

Cecil Frederick George HUMPHRIES, SS/207; 14000 (1886-1918)

Cecil Frederick George Humphries was born on 27 October 1886 at Mataura, the son of Charles John Humphries and Ada Rebecca née Bond, later Mrs Rowse. Cecil's father, a proprietor and publican of the Bridge Hotel, Mataura, died there in 1896; two years later his mother married Henry James Rowse. Ada and Henry had two sons born at Waimate. Cecil was educated at Mataura School and then for a few months at Kaikorai School in Dunedin. At Mataura School he gained a good attendance certificate in 1894, and again in 1895. When his mother remarried, he transferred to Waimate School. Young Cecil made his mark in rugby football while at Waimate. He was selected to play in the Waimate District High School first fifteen to play against Timaru High School boys on 11 August 1900; 12 days later he was in the wing position to play against Waitaki High School. In the 1902 match against Temuka High School, Waimate was successful and won by six points to nil, even though their team was thought to be rather weak. 'Humphries, who played like a "Trojan" throughout the game, scored a try after a splendid dribbling rush.' [*Waimate Daily Advertiser*, 6 May 1902]

On leaving school he joined the staff of Guinness and LeCren; sometime after he left Waimate for Christchurch. In 1911 Cecil and his sister Alice were at the Excelsior Hotel in Christchurch where their mother was the proprietress and Cecil the manager. In Christchurch Cecil played for the Christchurch football team. In the match against Marist in 1911 he was in the forwards where he led a rush which put Marist under pressure. Christchurch ran out winners by 34 to 3. He became well-known in football circles in Christchurch as a "crack" player and a Canterbury representative. The next year saw him playing golf at the New Brighton Club, where he soon became one of the leading players of the club. Shortly after he presented a prize for first at the Red and Black Association's indoor athletics tournament, he himself being prominent in athletics. And early in 1913 this noted swimmer and member of the New Brighton Surf Club was successful in gaining a bronze medallion and proficiency certificate in the Royal Life-Saving Society's examination. Cecil was also selected in a team to represent the Licensed Victuallers' Association in a friendly game of cricket against a club connected to an opera company, in Christchurch in February 1913. It appears that Cecil made a trip to New South Wales, Australia in mid 1913, when burglary was rampant. He and an Ashburton friend were staying at a house at Potts Point when housebreakers ransacked the place, carrying off £50 worth of jewellery and money among other property belonging to the two New Zealanders.

Cecil Humphries was holidaying in England when war broke out. He and his mother, and probably his younger sister, Esme, and his two half-brothers, Francis William Rowse and Henry Alwyn Rowse, had left Christchurch in mid-February 1914 on a twelve months' holiday trip round the world. After three months on the Continent, they had gone to England.

He enlisted at Whitehall, London, immediately, simply as Cecil Humphries, and was drafted into the Army Service Corps in London with the rank of sergeant (Service Number SS/207). His nominated next-of-kin was his mother – Mrs Ada Rebecca Rowse, Hotel Madrid, Cromwell Road, Kennington. Cecil was 27 years 284 days old, single and of Church of England affiliation. He was 5 feet 9¾ inches tall, weighed 170 pounds, and had a chest measurement of 42 inches with 3 inches expansion. His complexion was fresh, his eyes grey and his hair brown. His physical development and pulse rate were excellent. A pass was

issued for travel from London to Aldershot, which included a Ration allowance and noted that he was travelling in plain dress. After a short time at Aldershot he went to the front about the middle of August. As of 27 August 1914, he was a clerk at Le Havre. Soon after going to France, he threw in his stripes and, at his own request, transferred on 15 October 1915 to the First Manchester Regiment, Indian Expeditionary Force, as a private (Service Number 14000). Cecil wanted to be involved in the front line. He considered that it was “too slow for a healthy young New Zealander who wanted to be doing things.” Promotion soon came, however, and he was made lance-corporal on Christmas Eve.

A most interesting letter written by Cecil Humphries “In the Trenches, 4/12/14” reached a Christchurch gentleman in response to his kind messages. Cecil gives a graphic account of fighting Germans and snow –

“I suppose I must tell you something of these awful places they call trenches. In fine weather they are not so bad, but in snow and rain, why, the mud is deeper than in some of the Christchurch streets after they have been pulled up a few times by the council and Gas Company. The enemy's trenches are only twenty yards in front of ours, and we can hear them talking and singing quite plainly; and all day long we ‘exchange cards’ by means of hand bombs, which, by the way, are made of ‘bully-beef’ tins and jam tins, filled with anything hard, such as metals, nails, and even pieces of grave stone.

“All the fighting is done under the shadow of darkness, and it is generally ‘Stand to!’ most of the night, and sleep in the day time. My first experience of trench work was a sixteen days' spell without a wash or a shave; and you can understand what I looked like.

“About ten days ago we had a big fall of snow, and two privates and a lieutenant of the Leicesters (next trench to ours) volunteered to go out and cut the enemy's barbed wire in front. So as to try and creep up they disguised themselves by means of sheets, and, dressed completely in white, they crept up and cut the wires, but had got back within 20ft of their own trench when a machine-gun killed one private and wounded the officer, who, stumbling forward, got caught in our own entanglements, and met a terrible death by wounds, barbed wire, and frost.

“While I write, these poor unfortunates lie over the wires in front of us, their bodies rotting, and we are powerless to do anything, as it would mean certain death to anyone who dared to go out to bring them in and give them a soldier's burial.

We are well looked after, and have plenty of warm clothing (including a fur coat, which I should think was New Zealand rabbit skins). The food is wonderfully good, and, from the amount of tobacco some of the boys smoke, I think they must be trying to make human chimneys of themselves. The people of England send luxuries to us, and sometimes most strange parcels arrive. In one I received was some turtle soup — and very nice, too.”

