



## **A tribute: the contribution of the Otago University Medical School and its students in World War 1**

Pat Cotter

The recent return to New Zealand of the “unknown warrior” (now entombed in front of the National War Memorial in Wellington) has stimulated interest in the history of our fighting forces.

The Gallipoli campaign has long been the centre of our national acts of remembrance, although the losses of our troops in Europe far exceeded those on the Gallipoli Peninsula, Turkey. The forthcoming 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Gallipoli landing (on ANZAC Day, April 25) is an appropriate occasion to record and pay tribute to a group of our soldiers, who, to the best of our knowledge, have never before been documented. The men documented below, when war broke out, were medical students in Dunedin.

Many years later, one of the participants, DS Milne, wrote of his response at the outbreak of war:

“The Otago Daily Times, which announced the war, also declared that the war could not last longer than three months. There was not enough money in the world to run a modern war longer than that. Believing this naïve statement, we petitioned the authorities to let us sit our exams now [in August] instead of January when the war would be over”

In the euphoria of the occasion, there was a mixture of patriotism and a sense of adventure not to be missed.

With quite remarkable speed, the students responded. War was declared by the New Zealand Government on August 4, 1914. The following letter dated August 5, 1914 was delivered to Major Falconer, Senior Territorial Officer (who was also on the medical staff of the Dunedin Hospital).

For many years, this remarkable (framed) letter hung on the corridor wall of the old Dunedin Hospital:

To Major Falconer *Dunedin Hospital*  
Dunedin: August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914.

The following Final Year Medical Students are willing, if qualified, to place their services at the disposal of the New Zealand Government as Medical Officers for the Expeditionary Force.

[21 signatures appear]

This makes a total of 21 who have signed this letter

**The 21 final-year students were:**

<b>AITKEN</b>	William (Peter)	MB ChB. MD, FRACP. MC. ChCh
<b>BLAUBAUM</b>	Ivan	MB ChB. Melbourne
<b>CONNOR</b>	John	MB ChB. MC, SBSJ. Mayor Ashburton
<b>HASLETT</b>	Selwyn Langstaff	MB ChB. Tauranga
<b>JORY</b>	Phillip John	MB ChB. FRCS. DSO London
<b>MacCORMICK</b>	Kenneth	MB ChB. FRCS. FRACS. DSO. CBE Pres.NZ Branch BMA. Pres.Red Cross Auckland
<b>MacKAY</b>	Donald	MB ChB. Kaipara
<b>MARSHALL</b>	Angus McPhee	MB ChB. Died before 1925
<b>MILNE</b>	Donald Stuart	MB ChB. Hutt Valley
<b>REDPATH</b>	George	MB ChB. Remuera, Chatham Islands
<b>REID</b>	Oswald James	MB ChB. Takapuna
<b>REID</b>	William Jameson	MB ChB. New Plymouth
<b>RITCHIE</b>	Thomas Russell	MB ChB. DPH. MOH. Dunedin. DGH Wellington.
<b>SCANNELL</b>	William Gladstone	MB ChB. ENT specialist Christchurch
<b>SHARP</b>	George Stanley	MB ChB. Featherston
<b>SHORT</b>	Aubrey Vincent	MB ChB. MC. Died due to 1918 flu in Christchurch
<b>WALLIS</b>	Wilfred Stanley	MB ChB. OBE. Orthopaedic surgeon. Rotorua OSTJ Hon. Fellow NZ Orthopaedic Soc.
<b>WEBB</b>	Ernest John Herbert	MB ChB. BE (MINING). Died in accident – active service
<b>WHITTON</b>	Noel Stewart	MB ChB. Christchurch
<b>WILL</b>	William Hunter	MB ChB. Palmerston North
<b>WITHERS</b>	Robert Lanktree	MB ChB. Kaikoura

The University authorities agreed to the request although it is easy to think of their reluctance to see students break their training.

The fifth-year students sat their exams, were passed, commissioned, and joined the medical corps. They were not, however, registered. It is probably because the obstetrics and gynaecology training was incomplete. This was done when they returned to New Zealand in due course. All of this group, except EJH Webb (who died), returned to New Zealand.

The next big group were the third-year students whose First Professional Exam was advanced to August. Many passed and volunteered as stretcher bearers in the expeditionary force. There were various other students in their first, second, and fourth years who also enlisted.

It is interesting that they all sailed in the expeditionary force—and on the way, met the survivors from the German cruiser *Emden* which had been destroyed by the Australian cruiser *Sydney* at Cocos Island off Western Australia. This provided them with a sudden introduction to the violence of war.

