

# THE GREAT WAR TIMES

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FROM THE WHANGANUI  
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## THE HEROIC MASSACRE CALLED PASSCHENDAELE

The Third Battle of Ypres comprised eight battles. New Zealanders were most heavily involved in the fifth battle, the Battle of Broodseinde, fought on 4 October 1917, and the seventh battle called The First Passchendaele, fought on 12 October 1917. This latter battle is what New Zealanders refer to as Passchendaele.

Passchendaele is the worst disaster in New Zealand military history. Two thousand men were killed that day, to no avail, 843 of them between 5.30am and 8.00am. At least 34 of these soldiers had connections with Whanganui. Eleven had attended Wanganui Collegiate School. Twenty three of them are named on the memorial at Tyne Cot Cemetery as missing. Donald Hosie, designer of the Serjeant Gallery, was killed. Passchendaele is such a heart-wrenching battle because of the conditions under which the soldiers fought. Flanders is an extensive flat area in Belgium. It is covered with dense clay, which makes drainage impossible. The summer of 1917 was the worst for 75 years; it had rained continually. Constant artillery fire had destroyed the man-made drains and the place was a quagmire. One soldier records that when walking to the Front on 11 October, after the duck boards ran out, it took him four hours to walk the last half mile. How slow and how exhausting.

Ammunition to supply the artillery was carried to the Front by pack mules, constantly sinking into the mud. They had to be unloaded, rescued and reloaded, which was time-consuming and exhausting. One mule sank into the mud fully laden, and just kept sinking, never to be rescued. The guns got bogged down and could only be moved by man-power.

Yet, when in heavy rain at 5.30am, the 1st Otago

Battalion was ordered to attack the Passchendaele Ridge, they did so. Protective gun fire was not adequate. As soon as the infantry began to climb the muddy slopes, German machine gun fire erupted from concrete pillboxes along the ridge, firing 300-400 rounds per minute. The 2nd Otago Battalion managed to struggle through mud to the top of the ridge, only to find that the wire surrounding the pillboxes was uncut and the pillboxes undamaged. Valiant attempts to penetrate the wire were made but many men were shot down. Many got hung up on the wire, making themselves easy targets for German gun fire. An angry General Freyburg reported, "They were shot at like rabbits". In violent hand-to-hand fighting some heroic Otago troops took two pillboxes and over 80 prisoners of war.

At 8.00am Colonel Puttick ordered the three New Zealand battalions to dig in, refusing to commit the reserve battalion. He realised that progress was impossible as every attempt to climb the ridge resulted in another round of machine gun fire. Another disturbing factor about this disastrous battle is that the Germans were forewarned, and had prepared accordingly. Military historian Glyn Harper has unearthed documents that detail a British deserter being captured by the Germans on 11 October and informing them of British intentions. The Germans, therefore, moved extra artillery onto the ridge and placed snipers in the shell holes. The courageous Kiwis did not stand a chance. They effectively walked into a trap.

That Field Marshall Haigh was desperate to get the Germans off the Passchendaele Ridge and prevent them from advancing to the Belgium ports to obtain anchorage for their U boats, is understandable; however, neither he nor General Russell, in charge of the New Zealand Division, visited the battle area to assess the physical conditions or the physical state of the men. As Brigadier Hart, Commander of the Rifle Brigade, said, "I cannot speak too highly of the splendid courage and



### What rain does at the front

This postcard of a horse-drawn ambulance struggling through the mud to the front provides an authenticity to its title  
Whanganui Regional Museum ref: 1802.3794

devotion to duty of all ranks under my command, as they went into action in an exhausted condition and did everything that was humanly possible to attain success.”

Passchendaele was a heroic disaster. The dead of Broodseinde and First Passchendaele, whose bodies were recovered, lie in Tyne Cot Cemetery near Ypres. On the wall of this cemetery are listed the names of soldiers whose bodies were never found, including 1,179 New Zealanders. Amongst these names are 23 men from the Whanganui district.



