

## **Bensemman, Lawrence Otto**

**(1891-1969)**

**Occupation:** Accountancy Clerk

**Rank:** Lieutenant

**Service Number:** 19/307

**Force:** NZEF

### **Family**

Lawrence (also spelt “Laurence”), the tenth of fourteen children, was born on March 4, 1891 in what was then the German community of Sarau (Upper Moutere). His parents Johann Diedrich (“Dick”) Bensemman and Maria Johanne Eggers and his grandparents were all of full German descent and he grew up speaking both German and English.

Late in his life Lawrence wrote of being impressed as a boy with the Bensemman family’s military heritage. His grandfather, Cordt Bensemman, Sarau’s founder, had arrived in Nelson in 1843, after reading about emigration schemes while in London as part of a guard of honour for Queen Victoria’s coronation. The Kingdom of Hanover had sent a regiment of soldiers to take part and, according to Lawrence’s account, the men were especially picked for their physique – none were less than 6’2”.

In 1856, during the colonial wars, Cordt was appointed Lieutenant of Militia in command of a defence force in the Moutere and these “Volunteers” remained active into the 1890s under command of a first cousin of Lawrence’s, Bill Wilkins. Lawrence wrote; “I more than once climbed into the branches of the school macrocarpas to watch the company of about two dozen doing their drill. The bayonet drill, with the very long bayonets of that period glimmering in the dim light, was impressive. It was accompanied by a vigorous stamping of feet and slapping of thighs.”

One older brother of Lawrence's, Albert, and one younger brother, Norman, also served overseas in the First World War. All three returned, but Albert was wounded. Lawrence was the only officer of the three.

## **Pre-War**

Lawrence attended Nelson College from 1904 to 1906 and then shifted to Wellington where he had two contrasting jobs – one as an accountancy clerk for J. B. McEwan & Co and the other as a professional rugby league player. He was a “second rower” (ie number 11 or 12) during the era of contested scrums and represented New Zealand against New South Wales in 1913.

## **1914**

When war broke out, the Bensemman family, like other settlers of German descent in Nelson province, suddenly found themselves under suspicion and their loyalties questioned; both by their “English” neighbours and by government authorities. They found it difficult explaining that Germany as a country had not been formed at the time of emigration. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Napoleonic and other wars had left German-speaking people in a mass of separate states, with some under effective control by outside countries such as Austria, France and Britain. As Hanoverians from northern Germany the Bensemman had been loyal to British sovereignty for more than a century. Similar links to the Kaiser did not exist.

Their citizenship in New Zealand was prescribed in law. Under the Naturalisation Ordinance of 1844 of the General Legislative Council of New Zealand, most German settlers were “deemed and be taken to be and to have been from the 14<sup>th</sup> day of June 1843 natural-born subjects of Her Majesty as if they had been born within the realm of England”.

A letter to the Nelson Evening Mail by Upper Moutere's Lutheran Church Minister G F Hoyer and other community leaders, dated August 13, 1914 was headed *Upper Moutere Residents and the War* with subheadings; *Farewell to departing volunteers. Declaration of loyalty to British flag*. It reminded readers of this naturalisation:

“Over 30 residents were assembled in the hotel dining room, listening to patriotic speeches and songs, and expressing their good wishes to our departing boys, the New Zealand contingent and the Empire's forces on land and sea. The

following toasts were honoured 'The King'; 'The Army, including our Contingent', 'The Navy' and 'Our Departing Comrades'.

"At this gathering it was mentioned by various speakers that they had been questioned by a number of people outside the district about the attitude of the Moutere German residents, and that some doubts and misgivings seemed to be entertained as to their loyalty. The assembly therefore unanimously requested the undersigned (two of whom are English born and two of German extraction) to explain the matter through the press, and expressed the hope that this would once [and] for all remove any anxiety or misunderstanding that might exist. First of all we would like to emphasise the fact that the appellation 'German' to any resident of Moutere refers only to language. There is not a single person of German extraction in the whole district who is not a naturalised British subject...

"The residents of German extraction... will stand shoulder to shoulder, man for man, with any other inhabitants of the colony to defend its shores and institutions, their homes and families against any foe whatsoever."

