

# Daniel Joseph Brosnahan

## 1892-1973

**Daniel Brosnahan** was born at Kerrytown on 21 August 1892, the second son and fifth child of John Hugh Brosnahan and Mary Foley. Both of his parents were born in Co Kerry, Ireland and had emigrated to New Zealand in the 1870s. Daniel was named after his mother's father Daniel Foley, following the traditional Irish pattern for naming a second son. Both sets of grandparents had also emigrated to New Zealand and Daniel grew up in a small local community that included loads of close relations. He went to school at the local Kerrytown convent, where he was taught by the Sisters of St Joseph, but there was no possibility of further education and he was brought up to work on the land. When he was eighteen his mother died of tuberculosis, aged only 50. His father, who was a good deal older, was left with a large family, the youngest of whom (Clara) was only 8.

Daniel was already a part-time soldier when his mother died in 1912. He had joined the South Canterbury Mounted Rifles (the equivalent of today's territorials) in November 1911. This was compulsory military training in preparation for the war that was expected to develop in Europe. When war did break out in 1914 thousands of New Zealanders rushed to join the Army before it was all over. Grandad was not one of them but his turn came two years later. His older brother Hugh was apparently supposed to go as the family's contribution to the war effort but broke his leg in a motorbike accident. Daniel went in his place enlisting on March 27 1916 and sailed for the Middle East in September as a private in the machine gun section of the 16th Reinforcements of the Canterbury Mounted Rifles, No 16271.

Grandad's war was a bit more unusual than most. He was transferred to the Imperial Camel Corps shortly after his arrival in Egypt. The Camel Corps were a special unit of volunteers from all of the different parts of the British Empire, who became experts in the use of camels for desert operations and played a special role in communications and reconaissance. Daniel was a member of the 16th Company, New Zealand's contribution to the unit, and apparently a good one, being promoted to Lance-Corporal in October 1917. The I.C.C. liaised with the Arab troops led by T E Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) and one of grandad's few references to his war service related to a midnight meeting by his unit with Lawrence in the desert.

At the end of March 1918 the I.C.C. were involved in an assault on Amman, near the biblical city of Jericho. This involved a huge trek across the Jordan Valley at night and with few tracks, which was reputed to be a great feat of camelling. The Fourth Battalion, which included grandad's NZ 16th Company, blew up 5 miles of railway lines and then joined the right flank of the NZ Mounted Rifles in an attack on the Turkish lines. Fierce fighting through March 28 and 29 saw the New

Zealanders advance to a hill overlooking Amman, where they were left exposed to intense firing from Turkish artillery and machine guns. It was in this action that grandad was wounded, sustaining a gunshot wound to his right ankle.

All day long this exposed line was subjected to an intense fire from artillery and machine-guns, and counter-attack after counter-attack was made by the Turks, but each one was gallantly repulsed. The 16th N Z Company, occupied a forward position on the northern slope, but being exposed to a deadly fire, it was withdrawn to the extreme right flank. During one of these determined attacks to recapture the hill-top the Turks advanced almost to the muzzles of the rifles of our men who, gallantly led by their officers, swept them back down the slope once more. Lieutenant Crawford of the 16th Company moved out openly to direct his men and was struck down to die later of his wounds, Lieutenant Thorby of the same Company led charge after charge until he fell mortally wounded, as also did Lieutenant Adolph. In the heat of one attack Corporal MacMillan of the Lewis Gun Section of the Company was seen advancing and firing his gun from his hip, until he too fell. Trooper McConnell, one of the regular packmen of the Company, had gone up to the line with reinforcements. He had a supply of bombs in his charge, and when the Turks counter-attacked almost to our line, he ran forward to meet them, and continued pulling out the pins and throwing the bombs with deadly effect right into the ranks of the enemy, until he fell pierced with bullets. The same spirit animated the whole Company, and the enemy was held off till darkness fell.

