
OVER THERE!

John Francis Heslin

1915 to 1919, WWI Service

Wairarapa 10th Reinforcements, # 10/3904, 'Our Matura Boy'

Introduction

John Francis Heslin (Granddad) was my mother's father. A young Kiwi who served his country and his King during World War One. This is the story of his war service. It is a subject of interpretation because I never knew Granddad and because the men who came home rarely spoke of their experiences. So, drawn from his War Service Record are the facts and figures of this story. They are meshed to historical references which help describe what a soldier's experiences may have been like. Lastly, Granddad's story is rounded out through the memories of his daughter, Moira Annie Pritchard (nee Heslin). After all war is not just a matter of what one saw and did on foreign soil, but also the effect those experiences had on your life and family upon returning home.



ANZAC

The returned serviceman's poem

What means these great white ships at sea?

Ploughing their Eastward track,

Bearing their mangled human freight,

Bringing the spent men back?

They mean that New Zealand has been there

They mean she has played the game,

And her wonderful sons have won their share

Of everlasting fame.

Why Go?

John Francis Heslin was the son of Jock Heslin and Annie Frances Cavanagh. He had come from the Southland settlement of Matura. His Dad was a prominent member of the community there; on the local Council, the School Board of Governors; exhibitor at the Horticultural shows and an active rugby player and then coach. Jock had come to Matura to buy a piece of land and create a good life for this wife and son. And he did. John Francis became a carpenter and was working in the Matura Paper Mill by twenty and playing in Dad's rugby team.

1910, Matura Paper Mill employees. Jock Heslin 2nd back row, 2nd in on right (light jacket). John Heslin in next row down (not sure which one)



By twenty, John Francis (Jock's son) had become a carpenter, was working in the Matura Paper Mill with Dad and sister, Nellie and he played regularly in Dad's rugby team.

Two years later though John junior was gone! He'd moved out of town; next to be seen residing in the Commercial Club miles away up north. By 1910 there were around 12,000 residents in Matura, but perhaps it was still too small for a young lad. In the North Island he had begun a new life for himself living in Ekatahuna and working in Alfredton as a carpenter for the firm of R. H. Cameron.

So why did he sign up? For that matter, why did any of the boys sign up for war?

Was Granddad running away or was he instead just moving with the tide of mates who were all doing the same. Maybe he was worried that if he didn't 'do his bit' then he would bring shame to the family. Or was it the prospect of seeing the world on Prime Minister William Massey's coin. I wonder if it was simpler than any of that. What if it was simply a case of "why not?"



Registration – Nov 1915

‘A very good stamp of a man’

Before joining the Wellington Battalion John Francis Heslin (Granddad) had been with the group of volunteers called the Murihiku Mounted Rifles (established out of the Boer War) who were based in the small Southland settlement of Wyndham. It was from this local battalion that he first tried to sign up early on for WWI but had been rejected, as his registration form explains; “because of slight varicose veins”.

He was 24 years and one month old on registering a second time in 1915. 5 foot/7 inches with fair complexion and grey blue eyes; his eyesight and health were all good and the varicose veins were now of little importance. In fact the attending doctor noted he was a great walker and indeed “a fine stamp of a man!” and that was it – he was in.

THE WAIRARAPA DAILY

THE CALL TO ARMS.

TENTH REINFORCEMENTS.

THE WAIRARAPA QUOTA.

