

Prior to volunteering for overseas service, Trooper Ambrose Martin Cotterell (7/1603) served with the Territorial Forces as a member of the 8th South Canterbury Mounted rifles. He was working as a musterer for A.G. Nalder at Farlie when he, together with his younger brother Joseph, volunteered for service in the middle of 1915.



The volunteers outside the Army Hall, High Street, Timaru. Joseph Cotterell is in the middle row 5th from left. Ambrose Cotterell is 10th from left. Both men are in their Territorial Army uniforms.

In August 1915 Ambrose and Joseph joined the other volunteers at the army drill hall in High Street and then marched down Stafford Street to the railway station. Ambrose went into camp at Trentham where he was officially sworn into the Canterbury Mounted Rifles (CMR) on 26th August 1915.

The days at Trentham were spent drilling, marching, receiving musketry instruction and being issued gear and equipment. On 9th October 1915 the reinforcements boarded Troop Ship number 289 SS Hororata at Wellington. The Hororata arrived at Suez on 18th November 1915.

Ambrose traveled by train to Zeitoun Camp, near Cairo and was joined in December 1915 by the evacuees from Gallipoli. During his time at Zeitoun, training focused on hardening of the horses and horsemanship tests for the reinforcements. On 8th January 1916 he was officially posted to the 8th Squadron of the CMR.

British plans in early 1916 were initially geared towards protection of the Suez from the Turkish Forces. The CMR, a Regiment of the NZ Mounted Rifles (NZMR) would use this time to sharpen their training and familiarize themselves with operating in the desert.



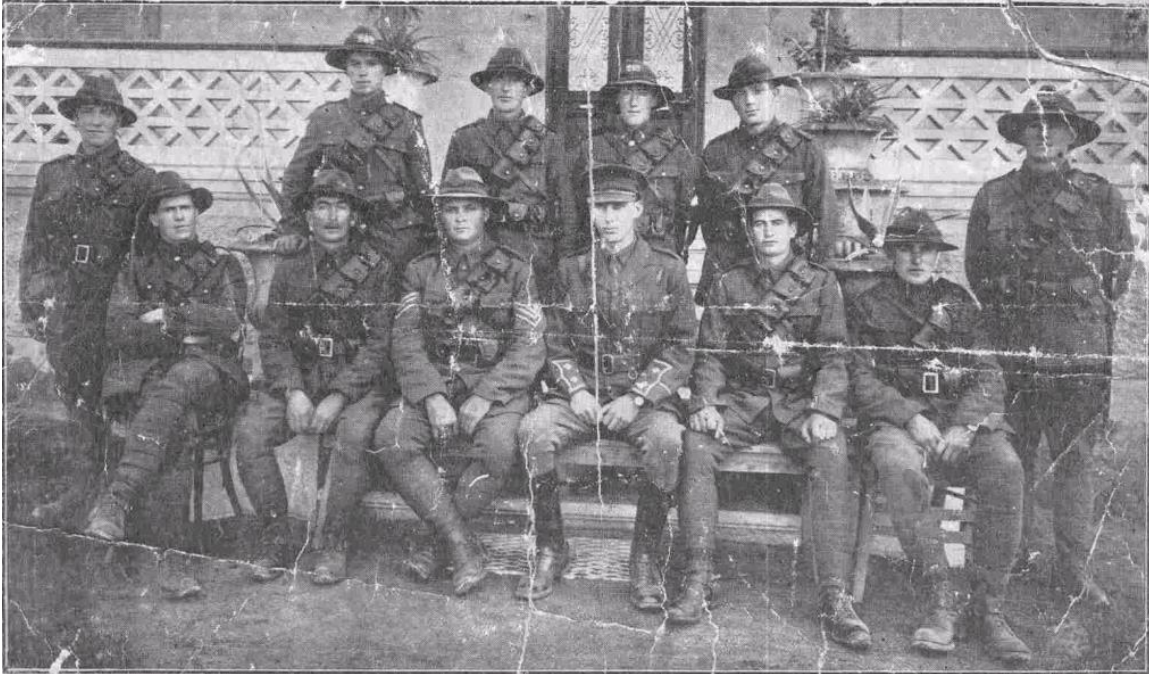
Trooper Ambrose Martin Cotterell on final leave in New Zealand 1915

The defense of the Suez eventually evolved into the clearance of the Sinai and the driving of the Ottoman Turkish forces from Palestine and Syria by the end of 1918.



