

## Hardship and Hope in the Trenches:

John Trevor Thomas, and the act of crafting stories from the archives.

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For the relatively short time that I have been immersed in the GLAMR world, I have felt myself gravitate towards personal stories more than anything else. So, naturally the category of archival material that piques my interest the most are letters, oral histories and diaries. I try to weave the contents of such materials as best I can into my weekly local history articles for the *Ashburton Guardian*, and while the feedback we receive from the public and our historical society is always positive, I often find myself in the doldrums while writing these columns. After all, how will my words compare to the eloquent prose so frequently penned, typed or chicken-

scratched upon the various mediums I use as sources of information? The difficulty with which I sometimes struggle to craft a cohesive story from a series of scribbled nonsense is so variable that I think it is about time I address my personal demons.

My problem lies not in deciphering late nineteenth century cursive, nor is it actually being able to empathise with the people from our past. Crafting a narrative using archives, which can include letters, diaries, newspapers, local history books and public records, that actually makes sense not only to myself but to readers of all calibres can be daunting. I find that I must take great care to balance my ramblings with the right level of detail, navigate colloquialisms so as to not alienate anybody, and above all else I feel the compulsion to make sure that there is a point. However, it needn't always be, or at least it does not have to be, explicit. After all, the only thing I really care about is making sure that the public are made aware of the incredible things that slumber behind our archive store's double doors.

I consider myself very fortunate to have been able to work and become familiar with the Ashburton Museum's community archives, and I am equally fortunate to be able to share with you one very interesting tale from the archives.

The story of 2nd Lieutenant John Trevor Thomas, as told through his diary entries and letters that he wrote whilst at a prisoner-of-war camp, is

nothing sort of captivating. John's diary alone, which consists of hundreds of typewritten pages, serves as a veritable index for his entire life. His letters are merely the icing on the cake. Condition varies across this series; John's diary was greedily munched on at some point in the past, presumably by silverfish, yet the letters he wrote are as close to pristine as they can be given their age.

Let us now take a look at a portion of this man's life through the words he chose for us to read, see how he represents himself and see what sort of narrative we can extract from his writing.

### **John Trevor Thomas**

John was born on 17 November 1887 and attended primary and secondary school in Ashburton. Before the Great War he was involved with several local clubs and associations, and he had also built a reputation for himself as a stock auctioneer around Canterbury and elsewhere. John also managed to snag himself the opportunity to go on two overseas tours, during which he visited China, Egypt, Tonga and Japan (he even took the opportunity to climb Mt. Fuji!)



[Figure 1. John Trevor Thomas (front and centre) with his siblings Rene, Joy, Isobel, Douglas and Walter, April 1942.]

Clearly John was a highly energetic and motivated person, which is also reflected in the fact that he very happily signed up for overseas service with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in December 1914. After a stint at the Officers' Training Camp at Rangitoto and the N.C.O camp at Trentham, he made the rank of Lieutenant on 28 May 1917 and subsequently left for England.

### **Curried oysters and chutney**

John was conveyed to England aboard the TSS *Maunganui* and he was placed in charge of the canteen, likely due to his business aptitude in civilian life. He enjoyed the job, however he did mention that there were some difficulties. "It was fun catching up with the suppliers of stock for there was grave dishonesty in loading that boat with goods for the boys. We restocked at Cape Town but as we approached the British Isles our stocks had become very low or non-existent."

He mentions in his diary that the food aboard the *Maunganui* was "excellent," however there was one dish which he would not dare try twice. On 15 June 1917 he wrote: "Rough weather. I have been mostly on bed down. Had a splendid "hic" just prior to arrival of steward and felt splendid so when he flashed the menu and asked what i would like I said the thing I would best and saw on top of the menu "Curried Oysters and Bengal Chutnee". I wasn't so well after."

After an exciting maritime journey which included such activities as going on submarine guard, attending lectures and "loafing around," he arrived at Sling Camp north of Plymouth on 16 August.<sup>2</sup> He described Sling as follows: "Sling is a huge place but nothing near as good regarding huts for men and officers - baths, mess as either Trentam or Featherston. Discipline is very severe and as there is no political influence or public opinion to consider justice is short and sharp. Everything hums with work and as the daylight saving bill is working we are up most of the day."