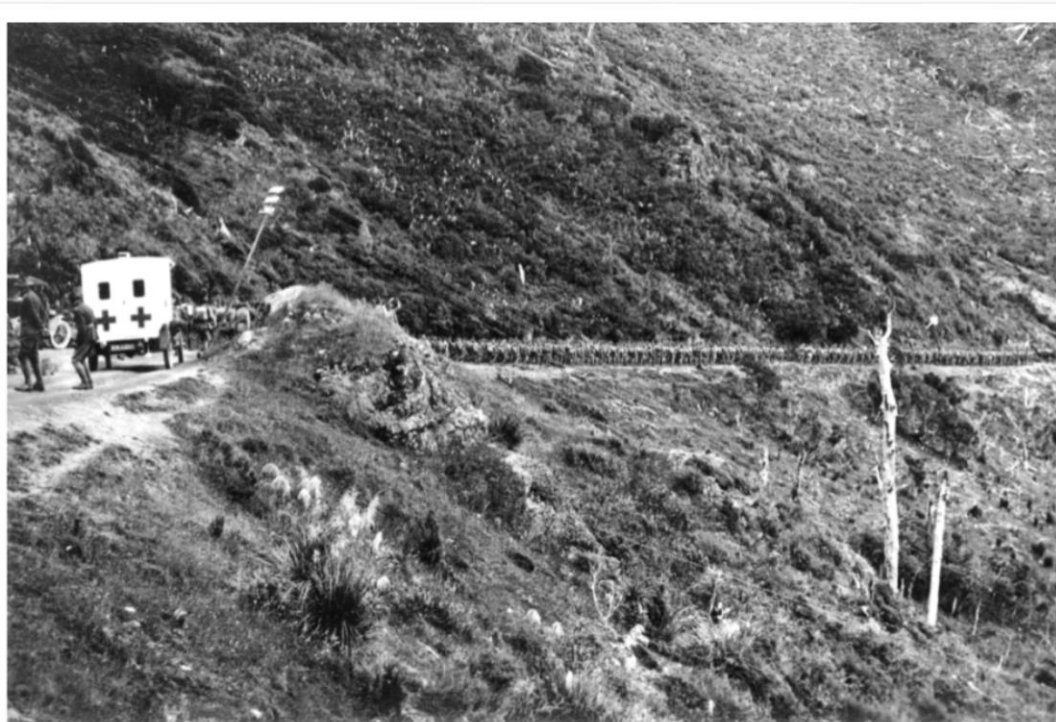
The following recruits have been selected as the Wairarapa quota of the Tenth Reinforcements, and will proceed to camp on November 16th:—

E. B. Oliver, Woodville; W. J. Flynn, Waipawa; E. F. C. Collen, Waipukurau; H. Tavistock, Waipukurau; W. F. Howlett, Whakataki; W. Inness, Waipukurau; H. E. Pike, Greytown; F. H. Moss, Eketahuna; W. T. Longhurst, Wellington; F. C. Barber, Carterton; D. H. Hopkirk, Wellington; W. H. Best, Masterton; P. H. Bailey, Martinborough; W. H. Butler, Dannevirke; A. T. Crawford, Woodville; C. C. Corlett, Carterton; F. C. Taylor, Pahiatua; O. W. Cross, Woodville; C. E. Coles, Onga Onga; J. Swanney, Pahiatua; B. Pilkinton, Pahiatua; C. P. McClosky, Pongaroa; E. Wardle, Pongaroa; S. Clark, Featherston; G. J. Gain, Featherston; J. W. Herod, Greytown; A. Sutherland, Masterton; H. Lindsay, Waipawa; J. F. Heslin, Alfredton; M. Clark, Rakau-nui; W. J. Thorburn, Dannevirke; F. Bevans, Pongaroa; A. Godfrey, Pongaroa; R. McLaren, Greytown; W. Therssen, Norsewood; C. Terry, Tirohanga; D. Swarbrick, Norsewood; J. F. Sadler, Featherston; J. T. Duncan, Manantai.

The March to Wellington

In the Wairarapa Daily Times, of Saturday 6th November 1915, alongside news of the Zeppelin disaster is printed a long list of 10th Battalion recruits. The Wairarapa quota includes John Francis Heslin of Mataura.

“The following recruits have been selected as the Wairarapa quota of the Tenth Reinforcements, and will proceed to camp on November 16th”



The 34th Reinforcement leaving the Rimutaka Road summit during the march from Featherston to Trentham.

Granddad and the other men enlisting that year in the Wairarapa did the arduous twenty-seven kilometre march over the hill to Trentham base and then on to town and the docks. Loaded down with full kit they would leave Featherston at 3am, taking five hours to reach the summit. It was 27kms just to get to Kaitoke on the other side. They would bivouac overnight at Kaitoke, do drills in the Mangaroa Hills and then march down in to Upper Hutt.



Each company would take turns to lead the column, often behind a local man, Frederick Rutherford (a cobbler). Rutherford did the journey with the boys each time, striding out in front holding the flag high (Wairarapa100, 2015). Sixty

Thousand soldiers signed up from 'over the hill' in WWI. Granddad may have been originally from down south, but I am sure that many friendships will have struck up along the dirt tracks of the Rimutakas!

Off in to the Tasman – March 1916



Granddad's battalion sailed out of Wellington harbour in March 1916 along with the 4th Reinforcements for the 1st and 2nd Battalions. They sailed in convoy with two ships "Willochra" and "Tofua" to Australia meeting others in Hobart before taking just over a month to reach Egypt.

We can tell which troop ship he was on by the magazine the men produced on the way over. By the looks of the photos of the ships leaving the harbour at that time (like this earlier photo of the Willochra laden down with troops the year before) that the journey will have been quite a shock to a lad from Southland.



