

Private James Oliver Bringans (1897–1918):

A South Canterbury Soldier and Victim of the HMNZT Tahiti Influenza Disaster



Fig. 1 James Oliver Bringans¹

Military Service Summary	
Service No.	78548
Unit	A Company, 40 th Reinforcements, NZ Expeditionary Force
Previous Service	2 nd South Canterbury Regiment
Birth	26 October 1897, Ashburton
Occupation	Farmer
Embarked	10 July 1918
Troopship	HMNZT 107 Tahiti
Died	6 September 1918
Cause of Death	Influenza
Burial	At Sea

James Oliver Bringans was born in Ashburton, Canterbury, New Zealand, on 26 October 1897. He was the fifth child and second son of Alexander Bringans and Mary Oliver. Although christened James Oliver, he was known throughout his life as Oliver, or more affectionately as "Olly" to family and friends.

Oliver grew up in a large farming family during a period when rural New Zealand was still developing its identity as a young nation. By about 1915, the Bringans family had settled at Waituna near Waimate in South Canterbury, where Oliver worked alongside his father on the family farm. Like many young men of his generation, he was accustomed to physical labour, responsibility, and the rhythms of rural life. Those who knew him remembered him as dependable, hardworking, and well-liked.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Oliver was still a teenager. As the war continued and casualty lists lengthened, increasing numbers of young New Zealand men volunteered for service overseas. Before enlisting in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, Oliver had already been serving with the 2nd South Canterbury Regiment. At the age of twenty, he decided to join the thousands of New Zealanders who had volunteered for service abroad.

Oliver attested for military service on 26 November 1917. His military records show that he stood 5 feet 7½ inches tall, weighed 145 pounds, and had brown hair, grey eyes, and a fresh complexion. A medical examination conducted in late October or early November 1917 identified only a slight weakness in his left eye, a condition considered too minor to prevent active service. His official military service commenced on 29 April 1918 when he was required to report to the Drill Shed, Waimate between 1200 and 1300 hours from where he would proceed to camp.

Like many recruits destined for overseas service, Oliver underwent training at Trentham Military Camp near Wellington. The camp, one of New Zealand's principal training centres during the war, temporarily housed thousands of soldiers preparing for service overseas.

¹ Image. Photograph. BRINGANS, James Oliver Military Portrait. circa June 1918. Crown Studio, Wellington. Private Collection: Julie Buist, Katikati, New Zealand.

Accommodation was basic, and many recruits found the adjustment from civilian life challenging.

Fortunately, several letters Oliver wrote to his older sister Hope, survived, providing a rare glimpse into his personality and experiences during this period. While official records document dates, movements, and medical details, Oliver's letters reveal the everyday realities of military life and the observations of a young man preparing to leave New Zealand for the first time.

One of his earliest impressions concerned the food. Writing to Hope, he complained that "the tucker was simply rotten."² Perhaps camp meals compared poorly with the home cooking he had recently left behind. As time passed, however, he appears to have become more accustomed to camp life and its routines.

Upon arriving in Wellington, Oliver and several other recruits were left at the railway station to supervise and load soldiers' equipment onto transport wagons. Their delayed arrival at camp meant they had to find accommodation wherever space was available. He had hoped to share a tent with a friend named Andrew, possibly his cousin Andrew Dewar Bringans, but circumstances separated them. Despite this disappointment, Oliver reported that he had found "decent" tent mates and settled in reasonably well.



Fig 2: Oliver (2nd right back row) with his tent mates at Trentham³

Church services were held in the grandstand at the racecourse where the men were camped. The opportunity to sit comfortably during worship appears to have been appreciated. Visitors were frequently allowed into camp to observe military life, something Oliver noted could make it difficult to finish writing letters.

