for combat but whose mechanical skills equipped them to collect and sort discarded weapons, equipment and kit, including spent and unfired ammunition. Most Salvage Corps units (one was attached to each Australian infantry division) collected the detritus of battle for scrap or repair.

Bailey returned to Britain on leave on 18 August 1917, marrying Emily, possibly a friend of relations, in Sunderland, in the north-east of England. On returning to France soon after, he was posted to the Australian War Records Section. Established at Charles Bean’s instigation in 1917, it was commanded by the young Major John Treloar, collecting records and relics for what would become the Australian War Memorial.

Bailey was a man of a mechanical bent. As the well known photograph of him at work in Hoograaf depot in 1917 shows, he had a habit of messing about with shells and bombs, defusing them so that they could be added to the growing storeroom of what Charles Bean called “relics” that Treloar’s War Records Section would eventually ship home.

Bailey’s personnel file does not record leave to Britain early in 1918, but Emily mentioned it later, so the two may have seen each other for the last time in April 1918. On 17 May he began to scoop out the explosive from a French bomb at Ailly-sur-Somme, something he had done many times before. He hit the casing with a chisel and there was an explosion. Charles Bean and others ran into the yard and saw Bailey “lying amongst the straw and the shattered German packs”. Someone had already thrown a blanket over his body but they could all see that he was badly mutilated,

with a leg and an arm blown off.

Bean, who took a close interest in the work of the records section, wrote immediately to Emily in Sunderland. He offered consolation: “the Great Australian War Museum when it finally stands in the Australian capital will be a monument to him for it is his work that thousands upon thousands of Australians will see as they walk down those galleries”.

Emily’s sister Elizabeth replied to Bean, telling him that Emily was “just heart-broken” and unable to write herself. Emily arranged for an “in memoriam” card to be sent to Bailey’s friends and relations, and one is today preserved in Bean’s papers in the Memorial. Emily chose a verse from those offered by the stationer or printer, a familiar one, used by many grieving families that year:

*He sleeps not in his native land,
But under foreign skies
Far from those that loved him
In a hero’s grave he lies
To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.*

She described him, as Bean had suggested in his consolatory letter, as Corporal Ernest Bailey, “Founder of Australian War Museum”. Charles Bean made sure that a cross was erected on Bailey’s grave when he was buried in the British Cemetery at nearby Vignacourt. His name is on the Memorial’s Roll of Honour, of course, and his memorial plaque can be seen again, now on the wall of the Military History Section office. 



Below: Memorial plaque to Corporal Ernie Bailey to commemorate his death on 17 May 1918. AWM REL31322



Facing page

Top two: “In memoriam” card for Bailey. AWM RC02639

Bottom: Corporal Ernie Bailey, 51st Battalion and Australian Salvage Corps, alongside an overturned German pillbox near Messines on 7 June 1917. AWM E01320

This page left: Bailey tagging battlefield trophies at the Hoograaf Collection Depot on 15 October 1917. AWM E01085