How one weathered the journey often depended on the ship itself and the individual's constitution. Perhaps Granddad is one of the unlucky who were "out for the count" for most of the Tasman. They really suffered through the turbulent

seas of the Australian Bite. There again because he sailed on the Willochra rather than the rougher and older colliery ships then he should have had a more comfortable ride. On one older ship there were 400 men to share 5 basins for washing in, whereas in the steam ship

Willochra, which had been commissioned as a cruise ship in 1912 it was class all the way. She could cruise at a very respectable 16 knots and when originally fitted out there had only been first class accommodation. She would have been refitted for war service and by March 1916 she was crammed with men, stores and horses destined for Egypt. (McLean, 2015)

On board there were drills, boxing, cricket and even the “Willochra Tatler” magazine to read. In it you could read a yarn or two to pass the time. Perhaps hearing about the soldier who bought up yards of silk in Colombo destined for the family store back home in Willis Street.

You could remember the antics on crossing Neptune’s line or spare a thought for the young lad who didn’t even make it through the voyage, buried at sea.



The “Willochra” Alphabet,

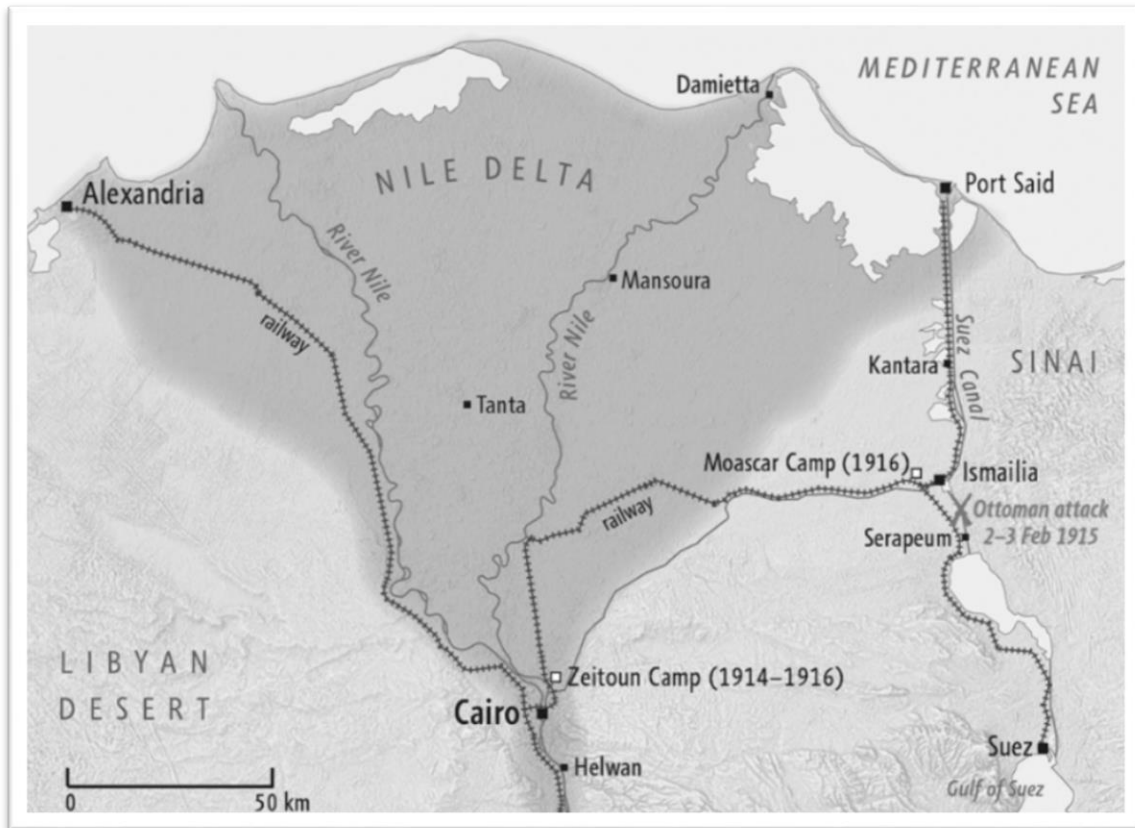
A stands for Allies, resolved to stand firm,
 B stands for Britain, who is taking her turn ;
 C for our Captain, hale, hearty and fit,
 D for the Doctors we have on the ship.
 E “ excuse duty,” very hard to get here,
 F for fatigues—I’m dry—Pardon ? Thanks—a beer.
 G for the Germans, our despicable foe.
 H is for—well, where old Wilhelm will go.
 I for Ould Ireland, we’re all sorts on board,
 J for sweet Joseph, a Chaplain adored.
 K is for Kitchener—our dog and mascot,
 L for the land—I could do with a lot.
 M is for Mate—a dry stick, the Chief !
 N is for Neptune, his visit was brief.
 O stands for Ocean, from whence he came,
 P for the pills he administered for pains.
 Q is for queer men—there’s plenty aboard,
 R is for Routine—a name now abhorred.
 S is for Sisters—three cheeky young girls,
 T he Officers’ hearts are all in a twirl.
 U means unkempt—salt water we blame,
 V vaccination and arms all inflamed.
 W for “ Willochra,” our noble old ship.
 X for her X-cellent behaviour this trip.
 Y for the yearning (but first we must go)
 Z To our homes in New Zealand, when we’ve beaten
 the foe.

