

## Sam Vernon 1880 - 1916



Samuel Edward Portman Vernon 4/1553 was born on 19 August 1880, at Vernon Terrace, Upper Waikaia, Southland, in the settlement of Whitecoomb.<sup>1</sup> The Vernon family were miners in the harsh and mountainous interior of the Upper Waikaia Valley. Sam was named for his father's father Samuel, his father Edward and his mother's maiden name Portman.

Sam's father Edward Vernon was born in 1830 in Derbyshire, England. He was probably a coal miner, since Derbyshire is renowned for its coal. Edward emigrated first to Victoria in 1856 with the discovery of gold, then to the coal mines of New South Wales.<sup>2</sup> He came to the Tuapeka goldfields in Otago in 1863, then moved to Waikaia about 1870, where he was a partner in the Anglo-Swiss [mining] Co. This went bankrupt in 1873, so when gold was discovered in the Upper Waikaia River in the 1870s, Edward Vernon moved there and purchased a share in a water-race near Whitcoomb Stream. He worked

successfully there for some time, recovering as much as 42 ounces (1.3 kg) from three dishes of dirt. After working this claim out, he shifted further up the river and spent a considerable amount of money with no return for it. (Perhaps for this reason he was declared bankrupt in June 1873<sup>3</sup>). He then shifted back to the Whitecoomb where he built a hotel in 1874. This was a success for a few years, but he did not renew the hotel licence when the fee increased as there were very few miners left about that time. He continued to mine with varying success, but the Whitecoomb was never very rich. Sam's brother George recalled that it was in the early seventies when their father went to the Whitecoomb where he worked a claim for a year or two without much success – except that he did find the biggest nugget ever to come out of the district. It weighted six ounces four pennyweights (just over 190 grams).<sup>4</sup>

Sam's mother Laura Emily Rainsford Portman arrived in Dunedin on the *Asia* in April 1874 aged 18, a general servant from the London borough of Wandsworth. In 1879 she was working as a domestic servant in a Dunedin boarding house, when the proprietor introduced her to a guest, Edward Vernon. Edward had come to Dunedin to get married, but his chosen bride changed her mind and would not marry him. After three days Edward and Laura married, on 4 October 1879, in Knox (Presbyterian) Church.<sup>5</sup> They returned to the

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<sup>1</sup> *Tuapeka Times* 25 August 1880 p.2

<sup>2</sup> Tyrrell, A.R. *Waikaia and districts: a history* 1999 p.269

<sup>3</sup> *Otago Daily Times* 18 June 1873 p.2

<sup>4</sup> Millar, F.W.G *History of Waikaia* 1966 p.26, 102

<sup>5</sup> *Tuapeka Times* 8 October 1879 p.2

Whitcomb and Edward's two room hut, built over a tree stump that served as kitchen bench in one room and dressing table in the bedroom. Edward continued mining, and was also Commissioner and News Agent at Upper Waikaia. In 1887 the family re-opened the Bush Road Hotel beside Whitcomb Creek, and Edward became postmaster here in 1890.<sup>6</sup>

Laura, who was 26 years younger than her husband, was clearly of hardy stock. Her children were born in this harsh environment, with winters that claimed many lives from exposure. Her children were born in 1880 (Sam), 1881 (George), 1886 (Laura Mary 'Daisy') and 1891 (Henry). Sam, George and Henry were all born at the Whitcomb, Laura in Roxburgh. Eventually, in the early 1890s, all the miners' wives decided they could not over-winter in the hills any longer. The last to come out was Laura Vernon and her daughter Daisy.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, the sons remained with their father, to continue the mining. Edward and Laura Vernon ran the hotel, but it was never a roaring success; Edward Vernon 'hotelkeeper of Whitcombe' was bankrupted for the second time in 1891.<sup>8</sup> He had told a meeting of his creditors in Gore in 1889 that 'I went to Whitecombe about 4 1/2 years ago. Had no money then, and was just working for a living. The hotel never paid. Mr Cooper of Roxburgh supplied me with funds to build the hotel and to buy supplies....I still have the hotel. I agreed at one time to give a bill of sale over the house and effects and I signed the deed....The hotel is built on a residence area, and the furniture is all of a rough bush sort made principally by myself....Never made anything out of the hotel. There were only about ten residents within a radius of a mile of the hotel. Had a difficulty getting a license, and when I did get it found it of no value.'<sup>9</sup> Edward Jackson applied for an accommodation license for premises situated at Whitecombe, Waikaia in June 1886.<sup>10</sup> A 'ten o'clock accommodation license for the Bush Inn, Whitecombe Creek' was granted in June 1888.<sup>11</sup> Sam Vernon was nineteen during the bankruptcy hearing.

