

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

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Private Robert John Porter, 3/3406

By Teresa Scott

Robert John Porter was the eldest son of Christopher and Martha (née Fair) Porter, of 6 Gibson St. Born on 27 March 1897 at Belfast, Northern Ireland, he had been in New Zealand for 11-12 years when he enlisted in 1917. In 1901 young Robert and his parents were at Windsor, Co Antrim, Ireland. Robert had attended Balmoral School, Belfast, Ireland before he was admitted to St Albans School, Christchurch in 1905. From there he went to Timaru in May 1906. Robert's sister Gladys entered Timaru Main School in 1909. His father was a carpenter, an occupation which Robert followed. On enlisting, he was employed as a carpenter for the Canterbury Education Board in Timaru.

Private R. J. Porter enlisted on 27 February 1917, a month before his 20th birthday, although he gave his age as 20. He was single, of Church of England affiliation, and physically fit. He had served with the senior cadets, and had been rejected for the territorials because of an accident to his hand. He was in good condition, apart from part of the second and third fingers and thumb on his right hand. This defect did not cause rejection. The South Canterbury quota of the 29th Reinforcements was to have left Timaru in early May 1917, but owing to transport trouble the men left at short notice on 30 April and proceeded to camp. He embarked on 16 July 1917, with the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, per the Athenic, destined for Liverpool, England. Having joined the Otago Regiment, on 26 October 1917 he proceeded from Sling to overseas duty in France.

In mid December 1917 news of Robert John Porter's death in action was received by his father, Mr C. Porter, of Otipua Road. Private Porter was killed in action on 24 November 1917 at Ypres, Belgium, after just a month in the field. He was one of over 100 fallen or missing men recorded in Casualty List 740 issued on 13 December. "Robert John Porter, the beloved eldest son of Christopher and Martha Porter, Otipua Road, Timaru; aged 20½ years" was killed in action "somewhere in France". At the meeting of the Timaru Main School Committee held on 19 December 1917 reported that since the previous meeting, two old boys had been killed at the front – Robert J. Porter and Norman Wallace. A vote of sympathy was passed. Robert was remembered again at the Timaru Main School, when the chairman at the annual meeting on 22 April 1918 proposed a vote of sympathy with the parents and relatives of ex-pupils who had fallen in the war. This was carried by silent vote, all present standing in honour of the 25 ex-pupils who had died in the past year.

R. J. Porter was first buried at Polygon Wood. His body was later reinterred in the Tyne Cot Cemetery, Zonnebeke, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium. "The exhumation was later carried out with all reverence, and at a later date a permanent headstone will be erected."

A copy of his Pay Book will, dated 6 November 1917 (just 18 days before his death), was received. He bequeathed all his property to his mother. His medals - British War Medal and Victory Medal – were sent to his mother, Mrs Martha Porter, Trafalgar Street, in 1921. By 30 November 1923, Mrs Porter had moved to Gibson Street.

There is a memorial on his parents' headstone in the Timaru Cemetery. Christopher and Martha spent the rest of their lives in Timaru. Christopher Porter, then assistant architect to the Education Board, died in 1931, Martha lived on till 1955. His name is inscribed on the Timaru Memorial Wall and on the St Mary's Anglican Church, Timaru, Memorial.

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