

## Meremere WWI Soldiers

Set high above surrounding hills and gorges is the idyllic settlement of Meremere, 14km inland from State Highway 3.

In 1922 when the War Memorial was unveiled it is described in the Hawera Normanby Star as “a very fine piece of work, made by Messers Jones Brothers of Hawera in the form of an obelisk in red Scottish granite, about 12 ft. high with a base of four tiers, and at each corner joined by a chain is a pillar of inserted marble with the names of those who left the district from school and country; while on the obelisk are the names of the fallen”. Meremere School which opened in 1894 with 19 pupils, closed after 96 years in 1990. But the War Memorial still stands sentinel in the grounds, reminding us of the 62 people from this area that went to WWI, and the 10 killed in action. Back in 1914 when war was declared Meremere was a thriving community, with a Dairy Factory, Store and Post Office, and many more people working on the farms than there are today.

Most of the men appearing on the War Memorial went to Meremere School. Two of them, Louis Bassett and Matthew Curry, were teachers at the school. Louis returned from the war, while Matthew died of wounds at sea when returning to NZ in 1918. Two past pupils who entered the medical profession, siblings – Dr Bruce and Nurse Flora McRea, both served during the war, but at this stage I’ve been unable to find out more information about them.

Percival Clee enlisted from Meremere at the very beginning of the war. He was a new immigrant from England, and was working on the Williams farm. His war records show that he was badly wounded at Gallipoli. He was never to return to NZ, and he died five years after the war finished (in 1923) from these wounds at his parents’ home in Cheltenham.

Bugler - George Bissett intrigued me right from the beginning, but I struggled to find out anything about him. I only knew that he was at Meremere School in 1908, his parents were farmers in the area, and that he was 20 years old when he was killed at Gallipoli in 1915. Then in a moment of complete serendipity late one night, I discovered his story when I googled ‘WWI bugle’. Waiouru Army Museum curator, Chris Rapley, had posted his story of the bugle from Gallipoli in their collection with bullet holes in it, belonging to George Bissett of Taranaki. He tells how George landed at Gallipoli Cove on the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915, (our future ANZAC Day) and within 3 days was dead.

When I asked military enthusiast Tony Hunter about the role of the Bugler in battle, he told me that the bugler was essential to all military communication until its displacement by field radio after WWI.

The Bugler was used by the Battle Field Commander to communicate his orders by set bugle tunes to his men, as the notes could be heard over large distances, i.e. calls like Stand To, Advance, Retire and Stand Down. Mounted and Cavalry troops also had their own bugle calls. All had to be remembered in the heat of battle. So like the key player in a rugby team, the Bugler was prime target for enemy fire.

Lieutenant Colonel William Malone makes special mention of George in his diary entry of 4<sup>th</sup> May he comments on the men he cannot bury between the front lines and refers to the ‘bugler lad’ Bissett lying ‘with his bugle on his back face downwards, shot in his tracks’. On May 24<sup>th</sup>, Malone writes that Bissett was finally buried during a short armistice. That means that he lay out in the elements in no man’s land for nearly a month. Chris finishes his article with the poignant observation of George’s bugle – *“For me it is an object that strips away the projections of national character building and distils Gallipoli – and any conflict – down to personal tragedy. It is a personal possession ripped apart by war, just like thousands of individuals and families. When I am close to this bugle it silently speaks to me in a way that other objects cannot. It doesn’t talk to me about bravery; it tells me about death, grief, and of families wondering how their boy is faring on the other side of the world. It makes me ponder how Adam and Alice Bissett felt when they heard they had lost their son.”*

A story that is a big part of my family history is of the four Murphy brothers who went to War and the tragic truth that three of them never returned. Their mother Ellen was a Dwyer, and was a strong,

respected influence over her 12 children (two more died in infancy). Ellen was 17 years old when she married fellow Irish immigrant Patrick Murphy. They moved to Meremere in 1898 from Matapu and leased a 320 acre farm, which they later bought in Ellen's name. Michael was the oldest, and had already left school in 1898 and was helping on the farm, but the remaining 11 children went to Meremere School. All the nine boys were of tall stature, strong build and played rep rugby in the province.

