

Against Odds Uncounted

The story of my great uncle

Alfred Cuthbert Amyes – Private 27191

1884 – 1917

According to the Cyclopaedia of New Zealand (Canterbury Provincial District), in the late 1800s Kirwee was a farming district of considerable fertility, situated twenty-five miles west from Christchurch, in the county of Selwyn. It was named by Colonel Brett, one of Kirwee's most dynamic residents, after a village in India, with which he had, as a military officer, been familiar. The railway from Rolleston passed through the centre of the district, and a township sprung up about the station. In addition to a hotel and several trade establishments, the village had a public school, a hall, and several churches. During the early days farming in the district was rendered uncertain by the want of a regular water supply. This difficulty, however, was removed by the resourcefulness of Colonel Brett, whose efforts led to the inauguration of the water-race system, by means of which an ample supply of good water was drawn from the neighbouring rivers, and distributed over the district. Sheep farming and grain-growing flourished, and the rearing of cattle was also carried on, though to a lesser degree. Public sales were conducted monthly in the district, and an annual show was held, under the auspices of the Courtenay Agricultural and Pastoral Association. Kirwee's postal service provided for two mails a day with Christchurch, and there was a telegraph office at the railway station.

This was the rural New Zealand environment into which my great uncle Alfred Cuthbert Amyes was born in 1884. He was my grandfather's youngest brother, one of five siblings (3 boys and 2 girls) born to parents both of whom emigrated from England to New Zealand with their respective families in 1862. Having the same first name as his father, Alfred, there is no knowing what he was referred to by the family. It is highly likely, with having the same name as his father; he was given a nickname or perhaps even called Cuthbert. Unfortunately, with the next generation now gone, we may never know. But for the purposes of this story, I will call him Alfred (sometimes Alfred Jr. in situations where his father is also mentioned).

Young Alfred and his siblings would have attended the Public School at Kirwee which was opened in December, 1881. The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand describes it as a wooden building, with a concrete foundation, and had room for seventy-five pupils. The walls were hung with maps and pictures, with framed portraits of Queen Victoria and other English celebrities. The headmaster displayed enlarged pictures of prominent men, with a view to perpetuating the memory of those who have done good work for the country. The school was surmounted by a flag-staff, with the Union Jack, one of the first to be used in the North Canterbury education district.

With the prominence Queen Victoria's portrait, other English celebrities, and the Union Jack, Alfred's school was demonstrating its allegiance to Britain. Pupils must have grown up feeling a strong connection with the British Empire through their learning and the fact they themselves were of British stock having parents or grandparents born in Britain. The ties between Britain and New Zealand were very close during this period.

Alfred Sr. farmed 397 acres at Kirwee until he sold the land to his brother in 1894 and moved his family to a farm in Haswell, near Christchurch. Alfred Jr. and his two brothers worked on the farm with their father until 1914 when the family moved again, this time to Motukaika, Cave, South Canterbury. Alfred Jr. was now 31 years of age and unmarried. With his brother Reg (my grandfather) Alfred Jr. worked on the new farm running sheep until he enlisted in the Canterbury Regiment in 1916. But what made Alfred Jr. enlist in the army and join the horrific battlefields of Europe?

“Remember! It is your duty to enrol.” “Remember! You must do your duty”. These were some of the challenging words emblazoned on posters directing eligible young men to enlist in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and detailing the consequences of failure to do so. The posters were published by order of the Government Statistician, Malcolm Fraser, following the enactment of the Military Service Act 1916.

Despite circa 14,000 men flocking to answer the call to arms in 1914, by 1916 reinforcements were required. Intensive campaigns to encourage enlistment failed to meet targets with only 30% of men eligible for military service volunteering. The Military Service Act 1916 was passed to conscript men not less than 20 years of age and under 46 years of age into the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Falling within the prescribed age group and being unmarried, Alfred would have been required to meet his obligations under the Act. Enlisting in the 2nd Battalion, Canterbury Regiment, he was off to war whether he liked it or not.

Alfred was shipped up to the North Island and after receiving training and spending time at the Featherston Camp, he travelled by train with his fellow 17th Reinforcements soldiers into Wellington where he would embark on the SS Devon on 25 September 1916, a journey that would take him via Durban, South Africa, to top up the ship's coal supplies and arriving at Devonport, England, on 26 November 1916. The SS Devon was a Federal Steam Navigation Company vessel of 9,661 gross tonnages specially fitted out for carrying troops. The cost of the fit out, which included a gun platform, amounted to £7,414-9s-0d. However there were issues between the shipping line and the Department of Defence which led to an unfortunate delay in departure date. These delays, over an entire weekend, must have been frustrating for the troops who were trained and kitted out ready to do their duty. After the various issues were resolved between the parties, accompanied by the SS Pakeha, the SS Devon was finally on its way.



