

Newel Alfred Joseph Maskell

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Image of Newel Maskell, Australian War Memorial Photograph Collection, Image Number DA15405

Born in Marungi, Victoria on 1 January 1883,¹ the war provided Newel Maskell with an opportunity to demonstrate his courage and leadership in a way that was not possible as a farm labourer in rural Victoria.² However, in the years following the war his attempts to become a successful farmer failed³ and he experienced considerable debt⁴ returning to labouring for the rest of his life.⁵

Newel was one of four men living in Marungi who volunteered in 1916,⁶ which unlike the nation, was the peak year for enlistments in rural Victoria.⁷ The breaking of a long drought and resultant good harvest in 1915⁸ may have been a factor in delaying Newel's enlistment to January 1916, or he may have been influenced by the major recruitment drives of late 1915.⁹

Newell was 23 years and 1 month and at 6' 1" tall easily met the height requirement which had been reduced to 5'2" in July 1915.¹⁰ Enlisting with Newell in Melbourne on the 23 February 1916 were his younger brother Frank, aged 18 years, 8 months, and Leslie Groves. They were part of the 177 men who formed the 13th reinforcements of the 22nd Battalion.¹¹

Following his training in Melbourne, Newel arrived in France in November 1916¹² and experienced the front line for the first time on 24 December with the heavy shelling of Needle Trench in the area of Trones Wood.¹³ The Battalion diary notes the terrible conditions living in trenches 'in extremely bad condition with mud and water' and heavy shelling, with 'snipers very active and causing much annoyance.'¹⁴ By 15 January 1917 the conditions had taken their toll on Newel and he was admitted to hospital with trench feet.¹⁵ Newel re-joined his Battalion on 12

¹ Service Record of Newel Alfred Joseph Maskell, p.1, National Archives of Australia, B884.

² Service Record for Newel Alfred Joseph Maskell, p.1, National Archives of Australia, B2455.

³ Official record for Newel Alfred Joseph Maskell, 'World War 1 Soldier Settlement Records in Victoria', Battle to Farm, www.soldiersettlement PROV.vic.gov.au, Accessed 2 August 2019.

⁴ Numurkah Court of Petty Sessions', *Numurkah Leader*, 19 January 1927, p.1.

⁵ Newel Maskell, Australia, City Directories, 1845 - 1948, Ancestry.com, Accessed 20 August 2019.

⁶ Service record of Newel Maskell, B2455, p.1.

Service Record of Frank Stanley Golbourne Maskell, p.1, National Archives of Australia, B2455.

Service Record of Leslie Groves, p.1, National Archives of Australia, B2455.

Service Record of Henry George Green, p.1, National Archives of Australia, B2455.

⁷ John McQuilton, 'Enlistment for the First World War in Rural Australia: the Case of North-eastern Victoria, 1914-1918', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, Issue 33, 2000, p.3.

⁸ McQuilton, 'Enlistment for the First World War in Rural Australia', p.3

⁹ Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1974, p.16-17.

¹⁰ Jobson, p62

¹¹ Following the Twenty-Second, page 20

¹² Service record of Newel Maskell, p.9.

¹³ Following the 22nd, 22nd Battalion:1916, <https://anzac-22nd-battalion.com/22nd-battalion-1916/>, Accessed 3 August 2019.

¹⁴ 22nd Infantry Battalion Unit Diary, January 1917, p.2, AWM4 23/39/17.

¹⁵ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.9.

March¹⁶ and moved in and out of the front line until 18 April 1917,¹⁷ when he was wounded in the left knee at Lagnicourt, and sent to a rest camp for 10 weeks.¹⁸

It was in the autumn of 1917 that General Haig launched an offensive on Passchendaele Ridge, believing that he was wearing the Germans down and that they were demoralised and almost beaten.¹⁹ Passchendaele was to involve 271,000 casualties of British and Dominion troops²⁰ and was described by Lloyd George in his memoirs as a 'ghastly fiasco'.²¹ High losses of 20,000 to 50,000 casualties per week occurred and indeed planned for, in this war of attrition.²²