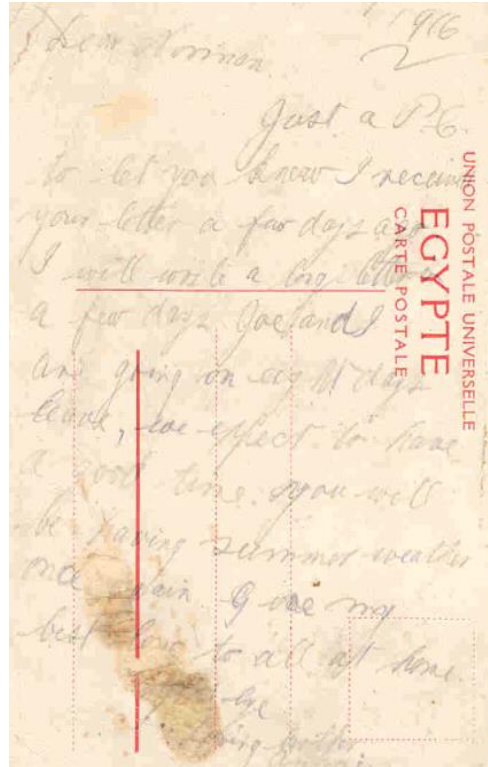
Ambrose and D Kidd enjoy a cup of tea on a pyramid.

By the end of 1916 the CMR had won a series of actions against Ottoman forces, driven them out of the Sinai, and reached the border of Palestine in one of the most successful Allied campaigns of the war. These actions included the battle of Romani in August 1916 and the action at Maghaba in December 1916.



A GROUP OF MACKENZIE COUNTRY MEN TAKEN IN EGYPT

Their names are, reading from the left: -Sitting- Trooper W. Guthrie, Trooper T.C. Adams, Sergeant Pike, Lieutenant C. Blakeney, Trooper J. Lang, Trooper C. Auld. Standing – Troopers A. Sullivan, L. Gordon, R. Day, J.R. Cotterell, W. Ross, A.M. Cotterell



September 30th
1916

Dear Norman,

Just a post card to let you know I received your letter a few days ago. I will write a big letter in a few days. Joe and I are going on eight days leave, we expect to have a good time. You will be having summer weather once again. Give my best love to all at home.

Your loving brother,
Ambrose

During 1917 the CMR and the rest of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade take part in three battles for Gaza. The most significant action for Ambrose is the attack on Rafa. In 1917 Rafa was a police and customs post on the Sinai-Palestine border. It became the focus of British attention after the fall of Maghaba, the other Turkish outpost guarding the Palestine frontier. Aircraft had reported two Turkish Battalions and four mountain guns holding a strong position at a hill called El Magruntein, about a mile south of Rafa and so the decision was made to mount an attack.



A line of horses and men from the 8th Squadron taking a break in the desert. The trooper at the front is Joseph Cotterell

The battle of Rafa was typical in many respects of the fighting that the CMR took part in. The point of attack was 40 km from the nearest supply depot so all food, water and equipment had to be carried by the column. The move towards the enemy positions took place with an overnight march in bitterly cold conditions with the attack commencing the next morning against an entrenched and stubborn foe.

The CMR moved out at dusk on 8th January 1917 and traveled through the night towards Rafa with orders to attack the enemy positions. Daylight revealed a pleasant change from desert sand as the Rafa area was lush and green with much of the land under cultivation.

The attack started at 9.30am on 9th January when the CMR, with Ambrose's 8th Squadron as the advance party, began an attack from the north-east. The 8th Squadron came under

enemy fire as it came into full view of the enemy and suffered several casualties. Despite this, the CRM captured the Police Station taking 200 prisoners.

