

Clinton Bates - A Human Face in New Zealand's Greatest Tragedy

Bryan Bates, November 2019.

The Battle

12 October 1917. One of the most important dates socially and militarily in New Zealand's 20th century history. On this day at 5:25am, a 22-year-old from Lyttelton, Clinton Miller Bates, climbed over the sand bags in front of his trench and waded waist deep through the mud at a place called Marsh Bottom, Gravenstafel Road near Passchendaele, Belgium. His commanding officer General Gough had recommended not to proceed due to the atrocious weather but was over ruled by English General Plumer.

The mud, barbed wire, and white-hot metal bullets spraying from German machine guns were cutting his comrades in the 2nd Otago Battalion down around him. Within minutes he was wounded. The family story goes that his mates picked him up and placed him in a shell hole to shelter with other wounded Kiwis while they continued the advance. This stalled shortly afterwards as only approximately 32 of the original group of 180 men were left to fight. As they returned to pick up the wounded, the sheltering crater had caved in and the wounded had drowned beneath the wet slurry, never to be found. Missing in action.



Photograph: Bryan Bates

The New Zealand Monument on Gravenstafel Road towards Passchendaele

Military historians will tell you New Zealand's casualties were 117 officers and 3,179 men of which between 846-1190 died. It was the biggest loss of life for the New Zealand

military in any one day. This was the First Battle of Passchendaele. It lasted less than a day, and moved the western front forward approximately 3-400 metres.

Passchendaele. Here the battle had roared all around on that fateful morning. Today it is a quiet country village surrounded by cornfields. The New Zealand monument stands proudly near an intersection amongst the paddocks where the troops assembled. A road slopes gently upwards from there to what was once “No man’s land” in front of the German pillboxes. Life has moved on; no evidence of the former devastation remains.

The cemetery and memorial wall for the New Zealand soldiers, which is flanked by two German pillboxes, is located nearby at Tyne Cot Cemetery in Zonnebeke. 1,179 names are recorded on the walls including C.M. Bates. These are young New Zealand men who have no known graves, but fell and disappeared amongst the mud and barbed wire.



Photograph: Bryan Bates

View from Tyne Cot Cemetery Towards the Battlefield

We stand and reflect on this stupid waste of human life. Our family lost an eldest son, New Zealand lost a generation of young men, in one day: 12 October 1917.

The Person

So, who was Clinton Miller Bates? Maybe he was just another casualty of World War One whose name is carved on the Lyttelton war memorial. However, his humanity, along with thousands of others, is often overlooked. Family believe that it broke his mother Caroline’s (Tottie) heart when she received the news of his death. The family lost

its eldest son, and his sister Louise (Aunty Lou) reflected 70 years later that she remembered him as a nice young man.

He worked for Graham, Wilson and Smellie, Drapers in Christchurch. He left his job as a clothing/drapery store assistant in Christchurch to join the army with a sense of adventure. His letters home reflected the wide-eyed excitement of seeing London for the first time. He had family and friends in Christchurch who wrote to him with all the latest news, and his letters home appreciated this correspondence. Before he left he played a bit of rugby, athletics, swimming, and loved the outdoors.



Clinton Bates circa 1915

He was the oldest of a family of eight siblings although sister Josephine died within a few months of being born. His father was Joseph (JJ) Bates who was a Presbyterian minister. His mother Caroline (Tottie) Bates was actually Josephs cousin. As a minister Joseph moved to various churches throughout New Zealand.

Their children were:

Clinton Miller Bates (1895-1917)

Marie Isobel (Molly) Bates (1897-1975)

Ewart Armstrong Bates (1899-1940)

Norah Kathleen Bates (1900-1980)

Josephine Anne Bates (1902-1902)

John Clifford (Cliff) Bates (1903-1971)

Joseph Clarke (Jace) Bates (1904-1986)

Isobel Louise Bates (Lou) (1906-1989)



Family Photo

Standing from left to right: Molly, Clinton, Nora

Seated from left to right: Ewart, Jace, Tottie, Lou, JJ, Cliff.