SS Devon

Life on board ship may not have provided the comforts of home, but the weekly menu suggests the men were well fed with three square meals a day. The set menus for each day of the week consisted of breakfast: porridge, accompanied by liver and bacon, stewed steak, curry and rice, and traditional sausages. Dinner at midday was the main meal of the day and offered the troops a variety of roasts,

stews with potatoes and vegetables followed by dessert that typically included an assortment of puddings. The tea menu was a simpler affair consisting of cold meat, Irish stew, vegetable stew and that culinary delight - stewed tripe. The men must have looked forward to Tuesday evening tea when stewed tripe was the only option on the menu.

Clearly the food on board ship was not responsible for the illnesses that hindered some of the troops on board. The Officer Commanding Troops sent a cable from Durban on 24 October 1916 to the Defence Department, New Zealand, announcing, "The general health of the troops on board is good; there are twelve cases of measles, twenty-two of influenza, and four of venereal disease." Perhaps the latter ailment could have been avoided had the SS Devon's departure from Wellington not extended over a weekend.



Sling Camp, Salisbury Plain

The New Zealand troops arrived in Britain where they were deployed to Sling Camp, Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire. The camp was initially created as an annex to Bulford Camp in 1903; it was originally named "Sling Plantation" after the nearby woods. Soon after the beginning of World War 1, New Zealand troops started work on building wooden huts here. The word "plantation" was then dropped from the title and it

simply became Sling Camp. After building was completed, it was said that if each hut were placed end-to-end they would have measured 6 miles.

In 1916, the camp was occupied by New Zealand forces and was then known as Anzac Camp by some. It then comprised four main sections: Auckland, Wellington, Otago and Canterbury Lines. It was officially called the 4th New Zealand Infantry Brigade Reserve Camp, and trained reinforcements and casualties who were regaining fitness.

Obviously, senior military personnel were not impressed by the training the troops had received in New Zealand before embarking on their journey to war. In a strongly worded report dated 5 December 1916, the Brigadier-General Commanding New Zealand Reserve Group wrote of the deficiency of the training of the men in N.Z. He considered the following courses should be adopted:

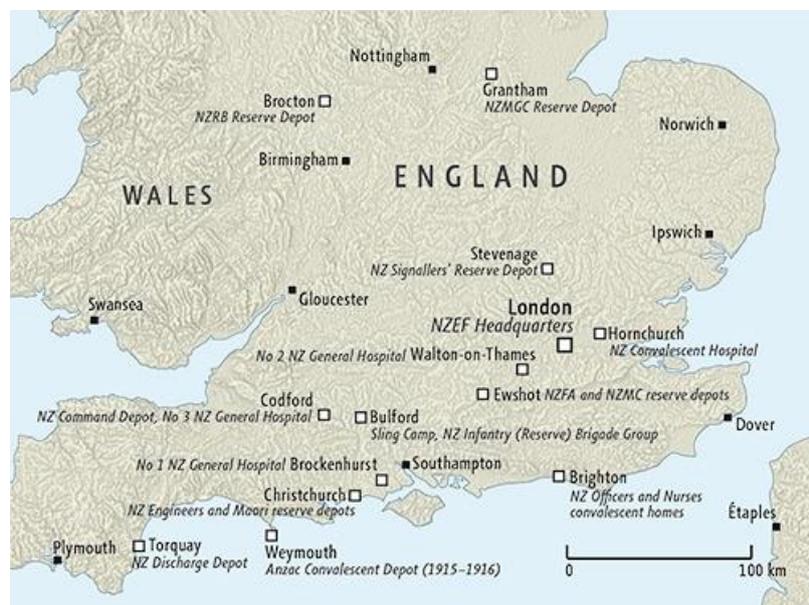
- a) "A complete staff – fully conversant with the latest methods of training as carried out in this country (England), should be sent to N.Z. to train the men before they are sent to Sling Camp; or if that is impossible
- b) Let drafts remain in N.Z. only for such time as would enable them to be organised and equipped and send them to England, where the main part of their training would be carried out."