The surviving correspondence also shows how soldiers filled their leisure hours while awaiting embarkation. During a weekend in Wellington, Oliver and Andrew unsuccessfully applied for extended leave to visit Olly's sister, Evie and instead made the most of their time in the city. They attended a social evening at the YMCA, visited the Wellington Zoo, and spent Sunday evening at St Andrew's Church, where a supper and sing-song were provided

² Bringans, James Oliver (1917) Letter to sister Isabella Hope Bringans. Topic: Thanks for birthday wishes and gift plus his enlistment update. 4 November. Private Collection: Julie Buist, Katikati, New Zealand.

³ Images. Photograph. Oliver Bringans and his Tent Mates, Trentham Camp. circa April 1918. Unknown. Private collection Julie Buist, Katikati, New Zealand.

for the soldiers after the service. Oliver clearly relished the brief escape from camp routine, describing the weekend as "a real good time."⁴

Comforts that would have seemed ordinary in civilian life took on new significance. When the Soldiers' Hostel was full, the men found accommodation in a private boarding house that catered for servicemen on weekend leave. Oliver delighted in describing their large room, complete with a double bed, spring mattress, white quilt and armchairs—luxuries compared with camp conditions. "Who wouldn't be a soldier?" he joked after recounting the experience.

Like many servicemen, Oliver devoted much of his spare time to correspondence. He wrote regularly to family members and friends, often spending afternoons penning letters while waiting for tea. He remarked that he had "quite a lot of letter writing to do" and relied on Andrew's company to break up the monotony. These letters reveal a young man who remained closely connected to home, balancing military duties with the ordinary concerns, friendships, and family relationships that continued to shape his life even as he prepared to leave New Zealand.

By mid-1918, Oliver's training was complete. He was assigned to A Company of the 40th Reinforcements, one of the final large reinforcement drafts sent overseas by New Zealand before the end of the war.

On 10 July 1918, the 40th Reinforcements embarked from Wellington aboard HMNZT 107 Tahiti.



Figure 3. H.M.N.Z.T Tahiti with troops on board circa 1915⁵

The ship left the wharf at 1.55 p.m. and finally sailed at 5.00 p.m. Among those who farewelled Oliver before departure was his sister Hope. Neither could have known that this would be their final meeting.

⁴ Bringans, James Oliver (1917) Letter to sister Isabella Hope Bringans. Topic: A weekend out in Wellington town. 17 June. Private Collection: Julie Buist, Katikati, New Zealand

⁵ Image. Photograph. H.M.N.Z.T Tahiti with troops on board alongside wharf. c1915. Aldersley, David James. Collection: Dickie, John 1869-1942: Collection of postcards, prints and negatives. ½-016377-G. National Library of New Zealand, Wellington. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22777905> : accessed 1 June 2026

The *Tahiti* carried 1,109 troops and 108 crew members. Command of the troops rested with Lieutenant-Colonel R. C. Allen. The ship's destination was Plymouth, England, with scheduled stops at Cape Town and Freetown, Sierra Leone. If all went according to plan, the voyage would conclude on 10 September 1918.

Oliver also had a personal reason to look forward to reaching England. His brother Alex who had left New Zealand with the Main Body in 1914, was stationed there, and the prospect of a reunion after years apart must have been an exciting one.

The early weeks of the voyage were marked by discomfort rather than danger. Many soldiers suffered severe seasickness. One contemporary observer described conditions as men being "packed in like sardines."⁶ During rough weather, sickness seemed to be everywhere—on floors, tables, seats, and even eating utensils. For many soldiers, simply reaching the deck before becoming ill proved impossible.

