

## 37498 Sapper John Alexander Bankier

(Submitted by his grandson with input from a now 89-year old nephew of Jack's who knew Jack well in the 1930s and 1940s)

John Alexander (Jack) Bankier was born in Newcastle, New South Wales, on 19 July 1878 to British immigrant parents. His father, who was a master mariner turned publican, had come from Greenock in Scotland; his mother from County Clare in Southern Ireland. They married in Melbourne in 1871.

Little is known of Jack Bankier's early life in Australia, and the date of his arrival in New Zealand is uncertain. He married Lizzette Catherine Morrissey in Auckland on 27 October 1910 and the couple produced two children – a son (also John Alexander) in 1911 and a daughter (Marion Esther) in 1912. The son went on to serve with the 4<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance in World War 2 including the North African and Italian campaigns.

Census records from 1911 show Jack and Lizzette's address as Sale Street, Auckland, but it seems that they moved to the Waikato area some time after that. This may have been to seek work or it may have been to be nearer Lizzette's family who were from the Waikato area. At the time of his enlistment into the Army in October 1916 Jack's civilian employer was recorded as the NZ Government and his occupation as a quarryman at the No1 Quarry, Waiteti

Road, Te Kuiti. The road name was presumably a misspelling of Waitete Road.



Sapper Jack Bankier prior to Disembarkation

Jack's enlistment and attestation papers show that he stated a preference to be a tunneller. This was an obvious choice – either on his part or the recruiting officer's – because the No.1 Quarry at Te Kuiti is a limestone quarry and therefore an ideal training ground for the chalky ground of Arras and surrounding areas which was the focus of the Tunnelling Company's wartime operations.

Although he gave a birthdate of 19 July 1883 when he enlisted in the Army, Jack's New South Wales birth certificate records his date of birth as 19 July 1878. He may have taken five years off his true age of 38 in the mistaken belief that the upper age limit for joining the Tunnelling

Company was 35 years, as it was in other New Zealand Expeditionary Force units. In fact the Tunnelling Company was accepting reinforcements up to 40 years of age.

During leave prior to disembarkation Jack had a studio portrait taken of himself. Not to be outdone, his wife Lizzette also donned the uniform and had a less formal picture taken in the backyard. One wonders how many wives put on a brave face in this way and tried to make light of what for them was undoubtedly a very difficult time. It is noted that the uniform worn by Lizzette does not have a cap badge or collar badges while Jack's uniform does. Jack's cap badge does not appear to be a good representation of the larger Engineer cap badge worn by the tunnellers, and nor, for that matter, are the grenade collar badges accurately rendered. Perhaps Jack had not received the badges at this time and they were added during the hand finishing of his photograph.



Lizzette Bankier wearing Jack's uniform



SS Maunganui

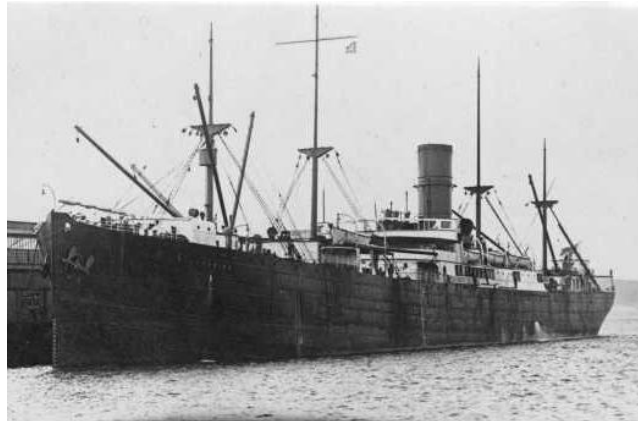
Following initial training in New Zealand Jack embarked on 15 November 1916 on the SS Maunganui along with 134 other officers and men who comprised the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reinforcements of the NZ Tunnelling Company. The contingent disembarked at Devonport, Plymouth on 29 January 1917.