Some of his delightful, detailed, ‘racy’ and interesting letters to his mother were forwarded to his aunt in New Zealand. The first of Cecil Humphries’ letters, addressed to “My Darling Mother,” was dated “In the Trenches, Dec. 16, 1914 (noon).”

These extracts tell his story -

Here we are again, still merry and bright; the weather conditions have greatly improved, and our feet are not nearly so cold these last few nights. To-morrow night, all being well, we are off to the “cowshed” for seven days' rest, and well we need it, as we all, more or less, look the worse for this straining vigil we must keep up. My “little home” is nearly complete now, even to a cat. While I was looking through my loop-hole, I heard the pitiful cry of a kitten and coaxed it in. It is now sitting on my knee, playing, regardless of all this noise and clatter. I will take it out tomorrow night and give it to the old lady at the farm.

. , the enemy's trenches are but 25 to 30 yards off in one portion of our trenches, and we can hear them talking quite plainly, and you will hardly believe it, but we had some very fine music in a solo from "Tannhauser," with a jolly good chorus. It does seem strange, all this. After they had finished, by way of our appreciation we sent over two well-directed bombs which stopped the singing.

This is the eleventh night and twelfth day in these trenches, but we are all well, and are being relieved tomorrow night. Then for a wash, shave and a change. If you could only see me now, the dirt is well ground in, and it will need some digging out. This morning a tantalising sniper kept hitting the top of my loop-hole and knocking the earth into my cheese. Our greatest worry at present is bombs. We have men on the look-out, and you will hear them call "ducks" (stands for look-out) right or left, and then it is a case of into the little hole again. This morning some of the boys were sitting round their little bucket of glowing charcoal, when a bomb landed amongst them, but they were fortunate, as all the damage was done to the breakfast, and beyond having their hair singed, they are quite all right, but the language is quite unfit for me to repeat, and I am sure any bullock-driver would feel proud to have mastered such a flow. Tucker on this job is always the first consideration. I am going to make a "bully stew," consisting of bully beef, a couple of onions the Indians gave me, some bread (allowed a round a day), and a canteen of tea.

. , we were marched off to the village church, which is of the old Gothic style, with the graveyard round it. The Germans here, as everywhere else, have found their marks with several shells, the altar and beautiful stained glass windows at the back were broken and scattered in ruins. The white-surpliced English clergyman stood beside the ruined altar, conducting service well within reach of shells. In fact, one could plainly hear the rapid fire of rifles, booming of big guns, the screeching of shells, and the buzz of an aeroplane overhead. "God save the King" was sung with feeling at the close.

December 7th —We had a rotten time of it last night; fell in at dusk, and had a seven-mile march with picks and shovels, and in the rain and mud, had to start digging a trench. I have done some hard work lately, but this was really hard labour. with our equipment on, and extra ammunition, it seemed doubly hard. As the night was dark, we finished our work without being seen by the enemy, and I can tell you it was a weary, wet, and tired band who trudged those seven miles through mud and slush to our little haven of rest —the "cowshed." No bath or change, but I fell into my bunk of straw, wet through and with the blankets over me.

A convent at X---, in reserve, resting, December 18th. — We landed dead beat, and spreading my oil sheet on the floor, and my pack for a pillow, I wrapped myself in my blanket, and all was blank until daylight. I am getting quite used to sleeping like this, but there is one thing I cannot master, and that is getting used to a half-wet blanket against one's face and neck. I often long for the feeling of a cold white sheet, and, in fact (you will laugh), some of the boys got some bedding, etc., from one of the rooms, and offered me some. I took a clean white sheet to just see what it will be like to-night—an oil sheet underneath on the floor boards, a sheet and blanket. Of course, we cannot take our clothes off —just our boots, as we have to be always "in a constant state of readiness,"

December 19th. — "The order of the bath" was a very funny performance. We were all marched down to the English hospital, and on arrival met by the surgeon, who said, "First forty file on upstairs." and we were conducted to a room with a pile of red blankets in the centre, and told to strip off everything, leaving all valuables and anything leather in your cap, then tie your clothes up and hand them to some of the natives, who marched off with them to the fumigator. We were then marched down a passage in "native uniform" to the baths. Two to a bath, and real hot, too—with a big piece of carbolic soap and a floor scrubbing brush, I had a glorious twenty minutes. Then we went back to our room, putting our red blankets

round, and squatting a la nature to await the arrival of our clothes. Someone shouted, "Here they come." and about a dozen natives filed in with a bundle of steaming clothes, and threw them on to the floor. We all started grumbling, as everybody thought they were wet, but it was a delusion, and after a good shake out they were bone dry.

[Press. 18 March 1915]

And some further interweaving extracts –

Your letter of the 11th I received this morning under most dramatic conditions. Sharp at 8 o'clock our artillery, accompanied by the French, opened up in great style, and the noise was simply awful. This is the first time I have been in reserve when anything startling has been on, so with the aid of a good pair of field glasses and a position well covered in but elevated I had my first view of a real battle in daylight (all the others we had had were at night). This morning it was just like sitting in a picture theatre and watching it all being played, but this theatre had the grim reality about it. After a big bombardment—the noise of shells whistling overhead, the report of the big guns, and the smoke of the bursting shells, earth and timber being blown skywards, the noise added to by the rapid fire of rifles and the incessant crack, crack of the machine guns—made a din that one could never forget. The French on our right from the other side of the railway line appeared like a lot of flies, and at the double came on the enemy's trenches, which were situated in a mangold field, about one hundred yards away. I could just see the glitter of the bayonets and as they went the dark forms falling to the ground, but on they went and secured the trenches; just before they arrived a big party of Germans were seen using their legs to good advantage. Very few managed to get away after the trenches were taken. The French advanced in parties of 25 as a support to the firing line. I could plainly see them hop over the line, make a dash, and then lie down, and after a brief spell rush on again. The few seconds the men are down they work like madmen making what we call head cover. This is done with a little adze. I could plainly see five rows of supports, and while they lay there, those dark objects on that field, the enemy opened up with shrapnel, and the little clouds of smoke over the brave heads of these Frenchmen told all too well that the German gunners had got their range, and only those who know the horror of shrapnel could picture the Hell that must be over there. The gallant little crowd stuck to it well, and when they moved and made good the trenches you could see the dark forms still lying that told the deadly tale. Later on going round to my observation post and looking out at the battlefield, it appeared to me as if the brow of a hill had been cleared of trees and fern, and the black trunks of the trees left lying on the ground. This is the picture that met my eye, only the black trunks are those of the brave French who made that gallant charge.

