

Remembering the sacrifices of those with SC connections who served their country 100 years ago.

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By Teresa Scott

Private Leslie John WILLIAMS, No.10/3125

Leslie John Williams, the son of John Alexander and Eleanor (née Hambleton) Williams, was born on 18 February 1896 at Dunedin. He was educated at George Street School, Dunedin, and at Waimataitai School after the family moved to Timaru in 1903. Leslie won an award for Proficiency in Standard III in 1903; and again in 1906. He was one of many ex-pupils whose names appeared on the Waimataitai School Roll of Honour drawn up in August 1915. In October 1912 at the Timaru Technical School, L. J. Williams was awarded a certificate for English; and in October 1913 he passed Commercial English, 2nd Class.

The family suffered a big loss when their father, a Timaru Post Office employee, died on 21 December 1912 at Timaru. He had a keen interest in the Boy Scout movement. In May 1914 as a distributor in the telegraph office Leslie was transferred from Timaru to Wellington on promotion. By 1915 he was a telegraphist at the Martinborough Post Office, having been appointed to the position of cadet there in March. His widowed mother, who was his next-of-kin, was still living in Timaru.

Leslie had been serving for some years in the Post and Telegraph Corps and had registered for compulsory military training at Timaru. At the outbreak of war he was engaged on duty at local forts. On enlisting in June 1915, he was only 19 years old, though he gave his age as 20 and his birth year as 1895. Leslie weighed only 116 pounds and had a chest expansion of 29½-32½ inches, but he was otherwise in good health. His medical examination report noted – “This man is rather under weight but a few weeks training will help him to put it on.” He was one of the Wairarapa men who left for Trentham camp in early June 1915. While in camp he was admitted to the Racecourse Hospital with measles and subsequently granted a week’s sick leave.

He embarked on 9 October 1915 with the Seventh Reinforcements, a private in the Wellington Infantry Battalion. He joined his Battalion in January 1916 and embarked for France on 6 April. The next news of Private Leslie John Williams came in Casualty List No 422 - to the effect that he had been killed in action on 16 September 1916 at the Somme, France. One of 178 reported killed in action in the 422nd casualty list issued on the night of 6 October 1916. Les was killed near Flers in the morning of 16 September while on duty with a Company attacking the enemy trenches. He was buried nearby in a corner of the village of Flers, together with other New Zealanders, a chaplain reading the service and his comrades erecting a rough cross. At this time his older brother Herbert Ralph Williams, who also served in World War One, was in camp preparing to leave with the 18th Reinforcements. Leslie was killed in France on the same day as his cousin Charles Leslie Hutchinson.

He was remembered in an In Memoriam notice in the Timaru Herald of 15 September 1917.

“But youth's fair form, though fallen, is over fair.
And beautiful in death the boy appears.
The hero boy that dies in blooming years:
In man's regret he lives, and woman's tears.
More sacred than in life, and lovelier far,
For having perished in the front of war.”

Leslie's younger brother Norman (born in 1899) left Timaru on 29 January 1918 on his way to the Duntroon Military Training College in Australia. Leslie's medals (1914-15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal) were sent to his mother, as were the plaque and scroll. He left a will, drawn up on 29 July 1915, appointing his mother as sole executrix and trustee and naming her as the beneficiary of the moneys from his insurance policy and superannuation fund.

Included with the probate is a letter addressed to “My dear Mrs Williams” from Charles E. Reid, “In the Trenches” and dated 14 October 1916. Reid was a Lieutenant attached to Private Williams' Wellington Infantry Regiment. His father was a lifetime friend of Leslie's late father, and he would send messages via Les to members of the Williams family who were his own friends. “. . . it is with deep feeling – how deep I cannot express – that I write these lines to give you what particulars I can” he writes. “He (Private Williams) was the youngest I think in the Section and was one of the most popular – a good soldier, cheerful, hard worker, and as brave as anyone could wish. No words of mine can express how the boys miss him – that is those who are left – and we suffered heavily. . . . We can only hope that in the midst of your grief you will be proud to think that Les lived his life as God had ordained and died for what he considered his duty – the cause for which we are all fighting.”

Leslie John Williams is remembered on the Caterpillar Valley (New Zealand) Memorial, Caterpillar Valley Cemetery, Longueval, Somme, France, and on the Timaru War Memorial Wall, the Waimataitai School War Memorial, and the Martinborough First World War Memorial.

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