

# Robert Norries Johnston

By Ngaire Cookson

My great uncle Robert Norries Johnston, known as Bob, was born in Devonport Auckland, on the nineteenth of June 1891.

He died on active service in World War 1, on the 6th April 1918, in France.

He was the sixth child of William and Helen Christina Johnston ( née Norries ).



They lived at 98 Victoria Rd Devonport. The house was given an Irish name "Rock Fergus", because Bob's father William was Irish. He had immigrated to New Zealand from Belfast Northern Ireland on the ship "Ocean Mail" arriving in New Zealand in 1875.

The picture shows "Rock Fergus" about 1903 with Olive, Bob's youngest sister on the steps aged 3 yrs.

There were 10 children in the family. Cyril, my grandfather, then Ella, Winnie, Howard, Eva, Bob, Nellie, Edith, Mabel and Olive.

Back row from left William Howard, ( who also served in World War 1, but returned to his wife and family), Helen Munro Nellie, Cyril Herbert, Edith Christina, Robert Norries, Evelyn Annie Eva, Front row. Ella , Helen Christina ( mother ), Olive Adaline, Mabel Esther, William ( father ), Margaret Winnifred Winnie.



William Johnston was a grocer in partnership with Archibald Noble, who was his brother in law. They had a horse and cart, pictured for deliveries.

The firm of Johnston and Noble, general grocers, is in the background, it was two storeys in brick, and situated at the corner of Victoria Road and Clarence street. General groceries were on the ground floor. The first floor had ironmongery and crockery showrooms, while the cellar was stocked with grain and produce. They also had a large scale coal and firewood business. Orders were collected by the firm's travellers, and were delivered the same day.

Bob had a comfortable family life, growing up in Devonport. He and his brothers and sisters attended Devonport District School.



This is a picture of the Johnston family dogs, and one of Cyril and Bob. Looks like Cyril has a new camera.

Wedding of Cyril Johnston and Mabel Farquharson, ( my grandparents ) at the Farquharson homestead 114 Victoria Road Devonport. They were married at the Devonport Presbyterian Church on April 15th 1915.



George Johnston (cousin), Cyril Johnston, Bob Johnston (brother).  
Ailsa Farquharson (sister), Mabel Farquharson, Helen (Nellie) Johnston (sister).



When Bob went to war, he had already served four years as a reservist in the army for the No 1 Field Ambulance, and he was working as a clerk in the Auckland Savings Bank in Queen Street Auckland. There was only one branch in Auckland in those days. Bob would travel to and from the city by ferry.

He was twenty four years old, six feet tall, with a fair complexion, blue grey eyes and dark brown hair. He was a member of the Methodist church.

The family never had a chance to get a photo of Bob in uniform before he went overseas, so they either had this one made from a photo they already had. I think possibly it was from my grandparents wedding photo, or this was when he was a reservist in the army medical corps, the medical arm band seems to be on the right arm instead of the left, as it was in the Army.



He had his Medical exam in Auckland on the 22nd of June, 1915. Some small varicose veins were not an issue. He was sent to Palmerston North and took his oath to serve and was enlisted on the 24th of September, 1915.

Bob embarked from Wellington with the 7th Reinforcements as a member of the Medical Corps, on the 9th October 1915. His destination was Suez, Egypt. He was in Egypt till early December and then he embarked on the Hospital ship H T Assaye from Alexandria, Egypt, on the 4th of December 1915,



and joined the New Zealand Field Ambulance at Anzac. It was nearly the end of the Gallipoli campaign. He was there for the successful withdrawal from Anzac Cove and Sulva Bay. Bob sent home these photos from Gallipoli. The writing is what Bob wrote on the back.

31/12/15.  
Dear Cyril.  
among the films I've  
sent Home there may be  
some of interest to yourself.  
Of course do what you like  
with them & use up the  
paper and stuff from  
my drawer. This one's  
pretty rotten  
Eh. what

Here is Bob in front of a funk hole he helped to dig. These were excavated openings on the front walls of trenches, where the soldiers could retire when not on duty.



