

The Grenade Accident on Cannock Chase

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In April 1918 a potentially lethal accident during a bombing lesson on Cannock Chase was narrowly averted by the quick thinking of 23927 Lieutenant Randolph Gordon Ridling, the Bombing Officer in charge of a group of New Zealand Riflemen.

Ridling's great nephew John Ridling (grandson of Randolph's youngest brother, whose grandfather was also wounded and ended up in the ANZAC Cyclist Corps) has provided additional information on the background of the family (as "Ridland" they had left Gravesend in 1847). Randolph was a schoolteacher in Auckland when war broke out in 1914. He married in May 1915 and had volunteered a few months later, shortly after his wife Henrietta had sadly passed away. He was quickly promoted to Corporal, then Sergeant Major, and eventually became a 2nd Lieutenant in October 1916, when he was sent overseas, arriving in France as the New Zealand Rifle Brigade began to settle down in the cold and muddy trenches of Flanders. He took over command of C Company, 4th Battalion New Zealand Rifle Brigade on 14 February 1917. Just over a week later the NZRB was moved to the Ploegsteert Sector of the Messines Ridge area south east of Ypres, to begin the training for the meticulously planned assault unleashed on 7 June that would successfully wrestle possession of the ridge from the Germans (the Cannock Chase terrain model of Messines was constructed in cement mortar nearly a year *after* the battle and used to train men about to go over to France and Flanders).



Staff at a New Zealand World War I camp in England. Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918. Ref: 1/2-014299-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22700189>. Permission of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, must be obtained before any re-use of this image.

Richard and Lee have identified the camp as Brocton Camp, Cannock Chase. 23927 Lieutenant Randolph Gordon Ridling is in the front row, 5th from right.

The NZRB took over the frontline trenches from the British 7th Brigade on 22 February 1917, with the 4th Battalion NZRB replacing the British troops of the 8th Battalion Loyal North Lancashires and the 3rd Battalion Worcesters, the final swap being completed by 11.00 pm that night. During the relief, the Germans opposite gave the newly arrived New Zealanders a warm welcome in the form of a barrage of “minenwerfer” trench mortars. This was superseded during the night by a general artillery barrage which morphed at 6.10 am the following morning into a “box barrage” which isolated the New Zealanders, preventing them from seeking sanctuary or for reinforcements to join them. A German raiding party estimated at about 200 crossed No Man’s Land and entered the New Zealand trenches, and worked its way southwards along the trench. However, the New Zealanders quickly rallied and within five minutes had ejected the Germans using rifles, bayonets and bombs.

The brief clash was bloody; the casualty list of men from 4th Battalion NZRB makes sobering reading - six killed, twenty wounded and three taken prisoner (two stretcher bearers plus the wounded man they were treating). One of those wounded was Lieutenant Ridling, shot in the arm. Three days later Ridling arrived at the 2nd General Hospital in London via Southampton. His recuperation took some time and Ridling was unable to recover fully, despite convalescing at various New Zealand hospitals, including Brockenhurst in Hampshire and Walton-on-Thames.

Eventually Randolph Ridling was transferred to the New Zealand Rifle Brigade Reserve Depot at Brocton, on Cannock Chase, and he was assigned “light duties” as he continued to recover. Initially he was the Assistant Adjutant at Brocton, and as his strength improved he also became the Bombing Instructor.



Bombing instructors at a training camp in England during World War I. Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918. Ref: 1/2-013866-G.

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/2230948>.

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Richard and Lee have identified the camp as Brocton Camp, Cannock Chase.

Note sandbags of bunker behind, right.



Row of bombing bays discovered by Richard and Lee on Cannock Chase

Photo: The Chase Project 2015

On 19 April, one of the recruits in Ridling's "live" bombing class, Rifleman 63475 John Archibald McCurdy (from King Edward Road, Dunedin, NZ), pulled the pin from his Mills bomb and dropped it in the throwing bay and "lacking the presence of mind to escape" he kicked the bomb towards the entrance and retreated to the inner end of the bay. Seeing the danger and realising the grenade would explode in a couple of seconds, Ridling shouted at the rest of the men to clear the trench, grabbed the clumsy McCurdy, and as he attempted to get the Rifleman and himself clear, the grenade exploded. Lieutenant Ridling was severely wounded in the leg and groin and Rifleman McCurdy was also slightly injured (left leg). His action was strongly recommended for an award by General Godley, Commander of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, who wrote "The coolness and bravery of Lieutenant Ridling undoubtedly saved the man's life."



