

**Th**

---

**The foot**

Jeff McNeill

ne foot



**We didn't expect to** find a foot. It was late September 2011, and I had just driven one and a half hours west from Brussels to Messines to meet with an expat Kiwi friend, Martin O'Connor. I was researching the Battle of Messines for interest and had a spare day between conferences I was in Europe to attend. Martin, a former journalist, guides battlefield tours on the Flanders front.

Mesen, as Messines is known today, is a small west Belgian town, 10 kilometres south of Ypres and 4 kilometres east of the French border. Messines' biggest claim is to be Belgium's smallest town. Well over a thousand years old, it sits on the southern end of the 10-kilometre-long Messines Ridge, which rises up to 65 metres above sea level in the Flanders plains. It hardly qualifies as a hill by New Zealand standards, but anyone standing on it has commanding views over the flat and low-lying rolling countryside, both to the west and east.

In late 1914, the Germans fought hard to capture these heights, in order to prevent the British artillery observers overlooking their positions, and so that their own observers could direct artillery onto the British front and rear lines. The British wanted to mount an offensive in Flanders (the Battle of Passchendaele, or Third Battle of Ypres) in an effort to break through the German lines and take the Belgian coastal ports that harboured the U-boats in mid-1917, but first they had to remove the Germans from the ridge.

The Battle of Messines was the solution, with the attack undertaken on 7 June 1917. The II Anzac Corps was to take the southern part of the ridge, with the New Zealand Division responsible for taking the

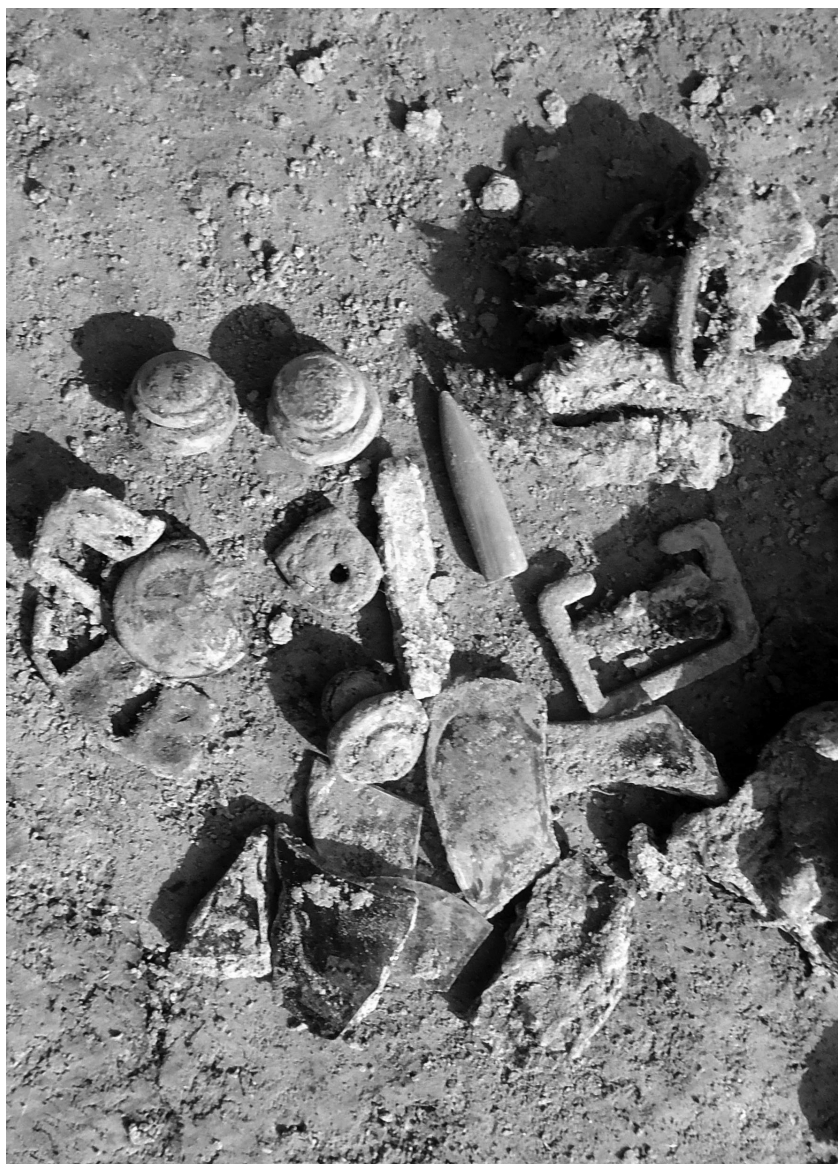
township of Messines. The battle was remarkable for its detailed preparation, and for the 19 big mines under the German strongpoints that blew almost simultaneously at its outset. It was also a significant victory for the Division, a battle in which both Martin and I had a grandfather fight as a rifleman in the New Zealand Rifle Brigade (NZRB), 'the Dinks'.