The Vernons moved to Roxburgh about 1905 when Edward retired. Edward died in 1917 at the age of 87, and Laura in 1926, aged 70.<sup>12</sup>

There no schools nearby, a matter of great concern to his father, who wrote to the Maitua newspaper on the subject in 1887, when Sam was seven.<sup>13</sup> It would seem most likely that Sam was schooled by his parents. His education probably didn't last very long anyway, since by the age of 12 he had his own mining claim. He gave evidence in support of his father about pegging out a claim in the Warden's Court in Waikaia in March 1893.<sup>14</sup>

The mining history of Waikaia can be divided into four periods – the tin dish and cradle, ground sluicing, hydraulic sluicing and finally dredging. Sam's introduction to mining would have been helping his father, panning for alluvial gold and working the sluice fed by his water race. Sam had left before the dredging began, possibly because he wanted to learn about deep lead mining, rather than the alluvial mining of the Waikaia Valley. As a young man he spent a period in the mines at Reefton on the South Island West Coast, where he

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<sup>6</sup> Tyrrell, A.R. *Waikaia and districts: a history* 1999 p.269

<sup>7</sup> Millar, F.W.G *History of Waikaia* 1966 p.29

<sup>8</sup> *Southland Times* 16 January 1891 p.2

<sup>9</sup> *Maitua Ensign* 4 October 1889 p.6

<sup>10</sup> *Southland Times* 15 July 1886 p.3

<sup>11</sup> *Maitua Ensign* 22 June 1888 p.4

<sup>12</sup> Tyrrell, A.R. *Waikaia and districts: a history* 1999 p.269

<sup>13</sup> *Maitua Ensign* 23 September 1887 p.8

<sup>14</sup> *Otago Witness* 30 March 1893 p.16

learned about deep lead mining – Reefton has underground mines of both gold and coal. While there he served in the Reefton Volunteer Rifles. He may also have spent a short period mining in the North Island. About 1904 he moved to Coal Creek in Central Otago, not far from Waikaia across the hills, where he worked in and subsequently became working manager of the Perseverance Coal Mine owned by James Craig. This move to Coal Creek coincides with his parents move to nearby Roxburgh. He was a keen member of the local Masonic Lodge, and also the Roxburgh Defence Rifle Club, winning the championship belt and gold medal in 1913-14, in addition to many other trophies.

On 2 November 1907, he married Margaret (Maggie) Campbell in the Roxburgh Presbyterian Church (though he described himself as Anglican when he enlisted in 1915, and gave his marriage date as 1908). Sam was 27, Maggie was 42, and she had an illegitimate daughter Ivy, who took Sam's surname, though he described himself as having no children on his enlistment papers.

Margaret Campbell was herself from a mining family. She was born on 9 March 1864 on the Tuapeka goldfields where her father James Campbell was mining. James Campbell was born in Perthshire, Scotland in 1835, and came to Auckland in 1856. He married Katherine Cameron in Auckland in 1857, and they lived for several years at Whangaparaoa, but after the discovery of gold at Gabriel's Gully in 1861 the family moved to the Tuapeka goldfields, Gabriel's Gully and Blue Spur, where Maggie was born, their fourth of eleven children. James Campbell became the manager of a major sluicing claim at Blue Spur. James was accidentally killed in a hunting accident in 1898 – Maggie, aged 34, who was then living at Blue Spur with her parents and her daughter Ivy, gave evidence at the coroner's inquest into his death.

Sam Vernon had his military medical in Roxburgh on 2 October 1915, and enlisted at Avondale, Auckland on 9 October. He was 35 years old, 5 foot 11 inches and weighed 183 lb (13 stone). Three of his teeth required attention. His next of kin was Mrs Margaret Vernon, of Coal Creek Flat, Roxburgh.

Avondale was a newly established Army training camp. The Tunnelling Company unit history records:

Early morning physical "jerks" with a gallop round the racecourse followed by six hours marching and countermarching in the blazing Auckland sun had a wonderful effect in renewing the youth of many an old work stiffened toiler. Of course at first they did not like it, they had enlisted to work, not to prance around on a parade ground, but very soon they entered into the spirit of the thing, they were so very anxious not to be left behind through any want of fitness.

It was really wonderful too how these men, drawn from the most independent class on earth, willingly and cheerfully surrendered to military discipline. They saw that it was necessary and that it was just and made no haggles over accepting it. The food was good and more than abundant and when the tents became flooded they slept equally well in the grandstand and tote-house. In after days the Tunnellers looked back on those days as perhaps the pleasantest in their military experience.

