John Jacobs

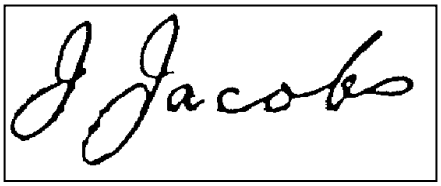
William and Mary Ann's ninth child, John, was born on Tuesday the 14th of August 1883 at Kaiata just outside of Greymouth on the road to Reefton.

John's schooling records are missing but he attended Grey Main School just as his brothers and sisters before him did. His army records tell us that he did not get an education to the level of standard 4.

John was known as Jack and he worked numerous places on the West Coast, especially at the Kopara, and mainly on farms. In 1917 he was living at Omoto Rd, working as a 'self employed' dairy farmer.

Left: Private John Jacobs.

Jack was 33½ years old, not young by army standards, when he swore this oath - 'I John Jacobs, do sincerely promise and swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to our Sovereign Lord the King, and that I will faithfully serve in the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces against His Majesty's enemies, and that I will loyally observe and obey all orders of the Generals and Officers set over me, until I shall be lawfully discharged. So help me, God.'
The term of Jack's enlistment was for the duration of the war and six months after if required.



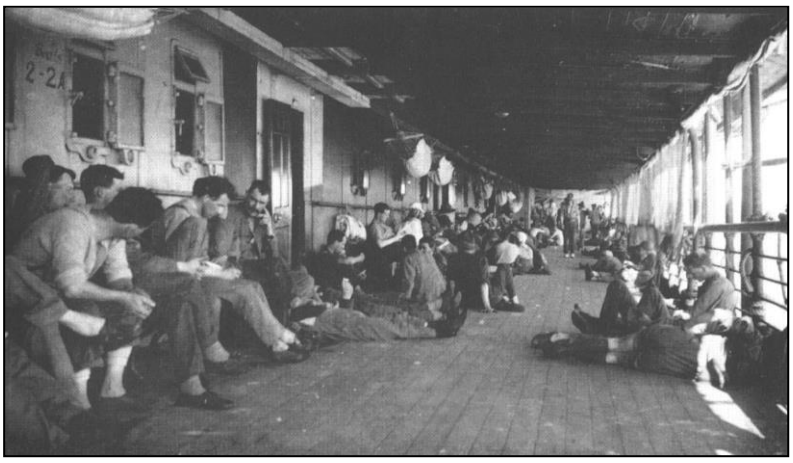
John's signature from his army papers.

At his medical, in February 1917, Jack was declared fit and well with no 'mental or physical defects'. He was 5ft 8½ inches tall and weighed 145 pounds (approximately 10 stone). The doctor conducting the medical also noted that Jack had a medium complexion, grey eyes, brown hair, good vision and hearing, and a chest measuring 33 inches.

Jack's initial training took place in Wellington at the Trentham and Featherston Military Camps. Featherston Camp was capable of holding 8000 men. The quartermaster's store supplied hats, overcoats, denims, boots and jerseys, socks and underwear to the new recruits. Jack also received a messing (eating) kit, blankets, a toothbrush, holdall and other small items. As most men of the day had diseased teeth a visit to the dental corps took place.

The 8,000 men in training were woken at reveille by the sound of trumpets. At 8:30am the reinforcements paraded for training - marching, musketry, attack drill and trench digging. They would sometimes go out on a long trek and be away from camp for three days during which time they would go through every feature of their field training[73]. Jack had occasion for leave and he no doubt took the opportunity to visit Wellington and surrounding areas. His final 10 day leave back home to Kaiata, prior to embarkation on a troopship, gave family and friends a chance for a send-off hoping that this would not be a final goodbye.

About 6am on the 13th of June 1917, the troopship *Tahiti* set sail from Wellington with almost 1000 men from the 27th NZEF Reinforcements aboard.



Aboard the Tahiti.

The ship struck bad weather almost immediately. One solider, 'tongue in cheek', wrote in the ship's magazine, Tales of a Tub, "And the waters beat hard on the Tub. Yea verily they smote it hip and thigh even bow and stern did it roll and pitch some. One moment it was lift up to the skies and another it reached the bottom of the seas. It reeled to and fro and did stagger like a drunken man. The windows of heaven were opened and the rain descended. Truly we were a miserable company".