When war broke out in 1914 the five oldest boys, who were of military age, were all eager to enlist. Michael and Richard were the first to leave NZ for the battlefields of Europe in October 1914. They were both in the Wellington Mounted Rifle Battalion, and rode their horses from Meremere to Trentham earlier that year. John was already working as an accountant in Dunedin (he had been encouraged to further his education and not become a farmer like the rest of the boys). He enlisted in the Otago Mounted Rifles but later transferred to Wellington Division and was therefore nearer to his two brothers. Initially Patrick stayed home to run the farm at Meremere, but then Daniel who was deemed medically unfit for Military service, returned from his sharemilking job at Te Kuiti to run the home farm. There is an article from The Hawera Normanby Star in Feb of 1917 where Paddy is up before the Military Exemptions Board asking for a 6 month reprieve before he started training for War. Younger brothers Owen & Alec- 18 & 19 at the time, were working on the farm with him, but a 320 acre farm, still being carved from the bush was not something that could not be left unattended. Paddy says in the article that he is getting milking machines installed before he goes in 6 months time, & makes it very clear that he wants to go & do his duty for the Empire.

Michael and Richard arrived at Gallipoli with the first wave of soldiers on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915, the same day as their old school friend, George Bissett, but unlike George, they were to survive this death trap for another 3 months.

In the early hours of 8 August Lieutenant Colonel William Malone, led the attack on Chunuk Bair with his 760 strong Wellington Battalion soldiers. The men had spent weeks on a diet of bully beef & rock hard biscuits, most had diarrhoea, & the heat on this barren, exposed peninsula was intense at this time of the year. By the end of the day, Chunuk Bair had been taken by the ANZACs, but there were only 70 men of the Wellington Battalion left, and Colonel Malone had been killed by friendly fire. Within hours the Wellington Mounted Rifles moved in to reinforce the 70 Wellington Battalion men. This was to be Michael and Richard's last battle. They had been fighting side by side as their company advanced on the enemy surrounding Chunuk Bair. Then Michael realized Richard was no longer with him, he back tracked to find Richard badly wounded and close to death. Michael was the oldest in the Murphy family and had always been the one to look out for his younger siblings. This was the last time the two brothers were seen by their fellow soldiers.

Ironically their brother Jack arrived at Gallipoli that same day, 9<sup>th</sup> August 1915, but was too late to ever see his brothers again. Their bodies were never found. Jack saw months of heavy combat on the peninsula & was one of the last to be evacuated just before Christmas 1915. The evacuation began on 15 December, with 36,000 troops withdrawn over the following five nights without a single loss of life. The last party left in the early hours of 20 December, they had rigged up rifles etc to fire periodically, so it took days for the Turks to realise they had gone. Jack was one of the last to leave, and would have felt the same thoughts as the words from another soldier's diary I read: *'About 4am we reached the troopship Osmanieh & watched the dark loom of ANZAC cove with its twinkling rifle flashes & bomb bursts...fainter & fainter they grew. We felt a sense of relief & great sadness...& failure'*

The capture of Chunuk Bair was the only real success we had in the entire Gallipoli campaign. However, the success was fleeting. The Turks recaptured the peak after a few days and were never to relinquish it again. A New Zealand memorial stands on the summit of Chunuk Bair. It has a narrow slit through which the rising sun shines in early August.

Jack had survived months of battle against the Turks and he went on to serve with distinction in the muddy trenches and fields on the Somme, France. He was doing Officer Training in England when Paddy arrived from NZ. But within weeks Paddy had contracted meningitis. He died on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1917 with his brother Jack at his side. At 6ft 2" Paddy was the tallest of the Murphy's. The doctors commented on Patrick's magnificent physique, but in those days before penicillin was discovered, nothing could be done for him.

After three years of war service Jack was made an Officer, trained at Oxford and sent back to New Zealand to train new recruits. His rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant indicates his proven ability as a leader. During this time back in NZ he was to meet his future wife, Jessie Barnes. When he was due to return to Europe, his mother met him in Wellington to say goodbye. She was staying at the Waterloo Hotel, along with many other soldier's wives and mothers. She confided to the proprietress how upset she was, as she had already lost three sons. This woman made an appointment for her to have an interview with Sir James Parr, Minister of Defense, and he said the family had made an outstanding war contribution and there was no need for Jack to return to the front. His bags were removed from the ship without his knowledge. Jack's war at the front line was over.

After the War, Jack married, and had seven children. They bought a farm at Ruawai, and like most returned service men, struggled through the hard years of the Depression in the 1920's. But with steadfast Murphy spirit Jack got through it all, and lived a long, successful life.

There are at least nine sets of brothers on the Meremere War Memorial. Frank and Bill, sons of early settler James Dunlop, are two such men. The family moved to Meremere in 1900, and in the Ohangai School Jubilee Book, Bill writes that as a child he could go all the way to the back of the farm without touching the ground simply by jumping from log to log. 62 cows were being milked on this land in 1917, and the third son Oswald was given a Military exemption to run this farm, and help with the larger Turuturu Rd farm. Frank's Grandson, our Mayor Ross Dunlop, told me about these community minded men who rarely talked about their war, as it was with most returned soldiers, they remained reticent about that part of their lives.

