

# The Life and War Time Efforts of Private Roy Frith (1896 – 1918)

By Chi Canty, Scotch Oakburn College

Private Roy Frith led an interesting and eventful life, tragically cut short by his enlistment and subsequent death in World War One (WW1). Roy was the second of four children, with his older brother Arthur having also fought and died in WWI, and his two younger brothers, Philip and Neil, both too young to serve and thus both alive until 1990 and 1989 respectively. His father, Albert Arthur Frith (1866-1935), was a Victorian-born piano and organ tuner, well-known for his trade across northwest Tasmania. His mother, Mary Maud Frith (maiden name Rosevear) was part of the third generation of the Rosevear family born in Tasmania. Mary's paternal grandparents, Mr and Mrs William Henry Rosevear, were settlers that arrived in Hobart in the early 1800s. They purchased 640 acres of land on Cimitiere Point, which is now a township bearing the family name, where they established a flourishing inn for those travelling along the Tamar River. After the passing of Henry, Mary's father, Thomas, managed the inn and the land around it, also finding time to conceive and raise 16 children (10 sons and 6 daughters), of which Mary was the second eldest. It is likely Mary kept strong ties to the Rosevears family and estate after marriage.

Roy's family lived at 33 Crescent Road, Trevallyn, Launceston. Any form of primary school education is dubious, but Roy is known to have attended Launceston Scotch College during his teenage years, most likely beginning his schooling in 1907-1908, at age 11 like his older brother. Roy excelled in a wide variety of activities at Scotch College throughout his time there. He received multiple academic prizes in 1910 and 1912, including prizes for arithmetic, reading, mapping, Latin, algebra and geometry. It is evident from this Roy had an analytical mind which favoured calculations and precision. That being said, it appears Roy was a well-rounded student, also showing good character and a thoughtful, considerate personality, as recognised through him receiving a Prize for Conduct in 1909. Roy was also an athletic individual, rowing for Scotch College and racing in the Bourke Cup in 1911 and 1912 as Coxswain. While the position of coxswain is not physically demanding as no rowing

is involved, control and precision are necessary for the role, so as to ensure the boat is steered correctly, further showcasing Roy's analytical and exact mind.




Roy on far left, as coxswain of the Scotch Boys IV, 1912

In 1912, at age 16, Roy graduated from Scotch College Junior Public with two credits and four passes, a commendable achievement. An academic or civil career seemed logical for Roy, yet he defied expectations, instead working as an orchardist at Swan Point, on the west bank of the Tamar. This location is not far downstream from the Rosevears estate, so family connections may have provided Roy with this secure position.

While Roy could have enlisted in October 1914 with permission from his parents, as he was 18, but under the age of 21, but he chose not to volunteer for service until he was almost 20, over two years after WWI broke out. His brother Arthur, by contrast, enlisted on 28 August 1915, a year earlier. It is unclear why Roy did not enlist sooner, especially considering he had spent 18 months serving with the Launceston Naval Cadets, showing an aptitude towards the military. His job, his age, family pressures, disinterest in the war, or even possible love interests, could have all played a part in convincing Roy to remain in Tasmania for the first two years of WWI.

Upon enlistment on 24 September 1916, Roy was recorded as being 5 foot 10 ¼ inches, well above the average male height of the time of only 5 foot 6 inches. His curly brown hair, fair complexion and blue eyes were all noted.

T. 5096 *has had wife*  
AUSTRALIAN  MILITARY FORCES. CAMP

CLAREMONT  
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# AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.

## Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad.

No. *6832<sup>nd</sup> gen*  
*Certified true copy*  
Name { Surname *Frith*  
in full { Christian Name *Roy*  
Unit *March 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Division, 1<sup>st</sup> AIF*  
Joined on *30.10.16*

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### Questions to be put to the Person Enlisting before Attestation.

- PAY BOOK No.
1. What is your Name? *Roy, Frith*
  2. In the Parish of \_\_\_\_\_ in or near the Town of *Launceston* in the County of *Tasmania*
  3. Are you a natural born British Subject or a Naturalized British Subject? (N.B.—If the latter, papers to be shown.) *Nat Born Brit Subj*
  4. What is your Age? *19 1/2*
  5. What is your Trade or Calling? *Orchardist*
  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 and relationship to be stated) *"Bervenfels" T. REVALLYN, LAUNCESTON TASMANIA*
  9. What is your permanent address in Australia? *LAUNCESTON TASMANIA*
  10. 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 *18 Month Naval Cadet's exempt having son out of area*
  11. Have you stated the whole, if any, of your previous service? *Yes*
  12. Have you ever been rejected as unfit for His Majesty's Service? If so, on what grounds? *No*
  13. (For married men, widowers with children, and soldiers who are the sole support of widowed mother)—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? *Yes*
  14. Are you prepared to undergo inoculation against small pox and enteric fever? *Yes*

I, *Roy Frith*, 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  $\frac{two-fifths}{three-fifths}$  of the pay payable to me from time to time during my service for the support of my ~~wife~~ <sup>wife,\* †</sup> and ~~children~~ <sup>children.</sup>  
Date *Sept 24<sup>th</sup> 1916*  
*R Frith R Frith R Frith R Frith*  
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.

Roy's enlistment form, 1916

Roy trained as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Depot Battalion, from after his enlistment in September 1916 to his departure for Europe on 21 November 1917. He trained first in Claremont, Tasmania from 20 March to 25 July 1917, then in Broadmeadows, a northern suburb of Melbourne, from 27 July until departure. During this time Frith was made Acting Corporal, highlighting his strong character, leadership and amicability. During home-soil training, Roy was sent to an Isolation Camp in Ascot Vale, Melbourne from 3-24 August. As soldiers in the training camps were falling ill with cerebro-spinal meningitis, those associated with the ill men, such as tent mates or training partners, were sent to Isolation Camps and closely monitored to ensure they didn't develop symptoms. As Roy was able to return to Broadmeadows immediately after three weeks in Ascot Vale, he clearly did not fall ill from meningitis.