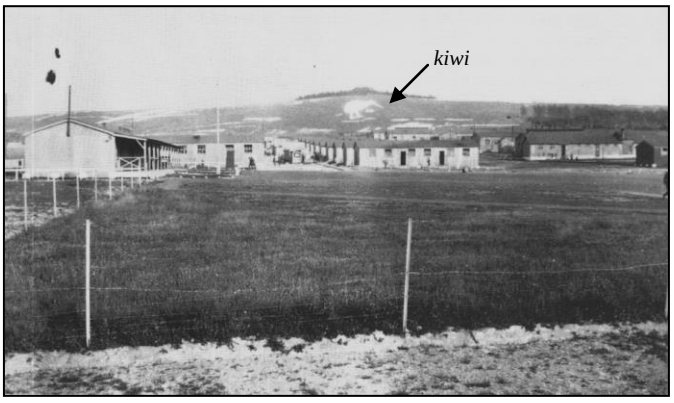
One of the jokes in the magazine sums up how the majority of those aboard felt, 'Bill (writing home): "I must say, dear, we are fed well – six meals a day – three down and three up".

The *Tahiti*'s portholes were closed and painted over so the ship would not become an enemy target. The sleeping accommodation consisted of bunks three high with getting into bed being anything but a simple operation. Washing was a nasty business with salt water making the clothes hard, sticky and salty feeling[77]. Daily life aboard the ship started at 6:15am when the men hopped up and dressed in shifts and got up onto deck by 6:30 in case they were grabbed for a scrubbing party. Breakfast was eaten in two shifts and consisted of porridge and bread with stew occasionally. Drill, lectures, sport on Wednesday and Saturday, recreation, concerts on Tuesday and Friday and sometimes a singsong before lights out at 9pm kept the soldiers occupied the rest of the time.

Many troopships put together a souvenir magazine with stories, poems, jokes and sketches done by the men. The magazine was then published and the men sent one home to their families. The 27th Reinforcement's magazine was called Tales of a Tub.

The ship stopped at Albany in Western Australia for a couple of days. It was a delight for the men to step foot on land again. However they were rather disappointed to find that the pubs were all closed! However the townsfolk gave a warm welcome and provided a rest room with reading and writing materials and light refreshments were available for free. They sailed again after two days.

Jack became sick with diarrhoea and spent three days in the ship's hospital a short time before disembarking on the 19th of August, at Devonport, England. As the *Tahiti* approached England she joined with a convoy of other ships and together they travelled with an escort of warships. German submarines sank many ships so the men spent time on 'submarine watch' as they zigzagged along. The watch was half an hour on and half an hour off for a twelve hour stint.



Sling camp on the Salisbury Plain, overlooked by the kiwi, 1919.

Once in England Jack caught a train to Bulford and then marched the final two miles to Sling, the New Zealand training camp. Sling, unloved, bleak and lonely was situated in the heart of the great Salisbury Plains. The Salisbury Plain is chalk and on the hill behind the camp was a giant kiwi carved into the hillside. A period of intensive training followed with more drill, musketry, wiring, bomb-fusing and throwing, gas-mask drill with visits to the gas chambers, Lewis gun instruction, trench stunts on the latest methods, more mock attacks, trench-digging and long route marches. The course usually took thirty days.

Jack's leave while at Sling enabled him, like other New Zealanders, to visit London. He may even have had the opportunity for some time on the Isle of Wight meeting aunts, uncles and cousins.

Jack left for France where he marched into camp at Etaples, a further training ground with the main training area called the 'bull-ring'. Most men seemed to have hated Etaples where the discipline and military police were notorious.