12-30 p.m.: I have just had another look out, and could plainly see the Red Cross men at work doing their best to relieve those poor creatures who are lying helpless in that little green patch. I have just heard that our artillery has blown up a bridge over the canal on the left, and a big party of Germans is thereby cut off. The French have captured three trenches - word has just been passed along—the charge a complete success, so some body's darlings, who at this moment are lying out on that field, have paid dearly for those few yards of soil which they have won for France.

2-30 p.m. —Things are much as usual again. In the trenches the boys are hard at work getting some onions and potatoes ready for the old bully stew, and further down two or three are singing (quietly) "Get out and get under," and a real comedian is singing, "Take me back to Yorkshire." Truly these trenches are funny places. I hope and trust the fates will continue to be kind to me. The experiences I have had could not be bought for bags of gold.

Kind regards to all, especially New Zealand friends. All my love! Cheer oh! Still as fit as a fiddle. Your loving son, Cecil Humphries.

In a Cowshed,

Having a Rest
Xmas Eve, 10 p.m.

My darling mother, —Your few lines at the back of Harry's letter told me that your Xmas was not going to be one of rejoicing. Mother, you must cheer up! My dear, I am quite all right, without a scratch, and as fit as ever. My diary I sent to you by a wounded London Scottish soldier. I had rendered him first aid. I said if he would do the greatest favour I had ever asked of any man, he would post this to your address. I do not know his name, but said to him that the name of his regiment would, or should, be sufficient guarantee that this little commission would be executed We were paraded to-day and given a very fine address by two generals. One old man fairly broke down when he ended his speech with this: "Men, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am a Britisher, and thank God you are fighting for a noble cause, and I am proud of you all." I sent you a wire saying "All well," and wishing you a merry Xmas. I hope you received it. To-day I got your parcel of clothing, and I may say I wanted these things very much. If you could only see me now with the knees out of my khaki pants, and also out of my drawers, and mud right up to the eyes you would not feel very proud of your boy, but I got it honourably, and will feel quite happy when I awake on Xmas morning in these rags. I am to receive a new pair of khaki, and with your new underclothing will be all right again. To-day has been one of the sad ones in my life. I acted as postman, and in going over the names in those bags full of letters the four piles told a most heart-rending tale, in short, here it is—dead, wounded, hospital, in billet. Well, I am sorry to say the three first heaps were greater than the post to be delivered. All my mates have gone, and I am left quite alone in my section. You will have read all about it, and when you get this letter just go down on your knees and thank God He has guided me as He has done. I am forwarding you a few souvenirs—two German helmets, cartridge cases, a French general's sash, and my own shirt with the holes in it, so you will see I had a most marvellous escape. When I joined this regiment, mater, I had to take down my stripes and go into the ranks as a private. Well, mother, I have won back the three stripes again, and not with a bread-knife, as in the Army Service Corps, but with a battle axe, and no one feels prouder, inwardly, to-night than I do to hear my promotion called out in orders. Outside the carol singers are singing away. Oh! how strange it all is, the French voices, Give my regards to enquiring friends, to you all my love. Your ever loving son, Cecil Humphries.

P.S. —I forgot to tell you that I had lost all my kit in this little "to do" the other day, so should like you to send me as soon as possible, a razor, toothbrush and paste, small hairbrush and comb, a scout knife and fork—knife and fork to fit into each other—shaving brush and soap, aluminium soap holder, folding cup and canteen, a Cardigan jacket. A couple of handkerchiefs would be most acceptable.

Xmas morning. The ground white with snow, the church bells ringing. I attended church this morning at 8 a.m. What a strange, strange Xmas! but never mind, cheer oh! Sorry to give you all this trouble. Hope I won't meet this fate again for a while. — Cecil. [*Wanganui Chronicle*. 16 March 1915]. The little "to-do" occurred on 20th and 21st December 1914.

In January 1915 C. F. G. Humphries (27 years old) was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal on the battlefield in Northern France (Battle of Loos) for gallantry in the face of gun fire and, being promoted to Sergeant, he was again the proud wearer of the three stripes. The citation in the Gazette read: "For conspicuous gallantry and coolness at Givenchy, during the attack on December 20-21, 1914, and also for gallantry in endeavouring to bring into cover the body of his company commander, who had been killed in the engagement." Brigadier-General Strickland assembled the men and decorated Humphries, right there in the battlefield. The distinguished honour which had fallen to his lot was the first of its kind bestowed on a New Zealander on the battlefield. He had seen quite a large amount of hard fighting and had

experienced all the rigours of the winter campaign. He was, however, always optimistic and, as some reports said, a soldier's life seemed to suit him admirably. He had enjoyed a high reputation in Christchurch as a thorough sportsman, and, in 1915, a new reputation as a valiant soldier. Among the messages of congratulations sent to his mother was one from the Christchurch licensed victuallers – “As a member of our honourable trade we feel proud of him.” At a meeting of the Christchurch Rugby Football Club particular reference was made to the fact that Mr Cecil Humphries had been promoted and decorated. 42 of the club's present members had gone to the front; over 100 past and present members were on active service. When the High Commissioner heard the news, he wrote to Mrs. Rowse: “You must be a proud mother that your son should, within so short a time, have come to the front. He is a credit to his family and an honour to his country.” The medal was awarded for gallantry at the Battle of Givenchy, on 20th and 21st December, when the Indian Force was hard pressed, but Sergeant Humphries only heard of his good fortune on 28th February, when Brigadier-General Strickland pinned the ribbon on his breast. The War Office record of the incident is: “For conspicuous gallantry and coolness at Givenchy in the attack of 20th and 21st December, and for endeavouring to bring into cover the body of his company commander, who had been killed.” On several occasions he had deemed himself highly honoured by being selected from his company to take part with other selected men in night raids across No Man's Land.