From the captured police station a good view could be obtained of the Turkish trenches 1,800 meters away. The Turks held a strong position at El Magruntein with a formidable series of trenches on the top of the hill and rising ground offering them a commanding field of fire against any aggressors. The sloping approach to the trenches was devoid of all cover but by 11am the CRM had dismounted and was working its way across this exposed ground in the face of heavy enemy machine gun and rifle fire. The CRM was joined by the Auckland Mounted and together they began an advance with covering fire being provided as ground was gained.

By early afternoon a steady rifle and machine gun fire was being directed at the Turks but the lack of ground cover had stalled further movement towards the enemy trenches. Enemy planes had also appeared and begun bombing the attacking force. Shortly before 4pm a force of 2,000 Turkish reinforcements was spotted moving towards Rafa. Ammunition and water were also running low and the Turkish position was looking increasingly impregnable so the order was given to withdraw.

Before this instruction could reach the Mounted Rifles, a final charge was commenced with cover provided by every available rifle and machine gun. This fierce and determined bayonet charge over 730 meters of open ground proved too much for the surviving Turks who immediately surrendered. But at some point during the action Ambrose's luck finally ran out – he had been wounded in the thigh by a Turkish gunshot.

Ambrose was one of 415 British troops wounded in the action at Rafa and evacuation was a major logistical exercise. Ambrose was firstly taken to an advanced casualty clearing station 13 kilometers away, a journey that took four hours. From there Ambrose proceeded by camel a further 30 km to El Arish.

The camel ride would have been particularly painful for a wounded man. A device called a cacelot was lashed to the camel's back which carried a man on each side. But the rolling gait of the camel resulted in an extremely uncomfortable ride and most wounded would probably have preferred to have been lashed to their horse.

The railhead at that stage came within 5 km of El Arish and an ambulance train composed of converted carriages from the Egyptian Railways had been introduced only the previous month. Ambrose was taken by this train to Kantara on 11th January and was admitted to the 800 bed Number 24 Stationary Hospital. He was there for 4 days before being transferred on 14th January to the Number 27 General Hospital at Abassia. From there Ambrose sent a postcard to his brother Norman describing how lucky he had been not to have been more seriously wounded:

*27th General Hospital
Cairo
January 17th 1917*

Dear Norman,

You will have heard by this that I was wounded on January 9th. I was very lucky the bullet would have gone right through my leg only for a pocket knife which was in my pocket. I will write you a long letter directly I get out of the hospital.

Ambrose



Ambrose top middle(with white collar) at the 27th General Hospital

On 30th January Ambrose was moved to the Aotea Rest Home at Heliopolis.

Extract from page 7 Timaru Herald dated 18th January 1917:

Mr W. M. Cotterill, Fairlie, has received word from the Defence Department that his brother, Private A. M. Cotterill, was wounded in the left thigh, and that he has been admitted to the Stationary Hospital at Kantara. Private Cotterill was a well-known and popular resident of Fairlie.

On 23rd February 1917 Ambrose was discharged to the NZ Mounted Training Regiment. Ambrose fell sick at Moascar and on 19th March 1917 was admitted to the Number 26 Stationary hospital at Ismailia before being discharged again to the Training Regiment on 27th March 1917.

Ambrose rejoined the CMR on 10th April 1917. While he had been in hospital, an unsuccessful attempt had been made to capture Gaza on 26 – 27 March. He had returned just in time for the second battle of Gaza.

On 22nd April 1917 the CMR took up a position at the Wadi near Shellal which became the base for daily reconnaissances. On 22nd May the CMR took part in the raid on the Beersheba railway at Asluj and 25 km of railway was destroyed using explosives. On 8th June the CMR retired to a rest camp set up on the beach at Tel el Marakeb. It was here that Ambrose was admitted sick to the ANZAC Reception Station on 28th June 1917, one of 73 CRM men admitted that month.

From Tel el Marakeb Ambrose went down the line by camel and hospital train through a succession of clearing stations and hospitals. It would be 21st August before he was admitted to the Aotea Convalescent Home at Heliopolis near Cairo. A lack of beds at Aotea saw Ambrose transferred to the NZ Convalescent Hospital at Port Said on 31 August where he remained until 20th September 1917.