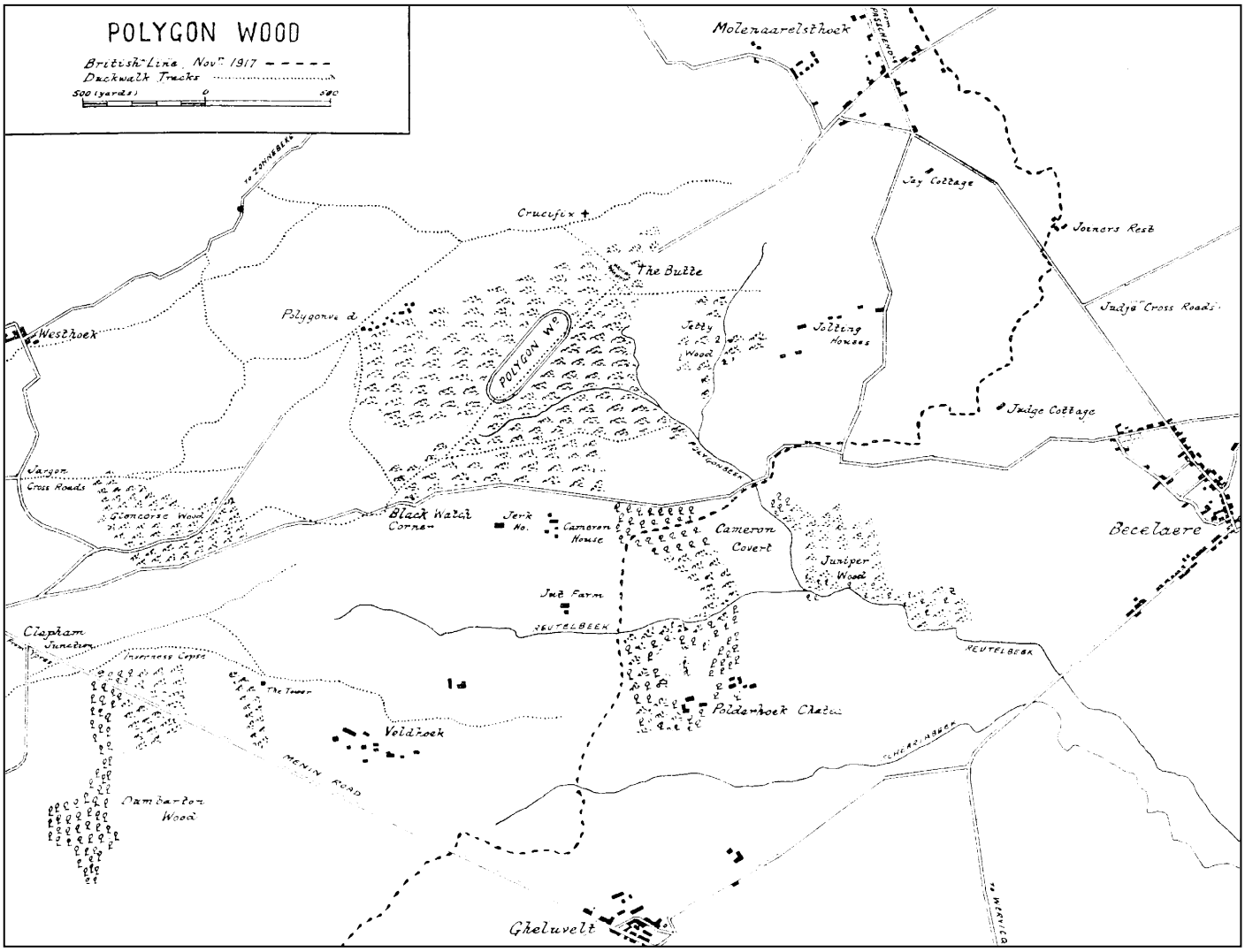
On the 26th of October 1917, almost 4 months after leaving New Zealand, Jack finally joined the First Canterbury Battalion. He was a rifleman of the 13th Company that contained men from North Canterbury and the West Coast. The Battalion, made up of the 1st, 2nd, 12th, and 13th companies, was billeted in the village of Lottinghem. A battalion normally consisted of 34 officers and 910 other men.

Jack's first battle came early in November 1917. The New Zealand Division received orders to relieve the 21st Division (British) in Polygon Woods near the village of Becelaere in Belgium.

To get to Polygon Woods they travelled to Columby, marched the following day for Wizernes, and then travelled by train to Houpoutre. Arriving in the late afternoon they marched with the 2nd Canterbury Battalion to Reninghelst. Both Battalions remained here until the 16th and then they marched to join the rest of the Division, which had established its headquarters at Chateau Segard Camp.