He was a regular church goer during his service in the army. As his father was a minister his upbringing would have been in conjunction with the Presbyterian Church in the various towns the family moved to. The following Presbyterian work record of his father Rev JJ Bates shows how mobile the family was:

BATES, Rev John James
 b 26.2.1868; w (1) Caroline b 22.5.1864 m
 20.7.1894 d 16.1.1924 (2) Evelyn Vere b
 27.7.1883 m 16.2.1925 d 16.6.1975
 He went to work at 12; he was converted 4 yrs
 later & went back to Chch BHS; 3 yrs at Cant
 Univ 1892-; HM Hunterville during vacs.
 Hall Dn 1898-1900
 Ord Waihi WkP 18.9.1900
 Carterton WpP 5.8.1902
 Lyttelton ChP 31.7.1907
 West Taieri DnP 1.3.1917
 Malvern ChP 11.12.1919
 Riversdale MtP 9.12.1926
 Lovells Flat 16.6.1932 ret 30.9.1935
 Sth Dn "supply" 1941
 Died 28.4.1959 Dn, aged 91

*Outram
 Sheffield*
*(Relieving) Lived 1 Philip St
 En. Dunedin.*

A glimpse of Clintons upbringing is seen in the following notice from the Wairarapa Daily Times (Volume LV, Issue 8587, 22 October 1906):

CARTERTON NOTES

(Special to DAILY TIMES.)

The successful scholars of St. Andrew's Sunday School, at the recent Sunday Schools examination, were:—Mid Division—Mona Skelley, scripture 82, catechism 94; Winnie Feist, 80 and 89; Kathleen Lawrence, 71 and 93; Lizzie George, 58 and 88; Ivy George, 62 and 94; May Smyllie, 73 and 91. Senior division (scripture marks): Mina Smyllie, 60; Mary George, 35; Annie McPhee, 28; Bessie Bailey, 37; Jennie Mason, 80; Clinton Bates, 43.

He went to Lyttelton District High School and was a good runner and swimmer as noted in the Press in 1910 (see below). He also won a few medals in sporting events (photo below).

At the gathering of pupils of the Lyttelton District High School in connection with the Dominion Day celebrations yesterday morning, the prizes won by the boys during the past year for athletics and swimming, were presented by Mr G. A. Lewin, president of the L.D.H.S. Old Boys' Association. The prize-winners were as follows:—100 Yards' Championship (running).—**Clinton Bates** 1, Arthur Shrimpton 2, George Clarke 3. 200 Yards' Championship (running)—**Clinton Bates** 1, George Clarke 2, Arthur Shrimpton 3. 50 Yards' Championship (Swimming Race). Henry Lewin 1, Evison Thorpe 2, Basil Toomey 3. 75 Yards' Handicap (Swimming Race).—Evison Thorpe 1, Henry Lewin 2, Wm. Brown 3. The medal given by the Old Boys' Association for the best athlete of the season was presented to **Clinton Bates**, whose name was also inscribed on the Association's shield.



Clintons Sports medals

Military Service

Clinton enlisted at Featherston Military Camp on 13 February 1916 as a member of the Mounted Rifles in the rank of Trooper. He transferred to the Otago Regiment on 4 April 1916 in the rank of Private. He left Wellington on 31 May 1916 aboard New Zealand troopship number 54, SS Willochra. He trained as a signaller however this activity seemed to become irrelevant once he got to the front where he was in the infantry. He disembarked at Devonport in England on 27 July 1916 and marched to Sling Military Camp, Salisbury Plain on 29 July 1916. He was posted to the Western Front in February 1917. He survived the “successful” battle of Messines, but was killed on 12th October 1917. He has no known grave.



Clinton Bates on Board Ship Heading Towards England in 1916 (centre rear)