Frank was in the Wellington Mounted Rifles and was involved with horses, both cavalry and teamsters taking supplies to the front. He suffered a severe leg or hip wound, and had a limp for the rest of his life. Their 89 year old nephew Angus Dunlop recalls Bill, who was a Sergeant, telling him how he nearly died at Passchendaele when he along with other soldiers were struck down with a virus. Bill and a number of other sick men were put in a room on their own, expecting them all to be dead by morning and they were with the exception of Bill. Other than that story, Angus never heard Frank or Bill speak about the war, even at ANZAC Services which they always attended. When the war ended Frank farmed on the Turuturu Rd. In later years he was Deputy Chairman of the Hawera County Council, Chairman of The Hawera Co-op Dairy Company, amongst other roles. Bill farmed in partnership with his brother Oswald for a time at Meremere, eventually buying him out. Bill's daughter Catherine recalls: "When he came back from WWI he had to bach all alone on his side of the farm and the silence after the noise of the war nearly drove him mad".

Once again, a treasure of stories are behind these names etched into the marble and granite on this monument, a tribute of gratitude from a remote community in our province.

Jacq Dwyer

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Meremere War Memorial, as it stands today, surrounded by kowhai trees in a beautiful garden setting in the old school grounds. It was unveiled in May 1922.

### **Meremere WWI Roll of Honour**

\*George Francis McGovern BISSETT, Private, 10/304

Bugler, Wellington Infantry Battalion

Occupation before enlistment: Joiner

Died - Gallipoli

Died at age 20, on 27 April 1915

Son of Adam & Alice Bissett, Wanganui

\*Matthew Goodwin CURRY, Second Lieutenant, 41429

New Zealand Expeditionary Force

Occupation before enlistment: School Master

Died – at sea of Disease, while returning to NZ

Died at age 29, on 5 September 1918

Husband of M Curry, Palmerston North

\* Frank CLOSE, Private, 69466, Private (on the returned list, but he was killed in action)

Wellington Infantry Battalion

Occupation before enlistment: Farmer

Died – Le Quesnoy, France

Died at age 22, 4 November 1918

Son of Thomas Banchett & Margaret Caroline Close of Hawera

\*James Thomas CLOSE, Trooper, 18343

Wellington Mounted Rifles

Occupation before enlistment: Farmer

Died – Egypt of Disease

Died at age 23 ,on 15 August 1917

Son of Thomas Banchett & Margaret Caroline Close of Hawera

\*Bernard Herbert MONK, Private, 10/459  
Wellington Infantry Battalion  
Died – Gallipoli  
Died at age 22, on 7 May 1915  
Son of George & Margaret Monk, Ranana, Wanganui River

\*Michael MURPHY, Trooper, 11/419  
Wellington Mounted Rifles  
Died - Gallipoli  
Died at age 32 on 9 August 1915  
Son of Patrick & Ellen Murphy, Meremere

\*Patrick MURPHY, Rifleman, 54557  
New Zealand Rifle Brigade  
Died - England of Disease  
Died at age 29 on 5 November 1917  
Son of Patrick & Ellen Murphy, Meremere

\*Richard MURPHY, Trooper, 11/506  
Wellington Mounted Rifles  
Died – Gallipoli  
Died at age 24 on 9 August 1915  
Son of Patrick & Ellen Murphy, Meremere

\*Samuel Joseph POOLE, Lance Corporal, 46243  
New Zealand Expeditionary Force  
Died – Le Quesnoy, France  
Died at age 34 on 4 November 1918  
Son of William & Mary Poole, Levin

\*Waikohari TAMARAPA, Private, 16/418 (not on the Memorial, but should have been, he lived in the district)  
1<sup>st</sup> Maori Contingent  
Died – Mudros, Gallipoli, of disease  
Died at age 25 on 12 October 1915  
Son of Matehaukere Tamarapa, Meremere

\*Norman WALLACE, Private, 20469  
New Zealand Expeditionary Force  
Died – Messines, Belgium  
Died at age 29 on 7 June 1917  
Son of William & Mary Wallace, Meremere

\*Paul WOODFORD, Rifleman, 23/1246  
New Zealand Rifle Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion  
Died – Somme, France  
Died at age 23 on 15 September 1916  
Son of Edward & Emma Woodford, Pukekohe

## **WWI MEREMERE RETURNED:**

Harry ALLEN, Private, 23/1317  
Bruce Stanley ANDERSON, Private, 10/2839  
Victor Godfred ANDERSON, Sergeant 10/3826  
Albert BALDWIN, Private, 31211  
Louis William BASSETT, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, 15651  
Alfred Henry BIRCHALL, Private, 29353  
Spencer W BIRKETT(or Burkett), Private  
\*George Francis McGovern BISSETT, Private, 10/304  
David Alexander CARMICHAEL, Private, 63824

