

Watson, Stanley Holm (1887–1985)

by **Jean P. Fielding**

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Stanley Holm Watson (1887-1985), railway engineer and soldier, was born on 24 October 1887 at Parkside, Adelaide, eldest of eight children of Harry Watson, a clerk with the Hydraulic Engineers' Department, and his wife Adelaide Elizabeth, née Menz. Educated at Plympton Primary and Sturt Street Advanced schools, Stan studied engineering at the School of Mines and the University of Adelaide. In 1904 he was apprenticed in the South Australian Railways for five years as a draftsman. On 12 June 1911 he married with Catholic rites Leila Vera McBride at Clarence Park.

Having joined the 6th Field Troop of Engineers (militia) as a second lieutenant in 1910, by August 1914 he was lieutenant and commanding officer of the 28th Signalling Company, Engineers. He was appointed to the Australian Imperial Force as lieutenant commanding headquarters section, 1st Australian Divisional Signal Company, on 19 August, left for Egypt in October and reached Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. With lines established, Watson and several 2nd Australian Field Company sappers constructed the first pier at Anzac Cove: using a defused Turkish shell as a pile-driver, they completed the jetty on 18 June; it was named 'Watson's Pier'. Appointed second-in-command, and officer commanding No.1 Section, of the 2nd Divisional Signal Company on 26 July, Watson was promoted captain in November. On 11 December **Brigadier General (Sir) Brudenell White** gave him responsibility for the lines covering the Anzac withdrawal on the nights of 18 and 19 December. On the 20th Watson sent the final signal: 'Evacuation complete 3.45 a.m.—casualties unknown'; he then left by the last lighter. He was mentioned in dispatches for 'distinguished and gallant services' in the evacuation of Gallipoli.

Reaching France in late March 1916 with the 2nd Divisional Signal Company, Watson was attached to artillery headquarters on 18 April and took part in every 2nd Division engagement in France and Belgium. Following the Somme battle for Pozières Ridge in July and August, he was recommended for the Military Cross for his services in the Albert Area, Gallipoli and Pozières. At Flers and Fricourt during November and December he 'showed great gallantry and devotion to duty in maintaining lines and controlling linesmen' and was awarded the Military Cross. Watson commanded the 2nd Divisional Signal Company from December 1916 and was awarded the Order of the White Eagle of Serbia. Promoted major in January 1917, he followed the German retirement from Butte de Warlencourt through Bapaume to the Hindenburg line in March and April, and served in the battle of Bullecourt in May. He was mentioned in dispatches in September for his work at Bapaume and Bullecourt.

Continuously in the Somme area from March 1918, after the battle of Hamel in July Watson laid a system of cables almost to the front lines. **General Sir John Monash** made him responsible for communications for the battle of Amiens which commenced on 8 August. Watson received a special mention in dispatches in November and in January 1919 was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his work on the Somme from August to 3 September 1918, especially prior to 8 August 1918. A natural leader, he 'was one of the most efficient and successful commanding officers of Signals in the First World War'.

Discharged in January 1919, Watson rejoined the South Australian Railways. He was acting resident engineer at Bordertown and Quorn, then superintendent at Peterborough in 1922 and in Adelaide in 1924. The State commissioner of railways sent him abroad in 1928 to study train control systems before their introduction in South Australia. General traffic manager from 1935, Watson became deputy commissioner of railways in 1948 and held the post until his retirement in 1952. For his services to transport he was appointed C.B.E. in 1958. During World War II, as a lieutenant-colonel, he had been Commanding Royal Engineer in South Australia.

Predeceased by his wife and son, and survived by his two daughters, Watson died in Adelaide on 5 May 1985. After a service at St Michael's Anglican Church, Mitcham, he was buried in Centennial Park cemetery. In delivering the eulogy, Brigadier Phillip Greville concluded: 'Colonel Watson combined the steadiness of the battle-wise soldier with the intellectual discipline of the civil engineer. He was, in one sense, a simple man—simple and direct as the railway lines he built—and just as purposeful'.

Citation details

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Life Summary [\[details\]](#)

Birth

24 October 1887
Parkside, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

Death

5 May 1985
Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

Religious Influence

- Anglican

Occupation

- army officer
- public servant
- rail/tramways engineer