Four sections were constituted each at strength of three officers and 80 other ranks and in addition six months reinforcements of two officers and 90 other ranks. Major J. E. Duigan, N.Z.S.C., was appointed to the command and an officer promoted from the ranks to complete the establishment. Attached to the company also were a medical officer and two medical orderlies belonging to the N.Z.M.C. and nineteen motor and horse drivers from the N.Z.A.S.C., making a total strength on embarkation of 17 officers and 429 other ranks.<sup>15</sup>

When Sam Vernon enlisted at Avondale on 9 October 1915 he was posted as a Sapper in the Tunnelling Company of the NZ Engineers. He was promoted to Sergeant on 27 November 1915. Sam had his photograph taken at the Auckland studio of R. Reid photographer. He is resplendent in his sergeant's stripes, and he holds his sergeant's 'swagger stick' though his collar is unbuttoned and he has no insignia on his cap or his collar. That is true of all the men of the Main Body; presumably the Army had yet to provide the insignia. On the little finger of his left hand he wears a ring with a gold nugget mounted on it. This might be a wedding ring, but it seems more likely to be a memento of his gold mining days. He wore this ring when he went to France, and was probably wearing it when he was killed. It was well known to his comrades, but they were unable to find it when gathering his personal effects such as his wrist watch.<sup>16</sup>

The NZ Tunnelling Company embarked at Auckland on 18 December 1915 on the New Zealand Shipping Company refrigerated cargo vessel *SS Ruapehu*.



The ship sailed across the Pacific via Cape Horn. After a voyage of two months, with a brief stopover in Dakar, they arrived in Plymouth on 18 February 1916.

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<sup>15</sup> *The New Zealand Tunnelling Company, 1915-1919* J.C.Neill (ed.) 1922

<sup>16</sup> See June 1916 letter from Sgt Leeden, below



*Sergeant Sam Vernon leads his section at the 'Christmas Box' parade on board S.S. Ruapehu, Christmas 1915.*

The Company history notes:

The War Office made no provision for training the men in their own branch of the service or to enlighten them on the methods involved in the new underground fighting in Flanders; as before, they were dependent on their own resources. Infantry training was continued ... [instructor Sergeant O'Brien's] conception of the Company's activities in war were first to march to their job like soldiers, secondly to pile arms in immaculate order, thirdly to dig. For this last nobody could teach the Tunnellers and for the others the reality meant floundering in twos and threes up muddy trenches with rifles kept very handy for instant use.<sup>17</sup>

Little time was spent in England, because the Company embarked for France on 9 March 1916. They were sent to Arras, and became engaged in the tunnelling and mining there. The Company history continues:

From the billets a walk of little over an hour up the communication trench would bring one to the front line trench along which and in the immediate support trench the mine entrances were located. Each section of the Company had a definite number of jobs allotted to it and these jobs were worked continuously by the three reliefs into which a section was then divided, eight hours on and sixteen off.

This was the unvarying routine for many months, eight full hours hard slogging in the solid chalk and flints, till relieved at three, eleven or seven o'clock, then a good hour's plod back to billets along the trench, a rum ration, a hot meal and to sleep till time for the next shift: each day of the week or month exactly alike, the only variations being in whether it rained or snowed, whether the mud was liquid or merely sticky or in "Jerry's" supply of ammunition for "hate" purposes. ...

On the 6th June, after an intense bombardment lasting two days, the enemy blew four big mines as a preliminary to a general attack. Three of the resulting craters were

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<sup>17</sup> *The New Zealand Tunnelling Company, 1915-1919* J.C.Neill (ed.) 1922

in the company's sector and one in the adjoining section to the north. Huge craters they were — the largest 147 feet in diameter and 38 feet deep, the mounds of chalk thrown up forming conspicuous landmarks. They were christened Cuthbert, Clarence and Claude in honour of a then popular revue.

Their effect may have helped the German attackers to get across no-man's land, but the actual damage to our personnel, trenches, or galleries was practically nil. The Norfolks and Warwicks suffered some casualties in the trench fighting before the Germans were driven out, but the New Zealand Tunnellers came off without a scratch. For the rest of June and all July mining progressed steadily without any spectacular features on either side; footage average per man per week for the period was 2.4 feet.<sup>18</sup>

On 21 June 1916, Sam Vernon was wounded by a rifle grenade, and admitted to the 14<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance with multiple wounds. He died in the Field Ambulance. He was buried on the same day, 21 June 1916. His grave is now in Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery, Arras (though said on his casualty record to be Armentières). He was 36 years old.

Sam was killed above ground, keeping watch while other tunnellers were underground. This was at 'Chantecler', in J Sector, just north of St Laurent-Bleigny, northeast of Arras, between the later Bailleul Road West CWGC Cemetery and the D919 road.