Then there were sports afternoons once a week – long jump, tug-of-war, standing high jump and cock fighting (lovely!).

Lastly on page 18 is the proof that this was Granddad Heslin’s transport.

Under the embarkation roll you’ll find Sargeant J.F. Heslip (sp. Heslin), B Company reporting to Major McLean.

Training Camps Egypt and England – ‘foreign lands’ - April – June 1916



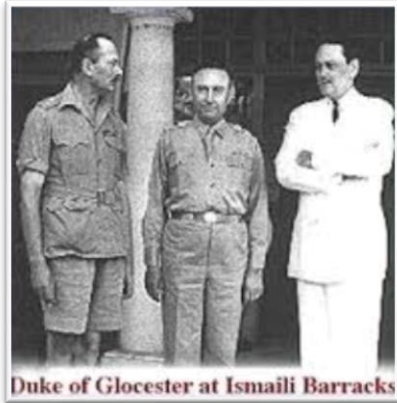
Suez, Egypt

A little over a year after the Ottoman attack on the Allied forces the ‘Willochra’ arrived in Port Said. This was around the time that renewed efforts were being applied to the Moascar Camp there. Stationed down the road from the Ozzies and about a mile from the township of Ismailia the NZEF camp wasn’t well prepared initially, but by the time Granddad had arrived they were in full swing. How strange it must have seemed to disembark in the ancient Nile Delta and camp next to the desert just a mile from a charming French village (established by the French canal builders) (McGavin, 1923).

That April got intolerably hot in the Suez. So hot in fact that they started training between 2a.m. and 8a.m. in the mornings just to cope. Here only a

short time, this is when Granddad joined the newly formed, 1st Brigade New Zealand



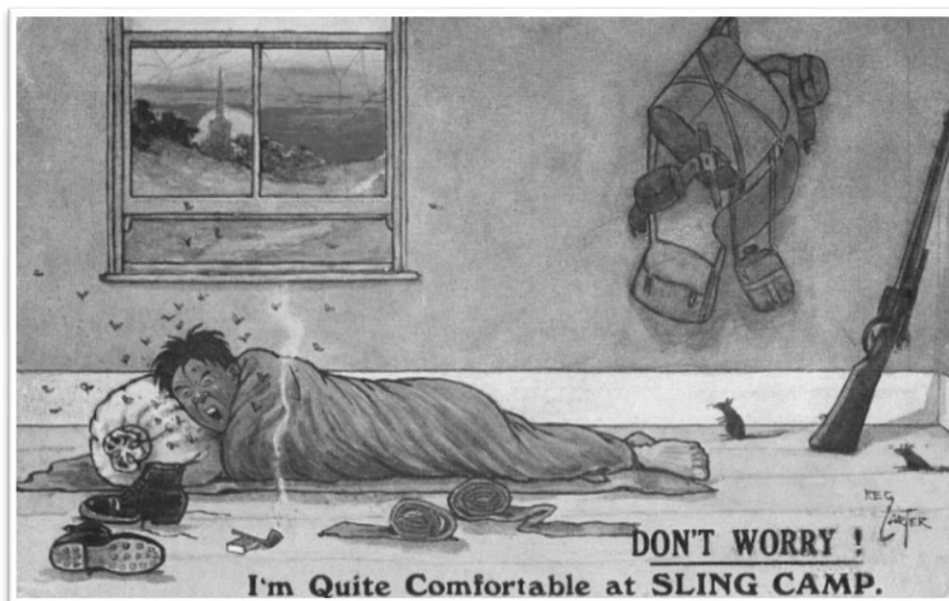


Battalion. In fact the New Zealand Division only came in to being that March in Moascar. Before then it had been named the New Zealand and Australian Division. The departing 1st Brigade of New Zealand Infantry, of which Granddad was part, was to be the first of three infantry brigades to join the new division.

The archives show that Granddad was there in Egypt when Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester (the future King George VI) visited the barracks in April 1916. The training would have stepped up a pace in the lead up to the visit. Then afterwards the newly formed 1st Brigade shipped out to a more permanent training camp on the Salisbury Plains in England.