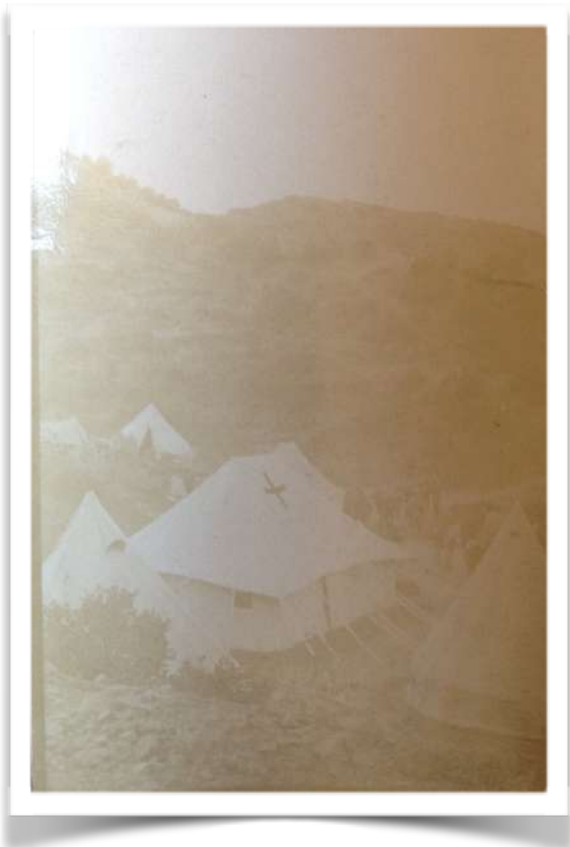
You know how I can wield the spade, well on the Pen, it was necessary to dig large funk holes for safety, a job that everyone helped in, and I appear as a pickman. This hole when we had a go @ it, was six foot high & ran back for 30 feet & had the prospect of night an' a climb in for some distance.

He says (Writing below), that he submitted this photo to the "Daily Mirror", a London newspaper. It shows a Protected Station, where patients would wait for disembarkation. The two marques behind were dressing tents which comprised the Number 3 Field Hospital Clearing Station. The sandbag on the shoulders of the man in front was placed a short distance away from the Williams Pick, Gallipoli.

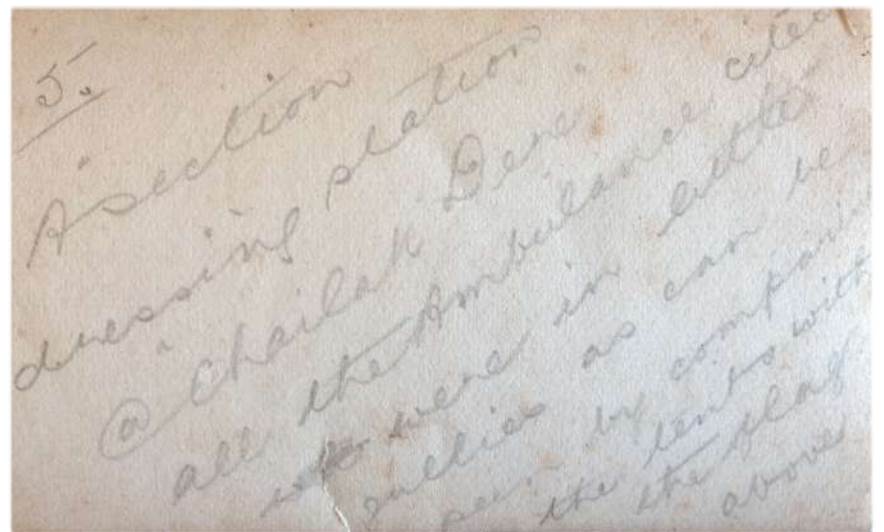
I submitted this to the "Daily Mirror". Shows a Protected station, where patients waiting for disembarkation took their turn. Behind, 2 marques were dressing tents & constituted the clearing station. This was placed only a short distance from the Williams pick.







A Section dressing station at "Chailak Dere", Gallipoli. All the Ambulance stations were in little gullies.



After the smooth withdrawal from Gallipoli, he left by ship for Mudras, a small Greek port on the Island of Lemnos, where there was a British base.

By the 30th of December 1915, he was back in Alexandria, having arrived from Mudras In the British Troop Ship the Ascanius. That same day he arrived with his unit at their training depot at Ismailia on the West Bank of the Suez Canal. Bob was there for three months, during this time the British saw off an attempt by the Ottoman Turks to take the Suez Canal. He was back in Alexandria in early April.

After The Gallipoli Campaign, Alexandria remained an important Hospital centre during later operations in Egypt and Palestine, and the port was much used by hospital ships and troop transports bringing reinforcements and carrying the sick and wounded out of the theatres of war.