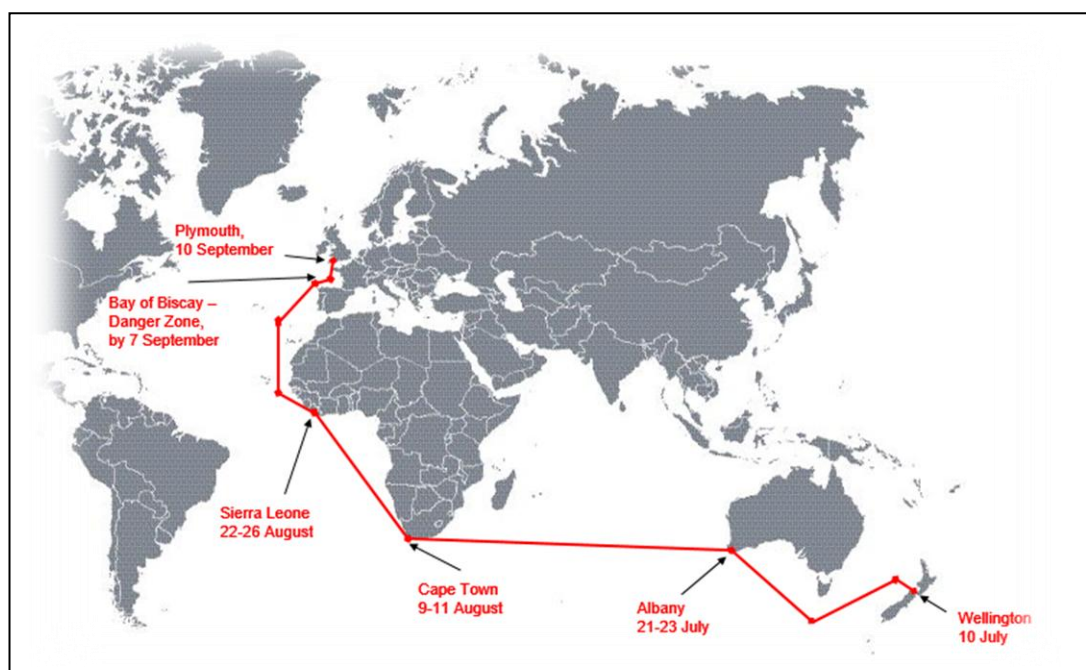


Figure 4: Route of H.M.N.Z.T. 107 *Tahiti* 1918 Voyage^{1,1} Map courtesy of *Freedesignfile*.⁷

Despite the cramped conditions, morale generally remained good. Food during the early stages of the voyage was reported to be plentiful and of reasonable quality. A ship's band provided entertainment and accompanied church services. Such activities helped relieve the monotony of life at sea.

There was, however, disappointment when troops were denied shore leave at Albany, Western Australia. Consequently, many men remained aboard for nearly a month before finally being allowed ashore at Cape Town.

For Oliver, Cape Town proved to be one of the highlights of the voyage.

⁶ Hansen, John. (2012) *A Soldier's Diary Pvt. Marcus Christian Hansen (Rifleman) Regt. No. 74744 Company: SPEC 40th Reinforcements 1918/19*. <http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C112236#documents> : accessed 8 February 2016. [Includes a transcript of the diary from 10 July 1918 to 21 September 1919].

⁷ Freedesignfile. *Free EPS file simple world maps vector 05 download*. <http://freedesignfile.com/139591-simple-world-maps-vector-material-05/> : accessed 13 June 2016.

On Friday 9 August and Saturday 10 August 1918, he spent time exploring the city. Writing to Hope shortly after the Tahiti departed Cape Town, Oliver expressed genuine enthusiasm about his brief visit.⁸ He reported that the soldiers had thoroughly enjoyed themselves but regretted that their stay had been so short. Two or three additional days, he felt, would have allowed them to see much more. He hoped he might have the good luck to return some day....

The hospitality extended to New Zealand soldiers made a lasting impression. A "Visiting Soldiers' Welcoming Committee" had rooms where they provided free meals and refreshments, a stark contrast to the experience at Albany where troops had not been permitted ashore at all.

Oliver particularly regretted missing the opportunity to visit the former residence and grounds of Cecil Rhodes. Soldiers travelling by tram toward the site were reportedly turned back because military personnel were not permitted near certain areas of the city. Instead, Oliver and his companions visited Camp Bay for a swim. He described the tram ride as one of the finest he had ever experienced.

His letters also reveal the casual language and attitudes of the period. He described bargaining with local traders for oranges and noted that fruit was among the few inexpensive (relative to New Zealand) items available. Such comments provide insight into the perspectives of a young New Zealander encountering unfamiliar cultures and environments during wartime.