**Other students at Otago who are believed to have served in World War I include:**

<b>1914: 3<sup>RD</sup> YEAR STUDENTS</b>		
<b>BOOTH</b>	Leonard Hugh	MB ChB. UK
<b>CHRISTIE</b>	Robert Lyall	MB ChB. Then rejoined NZMC Porirua. Died in a motor vehicle accident in 1932
<b>CURRIE</b>	Donald Eric	MB ChB. Christchurch
<b>DENNISTON</b>	TH	<b>Died at Gallipoli</b>
<b>FISHER</b>	Geoffrey Jasper St.Clair	MB ChB. FRCOG. OBE. Auckland
<b>FITZGERALD</b>	Gerald Patrick	MB ChB. FRCOG. Dunedin
<b>GLASGOW</b>	Wilfred Thompson	MB ChB. Christchurch
<b>KELLY</b>	GA	
<b>O'SULLIVAN</b>	Aeneas William Tolster	MB ChB. Died due to the 1918 flu
<b>PARKER</b>	Spencer Tauria	MB ChB. MRCS. LRCP. FRCS. UK
<b>SPENCER</b>	Frederick Montgomery	MB ChB. FRCSE. MD. MRACP OBE. MC. Rejoined NZMC. Served WWII C.O.2 Gen Hosp. Wellington. Died in Egypt.
<b>WILL</b>	James Leslie Allan	MB ChB. FRCSE. FRACS. CBE. Rejoined NZMC. Chairman NZ Red Cross. Pres. Orthopaedic Assn. ChCh.
<b>2<sup>ND</sup> YEAR STUDENTS</b>		
<b>BARNETT</b>	Geoffrey Michael Fulton	MB ChB. MRCS. LRCP. FRCS. FRACS. Dunedin
<b>BEGG</b>	Arama Thomas	MB ChB. Pukekohe
<b>BEGG</b>	Andrew Muir	MB ChB. Dunedin
<b>FRASER</b>	Charles Stanley Frederick	MB ChB. Timaru
<b>SEFTON</b>	WF	
<b>THOMSON</b>	George Herbert	MB ChB. WW2 POW. New Plymouth
<b>1<sup>ST</sup> YEAR STUDENTS</b>		
<b>CHURCH</b>	Robert Alan Henry	MB ChB. MM Marton
<b>LAIDLAW</b>	RR	
<b>KITCHEN</b>	Raymond Leopold Albert	LRCPED. LRCS. ED. LRFPS. MRCPEd. Hastings
<b>PATERSON</b>	James Aitkenhead	MB ChB. Auckland
<b>SALMOND</b>	Kenneth Guthrie	MB ChB. Feilding
<b>FISHER</b>	J	
<b>CAMERON</b>	N	
<b>OTHERS</b>		
<b>CHRISTIE</b>	Alan Leslie	MB ChB. Died due to the 1918 flu
<b>BELL</b>	Leslie George	MB ChB. Lumsden
<b>CHILTON</b>	Charles	<b>Died at Gallipoli</b>
<b>JAMESON</b>	Alfred Barrett	MB ChB. FRCGP Chairman Council. MSc. Orakei
<b>JOSEPH</b>	Edward Gordon	MB ChB. Edin. MRCS. LRCP. MS. Minnesota. Died in Israel

After the end of the Gallipoli campaign, all the medical students were recalled to Dunedin to complete their training. The imminent shortage of doctors was appreciated. At that time, the course was 5 years. Such was the calibre of these men that several (notably JL Will, RL Christie, and FM Spencer) qualified and rejoined the Army to serve in Europe. Some served in World War 2.

**Photograph 1. This is probably a photograph of all the unqualified students taken on their return from Gallipoli to Dunedin (late 1915–early 1916)**



*Back Row*—JL Will, CS Fraser, GP Fitzgerald, RL Christie, N Cameron

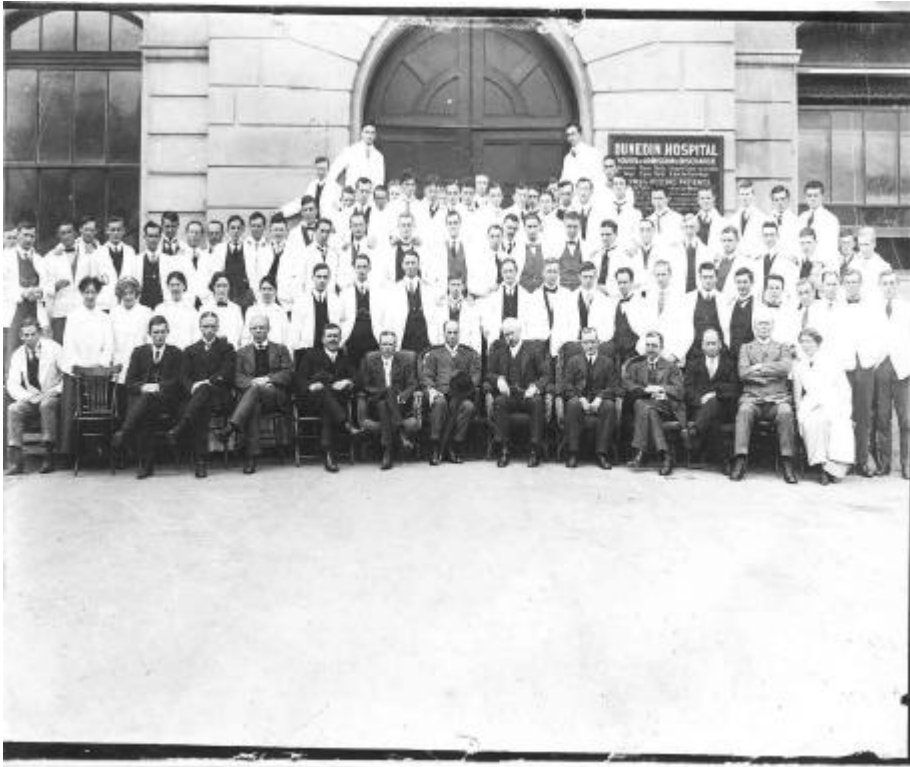
*Middle Row*—GH Thomson, RA Church, DE Currie, GJS Fisher, FM Spencer, KG Salmond.