Clinton Bates in Uniform

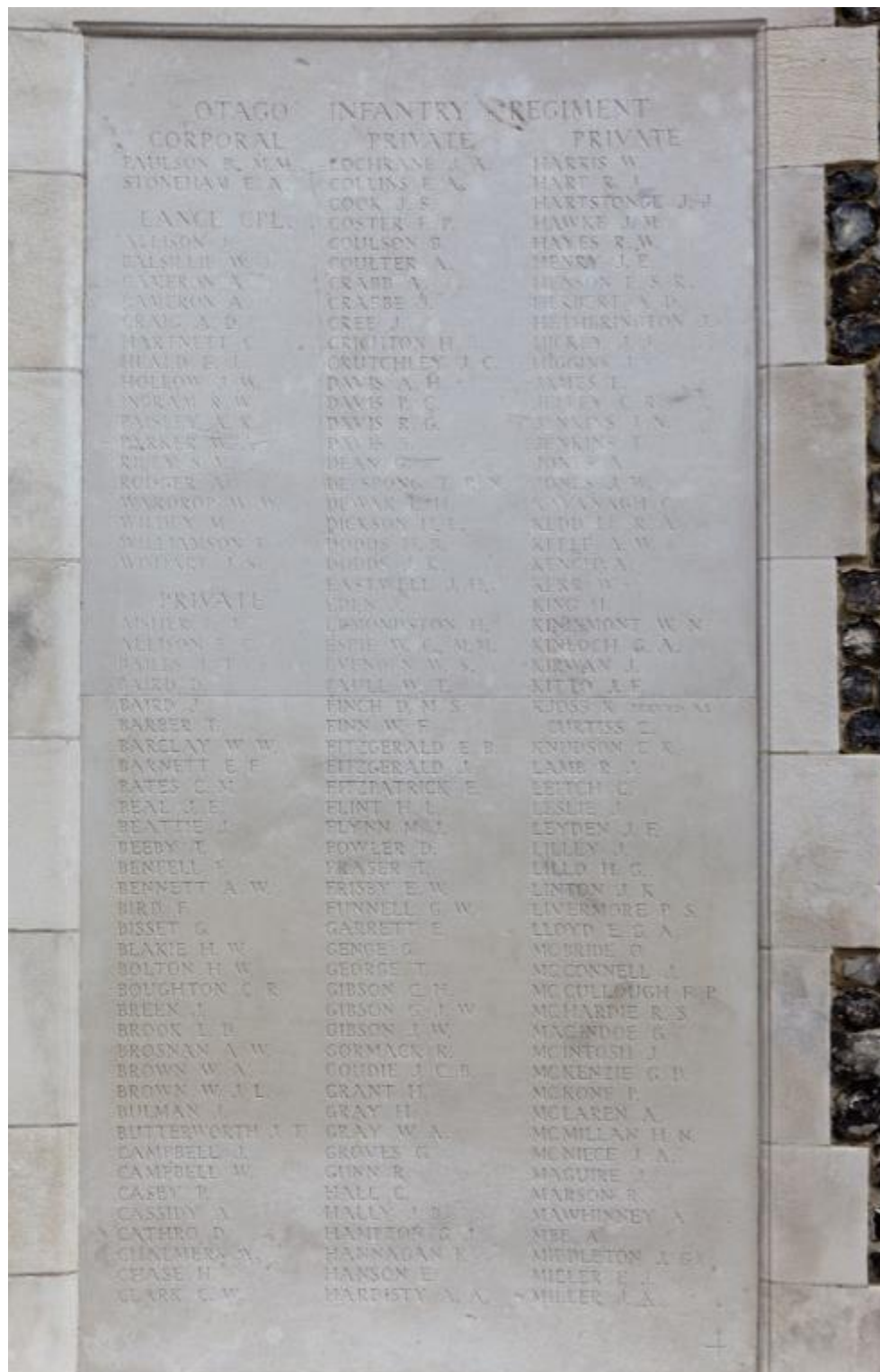
Memorials

Clinton has his name on a number of memorials:

1. Tyne Cot Cemetery. Near Ypres in Belgium, Clintons name is recorded on Panel 4 amongst the New Zealanders who fell. This cemetery is an easy drive from Ypres and the battlefield and the New Zealand Monument are nearby. In Ypres, the last post is played every night at the Menin Gate monument to commemorate those who died.

The photos below show where Clintons name is recorded at Tyne Cot. It is a tranquil place and worth visiting and reflecting on the huge loss of life within a few kilometres.





Panel 4

PRIVATE

AISHER F. J.

ALLISON E. C.

BAILES T. T.

BAIRD D.

BAIRD J.

BARBER T.

BARCLAY W. W.

BARNETT E. E.

BATES C. M.

BEAL J. E.

BEATTIE J.

BEEBY T.

BENFELL F.

BENNETT A. W.

BIRD F.

BISSET G.

BLAKIE H. W.

BOLTON H. W.

BOUGHTON C. R.

2. The Lyttelton War Memorial was shifted after the Christchurch earthquakes and is now in the centre of town. Clintons name is on the left panel on the south face.



