

Geraldine man seeks name change for fallen forebears

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Alexander Worner



George Worner



Alfred Worner

For Nathan Worner, finding information about relatives killed in World War I began to resemble the plot of a movie.

Brothers George, Alexander and Alfred Worner were all born in Geraldine before the turn of the 20th century. All three died within two months of each other in Belgium's notorious Flanders Fields.

Their mother, Florence, must have wondered what she'd done to deserve such terrible luck. Her husband, Fredrick Worner, had a butcher's shop on the corner of Talbot and Wilson Streets. He died in 1899 at the age of 37. The following year, six-year-old daughter Jessie died of burns. Then, in 1917, George and Alexander were killed at Passchendaele and Alfred was killed at Messines.

All this, while tragic, seems quite straightforward. However, Nathan's search has been hindered by the fact that Alexander and Alfred changed their names to enlist for war.

It seems the Army was reluctant to send brothers away to war. So, when Alexander enlisted after George, he changed the spelling of his surname to Warner. When Alfred enlisted he was under 18, so he lied about his age and used his mother's maiden name, Helem.

Since 1917, Passchendaele has been a byword for the horror of the Great War. The name conjures images of a shattered landscape of mud, shell craters and barbed wire, and of helpless soldiers mown down by machine-guns and artillery.

The capture of the Belgian village of Passchendaele, near Ypres in Flanders, became an objective that cost the lives of thousands of people, including many New Zealanders. In terms of lives lost, the ridge leading to the village was the site of the worst disaster in New Zealand's history since 1840.

Many New Zealand families suffered multiple tragedies at Passchendaele. The 1,176 names on the Memorial to the Missing at Tyne Cot Cemetery, where most of the

New Zealand dead from the Passchendaele attacks are commemorated, include at least five sets of two brothers.

However, there is only one documented case where three brothers were killed: the Newloves of Blenheim. Nathan would like to rectify this.

Nathan flies Boeing 777s for Air New Zealand. Recently, on a four-day stopover in England, he travelled to Europe and visited the sites of some of these historic battles. He also went to the cemeteries to try to locate his dead relatives.

While the three Worner brothers are buried in unmarked graves, Nathan found them listed on the memorial, but under the names Worner, Warner and Helem.

Now Nathan is in contact with the New Zealand Army High Command to see if the name changes can be reversed. Then the three brothers can rest in peace under the right name and get the recognition they rightfully deserve.

Lindsay Nelson