

News from the other side of the world

For New Zealanders at home 'on the other side of the world' during the First World War, letters and newspapers were their only means of communication. Any report was eagerly scanned for news about loved ones, and letters home were particularly prized. Today, these letters and reports provide a personal insight into the life – and death – of Kiwis far from home almost one hundred years ago.

Sam Vernon

On the 21 June 1916, Sergeant Sam Vernon (pictured below) was the first New Zealand Tunneller to die as a result of enemy action. The next day, Sapper J. E. MacManus wrote a letter (right) to Vernon's widow.



By the age of 12 Sam had his own gold mining claim. On the little finger of his left hand he wears a gold band ring with a gold nugget mounted on it. He wore this ring when he went to France, and he was probably wearing it when he was killed. It was well known to men in his Section. On his death Sam's wife Maggie was informed that the ring could not be traced and it was not included in personal effects returned to New Zealand.

Dear Madam

I extend to you my deepest sympathy in the sad loss sustained in the death of your husband, Sergeant Vernon. He was the sergeant of the relief I am attached to. He won the respect of all, because he was a man of iron nerve, well fitted to hold his position. He was a tireless worker in the interest of the army. His knowledge of mining was incalculable benefit to the Engineer Tunnelling Company. He was a man of such valued experience and cool judgement, that he inspired feelings of confidence and respect. If there were any possibility of adding to the comfort and convenience of the men under his control, his time was always generously at our disposal. Only a fortnight ago when an enemy mine explosion buried some of our infantry, he toiled hard in the work of rescue. Well do I remember the morning following that explosion. He came over and pointed out that two men who were still alive were buried, that as far as he could judge the infantry officers deemed it impossible to dig them out in time, because they were exposed to fire. "They may be dead if we leave them until night time," he said, "so we will dig them out now. Will anyone volunteer to help me?" Sapper Calloway and I volunteered. This action so inspired an Infantry Officer to action, that after we were working half an hour he ordered his men to continue the work. Your husband replied, "I am not needed with my own men as they know their work, so I will stay and help you." He remained in the work of rescue until the men were rescued. These men owe their lives to the stimulating example of your brave husband, who ever and always faced risks and dangers fearlessly in the execution of his duty. I am proud to have been a Sapper under his command.



Although born in Ireland, Jack MacManus, pictured above in his wedding photograph, spent his formative years in Australia where at 15 he became a member of the Australia Workers union. Before long he was actively involved in working for union members' rights, to the extent that he had to relocate to New Zealand. He met his wife at a Socialist Party social in 1908. Workers' Rights would become a life-long interest that didn't stop when Jack was on the Western Front. New Zealand miners went on 'strike' for better conditions for fellow miners serving with the British Army.

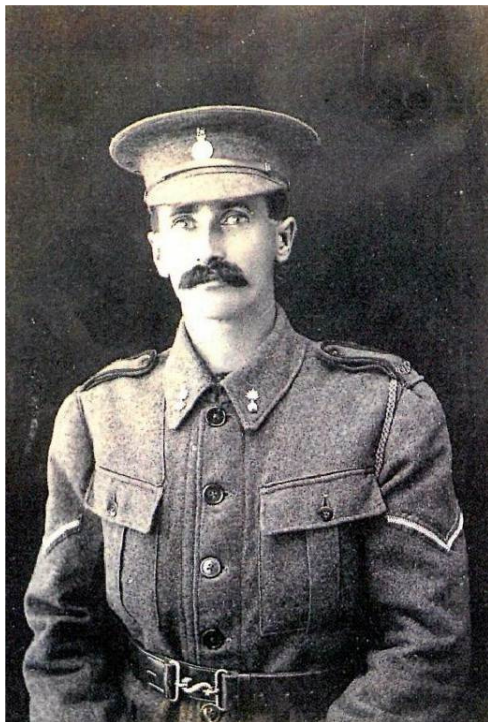
Sergeant Alexander Leeden would also write to his fellow Sergeant's widow;

The funeral took place at 6.30 pm. It has been usual to never allow more than ten men to attend a funeral, for fear of airplane observation, but as a special mark of respect to a brave soldier, no less than 25 men were permitted to be present.

In accordance with Military custom, his blanket was his shroud, covering this was the "Union Jack" on which lay a beautiful bunch of roses. I have visited the cemetery twice since, & in co-operation with his friends am arranging for a memorial to permanently express our great loss, on completion of which, if permitted, a photograph will be taken and duly forwarded to you.

Fred Hansen

A proud father working as a lighthouse keeper in New Zealand had two sons serving overseas, one as a stretcher bearer with the NZ Rifle Brigade and the other in the NZ Tunnelling Company. He wrote on the back of the photo of his uniformed Tunnelling Company son.



While recuperating in hospital Fred learned to do embroidery. He entered one apron in a display of soldier's work while in hospital. Queen Mary visited, saw the apron on display and asked to buy it. Hansen had promised the apron to his mother and despite the Royal interest, held to his promise.

*Lance Corporal W. F. Hansen
New Zealand Engineers
(Tunnelling Corps)
Aged 36*

'The above is my eldest Son, many years in the employ of the Westport Harbour Board, as carpenter and of late years as Quarry foreman and in charge of all Tunnels & blasting operations.

PS Since the above was written my son has been promoted to Sergeant, and is on his way home.

Following the Battle of Arras, Fred Hansen was invalided to England where he made temporary wooden legs for wounded soldiers. He wrote home to his mother on the back of a postcard.