A Waimate resident received the following post card-from Sergt, Humphries a few days ago (March 1915). It explains the occasion of the awarding of the D.S.O. It is as follows: —
January 9th, 1915.—Your letter of 17th November to hand. By the time this card gets to you the worst of this awful weather should be over. My word, it knows how to rain here, and the trenches are up to your knees in mud and water. Oh, the mud! I have slept in it, eaten it, and am living in it. It is wonderful what the human body can stand. Had a bit of a bust-up on December 20th and 21st last; got hit several times, but was lucky, and got through without a scratch. Have sent my shirt to the mater as a souvenir; it has eight holes in the tail (please don't think I was running away). I happened to be leaning over a poor chap who had ‘stopped one’, when they turned the machine gun on me, and God knows how I am here with a whole skin; but it's the way of the world, so there you are. Regards to all at home and my enquiring friends. Your old pal, Cecil. [*Waimate Daily Advertiser*, 13 March 1915]

Sergeant Cecil Humphries sent the following extracts from his diary to his mother in London (per the Scottish soldier, it is presumed). The extracts which were reposted to relatives in New Zealand, were kindly supplied to the press.

December 22, 1914. In the remains of a home at Givenchy, by a coke fire, room full of Sikhs, a candle, and here I am, 3 a.m.

How I am to relate my experiences since noon on Sunday I am at a loss to know. . . . After an inspection by the colonel on Sunday morning we all started to get together our dinner, but the order came. “Fall in at once”; blankets to be left behind (something doing)! We could plainly see the shells, and the booming of the big guns told us we were in for it. We were marched, or rather forced-marched, and all along the rapid despatch carriers, with their urgent messages, passed to and fro. It was not until my friend Webster came along with a message, and, spotting me, gave me the following startling news: — “Enemy broken through the natives; captured small village; moving towards canal!” As soon as we heard this our packs seemed to get lighter, and we all had our fighting blood up. Along we went, and if I live to be a thousand years old I will never forget that sight. The poor natives wounded—some slightly, others, poor wretches, with hands off, arms off, legs off. Then the French seemed to me (about 500 or more of them) absolutely in retreat, like a lot of lost sheep, making south, as we were getting a move on as quickly as possible the other way. All

were by this time fully aware we were in for a good to do! Strength seems to come to one when it is a case of "have to."

We were being pushed along with all speed As we were getting ready, the enemy,, put two well-directed shells plump into us, and oh! the sight! It is useless for me to try to picture the horror of it all. I counted seven, besides wounded, where that dreadful shrapnel had taken effect.

"File on!" and across that field at the double;, all the while the shrapnel making our line smaller every few yards: but on we went I must, if God looks over me, tell you the rest by word of mouth. Suffice it to say that we captured the village. The first trench we took. Up again, and the second. Then again, the third, and again the fourth. Our ranks were getting weaker, so we retired into the third and made a stand for it.

. in the morning before daylight. My duty was to take charge of 10 men in the trench and guard all the communications — a very risky job - and to bayonet anyone who came along. Then came the order to advance, ready for the big charge. The Germans, meanwhile, by the aid of those dreadful night lights, spotted our position, and then a machine gun opened on that thin kakhi line - and oh! the sight! Will I ever forget? Our commands were now given by a whisper from one to another, and as a message came along I touched the man next to me, and gave him the order. No reply—dead! I touched the next. No reply- dead! Then I realised the position. Crawling along, and it was just now breaking daylight, I worked my way in some mysterious fashion over to where our captain was, and what I should find! Our captain shot through the head. I dragged him under cover, and then made the startling discovery — I was right under the very nose of the German trenches! Getting down under the screen of a communication trench, I did my best to get the captain along, but he was too heavy. I took off my scarf and tied it round his legs, then, putting my head through, tried to drag him along that narrow and mucky trench. I got him along a bit, until I came to the body of a dead native. It was too much for me. I couldn't get his 15-stone deadweight along, so I left him, and, poor beggar, long 'ere this he's breathed his last. Going along the trench a comrade by the name of Mick Hunt noticed me, and said: "Charlie (they call me Charlie, as they said Cecil was too swanky for a Tommy), you won't leave me here, will you?" He was lying in the open on the opposite side of a hawthorn fence, with his leg absolutely shattered. I had to fell the hedge with the butt of my rifle (under fire all this time), and, getting him to put his arms round my neck, dragged him with his shattered limb into the trench. Then, with him on my back, we struggled along, stopping every now and again for a breath. I got him safely out, took him to the shelter of a house, cut off his boots, sox, and puttees, and did my best with a bandage. What a terrible leg! The bone was powdered, and presented an awful sight. I just got him finished and laid alongside the building to await the arrival of the stretcher-bearers, when another poor devil staggered along. I gave him a lift to a building near at hand, and his wounds were also gaping ones in the leg, and partly disembowelled. I got some wads of wool and did my best for him, and gave him a little ease until the stretcher-bearers came for him. After this my time was taken up for the next hour in doing small wounds, such as wrists, etc. The road—what a sight! Men limping along and staggering. Shall I ever forget? I got back to the firing line, and It was hell! The battle raged and raged, getting worse and worse. Will I ever forget, that awful sight as we struggled along? No food, and fighting continuously for two days! The enemy opened their deadly shrapnel and mowed down some of the poor chaps. How I got through it all, God only knows; but I arrived back with a whole hide[?], The whistle went to try and bring that scattered little army together. My section, F., usually 200 strong, could only muster 50 men: and there we stood, asking where So-and-so had gone, and so on. What a sight! I could never picture to you the dreadfulness of all this. I am minus my rifle and all my kit, so only have the ragged clothes I stand up in. We were marched off to the brewery to rest

for the night, and I believe go into billet for some days to reorganise, as we have only two officers left out of 14. It seems awful, this dreadful waste of human life.