He went on to say that the training is far from economical and a good deal of time is wasted by the fact that the training in New Zealand is not up-to-date and therefore some change on the lines

suggested above appear to be necessary. Had this criticism filtered down to the troops, we can only imagine how they would have reacted, especially if they had thought their training was complete and they were ready to face the enemy in combat.

But the criticism of the newly arrived 17th Reinforcements did not end there. In a further report, some of the men were considered too old to face the hardships in France and a number of men had arrived at the camp in riding breeches and other clothing purchased by themselves, not uniforms issued by the army. The men's discipline also came under scrutiny comparing them with the 16th Reinforcements. Words like irresponsibility, slovenliness and a want of respect for seniors summed up the views of the commanders. Although the 17th did gain some praise, albeit faint, over the 16th. It was reported the men of the 17th appear to be a little more amenable to discipline, probably owing to the fact that greater control seems to have been exercised upon the voyage from New Zealand. Tough times lay ahead for the troops during their time in Sling Camp.

Alfred left for France on 9 December 1916, but fell ill the following March and was returned to England. He was admitted to the casualty clearing station (CCS) and in early April was diagnosed with otitis media (OM). Otitis media is inflammation located in the middle ear. It can occur as a result of a cold, sore throat, or respiratory infection. Alfred would likely have suffered from irritability, difficulty sleeping, fever, fluid draining from the ears, loss of balance, hearing difficulties and ear pain, not symptoms that would enable him to effectively discharge his responsibilities as a soldier. A week later he was transferred to the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces Convalescents Hospital at Hornchurch in Essex.





Passchendaele Map

He returned to active service on 26 May 1917 and again proceeded to France on 11 July and was posted to a unit on 13 September. You also have to wonder if the after affects of his illness, along with battling such appalling weather conditions at Passchendaele, contributed in some way to his death only four weeks later.

Alfred would have found the conditions in Belgium in October 1917 a far cry from what he would have experienced in South Canterbury. South Canterbury has a relatively dry temperate climate with temperatures warm in summer and cold in winter. In October the average high temperature is 16 degrees Celsius with average lows reaching 6 degrees Celsius. The average rainfall is 55mm and he would have

enjoyed plenty of sunshine, around 2,000 hours each year.

Conversely, conditions for Alfred and his fellow soldiers were appalling. They were marched in driving rain often knee-deep in mud with virtually no protection from the miserable weather. They arrived at their destination exhausted and ill-prepared for what was in store for them. It was to be a devastating battle that unnecessarily cost the lives of hundreds of young men.

Owen H. Mead, Lieutenant-Colonel, Commanding the 2nd Battalion Canterbury Regiment, in his war diary chronicled the events of 11 October 1917 and 12 October 1917, the day Alfred was killed in action. The following chronology is an extract from his diary.

11-10-17

On the morning of this date, the Battalion was disposed.....

7.00am

Major Medding was killed and Lieut. Davies wounded, both being hit by the same shell.

10.00am

The C.O and O.Cs 1st & 13th Coys. went forward to reconnoitre the route up to the assembly line. The day was fairly fine with occasional showers. Enemy shelling intermittently. Our artillery only fairly active as many guns were busy moving forward. Owing to the bad state of the roads and approaches, great difficulty was experienced in doing this, many guns being bogged and unable to get into position.

3.00pm

Conference of Commanding Officers with the Brigadier at the Capitol, when final orders for the attack were issued and discussed.

5.30pm

1st & 13th Companies moved from the old German front line and joined 1st Canterbury and 1st Otago Bns. respectively, coming under orders of the C.Os of these Battalions.

6.30pm

2nd Otago, 1st Otago and 1st Canterbury BNs. with the attached Companies of the 2nd Canterbury moved up to the trenches of assembly.

8.30pm

All battalions of the Brigade were formed up in position of assembly. Great credit is due to Company and Subordinate Commanders for the manner in which the assembly was carried out, considering that the ground was exceedingly heavy, wet and torn up by shell fire.

The night was also very dark and with intermittent showers of rain. The enemy appears nervous and jumpy, and continually sent up flares of every description. His artillery and machine gun fire however were fairly quiet.

12-10-17

3.00am

Rain came on fairly heavy and the weather continued to be stormy and wet till just before Zero.

5.25am Zero

Our barrage, which was very feeble, opened behind our forward assembly line, and continued for four minutes. As soon as our barrage commenced, the enemy opened very heavy machine gun fire and dropped his barrage about 50 yards on the northern side. His barrage, however, did not cause our troops many casualties, and all our men were able to cross the river without much difficulty.

