

From a pile of junk, emerges Taranaki hero's World War I tale

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Andy Jackson/Fairfax NZ

Three generations of Lepperton's Lepper family, from left, Steve, Tim, Graeme and Dennis, view the memorial plaque presented to the family at New Plymouth Boys' High School.

From a pile of junk under a high school art room has emerged the graphic tale of a young Taranaki man's World War I heroism.

Schoolmates of former New Plymouth Boys' High School pupil Harper Mervyn Lepper created a plaque in his honour after he was killed in action in 1916.

Some 20 years ago caretaker Trevor Woodward had found it while clearing accumulated junk from under the art room, and instead of throwing it out he took it to his workshop. It lay there until last week, when it was discovered by school historian Max Carroll when he was researching some old photographs.

"Nobody knows how the plaque came to be under the art room," said Carroll. "All we know is that it was presented to the school by a group of Harper Lepper's classmates, and was probably displayed somewhere around the school for several years. But it certainly hadn't been on display for the past 50 years or so."

But the story of Lieutenant Harper - who was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry on the Western Front - was such an important one that both Carroll and NPBHS principal Paul Veric agreed the plaque should be returned to the Lepper family.

And the family - descendants of Colonel Maxwell Lepper who was the commander of the Taranaki Militia during the New Zealand Wars - said they were honoured to accept it.

Three generations of the family visited the school yesterday for the presentation. Steve Lepper - Harper Lepper's great-nephew - said he was delighted to see the plaque back with the family.

Harper Lepper was a star pupil at NPBHS. Head boarder in 1914 and at age 17 he became the youngest New Zealander at the time to be selected as an officer with the British Army. But because he was too young for military service, he attended the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, England, until he became eligible to be assigned to an active British regiment.

He then joined the 57th Middlesex Regiment where he soon proved to be an outstanding soldier.

Lepper's bravery was dramatically illustrated during fighting in Flanders on July 20, 1915 when part of his trench was blown in during a heavy bombardment, and communication with his next battalion was in danger of being lost. But despite being wounded twice the young Taranaki man remained at his post and kept up communications, sending in accurate information of the situation.

Describing the incident, the captain in charge of the company said "This youngster - he is only 18 - really did marvels, and I knew he would keep his men calm.

"We hung on all along the line, and after two hours of the most exhausting bombardment that I have ever heard, seen or dreamt of, the Huns gave it up, and by daylight we had been relieved and managed to get back to the reserve line in a small wood."

After recovering from his wounds, Lepper received his Military Cross from the King, then rejoined his regiment. He died at sunrise on April 9, 1916 while leading a charge on Turkish trenches in what is now Iraq.

"In memory of Lieutenant Harper M Lepper, Military Cross, who was killed in action in Mesopotamia," says the plaque. "Erected by his schoolfellows in the hope that his example may not be forgotten."

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