Salisbury Plains, England

At the end of May Granddad's troop headed for the much cooler climes of the new training camp on Salisbury Plains; Sling Camp. To imagine what Sling Camp was like think of camping out on the New Zealand Desert Road. It was described as a barren, bleak place. There was heavy snow in the winter, windy hot days in summer and mud all year round. Set a couple of miles away from the railway station at Bulmer this was a camp unlike most that the men had seen before.



Newcomers were treated much like fresh recruits at Trentham. It was run almost completely by Kiwis and many of them had come direct from service in France. These were

hardened chaps who wanted to prepare the new men for the horror and hardships that lay ahead. So, the new lads were subjected to a remorseless regime; stripped of excess kit, enforced discipline, long marching drills over the hills and the chagrin of being taken down a stripe. It was tough to have rank stripped away, but as one historian said “the practice was the right one; and when the men reached the line in France, where many fine hardy experienced soldiers...were still awaiting their stripes, they understood” (McGavin, 1923).



It wasn't all bad though. In the distance on the white chalk hillside had been cut a giant Kiwi, and the huts were warm and the food wholesome. A strong sense of unity with your fellow Kiwi developed here, but Granddad was probably pleased though to see the end of his training in July. As he marched out of camp to the band playing it's unlikely he had any idea what he was heading in to.

“Route marches over the hills, the drone of the aeroplanes, the wail of the plover, the old tin bombing pulpit on the hill, the craving for leave, and the everlasting khaki”.

Sir D.J. McGavin

France 'in the field' - July – Dec 1916

Armentieres

Not much can be deciphered about Granddad's assignments in France from his service record. The notes "France", "in the field" and "Western Front" encompasses many possible battles of the time period. By this point though we know that Granddad arrived as part of the reinforcements to the 1st NZ Infantry Brigade. From historical records we see that the brigade had been made up of battalions from Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury and Otago regiments. They were in turn part of the ANZAC Corps now commanded by Lieutenant General William Birdwood.

So, it can be deduced from archives that Granddad's regiment was involved initially in the zone near Armentieres (south of Ypres). Although this was dubbed the 'Nursery Sector' these first three months still saw the division suffer 2500 casualties, including 375 killed. By mid-August they were relieved of duties there to prepare for their involvement in the, now infamous, "Somme".

Somme

In mid-September 1916, New Zealand's involvement began, in force, in the Somme Offensive, participating in the Battle of Flers-Courcelette. Granddad had already seen action in France, but many of the men around him (in the 15,000-strong Kiwi force) were going 'over the top' for the first time. Trench warfare was a whole new experience for them (Dyer, 2011).



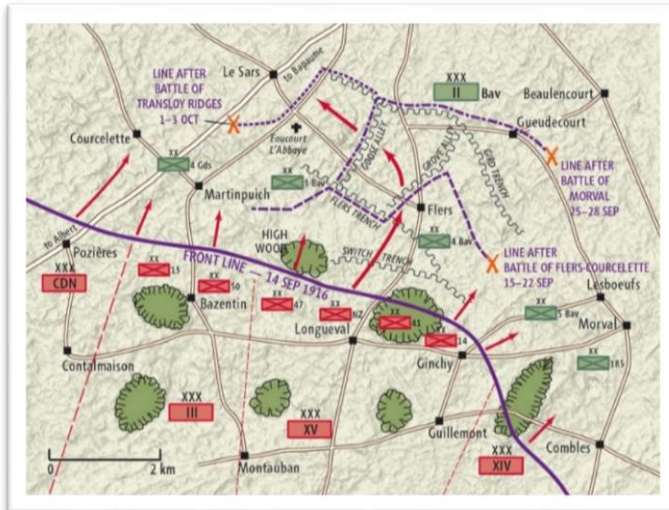
The results were not good; one in every seven men died with many more (one in 4) were wounded. Every time they made small advances (like the success at Flers village) they would face another setback.

During this battle Granddad would have seen tanks for the first time divisions sector. Both sides

employed the use of insidious gas bombs (like Mustard Gas) during the Somme and the men