There was much drilling and marching to endure, and John had the very important task of "inspecting men's feet and hair" which I am sure was every bit as enjoyable as it sounds. Despite the discipline, John managed to find for himself some leisure time on the odd occasion: "9 September. A wet Sunday so after bunking church Hamilton and self adjourned to my cubicle and wrote letters all day. Resting at intervals to eat chocolate out of the box."

It is also worth noting that John may have had an anti-authoritarian streak. On 15 September he was obliged to attend a 2½ hour lecture on

the subject of “Crimes and Punishment,” delivered by a General. “Of all the rot a man ever talked nothing could beat it” John said. “Honestly, it was the poorest effort I have ever listened to. By jove it was an eye opener for incompetence.” Despite being an officer, did John have a disdain for authority or did he just think he knew better than the General? The latter is more likely, judging by some of his actions to come.

While at Sling, John also qualified as a first-class shot, practiced with live bombs, Lewis Guns and he also faced tear gas. The same day he went through the gas, he had a good long talk with three men from Ashburton and two men from Oamaru, one of which having just returned from a field hospital with a wound. To have encountered some familiarity on the opposite side of the world, knowing you may not return, must have been therapeutic for John. Although, his diary seems to suggest he felt no homesickness nor discomfort with regards to his circumstances whatsoever, so this social encounter may not have had such an emotional impact on him as we may try to project.

On 1 October, John picked up his draft for overseas service and the next morning he was off. According to his own figures, John and 206 other freshly trained men set off for Boulogne aboard a paddleboat accompanied by two other vessels, destroyers and an airship above them. The boys reached Boulogne and hunkered down at St. Martins Camp (located in Saint-Martin-Boulogne, France.) Things went smoothly for most of the day, but John’s first impression of France was spoiled at the very last moment: “Had tea, settled men down with 1 blanket and turned in. Germans dropped bombs on camp and set fire to P.M.O. tent 100 yards from us, they were trying for the wireless station here.”



### Crime without punishment

Let’s fast-forward to 1918, which is when John’s military career takes some very interesting twists and turns. At this point, John is part of the 7th Wellington West Coast Company, 2nd Battalion Wellington Infantry Regiment.<sup>4</sup>

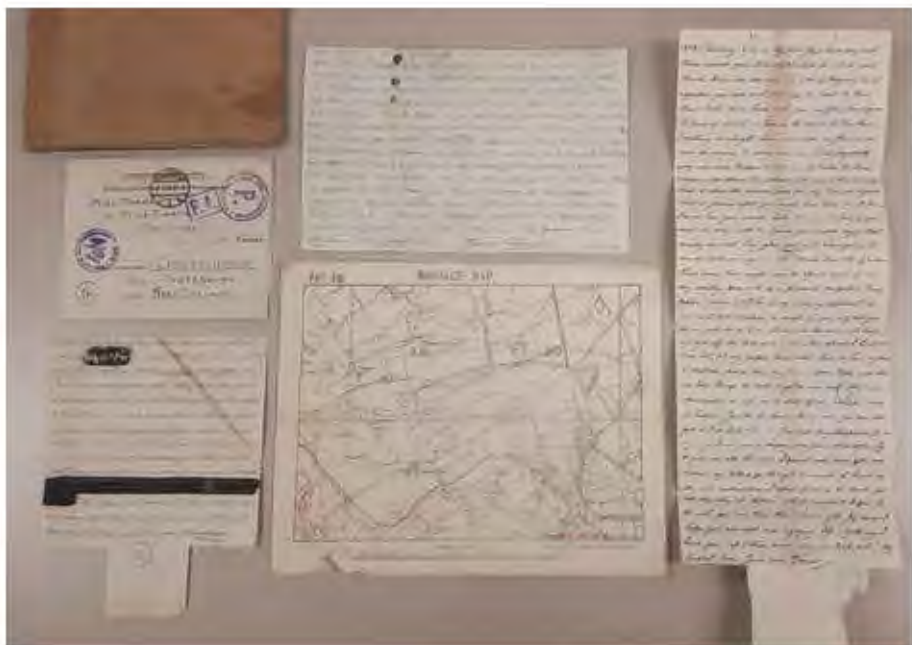
**Figure 2.** As stoic as John appears throughout his reminiscences, there is one incident in which an entire platoon under his charge are killed by a shell. The words “I sat down and cried” stand out on the page.<sup>3</sup>