Possibly because Sam was the first member of the Tunnelling Company to be killed in action, a number of his comrades wrote to Maggie Vernon, Sam's widow, to newspapers and to others.

Sam's service and death was described in an as yet unidentified newspaper article by one of his comrades, Sapper John Edward (Jack) McManus:

A few of our men have been wounded, and one man from Otago, Sergeant Vernon, has been killed by shellfire. Sergeant Vernon was born and raised in Otago. His family reside at Coal Creek, Roxburgh. He was the sergeant of my relief. He was the one man, I can safely say without exaggeration, whom I would have preferred to see the very last to go. But fate decreed otherwise. Sergeant Vernon was a man with iron nerve, who understood his work of mining thoroughly.

As evidence of his self-sacrificing disposition, I have seen him (when the fatigue party under his control feared the enemy's fire with his own hands build a wall of sandbags to protect the dump from the enemy's view. I have seen him down below, where shattered ground required timbering, wanting to do the dangerous work 'himself, even excusing himself in such cases by saying: "A little exercise will do me good; let me do this". I have seen him, when shells were falling at the rate of 105 a minute, appear at our saphead to make sure we were not hurt. When the enemy sprang some mines and buried some of our infantry, it was Sergeant Vernon who, on discovering that two men were still alive, and through fear of enemy fire in daytime were not to be dug out until night time, decided they should be dug out then and there. I shall never forget that memorable morning, when he came, and, explaining the circumstances, asked who would volunteer to dig them out, as they would be dead by night if left. I

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*



was so thrilled by the spirit of the man, which is so typical of the colonial miner, that I eagerly volunteered to go.

I was fortunate in being one of the men selected. He led us to a spot where we had to crawl to avoid being seen, and started to dig when blood besmeared the ground. For on that very spot in the dawning hours a Red Cross man was killed while engaged in the work of rescue. We had worked but barely half an hour when the English officers, stimulated to activity by the energies of Sergeant Vernon, decided to carry on sapping in the trench we made. It was Vernon who then spoke up and pointed out that as his men understood their work, and did not require his supervision, he might be permitted to remain. "I might be more useful than your men," he said, "as, being a miner, I can timber the earth up to prevent them being smothered. The men were rescued, and such was his modesty that I have since learned that all the credit he took to himself was an admission that he helped to dig some men out. Like all brave men, he was modest, and his deeds were to him but incidents that occurred in his daily work, of which he rarely spoke. These are but a few of the many incidents just told to illustrate the wonderful self-effacing disposition of the man.

When the fateful shell did its deadly work, almost severing his leg, shattering his arms, and injuring his body, he calmly gave final instructions to his lieutenant about the disposition of his effects, and sent a farewell message to his wife. Like all heroes, he was a good-living man and attached to his home. When being carried to the hospital by the stretcher-bearers, he overheard one of them say he was heavy. 'Throw my leg away,' he said, 'it will make me lighter. It ain't much use to me now.' On overhearing a remark about the brave manner in which he bore his injuries, he quickly replied: 'But we came here from New Zealand, Tommy.'

Never were the words of Cullen's song used with more telling effect.<sup>19</sup> When he was laid on the table at the hospital and expired peacefully almost immediately after he was brought in, the magical effect of those words, 'We came here from New Zealand' was brought home with full force to his hearers, and must ever live in the memory of them. It would seem as if the man took pride in dying, so that the world should know that a New Zealander can show the way to die. He was born in Otago. He was a product of New Zealand. We may go back into the past traditions of our race and search the pages of history for brave deeds and brave deaths for the honor of the Mother Land, but nothing more glorious can be found than the death of Sergeant Vernon. Such deeds and such deaths add a lustre to the already glorious achievements of our New Zealand troops. And he was the first among the New Zealand Engineer Tunnelling Company to go — that company of New Zealand miners who, through the supervision of men like Sergeant Vernon, were instrumental in doing work which has been warmly praised because of its usefulness. Certain it is that whenever the Last Post is sounded I will always think of Otago, that reared such a noble son and of his dying words, delivered with such telling effect: 'We came here from New Zealand'. Convinced am I that whenever the memory of this great war recalls the imperishable deeds of our troops, the telling words of Sergeant Vernon,

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<sup>19</sup> The words in a song composed by Sergeant Charles Stuart Parnell (NZ Tun Coy) were written by Sapper J.E. Cullen. The song, with a rousing chorus, was first heard at an Anzac tea given by Mrs Fink at York House, Kensington. The singer was Sergeant Pollard (NZEf).