Jack's Battalion went into bivouacs at Kruistraathoek on a very muddy area with damp and uncomfortable quarters. Both the 1st and 2nd Canterbury Battalions began training at once on ground that was especially marked out to represent the up-coming battlefield.

At the front line of Polygon Woods, the land to be manned by the New Zealanders had been badly shelled before, the trees were stripped bare and burnt trunks littered the landscape. The local river changed course from all the shelling and now turned the lowlands into an impassable morass. Wet weather and low flying planes attacking with machine guns and bombs added to the discomfort.



The site of John Jacobs' first battle in November and December 1917.

The Germans occupied Polderhoek Chateau, located on a hill. The height allowed them to observe the New Zealand and British lines. It was decided to attack the Chateau and on the night of the 2nd and 3rd of December the Battalions assembled for attack.

Jack's company was in the rear trenches where they were held in support, and, as counter-attack company. Under the protection of a smoke screen the 1st and the 12th companies were to attack. When they went 'over the top' Jack's company would move forward to occupy their former trenches.

At noon on the 3rd of December the barrage began. A barrage consisted of much heavy fire from the big guns. This was meant to knock the enemy about and break down their defences making it easier for our troops to attack. However it was so muddy that the big guns sank each time they were fired and therefore needed re-setting all the time.

The troops moving forward met with heavy machine-gun fire from two enemy pill-boxes and the advance faltered. One of the Battalions companies, the 1st Company, was unfortunate in losing many of its most experienced officers.

An hour later the Commanding Officer of the battalion sent forward two strong sections of the 13th Company to assist the 1st and 12th Companies to capture a pill-box. These 13th Company sections came under very heavy machine-gun fire on leaving the old front line trenches, and lost so heavily that they were unable to help on the advance. This being reported the Commanding Officer sent up to the firing line a full platoon of the same company, but it was not able to press the attack any further. The advance was now definitely held up. The attacking troops had lost the protection of the creeping barrage, resulting in enemy machine-gunners firing without any interference.
The 1st Canterbury Battalion's firing line was now only about 80 yards from the Chateau. The 1st Otago Battalion had advanced its line level with the Canterbury Battalion but was also unable to advance further forward. In order to hold the little ground they won both battalions began digging trenches.

At about 2:30pm small parties of German's, seen moving toward the Scherriabeck creek bed near the Chateau, appeared to be preparing a counter-attack. Light trench mortar successfully scattered the enemy and they bolted from their position without waiting to take rifles or equipment. Lewis-guns trained on the enemy as he fled inflicted severe casualties judging from the activity of the stretcher-bearers for some hours afterwards.

The next day was fairly quiet despite a threatened counter-attack. The following day though, the enemy began to shell the old front line at 10:30am and continued to do so all day. During the afternoon the fire increased in volume and extent, and became intense over the whole area causing numerous casualties. Our brought down heavy barrage on the German infantry positions and after an hour and a half, the enemy's fire finally ceased.

During the night the 2nd Battalion of the Bedford Regiment relieved the two New Zealand battalions, which matched to Birr Cross road and then caught the train. At about 1:30am on the 6th they arrived at Howe Camp, two miles south-west of Ypres.

The attack on Polderhoek Chateau was considered a failure. The following reasons were given:

- inadequate training - the large proportion of officers and men were reinforcement drafts quite unfamiliar with hostile shelling or our own barrage fire. The period of training was far too short and gave neither the officers, nor the men a chance to know and feel confidence in each other. It had also been interrupted by heavy weather.
- the strength of the enemy defences.
- the isolated nature of the attack drew intense artillery and machine-gun fire.
- the experienced officers were located together rather than spread about the companies.
- a strong westerly breeze dissipated the artillery smoke-screen, which was to have hidden the movement of the assaulting troops from enemy observers. The failure of the smoke-screen allowed enemy machine gunners in Gheluvelt to inflict heavy casualties on the 1st Canterbury Battalion in particular.

What the battlefield would look like.

Nine days after the attack, the enemy re-captured the ground that the 1st Canterbury and 1st Otago Battalions had taken on December 3rd.