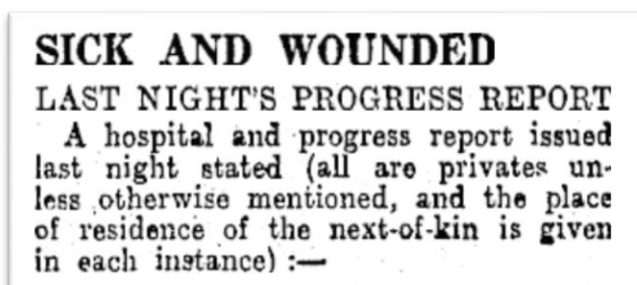
in the trenches were easy targets for the planes overhead. Days of rain turned the place to a putrid quagmire; planned attacks were even delayed because the weather was so poor. The battlegrounds were often a haze of green; shrouding in a toxic mix of rain haze and poisonous

gas. Someone would yell “gas” and you had to scramble for your mask. But it was often later when the gas looked to have cleared that the long-term impacts of chemical warfare settled in, for the gasses hung in the air for many hours (sometimes days) after an attack. These were the worst days in military history for our countrymen and women; worse still than



Passchendaele or Gallipoli. The 172 divisions of the Allied troops advanced a mere seven miles in the whole of the battle. On just the first day our New Zealand casualties numbered 2,050 and by the end of the battle the Allied troops had suffered a massive 640,000 casualties in total.

By December Granddad was sick. Only diarrhoea this time but bad enough to be registered on his casualty record where he is listed as being admitted to a general hospital in Boulogne 300 kilometres away. There were other hospitals closer, so it is likely that he was already on his way by then to Flanders with the rest of the Brigade. In late December he is recorded as ‘marching in’, well enough to return to duty to the base in Etaples (south of Boulogne) where he continued on to the battle of Messines ridge.



Not much is known about Granddad’s service between Dec 1916 and February 1917, except to say that on the 4th of January he was among the casualties published in Wellington’s Evening Post. Although this time thankfully he was “not

a severe case” this was a tough, cold winter so tramping through the tracks and roads of France will have been dreary and miserable.

A New Year; in another field - 1917

Flanders Fields - Messines

Most of us know the early battle at Ypres and Flanders through the poem "In Flanders Fields". It was written in May 1915 by a Canadian physician Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae after presiding over the funeral of his friend at the second battle of Ypres.

Before Granddad 'dug in' up north he had been based in Camiers for a month (mid Feb to mid-March 1917) retraining to join the No.3 New Zealand Machine Gunnery Battalion 'C' Company. The training school had been established the previous year and was seen as 'progressive'. Here, any idea or suggestion for improving the guns and their use was welcomed. In J.H. Luxford's memoirs he says "Many members of the New Zealand Machine

Gun Corps will have pleasant recollections of the courteous and efficient manner in which they received instruction at this very excellent school" (Luxford, 1923, p. 23). Interestingly, Major J.H. Luxford's account is very close to Granddad's experience as he was



Granddad's major in 'C' Company.

It wasn't just in the training school that things were changing. By this time, two years after the first offensive in Flanders, the Allied preparations for the Messines Ridge were very different. Here the No.3 New Zealand's Machine Gunnery Battalion would play an important part. No longer could they afford to have their soldiers and supply lines continually cut down by enemy planes overhead, so planning was a must. This time around the preparation was significant as the troops headed back towards Flanders and the border with Belgium.

The goal lay over the Messines ridge which was heavily fortified and the Germans had all the advantage. Commander-in-Chief Sir Douglas Haig was determined to get to Passchendaele.

Doing so would lay down Allied supply lines right through the German zone and out to the coast enabling them to neutralise the German U-boat facilities.

Getting to Passchendaele meant going through that stronghold at Messines. Extensive preparatory work done, including putting the newly trained 'gunners' like Granddad behind one of the Light Vickers guns. Wheel to wheel they lay ready for the massive Allied attack planned for 7th June. At 3.10am of the morning of 7 June the Allied forces threw everything they had at the Germans. Every tank, every gun, soldier and explosive. Five hundred tons of explosives, to be exact. It broke the morning with such a thunder that the ground shook and the crash could be heard all the way over in England. In minutes they were over 'no man's land' and in just a few hours they had cleared the ridge.

"The first tanks came over at Messines, cos they were only 5 miles an hour but they put the fear of him up and you thought 'what in blazes is coming over me?' Sod knows, neither did we! But anyway, they were ferocious looking things!"

Soldier 2, New Zealand Film Unit 1973.

Ypres, Passchendaele

The Third Battle of Ypres at Passchendaele that began at the end of July wasn't as quickly dealt with. The rain made the battlefield in to a morass and movement forward was slow. 'C' Company were relieved in late August, and as Granddad's service record shows he was granted two weeks leave in England and returned to France in mid-September 1917. Coming back to the field the ANZAC troops had some early success in October. However, this then spurred the command on to the worst event of our involvement in WWI.





