

Uncle Billy

New Zealand Machine Gun Company

Egypt and Europe

World War 1



New Zealand machine gun post on the Somme, near Mailly-Maillet, France, 31 March, 1918.

ROACHE, William Michael

13/3130 Sergeant W. M. ROACHE, New Zealand Machine Gun Company, served in France and Belgium and was awarded the Military Medal (M.M.) for gallantry in the field.



In a sense, William Michael (Billy) ROACHE had a varied career throughout his military service during World War 1.

He served his entire duration alongside his brother Gregory, in Egypt with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade, and in France with the New Zealand Infantry Brigade. On the Western Front he would see action at the Somme, Gravenstafel, Passchendaele, Polygon Wood, and Le Quesnoy.

Affectionately known as Uncle Billy, he married my grandfather's older sister, Euphemia Hannah (Effie) MORGAN.

William Michael ROACHE was born on 7 June 1893, at Brunswick, Wanganui. The second eldest of eight children to parents John ROACHE and Mary MULLINS. His parents were farmers at Brunswick, a farming settlement north-west of Wanganui, and is where Billy grew up as a child. On completion of his schooling years, he worked on the farm¹ employed as a shepherd.

Enlistment

Billy, along with younger brother Gregory Lawrence ROACHE, enlisted for service on 16 November 1915 at Trentham. Billy was 22 years old.

He was declared fit for service and began his training at Trentham Camp where he was posted to 1st Reserve Squadron, New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade (NZMR) with the rank of Trooper. Small in stature, Billy was 5 foot 8 ¾ inches with brown eyes, brown hair, and weighing 158lbs (just under 72kg). Over the next few weeks, he would receive intensive training on basic infantry drills.

On 27 February 1916 Billy was transferred to A Squadron - Auckland Mounted Rifles, New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF). Two days later on 29 February 1916, he departed New Zealand on *HMNZT 46 Aparima* as part of the 10th Reinforcements², disembarking at Suez Egypt on 4 April 1916. Immediately he was 'taken on strength' to the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Training Regiment based at Moascar Camp.

Billy was lucky in a sense, as he had a companion from home in his brother Gregory³. Perhaps he owed a duty to look out for his younger brother⁴ as the two would never be far apart for the rest of the duration of the war. They were both about to embark on a path that would lead them to Europe.

Billy would serve with a number of regiments. Initially with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles: Auckland Mounted Rifles then 2nd New Zealand Infantry Brigade and New Zealand Division: under the auspices of the New Zealand Machine Gun Corps: 1st Battalion Otago Infantry Regiment and 2nd Battalion Auckland Infantry Regiment (there were possibly other regiments).

¹ The farm at Brunswick may have been owned by his maternal grandparents - Anthony and Johanna MULLINS. The boys worked for their uncle, Gregory MULLINS.

² *HMNZT 46 Aparima* departed New Zealand with NZ Mounted Rifles Brigade (Roll No.23), troops under command of Major Bennett.

³ Older brother, 75006 John Anthony ROACHE, also enlisted at Wanganui on 24 October 1917. Served with the Wellington Mounted Rifles in Egypt. Discharged from service on 9 October 1919.

⁴ 13/3131 Gregory Lawrence ROACHE was nineteen years old when he enlisted.

France and Belgium

After only four weeks in Egypt Billy was transferred to 2nd New Zealand Infantry Brigade and within a few weeks was on his way to France.

Around this time the NZEF underwent reorganisation, and a New Zealand Division was being formed which was to have an impact on our forces in Egypt. The main principles governing military policy in Egypt were two-fold, (1) defence of the Suez Canal, and (2) probability that the various Corps would be required for operations in another theatre of war.

Billy found himself in the latter situation. Mounted soldiers were being drafted into Infantry regiments; he had no choice in the matter – men were desperately needed to reinforce the heavy casualties being experienced on the Western Front. On 2 May 1916 he was transferred to the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Brigade - 2nd Battalion Auckland Infantry Regiment with the rank of Private.

He quickly found himself on a train for Alexandria, sailing for France⁵ on *HMT Ionian* on 20 May 1916. Arriving in Marseille on 28 May 1916, Billy marched into Étaples (pronounced Eh-Tar-Play), the New Zealand Infantry Base Depot⁶. All New Zealand troops on their way to France and Belgium were required to go through a short, intensive training course here.

On 11 June 1916, a bout of illness sees Billy spending 6 weeks at the Segregation Camp⁷ located at Étaples. The Segregation Camp was a quarantine camp to ward off the spread of infectious disease. Recovered, Billy joins the 2nd Infantry Brigade (New Zealand Division) on the front-line near Armentières, northern France on 28 July 1916 and is posted 'on strength' to the New Zealand Machine Gun Corps.

The New Zealand Division was sent to the Flanders region to gain experience of new trench conditions, they spent the next three months guarding a 'quiet' sector of the line at Armentières before moving south to the Somme battlefields and their first large-scale action on the Western Front.

Machine Gunners

Machine guns were important weapons during the First World War, capable of rapidly discharging large numbers of rounds at advancing enemy forces.