On the night of the 9th and 10th of December the 1st Battalion took over the sector called 'Judge Cross Roads'. The trenches were a sea of mud and needed improving. Because there were hardly any communication trenches, which connected support trenches with those at the front line, the

men had to travel over open ground. The few duck walks (board tracks) were in positions known by the enemy who constantly shelled them. In ordinary circumstances these tracks would have been exceedingly unsafe; but the mud which rendered them necessary also smothered the enemy shells, and greatly reduced their danger area. These tracks were at all times much more unsafe than communication trenches, and when the frosts came, even very badly-aimed shells could cause casualties to troops using the tracks.

On the 15th and 16th of December the 1st Canterbury Battalion was relieved by the 3rd Canterbury Battalion. Together with the two Otago Battalions they went to Howe Camp.

Christmas that year was spent in the trenches. Wet feet were a constant problem and snow also fell, but as it froze, it did not add much to the discomfort. Imagine how cold and uncomfortable Jack felt as he spent his first Christmas away from his family. The cooks did their best to provide a traditional, hot, Christmas meal and various denominations held services for the men.

Frosty nights followed by sunny days caused numerous casualties in the mornings. The contents of gas-shells fired during the night remained in liquid form till the heat of the sun caused them to evaporate. The deadly gas then moved about and caused breathing difficulties, burns and even blindness for those not quick enough to get their gas masks on.

Casualties for the 1st Canterbury Battalion since their arrival at Ypres in November 1917 and the Polderhoek chateau attack were 129 dead and 227 wounded. This amounted to a loss of one third of the Battalion's men.
It was normal for men to spend up to eight days in the trenches before being rested in billets behind the front lines. Rest meant training, transporting supplies to the front line trenches, and searching for and burying the dead. Most work was done at night and people tried to sleep by day. Men were always tired and with baths only being available during rest period, soldiers were often covered by lice. They lived for mail from home and the hope that one-day they would get back to New Zealand.

Parcels from home supplemented the army diet and often contained items like butter, cake, tobacco, chewing gum, sheep tongues, sardines, meat extracts, writing paper and envelopes, a handkerchief or some socks[76].

Late February 1918, the Battalion entrained at Ypres for the village Caestre. On arrival the YMCA welcomed them with hot tea and biscuits before they marched to their billets. 'The quarters were good, the weather fine and everyone was relieved to get away from the Ypres Salient, which had not belied its evil reputation.

IN SCHOOL

"New Zealand At The Front" was a magazine written and illustrated by the men in France. This cartoon shows a 'bayonette charge'.

They were in for a 'months spell' and this put all the ranks in the highest spirits. Sporting competitions like rugby, horsemanship, boxing and tug-of-war took place between battalions to help the men unwind.

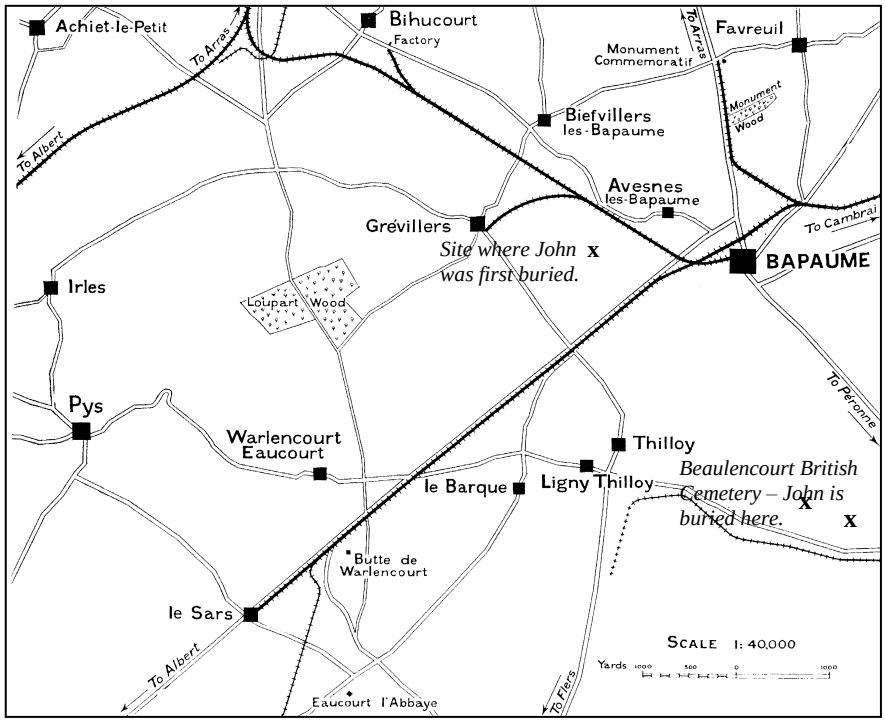
Jack's army records show that he was detached 'to school' on the 1st of March and here he remained until the 18th. Where the school might have been is anyone's guess but there was further training in all forms of warfare. About 10 days after returning from school, Jack's Battalion was hurriedly called back to the front line where the Germans had been putting pressure on the men posted there. This had caused the line to thin out in several places allowing the enemy a possible entry point.