Early on the morning 4th October Granddad and his fellow machine gunners opened with a tremendous barrage on the Germans. His Major, J.H. Luxford was dangerously wounded during the attack, but on the whole progress was significant that day. But winter had begun in force bringing such terrible weather that soon guns and horses were bogged down everywhere. A week later the ANZAC soldiers leading the charge soon found themselves trapped amongst the barbed wire under direct line of fire from the German pillboxes. Granddad's old employer from Ekatahuna, R H Cameron died that day. There were to be many, many others for this was the blackest day in New Zealand's history. 845 men were either dead or lay dying in the mud and another 3700 were wounded that day.

The rain had now set in steadily, and the conditions were appalling. The greatest difficulty was experienced in keeping the belts fit for firing, and the guns and ammunition from sinking in the mud". Capt. Inglis, 4th Company, N.Z.M.G. 12th October 1917

Allied forces pulled back. The N.Z.M.G. battalion were billeted a while in the relative comfort of the local villages before returning again at the beginning of November. This time with the goal of holding and advancing the five-mile front by Tiber in order to gain ground by the Polderhoek Chateau. The gunners were kept especially busy during this time dealing with the



overhead attacks.

After a number of planned initiatives the Chateau remained in enemy hands well in to December. It was during this time, on the 22nd of November, that Granddad was promoted to Lance Corporal while serving 'in the field'. Christmas that year was fairly

uneventful with the ANZAC's firing regularly on the Germans, but little or no movement from the German line , although they observed "...parties going to and from a Battalion Headquarters, apparently in connection with the Christmas dinner" (Luxford, 1923).

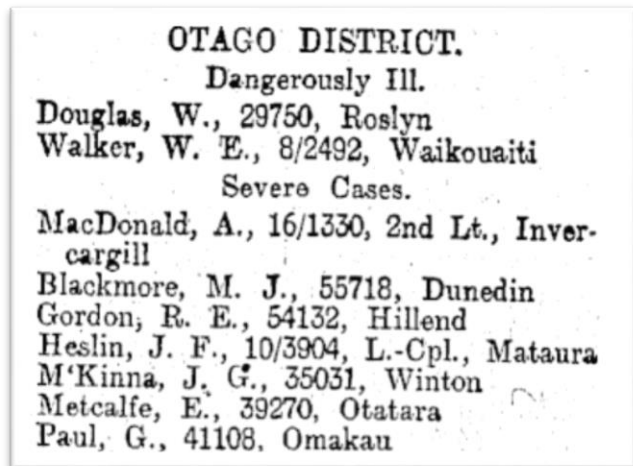
The weather was said to be either wet or snowing or both. By this time the men never felt dry and illness and death crept in to every crevice of the battlefield; as much through poisonous gas and trench fever as shelling and bullets. Morale was especially low going in to another New Year. Would this see the end of it or would it continue to live up to its nickname as the 'war of attrition'. By this time Granddad was not doing well either and on the 3rd of January he was admitted to the No.1 New Zealand Field Hospital.

In and out of hospitals - 1918

Laid Low

As the thaw came turning the ice to mud again not much moved in the field. The Chateau remained a favourite target for picking off Germans and the overhead planes were relentless. N.Z.M.G. took down their only recorded German plane in February, but in reality, little ground was made. Granddad re-joined his unit from the field hospital at the end of that month.

He was clearly weakened though. And just as the whole battalion pulled out of the line to regroup and retrain Granddad was back in the No.3 Canadian Stationary hospital at the end of March and then transferred on to the 140th St Johns Field Ambulance hospital with suspected P.U.O. (Pyrexia of Unknown Origin). By April he was being reported back home in the Evening Post as a 'severe case'.



The Royal Army Medical Corps knew that a man's survival and recovery in battle was dependant on swift treatment which often required the efficient and rapid movement away from the field of action. They moved fast. Within days he had been transported to Etaples on the coast and then over the channel to the N.Z. General Hospital in Walton-on-Thames.

Trench Fever

P.U.O, or Trench Fever, was unlike anything doctors had seen before. It came on fast with relapsing fevers, headaches, dizziness, stiffness in the legs, severe pain in the joints, lower



back and shins. Often confused with enteric fevers like Typhoid, caused by salmonella bacteria, Trench Fever was in fact a whole new disease. The key commonality in all cases was "extreme strain and exposure in the trenches...associated with "holding the line" (Atenstaedt, 2006).

It took two separate task forces from Britain and America to track down the cause to a minute bacteria carried by lice which became especially virulent in subjects of poor health and environments (i.e. the Trenches and front line). It's estimated that around half a million patients in the Allied forces suffered from Trench Fever.

Even though rarely fatal there was no cure. Prevention was implemented late in the piece; too late for Granddad. The best method of recovery was fresh air and rest, and that is exactly what he got over the next three months; firstly in Walton-on-Thames, England and then on to Hornchurch in Essex to convalesce.