The evacuation of the wounded proved a terrible ordeal, with the only way back being across the same tortuous mountain paths. The first dressing station was a mile and a half behind the line across flat country exposed to shell and machine-gun fire. From there the seriously wounded were carried ten miles slung in stretchers from the sides of camels or tied to the backs of horses, "along tracks so rough and slippery that time after time the animals fell, causing intense agony to the sufferers on their backs". Then from the clearing station there was another ten mile journey by limbers along the Jordan Valley, a seventy mile journey by ambulance to the railway and a final 200 mile ride to Cairo by hospital train. The total journey took up to two weeks. In grandad's case this involved transfers through clearing stations and field hospitals in Jerusalem, Ludd, El Arish, Kautara, Abbassia and Heliopolis all within the two weeks to April 12. It must have been hell.

The severity of the wound put an end to grandad's war and he returned to New Zealand in late August. It was the only time he ever left New Zealand and many of us will recall his stories of camel races, of visiting the pyramids, and in my case the antique elephant figures bought in Cairo that were supposed to pay for boarding fees at St Bedes. He returned to the forces during the second world war, but only for a brief period as a sergeant at Burnham military camp - they didn't send fathers with six children to war. After the war he had drawn a small farm at Cannington, near Cave, as part of the government's rehabilitation scheme for servicemen. It was not a large farm and it must have been a struggle to keep going through the Depression with six young mouths to feed. But kept going it was until the children had flown the nest, and Daniel and Agnes retired to Timaru in 1952. Grandad died after a short illness on 18 May 1973, aged 81 years.

## Grandad's War

All of us who remember Daniel Brosnahan will recall his pride in his military service during the First World War. Personally, I can remember him telling of his visit to the pyramids in Egypt, of camel racing in the desert and of his gunshot ankle. My Dad recalls a rare anecdote of a midnight rendezvous in the desert with Arab irregulars led by T E Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). He was a proud participant in Dawn Parades and the annual Anzac Day commemoration. And of course all of the grandsons were promised Grandad's gun if they got their haircut to his satisfaction - from which I formed the distinct impression that the .22 rifle in his wardrobe cupboard was THE rifle, as used in the Egyptian desert. So for me at least the war experience was a big part of my mental map of who Grandad Brosnahan was.

In researching the Brosnahan family history I used military records to track down a number of the men of the war generations. In doing so I came across a few more details of Grandad's war which I would like to share with the rest of the family as we gather together in 1999.

Reflecting on the reality of his war service underlines how lucky we all are to be here today. Grandad was lucky to survive and might easily have suffered the fate of the two cousins who posed proudly with him in their uniforms in this photograph. These two brothers, Michael and Charles Scannell, died within days of each other, one from illness in South Africa and the other in action in France. Of the three, Daniel (on the left) alone returned to South Canterbury to live out his natural term of life.



Daniel Joseph Brosnahan enlisted in the 1st New Zealand Expeditionary Force on the 27 March 1916 for the duration of the conflict. He was a 22 year old farm labourer working for his father John Hugh Brosnahan at Levels. He had some military experience already, as a member of the A Squadron, Pleasant Point, of the 8th South Canterbury Mounted Rifles of the Canterbury Volunteers from November 1911. This predates the imposition of Compulsory Military Training [in 1912] so we can assume I think that Grandad was a bit of an enthusiast for

the army - unlike many of the 1NZEF who were conscripted for service after late 1916. His first four months in the full-time army were spent in training in New Zealand. Initially he was with the 16th Mounted Regiment and left to join the Expeditionary Force in Egypt, disembarking at Suez from the SS Mooltan on 21 September 1916. At some point he became part of the Imperial Camel Corps, a composite force of soldiers from throughout the British Empire who were to use camels for

### *Historical Notes for Brosnahan Family Reunion, October 1999*

long range operations in the hostile environment of the desert. Accordingly he spent the next few months at Abbassia on the outskirts of Cairo where he learnt how to handle and care for a camel. In January 1917 he joined the 16th (New Zealand) Company of the Imperial Camel Corps at Port Said. He was in the field from 1 October 1917 and on 1 December was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal. He then spent a short time at the School of Instruction at the Ferry Post. His military record gives few clues as to what he was involved with until it records his wounding on 30 March. This gives us a fix on where he was and with whom.