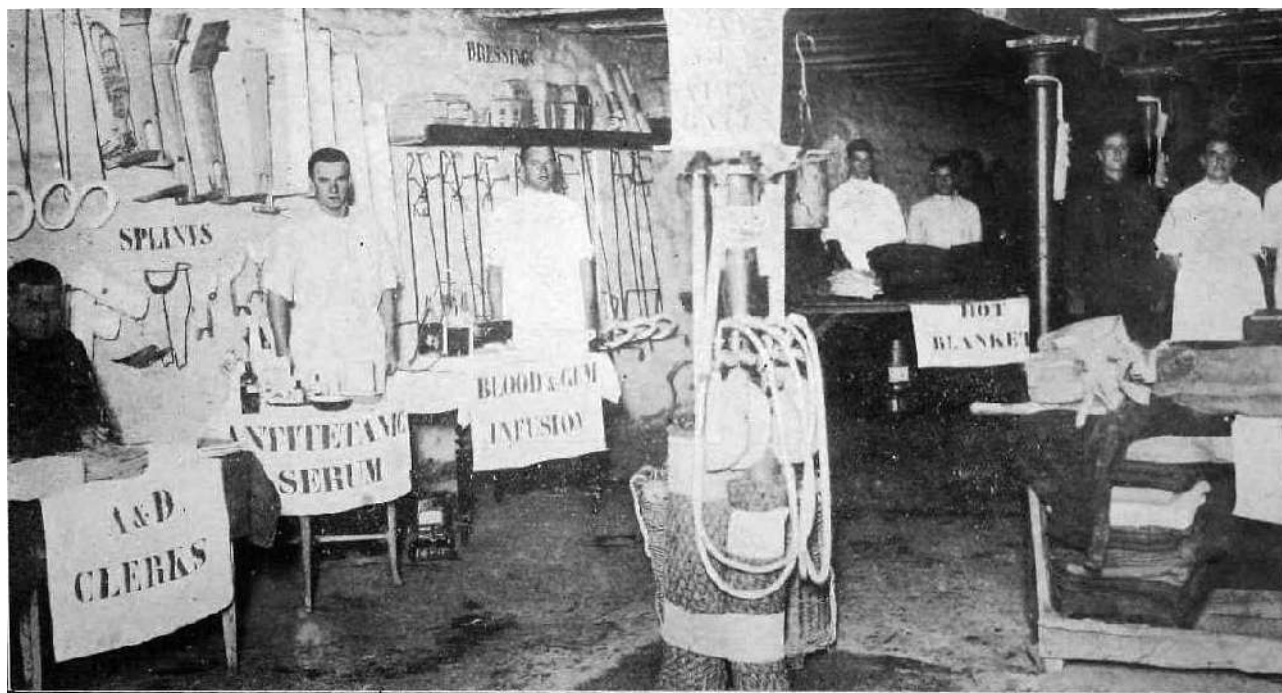
Now, off to France and the Western Front on the Ship H T Minnewaske, on the 6th April 1916. ( This ship was mined and sunk In Suda Bay Crete, on the 29th November 1916 ). The New Zealand Division landed at Marseilles and went north by train.

For the next two years Bob was on active service in France, on the Western Front.

By midway 1916 the New Zealand Division was fighting at the front line in the Armentieres Sector, near the border between France and Belgium. Then there were campaigns near the Somme River.

The Field Ambulances provided relays of stretcher bearers and men skilled in first aid, at a series of "bearer posts" along the route of evacuation from the trenches. All the men involved were well within the zone where they could be under fire.

The Field Ambulances also established Main and Advanced (forward) Dressing Stations, where a casualty could receive further treatment, and be got into a condition where he could be moved rearward several miles to a Casualty Clearing Station (CCS). The wounded or ill men would go to the CCS by foot, horse drawn wagon, motor ambulance, lorry or light railway. The CCS were large, well equipped static medical facilities. The men could then be moved on to Hospitals if necessary.



THE INTERIOR OF A DRESSING STATION (1).

*Flashlight Photo.*

Bob would have been taking his turn at stretcher bearing, giving first aid, working in the Dressing Stations and moving men rearward to the Casualty Clearing Stations.