Following their departure from Cape Town, everyday shipboard duties resumed. On 12 August Oliver was assigned to steward's fatigue duty with seven other soldiers. Together they peeled large quantities of potatoes, melons, and onions for the ship's kitchens. Rather than complaining, Oliver took satisfaction in the work and noted that the task was not nearly as unpleasant as some men claimed.

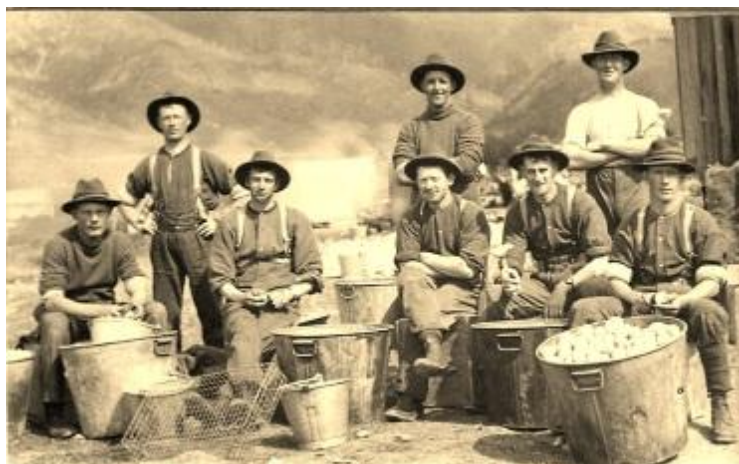


Figure 5: Soldiers on steward's fatigue duty.⁹

His final additions to the letter were written on 18 August. It would be the last letter his sister ever received from him.

⁸ Bringans, James Oliver. (1918) Letter to sister Isabella 'Hope' BRINGANS. Topic: Mainly describing shore leave in Cape Town. 11-18 August. Private Collection: Julie Buist, Katikati, New Zealand.

⁹ Images. Photograph. Soldier's on fatigue duty. Alex Bringans -middle, back row. circa April 1914. Unknown. Private collection Julie Buist, Katikati, New Zealand.

A few days later, events took a tragic turn.

On 22 August 1918, the Tahiti arrived at Freetown, Sierra Leone, where it joined a convoy assembling for the final leg of the journey to England. Reports indicated that fever was prevalent in the area, and strict quarantine measures prevented troops and crew from going ashore. Nevertheless, local labourers boarded the ship to load coal.

At approximately the same time, officers and wireless operators from ships in the convoy attended meetings aboard HMS Mantua. Unknown to those involved, the Mantua had recently experienced an outbreak of influenza and is now considered one of the most likely sources of infection within the convoy.

The Tahiti departed Sierra Leone on 26 August.

That same day, soldiers began entering the ship's hospital.

Within three days, more than 700 people had become ill. Over the following weeks, influenza spread to more than 1,000 of the 1,217 people aboard. Medical supplies quickly ran low. At first some believed they were dealing with an unfamiliar tropical fever, perhaps associated with conditions in Africa. The reality was far worse.

The ship had encountered the deadly second wave of the 1918 influenza pandemic.

Within a week of the first cases appearing, deaths began to occur.

Official investigations conducted after the voyage attempted to determine why the Tahiti suffered such catastrophic losses. Medical officers examined questions of overcrowding, accommodation, ventilation, sanitation, medical staffing, and supplies. The ship had originally been designed to carry approximately 650 passengers and crew, yet more than 1,200 people were aboard during the voyage. Wartime shipping shortages had made such overcrowding common, but it severely limited opportunities to isolate sick men once the epidemic began.

Researchers have also suggested that sleeping arrangements may have contributed to the high mortality rate. Unlike some troopships where men slept in hammocks, sections of the Tahiti contained enclosed cabins fitted with bunks. Poor ventilation within these spaces may have increased the likelihood of infection. Mortality rates were notably higher among groups known to have occupied cabin accommodation.

Yet official reports tell only part of the story.

