

## **Lodge Homewood No. 447**

### **John Nimmo's Empty Chair Speaking Notes 25 April**

#### **Revised 2019**

Private Jim Nimmo served in the New Zealand Rifle Brigade and his WW1 bayonet was on the Empty Chair tonight.

Jim was my Dad's older brother, my uncle. He was a country boy from the small village of Ngapara in North Otago where he worked with his Dad in the family coalmine.

Jim was a prolific and descriptive writer who wrote hundreds of letters home from overseas. Some were written on scraps of brown parcel wrapping paper, just anything he could get hold of. Fortunately, his mother kept them all and ninety years later his daughter Marian re-produced them in this book titled "Somewhere in France", which was also on the chair tonight.

I'll quote from some of his letters written during the hundred days offensive when the Allied troops drove the Germans out of France and Belgium and back into Germany.

Jim enlisted for the army on his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. His mother would not let him enlist earlier as her older brother had lost 2 of his 3 sons, one in Belgium and one at Passchendaele. Her sister had also lost a son at Gallipoli and her second son was badly gassed, eventually dying soon after the war ended.

After training in New Zealand then at Brocton Camp in England Jim crossed to France in September 1918 on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Soon after his arrival he wrote that 'He got a touch of gas a few moments ago and it's not good! 'We were loading our Lewis gun on the Limber and never noticed the stuff until it was all around us. It's very rotten too and it wouldn't take much to do some real damage. I wasn't in it long and have got over it now. Old fritz had been putting shells about 50 yards over our heads and that is why we never noticed this was a gas one until we got the contents.'

This gas shell exposure left Jim with life-long whooping cough.

In October 1918 Jim wrote that they were chasing Jerrie across France and he thought that another year should see things finished. He said that there had been a few rumours at the time of peace talks commencing, but had strong views on why they shouldn't.

He wrote that *'Peace at present would be a lot of rot and while I haven't seen a great deal yet, from what I have seen I would say fight this thing out now until there's no chance of a war like this occurring again.'*

*War is hell - nothing else - and if I should be unlucky enough to go out, I would do so gladly if I thought that I had helped to finish wars for ever. If people could just realise what a terrible thing war is, there would be no peace talks until there was no chance of another scrap like this occurring again.'*

He described the old German Hindenberg Line where he said Jerrie had dugouts galore, made to last for many years, fifty or sixty feet below the ground and each one long enough to hold 20 or 30 men. In some places all connected and a whole company could have lived in them. There was barbed wire everywhere and Jerrie didn't expect to lose it. Jim thought it was a marvel how Jerry had been driven out of it so quickly.'

Another letter described one of our opening barrages.

*'Things were pretty quiet, just a few Jerry shells coming over. All of a sudden there was one tremendous explosion, hundreds or possibly thousands of our shells burst in Jerries' front line. It was practically pitch dark and the sparks and light from the explosions made an indescribable sight.'*

*What a hell of a thing it must be to be under a barrage like that and how a single man can live in it is a thing I can't understand. But they do live through it and were able to give us plenty of trouble with their machine guns.'*

Jim was involved in the NZ Rifle Brigade's liberation of the old French town of Le Quesnoy in November 1918.

The New Zealanders advanced on the town working their way through many orchards then scaled the surrounding masonry town wall on a long ladder specially built for the job, surprising Jerrie, some of whom surrendered immediately, but heavy fighting continued until evening before the rest of the German garrison surrendered.

Jim said that when they got into the town they were surrounded by civvies, laughing, crying, and just about mad with joy as they'd had a very rough few years under the German occupation. He said it was ten minutes before our soldiers could get away from them.

There is no doubt that the New Zealanders' decision not to bombard the town preserved it from destruction and the French have been eternally grateful for this

As we know, New Zealand's special relationship with Le Quesnoy has endured now for 100 odd years with Cambridge and Le Quesnoy being sister towns.

From the uttermost ends of the earth they came

Lest we forget

You can read more about the liberation of Le Quesnoy by New Zealand soldiers by following this link:

<https://www.noted.co.nz/currently/history/le-quesnoy-wwi-why-liberation-means-so-much-new-zealand/>