5.29am

Our barrage moved forward followed by the infantry, our shell fire apparently not worrying the enemy very much, as the machine gun fire did not decrease in the least. The barrage continued to move forward in 50 yard leaps, followed by the infantry, who had by this time sustained very heavy casualties from hostile machine gun fire. The advance continued until held up by masses of uncut wire which was utterly impassable.

?.??am (The next time entered in the diary was unreadable.)

2nd Otago were held up but small parties of the Battalion attempted to take the two Pill-boxes by crawling under the wire. Unfortunately none of these gallant attempts were successful.

The 2nd & 12th Coys. of 2nd Canterbury had now pushed up level with the 2nd Otago and a party of the 2nd Coy. also made an attempt by working round to the left. This was also unsuccessful. Another party from the 12th Coy. made an attempt on the right, but also unsuccessful. Other parties

from these two Companies also made attempts, one or two getting within 15 to 20 yards of the Pill-boxes. The bravery and determination of the men in these attempts were magnificent.

?.??am (This time entered in the diary was also unreadable.)

By this time all units of the Brigade had attempted to get on without success and it was realised that further advance was impossible until the uncut wire and Pill-boxes with their machine guns had been properly dealt with by the artillery. Machine gun fire was still exceptionally heavy and very accurate. Enemy snipers were also very active, movement practically impossible. Any man exposing himself was immediately shot. Information to this effect was received at Battalion Headquarters about this time. Lieut. Colonel Smith went forward to reorganise and reconnoitre for an attack but found on personal reconnaissance that further advance was impossible. It was then decided by the remaining Commanding Officers to dig in and consolidate on the line we now held.

11.00am

Word was received that the whole advance was held up, the 3rd Brigade and the 10th Australian Brigade being unable to go forward on account of the very heavy machine gun fire

12 noon

About this time the Brigade major arrived and immediately held a conference with the Commanding Officers. The whole situation was gone into and discussed and consolidation of the position then held by us was acknowledged to be the only practicable course to adopt.

12.45pm

The situation was still unchanged when orders were received to renew the attack at 3 pm.

It was decided by all Commanding Officers in Conference with the Brigade Major that such an attempt would be absolutely disastrous as owing to the heavy hostile gun fire, reorganisation was impossible.

It was also practically an impossibility to advance with troops in the formation they occupied at the time – all Battalions being intermingled.

All Commanding Officers, however, would have been willing to make the attempt had it not been for the enemy's uncut wire which was in some places at least 50 yards in depth. To advance against it would have meant practically annihilation of the Brigade.

Brigade Headquarters was accordingly advised of this opinion of the four Commanding Officers and all were very much relieved when orders came through that the attack would not take place.

3.00pm

Our barrage again opened and covered the same ground as in the morning and although it appeared stronger, it did not do any apparent damage to the enemy since his machine guns and snipers were as active as ever.

4.00pm

Orders were issued to reorganise the Brigade.

7.00pm

Companies were disposed. Owing to the extremely wet nature of the ground, it was impossible to dig communication trenches. The battalion was disposed in depth in shell holes.

11.30pm

By this time, reorganisation of the Brigade was complete. Reorganisation was carried out without a hitch, everything being complete before midnight. This movement as all but four Officers had become casualties reflects great credit on the NCOs who worked splendidly throughout the night, encouraging the men and getting them into proper positions and dug in before midnight. The night was very wet and cold, but quite quiet.

By the end of 12 October 1917 Alfred Cuthbert Amyes was dead. Given the diary reference to the 2nd Company, 2nd Canterbury Battalion, we can only surmise that he was killed in action between 5.30am and 11.00am.

Lieutenant-Colonel Mead's brief descriptions of events do not portray the depth of the carnage. The battle at Passchendaele should never have gone ahead in the appalling conditions that prevailed that day. 846 New Zealanders were killed, their bodies lying in swathes about the wire, buried in the quagmire and along the road. New Zealand suffered some 17,000 killed during the war and another 41,000 wounded. The number of casualties that occurred in just one morning on 12 October 1917 totalled 6% of New Zealand's total casualties. But why did so many good men die.

There were several factors contributing to this tragedy. Field Marshall Douglas Haig, the British senior officer who commanded the British Expeditionary Force, must take the blame for the events that unfolded on this disastrous day in New Zealand history. Haig was determined not to miss what seemed a prime opportunity meant the 12 October attack was hurried.

