

Reference: Christchurch Boys High School Newsletter August 2012

Each ANZAC service we pause to briefly remember an Old Boy of the school and his involvement during times of war.

Arthur John Ware Birdling – ‘Jack’

A student at Christchurch Boys’ High School from 1906 - 1907

Jack was the grandson of William Birdling of Somersetshire, England; he arrived in New Zealand in 1842 and in 1852 purchased the first portion of the Birdling’s Flat estate, near Little River. His fifth son Arthur senior married and farmed at Lansdowne Halswell where Jack was born in 1890.

Jack attended Boys’ High School in 1906 and 1907; leaving to farm on the Lansdowne property.

At age 23 he passed his 2nd Lieutenant’s examination. He reported to the Trentham Military Base on March 5th, 1915, leaving for The Front as an officer of the First Canterbury Mounted Rifles in November and arriving in Egypt and at the Suez canal in December. Four months were spent in Egypt during which time he was transferred to the Canterbury Regiment and promoted to 1st Lieutenant.

The Canterbury Regiment arrived in France to be part of the Battle of the Somme.

The Battle of the Somme was the main Allied attack on the Western Front during 1916. Sadly, it is famous chiefly on account of the loss of 58,000 British troops on the first day of the battle, 1 July - one third of them were killed. Many of these men were killed or wounded the instant they stepped out of the front lines into No Man’s Land.

On the 15th September 1916 the New Zealand Division, supported by tanks, surged out of its front lines between Longueval and the Bois des Fourcaux (known to the British army as High Wood). They reached their objective, Flers, the same day. Five days later, on September 20th, Arthur Birdling was killed in action aged twenty-six while fighting with the Canterbury Regiment at Picardie.

In the Boys’ High School Magazine of 1917 is an excerpt from a letter from Lieut. V. E. McGowan to Jack’s mother:

... It was on the night of September 20th that Canterbury had to push forward and were getting a sad time. The officers were all killed in this advance. . . . Just as your son was jumping into the German trench he was shot just below the heart. He got into the trench, gave orders to the men as to what they must do; in fact he several times said, ‘Bomb them right down the trench boys.’ He was then sitting on the fire step in the trench. He gradually lost consciousness, and when the stretcher bearers took him out he was quite unconscious, and died just before they reached the field dressing-station. He is buried in the soldiers’ cemetery just before going into Flers, on the right and close to the road. There is a little cross with his number and name at his grave.

And from Major John Studholme

“I write these few lines to tell you how grieved I was to hear of your boy’s death; of all the many casualties in this war among our N.Z. officers there is no one that I have regretted so

much as his. His was that happy sunny nature that springs from simple goodness of heart. He seemed always to do the right thing and avoid the wrong instinctively. He had no false shame or fear of being thought a humbug, which is so refreshing, but he simply went his own way and said what he thought as naturally as a child, and without being aware of it had a great influence for good wherever he was. He had such a cheery nature and his cheeriness was so contagious that he was a delightful man to work with. We had many a good laugh together. "His men simply loved him, though he was in every sense a good officer, and wouldn't overlook bad work or slackness..."

"We cannot give you back your boy, but can only pray as I do that you may realise the greatness of the Cause he has died for, and that the happy memories he cannot but have left behind will lighten the sorrow and pain of his loss."

Poor weather eventually brought a halt to the Somme offensive - a five-month battle: during which the British and French had gained 12 kilometers of ground at a cost of an estimated 620,000 Allied casualties. German casualties have been estimated at no less than 500,000. Arthur 'Jack' Birdling is now buried in the Caterpillar Valley New Zealand Memorial Cemetery at Longueval in the Somme, France. The names of 1,205 New Zealand soldiers who died in the September advance are carved into marble at Longueval.