### The Convalescent Blues

This cartoon postcard is of a wounded soldier wearing the much hated but distinctive blue floppy uniform that military authorities required non-officers, or “other ranks”, to wear in hospital and in public during their recovery from wounds or illness.

Whanganui Regional Museum Collection ref: 1955.4.3

## BEERSHEBA

The battle of Beersheba on 31 October one hundred years ago was part of the 3rd Battle of Gaza in the Palestine campaign. The actions of Queen Alexandra's Mounted Rifles in this battle were mentioned in Issue 7 of *The Great War Times*. The town of Beersheba contained wells, and it was critical to capture them for the horses of the Anzac and British mounted troops. The Kiwis attacked strategic positions, held by the Turks, on a hill called Tel el Saba. Thanks to the capture of these by the Kiwis, it was possible for a cavalry charge to be made on Beersheba by 500 Australian Light Horse troopers.

Sergeant Charles Levett from Fielding, who attended Wanganui Collegiate School, fought in and survived this battle. He was later killed at Amonan, near Jordan, in 1918.



### Sergeant Charles Levett

*In Memoriam 1914-1918,*  
Wanganui Collegiate School circa 1919

# GOING TO WAR AT SEA

## PART I: NEW ZEALAND NAVAL FORCES

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With the passing of the Naval Defence Act in 1913, New Zealand's first naval forces were established. Lacking a ship, Minister of Defence James Allen persuaded a reluctant British government to provide the outdated cruiser HMS *Philomel* as a training vessel. Launched in 1890 *Philomel* had had a varied career which included serving in the South African War (1899-1902) and the Middle East. By 1904 the ship was included in Admiral Fisher's famous list of "sheep, llamas and goats" – ships too old to fight and too slow to run away.

Recommissioned for New Zealand, *Philomel's* first naval voyage to Picton on 30 July 1914 to train new recruits was interrupted by an order to return to Wellington to prepare for war. When war was declared on 5 August *Philomel* returned to Royal Navy command, although the New Zealand government paid the wages of the crew and maintenance of the ship throughout the conflict.

Sixty New Zealand naval ratings served with the British crew of the HMS *Philomel*. Their first action was to escort the Advanced Party of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force to capture German-held Samoa. The *Philomel* then joined the escort of the Main Body of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force when the troopships left Wellington, bound for Egypt in October, 1914.

Able Seaman William Knowles was one of the first Kiwis to die in combat in World War I on 9 February 1915 after a landing party from the *Philomel* intercepted Ottoman forces near Alexandretta (now İskenderun) in the eastern Mediterranean. About 500 New Zealanders served in the Royal Navy during the war. Auckland Lieutenant Commander William Sanders remains the only New Zealander to be awarded the Victoria Cross, for a naval action against a German U-boat in 1917.

Assigned to gunboat patrol in the Persian Gulf, HMS *Philomel* returned to New Zealand in 1918 when it became too expensive to continue to repair the aging ship. She ended her days as a naval training ship based at Devonport in Auckland before being decommissioned and finally consigned to the sea off Cuvier Island, off the east coast of the North Island of New Zealand, in 1949.

# WANGANUI COLLEGIATE SCHOOL CRICKET PAVILION

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In 1917 the Headmaster J H Allen organised the building and gifting to the School of the Cricket Pavilion as a memorial to two men. His brother, Charles Bramwell Allen of the Canterbury Regiment, was killed on 15 September 1916 during the First Battle of the Somme. A WCS staff member, Hugh Montagu Butterworth of the British 9th Rifle Brigade, was killed during the diversionary Battle of Bellewaarde Ridge in September 1915. Both men were keen cricketers.

