

The MacMahons - George and Russell

For many years the MacMahon farm, just north of the Tapawera village, hosted the Tapawera Military Camp. The camp was regularly attended by thousands of volunteer soldiers from April 1909¹ and compulsory territorial soldiers from 1912.²

George MacMahon (sometimes spelled as McMahan) was a sheep farmer and Waimea County Councillor.³ Married to Caroline, he was a firm supporter of the military and was the Tapawera delegate of the Canterbury Military District National Efficiency Board, representing the Executive Group Committee on the permanent Executive Council.⁴

George showed his community spirit in many ways, also allowing his land to be used by other organisations, including the Motueka Valleys Racing Club, which held its race meetings there from at least 1907.⁵ He served on the Tapawera School committee and held office on numerous other organisations and clubs.

George died in 1935, following Caroline's death in 1929. Both are buried at Wakapuaka Cemetery.⁶

In 1915 George declared his own willingness to serve in the war if the authorities would let him.⁷ However, his age was against him, although his only son, no stranger to the Tapawera camp himself, was called up.

George and Caroline's son, Russell Bernard MacMahon, was born in Tapawera in 1888. He was an old boy of Nelson College, where he had been a college cadet. Russell joined the Wakatu Mounted Rifles from the time he left college in 1905 until 1911 when he transferred to the 10th (Nelson) Mounted Rifles, and was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant. He was a member of the New Zealand Contingent which went to England for the coronation of King George.⁸

Russell owned a farm next to his parents' and married Victoria Ingledew in Tapawera on 1 January 1914. They had two young children, Doreen (born May 1915) and Pamala⁹ (born January 1917). At the beginning of the war he was attached to the Nelson Defence Staff.¹⁰

Russell volunteered for war service in 1916, enlisted in March 1917 (service number 92978) and was finally called up in October 1918. As a private he was posted to the Special Training Unit at the Trentham Military Camp, leaving Nelson on 4 November. Promoted to temporary sergeant, he arrived in the camp on 7 November. Tragically he arrived at the camp at the same time as an outbreak of Spanish Influenza.

During 1918, 77 men at the camp died of the flu, the vast majority of them during a 12 day period from 10-22 November.¹¹ It is thought the sickness was brought into the camp by men returning from leave in Wellington because there were no flu cases in the camp before 4 November. In just three days, the close conditions the men were living in at the camp ensured that flu admissions to the camp hospital soared from three to 137.¹²

One of these was Russell MacMahon, who was admitted to hospital on 10 November. He died on 22 November of pneumonia, a complication of influenza, aged 31. His death came just 10 days after the Armistice¹³ and a month after he was called up.

Historian Geoffrey Rice noted the country's military camps, Trentham and Featherston, were "by far the most dangerous places to be in 1918" with 23.5 deaths per 1,000 people recorded at Trentham.

In announcing Russell's death, the *Colonist* noted "his generosity among territorial camps at Tapawera earned golden tributes from officers and men".¹⁴

The territorial camps at the MacMahon's property (although it changed hands in the 1920s) continued through into World War Two, before being cancelled.

The researched Biography was compiled by Karen Stade, Nelson Provincial Museum, in 2014.

¹ 'The Volunteers', *Colonist*, Volume LI, Issue 12531, 6 May 1909, Page 5.

² Peter Cooke and John Crawford, *The Territorials, The history of the Territorial and Volunteer Forces of New Zealand*, Auckland: Random House, 2011, pp.173 - 175.

³ Motor Tour Through the Country, *Colonist*, Volume LII, Issue 12738, 9 March 1910, p.2.

⁴ National Efficiency, *Nelson Evening Mail*, Volume L, Issue 175, 31 December 1917, p.6; and National Efficiency, *Colonist*, Volume LX, Issue 14600, 3 January 1918, p.7.

⁵ Motueka Valley Racing Club, *Colonist*, Volume L, Issue 12120, 19 December 1907, p.3.

⁶ MacMahon, George and Caroline, Nelson City Council Cemeteries Database, <http://nelson.govt.nz/services/facilities/cemeteries/cemeteries-database-2/>

⁷ Personal Items, *Nelson Evening Mail*, Volume XLVI, 23 October 1915, p.4.

⁸ Personal Items, *Nelson Evening Mail*, Volume LII, Issue 282, 23 November 1918, Page 4.

⁹ Pamala – note this is the correct spelling according to Russell's handwritten military history sheet.

¹⁰ Personal Items, *Nelson Evening Mail*, Volume LII, Issue 282, 23 November 1918, Page 4.

¹¹ Geoffrey Rice, *Black November* (2nd ed.), Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2005, p.288, 294

¹² *Ibid*, p.213.

¹³ New Zealand War Graves, Russell Bernard MacMahon, <http://www.nzwargraves.org.nz/casualties/russell-bernard-MacMahon>

¹⁴ Personal Items, *Nelson Evening Mail*, Volume LII, Issue 282, 23 November 1918, Page 4