Austin Frederick CATLEY, Private, 45047  
 Robert CHESTNUT, Trooper  
 Percival Harry CLEE, Corporal, 10/866  
 Henry William COAD, Private, 33838  
 Norman Richard COAD, Private, 31226  
 Cyril Arthur COLES, Private, 22779  
 Thomas Patrick CULKEEN, Private, 69469  
 Frank Crawford DUNLOP, Trooper, 11/2086  
 William DUNLOP, Sergeant, 28105  
 Harold FRANKLIN, Sergeant  
 Norman GUNDESEN, Trooper, 74868  
 Percy GUNDESEN, Private, 61619  
 Cyril Pakenham HUTCHISON, Trooper, 75862  
 S JEFFRIES, Private  
 Egbert William JOHNS, Private, 50880  
 Frank KURTH, Private  
 John Mathison LUMSDEN, Private, 31308  
 David McLACHLAN, Private  
 Harry McLEAN, Sergeant  
 Dr Bruce McRAE  
 Nurse Flora McRAE  
 George Francis MONK, Private, 10/458  
 Lawrence MONK, Private, 54551  
 John MURPHY, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, 9/951  
 Albert NICKEL, Private, 31336  
 Ernest OLIVER, Private, 11/1206  
 W H OLSEN, Sergeant  
 James PATCHELL, Rifleman, 26/415, **not on war memorial, but did go to Meremere School**  
 Robert George PATCHELL, Corporal, 11/1949  
 Arthur PRENTICE, Private  
 John RAILTON, Trooper, 11/430  
 Henry ROBERTS, Private, 8/1475  
 John ROSS, Private  
 Edgar Earl SANSON, Private, 10/4198  
 Wiremu TAMARAPA, Private, 20837  
 Henry TELFER, Private, 11/1983  
 James TOLME, Private  
 J WELLS, Private  
 Thomas W WHITE, Private  
 Alfred Edward WILLIAMS, Sergeant, 75867  
 William Bryan La Mothe WILLIAMS, Corporal, 48395  
 Henry Daniel WILLIAMS, Lieutenant, 13/759  
 John WOLFE, Private

## **Meremere WWII Roll of Honour**

\*Lyn William WILLIAMS, Flight Sergeant, NZ421120  
 Royal New Zealand Air Force, 16 Squadron  
 Died-New Caledonia  
 Died at age 26 on 31 July 1943  
 Son of GWA & LE Williams

\*Alistar Cameron DUNLOP, Flight Sergeant, NZ411607  
 Royal New Zealand Air Force, 62 Operational Training Unit  
 Died- United Kingdom  
 Died at age 23 on 19 February 1943  
 Son of Oswald & Mildred Dunlop, Hawera

\*Walter John GEARY, Flight Sergeant, NZ428101  
 Royal New Zealand Air Force, 6 Squadron

Died-New Caledonia  
Died at age 31 on 27 January 1945

\*George Fredrick PARNELL, Driver, 6606  
Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force  
Died – Crete, at age 25 on 21 May 1941  
Son of Fredrick & Ellen Parnell, Wellington

\*R LICHTWARK, Private,

\*George Albert SPICE, Private, 25384  
24 Infantry Battalion  
Died-Western Dessert  
Died at age 25 on 25 November 1941  
Son of Alfred & Elsie Spice, Hawera

**.WWII Meremere Returned:**

I ANDREWS, Private  
N ANDREWS, Private  
G ASHLEY, LAC  
G BAKER, Gunner  
B COILE, Private  
G DAVIDSON, Private  
H DAVISON, Stkr  
O J DAVISON, Fly, NZ70020  
W DUNLOP, WO  
R FINDLAY, Private  
B FOREMAN, Private  
N FOREMAN, WO  
W GARDNER, AB  
R GEARY, Private  
J GILLIGAN, Private  
Mary GULLIVER, Private  
R HILL, Private  
D JUDD, Gunner  
S KERRISON, Trooper  
L KITNEY, Private  
K LOONEY, Private  
P MURPHY, AB  
O NAIRN, Private  
C NICHOLSON, Private  
N NORRIE, Sergeant  
R PALMER, Private  
J PARNELL, Private  
L PIPER, Lieutenant  
K SANGSTER, Private  
M SANGSTER, Private  
H SMALEY, Private  
C SPICE, Gunner  
R SPICE, Trooper  
W SPICE, Private  
S TAYLOR, Private  
D THORBURN, Private  
R WALLACE, Private  
T WALLACE, Sergeant  
A WARREN, Private  
R WILLIAMS, NA