Newell was part of the 22nd Battalion on the 1st October at Zoobeke Lake, ready for the Battle of Broodseinde, the first of three steps in the attack of Passchendaele Ridge.²³ At the time there were 34 officers and 812 other ranks.²⁴ They experienced shell fire on 2nd October and the weather was so bad that the advance was brought forward to 6am on 4th October. However, the German army also had an attack planned for this day and 'at 5.35 am enemy opened a heavy bombardment and caused many casualties.'²⁵ At 6am the Battalion advanced and "almost at once encountered the enemy in force. Parties with fixed Bayonets were met advancing... Considerable Casualties were inflicted by our Lewis Gunners firing from the hip." Newell was one of these Lewis Gunners.²⁶ By 7.23 am the Battalion had reached their objective of the red line and had taken 'a conservative estimate' of 200 prisoners. By 8.10 am the Battalion had recorded losses of 63 killed, 19 missing and 157 wounded.²⁷ Broodseinde was costly, with 20,000 casualties along the British line for an average advance of only 1000 yards.²⁸

Included in the missing was William Brimelow, also a Lewis Gunner on whose Red Cross record Newell wrote some months later: "I knew him well...I was told Brimelow was killed in the attack. About a fortnight later I took up a cross with his name on it and put it near where he was buried."²⁹ Honouring the dead was clearly important to Newell, as he also wrote to his mother in a

¹⁶ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.9.

¹⁷ 22nd Infantry Battalion Unit Diary, March 1917, p.p.2-4, AWM4 23/39/19.

22nd Infantry Battalion Unit Diary, April 1917, p.p.2-8, AWM4 23/39/20.

¹⁸ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.10.

¹⁹ Carlyon p 477

²⁰ Ham, *Passchendaele*, p.374.

²¹ Ham, *Passchendaele*, p.430

²² Ham, *Passchendaele*, p.413.

²³ Ham, *Passchendaele*, p.299

²⁴ Following the 22nd, '22nd Battalion:1917'.

²⁵ Battalion diary 4.10.17

²⁶ Newel AIF Records for WW2

²⁷ Battalion diary 4.10.17

²⁸ Les Carlyon, *The Great War*, Sydney, Pan Macmillan Australia, 2014, p.485

²⁹ Brimelow Red Cross Record

letter published in the Shepparton News that he placed a cross on his cousin's grave and "saw that he was buried all right."³⁰

Havre
A.I.F. 22.
16th July 1918.
Brimelow W. No.1179.
K. 4th Octr 1917. Det D/B.
He was in A.Co. III Pltn. I know him well, his people live in England, he was a small dark man, clean shaved, about 22. On the 4th Octr we took P Passchendaele Ridge. I was told Brimelow was killed in the attack. About a fortnight later I took up a cross with his name on it, and put it near where he was buried. We could not find the exact grave the ground had been knocked about, but it was in the open ~~at some~~ ~~place~~ ~~some~~ ~~where~~ ~~before~~ ~~we~~ ~~got~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~ridge~~.
Inf:- L/Cpl H.A.Maskell Co. 5052.
A.I.F. 22. A. IV.
Australian Camp.
Rouelles.
HPG.
EP.

Image of William Brimelow's Red Cross Record Number 5536649

In his letter to his mother Newel did not flinch from describing the horror of war after a shell caused the death of his cousin: 'Both legs and one arm were blown off, and he was also hit in the stomach and head.'³¹ The impact on Newel is evident: 'Mother, it is terrible, and only those who are in it know what it is like. Don was conscious all the time and when he got hit, he said "O boys, I think my legs are broken."³²

Following Broodseinde the 22nd Battalion spent several days in reserve living in 'shell-holes, half filled with mud and water'³³ where 'hundreds collapsed with exhaustion.'³⁴ 'Haig decided to press on to Passchendaele, in what many now regard as the most disastrous decision of his career.'³⁵ On 8 October 1917, Newel was back in the front line at Poelcappelle in such miserable conditions 'as to render superlatives meaningless,'³⁶ where 'snipers took a heavy toll' killing 20 men from a Battalion which now only numbered 150 men.³⁷

³⁰ Shepparton News, 6 December

³¹ 'Pte Newel Maskell', *Shepparton News*, 6 December 1917, n.p

³² 'Pte Newel Maskell' n.p.