The 1st and 2nd Canterbury Battalions were joined together into a brigade and they took their position at the front. There was much 'toing and froing' and

some pretty heavy fighting but fortunately the casualties were quite light. The brigade became very active in both day and night raids into enemy territory. These raids were carried out with the aim of harassing the enemy, taking prisoners and capturing weapons. The weather deteriorated again. Mud and wet feet once again became a nightmare for those in the trenches.

At this stage the Americans were active on the front line and whole platoons had been assigned to the Battalions. The trenches settled down into the typical pattern. Long periods of 'light activity' with occasional outbursts from either side and raids into enemy territory to keep things rolling. The Battalion moved in and out of line as their turn came to be at the front. Although losses were light during these times there was always a steady trickle of men killed or wounded.

The ministers working at the battlefields were responsible for burying the dead, writing letters of condolences home to the parents of those killed and sending details to be written on the soldier's service record to the necessary department. Burials during quiet times were conducted in a cemetery with friends being able to pay their last respects. During a battle, men were often buried where they fell. The grave was marked with a cross and then the bodies exhumed at a later date and reburied in a military cemetery.



The day before Jack's Battalion went into battle most of the New Zealand Division had been involved in an advance from the corner of Loupart Wood to a quarry on the Bapaume-Achiet le Grand railway between Grévillers and Biefvillers. They also captured Loupart Wood and Grévillers.

The country they were to attack over had not been under heavy fighting before and so it was not cut up by shellfire. For many miles in front of them the country was open and gently rolling, with small woods here and there[76]. The French people were 'up to their eyes' in the wheat harvest, which promised to be a good one if a shell, didn't land in it and decimate the lot.

New Zealand troops marching into line at Grévillers. 25th August 1918

Jack along with the rest of the 1st Battalion were bivouacked near the Albert-Arras railway. They left at 2am on Sunday, August 25th to the front line of Grévillers and Biefvillers. The advance, helped by sixteen tanks and a creeping barrage, began at 5am.

The enemy resisted stubbornly but a heavy ground mist hid the attackers' movements. The battalion had taken all its objectives by 7am and had established a line of posts from a point on the Bapaume-Arras road, two hundred yards south of its intersection of the Bapaume-Achiet le Grand

railway, to the cemetery on the Bapaume-Arras road.

The 1st Battalion remained in the line till the night of the 27th/28th when it was relieved by the 2nd Wellington Battalion and moved back to the trenches south of Bihucourt. However, Jack did not go back with his Battalion because sometime during the fighting on the 25th he had been killed. 'One of the Mirfin brothers (possibly Ash) from Ikamatua was going over the railway line. He saw a body and thought it looked familiar. He looked and saw it was John. He had died from a single bullet wound to the forehead while going over the line. He put a hanky over his face' said Lillian Wingham.

Jack's death just two and a half months before the Armistice was signed was a bitter blow for the family. The men at the front had been aware for some months that the war was coming to an end. Each hoped that they would make it. They saw increasing numbers of German soldiers being marched back behind the lines to become prisoners of war. The Germans had become more despondent as they realised the impending outcome of this bitter struggle.