On 21 March 1918, rumour reached John and the 2nd Wellingtons, who had recently pulled out of the Ypres salient and had regrouped in Staple, France, that the Germans were attacking the Somme and that the British were in serious trouble. The boys were therefore told to do three things: “(i) that all men had to make their Wills and (ii) then go to the grindstone and sharpen bayonets and then (iii) prepare for divine service.” The Spring Offensive of 1918 had begun.<sup>5</sup>

The brigade travelled by train from Cassel to “Ailly-sen-Somme” (possibly Ailly-sur-Somme) on 24 March. During the journey John managed to find his brother, Corporal Donald Thomas, which must have been a welcome surprise and some comfort knowing what lay ahead of them. When they detrained, the brigade had to face a tremendous march to the front lines in full gear. “The 2nd Wellingtons were the only Battalion thrown into action which had no assistance of transport by motor bus from the detraining point” according to John.

“When the halts were called the lads would simply sit where they had stopped – in the mud and slush. I had “had it” particularly as I was carrying 3 extra rifles to help some of my lads.” As an officer, John was called into a small chapel at Port Camon and he received his Company’s orders from Major McKinnon. The orders given were confusing and unhelpful, as the Major repeatedly confused himself as he tried to orient himself with his battlefield map. After a botched briefing, John brought his Company over the frontline under whistle signal command and a serious firefight occurred due to the fact that a serious strategic gap caused by another officer had exposed John’s Company’s flank.

John and his Company held the German soldiers off for a while, but they were soon in serious trouble and had to make an escape. During the process of pulling his men out of danger, almost all of them were wounded in one way or another, and John claims that he made sure to dress as many of their wounds as he possibly could “in double quick time.” As it turns out, John’s Company were victims of friendly fire. While they retreated, an allied Lieutenant Colonel had ordered his gunners to shoot the Company as he believed them to be Germans. After retreating from danger, John was notified that he had been placed under arrest by Brigadier General H. T. Fulton for “retiring and leaving his flank exposed.” John’s story could have ended here, but in a strange twist of fate he soon learned the following: “Fulton was killed by a shell in his leg before the Court-martial.”



**Figure 3.** Letters written by John Trevor Thomas from Graudenz, as well as a Message Map of his from late 1917 and his Field Message Book. This book has entries describing the wounded among his platoon up until before he was captured.<sup>6</sup>

### **Prisoner of war**

The events that led to John's capture and imprisonment by the Germans is long and complicated, therefore hard to summarise. While out on night patrol in No Man's Land with a small platoon, John and his companions were caught in the open and fired upon. A hand grenade sent our writer tumbling to the ground with the bridge of his nose split open and all the rest of his platoon were wounded. They were hurried into a dugout, John was brought to a German officer and before he knew it he was on his way to the Marcheannes camp for prisoners of war. John was brought here by mistake; this was not a camp for officers, rather it was a place only fit for animals.

The building the soldiers were kept in was nothing more than a dilapidated old wooden glass factory, with dirty grass straw strewn about for bedding. The prisoners were on a starvation diet, had no blankets, no water for bathing, and were infested with lice. John tells us that the

inmates consisted of “several hundred Tommies of many Regiments, 2 Russians and 4 N.Z. lads.” It is here at Marchiennes that we catch a glimpse of John’s real character.

In a blind rage, John sought to procure washing water and blankets for the prisoners: “I disliked the Camp Serg. Major ... I told him I wanted to speak to the Commandant but he tried to dodge the issue. This Commandant we could hear approaching the Lager. He walked and yelled. The gates were thrown open and he entered with his grey overcoat thrown back to display the red lining and wacking his leather boots with his swagger cane. I went to the Serg. Major and told him he had to act as interpreter for me and he refused so, I caught him by the back of the neck and marched him straight up to the Commandant who yelled at me and the more he yelled the louder I yelled back. Eventually I made him understand I demanded water for washing, blankets, baths etc. After a rumpus wherein I expected all sorts of penalties it was agreed that I could send 16 men out for water.”

