

Messines Model Excavation Update

In the late summer of 2013 the excavation of the Messines Ridge terrain model took place on Cannock Chase in Staffordshire, and was reported in the July 2013 Bulletin by Lee Dent and Richard Pursehouse of The Chase Project, who had made the initial rediscovery of the model in 2007. Their research on the battle and model led to a serendipitous discovery of a soldier born locally who joined the Australian Imperial Forces and fought at Messines in Belgium - and also a further twist to the story.

The model had been built by the New Zealand Rifle Brigade for Topographical training at the Brocton School of Instruction, and was finished in late May 1918 - just in time for the first anniversary of the battle of June 7th 1917.

Private Thomas Jackson 6042

Private Thomas Jackson (Army number 6042) had moved to Australia shortly before the outbreak of the Great War, and was a member of C Company, 14th Battalion of 19th Reinforcements, Australian Imperial Force (4th Division). He enlisted at Geelong, Victoria on the 14th April 1916 and stated his age as being twenty nine. Initially, details of his next of kin were given as his brother Mr William Jackson of Melbourne, Victoria; this was crossed out and replaced with details of his father of 50 Hednesford Road, Cannock, Staffordshire. The form stated his height, weight, chest size, eyes and colour and that his trade was "Dairying".

After several months training, Jackson

sailed on the Troopship 'Miltades' from Melbourne to Plymouth, then on the S.S. 'Arundle' from Folkestone to the training base at Etaples in France. During training in early March 1917, Jackson was admitted to the hospital with 'abrasions, foot' then 'septic foot' then 'abscess foot', re-joining his comrades in mid-May, three weeks before the opening of the Battle of Messines.

On the 19th of August 1917 Jackson was wounded in action, being in a party of men moving supplies up to the front line that had now moved over the Messines Ridge and down the eastern side, where the Allied trenches were being consolidated. The next day he was declared "Died of wounds received in action" being one of seven Other Ranks and one Officer from the 14th Battalion killed that day.

Although the main fighting for the nine mile long Messines Ridge had finished in June the Germans were still actively attempting to regain this important high ground, which was crucial for observing the build up for the pending attack towards Passchendaele to the north-east of Messines.

Initially Jackson was buried at Lumm Farm, to the south of Wytschaete, half a mile north of Messines, with another Australian and thirteen British soldiers. Their bodies were eventually moved to the Messines Ridge British Cemetery.

Witness Statements on Jackson's death

There were three witnesses to Jackson's death or burial, including:

1. Vere Dubout (Army Number 6644)

"Jackson was hit about 5 yards from me by High Explosive shell and lived for about 15 minutes only. I was next man to him. Hit at Fanny's CT" (Communication Trench)

2. William Watson (Army Number 6122)

"Jackson was my mate and was hit going into fatigue and lived about half an hour. He was buried at a place called Lumm Farm near Wytschaete and cross erected. I helped bring in the body and to bury him. We went back the following morning to get him. I was with him when he died. He was a fine soldier. He was buried, adjoining and at same time as, five Tommies by an English padre."

Watson was awarded the Military Medal on 15th May 1917 (one of one hundred and thirty two awarded in 14th Bn) for carrying wounded to a Dressing Station during the attack on the Hindenburg Line at Reincourt (11th April) and a Bar to his Military Medal (one of ten awarded to the 14th Bn) for stretcher bearer work for fifteen hours on the 26th September at Zonnebeke, near Passchendaele, he was wounded, 'sniped' in his left leg. Watson was in the same 14th Battalion as Jackson, and came on the same Troopship 'Miltades' from Australia.



Albert Jacka VC at Messines Model in Belgium

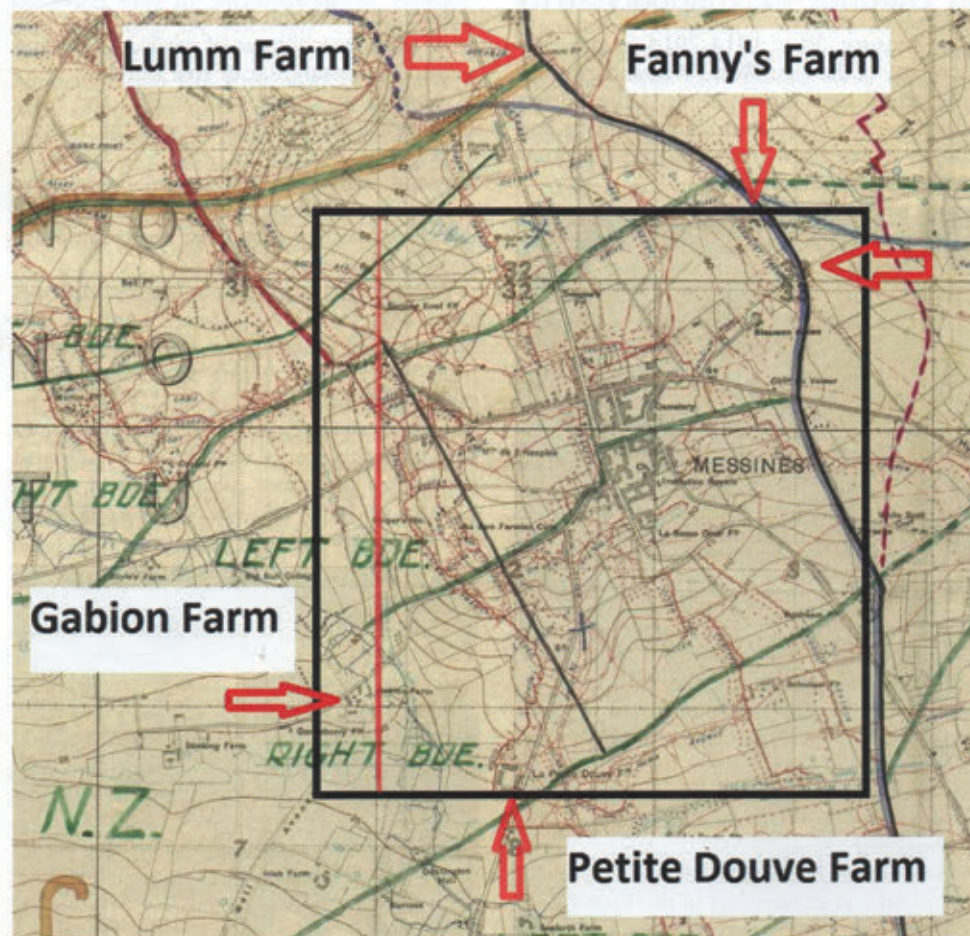
The 14th Bn was known as "Jacka's Mob" after Albert Jacka, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions in Gallipoli 1915. Although Jacka was photographed at the Messines terrain model at Romarin in France, he did not take part in the battle. The model was constructed by the Australian 3rd Pioneer Battalion at the end of May 1917, and was one of two terrain models constructed prior to the battle (the other being at Scherpenberg, completed in April 1917).