uttered under such tragical circumstances will fire men's souls. He died for the country he loved.<sup>20</sup>

Jack McManus also wrote to Sergeant Vernon's widow, Maggie. There are two versions of this letter, apparently in the same handwriting. They are identical except that the second begins with the salutation 'Mrs S Vernon, Lawrence, Dear Madam', and has MacManus' regimental number (No 4/1530) in the signature. Both versions are among McManus family papers, so they may well be copies and not the letter actually sent to Coal Creek. Photocopies of the same two copies of the letters are also among Vernon family papers:

At the Front

France

June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1916

Dear Madam,

I extend to you my deepest sympathy in the sad loss sustained in the death of your husband, Sergeant Vernon. I attended his funeral this afternoon and paid my last respects to him. He was the sergeant of the relief I am attached to. He won the respect of all because he was a man of iron nerve, well fitted to hold his position. He was a tireless worker in the interest of the army. His knowledge of mining was of incalculable benefit to the Engineer Tunnelling Company. He was a man of such varied experience and cool judgement that he inspired feelings of confidence and respect. If there were any possibility of adding to the comfort or convenience of the men under his control, his time was always generously at our disposal. Only a fortnight ago when an enemy mine explosion buried some of our infantry, he toiled hard in the work of rescue. Well do I remember the morning following that explosion. He came over and pointed out that two men who were still alive were buried, that as far as he could judge the infantry officers deemed it inadvisable to dig them out in day time because they were exposed to fire. 'They may be dead if we leave them until night time' he said 'So we will dig them out now. Will anyone volunteer to help me?' Sapper Calloway and I volunteered. This action of Sergeant Vernon so inspired an Infantry Officer to action that after we were working half an hour he ordered his men to continue the work. Your husband replied, I am not needed with my men as they know their work, so I will stay and help you'. He remained in the work of rescue until the men were rescued. These men owe their lives to the stimulating example of your husband, who ever and always faced risks and dangers fearlessly in the execution of his duty. I am proud to have been a Sapper under his command. Because of the opportunities I have had of studying his character, I admired his geniality, his love of sport, and his utter reliability. Because of this I feel better qualified than most to realise the great loss you have sustained, for he was indeed a man in every sense of the term. He was killed by shell fire when bravely doing his duty. He spoke not of his deeds because he was modest. He did much too to make us happy. When coming over on the boat on the visit of 'Father Neptune' as we crossed the line he caused great amusement by seizing Father

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<sup>20</sup> The newspaper cutting of this story in McManus family papers has no details of newspaper or date



Neptune's barber & successfully ducking him too. We will miss him here and can realize only too well how you will feel his loss.

I hope you will have strength to bear the blow, for your husband died a noble death.

Yours faithfully,

Sapper J E MacManus  
No 4 Section NZE Tunnelling Company  
B.E. Forces  
France

A fellow Sergeant in No 4 Section, Sgt A G Leeden, wrote:

"Arras"  
France  
24th June 1916

Dear Mrs Vernon

I extend to you my heartfelt sympathy in the sad loss you have sustained through the death of your husband. His death created a profound impression here and especially came as a shock to me, for I was a Sergeant in his Section and was at all times honoured with his confidence.

There was an arrangement between your husband and I that in the event of anything happening I was to act in all final arrangements, which he also agreed to do for me. I was present at the Hospital during his last moments, and the doctor who attended him advised me to write to you and assure you on his word that your husband passed peacefully away suffering no pain.

He passed away in the 15<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance 15<sup>TH</sup> Divisional Hospital "Arras" at 1.40 pm 21/6/16. He was wounded by shell fire in the trenches at 11.30 am. He was quite conscious and Lieutenant Thompson (who is also writing to you) who was present immediately after the shell burst is the bearer of a message to you; also a request that provision should be made for those at home. Sam also mentioned that his pay book containing a will, and his private letters in my keeping would be dealt with by me.

Mr Thompson is going to England on leave and has agreed to send by parcel all private letters and effects so as to avoid all confusion and delay of a Military Post Office. Sam's pay book is in the parcel but his will form according to regulations must go through the Military Authorities and is now in their possession.

His will is very brief and reads as follows: "In the event of my death I give to my Wife Mrs S. Vernon all of my property" Signature S.Vernon. 30/5/16. A Mrs Faulkner has a parcel of his which he forwarded from Falmouth her address is 128 Meyrick Rd, Clapham Junction. London. S.W.

Mr Thompson is forwarding to you Sam's wristlet watch which he cherished very much, being your last present to him before he left New Zealand, but his gold band ring with small nugget attached we cannot trace. His titles, buttons and hat badge worn by him at the time of his death I am also sending, along with some French money and souvenirs found on him.

