

Military matters Register

Two soldiers and the Bible from no man's land

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In April 1918 a young British soldier of the 9th Battalion of the Royal Irish Fusiliers found himself stumbling in a shell hole as he climbed out into the devastated ground between trenches during an attack around Messines, in Belgium.

As he fell into the mud his hands grasped on to something — a book. Stuffing it into his pocket he managed to get up, before the blast from a shell landing near by knocked him unconscious. Recovering later, after he had been carried back to Allied lines by stretcher, he discovered that the mud-encrusted book that he had rescued was a Bible, unmarked except for an army service number printed across the top edge of the pages.

Told by an officer that he would never find the rightful owner in the chaos of fighting and that he might as well keep it to bring him luck, Herbert Hodgson became its guardian. A few months later the Armistice was declared and, in February 1919, Hodgson camped on the snow-covered cliffs above Dieppe, waiting to be transported back to England.

Ninety-two years later, Hodgson's family, who have handed down the Bible over the decades, have traced its original owner. The army service number covering the leaves was that of Private Richard Llewellyn Cook, of the Otago Regiment of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. The 26-year-old

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soldier from Southland, New Zealand, was shot in an attack on Gravenstafel Ridge, near Passchendaele, in Belgium, in October 1917. Wounded in his left hip and right shoulder, he wrote to reassure his parents from the hospital where he was waiting until he was well enough to go to England. The next day he bled to death on a stretcher. He was buried in Etaples Military Cemetery, France. The Bible will be returned to New Zealand, to be deposited at the National Army Museum in Waiouru, next March.

It is most likely that Cook lost his Bible a few months earlier under heavy shelling near North Midland Farm, during the Allied capture of Messines Ridge and village — briefly recaptured by the Germans the following year and then retaken by Allied Forces, among whose number, in one of the battles, was Hodgson.

The story is at the heart of the memoirs of Herbert Hodgson, *Impressions of War*, which are published this month. The memoirs are the personal accounts of an "ordinary" soldier serving on the front line, from his first experience scrambling over the top of a trench at Givenchy, while many around him were shot down, to the "nightmarish" mud, vermin and continuous noise of machinegun fire and artillery shells in the trenches. The book also captures the surreal moments of war. During one battle near the Somme in early 1918 Hodgson found himself in the eerie silence of an abandoned farm, where the stove was still alight, a pan of coffee simmering temptingly upon it.

He also describes his return to Britain, his innocence lost, and the changing social order of the postwar years. Hodgson went on to work as a successful printer, printing a rare edition of T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

Impressions of War: The Memoirs of Herbert Hodgson, edited by Bernard Hodgson and Geoffrey M. Hodgson (Martlett Books, £24+p&p.)