Just over a month of training at Boscombe was followed by a further month at Etaples Camp in France before Jack joined the Tunnelling Company in the field on 8 April 1917. The following day – 9 April 1917 – was significant for two reasons; it was the first day of the Battle of Arras, and Jack was charged and summarily punished for being in town without his gas respirator, not complying with an order, and using abusive language. Perhaps it could be kindly said that Jack was disoriented by the fog of war on his first full day with the Tunnelling

Company. But Jack had the reputation of being a feisty character, and with this knowledge it is not difficult to picture the scene on 9 April 1917 when an officer or non-commissioned officer confronted Jack about not being in possession of his gas respirator. Jack was awarded four days forfeiture of pay but overall his pay book may have come out on the credit side of the ledger. An entry on his Statement of Services form notes that he received "21 days extra pay for moving coal". He would have been on SS Maunganui enroute to England at this time.

The lack of any further entries on Jack's conduct sheet suggests that he put this early instance of ill-discipline behind him and went on to play his part in the important work of the Tunnelling Company during the month-long Battle of Arras. The tunnellers had dug tunnels up to and beyond the German lines from which British infantry were to emerge and surprise the enemy. In this way it was hoped to avoid the slaughter of soldiers advancing across open ground towards the German trenches as had been experienced in earlier battles. During the remainder of 1917 notable contributions of the Tunnelling Company were road making on the Arras-Cambrai road, the demolition of large quantities of ammunition that was unsafe after being damaged in storage dump explosions, the building of a sawmill at Ronville, and the construction of dug outs in preparation for the Battle of Cambrai. Jack was likely involved in some of these activities.

Jack was injured and spent some time in hospital before returning to New Zealand on the SS Ayrshire in late 1918. A Medical Board conducted on the Ayrshire records that he was no longer fit for war service due to a deformed left elbow. This was considered to be a permanent condition.



SS Ayrshire

The miners of the NZ Tunnelling Company had the reputation of being hard men, but Jack apparently revealed a softer side during his return to New Zealand. An elderly cousin recalls that Jack embroidered a 'table set' (thought to be a table cloth and possibly some table napkins) in a pattern similar to the willow pattern, and that Jack presented this to his wife on his return. Unfortunately the whereabouts of these items is no longer known.

By a stroke of very good planning or serendipity, Jack disembarked in Auckland on Christmas Eve 1918, hopefully for a joyous yuletide reunion with his wife and two children. Jack was discharged from the Army on 19 March 1919 having served 129 days in New Zealand and two years 40 days overseas. He was

awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal – both of which are in his grandson's possession.

After the war Jack worked for the Auckland stevedoring company of Leonard and Dingley for some time before working for many years as a waterside worker on the Auckland wharves. Jack was active in union affairs but was probably retired before the 1951 waterfront strike, at which time he would have been 72 years of age. He passed away aged 73 on 18 October 1952, just 18 months before his wife, Lizzette. He had thus exceeded the Biblical span of three score years and ten which was something of a yardstick of long life for people born in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

It is sad to reflect that the writer of these lines and a nephew of Jack's, who is now in his 90<sup>th</sup> year, are probably the only living people able to profess any knowledge of Jack. And in the case of the writer they are vague memories of a child who did not know his grandfather beyond his seventh year.

But of course at the time of writing the wartime events which are the focus of these pages occurred very close to a Century ago and the New Zealand Tunnelling Company was disbanded 94 years ago. It is fortunate, then, that official records including service records are so well preserved. One does not need to read too carefully between the lines of files of men of the New Zealand Tunnelling Company to appreciate what a colourful bunch they were. But they also made a very significant contribution to New Zealand's war effort in the neighbourhood of Arras which, in the words of the General Officer Commanding the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, "was carried out in a spirit of devotion to duty, creditable in the highest degree to all concerned"<sup>1</sup>.

We will remember them.



Jack, Lizzette, and grandsons John and Peter in about 1945

<sup>1</sup> Lieutenant General Alexander Godley, in the Foreword to J.C. Neill's *The New Zealand Tunnelling Company*, Whitcombe & Tombs Limited, 1922.