The troops were already exhausted from their long march to the front, but Haig allowed only two days planning time for what would be deeper objectives than preceding attacks. There was little time to determine the tape line for the attack, to draft and issue orders, for commanders at all levels to brief their troops, for artillery tables to be calculated and disseminated to infantry battalions. And on top of all this, the unrelenting weather and bog-like battlefield.



Jacking up a field gun at Passchendaele in an attempt to move it forward. (1999-929, Kippenberger Military Archive and Research Library, Army Museum, Waiouru)

The state of the ground meant that many platforms for the forward guns were unstable. The guns became useless after firing a few rounds as the recoil pushed them deeper into the mud. Not only that, but every single artillery shell had to be cleaned before it could be fired. This situation led to weak artillery protection resulting from a lack of guns forward, the impossible task of establishing stable platforms for the few that were and the scanty ammunition supply. Shells that did land in front of the hapless infantry became buried in mud, showering the pill-boxes with fountains of mud, but doing little real damage. Held up by yards of uncut wire, the enemy artillery and the dangerous German machine gun barrage sprayed the slowly advancing infantry at will. The Germans were ready and waiting for the attack. This then was the death scene of my great uncle and hundreds of other New Zealand men.

Alfred spent his first thirty years growing up, attending school and working in quiet rural New Zealand. When they arrived by ship at Port Chalmers in 1862, his grandparents Edmund and Elizabeth Amyes could not have imagined what fate would bestow their grandson Alfred some 55 years later.

I have vivid memories of my grandfather, Reg. Alfred's older brother, and his sister Olive. Growing up as a child in Dunedin, my family often visited them in Timaru during school holidays. But as a child, and most of my adult life, I knew nothing of Alfred or what had happened to him. He had been killed 33 years before I was born and the family had probably preserved their memories of him somewhere safe within themselves.

Having researched his story and knowing the general temperament of the Amyes family, I can only surmise that Alfred was a quiet and respectful in nature, but possessed an underlying courage and drive that maybe only his fellow soldiers had seen demonstrated. He was, in my view, a very brave young man who should always hold a special place in the family's history.

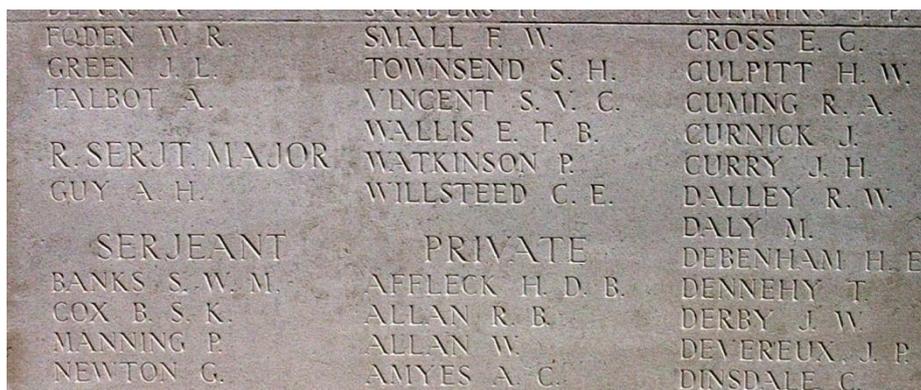


AMYES, Private, ALFRED CUTHBERT, 27191. No. 2 Coy.
2nd Bn. Canterbury Regiment, NZEF. Killed in action
12 October 1917, Age 33. Son of Alfred and Elizabeth
Anne Amyes of Motukaika Cave, South Canterbury. 2.

Alfred's body was never recovered. He is remembered at Tyne Cot Memorial, Tyne Cot Cemetery, Zonnebeke, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium, and the Cave War Memorial, South Canterbury, New Zealand.

Memorial Name: Tyne Cot Memorial, Tyne Cot Cemetery, Zonnebeke, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium

Memorial Reference: NZ Apse, Panel 2



Cave War Memorial



Cave War Memorial

Memorial Inscription:

So long as the rocks ensure and the grass grows and water runs.

So long will this stone bears witness that through this low pass in the hills, men from Cave, Cannington and Moutakaiki Districts rode and walked on their way to the Great European War 1914-1918 and the World War II 1939-1945.

Some of them have not returned but have left their mortal remains in foreign lands and strange seas that our British way of living may continue, but their immortal souls have risen from the grave.

Those who gave their lives:

G. Alexander, A.C. Amyes, L. Hughan, M.D. Martin, A.M. Murphy, B.M. Murphy, T. Nelson, A. McInnes.

*“At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.”*

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