

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

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Rifleman Timothy Joseph Breen, No.21778

Timothy Joseph Breen, known as Tim to the family, was the eldest son and one of a nine children born to John and Mary (née Lynch) Breen, of Levels. He was born on 9 February 1893 at Timaru and baptised on 14 February at St Joseph's Catholic Church, Temuka. John Breen hailed from County Kerry, Ireland, while Mary Lynch was born in London, England. With two older sisters, Catherine (Katie, Kitty) and Hannah (Annie), and his brother William (Bill), he attended Seadown School before transferring to the St Joseph's Convent School at Kerrytown. Breen Road at Levels is named for this family. Young Tim met with success in the ploughing match held at Washdyke in late August 1911 for competitors from all parts of South Canterbury, when he finished in third place for Class D, plain ploughing, for youths under 19 years.

Timothy Joseph Breen, a 23-year-old farm hand at Levels, enlisted in May 1916. While on final leave from Featherston camp, in mid July 1916, Private T. Breen was one of those treated to a send-off in the Washdyke Hall. This was the first function arranged by the recently formed representative committee at the Levels for the purpose of farewelling local volunteers and giving them a fitting reception on their return. They were presented a handsome set of ebony military hair brushes and a sovereign belt to each of the soldiers, who responded in brief and patriotic speeches. A most enjoyable social evening followed, with music, solos, recitations, dancing, and a plentiful supply of refreshments. Private T. Breen and Trooper D. Brosnahan left by the second express on the Saturday following. A large number of Levels friends gathered at the station and gave the departing soldiers three hearty cheers, as the train moved off.

Although of quite small build (standing at only 5 feet 2 inches and weighing 126 pounds), Timothy was in good physical condition, although he had previously been rejected as being 33% unfit. He named his mother as next-of-kin. At Featherston Camp he had a stay in hospital, with influenza. With the 7th Reinforcements, 3rd Battalion, he embarked on 21 August 1916 from Wellington on the Mokoia, destined for Plymouth, England. At Sling in October he was posted to the Rifle Brigade, with the rank of Rifleman, before proceeding overseas. Suffering from tonsillitis in May 1917, he was evacuated to hospital. On 12 June 1917 he was wounded - gassed - and admitted to hospital, as reported in Casualty List 614. A week later he rejoined his unit. The next report - a very long casualty list - was the last. Rifleman Timothy Joseph Breen, 21 778, of Levels, died of wounds on the 12 October 1917 in Belgium

("somewhere in France"), aged 24 years. In fact, he died at Passchendaele, when he was hit in the stomach and died on his way down. The informant saw him wounded and heard of his death from the stretcher-bearer. He is buried in the Tyne Cot Cemetery at Zonnebeke, another victim of the Passchendaele tragedy.

Two excerpts from letters written home by Tim have been deciphered from the now very fragile and faded pencil-written pages -

"Dear Mother

Just a few lines to let you know that I received your most welcome parcel alright. The cake was very nice but it was very funny about the cigarettes. The rats put a hole in my pocket and took them away the night I got them, but I had one packet smoked. Tell Bill that I have given some smokes to Hughie Brosnahan.....

I heard that Tim Breen from Kerrytown had been to Ireland to see relatives. I think I will be going on leave to England in two months' time. I think I will go to Ireland and Scotland and have a look around. I wish I had Dad's address when he was in Ireland as I could go there and see some of his people."

"Dear Mother please make sure that you have access to my bank account if anything happens to me.

Your loving son

Tim"

His medals – British War Medal and Victory Medal – were sent to his mother, while the plaque and scroll were sent to his father. Timothy Joseph Breen is commemorated on the Timaru War Memorial Wall, the Washdyke War Memorial and the Timaru Sacred Heart Basilica Memorial. And he is also remembered on a stone in the Temuka Cemetery, the burial site of his sisters Mary and Julia, and later of his brother William John.

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