The town was installing a new wastewater treatment plant. A partial skeleton from World War I had been discovered during excavations, and patches of khaki cloth next to it suggested it was that of a British soldier. Soldiers' skeletons are not unusual finds in Flanders; two weeks earlier another had been discovered in a nearby village. But for us this skeleton was special; it was more than likely that of a New Zealander, and, given where it was found, according to our maps it was most likely a Dink.

At the building site we met with Messines Town Council staffer Steven Reynaert, and after consulting our historical battle maps we agreed that the site was on the 'Yellow Line', an objective taken by the 3rd Battalion New Zealand Rifle Brigade on the first day of battle. The site was some 500 metres to the east of the town centre and just past the town cemetery, through which the New Zealanders had followed up a German communications trench for about 50 metres to form a block against a counter-attack.

After a cursory examination of the site where the skeleton was found, we wandered across to the other side of the building excavations. Almost immediately, we spotted the sole of a boot, its heel constructed of layers of leather and metal, on the bare clay. Then, a metre away, another boot sole — and the bones of a foot. Steven phoned the municipal archaeologist, who said he would be over in half an hour, giving us time to buy lunch. We sat down on the bank next to a pile of rusted metal the builders had excavated: electrical cabling, barbed wire fencing stakes with their spiral bases, the base of a large shell, a kettle, a shovel, and indeterminate chunks of rusted metal. We spent the next hour watching Jan painstakingly excavate the site around the bones.

Scrape by scrape, objects emerged: a bullet head, a shrapnel ball, a glass phial with its liquid iodine still inside. Then two leather buttons, the Rifle Brigade's bugle moulding still visible, and a bent metal



shoulder badge, 'NZRB'. Subsequent forensic analysis showed the foot belonged to the same skeleton that had been discovered the previous week. It was of a man who stood 166 to 174 centimetres high and was aged 20 to 24 years old when he died. This man was a New Zealander. But who was he?

Death was mostly random in this war. While popular narrative has German Maxim machine guns scything down advancing troops — and they did — most casualties on both sides came from artillery fire. This artillery war was such that Flemish farmers still unearth some 200 tonnes of unexploded shells annually. They stack this 'iron harvest' neatly by telegraph poles so the Belgian military's ordnance disposal unit can collect it for disposal. Sometimes the farmers are not so lucky: earlier in 2016 a farmer harrowing his field exploded a shell, wrecking the harrow and lifting the back of his tractor half a metre into the air.

Artillery fire was no respecter of rank. Just weeks before the attack, the Rifle Brigade's bandsmen, all old hands, were sitting in a hut in the back area when a shell crashed into it, killing four of the men and shredding the instruments. On the second day of the attack, the day my grandfather was wounded, General Guy Russell — the officer commanding the New Zealand Division — and his brigade commanders were standing together in discussion near the ruins of an old windmill, Le Moulin de l'Hospice, when a shell landed nearby, killing Brigadier-General Charles Brown almost instantly.

Brown's burial, unlike so many, was in a cemetery, at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, just across the border from Messines in France. And there was no shortage of men to bury — the victory had cost the New Zealand Division 3700 casualties, including around 700 killed, though exact numbers remain uncertain.

Flanders is dotted with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries, with their neatly ordered graves of British and Empire soldiers, but most bodies were never found. Many soldiers were simply buried in shell holes where they fell, either by debris from subsequent explosions or as field burials that were themselves destroyed by shell fire. Or simply atomised.