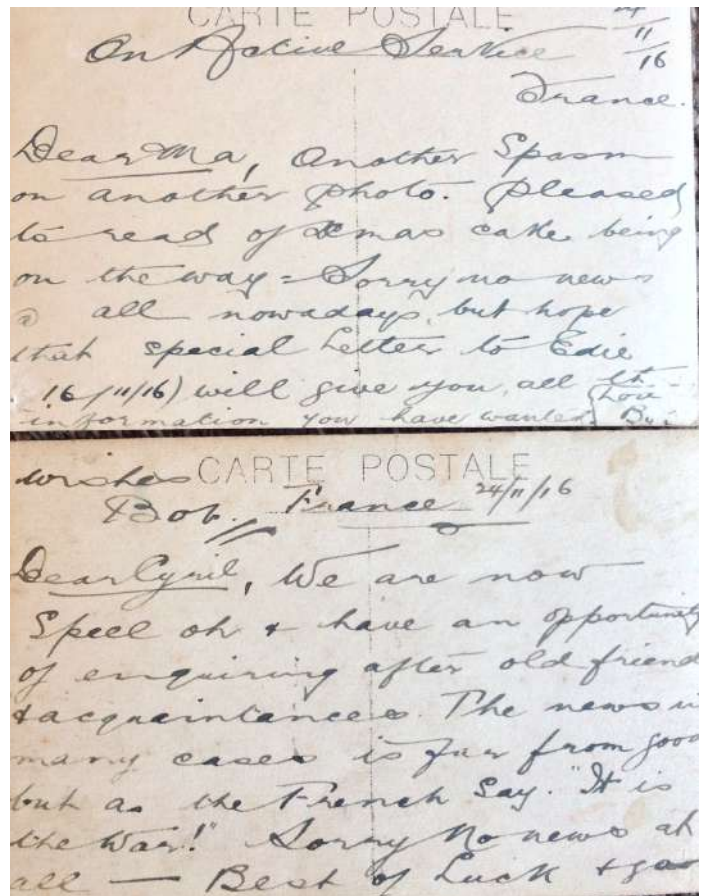
After the Somme the New Zealand Division was despatched to the Saily Sector, again close to the border with Belgium, and to the south of Ypres. In between battles they would rest and train and then return to the fighting.



A FIELD AMBULANCE.

*Face p. 560.*

Bob had this photo taken and sent a copy each to his mother and brother. This is what he wrote on the back of them.



On the 11 th of February 1917, Bob was diagnosed with measles. He was admitted to the No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station, and then on to the No. 7 General Hospital in Saint-Omer, in northern France. On the 24th of February he was discharged from hospital and rejoined the No. 1 New Zealand Field Ambulance, in the field.



Bob in France smoking his pipe and wearing a German helmet.







Bob had good news from home. His first niece Muriel Jean Johnston was born on the 9th July 1917. Cyril and Mabel's daughter, my mother.

Winnie, Bob's sister organised a present for him to give the baby. It was a white handkerchief with wide lace around it. Bob asked her to write : " To little Miss Muriel from Bob."

Seven months later on the 14th September, he was in Paris for two weeks leave.

Then it was back to his unit in time for the Battle of Passchendaele, near Ypres, on the 12th October 1917. This battle is sometimes called the 3rd. Battle of Ypres. The loss of life was appalling. There was 2735 New Zealander casualties and 845 dead and wounded stranded in the mud of no-man's-land. In lives lost in a day, this was the blackest day in New Zealand history. A few days later the Canadians took Passchendaele with huge loss of life. Some months later all of this land they took, was given up by the Allies without a fight, as it was decided it provided no strategic importance whatsoever.