When Wanganui Collegiate School moved from Victoria Avenue to Liverpool Street, Hugh Butterworth (staff member 1907-14) was the first tutor in Selwyn House and a very able cricketer. He was much admired and respected by boys and staff alike. While at the Front he wrote letters back to the students. These were collated and published in 1916 as *Letters from Flanders*. The 2011 biography *Blood and Iron* by Jon Cooksey made mention of Butterworth's years at WCS.



### The Cricket Pavilion on Completion

A memorial plaque inside concludes with the Latin phrase, "Vivit Post Funera Virtus", which means "Virtue Outlives Death".

When constructed, the centre section of the pavilion was not enclosed and the scorer's box was sited to its left. Research by the late Wendy Pettigrew indicated that the pavilion was the first World War I memorial in Whanganui.

Thanks to Wanganui Collegiate School Museum staff for the text and photograph.

# WAVERLEY STORIES: THE MATTHEWS FAMILY

In 1912 Ernest and Frederick Matthews were in their late teens when they moved to Waverley. Their father, Frederick senior, had purchased a farm at Ngtuweru.

The elder brother, Ernest, was working on the farm when war was declared. By early 1917 he was on his way to the front as a Trooper with the Wellington Mounted Rifles, probably taking his own horse. Ernest had been stationed in Palestine for just under a year when a raid was launched from Jericho across the River Jordan in an attempt to capture Amman. The action was not successful but the railway line was blown up. On the return to the river, Ernest's brigade was ambushed. Caught in open terrain with no cover, riding at top speed was the troopers' only hope of escape. Ernest was, however, shot dead, four days before his 25th birthday, on 1 April 1918. On 8 April his parents were told that he was missing in action. Days later, they were told he was officially dead. When a nephew was born on 8 April some years later, he was named Ernie in honour of his uncle.



## The Matthews Family of Waverley

Ernest Matthews is seated at left while his brother Fred is seated at right. Their friend Jack Evans stands at left while another Matthews family member stands at right.

Younger brother Fred left New Zealand in May 1916 after six months' training promotion to Sergeant in the New Zealand Cyclist Battalion. As a young civilian he had studied Law in Wellington and was doing legal work for the Public Trust Office there. On 15 May 1918 he was

awarded the Military Cross for Acts of Gallantry in the Field. Within two months he was dead, killed in the 2nd Battle of Marne at a time that was to mark the turning point of the war. The Germans were 40 miles from Paris when Fred arrived with a company attached to a British Division on the night of 19 July. Ordered straight into attack, they broke the German line at a village called Marfaux. The next day the Germans began a full retreat across the Marne River. Fred was killed on 23 July going forward through a wheat field at Marfaux.

Ernest and Fred's older sister Charlotte had trained as a nurse in Masterton where the Matthews family farmed before they moved to Waverley. By 1914 Lottie was 28 years old and was a nursing Sister. She enlisted in the NZ Army Nursing Service and left home for Egypt on the NZHS *Marama* in December 1915, spending most of her war service there. She returned in March 1919, nursing soldiers on NZHS *Willochra* as she sailed home. Initially Lottie took up a nursing position in Rotorua, but by 1925 she was a private nurse in Durban, South Africa. While she was there she met local man, Colin Brander. The pair married, and she lived the rest of her life there, on a large farm, with her husband and their children.

Thanks to Jacq Dwyer, President of Patea Historical Society, for compiling this account.

## WHAT'S ON

### WORLD WAR I EXHIBITIONS

#### NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, WAIOURU

##### *Going Underground: Tunnellers of WWI*

A photographic exhibition by Brett Killington that explores the tunnels under Arras in France

#### NATIONAL WAR MUSEUM, BUCKLE STREET, WELLINGTON

*The Great War Exhibition* by filmmaker Sir Peter Jackson

#### TE PAPA, WELLINGTON

*Gallipoli-The scale of our war*

*For information on all national activities commemorating the centennial of World War I, visit the official website [www.ww100.govt.nz](http://www.ww100.govt.nz).*

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