However, as Lawrence wrote later, this was not enough to spare the Bensemans and others from suspicion and name-calling. Another first cousin, Edward Christopher ("E.C.") Bensemman, had been something of a community leader, representing Upper Moutere on various agricultural and other committees. When the war started in 1914, Lawrence wrote, E.C. tried to extend this leadership role to patriotic gatherings and was initially in demand as a speaker. However at one meeting someone in the audience called him "a bloody Hun". He did not speak publicly again during the war and after the meeting gathered up Bensemman family records in the German language and burnt them in a bonfire.

## **1915-1917**

Lawrence started his overseas service on March 27, 1915, when he sailed on the *Talune* with the NZ Field Artillery from Auckland to Apia as part of the Samoa Relief Force. Western Samoa had been a German colony from 1900 to 1914 but New Zealand troops took over, just after war was declared in August 1914, without a shot being fired. Lawrence's German language skills were in demand because the German population had generally stayed in Samoa during the war,

and New Zealand needed to confer especially with German business owners and those German administrators who had been kept on in their positions.

## **1917-1918**

On March 27, 1917, Lawrence left Samoa for New Zealand, arriving on April 3, 1917. After leave and further training he left on the *Athenic* on December 31, 1917 as part of the 33rd Reinforcements Specialist Company, NZ Expeditionary Force, arriving in Glasgow on February 25, 1918. From there he went to France.

Despite the ongoing service of the Bensemenn brothers and others of German descent, paranoia continued about local German-speaking families, including the Bensemenns. Lawrence's family had by now shifted from the Moutere to Golden Bay where his father "Dick" Bensemenn had set up a wheelwright and foundry business. According to oral history, Dick, who was 6'6" tall and powerfully built, was infuriated by a man in a Takaka Hotel bar who called him a "dirty Hun". Dick lifted the abuser up horizontally over his (Dick's) head and threw him through the hotel's front window. Because of his sons serving overseas, he was not charged by the police. This may be an apocryphal tale but is regularly told within the family with some pride.

Lawrence too had his loyalty questioned - by Motueka politicians - in correspondence with the military and with Defence Minister James Allen. Motueka Member of Parliament Richard Hudson wrote to Mr Allen on April 30, 1918 saying: "I have been informed on very reliable authority that it is highly desirable that a careful watch should be kept on 19/307 Lieut. Lawrence Otto Bensemenn, Field Artillery, Samoan Relief, who has lately been writing some of his friends in this neighbourhood that he is making fast friends amongst the Germans of Samoa. I believe this man's father got into trouble at the beginning of the War owing to his disloyal attitude and utterances." No letter from Lawrence or any other evidence was produced, but Mr Hudson implied a relative of James Wallace, the Mayor of Motueka, had seen it. Mr Hudson did not appear to know that one of Lawrence's tasks in Samoa was communicating with the German population, nor that Lawrence had left Samoa 13 months before.

Mr Allen checked with the Commander-in-Chief in Samoa, Colonel Robert Logan, and then wrote back to Mr Hudson on July 1, 1918 saying the officer under question had left Samoa a year before and was now in France. "It would

appear therefore that there was no foundation for the statement that he had lately been writing to some of his friends stating that he was making fast friends amongst the Germans in Samoa.”

The suspicion at home had not prevented Lawrence’s promotion from Sergeant to Lieutenant while in Europe.

### **Post-War**

After the war, Lawrence settled back in Wellington with his wife Charlotte (nee Newbury) and returned to his accountancy career. He died on September 23, 1969, survived by two sons and eight grandchildren.

The previous year, on November 16, 1968, one of Lawrence’s great nephews, and Dick’s great grandsons, Lance Corporal Donald Bensemman, 41383, Royal NZ Infantry Regiment, was shot to death in Vietnam during an engagement with the Viet Cong.

### **Links:**

View Military Record

([www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C38393;](http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C38393;))

View Rugby League Record

([www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence\\_Bensemman;](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Bensemman;))

View Bensemman Family Record

([www.bensemman.org.nz;](http://www.bensemman.org.nz;))

**Researched and written by Paul Bensemman**