Sam and I were 'Brothers' belonging to the same Lodge, and he asked me to return his lodge book (which by virtue of his position is Lodge property) direct to the Lodge Teviot for them to dispose of according to their rules.

The funeral took place at 6.30 pm on June 21<sup>st</sup>. Chaplain Captain C H Meyrick officiated (Anglican Minister) that being the Church he belonged to according to his official declaration on enlistment.

It has been usual never to allow more than ten men to attend a funeral for fear of Aeroplane observation, but as a special mark of respect to a brave soldier no less than 25 were permitted to be present. I acted as one of the pall bearers and on account of being his most intimate friend and confidant I was permitted to select the other three pall bearers. I chose three other Sergeants. Meyer, Wheeler and Browne. Major Duignan company commander, Lieutenant Collyns, Sergt. Major McKee and Sergeant Stave were also present, the remainder were Sappers from Otago belonging to his relief.

In accordance with military tradition, his blanket was his shroud, covering this was the 'Union Jack' on which lay a beautiful bunch of roses.

I have visited the Cemetery twice since, and in cooperation with his friends am arranging for a memorial to permanently express our great loss, on completion of which, if permitted, a Photograph will be taken, and duly forwarded to you.

Should you require any additional information I invite you to write freely as I will be only too pleased to furnish you with any, that may be in my power. Knowing your husband as I did, his usefulness, coolness, and bravery were such that all who knew him would have preferred to see him the last to be taken therefore I only know too well how great must be your loss, and I hope you will have strength to bear the blow which is felt by all who knew him here. In conclusion I wish specially to mention the very valuable first aid services rendered by Lance Cpl. Huggard C Company 6<sup>th</sup> Battallion D.C.L.I (Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry) who was on the spot immediately.

I remain

Yours faithfully,

4/1516 Sgt A.G. Leeden  
No 4 Section  
N.Z.E.T.Coy.

[Lance Corporal John Stephen Huggard (D.C.L.I.) was killed two months later on 18 August 1916. He is buried at Delville Wood, Longueval in Grave VII.B.6. He was aged 30, married with a 6 year old son.]

Another member of Sam's section, Corporal Richardson, also from Central Otago, wrote to Maggie Vernon:

June 23<sup>rd</sup>  
Somewhere In France

Mrs Vernon

Dear Madam

It is with regret I have to pen these few lines relating to the sad death of your husband and I thought it my duty as a Corporal in his Section to convey the deepest sympathy to you from all who had come in contact with him. Having been intimately acquainted with him both in civil life and a Soldier, I feel qualified to fittingly express my admiration for him and to fully realise the loss you have sustained, which I and all those who worked with him share in common with you, and hope when the sad news reaches you, you will bear up, and look to brightest side, as he has been torn away from you while serving a nobly and just cause, and losing him the N.Z.E.F have lost one of their best and most conscientious Sergeants, one who was both kind and thoughtful, and his first consideration was to his little section in his command when trouble was around, and I can not recollect one occasion that he has put any one on the mat, which is sufficient to show the respect shown to him by those under him. He was both brave and modest, and work he has carried out in Great Danger where other men have not dared to go, has escaped the eyes of those above him and not being of the self praise sort, has never ever mentioned a job when done. We buried him last night at seven, with four sergeants as carriers and quite a number of soldiers. Owing to great danger off [sic] being observed, only a limited number of men were allowed and I had the unthankful job of telling the required number off, and as there was a greater number prepared to pay their last tributes to him we had to give preference to southerners. I am getting a little artificial wreath to put on his grave.

I will conclude now hoping this will find you in the best of health and spirits, as you have the satisfaction of knowing your husband died a noble death, in fighting for his country in a just cause, once and all. Accept my deepest sympathy in your sad bereavement.

Cpl. Richardson  
No 4 section 4/1539  
N.Z.E.

Late of Alexandra South

One of the officers in charge of Sam's Section wrote:

