

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

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Thomas Joseph Histen No.14104

By Teresa Scott

Thomas Joseph Histen was the second son of Denis and Honorah (Norah, née Rooney) Histen, of Temuka. His parents, both from Ireland, had married in New Zealand in 1887, and Thomas was born at Timaru on 20 April 1899. A week later, on 27 April, he was baptised Thomas Joseph in the Timaru Catholic Church. Along with his siblings, Thomas attended Adair School in his early years. The family moved to Clandeboye about 1909, and there he continued his schooling. His father, Denis, served on the Adair School committee for three consecutive years in the 1890s and later on the Clandeboye School committee.

Thomas was only 16 years old when he enlisted, but he gave a birth date of 1 January 1896. He was living at home (Factory Road, Temuka) and working as a farm hand for a Temuka farmer and on his father's farm at Clandeboye, when in 1916 he volunteered. He was of a slight build, as would be expected of a 16 year old, but he was in good physical shape.

Leaving Timaru in early March 1916, he travelled north by the express as part of South Canterbury's quota for the Fourteenth Reinforcements. He left Wellington on 26 June 1916 with the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, destined for Devonport. In August he proceeded overseas from Sling Camp on the Salisbury Plain.

His father received a cable, in March 1917, stating that Thomas had been admitted to the 24th General Hospital at Etaples on 6 March suffering from inflamed sinews of the foot. On 12 April he was transferred from the hospital to the Base Depot in France, and in May 1917 he joined his Battalion at Rouen, only to be wounded in action in early June 1917, in the battle of Messines. This time he suffered a gunshot wound to his left thigh, though initially it was reported as a "not serious" case.

After time in a base hospital in France, Thomas had again joined his unit before being killed in action in the field in Belgium on 12 October 1917, aged only 18. In the aftermath of an early morning advance, Thomas had become a victim of the Passchendaele offensive, falling on New Zealand's blackest day.

Thomas is buried in the Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium with nearly 12,000 soldiers of the Commonwealth Forces in the largest Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery on the Western Front. His name is inscribed on the Timaru Memorial Wall, the Temuka RSA Roll of Honour; the Temuka War Memorial, the St Joseph's Church Temuka Roll of Honour, and the Clandeboye Hall Memorial Tablet.

Thomas Histen left no evidence of a will. How many 16-year-olds would? His medals – British War Medal and Victory Medal, plaque and scroll were sent to his father. His sorrowing and loving family continued to remember Thomas, "a staunch and fervent Catholic", for some years with In Memoriam inserts in the New Zealand Tablet. An older brother Denis Patrick Histen also served in World War One. He was spared to return home.

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