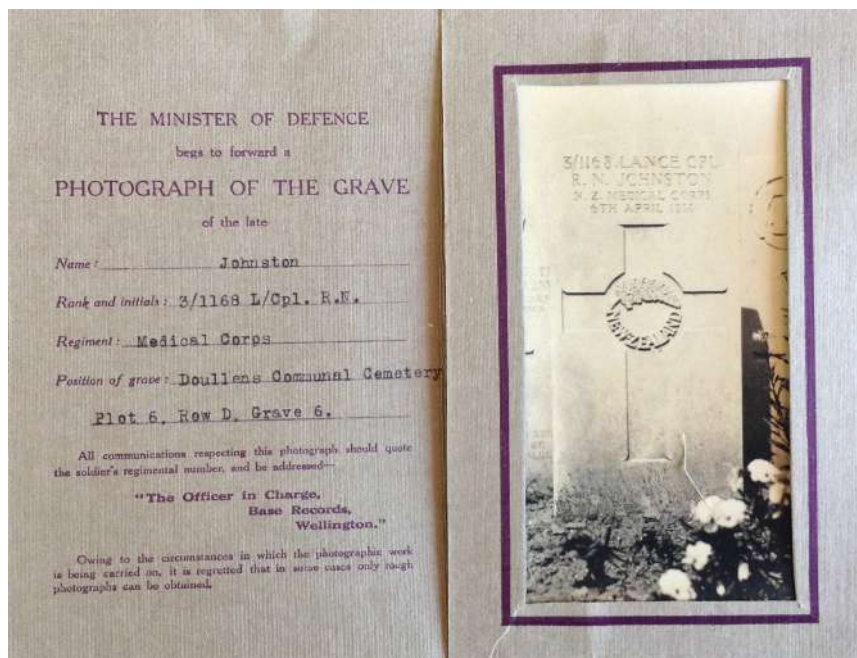
On the 22nd of December, 1917, Robert Norries Johnston was promoted to Lance Corporal.

Three months later he had a weeks leave in England, where he visited his brother-in-laws family the Busson's. ( His sister Eva was married to William Busson).

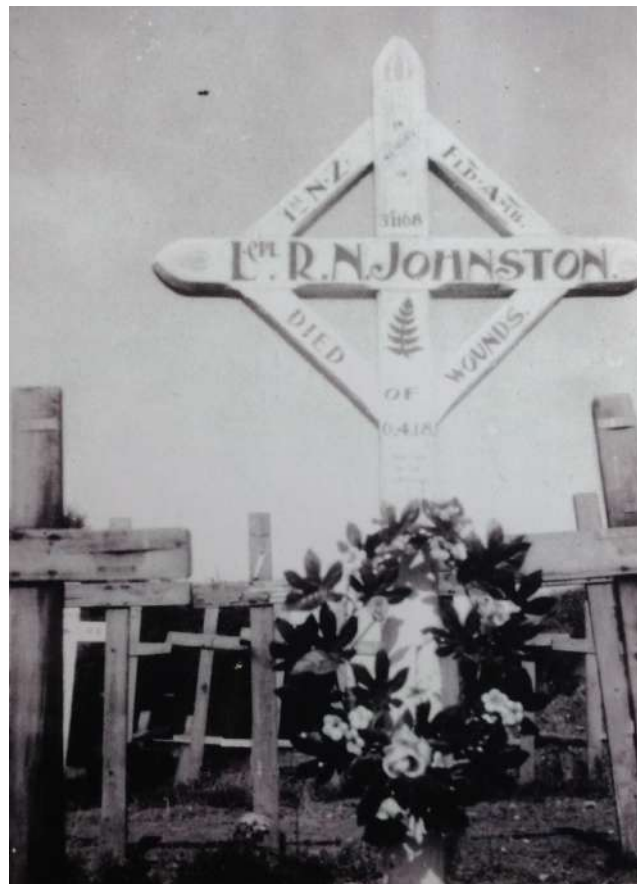
Bob on leave in England with Ida Busson, his sister-in-law.







Early morning on the 5th April, 1918, the Germans attacked Colincamps, near where Bob was based with his Field Ambulance Unit. The barrage of fire was so intense, that the casualties came in not only from the forward area, but also from about a mile behind Colincamps. The walking wounded post had its remaining windows shattered, and the walls were so perforated by shrapnel fragments, that it was necessary to make use of the cellars around. The New Zealander's Rifle Brigade met the oncoming waves of Germans, and they failed to take Colincamps.



Bob was sitting with his mates having a tea break when one of the shrapnel fragments flying around hit him in the abdomen. He was taken into the Field Ambulance dressing station and then

transferred to the No. 3 Canadian Stationary Hospital, where he was placed on the dangerously ill list.

Robert Norries Johnston died of wounds on the 6th April, 1918. He was buried at Doullens Communal Cemetery Extension, Plot 6, Row D, Grave 6.

His mates erected a special cross at his grave, and placed a wreath on it. They put a silver fern on the cross and inscribed :

IN MEMORY OF 3/1168  
Lcpl. R. N. JOHNSTON.  
1st. N. Z. FLD. AMB.  
DIED OF WOUNDS.  
6.4.18

ERECTED BY HIS COMRADES

I think that Great Uncle Bob must have been a really nice person, kind and caring. His mates obviously thought a great deal of him to have made this memorial when so many young men were being killed.