In total Ambrose was ill for almost 3 months. His service records only disclose that he was admitted because of sickness although we know he had malaria at some stage. He was finally discharged to the Training Regiment on 20th September 1917 and was dispatched with a reinforcement draft to rejoin the CMR in November 1917 near Jaffa.

During 1918 the CMR and the rest of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade moved east across Palestine into the Jordan Valley as part of the Anzac Mounted Division. Two raids into the highlands east of the Jordan were costly failures. A third raid in September reached Amman and took 7000 Ottoman prisoners. .

In May 1918 Divisional Headquarters received a letter from the Mayor of Richon le Zion which was located southeast of Jaffa. This pleasant garden city had been liberated by the CMR in 1917 and the grateful citizens had since billeted the Division on several occasions. The Mayor informed them that their billets were still available if they ever wished to return. Richon was now home to a Military Instruction School so it was decided to send the 8th squadron to Richon for 6 weeks. Ambrose and the rest of the squadron left for Richon on 27th May 1918 and it was while at Richon that Ambrose was promoted to Lance Corporal. Richon was a small Jewish city with a population of 1,500 that had extensive orange orchards and mulberry trees. But its most attractive feature was that it was the center of the Palestinian wine industry. Here red and white wines and cognac could be obtained at reasonable prices. The 8th squadron rejoined the CMR on 10th July 1918 and the *History of the Canterbury Mounted Rifles* records that they “had had an easy time, and were much refreshed by the spell”

Rest camps had been opened on a Mediterranean beach at Tel el Marakeb and on the cliffs to the north of Khan Yunas. The rest camps gave the troops the chance to recover from the mental and physical exhaustion that many were suffering from. Following the success of these camps a larger rest camp was formed at Port Said and the CMR began

posting drafts of men there from May 1918. Ambrose was posted to the rest camp on 15th August 1918.

The rest camp at Port Said was a makeshift affair created by lashing tents together. Pianos, books, cards and games were provided by the Red Cross and swimming in the sea was very popular. There were no parades and the only duty required of Ambrose would have been to keep his bed tidy.

It was back to reality for Ambrose in early October 1918 with a train trip back to Jerusalem to rejoin the CMR. Ambrose rejoined the CMR at Jerusalem on 9th October 1918 to find the CMR decimated by malaria and the war effectively over. In his absence, the CMR had finally occupied Es Salt and Amman.

Many men took the opportunity now to take a last look over Jerusalem and it is likely that Ambrose did likewise. On the 13th October 1918 the CMR returned to Richon le Zion.

On 31 October 1918 news of the armistice with Turkey arrived. Training carried on at Richon but more time was allowed for recreation. The armistice was followed by the Allied occupation of the Dardanelles and Constantinople and it was decided that the ANZAC's should be represented in the force to be landed at Gallipoli. The CMR were picked to go to Gallipoli as Infantry and so the majority of the horses were to be left behind.

On 13th November, two days after the armistice on the Western Front, the CMR went by train from Ludd to Kantara. It was an uncomfortable journey with heavy rain coming through the roofs of the carriages and soaking everyone to the skin. It was decided that the force to the Dardanelles was to be limited to 25 officers, 464 other ranks and 81 animals for transport purposes. Preference was given to Gallipoli veterans and experienced men. Ambrose by now was definitely in the latter category. The remainder of the CMR returned to the training unit at Ismailia.



A Christmas card from Ambrose to his older brother William and wife Annie posted 19th November 1918 from Kantara

On 27 November Ambrose embarked on the transport H.M.T Huntcastle from Kantara. The Huntcastle was a captured German ship that had been gutted by fire and then refitted as a horse transport with accommodation for 100 men and 1,000 animals. So it wasn't exactly ideal accommodation for 1,000 men and 160 animals. In addition the decks leaked during wet weather and there were no medical facilities on board. The CMR disembarked at Maidos at the Dardanelles on 6 December and were billeted at a run down Turkish Hospital between Maidos and Kilid Bahr.