I got word from Apper this week, he said he had written to you that he was well out of sound of guns & was alright. He never said whether he was allowed to come and see me, it is a pity. Well dear Mum, I will conclude now hoping to see you soon & that you are all quite well

*Your loving son
Fred*

Sister Laura James

Not all New Zealanders in France were NZEF combatants. Sister Laura James was born in a New Zealand mining town. In England, on 3 November 1910, she joined the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service as a Staff Nurse. One of her references from a previous employer says 'Slightly difficult to work with, but can be guided by good influence'. As well as her birthplace, it appears Sister James shared similar attributes to the men from the New Zealand Tunnelling Company who were well known for their independent qualities. In World War One she would find herself working on the Front in the same area as them.

In a letter dated 14 February 1917, while serving with No. 37 Field Ambulance, Sister James wrote:

This little hospital is about eight miles from Arras, a very much shelled town. Some little time ago I had the good fortune to be taken to see it. I had to wear a shell helmet, and carry a gas helmet by way of precaution.

It is within a mile and a quarter of the German lines. Although it is in ruins, it still resembles a town — every street is clearly there, with the front walls of the houses and shops standing on either side. As we passed through the ancient gateway— where one's passes were examined by the British and French sentries — its stillness struck one as being uncanny. Except for the echoing of one's footsteps in the empty streets, the occasional whirr of an aeroplane and the rat-tat-tat of German machine-guns and the frequent thunder of our own guns, there were no sounds to be heard. There are still many

of the inhabitants living in the cellars of the ruined buildings, but I did not see more than half a dozen during my two hours' stay there.

The greatest ruin is in the chief squares, and amongst the once prominent and beautiful buildings of this beautiful old Spanish-built city. The Hotel de Ville is merely a vast stone heap. The Cathedral still has some walls standing, but the ruin is a mass of fallen masonry. The big railway station I did not see, as it was too dangerous a spot to go near.



Laura James was born in New Zealand, the only child of Dr David Philip James, a respected Welsh born, London trained doctor. For many years he was an honorary surgeon at Wellington Hospital, where his daughter trained as a nurse. He died in 1916, when Laura James was serving at the Front. In 1919, Laura James wrote to the QAIMNS Matron in Chief requesting permission to return to New Zealand on a troopship to settle her father's estate. Her request for a duty passage was turned down. Laura James would continue to work with the QAIMNS which included service in Italy and India. Royal Red Cross, Second Class and Military Medal recipient Laura James never married. After serving more than twenty three years in the QAIMNS she retired as Matron in 1937. Laura James died in Sussex, England in 1969.

In late March 1917 Sister Laura James was in charge of the 45th Field Ambulance. The unit was closing and the theatre equipment was sent to the underground hospital at Arras. Sister James was one of the few women from overseas who joined the regular Queen Alexandra's Nursing Service before the war, and she was one of the most decorated during the Great War She was awarded the Military Medal as a result of action in the Battle of Arras.

London Gazette 18 July 1917

On the night of 3rd May 1917, when Arras was being heavily shelled, Sister Laura James showed great courage, and by her coolness and devotion to duty succeeded in allaying the fears of the patients under her charge. She refused to leave the ward, although the hospital had been hit several times, 3 men being killed and 14 wounded. She was only prevailed on to leave when all the patients had been safely evacuated.

Jim Roycroft

27 July 1918 was Jim Roycroft's twenty-sixth birthday. Jim was a gold miner from Waihi. Lance Corporal Roycroft wrote home to his wife:

I suppose little Mary and little John are growing big children, I won't know them when I get back, it is nearly two years since I became a soldier. How the time does fly. The day I landed on the front I thought it was impossible for anybody to live more than a day over here with the shells and bullets and gas, but still I am going strong although the old pants was very nearly dirty the other day.

Talk about lying close to the ground. I longed for a shell hole to get in but was afraid to move. Lay there for twenty minutes with shells whizzing all about me but I still came out alright although very white about the gills. Talk about the old stope and eleven level at the mine, it is not in the same street for fright as this.



Jim Roycroft returned home after the war and was hospitalized. His wife had left him and he never saw his children who died from illness before he had the chance to see them. Jim remarried and continued to work underground in Waihi. The photograph above shows Roycroft (centre, second from right) on leave in England.

Malcolm Ross

Newspaper journalists reported on the war. On 4 May 1917 Malcolm Ross, War Correspondent with the New Zealand Forces wrote:

A few days ago, on the eve of the great battle, I made another trip to Arras. The troops sheltered in the old caverns in the bowels of the earth—ready, when-the time came, to go in long waves behind the withering barrage across the German lines. There were still inhabitants living in what a few months before had seemed a city of the dead. They lived for the most part underground. But they had little shops, and you could still buy food and raiment there.

Later on we came upon one of the tunnel entrances, and descending by steps down an incline of one in two found ourselves in a new world, where the cave-dwellers were going to and fro like bees in a hive. We passed miners from the Welsh mines, and from Newcastle. "Where," we asked, "will we find the New Zealanders?" "If you go along this tunnel and turn to the right farther on, you'll, find some of them in a cave on the right," we were told. Wires for electric light were fixed along the tunnel walls. On either side were big chambers, and caverns with the roof high above. In one of these we found some New Zealanders installing a dynamo!

I looked at the switch-board, and found it was of marble. "Where on earth did you get that from," I asked. A spectacled

engineer screwing at a bolt answered me, "Oh, we got these slabs from the latrines at the railway station!" It was another case of overseas initiative.



Ross was appointed the New Zealand official war correspondent in early 1915 as was on the Western Front from mid-1916 on. He spent as much time as possible close to the battlefield. The photograph taken at Haplincourt on 4 September 1918 shows Ross pointing out to visiting journalists the way in which New Zealand troops advanced on the battlefield. The visitors are wearing tin helmets. Two soldiers are looking through telescopes.

For further information contact Waihi Heritage Vision, Sue Baker Wilson. email 2017@nzetc.co.nz web www.nzetc.co.nz