*Front Row*—WF Sefton, RLA Kitchen, GA Kelly, ST Parker, LH Booth, AM Begg, AW O'Sullivan

*Sitting (on floor)*—AT Begg, LG Bell, WT Glasgow

*Absent*—GMF Barnett, RR Laidlaw, JG Stewart, EG Joseph, J Fisher

**Photograph 2. The staff and students, Dunedin Hospital (probably 1917)**



Odd snippets of information emerge from the growing biographical record. Dr DS Milne recalled (in a letter written 50 years later) that his first case was a man whose leg was badly cut by a kick from a horse on Wellington wharves before the troopships sailed. The same doctor noted that his first case on reaching the NZ Army Camp in Egypt was a similar cut from a horse's hoof.

This extract from the Otago University Review of 1915—an article entitled *ANZAC Anecdotes*—helps to understand the culture shock of the students when they reached the battlefield in Turkey:

“Some of us were fortunate enough to land on Gallipoli on the first day of landing. It seems still that we were in a dream. But a little previously, in the perfect morning hours, we had glided out of Lemnos Harbour, and now we were standing in this awful inferno, helplessly holding a stretcher in a dazed manner with shrapnel spitting all round us. But a few trenchant remarks from our officer wakened us up, and we speedily assisted to look after the enormous number of wounded who covered the beach. Barge after barge was filled up and taken away to the transports and Hospital Ships”

Two of the first 21 died tragically. EJH Webb, who had completed a degree in mining engineering before turning to medicine, died at Colombo in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) from a shipboard accident while on the voyage out from New Zealand in 1914.

Another, AV Short, returned to New Zealand shortly before the end of the war. He became a senior house surgeon at Christchurch Hospital and died on November 15, 1918 (4 days after the Armistice was signed) from pneumonia contracted while battling the terrible influenza epidemic which swept the world that year.

Geoffrey Barnett with his brother Ralph and father Louis (later Sir Louis) all served together at Gallipoli (we have a photograph of them).

Others enjoyed long and distinguished careers in New Zealand and abroad.

Kenneth MacCormick, for example, served in Egypt, Gallipoli, and France. He won the DSO in 1917 and returned to become a surgeon and urologist in Auckland. During World War 2, he served as Director of Medical Service for the 2NZEF from 1940 to 1943 with the rank of Brigadier. In addition, he was President of the NZ branch of the BMA in 1953-54 and President of the NZ Red Cross.

PJ Jory remained in Britain after World War 1 as an eminent ENT specialist. In World War 2, he commanded a military general hospital and went on to a spell as a ship's surgeon. When he died in 1973, the *Lancet* recalled him as "Wise and good, humorous and kind, and in all his many interests eager and generous." Ivan Blaubaum later served in the Australian Army Medical Corps and then at Melbourne Children's Hospital.

TR Ritchie, a tailor's son who was born in Gore, was for a time Medical Officer of Health in Samoa and later (from 1947 to 1950) New Zealand's Director General of Health. WS Wallis, born at Opawa in Christchurch, became one of New Zealand's pioneer orthopaedic surgeons working in hospitals at Rotorua.

Others, of the original 21, went on to serve communities in many parts of New Zealand. RL Withers, for instance, practiced in Kaikoura from 1919 to 1949. WG Scannell was an EENT specialist in Christchurch. John Connor served in Ashburton from 1922 to 1965, and was Mayor of the town from 1940 to 1944. William (Peter) Aitken was a physician in Christchurch up to his death in 1958. George Redpath practiced for a time in the Chatham Islands.

After all these years, the information available is limited. In piecing this together, I have been helped by TS Weston, LJH Davies, and NW Fitzgerald. There is considerable information in the biography of FM Spencer *A Doctor at War* by his daughter Christine Daniel. There will be errors and omissions. Any corrections and additional material will be welcomed.

The record of medical practitioners in New Zealand 1840–1930, *Historia Nunc Vivat*, by Rex Wright St Clair (who died recently), has been invaluable in tracing the later careers of these men. It is remarkable how many returned and picked up the threads of their lives. There were some very notable ones among this elite group.

**Photograph 3. Photograph of the model of the Gallipoli Peninsula made by PC Fenwick on his return to Egypt. The model is on display in the Auckland War Memorial Museum**



**Note:** This work has been done using the facilities of the Cotter Medical History Trust. For several years, the Cotter Medical History Trust in Christchurch has been recording the lives and careers of our earlier doctors, and now has an archive of many hundreds of often quite comprehensive records. All the information in this article is from the Trust Archive. Corrections and further information are actively sought and encouraged.

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