During the whole performance I have been hit three times, most marvellous — one through the puttees (cutting completely to the sock), through the seat of my pants (this done while I was bandaging a wounded man on the field). It went right through my pants and underpants and two shirts, and never drew blood. The third was through my helmet, and only raised a lump on my head. I have been lucky, and all I can say is “Thank God.” It is now 5 a.m. The reinforcements will be forming up now to regain those trenches we vacated.

[For fuller record, see *Evening Star*. 19 April 1915]

This diary began on Sunday, 7th inst., [7 March 1915] on which evening, at 10 p.m., the battalion bade farewell to the old French people in the village in which they had been billeted and marched for the front. From their new billets, which were within four kilometres of the trenches, they could see every few minutes the funk lights going up. Wet and tired Sergeant Humphries wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down on the straw to sleep. But the cold kept him awake most of the night, and at five a.m. he had to get up and move about to keep from freezing. All the inmates of the farmhouse were overcome with grief on account of the death of their son, aged 29. “I did my best to sympathise with the people, but my little knowledge of French was not good enough, so all I could do was to look sad myself. The day is glorious and fine, and our aeroplanes floating about ever since daylight keep watch over us like guardian angels.

. The roll was called for the evening with the sound of great guns still only two kilometres distant, and the breath like steam in the cold barn. But a great coat and blanket and two sandbags half full of straw made a comfortable enough bed.

“The ground was as hard as iron with a severe black frost, but the sun is shining out from a cloudless sky, and if it were not for the aeroplanes overhead and the occasional booming of the big guns, it would be hard to believe that war was on at all. Parade at 10 a.m., and as our platoon commander was away I had charge. Noon: Just received word we are to pack up and to be ready to move off.”

Wednesday, March 10th the opening day of the great battle, the 1st Manchesters were marched out to Lacoutre where they arrived at 7.15. At a given signal of two huge guns hell was let loose, and the noise — well will I ever forget the noise and row. All the boys here say “God speed every shell, and may it kill a million” but I am not like that. I can picture to myself the killed and wounded in those trenches, and it is too awful to think of. As I have gone through it all, I know too well what it means.

“8. The battery horses have just come in at the gallop. One of the batteries has been shelled by the Germans, Ammunition, extra carts, cyclists and motor cars all on the move. To the left of Richebourg the 7th and 8th divisions and the Canadians are making an attack. . . . , and by tomorrow I guess you will have some very sad reading in one sense, but glowing in the other. Thank God I have lived to hear all this as we are fighting a just battle, and only giving back to those barbarous Huns some of the awfulness that they had used on these poor and practically defenceless Belgians.”

Writing at 10 a.m. Sergeant Humphries said all was quiet except the occasional booming of the big guns. While he was in the pit an officer read a message which said that the first line of trenches had been taken by the Guards Brigade, and the second by the Seventh Division, and that the enemy was in great confusion on the retreat. “Glorious news, and as we stood there amid the war and boom of the various guns, one felt a feeling of “Thank God we are English.” By 11 all seemed to be over, and being able to see behind the scenes, the New Zealander believed the Germans to be on the run.

“A captain has just come in quite excited, and told us we were quite successful, and the present bombardment is perhaps the greatest one that has taken place. We have taken the church and two lines of trenches, and have got the enemy completely on the run, and taken everything before us. Three cheers for dear old England.”

After midday the Manchesters were formed up in a field near Richebourg, awaiting developments, with the Ghurkas not far off. Just before they had passed a party of seven officers and about 200 German prisoners “who had been lucky enough to fall into our hands. The prisoners were a very mixed lot and did not look a very formidable enemy. Some were old, others could not be much more than fifteen, and some, I am sure, will never see sixty again. They looked white and frightened and much mud-bespattered.” everything worked so smoothly that one felt confident of a big success. “The sad part of the business is now on. A convoy of our wounded has just passed, but they are mostly only slight arm wounds, and will not be long before they will again be with us. 3.03 p.m. —More good news. Have just been shown the map, and we have advanced one thousand yards. The second phase of the advance; we captured Neuve Chapelle and the attack our regiment was to do has already been fixed by the little Ghurkas, All the afternoon German prisoners have been trooping past, and some of them look miserable in the extreme. The ambulance waggons and motors are going along to the first-aid where it is sad to see the wounded, some walking, while the more severe cases are kindly handled by the native stretcher bearers. All the boys are in great spirits.”

The following day's diary is written actually in Neuve Chapelle, where during the night a great British force was massed. On the March thither Humphries fell into a big shell hole, which meant that he had to spend the night shivering in wet clothes. Orders were to advance at 7.30 a.m., “I personally am feeling very fit,” says the diary, “and will do my best to lead my little section to glory. The great bombardment is now on, and after they finish we have to advance in the hail of lead which the Germans will pour into us. I am trusting to dear old fate to pull me through.” 7.20 a.m - “Get dressed, all ready,” just given out. My thoughts just now are with you all, my dear pals of New Zealand. Off we go. Good-bye all, and God bless you. I am proud to be a New Zealander, and will do my best in the next few minutes.”