³³ Following the 22nd, '22nd Battalion:1917'.

³⁴ Carlyon, *The Great War*, p.495.

³⁵ Ham, *Passchendaele*, p.306.

³⁶ Ham, *Passchendaele*, p.308.

³⁷ Following the 22nd, '22nd Battalion:1917'.

In the slaughter that was Passchendaele, luck was on Newel's side. In his letter to his mother, he notes that he was the only one of his gun team to come out unwounded, although he did have a bullet pass through a sleeve, another through the coat shoulder and a piece of shell put a hole into his water bottle.³⁸ As Newel wrote, 'I was recommended for a military medal, but don't know if I will get it... I think I will get promotion to corporal out of it.'³⁹ Indeed, Newel was promoted to lance corporal on 6 February 1918.⁴⁰

In May 1918, Newel, a Lewis Gunner,⁴¹ received a recommendation for honours and awards for 'conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during the attack on VILLE-SUR-ANCRE Firing from the hip [he] worked towards the enemy ... although wounded early in the attack, he remained with his Company until the objective had been gained.' The report noted his 'coolness and daring throughout.'⁴² Newel was wounded in the hand⁴³ and re-joined his unit in early July⁴⁴ and promoted to corporal on 22 August 1918.⁴⁵ He continued to see front line action until the 5 October 1918, the last day the 22nd Battalion was in the firing line.⁴⁶

Newel returned to Australia on 22 September 1919,⁴⁷ and with his English bride Mary Warburton,⁴⁸ settled near Marungi. Newel became a soldier settler with 295 acres and a debt of £2348.⁴⁹ However, as noted by Faney, fifty per cent of these leases were unsuccessful⁵⁰ and in 1925 Newel was in court owing money to a Dr Harbison⁵¹ and in court again in January 1927, now owing £3000, with no ability to pay.⁵² Like many soldier settlers Newel was financially ruined and relinquished his land in 1929⁵³ to become a labourer again.⁵⁴

In the Great War, Newel demonstrated his courage and leadership and obtained several promotions, however he did not achieve similar success on his return to Australia. The importance

³⁸ Recommended for a Military Medal', *Numurkah Standard and Wunghnu, Cobram, Yarroweyah and Strathmerton Advocate*, 9 January 1918, p. 4.

³⁹ 'Recommended for a Military Medal.'

⁴⁰ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.10.

⁴¹ Service record of Newel Maskell, B884, p.26.

⁴² Honours and Awards (Recommendation) for Newel Alfred Joseph Maskell, Australian War Memorial, AWM282 2/321, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/R1561092>, Accessed 4 August 2019

⁴³ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.10.

⁴⁴ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.10.

⁴⁵ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.10

⁴⁶ Following the 22nd, '22nd Battaliion:1918.'

⁴⁷ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.17.

⁴⁸ Service record of Newel Maskell, p.15.

⁴⁹ Official record for Newel Alfred Joseph Maskell, 'World War 1 Soldier Settlement Records in Victoria', Battle to Farm, www.soldiersettlement PROV.vic.gov.au, Accessed 2 August 2019.

⁵⁰ Charles Faney, 'Battle to Farm, Soldier Settlement Scheme 1917 - 1935, Success and Failure,' Battle to Farm, www.soldiersettlement PROV.vic.gov.au/about/success-and-failure, Accessed 2 August 2019.

⁵¹ Numurkah Court of Petty Sessions', *Numurkah Leader*, 21 January 1925, p.5.

⁵² 'Numurkah Court of Petty Sessions', *Numurkah Leader*, 19 January 1927, p.1

⁵³ Official record for Newel Maskell.

⁵⁴ Australia, City Directories, 1845 – 1948.

of these war years to Newel is perhaps shown by the inclusion of his rank, service number and battalion on his headstone when he died in 1965.⁵⁵



Source: Ancestry.com

⁵⁵ Photograph of Newel Maskell Headstone, date unknown, original held by Helen McKee, Bendigo Australia.

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Newel Maskell Headstone, Photograph, date unknown, original held by Helen McKee, Bendigo, Australia.

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