

The Union Steam Ship Company World War One Service Medals at Wellington City Archives – using the records to trace the story

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Wellington City Archives (WCA) was established in 1995 and holds records of the council and related organisations, Wellington community organisations, and archives once held by Wellington Museum.¹ These latter archives include records of the Union Steam Ship Company (USSCo), which were transferred to WCA in 2004 under an agreement between the two institutions.

Wellington City Council was heavily involved in commemoration preparations for the 100th anniversary of World War One (WW1), and WCA was naturally involved in seeking out useful material. The USSCo archives include records of the USSCo's and its staff involvement in both world wars. In March 2015 Archives Support Assistant Avon MacDonald decided to look in a box of USSCo archives labelled 'WW1 Accts/papers'. (At this point I should note that, like any other archival institution WCA has a backlog, and the focus of its processing work is necessarily on the records of its parent institution; thus the USSCo's archives are not fully listed).

When Avon opened the box she immediately recognised an illuminated certificate of service (presented by the New Zealand government to the families of deceased servicemen of WW1). When she delved deeper into the box, she discovered another illuminated certificate of service, several boxes of medals, and three memorial plaques, as well as documents related to the medals and plaques.

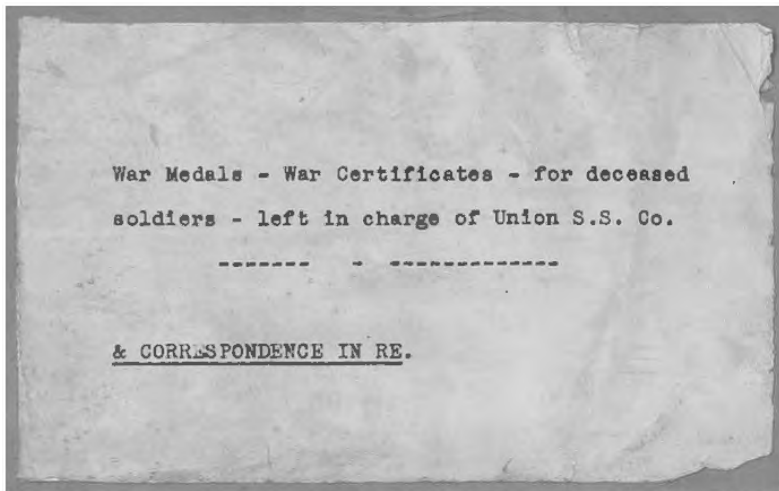
What Avon had uncovered was service medals, memorial plaques and scrolls, and certificates of service for three servicemen: Private Percy Burton, Temporary Corporal Francis William Desmond, and Lance Corporal James Lovell. The collection² consists of:

- Three British War medals and ribbons (one for each of the men)
- Two Victory medals and ribbons (Burton and Desmond)

- One 1914–1918 Star and ribbon (Desmond)
- Three memorial plaques (so-called ‘death pennies’ or ‘death plaques’) and scrolls, and ‘cover letters’ (a form letter signed by King George V)
- Two illuminated certificates of service and ‘cover letters’ (Burton and Desmond).

What is fascinating and possibly unique about this collection is the documentation and packaging that accompanied it, which has allowed us to understand how the USSCo came to have the collection. It also gives us insight to the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) medals and memorials process, from both sides. Documentation from other sources has helped us learn more about the men themselves.

The medals and other material appear to have been carefully packaged by the USSCo and may have remained so until the USSCo’s records were transferred to the Maritime Museum. One of the documentary items accompanying the medals is a label that appears to have been cut from a heavy brown paper wrapper or folder which bears witness to the recordkeeping practices of the USSCo. It is possible that this packaging was unwrapped by the late Jack Churchouse, curator of the Maritime Museum, when the USSCo archives were first transferred to the Museum.