B.E.F.  
France  
23d June 1916

Dear Mrs Vernon

As I arrived on the spot almost immediately after your husband was injured and remained with him while his wounds were dressed, until he was removed to the hospital I am able to give you some first hand information as to how he was wounded. He was on duty in the trenches with me, & at about 11 o'clock in the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> inst he was on one of the mine dumber's to ham [paper fold makes this unclear]. The explosion badly fractured his right leg, & broke his right arm, besides cutting him severely about the body and limbs. His face was not disfigured in the least, & he was perfectly conscious until he died about three hours later. There happened to be a First Aid Corporal on the spot, and he stopped the bleeding, and attended to the wounds while the stretcher bearers and ambulance men were being sent for. Although Sgt Vernon was in terrible pain at the time, he never made the slightest murmur of complaint & although he knew he had only a small chance of recovery he

never lost hope and was talking cheerfully all the time. All those about were remarking that he was the gamest man they had ever seen, & that it was no wonder the New Zealanders did so well at Gallipoli, if they were all like him. Any man with less heart would have fainted away almost as soon as he was hit, but Sgt Vernon would not give in in the slightest. His only worry was about home, and that you would be looked after. He asked me to be sure & write home, & to take his wristlet watch which he was wearing & to send it to you. I am forwarding the watch by registered post, & Sgt Leeden is forwarding his other personal belongings. I never saw a man who was badly wounded so unselfish, & he was continually asking about the other man who was injured with him, & to be sure & attend to him too. I was not present with him when he died, but Sgt Leeden, his most intimate friend was there, & told me that Sam was quite conscious, but very weak, & passed away without any pain. I was unable to be present at his funeral, as I was still on duty, but our own boys arranged everything, & buried him themselves.

Major Duignan & Lt. Collyns, the only officer of his section who was off duty were ... [fold obscures about three words] a large & representative number of his friends. When word was quietly passed round in the trenches that Sgt Vernon had gone, there was hardly a word spoken, & all knew that they had lost a friend that it would be very difficult to replace. He was one of our best miners & non-commissioned officers, & was absolutely devoid of fear. He was always a volunteer for any dangerous work that had to be done, & on several occasions I have known him stopping his own men & doing a piece of work himself, because it was specially dangerous. On another occasion he worked for several hours in an exposed position digging out some men who had been buried by a mine explosion, & during the time they were being sniped at whenever they exposed themselves & one stretcher bearer was shot dead.

Sgt Vernon was extremely popular with both officers and men for his personal character and constant devotion to duty. Please accept my deepest sympathy on your sad bereavement, & I am pleased to be able to tell you he died as he lived – a brave man doing his duty.

Yours very sincerely

Lieut. F.W. Thompson

No 4 Section N.Z.E.T.Co.

The other lieutenant from Sam's Section was on leave at the time of Sam's death. He later wrote to Maggie Vernon:

France 4/9/16

Dear Mrs Vernon,

I regret to say that I was not present when your husband Sgt Vernon met his death, but Lieut. Thompson who was there wrote to you the same day giving you full particulars of the sad happening. You have no doubt received his letter ere this, and know that your husband met his death during a German bombardment, while nobly doing his duty.

He and I were closely connected in the work here, & I always knew him as an excellent Sergeant, a brave man, & a true friend to me. I could have regretted the death of no other man as I have his.

You have the sympathy of

G.S. Collyns Lieut.

Another currently unattributed newspaper cutting reads:

Sergeant D. O'Brien writing to the Mayor of Westport, says that on his return to his company in France he was grieved to hear that Sergeant Vernon of his Section had met his death by wounds.

Sgt O'Brien gives the following account of the heroic death of his comrade. His heroic actions and calm selfpossession as his life ebbed away added a bright lustre to the character of a New Zealand tunneller. An enemy high explosive shell burst near him & a comrade while on duty on J13 sap, and although fatally wounded he insisted on his mate getting first attention, & then calmly gave instructions for everything to be sent to his wife. Like all brave men, as he lived so he died, a true husband. After he received first aid, the stretcher bearers where carrying him down [fold in paper obscures photocopy] ... heavy on them, so he asked them to throw away one of his legs that was nearly severed, & it could make their task easier. The Tommies marvelled at his courage & enquired if his pain was no severe. He said it was nothing and proudly added "You know we came here from New Zealand." About two hours after his accident Sergeant Vernon passed peacefully away.

As the guns thundered furiously, & shot & shell hissed messages of death through the evening air, a party of tunnellers laid the heroic Sergeant to his last rest among the brave. I miss him sorely – his cot was the right hand cot to mine, & whenever the Last Post or the reveille sounds I will always remember the brave fellow who went [out? – word missing]

Sam Vernon's death was formally recorded in the War Diary of the NZ Tunnelling Company:

Arras 22/6/16

Hostile activity between J3 and J4 and east of J5. Sergt. Vernon died of wounds today (1<sup>st</sup> fatal casualty) and 2<sup>nd</sup>. Corpl. Tonge was badly wounded.

Three newspaper notices of Sam Vernon's death have been identified. His death was reported in New Zealand newspapers in the official casualty list released in Wellington on 4 July 1916. Maggie and his relatives in Otago would have seen it in the *Otago Daily Times* of 5 July 1916:

THE ROLL OF HONOUR  
NEW ZEALAND CASUALTIES  
FOURTEEN MORE DEATHS  
(PER PRESS ASSOCIATION)  
WELLINGTON JULY 4

The following list was issued today (next of kin is given in parenthesis)

KILLED IN ACTION

.....