As luck would have it, a book was published in Dunedin in 1938 by John Robertson, one of the officer of the Brigade, 'With the Cameliers in Palestine'. This is a fascinating account of the Imperial Cameliers, who were unique in military history as the largest force ever mounted on camels. They had to be ready to go off into "the blue" at any time at one hour's notice and be able to remain in the field without support for five days at a time. There were just over 2,800 men in the Brigade, of whom 350 were New Zealanders. Three hundred and forty six of the Cameliers were killed. One section of the book provides some very useful detail of the action in which Grandad took his wound - the raid on Amman by Shea's Group in late March 1918.

The raid on Amman (now the capital of Jordan) was part of an attack on the Hedjaz railway on the high land east of the Jordan River. It aimed at the destruction of a railway tunnel and viaduct at Amman to disrupt Turkish communication lines with their base. The raiding party was under the command of Major-General Shea and known as "Shea's Group". It was made up of the Anzac Mounted Division, the 60th Infantry Division and the Imperial Camel Brigade. Amman was just 30 miles east of Jericho which had recently been recaptured by the Anzacs, but it stood on a plateau 3,500 feet above sea level. There were no bridges across the Jordan river and no passable roads beyond it. A pontoon bridge was strung across the Jordan after a small group of soldiers had swum across the river under cover of night on March 22. The next evening the Cameliers left their camp at Talat ed Dumm on the Judean hills and marched all night down the steep mountain road, through Jericho and across the Jordan Valley to within half a mile of the northern shore of the Dead Sea.

The river crossing was a bit of a nightmare. The pontoon bridge had been strung across in less than eight hours, in the dark and under heavy fire from the Turks who were well positioned in tamarisk trees along the river bank. The river was swollen and discoloured, tall trees on either side cut off the view while dead Turks and British casualties still littered the river bank. Each Camelier had one unwilling camel in front and a second even more unwilling beast behind him. The sound of artillery and machine gun fire could be heard not far ahead. The Cameliers pushed on across the river and up into the foothills, halting by the Wadi Kefrein in the afternoon. Worse was to come.

At 6pm on 23 March the Cameliers mounted and rode up the wadi. As they entered the hills it began to rain and soon the track became a slippery quagmire. The country soon proved too difficult for the force's artillery support, which was forced to retreat - its absence to be keenly felt in the battle ahead. The party was to climb over 4000 feet (its point of departure by the Dead Sea being almost 1300 feet below sea level) up steep rocky mountain sides. Camels were not designed to follow the steep, and now muddy, goat tracks being used and had to be driven hard by their riders. All night they struggled on through the dark and rain and mud. When dawn broke they found themselves atop a mountain plateau but the mist and cloud prevented any view of their surroundings. On they pushed with frequent stops as animals fell and blocked the track. Through the day and into the next night they struggled on, the rain and mud seemingly without end. At daybreak the next day the rain finally ceased, the countryside opened up and at midday a halt was called. After a quick meal those not on duty turned in and slept until well into the next morning - after 80 hours strenuous travel since their last sleep.

*Historical Notes for Brosnahan Family Reunion, October 1999*

The Fourth Battalion of the Imperial Camel Corps was despatched to demolish part of the Turkish railway, blowing up five miles of track between Libben and Kissir, before rejoining the right flank of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles for its attack on the Turkish position at Amman. Here they were subjected to attack after attack on the 28 and 29 March but held these off and gradually advanced toward Hill 3039 overlooking the town of Amman. At 1.30am on the 30th they advanced on the hill over a flat tableland of about half a mile, driving the Turks from their positions at the point of the bayonet. A second advance carried them to the crest of the hill overlooking the town where the only protection was from whatever stones and rocks could be gathered together - the soil was too shallow for the digging of trenches.