At this stage the diary is interrupted. At some later stage of the fight Sergeant Humphries was close to a building when it was hit by a shell, and a brick struck him on the head. He came to, to find that a wall had collapsed on him and with great difficulty managed to extricate himself from the debris. He continued to fight for twelve hours. It was not till some time afterwards that he felt conscious of pain in his hip, and on making enquiry, found that he had been hit by a fragment of shrapnel so as to be incapacitated for further service just now. A day or two later he was in England, and he was by now in hospital at Sevenoaks. For more detail, see *Waimate Daily Advertiser*. 27 April 1915]

Thus, Sergeant Humphries was wounded in mid-March 1915, on the third day of the battle at Neuve Chapelle, where the British had a great victory. He was admitted to hospital at Sevenoaks, Kent, and made a good recovery. Mrs Rowse responded to the Licensed Victuallers' Association: — “I am most grateful to you and to your Association for your kindly cable of Congratulations on Cecil's great honour. I felt sure you would all be proud of him. Will you please thank every member for me. I regret that I have to tell you that he was wounded at Neuve Chapelle. We are both thankful that his life was spared. It was a most desperate charge. His wound is in the thigh, and is reported to be slight, but only to-night I heard he was not so well. I have seen him twice, on the 15th and 17th March. He is at a place in Kent, called Wilderness, at Seven-Oaks, placed at the disposal of the War Office by the Dowager, Lady Hillingford, where all the nursed are titled ladies. Needless to say he is in good hands, and wants for nothing.” Sergeant Humphries had sent some trophies to London,

among them “the sash of a French General, a rifle, some helmets, and other interesting odds and ends.” In London his mother resided at Hotel Madrid, 147 Cromwell Road, Kensington. Her permanent address was Excelsior Hotel, Christchurch, New Zealand. Mrs. Rowse, who did not originally intend to remain in England, resided there in order to be in as close touch as possible with her son.

A Hastings man received a letter from Cecil while he was at Sevenoaks. “Here I am in hospital gradually going through the different stages of a soldier's life. . . . I should like to live to be able to look back and see the results of all this awfulness. Anyway, I have been very lucky and have had more than one close call. . . . I have no regrets in joining the fighting unit, and how any single able-bodied men can stay at home and see the long list of casualties every day, beats me. . . .” Cecil’s mother, in a letter (2 May 1915) to New Zealand, wrote that “Cecil made light of his wound, and it was only last week that he would let me see it. and I was surprised that it had been so severe; the shrapnel had gone right through the buttock, but, fortunately, did not touch the bone. I could not understand why they kept him in hospital for five weeks if it was so slight as he tried to make out. but when I saw it for myself six weeks after it happened, then I knew. There is no doubt he has been brave, and very, very lucky to have escaped with his life.” By the end of May the report was that Sergeant Cecil Humphries had fully recovered. He had been given a commission and was returning to the front. In a letter (dated 15 April) from Woolwich to his wife at Waimate, Dr Barclay wrote that he had visited Mrs Rouse, formerly of Waimate, and that he had seen Sergeant Humphries who was the on furlough, which the doctor had ordered. As an old Chairman of the Waimate High School Board, Dr Barclay was very glad to be able to help Sergt. Humphries to furnish “a certificate of satisfactory education” in his application for a commission.

Cecil F. G. Humphries gained a commission in the 12th Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry. Acting-Sergeant Humphries was discharged from the Manchester Regiment on 10 June 1915 and was to report, without fail, at Stirling on 15 June, providing himself with bedding and camp kit. Uniform, if not ready, could follow. The test involved dictation and arithmetic. He had sat at Stirling Castle, receiving his commission on June 25, 1915. He expected to leave again for the front about the end of August 1915. By November he was at Stobs Camp near Hawick, Scotland, where he was instructing young officers in trench warfare. Writing to his relatives in Dunedin he stated that he could not sometimes help smiling to himself when he remembered that a year previously he had hardly known the difference between the butt and the barrel of a gun, and here he was acting as an instructor. On 24 and 30 November he wrote from the trenches in Flanders. His observations are again detailed and graphic. “Here I am again still merry and bright, in what Tommy calls the ‘queer place,’ but, oh, how so different. . . .” In another letter written the following day, and headed “Somewhere in France, In the Trenches,” Lieutenant Humphreys says: “I am alone in my dugout. with a brazier giving out a cheery glow, a candle, and thoughts of New Zealand, with its peaceful surroundings and sunshine, while here it is white with snow, bleak, cold, and miserable, with nothing but ruins and desolation surrounding us, and now and again the not altogether pleasant smell of dead Huns.”

“. . . . a most dramatic time. We were having a two hours’ ‘hate’ by artillery, and the noise was helped on by aerial torpedoes, mines, bombs, rifle grenades, and all the other inventions to stop one another breathing well. I cannot picture to you what all this means, but the noise, why, it is terrific. Poor old “Fritz,” he is just getting back with real good interest some of the awfulness that we had to put up with at the first of the war. . . . The way things have

improved since I was last here is simply marvellous; plenty of everything at our disposal, and no limits put on bombs or any of the other devices that this method of warfare has brought into vogue. What a fine feeling it is to hear our guns day after day growing louder and louder, The part of the line I am in now —well, to tell you the truth, I am writing this letter to you sitting in a German dug-out that was captured in our advance of September 25th last. This place is just one sea of trenches. As we are dug in in the chalk, with a coating of mud and chalk over us, you can guess we are a queer-looking colour. The weather is bitterly cold, but frost is not so bad; it is the rain that makes things get into such an awful mess. As usual the Government is doing all in its power for the comfort of “Tommy,” and this winter we have rubber boots reaching to our hips.” “All the officers of this battalion I knew before I came out, and they gave me a right hearty welcome on arrival. I have a good set of boys, real Glasgow lads, hard as iron and always willing to go on with the game.”

In April 1916 Lieutenant Cecil Humphries was promoted to captain of B Company 12th Highland Light Infantry. His letters to folk in New Zealand continued to offer insights into and opinions on the fighting. Cablegrams in early July mentioned “the dashing work of the Highland Light Infantry - on the Western front.” Captain Cecil Humphries wrote “from “Somewhere in France,” under date May 8th, to his sister (Mrs S. C. Wilson, Musselburgh, Dunedin): — “The last few weeks the fighting has been most severe. The Huns used their poison gas on us for an hour and a half a few days ago; then followed it up with an attack, expecting no doubt to find us all half-dead, or dead, when they came over. But our new helmets are absolute protection against all their gas, and when they left their trenches they found we were very much alive. We inflicted great loss on them, and they never gained a footing anywhere in our trenches.” With leave being open, he was “expecting to go over home any day now.”