Every evening at eight o'clock in front of the Menin Gate in Ypres, the 'Last Post' is played, as it has been played every evening uninterrupted since July 1928, apart from during World War II. The Hall of Memory that forms the gate names the 54,896 Empire soldiers who died in the Ypres Salient up to 15 August 1917 and whose bodies have never been identified or found. It is a must-see part of the Ypres experience. 'He is not missing. He is here,' said Lord Plumer at the monument's unveiling in 1927. Plumer was the British 2nd Army general who had masterminded the Messines Offensive.

But New Zealand did not list its missing on the Menin Gate and so our man's name is not to be found there. A plaque on one column simply explains:

The 2384 soldiers of the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces who fell in Ypres Salient and who have no known grave are commemorated on memorials in Tyne Cot Cemetery Passchendaele, The Buttes New British Cemetery Polygon Wood and Messines Ridge British Cemetery.

The Messines Ridge cemetery has 577 graves, including those of 67 New Zealand soldiers, their Portland stone headstones engraved with the silver fern. There are also unidentified burials, some headstones simply engraved 'A New Zealand Soldier of the Great War'. The Messines Memorial to the Missing is constructed over the Moulin de l'Hospice ruins. It sits on the former German front line on the forward slope overlooking the New Zealand lines. This strongpoint was heavily bombarded in the lead-up to the New Zealanders' attack. The memorial is circular, with the Cross of Sacrifice in the middle. Its front panel simply states:

Here are recorded the names of officers and men of New Zealand who fell in or near Messines in 1917 and 1918 and whose graves are known only to God.

Around the base are the 840 names of the unknown soldiers in the

cemeteries and those soldiers with no known graves, from both the Battle of Messines and subsequent actions both before and afterwards. Under the Rifle Brigade heading is our man's name.

His name is also listed online in the National Archives in New Zealand. Martin had accessed this computer database of names and details and, using the height and approximate age, came up with a shortlist of eight possible names for our man. Of course, he might have been from another company who had strayed; National Archive records show that men in the battle wandered from their designated positions to help out their mates or to find a more secure position — 'a better 'ole'.

Despite the stereotypical image of our 'Diggers' as taciturn and resourceful young colonials recruited off farms, the reality was that by 1914 most New Zealanders lived in urban areas. Also, many New Zealand soldiers were immigrants — a preliminary analysis shows that the next of kin for a seventh of the men killed at Messines lived outside New Zealand, mostly in England, Scotland or Ireland. Contemporary records, however, show that these new New Zealanders strongly identified as 'Diggers' or 'Fernlanders', rather than as 'chooms', as the Diggers called the English soldiers. The best fit for our man is an Englishman serving in the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, who died aged 26, leaving a wife and three young children. However, the forensic analysis was unable to identify the skeleton conclusively and so his identity cannot be confirmed.

The man we think it most likely to be was posthumously nominated for very gallant action. It is unclear what this action was — had he charged a machine-gun position or a strongpoint to save his mates from suppressing fire and paid for his action with his life? Had he held the block on Unbearable Trench from a counter-attack? Certainly, there was no shortage of bravery shown that day. Or had he died from a random artillery shell? And had his mates simply given him a field burial?

There were no dog-tags, and his grave was lost in the subsequent German bombardment once the town was lost to them, or during the 1918 Spring Offensive when German storm-troopers regained in days all the land, including Messines, that their side had lost during the whole of the 1917 Ypres battles. We cannot be sure. In any case, while



that story belongs to one soldier listed on the memorial, the other 839 men must each have had their own stories of soldiering at Messines and their deaths there.

**A month later,** Steven emailed us to say that there was a problem with the bones we had discovered. The Flemish pathologist had confirmed that the foot bones belonged to the skeleton that had been found earlier at the building site. But they had also discovered that two of the bones we had found belonged to someone else, with no clues as to whom. They were too weathered even to date. Here we are forced to speculate: it could have been a bone blown from the cemetery by an exploding artillery shell and it could even be centuries old. Or it could have been a fragment of the Other, one of the hundreds of Germans who perished in and around Messines and the estimated 10,000 who died across the ridge during the Battle of Messines.

While little enough is told of the New Zealand and Australian soldiers who fought at Messines, even less has been available about the German side of the conflict — of the almost unendurable bombardments in the weeks that led up to the attack. At that time Germany was an empire, consisting of individual kingdoms, principalities and city states, dominated by Prussia. The German Army was in fact four different armies — from Prussia, and the Kingdoms of Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg — each with its own administration and archive.

