

## Who do you think you are?

### ***The Family of Thomas and Della Collins nee Leece.***

***This is the story of Della's brother Charles who was killed in World War One, a week after his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. 100 years ago, next week on 12 October 1917***

Hi, I'm Grant and Della was my grandmother, we called her Nana.

Tom and Della Collins had two daughters Mona and Margaret, they are known in the family as the Collins Sisters.

Mona married Ernest Bartlett, they had three children, Robert, Graham and David.

Margaret married Ian Middlemiss, they had two children, Grant and Lynne.

Nana (Della) was one of 10 children, her father John Alfred Leece was born in the Isle of Man, England. He came out to New Zealand via Australia, he was a miner, but they said he had a newspaper business when he was in Australia.

He married Emily Sullivan, (the Sullivan family had been early settlers, but that's another story) They married and ended up living with their 10 children at a mining village known as Mine Creek Colliery at Millerton in the hills above Granity on the West Coast of the South Island.

Nana's sister Nell married Tom Te Kanawa, they adopted a daughter who they call Kiri, who became a singer. But that's another story.

When Grandma was 11 her miner father was killed in an accident. The family fell on hard times, her 6 year old brother Charles was sent to Timaru to live with relations.

This is the story of Charles.

## **Charles Leece 1900 - 1917**

Charles Leece was born at Waihi on 6 October 1900 to John Alfred and Emily Leece (nee Sullivan). Mother Emily was born at Halswell Canterbury and father John in the Isle of Man England.

On Friday the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1907, Charles father John (father of 10) was killed in a mining accident at the Westport Coal Companies, Mine Creek colliery, which was at the township of Millerton in the hills above Granity. According to newspaper reports the accident occurred when a derailed coal truck struck some timber [supports] bringing down a large quantity of coal, which struck the unfortunate man. He died that day after being admitted to the Westport hospital. It was further reported that the deceased, prior to coming to New Zealand, had been a newspaper proprietor in New South Wales.

Charles the youngest son and 2<sup>nd</sup> youngest of the 10 children was 6-year-old when his father died. Della our Grandmother was 11. At some point Charles was sent to school in Timaru.

On 26 February 1915 Charles then aged 14 years and 4 months appeared in the Nelson Magistrates Court before Mr J.S. Evans (Stipendiary Magistrates) charged with failing to register as required by the defence Act. He pleaded guilty.

*It's amazing to think that 14 year olds had to register for the army at 14, and appeared in court and had their name in the local paper for not doing so.*

Sergeant Major Sharland, who appeared for the Defence Department, explained that boys attaining the age of 14 had to register. He told the court that once Charles had been informed by a Constable that he had not registered he had forthwith done so. The Magistrate (jocularly): Are you frightened to go to the front? Are you going to be a good soldier? Charles replied: Yes.