This is the official photograph of Bob's grave, which was sent to his mother.

His family missed him greatly. A nephew Robert Harvey Johnston, ( my mother's brother, who died in Egypt in WW 2 ), and a niece Roberta Busson, were named after him.

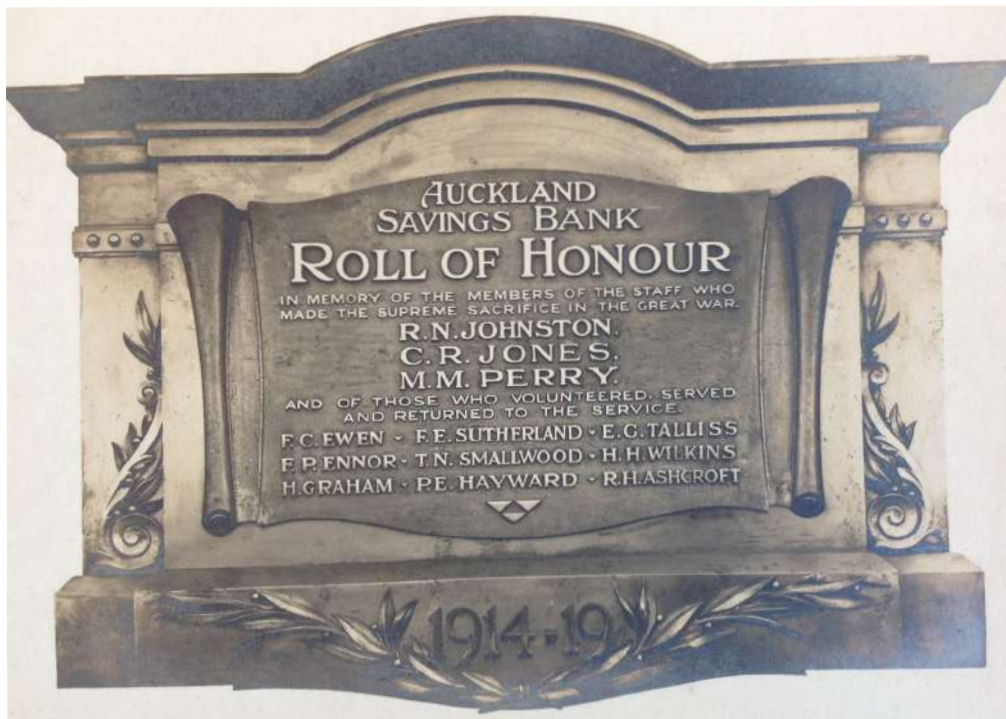
I have a footstool that he made for his sister Mabel, who had rheumatoid arthritis. His sister Edith, ( Edie ) followed in his footsteps and joined the St John Ambulance.

Bob's grave, when my sister Sheryl and her husband Mike Wills visited it in 2012.





Bob's name appears on several Rolls Of Honour. The Auckland Savings Bank was quite small when Bob worked there. Of the twelve staff that served in The Great War, R. N. Johnston was one of three that did not return.



His name is on The Cenotaph War Memorial at the Auckland Museum, on Devonport's First World War Memorial and on the granite tablet Roll Of Honour at the Devonport Primary School.



The Devonport War Memorial, which features Frank Lynch's bronze statue of the "untidy soldier".



The Devonport Primary School granite tablet roll of honour.

There were three brothers in the Johnston family. My grandfather Cyril was the eldest. Then Howard and the youngest was Bob.

Howard also served in World War 1. He commenced duty in August 1916, and fought in France with the 1st Battalion Auckland Regiment until he was wounded in action in July 1917. He was classified unfit by the medical board in England in October 1917, and sent home, landing in Devonport on the 18th February 1918.

His injury was to his thigh/ hip area, and he always walked with a limp. Howard married twice, but never had any children. He often visited his brother Cyril's family at their farm in Northcote, and was always welcomed fondly by his niece Muriel and nephews Bob and Keith.



Howard sent this photo of his Platoon to his youngest sister Olive, while he was at training camp. He wrote on the back. " My birthday cake from "Rock Fergus" was more than acceptable. All the boys enjoyed a piece and wished one many happy returns in loud voices. I hope you and all at home enjoy the best of health and happiness. Kia Ora. Your loving brother Howard."