Learning from experiences at Gallipoli, the New Zealand Expeditionary Force underwent a reorganisation early 1916. In part, the reorganisation recognised the importance of the machine gun and its use in modern-day warfare. Accordingly, a stand-alone New Zealand Machine Gun Corps was formed to increase the establishment of machine guns, organise personnel, and importantly organise the 'specialist' training required.

Initially men were sent from the battalions and regiments to a machine gun school that had been established at Cairo. As these men were passed efficient, they were posted to the new corps. When the New Zealand Division arrived in France (April 1916), the New Zealand Machine Gun Depot was established at Belton Park near Grantham, Lincolnshire in England, and a base depot was also located at Camiers in France. The average time spent at Belton Park in training was seventy days.

Billy's service records do not indicate where he received his 'specialist' training – there is no record of him being at Belton Park or Camiers preceding the time he was posted to the New Zealand Machine Gun Corps. It is assumed that he received his 'specialist' training whilst he was in Egypt⁸ (4 April 1916 to 20 May 1916).

⁵ The majority of the New Zealand Division (over 20,000 troops) were transported from Egypt to France during April 1916.

⁶ The No.27 or General NZ Infantry Base Depot Étaples is located on the northern French coast, just south of Boulogne.

⁷ Étaples is often recognised as the site where the Spanish flu epidemic took root among soldiers in France.

⁸ *"The companies were soon in full training, and much useful work was accomplished on the desert training ground at Moascar, which permitted of every form of practice from section drill to field firing. This continued until 5 April 1916, when the Division entrained for Alexandria, to sail for France".*

Active Service

Campaigns involved: Somme 1916; Passchendaele 1917; Spring Offensive and Advance to Victory 1918.

As a machine gunner, Billy moved around in support of the Division as battles dictated or as required. He is known to have been 'attached' (loaned out) to several regiments at various times, including the 2nd Battalion Auckland Infantry Regiment (2/AIR) and 1st Battalion Otago Infantry Regiment (1/OIR). Billy's home regiment remained the New Zealand Machine Gun Corp – No.1 Company.

By August 1916, No.1 Company were in L'EpINETTE (a subsector of trenches near Armentieres) when Billy joined them. The second week of August saw the Brigade on the move to prepare for the resumption of the great Somme offensive on the 15 September 1916. It was here that his brother, Gregory, was wounded on 19 September 1916 (the details of which are unknown, although did not appear serious).

Gregory's woes did not end there. On 20 October 1916 he was again admitted to hospital [Hornchurch in England – the New Zealand Convalescent Hospital] after suffering from varicose veins. He was discharged on 20 December 1916 and sent to the Command Depot at Codford to be "hardened" for further active service training, the first stage on his return journey to the trenches.

It is at Codford, for circumstances unknown, that Billy had a chance meet up with Gregory. Having a good time together, away from the stresses of the battlefield, they got into a spot of trouble. They may have gone on a bender as both were charged AWOL (absent without leave) on 4 January 1917 to 8 January 1917 and required to forfeit 5 days' pay.

1917 saw Billy in and out of hospital with sickness including Rubella (a virus also known as German Measles). On 2 September 1917 he was appointed Lance-Corporal. With his hospitalisation, he largely missed the major battles at Messines and Passchendaele. On Christmas Eve 1917, Billy rejoined his unit [No.1 Coy NZMGC] at the new Divisional front at Polygon Wood (Ypres in Belgium). The weather was showery, and snow fell all the afternoon.

On 3 January 1918, an enemy aircraft were busy over their lines [directing German shelling]. Twenty machine guns, on anti-aircraft mountings, poured a heavy fire against the plane, which suddenly burst into flames. This was the one and only aircraft that the New Zealand Machine Gun Corps 'claimed' to have been brought down by its guns – Billy was possibly involved in this skirmish.

Billy was promoted to Lance Corporal on 1 March 1918 whilst on leave to England. On 15 March 1918 he rejoins his unit at Polygon Wood, but the New Zealand Division is soon rushed south to help check a fresh German advance (the German Offensive) at their old haunts, the Somme⁹, in northern France. The Otago Company was the last to entrain for the Somme, arriving on 26 March 1918.

The New Zealand Division quickly established their defences here which proved to be very effective. German advances were repeatedly repulsed, a captured officer was questioned as to the failure of the attack and replied that the main cause was the intensity of the machine gun barrage. By June 1918, the New Zealand Division was relieved, and the Otago Company were stationed at Château de la Haie Switch.

The morale of the German Army had been rudely shaken by the failure of their 'grand offensive' and cracks began to show in their resilience. Allied forces went on the offensive over the next 5 months with Billy being involved in many battles, including the Advance to Bapaume (20 August 1918 to 15 September 1918); the Battle of Cambrai and the Hindenburg Line (28 September 1918 to 15 October 1918); and the Battle of the Selle River (18 October 1918 to 3 November 1918).

⁹ An area between Hamel and Puisieux-au-Mont - the Pas-de-Calais department in the Hauts-de-France region of France.

On 30 August 1918 Billy was promoted to Sergeant.