Eventually John was transferred to Graudenz prisoner of war camp, which was comprised of large buildings with proper amenities and medical care. During his imprisonment here, he wrote letters home which were conveyed to New Zealand via Mrs. Edith Lyttelton, a well-respected activist, Red Cross associate and author under the pseudonym G. B. Lancaster.

At Graudenz he also became best friends with a Colonel, surname Corpe, who helped to nurse John back to health when he had fallen ill with influenza: “I was supposed to have expired and was covered up. Col. Corpe was not satisfied that the Doctors were right and all night he put hot water bottles at my feet. When it broke day I was breathing and the Colonel having acquired some German brandy forced half a pannikin down my throat. Soon the Doctors came to see the corpse and in their way prescribed some Brandy which was produced by the Colonel and the Doctors pushed another half pannikin into me. They saw the Colonel laughing and asked what was the joke. Upon the Colonel telling them he had already given me about ½ a pint the Doctor exclaimed “My God we have killed him now.”

Once the war ended, Trevor was allowed day leave around Graudenz before he was shipped home. Curiously, he went into the biggest and most popular coffee-house in the town itself, only to find it full to the brim with jovial Commonwealth and American officers, who outnumbered the Germans by a great deal! After all the suffering he endured it must have been quite a surreal sight. Once he made it back home, he went into business in Ashburton and became very successful. During the Second World War, he helped to establish the B Company of the Ashburton Home Guard and he was eventually taken on as a member of staff at Burnham. Clearly, this sort of thing was in his blood.



**Figure 4.** John Trevor Thomas' business premises on Tancred Street, Ashburton c. 1950s.

## Conclusion

By studying John's letters and diary and crafting some of the events into a story, I feel as though I have become more aware of what I struggle with most when it comes to extracting a narrative from archives: relevance. By that I mean, being able to include details and anecdotes that serve to effectively tell a story without embellishment nor exaggeration, while carrying through a central narrative. In this case, I tried my best to include extracts from John's writing that were most relevant to his character and the wider context in which he operated. I was not surprised to find that some of the language used and comments made by John Trevor Thomas were problematic, which obviously I have excluded.

At the time of writing this, we currently have one Ashburton Museum volunteer transcribing copies of John's letters, and she has expressed great enthusiasm and emotional investment in John's story. Once the letters have been transcribed, our volunteer is very keen to transcribe his diary. I am currently exploring alternative options to the 'old fashioned

approach' – OCR, dictation, as I am aware that these may be valuable time-savers and I will continue to explore some options. At the moment, the plan is to photograph the diary and for our volunteer to type it out.

I would ultimately like to fact-check many of the events, figures and places mentioned by John in his diary, to at the very least evaluate the factual accuracy and usefulness of his writing, as I would consider it to be one of the most fascinating and significant items in the Ashburton Museum and Historical Society's archive collection (in my totally non-biased opinion, of course!) Not only are the war sections of John's diary of interest, but chapters describing his normal life in Ashburton and around the country are also worth promoting and exploring. The story of John Trevor Thomas is not over yet.

## Endnotes

1. J Trevor Thomas and siblings digital image, April 1942, digital file only, Photograph Collection, Ashburton Museum.
2. Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Sling Camp," New Zealand History, accessed May 24, 2022, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/keyword/sling-camp>
3. Diary of 2nd Lieut. John Trevor Thomas WW1, typewritten in retrospect, 07.2020.0035.1, A 15 Box 8, Archives Collection, Ashburton Museum.
4. Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Infantry units page 5 – Wellington Infantry Regiment," New Zealand History, last modified March 22, 2017, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/infantry-units/wellington-infantry-regiment>
5. Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "1918: Spring Offensive and Advance to Victory," New Zealand History, last modified October 8, 2018, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/western-front-1918>
6. John Trevor Thomas' correspondence, field message book and trench map, 1918, 07.2021.0047, A15 Box 8, Archives Collection, Ashburton Museum.
7. J. T. Thomas & Co Auctioneers premises, Tancred street, taken by photographer Charles Tindall, 1950s, 05.2007.0297.1, Photo Store D / Freezer Store, Photograph Collection, Ashburton Museum.