Battalion War Diary

The War Diary of 14th Bn Australian Imperial Force (page 33) -

On August 16th a work party of two officers and 100 men of C Company reported for work at Fanny's Farm at 9.30 P.M. for two days work, on Fanny's C.T for carrying work between Reserve Line and Support Line. Night of 17th August - They did three trips from Fanny's Farm to Fanny's C.T with 120 sheets of corrugated iron and 100 A Frames. Also two trips to front line from Blauwen Molen (windmill near Fanny's Farm) - 40 coils of French wire, 360 pickets small, 75 A Frames small, 25 A Frames large.

Next day carrying from Fanny's Farm to support line 70 A Frames and 80 sheets of corrugated iron.



Messines trench map



New Zealand wreath on Fanny's Farm Messines Model

Next day 75 duckboards, 50 screw pickets, 10 coils of French wire, 25 A Frames.

On account of hostile barrage only one trip could be made.

19th-20th Carried 200 sheets corrugated iron Fanny's Farm to support line.

This highlighted section of the War Diary refers specifically to the German artillery activity that had killed Jackson.

This is where The Chase Project connected the story of the Messines Model excavation on Cannock Chase with the fact that Jackson was originally from Cannock. The Graves Registration Unit (Exhumation) moved his body to Messines Ridge British Cemetery, which stands on the crest of the ridge, with its dominating view of the battlefield.

Messines Model Cannock - Fanny's Farm Strongpoint

The whole story takes a dramatic twist at this point; during his visit in September 2013, Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Beale from the New Zealand High Commission had given a short speech thanking all the volunteers for the hard work they had done and to The Chase Project and Stephen Dean (County Council Principal Archaeologist) for inviting him up to the excavation. He then placed a wreath on behalf of the people of New Zealand - on Fanny's Farm.

Mike had been present along with Richard Kay from the Embassy at the annual ANZAC ceremony on Cannock Chase in April 2013, which has taken place every year since 1918. It is believed to be the largest ANZAC ceremony outside of Australia and New Zealand and was the first place in the world where, in 2008, seventy three Dolores Cross Project www.dolorescrossproject.org R.S.A poppies and hand crafted Harakeke (flax plant indigenous to New Zealand) crosses were placed on the graves.

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Having managed to uncover this additional information about Thomas Jackson, The Chase Project contacted Lieutenant-Colonel Beale with whom they had liaised about the excavation since February 2013. Lee and Richard informed him of the

connecting coincidence with Cannock and he commented that he was going to Messines in early 2014 with his Australian counterpart Wing Commander Nathan Christic. When Mike was asked if they would place a wooden Royal British Legion poppy cross "from the people of Cannock" on Jackson's grave, Mike replied "I would be honoured".

After the war, Jackson's brother William wrote several times, up to 1923, to the Base Records Office enquiring about his brother's effects and death certificate, from his home at 346 Little Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria. Eventually his brother was sent the relevant documents and he was able to claim on the policy Jackson had taken out. The Prudential Insurance were instructed to forward any payments to Jackson's brother William or his wife (£50 plus interest) outstanding Army pay and £20 funeral death benefit.

The Chase Project research on Private Jackson has stalled at this point. That a man from Cannock, who had emigrated to Australia and had fought and died at Messines, and that a terrain model of Messines had been constructed on Cannock Chase is a strange coincidence; the fact that, unknown to The Chase Project and Mike Beale in September, Private Jackson had been killed near Fanny's Farm strongpoint and that Mike had placed a wreath on Fanny's Farm on the model, and later a Royal British Legion cross on his grave at Messines, is an additional twist to the story.

If anyone has additional information about Private Thomas Jackson, please email; thechaseproject@gmail.com
Richard Pursehouse



Thomas Jackson grave at Messines



Mike Beale lays a poppy at Jackson grave -



Richard Pursehouse and Lee Dent