The 18th Infantry Regiment ‘Prinz Ludwig Ferdinand’ of the 3rd Royal Bavarian Division held the line at Messines on the morning of the attack. It had just a day earlier relieved the 181st Regiment, 40th Saxon Infantry Division that had crumbled under the constant artillery barrages of the previous fortnight. The relief was not complete, however, and so some Saxons had remained.

In the battle the Bavarian division lost over a third of its men: some to the creeping artillery barrage that plodded up the hill leading to the ridgeline, others who were shot, bayoneted or captured by the New Zealanders advancing immediately behind it. Quite possibly these spare bones were once part of a Saxon or Bavarian soldier, blown to bits and scattered by a shell.

**Today the Messines landscape** is devoid of any signs of war, other than the ubiquitous Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries. After the war the local Flemish scavenged the metal, dismantled the pillboxes to make paved courtyards, and filled and smoothed the shell holes and trenches to grow crops. New housing and barns cover the battlefield, mostly replacing those used and destroyed in the war. Stinking Farm, Gabion Farm, Ration Farm and others look new and prosperous. No trace remains of the battle, apart from a couple of mine craters turned duck ponds to the north and south of the village. Farmers still use some of the barbed-wire stakes on their farms.

Of the hundreds of German concrete pillboxes and artillery shelters, no more than four remain in or around Messines, with two in front of the New Zealand Memorial Park Messines. This memorial, not to be confused with the nearby Memorial to the Missing, was unveiled in 1924 and is dedicated

In honour of the men of the New Zealand Division. The  
battle of Messines 7th to 14th of June 1917. From the  
uttermost ends of the earth.

One of these reinforced pillboxes, its concrete roof a metre thick, captured a human moment from nearly a hundred years ago. Chipped and weathered, with thin sheets of concrete blown off to reveal a little of the iron rod reinforcing, the pillbox remains intact despite several direct hits. Climb on top, look carefully, and you can see the boot-prints of one of the workmen — no doubt working at night, given its position right on the German front line — set into the concrete.

Those curious to learn more about both New Zealanders and Germans in that conflict need to explore the different military archives, which contain not only the names of the soldiers, but also their units' war diaries. Each is different, but also strangely alike. The archives are, for non-historians, intriguing. They are places where requests are made for obscure files, often more on a hunch than on any logical basis, which, hours later, are produced from the bowels of the building to be silently perused. The offices of Archives New Zealand, on Mulgrave Street, look out across Wellington Harbour. The Royal Bavarian Army

Archives, with its extensive 3rd Bavarian Infantry Division records, is on Leonrodstrasse in a nondescript Munich suburb. Its pokey first-storey reading room has small windows that look out onto the passing trams; its triplicate paper forms spell Bureaucracy. The Saxon Archive, with its records of the 40th Saxon Division, is located on the functionally named Archivstrasse in Neustadt, directly across the river Elbe from Dresden old town. Unlike the old town, which was razed in the fire-bombings of February 1945, Neustadt is a beautiful leafy suburb of government administration buildings and houses from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. But its pickings are slim; only administrative documents remain. The Saxon war diaries had been forwarded to the Prussian archive in the 1930s, and this was destroyed in 1945 by the Allied air raids on Potsdam.

These archives share similarities — silent readers turning pages, making notes with the obligatory pencils, and periodically going up to the issues desk to exchange one folder of documents for another. And they share something else: the musty, slightly acrid smell of the nearly century-old documents and the chemical smell of cyclostyled ink. Despite the different languages, similarities quickly appear in the contents of the military archives, too, reflecting a mind-set that suggests bureaucracy, with men and guns as items on the ledger book, men as anonymous unless they were officers.

The writing is often dry and administrative in intent. An incomplete record glued into one of the bound volumes in the Saxon Archive concerns the disposal of the paybook and 35 francs belonging to a badly wounded New Zealand soldier captured in a raid in March 1917. The soldier had subsequently died and was interred in a German cemetery. He was not named (and the New Zealand war diaries do not record any raid on the day mentioned in the German note), but the 35 francs clearly posed an administrative problem for someone.