(June 21)

Sergeant SAMUEL EDWARD P VERNON (Mrs M. Vernon, Roxburgh, Otago, wife)

.....

An undated cutting, possibly from the *Otago Witness*, reads:

Sergeant Samuel E. P. Vernon, who was reported killed in action in France on June 21, was the eldest son of Mr and Mrs E. J. Vernon, of Roxburgh. He was born at Upper Waikaia, and followed mining in the North Island and West Coast. During the past 11 years he was coal mining in the Perseverance Mine at Coal Creek Flat, the latter the years of which he was mine manager. He took a great interest in Lodge affairs, being a member of the Masonic Lodge and P.G. of the Loyal Roxburgh Lodge, M.U.I.O.O.F. He was also a member of the Roxburgh Defence Rifle Club, in which he took a very keen interest, winning the championship belt and gold medal in 1913-14, in addition to many other trophies. He enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Tunnelling Corps, and left New Zealand on December 18, 1915. After completing his training with the Royal Engineers at Falmouth, England, he landed in France on March 8, 1916, and was serving in the British Section in the north up to the time of his death. Sergeant Vernon was 36 years of age, and leaves a widow.

An item appeared in the *Colonist* (a Nelson newspaper) of 15 July 1916:

Sergeant S. E. P. Vernon, of Coal Creek Roxburgh, whose death was recorded during the past week, was a member of the Tunnelling Corps, and left with that body in December. He was the eldest son of Mr and Mrs E. J. Vernon, who for a large number of years lived at the Whitecombe. Sergeant Vernon went to the West Coast, where he acquired considerable experience in deep-lead mining.<sup>21</sup> Returning to Roxburgh, he readily obtained employment in the coal mines, eventually becoming working manager of the Perseverance mine, which position he relinquished in order to join the Tunnelling Corps. He was a man of noble character, and most popular with everyone, and his enlistment was what might have been expected from a man of his stamp (says the "Otago Daily Times"). He was for some time a member and secretary of the school committee at Coal Creek. He was also a past officer of the Loyal Roxburgh Lodge, M.U. I.O.O.F. and a member of Lodge Teviot.

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<sup>21</sup> Deep lead mining involves a shaft and tunnelling, unlike the surface alluvial mining or sluicing that were common in Central Otago. The *Perseverance* mine was a deep lead mine.



*Sam Vernon's grave in Arras. The NZ RSA poppy at the base was placed there by Stuart Park in May 2004*

Sam Vernon is buried in Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery, Arras, Pas de Calais, France. His grave is number I D 59. His will in his paybook left all his property to his wife Mrs S Vernon. His service sheet shows that he was eligible to receive the Western Europe Service medal for 1916, and its issue to his widow was authorised on 19 October 1921. The issue of the British War medal was authorised on 22 Nov 1921, and the Victory medal on 28 September 1922. His memorial plaque was dispatched on 11 November 1921, and the memorial scroll on 4 August 1921.

The French handed over Arras to Commonwealth forces in the spring of 1916 and the system of tunnels upon which the town is built were used and developed in preparation for the major offensive planned for April 1917. The Commonwealth section of the Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery was begun in March 1916, behind the French military cemetery established earlier. It continued to be used by field ambulances and fighting units until November 1918. The cemetery contains 2,651 Commonwealth burials of the First World War. In addition, there are 30 war graves of other nationalities, most of them German.<sup>22</sup>

Sam's widow Maggie Vernon continued to live at Coal Creek, and maintained contact with her relatives in Central Otago and Dunedin, though details of her life are not documented. She died on 10 July 1934 at the age of 70. She is buried in the Roxburgh Cemetery. Sam and Maggie had no children of their own, but Maggie's daughter Ivy lived with her mother until her death in 1926.

Mining was also part of the life of other members of the Vernon family. Sam's brother George became involved in gold mining as manager at the Sugarloaf mine at Arthur's Point

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<sup>22</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Commission <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/28800/FAUBOURG%20D%27AMIENS%20CEMETERY,%20ARRAS>



near Queenstown and then as manager for the Central Shotover Mining Company at Skippers. George's son, also George worked at the scheelite mine at Glenorchy. Another son, James Edward Vernon DFC, worked in mining both at Glenorchy and in Queenstown, before joining the RAF in 1938. He was decorated for an action in France in May 1940, and lost his life in a subsequent action in June 1940. He is buried in France.

Stuart Park

October 2014