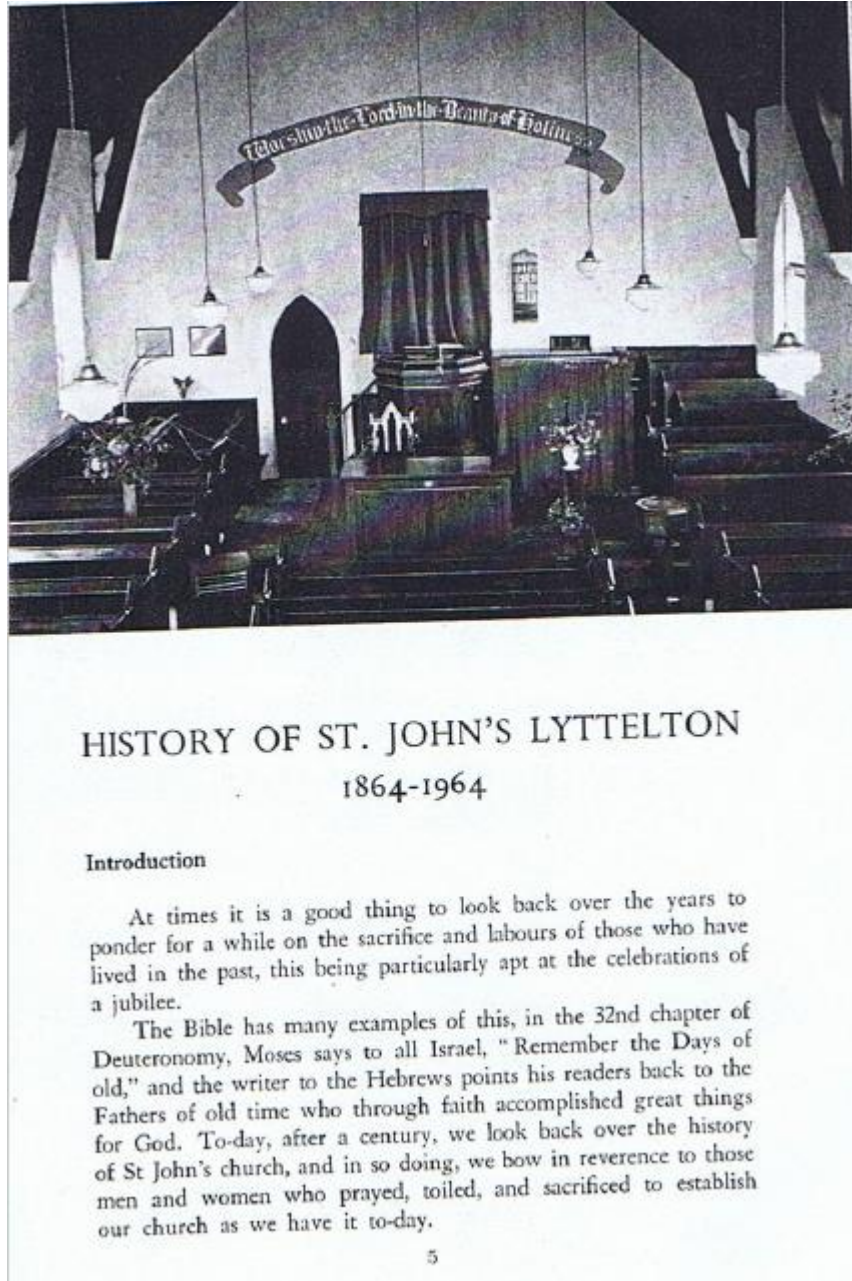
Clinton David Bates pointing to the record of his Uncle Clinton Miller Bates



The South Panel. Lyttelton Cenotaph

3. St Johns Presbyterian Church, Lyttelton.

A plaque was mounted on the wall of St Johns Presbyterian Church in Lyttelton and its location is shown in the following picture:



Following the Christchurch earthquake, the church was demolished. Following urgent phone calls by Bryan Bates to the Presbyterian Church administration in Christchurch, the plaque was rescued from the demolition site. It was proposed to be placed on the wall of a new interdenominational church in Lyttelton. A photo of the rescued plaque is shown below:



4. Clinton David Bates. – One of Clintons brothers, Ewart, named his second son Clinton David Bates.

5. Joseph Bates Grave and Family Plot, Linwood Cemetery. Clintons mother Caroline (Tottie) was buried in Linwood cemetery along with her father Joseph and other family members. Clintons name is recorded on the headstone on the top of the family plot (see below).