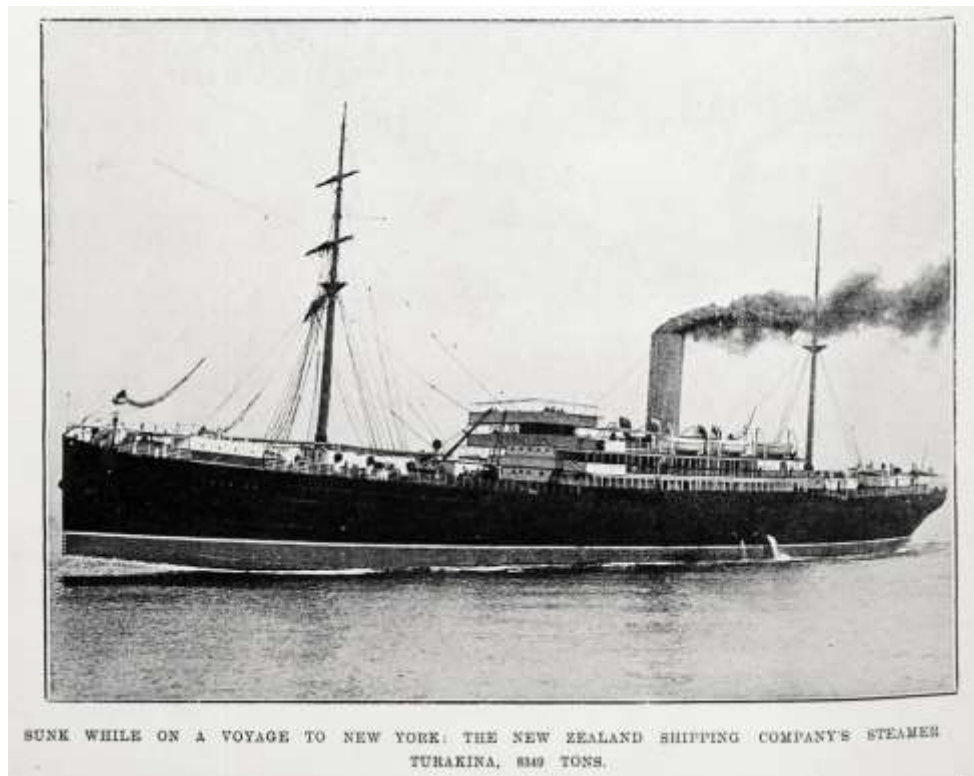
On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1917, aged 16 years 3 months, presents himself at the army recruiting office in Nelson claiming to be 20 years old. There he is required to fill an application to join up, and must swear that his answers are true. Charles gives his occupation as a hotel porter at the local Nelson Masonic Hotel, where his employer is a Mr Scott. To cloud his background, he claimed to have been born at

Brisbane Australia, his mother in Adelaide, and that the family had shifted to New Zealand four years earlier.

Charles 5 foot with fair hair with blue eyes 9 ½ stone (60kg)

Charles joined C Company of the Canterbury Infantry Regiment of the 25<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements and is sent to Trentham for his training. He departs New Zealand from Wellington on the Troopship *Turakina* on 26 April 1917, arriving in Plymouth England on 20 July 1917.

*Turakina* a passenger/cargo ship, then sailing from London to New York in ballast was torpedoed and sunk by U-86 with the loss of 3 lives.



After training at Sling Camp in Wiltshire England he is transferred to France on 5 September 1917, 10 days later he is at the front.

On 12 October 1917 Charles is reported missing. The Canterbury Infantry Regiment and troops of other NZ Divisions were fighting to capture the Belgium town of Passchendaele that day 45 officers and 800 New Zealand men killed with more than 2700 men wounded.

Charles was initially reported as missing, it was not until a Court of enquiry seven months later held that he had been killed in action on the date of his disappearance. He had been 17 years old for just 6 days

12 October 1917 has gone down in history as ***New Zealand's blackest day***. In terms of lives lost in a single day 12 October 1917 is the greatest disaster in New Zealand's history,

Charles's body has never been found.

***Private Charles Leece (46195) aged 17, was killed in Action at Passchendaele, Belgium on 12 October 1917  
He is remembered on the Tyne Cot Memorial, (NZ Apse, panel 2)  
Tyne Cot Cemetery, Zonnebeke, West-Viaanderen, Belgium.***

12 October 1917 is the most tragic day in New Zealand's military history. The failed attempt to capture Bellevue Spur, Passchendaele.

A preliminary artillery barrage was supposed to destroy German barbed wire, but following an advance bogged down in mud, horrified New Zealand Infantry discovered the wire was still intact.

Trapped in the open ground and stuck in mud, they were cut down by withering German machine-gun and artillery fire 800 New Zealanders died and 2,900 were wounded.

The greatest number of lives lost on a single day in our countries history.

## Photos of the Mine Creek Colliery

In the hills of the Papahaua Ranges behind the coastal town on Granity 25km North East of Westport on the West coast of the South Island lies the settlement of Millerton which included the Mine Creek Colliery and village, one of a number of mines in the area. It was here on 7 June 1907 that our Great Grandfather John Alfred Leece lost his life in a mining accident.

(Can you spot Grandma Della, or any of her brothers and sisters)