But before long, Captain Humphries was wounded in action in the Somme offensive in France, receiving a bullet wound through the muscle of his arm, although he was not aware of it for some time. (London report, 10 August.) Humphries went again to England. All fifteen officers of his battalion were injured, three being killed. By mid-December he had made a complete recovery and rejoined his battalion at Leith. Temporary Captain C. F. G. Humphries was mentioned in a Despatch by General Sir Douglas Haig on 13 November 1916.

The news in July 1917 was all good. Captain Cecil Humphries had been awarded the Military Cross, for an act of bravery on 5 June while serving as commander of a Battalion in the Labour Corps at Ballieul. The commanding officer’s despatch read - “An ammunition train was being bombed by aeroplanes, and Captain Humphries, commanding No. 10 Labour Company, arrived on the scene and took charge of the party. Under this officer’s guidance and help eight trucks were salvaged. The eighth was uncoupled by Captain Humphries and Sergt.-Major Harland, while the ninth truck was burning fiercely, and its load of shells was exploding freely. This remarkably gallant piece of work was carried out under a hail of shell and fragments, any one of which could have exploded the contents of the trucks which were being moved. I consider, from my observation of the explosion, that Captain Humphreys and the other members of the party are deserving of the highest praise, and I have the honour to bring to your notice their gallant and valuable work.” Captain Humphries, writing to a friend in New Zealand on the occasion of his receiving the Military Cross, said: — “It’s all luck; we just happened to be there, but the rotten part of it all was that I had ten killed and thirteen wounded.” On 1 December 1917 at Buckingham Palace, in the presence of his mother, sister, and a Christchurch mate, he received his Military Cross.

Soon after Captain Humphries was asked to report to the Commander of the Duke of Connaught's Light Infantry. In the early months of 1918, he served on the Italian front attached to a battalion of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, before being recalled to Flanders in May. While serving with the Cornwall Regiment in Italy, Major Cecil F. G. Humphries was awarded a bar to the Military Cross and promoted to lieutenant-colonel. (London, 28 May.) When on the Italian front, and while travelling in a motor-car, he was run down at a crossing by a train and thrown out, escaping without a scratch, the only damage being that the sleeve was torn from his coat — one more narrow escape, as he wrote, from joining the "aerial scouts." From Italy, Humphries returned to the Western Front.

While commanding his battalion under heavy fire, in April 1918, Humphries was gassed. He returned to duty, leading his battalion forward. For his fine leadership, he was awarded the D.S.O. (Distinguished Service Order) for conspicuous gallantry and fine leadership. "Having taken his objective, the late Lieutenant-Colonel C. F. G. Humphries, M.C., D.C.M., Duke of Cornwall's L.I., attached 1st Battalion, Norfolk Regiment, reorganised his battalion, and, on hearing that the attack on the final objective was held up, he went forward under heavy fire and reconnoitred the whole position, after which he led the battalion forward. Later, he personally controlled his men during a very determined counter-attack by the enemy under the heaviest machine-gun fire. His courage inspired confidence throughout the operations. The award of the D.S.O. was posthumous." [*Evening Post*, 11 February 1919.]

The news in August 1918 was not good. Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil Frederick George Humphries, D.S.O., M.C. and Bar, D.C.M., who was "one of New Zealand's most illustrious soldiers", died on 22 August 1918 of wounds suffered in action at Achiet-le-Petit, France. He was 31 years of age and had given four years and fourteen days of service. A telegraph from the Minister of Defence to Mrs Rowse read — "New Zealand deeply regrets death of Lieut Colonel Cecil Humphries who was one of its most gallant sons and tenders you sincerest sympathy." In response to a newspaper report of 4 September, F. W. Bond, of Wellington wrote — "Sir, I thought a cable to the mother of this brave New Zealand lad would be a fitting compliment. Yours faithfully, F. W. Bond" and gave an address for Mrs Rowse. This was surely Frederick William Bond, a dentist in Wellington, who was a brother of Mrs Rowse. It was said that on the day of his death he was recommended for the Victoria Cross. His brigadier said of him: "He was without exception the bravest man I have ever met, and his loss to me as commanding officer is irreparable. He died leading his men in a very difficult position, where we had been heavily counter-attacked. His example of coolness and courage was magnificent. I admired him immensely both as a friend and a commanding officer, as did all the officers serving under him. I feel his loss the more as he was commanding my own regiment." Lieutenant-Colonel Humphries had a keen sense of duty. Writing to a friend in New Zealand last year (1917), he said: — "After seeing the outrages of the Hun since 1914, I would willingly lay down my life to protect British women and children from this dreadful German." He was buried at Foncquevillers Military Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France. His gravestone bears the inscription: "To live in the hearts of those we love is not to die." At the top is worked into the stone the insignia of the Duke of Cornwall's Infantry. Widespread sympathy was extended to Mrs Rowse in the loss of her gallant soldier son.

The Will of Captain Cecil Frederick George Humphries, of Kensington, Middlesex, which he drew up on enlistment, went to probate in both New Zealand and England. Probate was granted to Ada Rebecca Rowse (wife of Henry James Rowse), his effects in England totalling £348.7s.7d. This brave soldier, who served as Private/Corporal C. Humphries, SS/207, Army Service Corps, and as Captain (later Lt. Col.) C. F. G. Humphries, 14000, Duke of

Cornwall's Light Infantry, was awarded the 1914-1915 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. Mrs A. R. Rowse, of Streatham, London, and later of Roslyn, Dunedin, applied on 11 January 1919 for the 1914 Star and ribbon in respect of her late son. She further applied on 12 January and on 3 February. In October 1919 His Majesty the King approved the issue of a clasp to those who had been awarded the 1914 Star and had actually "served under the fire of the enemy in France and Belgium between the 5th August 1914 and midnight 22nd-23rd November 1914." The clasp was to be in bronze, would bear the inscription "5th August-22nd November, 1914" and, when ribands were worn, would be denoted by a small silver rose in the centre of riband. Quite a number of New Zealanders were entitled to wear the clasp, among them Lieut.-Colonel C. F. G. Humphries, D.S.O, M.C., D.C.M., qualified with the R.A.S.C.