Such items make a change from the usual Orders of the Day, with their daily notices concerning lost Iron Crosses, deserters, reductions in the already meagre troop rations, and stolen bicycles and horses. The New Zealand material shows a similar administrative preoccupation with stolen horses and the like. One notice in the New Zealand Division's Routine Orders for 20 May 1917 initially caught my eye as amusing:

## 214 Shooting of Game

GRC 1397 is republished for information of all concerned. Numerous cases of contravention of this Order have recently occurred in this Area and Commanding Officers are required to take special precautions to prevent any case occurring in this Brigade.

‘As cases still occur of Officers and other ranks pursuing and killing game, it is notified for information that the hunting, shooting or killing of game (which includes hares and rabbits) by nets, snares or other methods is strictly prohibited.’

But of course it is grotesque: only humans are to be hunted, shot or killed.

All these documents had been written and annotated for and by living people. Often, these were faded handwritten pencil notes in nearly unintelligible scribble. They recorded casualty lists — daily, weekly or monthly — by officer and other rank. Sometimes the arithmetic is showing, followed by a list of officers’ names — names the writers must have known as comrades and friends.

I turned one page in the New Zealand archive to find a situation map with a clay thumbprint in one corner. The clay had the same beige colour and fine texture as the dried mud I had brushed off my boots after walking through fields at Messines. This map had clearly been out in the field, carried and referred to in a fight whose outcome and casualty list we now know, but which remained unknown when the blue pencil lines showing troop dispositions were drawn on it.

Newspaper death notices tie the similarities at home on both sides. The *Evening Post* printed a two-page casualty list in its Friday, 22 June 1917 edition with ‘a total of 1201 names including 1149 wounded’. Another list of 323 names was published the following day. Smaller numbers of names were published subsequently. Presumably our man’s name is in one of them.

Even if we cannot connect a name with the skeleton, our man’s

loss would have been felt back in New Zealand. The newspaper also published private notices in the daily 'Roll of Honour' sections on the front page. Many are impersonal: killed in action, died of wounds, his duty nobly done, he died for his country. But some locate the soldiers in their families: beloved husband, only son, fifth son, eldest son, youngest son, deeply regretted. And sometimes they hint at more: 'Inserted by his sorrowing friend, Ada Wither' (27 August 1917) reads one — the unofficial fiancée left to grieve a future together lost?

And the owner, the Other, of the leftover bones we found was presumably also missed by his family. The newspapers in Landau, where the Bavarians who fought against the New Zealanders were garrisoned, did not print casualty lists but they did print personal notices not so very different from the New Zealander's: a hero's death, for the Fatherland, eldest son, brother. The family of a 27-year-old medical sergeant announced his loss thus:

Fell from an enemy shell in recent heavy fighting on 6 June 1917 after 34 months of faithful service, my dearly beloved, unforgettable husband, faithful caring father of my children, our good son, brother, brother-in-law and uncle.

**The foot we discovered**, along with the buttons and badge and the bullet and shrapnel ball that may have killed him, were reunited with the rest of the partial skeleton. Our soldier was given a formal military burial attended by the Minister of Defence at Messines Ridge Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, which backs onto the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing, on 4 February 2012. It made the TV news. The short item began with footage of the impressive military ceremony and rifle volleys by a Belgian Army guard before quickly cutting to a soundbite from the minister on New Zealand's military involvement in Afghanistan, the Cross of Sacrifice at the Memorial to the Missing behind him.

It concluded with a shot of the 'Last Post' bugler at the Menin Gate at Ypres, rather than the New Zealand memorial where the soldier's

name is engraved. 'He is not missing. He is here, in Messines.' The two remaining bones, which may have belonged to a Saxon or Bavarian, remain in a box on a shelf in a Flemish pathologist's office.

I had more or less forgotten our foot until I returned to Messines in June 2016 to complete my research on the battle. There was urgency to the visit; this was my last chance to explore the battlefield before its centenary in 2017. I was reminded of the foot when, visiting the Messines Ridge cemetery to look out across the New Zealand front lines from the German front line, I came across our man's grave, 'A Soldier of the Great War N.Z. Rifle Brigade'. It had rained the entire visit, and the photocopied map I was holding to locate Gabion Farm, Ration Farm and La Rossignol had a clay thumbprint on it from when I had earlier dropped my compass in the fine yellow mud that stuck to everything.