Joseph Bates Grave and Family Plot, Linwood Cemetery.

Medals and Royal Note of Thanks

Clintons medals were sent to his parents. He received two service medals and a plaque.



Clinton Bates War Medals

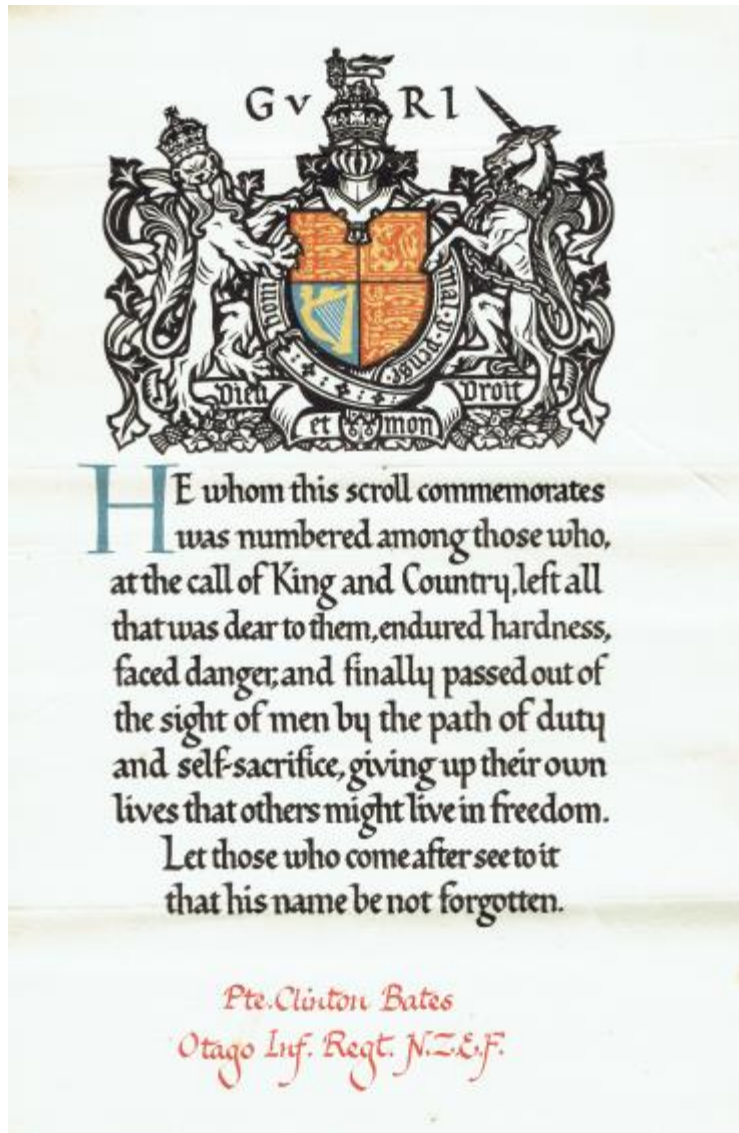
A note of thanks was also sent to the family from King George:



BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

I join with my grateful people
in sending you this memorial
of a brave life given for others
in the Great War.

George R.I.



Letters Home

Clintons brother Cliff held many letters he sent home to various family members. These were passed on to (Clinton) David Bates, Cliffs nephew. Bryan Bates has scanned these letters and they are now in digital form and available from him. Email address: bryanbates@xtra.co.nz

Fields of Remembrance

In 2018, the Fields of Remembrance Trust created a memorial of crosses at the Auckland Domain for the centenary of Armistice Day. Over 18,000 crosses were personally inscribed for each of the New Zealanders who died in World War 1. Clintons name was placed on one of the crosses. When the memorial was dismantled, the cross was removed and taken to Christchurch to be placed at the family grave in Linwood cemetery.



Clintons cross at the Fields of Remembrance, Auckland Domain.

Conclusion

It has been over 100 years since Uncle Clinton was killed in action at Passchendaele in World War One. We lost a member of our family and this has not been forgotten.