Personal diaries and survivor accounts reveal the human reality behind the statistics. Soldiers described increasingly crowded hospital facilities, mounting fear as illness spread through the ship, shortages of medicine, and the relentless succession of funerals. The ship's band ceased playing as its members themselves became ill. Ordinary routines disappeared as healthy men were increasingly required to assist the sick and dying.

Marcus Christian Hansen, a member of the 40th Reinforcements, recorded the unfolding disaster in his diary. On 5 September he noted that forty-two burials had already taken place, commenting that such losses were hardly surprising when "human beings were herded together the way they have been on this boat."¹⁰

¹⁰ Hansen (2012) *Op.cit.* 5 September 1918

The following day the total reached fifty-nine. One of those fifty-nine was James Oliver Bringans.

Oliver died on 6 September 1918, only four days before the *Tahiti* reached England. He was twenty years old.

Like many of those who died during the outbreak, he was buried at sea.

Years later, survivor Sergeant Clifford Hingston vividly recalled the burial ceremonies. Officers read the burial service while bodies were committed to the ocean. Initially, the dead were sewn into canvas burial bags. From about 6 September, as supplies depleted, hammocks were used instead. Survivors remembered the distressing sight of bodies slipping from the hammocks before reaching the water and sharks circling beneath the ship. Even decades later, Hingston remained deeply affected by what he had witnessed.

Family tradition records that Oliver's brother Alex travelled to meet the ship on its arrival in England, only to discover that his brother had died days earlier. While this story cannot be conclusively verified, it is certainly plausible. At the time Alex was stationed at Sling Camp on Salisbury Plain, within travelling distance of Plymouth.

News of Oliver's death devastated his family.

Condolence letters sent to his sister Hope reveal the high regard in which he was held. One correspondent described him as "one boy in a thousand."¹¹ Again and again, family and friends expressed disbelief that a young man who had successfully completed his training and crossed half the world should die before ever reaching the battlefield.

The esteem in which Oliver was held was further demonstrated by a memorial service held in his honour on 2 October 1918. The service took place during an evening gathering in the Waituna Schoolroom and was attended by members of the local community. Reporting on the occasion, the *Otago Daily Times* noted that Oliver had been a member of the Waituna Bible Class and that he was "universally liked and respected".¹² The service provided an opportunity for family, friends, and neighbours to remember a young man whose life had been cut tragically short far from home.

His death occurred only weeks before the influenza pandemic swept through New Zealand itself. Between October and December 1918, approximately 8,600 New Zealanders died during the epidemic—almost half the number of New Zealand military personnel killed throughout the entire war.

For the Bringans family, the loss was intensely personal. Their sister Janet, known as Evie, wrote of the impact Oliver's death had upon the family. Their father had relied heavily upon him on the farm, while their mother was heartbroken by the loss of her son. Oliver had shared a particularly close relationship with his younger brothers, George Douglas ("Dougie") and John Lennox ("Lennie"). Evie recalled that Lennie "was not particular who he fell out with so long as Olly and he were friends."¹³

¹¹ Min. (1918) Letter to Isabella 'Hope' BRINGANS. Topic: Condolences on death of Olly Bringans. 16 September. Private Collection: Julie Buist, Katikati, New Zealand.

¹² *Otago Daily Times*. (1918). Personal. Memorial Service for BRINGANS, Private J. 5 October. P. 10e. PapersPast. *Otago Daily Times* 1861-1950. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ODT19181005.2.73> : accessed 1 June 2026.

¹³ Aldridge, Janet 'Evie'. (1918). Letter to Isabella 'Hope' BRINGANS. Topic: Condolences on death of Olly Bringans. Tuesday (possibly 17 September). Private Collection: Julie Buist, Katikati, New Zealand.

At the time of Oliver's death, Evie was approximately six months pregnant. When her son was born in December 1918, she and her husband Ben Aldridge named him James Oliver in memory of the brother they had lost.

Although Oliver never reached the battlefields of Europe, his story forms part of one of the most significant tragedies experienced by New Zealand forces during the First World War. The influenza outbreak aboard HMNZT Tahiti claimed the lives of dozens of soldiers and remains one of the most devastating maritime epidemics in New Zealand history.