Ambrose in later years was reluctant to speak of his time in the Dardanelles so we can only surmise what work he carried out there. We do know that the weather was extremely cold and influenza and malaria were rife among the troops. We also know from photographs that Ambrose took that he had time to have a look around, including an inspection of the Turkish fortresses that lined the Dardanelles Straits and whose guns repulsed the British fleet in 1915.

It is also possible that Ambrose was in one of the groups assigned to explore the old 1915 positions at Gallipoli and to search for graves. Around 10,000 ANZAC's were left behind at Gallipoli. Ambrose may have been involved in searching these remains for scraps of information such as buttons and the remains of uniforms that would identify them as ANZACs. The remains were then gathered together and a grave dug and properly marked and recorded.

The CMR left for Port Said on 19 January 1919 but Ambrose was one of 94 men who stayed behind with the horses and transport vehicles. He finally disembarked at Alexandria in Egypt on 31 January 1919 and rejoined the main body of the CMR at Rafa.

Ambrose rejoined the CMR at Rafa to find that the process of demobilization had commenced and that many of the horses had been shot. The quarantine regulations in NZ prohibited the importation of animals from the Middle East.

In March the CMR was unexpectedly involved in one last operation. Demonstrations by students in Cairo early in March were the signal for widespread rioting culminating in a general strike. The Mounted were given the unhappy task of suppressing this rebellion. The whole Regiment moved by troop train to the west bank of the Suez where they were re-equipped with new gear and fresh horses. From there they rode to Tanta in the northern delta of Egypt and the 8th Squadron was involved in patrol duty to control unrest in the many small villages of the delta. There was a distinct lack of enthusiasm for this work by the men of the CMR. The war had officially ended 4 months previously and there was a feeling that the job had been done and it was time to go home.

The slow process of demobilization was a frustrating time for the men of the CMR. There was insufficient shipping available with so many vessels sunk by the Germans during the war. For Ambrose the process began on 11 May 1919 when he was posted to the CMR Training Unit at Ismailia. On 23rd May he moved to the Transit Camp at Port Said and on 24th May he embarked on the SS Princess Juliana for Marseilles on route to the UK.

The main body of the CMR stayed on in Egypt. On 30 June 1919 the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade was disbanded and 1,089 men departed from Egypt on the transport Ulimaroa bound directly for New Zealand. The last transport departed on 23 July 1919 on the Ellenga.

Ambrose and his younger brother Joseph spent three weeks in London and it was during this time that he presented his hat badge to a girl while taking part in a victory parade. On Victory Parade Day in 1945 she recalled being given the badge and posted it off to his old address in New Zealand where it eventually found its way back to Ambrose.

On 8 July 1919 Ambrose reported to Sling Training Camp near Salisbury and on 28 July he sailed from Plymouth to New Zealand on HMS Hororata, the same ship that had transported him to Egypt nearly 4 years earlier. The voyage took 54 days and he disembarked in New Zealand on 20 September 1919 and was finally discharged from the Army on 21 October.

Ambrose was 26 when he stepped off the Hororata. He had served overseas for 3 years and 347 days and his total length of service was 4 years and 58 days.

No account of Ambrose's war service would be complete without mentioning the part played by his brother Joseph Richard Cotterell. Joseph volunteered as a 19 year old at the same time as Ambrose, served alongside him for most of the war, and returned to New Zealand on the same ship. The bond forged through their shared experiences in the Middle East endured until Joseph's death. The two old soldiers and their families would meet every Christmas and share a jug or three of beer, no doubt reminisce about the war and then sleep it off on the back lawn. Joseph suffered from sickness throughout his life as a result of his war experiences and died at the age of 56 on 22 February 1952.

Ambrose suffered his fair share of ill health, much of which can probably be attributed to his war service. Despite this, Ambrose and Violet raised eight children and Ambrose was even called up during the second world war for service at Timaru Military Camp. He was 51 when he was discharged on 1st September 1944 by which time he had served a total of 7 years and 238 days over the two wars. Ambrose was 64 when he died on 3rd March 1958.



Medals and Badges of A M Cotterell