Ada Rebecca Rowse, her younger daughter, Esme Maribel Humphries, and her youngest son, Henry Alwyn Rowse, departed on 6 December 1919 from Southampton, England, per the 'Bremen', for their return to New Zealand. After her return to New Zealand Ada Rowse lived in Auckland, her son Alwyn with her. Ada and Henry seemed to be apart by 1911. When Mrs Rowse visited Matura in March 1920, she had with her a collection of decorations won by her soldier son and war trophies. During his visit to New Zealand in May 1920, the Prince of Wales ensured that Mrs Rowse was presented to him, most probably at Wanganui. Approval was given in January 1921 for payment of £134.12.8, being the difference between Imperial and New Zealand rates of pay and gratuity, to Mrs A. R. Rowse, mother of C. F. G. Humphries, Lieutenant-Colonel, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Regiment. Mrs Rowse had been asked whether or not her son had married, to which she replied that he had never married. She also provided, as best she could, a record of his ranks and units at various dates. Cecil's half-brother, Francis William Rowse, enlisted with the English forces, aged not 17 years old. After the war Francis settled in Canada and married there. Lionel Edward Grimstone, who was killed in action in France on 8 October 1918, after more than four years of service, was a cousin of Cecil Humphreys. Ada Rebecca Rowse, who died on 14 July 1938 at Takapuna, Auckland, was cremated at Waikumete. She was survived by her two daughters of her first marriage and two sons of her second marriage.

bar

Photos of Cecil Humphries were printed in the *Star* and the *Sun* at the time he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and promoted to Sergeant on the battlefield. A portrait photo can be found at Archives New Zealand (Archway). An interesting aspect of Cecil Humphries' character was apparent when, just before he joined the Highland Light Infantry, he sent an interesting collection of mementoes of the battlefields of France to a friend in Christchurch "to be cared for until his return". It included "two Germany infantry helmets of thick leather. One has a hole in it made by a British bayonet. The other has over it a grey-green cloth cover. There is also a Bavarian infantryman's cap. A particularly interesting item in the collection is a clip of German rifle cartridges, each of which has the bullet reversed. It is clear that the bullets were reversed when the cartridges were filled, and so the clip is a silent witness to the truth of the stories that the Germans have used such cartridges so as to inflict very hasty wounds upon their opponents. There is also a German machine-gun cartridge—of larger calibre than a rifle cartridge – with a bullet which has been so cast that the nose is blunted and slightly hollowed – a "dumdum." One of the Christmas gifts which accompanied by cards, were sent to troops by Princess Mary is included in the collection. It is a neat metal box bearing a medallion portrait of the Royal donor and her monogram and containing a packet of tobacco and another of cigarettes. There is also a French general's tricolour sash, which was taken from a Prussian officer. Some shoulder-straps taken from the uniforms of dead German soldiers show the colours—blues and greys—of some of the

German uniforms. One of the water bottles used by the Indian forces is in the collection. An object of more personal interest is a khaki shirt which was worn Sergeant Humphries and which has several bullet holes in it, illustrating the narrowness of an escape from wounds.”

The name of Cecil Frederick George Humphries, D.S.O. & Bar, D.C.M, is inscribed on the Maitua War Memorial - HUMPHRIES C. F. G. [D.S.O. & Bar, D.C.M., D.C.L.I]. His was also one of “the names of those award-holders and members of the Society who had enlisted for active service” which were recorded on a roll of honour unveiled on 9 December 1915 at the conclusion of the annual meeting of the Canterbury head Centre of the Royal Life-saving Society. He had been a very prominent Christchurch rugby footballer, representing Canterbury, was an enthusiastic golfer, and was at the top in swimming and surf-bathing, gaining a life-saving medal. “Belonging to a type of manhood of the robust order” and being “a man of fine physique, he took part in all kinds of sport, and gained great popularity.” On 9 July 1908, Cecil F. G. Humphries, an estate agent, had been initiated into Conyers Lodge, Sydenham, Christchurch, where his death in 1918 was noted. In May 1915 the *Otago Daily Times* published extracts from Cecil’s diaries which dated from his enlistment. These accounts give vivid accounts of the reality of life in the trenches and other aspects of early warfare. [See separate attachment.] The late Lieutenant-colonel Humphries had a most cheery disposition, and always looked on the bright side of things. A younger half-brother, only 17 years of age, was a sergeant in the British Army. He ran away and enlisted. “It was a somewhat remarkable coincidence that the many incidents in the deceased's life since leaving New Zealand were associated with the number 13, a number which is generally considered to be very unlucky. He left New Zealand on the 13th day of a month, the number of his bunk on the vessel making the homeward voyage was 13; he joined up with the British Army on the 13th day; the number on his rifle was 13, and he discarded this rifle on the field of battle and picked up another rifle which was also numbered 13.” [*Evening Star*, 30 August 1918]. A correspondent to the *Timaru Herald* of 10 May 1920 wrote, in relation to the report of the Prince of Wales’ visit - “It seems to me that if brave Cecil Humphries had been a scholar or a preacher, we should be enlightened as to who he was. May I state briefly that he was born in a public house, reared in a public house, and managed an hotel for his mother right up till the eve of his departure from the colony. I hold no brief for publican or parson, and I never enter an hotel, but mine host of the Maitua Hotel, the late Cecil Humphries’ father, was a good man, though a publican. Like father like son, and it seems there are some good and brave publicans.”