More than a century after his death, Oliver Bringans is remembered not simply as one of the victims of the Tahiti influenza disaster, but as a son, brother, farmer and soldier whose surviving letters allow us to glimpse the life behind the casualty record. The words written by a grieving friend in September 1918 still provide perhaps the most fitting epitaph:

"One boy in a thousand."

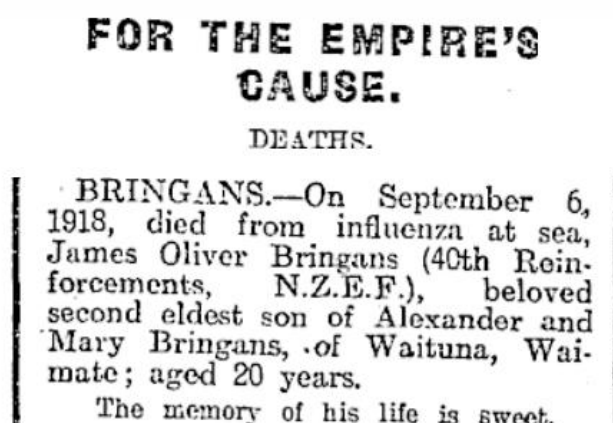


Figure 6: Death Announcement James Oliver BRINGANS¹⁴

Acknowledgement

The research upon which this biography is based originated from a dissertation completed by Julie Buist in 2016 for a Post Graduate Diploma in Genealogical, Palaeographic and Heraldic Studies. Additional family records and correspondence have been incorporated to present a biographical account of James Oliver Bringans and his experience aboard HMNZT Tahiti.

¹⁴ Death Announcement. (1918) *Otago Daily Times*. 19 September. BRINGANS, James Oliver. p.4c.
<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ODT19180919.2.22> : accessed 1 June 2026.

Sources and Historical Notes

Sources

This biography draws upon a combination of family papers, military records, contemporary accounts, and later historical research.

Primary sources include surviving correspondence written by James Oliver Bringans to his sister Hope Bringans during his military training and voyage aboard HMNZT 107 Tahiti, family and friends correspondence written following notification of his death, his New Zealand military personnel file, contemporary diaries kept by members of the 40th Reinforcements, official reports relating to the influenza epidemic aboard HMNZT Tahiti, and oral history recollections of survivors.

Particular use has been made of the diary of Marcus Christian Hansen, survivor accounts recorded by Clifford Hingston, official Court of Enquiry records, and documents held by Archives New Zealand, the Alexander Turnbull Library, the National Army Museum, and the Auckland War Memorial Museum Online Cenotaph.

Secondary sources include Geoffrey Rice and Linda Bryder's *Black November: The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in New Zealand* and later epidemiological studies examining mortality patterns aboard HMNZT Tahiti.

Historical Context

HMNZT 107 Tahiti departed Wellington on 10 July 1918 carrying members of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force's 40th Reinforcements. After calls at Cape Town and Freetown, Sierra Leone, the ship experienced one of the most severe outbreaks of influenza recorded aboard a troopship during the First World War.

More than 1,000 of the 1,217 people aboard became ill. Sixty-eight people died during the voyage and a further nine died after arrival in England. The outbreak occurred during the second wave of the global influenza pandemic of 1918–1919, one of the deadliest disease events in recorded history.

The tragedy became a significant episode in New Zealand's wartime experience and prompted both military and governmental investigations.

Notes on Sources

The surviving letters written by Oliver Bringans provide valuable personal insights into his military training, troopship life, and experiences in Cape Town. These letters help illuminate the experiences of an ordinary New Zealand soldier beyond what can be learned from official records alone.

Where family traditions or recollections have been included, they are identified as such. One example is the family story that Oliver's brother Alex travelled to meet the Tahiti upon its arrival in England, only to discover that Oliver had died during the voyage. Although documentary confirmation has not been located, the account is consistent with Alex's known military posting and remains an important part of family memory.

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