Roy Frith on the top right, before departure to Suez, 17 November 1917

On 21 November 1917, Roy embarked on the A71 HMAT Nestor, as part of the 20<sup>th</sup> reinforcement for the AIF 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. Reinforcements for the 14<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Battalions were also aboard, making up the entirety of the 1931 military personnel on the Nestor. Interestingly, Roy was one of only three Tasmanian soldiers recorded on the Nestor; All the battalions being reinforced were from Victoria and thus the ranks were almost exclusively filled with Victorians. Why Roy and the two other Tasmanians (Herbert Brewer and Albert Pratt) joined these Victorian battalions is unknown, but could be due to low enlistment numbers in Tasmania not warranting the reinforcement of a battalion by exclusively Tasmanian soldiers

The A71 Nestor disembarked Melbourne on 21 November 1917, sailing for Suez, Egypt. Roy stood out among his reinforcement division during the journey, not only for being the only Tasmanian in a group of born and bred Victorians, but also for being made Voyage-Only Corporal for the journey. Upon arrival in Suez on 15 December, the soldiers joined the Australian camp and trained for close to a month, ensuring they maintained fitness and were prepared for joining the frontline. After embarking on the HMT Abbassiah on 8 January 1918, Roy's division briefly stopped in Taranto, Italy on 13 January, before travelling to and disembarking in South Hampton, Great Britain. It appears Frith underwent another brief isolation period from 23 January to 13 February; it is unclear as to why this occurred. Roy spent five months in Fovant, a small town northwest of Salisbury, England, where Roy likely took part in further training exercises. Finally, Roy arrived in France on 12 June, when he landed in Havre, a coastal town on the English Channel near Caen. It is interesting to see the amount of time it took for Roy to enter the frontline after enlisting, a total of 21 months. The enormous bureaucratic and administrative machine required to organise thousands of soldiers and prepare them for war evidently took time to run. In total, Roy would only serve on the frontline for 64 days, just more than two months in a two-year service.

Roy participated in the Hundred Day Offensive, fighting mainly near Villers-Bretonneux, France. After providing close support and frontline action east of Villers Bretonneux during early August, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion moved further east of the position from the 8<sup>th</sup>, forming the frontline outside Herleville on 11 August with the 11<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> Divisions. Over the following week, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion consolidated its position and made small advances against a weakening German front line. The battalion was split into four companies, labelled A, B, C and D. By the 17<sup>th</sup>, the battalion was just south of Madam Wood, with A Company prepared to advance to Saurian Alley on the 18<sup>th</sup>.

At 4:15 am on 18 August, an artillery barrage began as cover for C Company, which was to advance towards the junction of English and Vermand Oviller Alleys. There they would join the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. Three platoons from C Company advanced the front line while a fourth followed from behind, completing mop up operations. B Company advanced up Saurian Alley to eventually meet with C Company.

The main objective of 18 August was to capture the Crucifix, a position just south of Herleville; A cross marks the spot just outside of the modern-day village. Heavy resistance

was soon encountered by B and C Companies, on the left flank of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, causing an SOS signal to be fired. 25 men were sent to reinforce the left flank, seemingly a small amount, but all that was available to spare.

Due to the stagnation on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion's frontline, the Crucifix had not been captured and was still held strongly in enemy hands. In response, a company from the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion, under the command of Captain Sullivan and personally led by Lieutenant Hardwick, was sent to capture the objective. They succeeded in doing so, securing the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion's A company in the process. Consolidation of captured territory was comparatively easy and the day's advances were held.

It is unclear as to which Company Roy served in, but regardless he underwent heavy front line fighting on the 18<sup>th</sup>. As a result, he suffered multiple shell wounds to the head, severely wounding him. He was admitted to the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Field Ambulance the following day, but any efforts to treat him were ultimately futile. Roy sadly passed away on 19 August 1918. He was one of 30 wounded on the 18<sup>th</sup>, with a further 25 killed in action. Roy was buried in the Chalk Pite British Cemetery, what is now the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial. His grave is marked and can be visited.

It is evident that Roy was both academically and athletically gifted, a hard worker, and a natural leader, with great potential for a successful and eventful life, had he survived the war, or not enlisted at all. Yet this potential was never fully realised, due to his tragic passing before even reaching the age of 22. Even more tragically, this would not be the only unfortunate news to come from the western front for his family; Roy's older brother Arthur was also killed in action only 6 days prior. A church ceremony in honour and respect to both deceased sons was held at St. Oswald's Church in Trevallyn, Launceston, on Sunday 15 September 1918. The family all followed the Anglican faith, and this tribute made shows the strong community spirit provided by local churches at the time, and the comradery of grieving families.

For me the most fascinating and revealing thing about Roy's story is how well it showcases the bureaucracy involved in such a full-scale war, and all the procedures necessary before soldiers can be sent to the frontline. In Roy's case, an enlistment made in 1916 resulted in frontline action almost two years later. In a war involving millions of soldiers, and up to

416,809 Australian troops, this delay is understandable, especially considering naval travel, but it is something easy to forget when taking dates at face value. It is easy to mistake a two-year service for two years fighting, while in fact for many that was not the case; For Roy, it was only 63 days. Little over two months, to fight and to die. Such is the brutal nature of modern warfare.





Roy's grave in Villers-Bretonneux cemetery, France, as visited by the bi-annual Scotch Oakburn College French language trip students