

THREE GISBORNE SOLIDERS FROM THE SKILLICORN FAMILY

WAR

TO END ALL WARS

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM:

Thousands of New Zealanders honoured the country's war dead this morning on the 100th anniversary of the Anzac landing at Gallipoli.

Wynsley Wrigley spoke to Raumati Beach resident Ailsa Parker who is the great niece and cousin of three Gisborne men who served in World War 1. She has researched their life stories, which ended as short stories because they are among the estimated 16 million people who died in the Great War.

PICTURE © Paul Rickard



PICTURES © Supplied

THE POPPIES BLOW BETWEEN THE CROSSES, ROW ON ROW:

Three Gisborne soldiers, an uncle and his two nephews, were killed within a three-week period in World War 1 — Edmund Skillicorn (right) and brothers Allan (left) and Henry Higgins. The photograph of the two brothers was taken in Gisborne shortly before they left for deployment to France.

Edmund Skillicorn, Henry Edmund Higgins and Allan Higgins are just three of the names inscribed into Gisborne's cenotaph.

They are unknown to those who gathered to honour them this morning, just three of the

nearly 28,000 New Zealanders killed in wars dating from the Boer War to Afghanistan.

A century ago they were part of the Gisborne community with connections to Ormond School, Tolaga Bay, the gas fitting industry and the rugby fraternity.

They did not serve at Gallipoli but a year later fell in the battle synonymous with the carnage, mass slaughter and military ineptitude of World War 1 — the Battle of the Somme.

Mr Skillicorn (35 at the time of his death)

and his nephews Henry Edmund (25) and Allan Howard Higgins (21) died within 22 days of each other in 1916.

All three grew up and lived in Gisborne.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Soldiers died within 22 days of each other

FROM PAGE 1

Edmund, son of Abraham and Elizabeth Briggs Skillicorn, was educated at Ormond School where his father, a fellmonger and wool classer, was chairman of the school committee.

Henry and Allan's grandfather Henry had been the headmaster at Ormond School.

Their parents were Braidwood and Alice Skillicorn Higgins and their brother Graham (9) drowned in the Waimata River in 1907 while trying to rescue Allan.

Graham was posthumously commended by the Humane Society.

Edmund worked as a telegraph message boy in the 1890s and was a butcher at the Gisborne Co-op Meat Company when he enlisted.

He was a keen rugby player and in 1911 is recorded as playing for the butchers against the carters.

Henry was a gas fitter at the Gisborne Gas Company while Allan was a carpenter for Fitzgerald Brothers at Tolaga Bay.

All three men had served in local military units, the two young men in the Senior Cadets and Edmund in the Mounted Rifles.

Both families had strong connections to the Gisborne community, being related to

the Clark, Roe and Currie families.

Edmund and Henry enlisted together and left Gisborne with the 10th reinforcements on November 14, 1915.

They were posted to the Otago Regiment.

Military records show they overstayed leave on December 26. They lost a day's pay and were confined to barracks.

The two men left Wellington on the Maunganui on April 2, 1916 after a final parade through the streets of Wellington the day before.

Allan was initially turned down by the army because of a speech impediment, but two days after his uncle and brother left Gisborne, he passed the medical examination with his stutter being considered "slight".

He left Gisborne with the 11th reinforcements and as part of 2 Company, 2 Battalion, Canterbury Regiment, and sailed to Egypt on the Maunganui with Edmund and Henry.

Their military files show the three men did not serve together in France.

All were hospitalised at some stage — Edmund with influenza, Henry with influenza and measles and Allan with tonsillitis.

Edmund became a member of the No. 2

Machine Gun Company (MGC) but military records are rather confusing as to where he was in September 1916.

If he had still been with the MGC, he would have been positioned near Switch Trench on September 16.

He was injured three days later when the MGC movements are described thus: "During the night of the 18th/19th September 2 Company relieved 1 Company.

"This relief occupied the whole night, owing to the difficulty of movement over the morass of sodden clay, accentuated by the heavy loads the gunners had to carry to get the whole of their guns, ammunition and equipment along with them.

"He was moved from Dressing Station to Casualty Clearing Station and died at the No. 9 General Hospital, Rouen on October 8, 1916."

Edmund is buried at the St Sever Cemetery, Rouen.

Henry was killed on September 16, 1916. His body was never found and the Court of Inquiry on 30 November, 1916, found "no evidence or witnesses available".

"He was with his company when they went through a heavy shelling barrage near Switch Trench September 16, 1916."

Henry is commemorated at the Caterpillar

Valley (New Zealand) Memorial.

Allan was killed on the same day and is buried at Caterpillar Valley Cemetery, Longueval.

2 Canterbury Battalion was also located near Switch Trench and the regimental history records: "The Canterbury Battalion therefore relieved the Otago Battalion at 7pm on the 15th.

"Besides digging a continuous trench through to the troops on the right flank, the battalion worked hard deepening the new front line. This work was done under incessant shell-fire, and the losses were heavy."

Both families left Gisborne shortly after the war.

Their "loving father, mother, sisters and families" recorded their deaths in the Poverty Bay Herald in December 1916.

In part the death notice said:

*Somewhere in France they are laid to rest,
Their life's work truly done,
'Twas a sacrifice for Liberty,
Ere life had scarce begun.
They have borne their Cross, they have gained
their Crown,
Though they lay in a far-off grave,
And we think of their life — a duty done
Manly, unselfish and brave.*