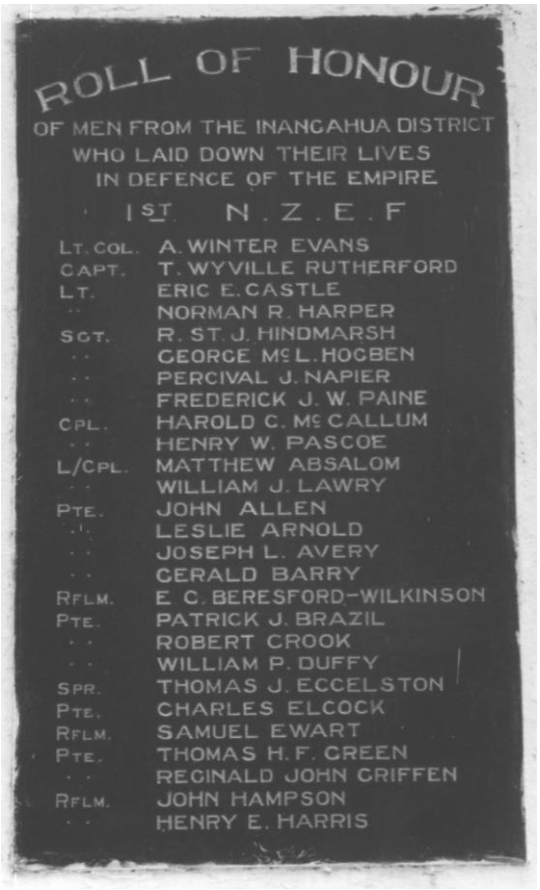
In 1914 New Zealand's population was estimated to be 1,089,825. Our small nation sent 100,444 soldiers and nurses overseas - 18,166 were killed or died of wounds and disease, 41,317 were wounded. It has been said "Almost a generation of the best men were wiped out, and throughout my life I have been conscious of this deprivation. In all walks of life many of those who would have been leaders were missing. The ineptitudes of the decades between the two wars, both in Europe and in New Zealand, may in large measure be due to this. Not only these men, but those who would have been their children are missing, and we have to do our best without them."

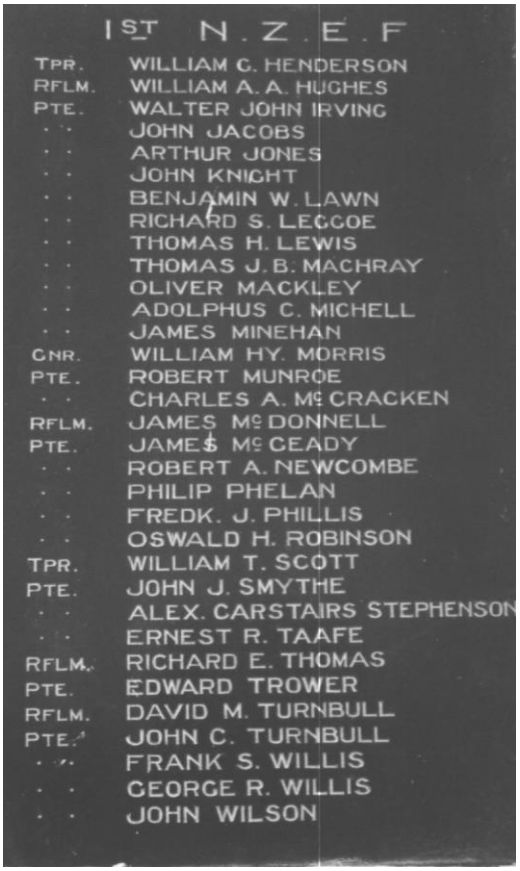
Rev. George Robson buried Jack along the Bapaume-Avesnes railway line, ½ mile west of Bapaume, east of Grévillers. He may have been buried in the Grévillers cemetery or in the field where he lay – the records don't say.

After the war ended, Jack's body was exhumed and re-interred at the Beaulencourt British Cemetery at Ligny-Thilloy. The Casualty Clearing Stations originally made the cemetery for burials from the hospitals. It was greatly enlarged after the Armistice by the concentration of 571 graves from the neighbouring battlefields and certain other cemeteries. Eighty-one graves belonged to New Zealanders. The cemetery, located on the southern slope of a hill is planted with Irish yews, limes and Lombardy poplars.