N.Z. Gunnery Convalescent Hospital, Hornchurch

At the outbreak of WW1 the large 85-acre grounds and country mansion called 'Grey Towers' in Hornchurch, was sequestered for use by the Army Council and then transferred to N.Z. forces in 1916. By the end of 1918 20,000 patients had passed through the hospital (Lost Hospitals of London - New Zealand Convalescent Hospital, 2012).



Here the facilities were the very latest. The gardens, which were extensive and beautiful, were as much a part of the treatment as massage, exercise in the gym and medical electricity. Once well Granddad would follow the same route the others had taken; transferred to the command depot at Codford and rendered fit again for service. However, while at Hornchurch the war must have seemed a world away (McGavin, 1923).

Leave, Lily and home – May 1818 to Dec 1919

At the end of May 1918 Granddad was discharged to Codford, but his return to the field was not immediate. He was given a leave pass to Grantham to report back at Codford 10 Jun 1918.

Although there are no records of how Granddad and Lily Toynton met, Nana remembers being told that they met in Grantham where Lily worked in either a local café or in the base canteen.

Lily was just nineteen, born in the small hamlet of Spilsby in Lincolnshire she was the daughter of farmers, James Walter Toynton and Maria (Mary) Rebecca Borridge. She had grown up in the country with her ten siblings, but had been living more recently in Cambridge with her older sister Ellen Merryweather. She'd already lost one brother to WWI and another brother was still serving.



Lily (right, Back) with younger sister Annie, and mother and father (Lincolnshire, England), approx. 1915.

William had died of wounds in the fields of Flanders in 1916 and George was still over there. So, perhaps when she met John Francis Heslin they talked about the war and their losses and it became part of the shared bond they had.

What is known is that in early July Granddad was accepted back in at Codford, and then a month later appointed Acting Sergeant while attending instruction at Machine Gunnery school, Harrowby Camp. Harrowby was about four miles from Grantham. Lily was living about an hour's train ride down the line in Cambridge and her family were closer still in Lincolnshire.

The average time spent at Harrowby was usually seventy days. Even though Granddad had attended training in France there was always new machinery and tactics to learn about and

Kiwi's at Grantham had a reputation for being fast learners. So, by the beginning of September his training is complete and he returns to the rank of Corporal.

Not much more is known about the time after September 1918 until John Heslin marries Lily Toynton on the Grantham base on the 18th of December that same year. He marches back in at Torquay in early January 1919, but by then the Armistice had been signed under the Treaty of Versailles and by the end of June it was all over.

The last annotation in his service record is in December 1919 when he and Lily embark for Christchurch, New Zealand on the military transport ship 'Ruapehu'; bound for Matura, family and home with their little baby (Francis, 'Frank') in their arms.

Home to reunite with his brother, safely returned from Africa the year before. Home to Mum and Dad and the safety of the Matura community. Home to a new life.



A small group of the men from Matura Paper Mill; engineers, carpenters and firemen. Granddad is 2nd from left, back row. (Look for the big ears)!
(Matura Historical Society, 2015)

Conclusion

It's been almost a hundred years since the men who fought in WWI died or returned home. There are none of them left now, and yet there are many monuments to honour them. Like echoes of them and their time 'over there'.

I had never known my Granddad. I knew he had lived in the bach at the end of our garden for a while and I'd heard that he was a bit of a grumpy old fella in later years. And yet I was intrigued by this dapper young fellow in a black and white photo on Mum and Dad's hallway wall. So, when I started out on this task it was to honour just this one man; John Francis Heslin. The task seemed simple at first; to print out and interpret the scribbles and odd-looking details on a war service record.

Soon after starting I was drawn in to something larger. I foolishly thought he hadn't seen much action and I suppose, in part, that assumption was because there had been almost no family stories of the war at all. In deciphering his records and filling in the blank spaces with diaries from those who had fought alongside him I came to realise what a great service he had done for our family.

'Great Service' seems wrong though, doesn't it? It most certainly wasn't *great* over there and at times it must have seemed more like hell-on-earth than any sort of 'service'. I am aware too, that this may not be all of Granddad's story. Perhaps it is a quite different recollection to the one he may have shared with his brother and other returned comrades over a beer or two. It is only a fraction of the full account and yet it is enough to make me enormously proud to be his Granddaughter.

This is for you Mum, the youngest daughter of John Francis Heslin and Lily Toynton – you are a gift to us all. The offspring of a love that grew among the dark and unsettling times of a world war, and yet you are our bright light, our precious stronghold. I hope these pages remind you of the father you knew and that, in some small way, it helps unravel some of the mystery of his time in the Great War.

I wish I had known him, Mum.

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