Extant grenade throwing bay (circular area) and entrance trench discovered by Richard and Lee on Cannock Chase

Photo: The Chase Project 2015

Various reports mention the Rifleman from the grenade accident, but do not name him. However, he is named in the War Diary of the 5th Reserve Battalion NZRB, recently discovered by The Chase Project; the entry for 20 April 1918 states:

“Whilst live bomb practice was being carried out an accident occurred through which Lieut. R. G. Ridling and 63745 Rfm J. A. McCurdy were injured. The accident was due to the dropping of the bomb in the bay.”

The *Chronicles of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force* added a comment upon Ridling’s return to duties:

“Lieutenant R.G. Ridling is back in camp again and looks as fit as ever after his ‘bombing rescue’.”

On 18 December 1919, King George awarded the Albert medal to Ridling, which is considered the “civilian Victoria Cross” a decoration for civilian acts of bravery in saving life; the medal was eventually replaced by the George Cross in 1940. The London Gazette for 12 December 1919 stated:

“The King has been pleased to award the Albert Medal to Lieutenant Randolph Gordon Ridling, New Zealand Rifle Brigade, in recognition of his gallantry in saving life in April of last year.”



*Lieutenant Ridling’s medals: The Albert Medal is on the left.
Photo courtesy of Geoff McMillan who is assisting Richard and Lee with their research.*

Ridling’s academic background was utilised after the grenade incident, and he became the Education Officer at Brocton, ensuring that wide and varied courses in mathematics, engineering, agricultural science and animal husbandry were proffered (deemed essential for the estimated 60,000 that would be demobilised after the war and returned to New Zealand).

He was instrumental in creating the glow-worm farm for night map reading training on the Messines model (in a drainage pipe near Fanny’s Farm strongpoint; due to the exigencies of time, this pipe remained unexplored during the Messines model archaeological dig in 2013, despite the archaeologists intending to return to it). *Lampyrus noctiluca* glow-worms had been found to provide enough light (bioluminescence) for reading maps, reports and compasses at night in the trenches (without drawing the attention of snipers or ruining night vision).

The training on the Messines model was intended to be as realistic as possible. Training back at Trentham in New Zealand had even poetically described the use of glow-worms:

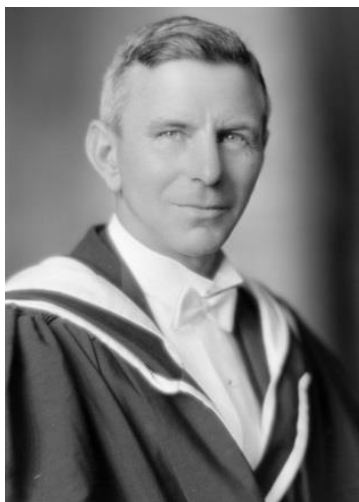
*And when the night is finding
The weather cold, outside,
Through trenches, dark and winding,
We do the glow-worm glide.*



*Fanny's Farm building, trenches, volunteer 'digger' and Water Management System drainage trough which went round all four sides of the Messines model. The glow-worm farm was in the covered drainpipe top right (a pull out, slotted semi-circular "grid" system).
Photo: The Chase Project 2013*

Ridling appreciated he had a unique opportunity as Education Officer, and encouraged New Zealand soldiers waiting to return to New Zealand after the Armistice to sit examinations. Therapeutic and practical classes such as woodworking and metal moulding classes were also organised by Ridling during his time at Brocton.

According to information provided by his great nephew, John Ridling, after being discharged from the Army on 28 September 1919, Ridling went on to Queen's College Cambridge where he gained an MA (Diploma in Agriculture) in 1921, and eventually returned to New Zealand. He remarried and adopted a daughter Sheila (who would eventually offer his medals on permanent loan to the National Army Museum, Waiouru, New Zealand). Randolph continued in education and returned to teaching, becoming a supervisor and inspector, and eventually in 1931 Director of Wellington Technical College, until he retired in 1950. After retiring he was active in UNESCO trips abroad including to Beirut in 1959, and maintained his interest in hobbies such as woodworking and gardening, as well as being a regular host to Sheila and her husband Ken Matthews (and grandsons Ian and Andrew).



Randolph Gordon Ridling in 1934

As a living holder of the Albert Medal, in 1971 Ridling was invited to swap his medal for the George Cross, although he wrote to the Queen asking if he could keep his original medal for sentimental reasons. The request was granted. He was also involved in bi-annual medal holders' reunions; in 1974 he attended a meeting in London of holders of Victoria Cross and George Cross medals (which comprised of four men awarded the Victoria Cross, including the VC and Bar holder from New Zealand, Charles Upham).

In 1975, Randolph Ridling passed away in his home town of Wellington, aged 87 years.

The Chase Project are currently researching what happened to the hapless soldier who Ridling rescued, Rifleman John Archibald McCurdy, and would appreciate any further information on Lieutenant Randolph Gordon Ridling or on Rifleman John Archibald McCurdy. Please contact Richard and Lee at thechaseproject@gmail.com.