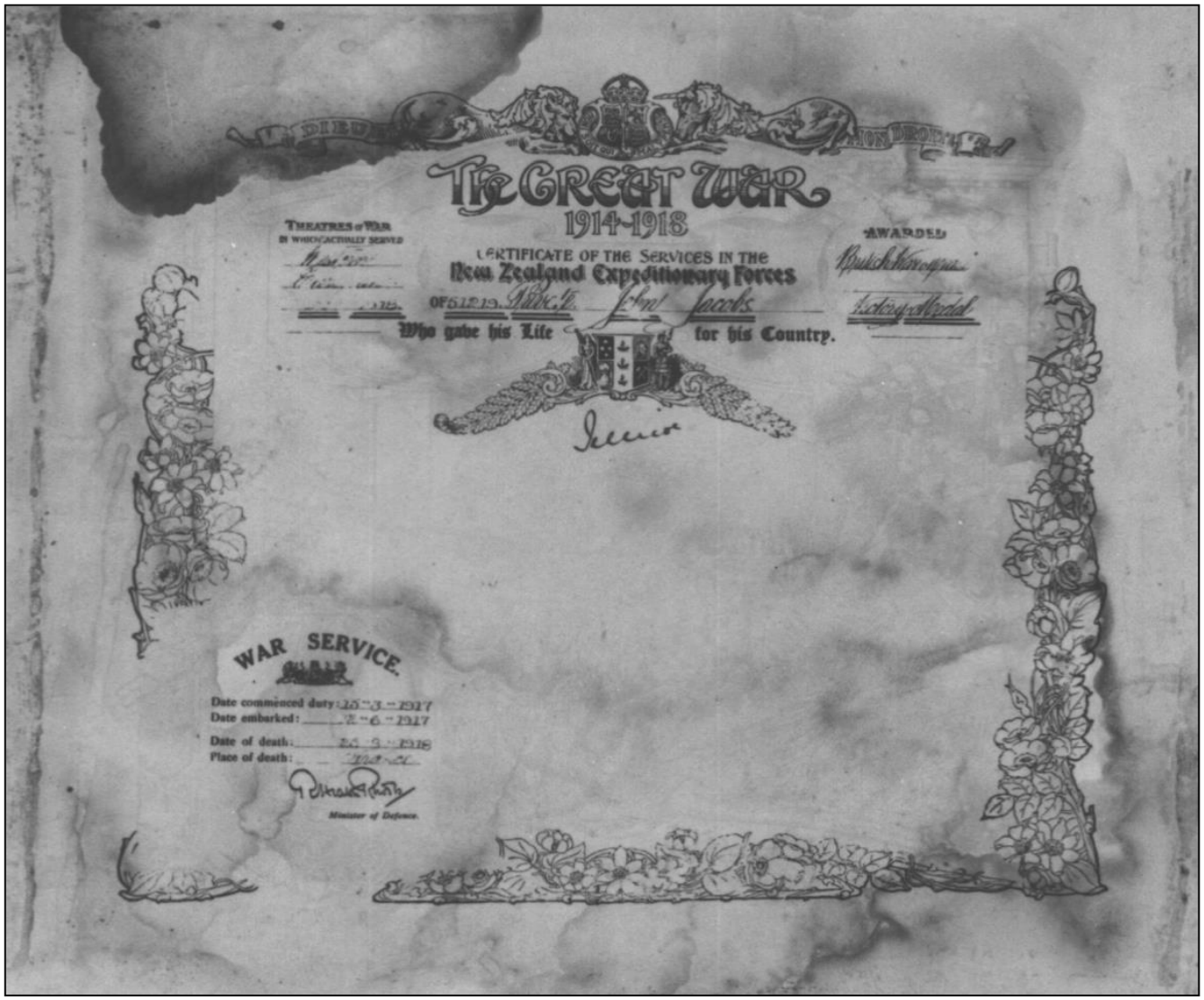
All soldiers had to leave a will and many did this in the front of their pay books. Jack's pay book will, dated exactly a year to the day before his death, states that he had left a will with the Public Trust Office in Greymouth.

Jack's posthumous medals, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, were sent to his brother, Arthur, and sister, Mary Ann in 1921. These medals were given to all the men who fought in the First World War. A scroll was also sent to the family.





The Inangahua memorial in Reefton.



John's scroll.