

## **Robert Henry Smith 6/545 Canterbury Regiment NZEF Main Body**

Robert Henry Smith (Bob) was born on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1892 in the Southland village of Arthurton the youngest child of John & Jeannie Smith. The first years of his life were spent on the farm there and at the age of 5 he attended the Arthurton School.

He was very interested in music and at the age of 5 walked 5 miles to get a promised violin. He started to learn piano but liked to play the tunes of the day which he was able to play by ear so piano lessons were stopped. He was able to play the violin by ear as well. In later years he rued the day when lessons stopped as he always wished he could read music. While he still attended primary school the family shifted to Timaru where he attended Timaru Main School. While there he excelled at sport and was nick-named “rooster” for his running prowess.

As all good children were in those days he was sent off to attend the Presbyterian Sunday School. However, on the way he met a friend who suggested he go with him to the Bank Street Methodist Sunday School. Bob’s religious convictions were not very strong so one Sunday School was as good as the next and off he went with his friend. Bob’s name is on the Roll of Honour at Bank Street.

When he left school he served a carpentry & joinery apprenticeship at John Jackson’s in Timaru which he completed and then was employed by S Mitchell. When war was declared on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1914 he enrolled for service 6 days later on August 11<sup>th</sup>.

He went into camp in Christchurch and during September sailed from Lyttleton to Wellington on the Athenic. Wellington was the assembly point for the Main Body of 8500 men from all New Zealand except Auckland.

The planned departure of these troops was delayed by PM Massey on account of the news that German Patrol boats were in the Pacific. The departure date was delayed until a more substantial escort fleet could be assembled.

During this period of delay sporting events were held to occupy the men and keep them fit. It was during this time that Bob’s athletic prowess won him a gold medal for Long Jump at the Military Games.

The troops finally left Wellington for Egypt (Bob sailed again on the Athenic) on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1914. To quote from his diary, “We arrived in Cairo in December after a splendid journey and started our training on the sandy desert”

At the end of January 1915 his regiment was sent to Ishmalia to help in the defence of the Suez Canal which was under attack from the Ottoman Empire.

Early in April 1915 he set sail for Gallipoli. First stop was the island of Lemnos. The following quotes from his diary tells how he experienced April 25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup>, 1915.

*Sunday April 25 1915*

*Left Murdros at 1.30 in the morning and were awakened at 5 am by big gun fire. We were near the entrance to the Dardanelles. The warships were pouring out the shells as fast as they could. We travelled on for about another 6 miles up the Gulf of Saros. There is an observation balloon up and a few water planes flying about (of course British). We are now at anchor waiting for orders to disembark. We can see the shells from the man o' wars exploding on the hills. These hills rise up from the beach and seem to be covered with bush. It is a great sight and sensation and everybody is very excited and ready for anything. We got off the boat at 10 o'clock and had to go straight to the firing line to reinforce the Australians who were under heavy fire. We were under fire all the time we were landing and then we had a bayonet charge to try and drive the Turks out of the trenches*

Monday April 26, 1915

*The firing has gone on all night. We got some artillery ashore last night and they have been doing some great work. They are bombarding the forts in the Narrows today and the Queen Elizabeth is firing from the side. All the boys are doing good work and we have taken a lot of prisoners and a few machine guns which were all worked by gunners who were deadly. Our Colonel is dead and Major Loach is wounded. There are Germans with the Turks and they have mines and foils everywhere. Today they buried 13 Australians from our ship. The firing has been very heavy and the Turks seem to be firing from all directions. A bullet grazed my nose just drawing blood then shrapnel burst 5 yards in front of us. I only had my hat blown off but the chaps on both sides of me were killed. I was digging in and was hit in my left arm by a bullet which grazed the bone and turned out. If it had missed the bone it would have gone straight into my heart (so that is luck). I think I am the luckiest man in the world to be alive and writing my diary.*

Bob was sent back to Cairo to have his wound attended to and spent time in hospital. When he was pronounced fit he was sent back to Gallipoli again. This time he suffered from severe dysentery so was shipped to England where he spent time in the hospital at Walton on Thames..

When his health improved he was sent home to New Zealand aboard the SS Willochra. On his arrival in Timaru it was suggested that a spell at Hanmer might be the best thing for him. He was not a well man and was discharged from the army on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1917

Another health scare came when he contracted the so-called Spanish Flu in 1918 but once again he escaped death. When his health improved it was decided that a carpentry life was not for him. He was simply not robust enough for that kind of work.

He married Dorothy Gladys Brown on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1919 and they had three children

There were business interests in the family which saw him grow an interest in bikes, motorbikes and later radio. Motorbikes became his passion and he owned a Harley Davidson motorbike and sidecar which he took to rallies and was also the principle form of family transport before the sidecar became too small. He also ran a small money order business with McGruer Davies.

One of his great loves was trout fishing which was made very accessible as the family had a bach at Grassy Banks on the Opihi River. It was a weekend retreat for all the family and many happy days were spent there. Many a picnic was packed when he visited another

fishing spot. He was a consummate fly fisherman and the family were never without trout to eat. Bob was a keen gardener and not only did he have a garden at home but one at the bach too. Fresh veges were always on the table.

His sporting prowess was always evident but only in a very quiet way but his love of music was obvious. He loved to sit down at the piano and play tunes of the day. He had to have a piano at the bach as well as at home and he made sure his family loved music and were never without it.

In retrospect the horrors of the war stayed with him and he never discussed it. Occasionally he would share a story of some mischief that he had got up to when a soldier which was always good for a laugh. His diary was not found until after his wife died thirty years later.

The war years took their toll and he died at the early age of fifty-nine in 1952