By 13 October 1918 the Battalion was concentrated at Esnes for reorganisation and rest. The weather was good, this break was highlighted by a visit from H.R.H. the Prince of Wales (future King Edward VIII – who abdicated his throne in 1936). By the end of October 1918, the Allied Armies had made phenomenal progress, and the Final Battle of the War (4 November 1918 to 11 November 1918) was about to take place.

Gallantry

Billy was awarded the Military Medal on 28 February 1919 for act of gallantry in the field on 5 November 1918.



The Military Medal was established in 1916, with retrospective application to 1914, and was awarded to other ranks for "acts of gallantry and devotion to duty under fire". Junior Officers were awarded the equivalent, the Military Cross.

His act of gallantry occurred at Forêt de Mormal, a forest in France near the Franco-Belgian border 11km south of the French town of Le Quesnoy¹⁰ [pronounced Le-Ken-Wa]. The location and date has special significance in New Zealand's military history. Famously on 4 November 1918, the New

Zealand Division liberated Le Quesnoy which was the last major action by the New Zealanders in the Great War.

This period, referred to as the Final Battle of the War¹¹, heavily involved the New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion (Auckland, Otago, and Canterbury Companies) by supporting the advance of infantry regiments. It is understood that Billy was attached to the 1st Otago Infantry Regiment at this time. Billy's act of gallantry occurred the day after the liberation of Le Quesnoy and was part of a continued push eastward by the New Zealand Division.

Billy's citation¹² reads as follows:

On the 5th of November 1918 during the advance through the FORÊT de MORMAL, this N.C.O. had command of two machine guns which were ordered forward with the attacking Infantry. This necessitated the passing of cross-roads which at the time were under heavy enemy shell fire. With great bravery this Sergeant led his men forward and in spite of the loss of three mules, which necessitated the manhandling of the guns, he successfully kept touch with the advancing Infantry, and was able to materially assist in the success of operations. It was undoubtedly his boldness and initiative that overcome the difficulties and inspired the men to follow his lead.

After the War

Billy returned home seven months after the war had ended and spent some time in Germany as part of the occupying force.

The Battalion was preparing to leave Le Quesnoy at the hour on which hostilities ceased (11.00 a.m. on 11 November 1918), destination Beauvois, northern France. Billy was granted 11 days leave and rejoined his unit on 26 November 1918.

¹⁰ Le Quesnoy is a walled mediaeval fortress town in north-east of France. It had endured four hard years of occupation and was liberated (without loss of life to civilian inhabitants) by elements of the 3rd (New Zealand) Rifle Brigade.

¹¹ With the Machine Gunners in France and Palestine, Chapter XV — The Final Battle Of The War — Period 4th November 1918 to 11th November 1918, p164-170, <https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH1-Mach.html>.

¹² "Roache, William - 13/3130, M.M. Sergeant, NZ Machine Gun Bn, L.G. 20 Aug 1919, P10586 (Recommendation 3412)

The cessation of hostilities did not mean a cessation of discipline and work, and the Battalion soon found itself on the move again, commencing their march into Germany on 28 November 1918 destination Mülheim, Cologne (with the New Zealand Division as part of the Army of Occupation).

The first batch of homegoers left the Battalion on 24 December 1918. Thereafter throughout the following months homeward drafts left the Battalion until at last the whole of the New Zealand Division was back in England patiently awaiting its return to far-off New Zealand.



Billy's service medals: Military Medal, 1914-1918 British War Medal, and Victory Medal

Billy embarked for New Zealand from Liverpool on 11 May 1919 on the troop transport *Northumberland*. He served a total of 3 years and 205 days (3 years and 72 days overseas) and was officially discharged on 7 June 1919. For this service he was awarded the British War Medal and Victory Medal to go with his gallantry medal.

Back home, Billy returned to work as a shepherd on his family farm at Brunswick.

In 1924 Billy married Euphemia Hannah (Effie) MORGAN. They had two daughters, Kathleen Gertrude ROACHE (1925-2005) and Leonie Mary ROACHE (1927-2019). In 1928, the family came to live at 'Roseville' when Bill became farm manager for the W.E. MORGAN Estate¹³.

In 1947 the W.E. MORGAN Estate was acquired by the government for the rehabilitation of soldiers returning from World War 2. Billy remained as farm manager for a further three years while the property was subdivided and developed. A 'soldiers' ballot for the farm took place in February 1950.

This ended an association of 89 years by the MORGAN family at Newtonlees.

Billy continued farming until his retirement circa 1962. He was known as a very brave, quiet, unassuming man. He passed away on 12 April 1971 aged 77 years and is buried at Aramoho Cemetery, Wanganui. His wife Effie died in 1980.

¹³ My great grandfather – the estate farms included Roseville and Newtonlees.

References

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William Michael ROACHE

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Armentières and the Battle of the Somme

[The Battle of the Somme - 1916: Armentières and the Battle of the Somme | NZHistory, New Zealand history online](#)

Book: BILL AND EFFIE ROACHE, Lakes District of Wanganui, Marie White, The Print Place (reprinted 1997), pages 30-31, ISBN 0-473-01016-X.