All day long this exposed line was subjected to heavy fire from Turkish artillery and machine-guns and counter-attack after counter-attack from the Turks. The 16th New Zealand Company (including Lance Corporal DJ Brosnahan) was on the extreme right flank and one Turkish advance advanced almost to the muzzles of their rifles. Lieutenant Crawford of the 16th moved out openly to direct his men and was struck down, Lieutenants Thorby and Adolph led charge after charge until mortally wounded. Corporal MacMillan of the Lewis Gun Section was seen advancing and firing from his hip until he too fell. Trooper McConnell, one of the regular packmen, had a supply of bombs and throw them with deadly effect until he too fell pierced with bullets. "The same spirit animated the whole Company, and the enemy was held off till darkness fell." Sometime during this action on 30 March Grandad suffered a gunshot wound to his right ankle.

With Turkish reinforcements coming from two directions, and no artillery support, the position was deemed not worth the cost of defending any further and a retreat to the Jordan Valley was ordered. But the evacuation of the wounded was the next challenge. The casualties were heavy and the dressing station was a mile and a half behind the line across the flat table-top exposed to artillery and machine-gun fire. Stretcher bearers were frequently hit while crossing it. From this dressing station to the next clearing station was a further ten miles. Those who could not walk or ride had to be carried in camel cacolets or tied to the backs of horses.



*Camels with cacolets for the wounded before the Raid on Amman, 1918*

### *Historical Notes for Brosnahan Family Reunion, October 1999*

The tracks were so rough and slippery that time after time the animals fell, causing intense agony to the sufferers on their backs ... A camel cacolet consisted of an arrangement of two stretchers, hung one on each side of a special saddle, in which the patients lay. Two men had always to be carried, the weight of one balancing that of the other, on the opposite side ... This method of evacuating the wounded was an agonising experience to them, but it was the only available means of saving their lives or preventing them from falling into the hands of the Turks. From the clearing station the wounded were conveyed to the Jordan Valley in limbers, another ten miles, and from there motor ambulances carried them to the railway, some seventy miles from the front line. All cases that could be safely moved were then forwarded in hospital trains to Cairo, a further journey of over two hundred miles, the total journey from the front sometimes occupying a fortnight or more.

Grandad reached the 45th Stat. Hospital at El Arish on the 4 April, then the 44th at Kautara on 7 April. The next day he was moved to the 27th General Hospital at Abbassia and on the 12 April to the Aotea Convalescent Home at Heliopolis. His condition was improving by early May. Two months later on 19 June he was discharged to the New Zealand Base at Ismalia. On 15 July he boarded a ship for the return to New Zealand but was then detached to a Rest Camp at Port Said on 29 July. He was admitted to the No 14 Australian General Hospital on 16 August suffering from influenza. (This was the influenza that swept the world in 1918/19, killing over 20 million people, including 6,700 in New Zealand) Finally on 29 August he embarked on the SS Wiltshire at Suez for his return to New Zealand arriving on 9 October. He was discharged from the New Zealand Army on 6 February 1919.

This was not the end of Grandad's military career. He was recalled to the army in the Second World War serving as a sergeant at the <sup>Sutton</sup> ~~Trent~~ <sup>Ham</sup> Military Camp. The Imperial Camel Corps has a monument to its memory, which Bede and I were lucky enough to visit in December 1998. It is in a park beside the Thames River in the heart of London, just by the Embankment Tube station. It features a camelier atop his camel and lists all of the major engagements of the Corps as well as the names of its dead. At first Bede and I were disappointed not to find D J Brosnahan's name there - until it dawned on us that if his name were there, we would not have been!