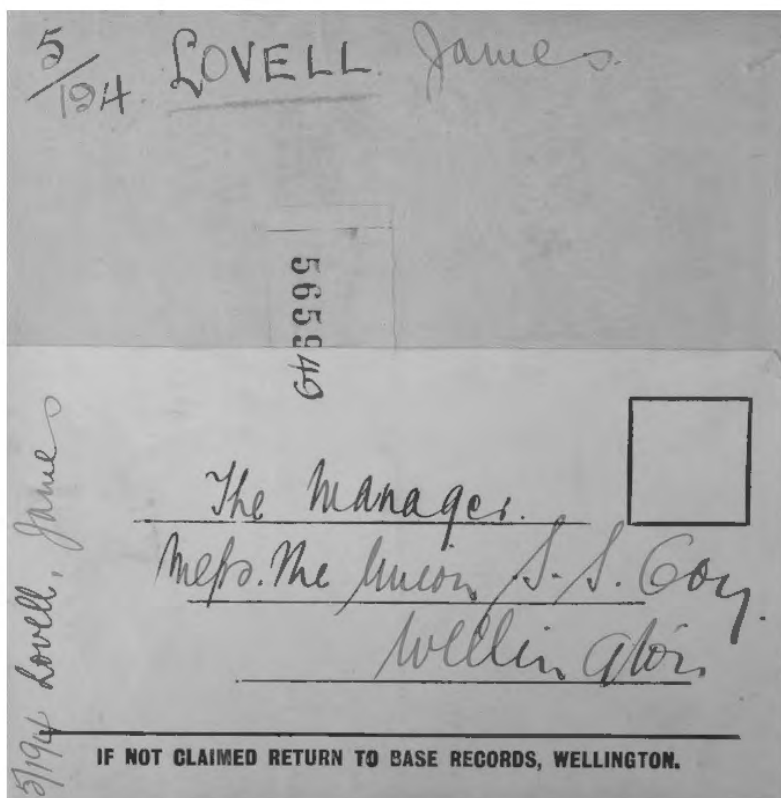


The label from the original packaging of the medals [Ref: AF091].

Photo: Wellington City Archives

Several of the envelopes and boxes in which the medals were packaged were still with the medals, as were the receipts for them and other objects sent by the NZEF. Normally these would have been returned to the NZEF by the recipients.

The memorial plaques still have their inner and outer envelopes, which, according to the UK Great War website, is quite rare: *"Whilst the Memorial Plaques may often be found, finding a set of a Next of Kin Memorial Plaque complete with its outer envelope, inner card envelope and covering letter with a memorial scroll commemorating the same casualty of war is rare"*.³ In fact, James Lovell's memorial plaque is still in the addressed envelope in which it was delivered to the USSCo, having never been unwrapped by the company.



James Lovell's memorial plaque, still in the original wrapping. [Ref: AF091:0:11]

Photo: Wellington City Archives

A memorial plaque showing the
inner and outer envelopes
[Ref: AF091]

Photo: Wellington City Archives



So how did the USSCO end up with medals and other items intended for the relatives of soldiers killed in the Great War? The records kept with the medals and other items tell us the story.

In 1923, the Officer in Charge of the NZEF War Accounts and Records Office wrote to the General Manager of the USSCo in Wellington concerning Private Percy Burton, who had enlisted with NZEF in 1916 and was killed in action in 1918.

Despite “exhaustive enquiries”,⁴ the NZEF could not find any relatives to send the soldier’s medals, memorial plaque and scroll. The Officer asked if, as Burton had been employed by the USSCo, the company would “accept and hold in trust”⁵ the medals, memorial plaque and scroll “pending receipt ... of an application by some person entitled to receive and hold them”.⁶

The letter included a trust form, with the following terms and conditions:

"That the Company will preserve them with all due care and respect and will not at any time part with the possession or control of them without having first obtained the consent in writing of the General Officer Commanding, New Zealand Military Forces, W'gton.

"That the Company will if called upon to do so, re-deliver the said medals and memorials to Headquarters, Defence Department, Wellington, on good order and condition, fair wear and tear and damage by fire alone excepted".⁷

The letter went on to say that if the trust form were signed and returned, the decision would be taken to govern any further cases.

In the event, Burton, Desmond, and Lovell were the only three cases of USSCo employees whose relatives presumably could not be found and whose medals and memorials were sent to the USSCo.

Because Archives New Zealand has digitised WWI service records, we were able to find out more about the men. The service records

also document details of the medals and memorials dispatch to the USSCo. Effectively, the recordkeeping of the USSCO and the NZEF combine to give an almost complete picture of the process of the 'medal action' as it was called by the NZEF.

Francis Desmond,⁸ born in Ireland in 1886, was a seaman working for the USSCo when he enlisted. He served in the Otago Regiment in Egypt and France, and was killed in action in June 1917. Desmond's nominated next of kin was his fiancée, Miss May Booth, whose address was given as c/o Post Office, Ophir, Central Otago. His legal next of kin was noted as 'unknown'.

Percy Burton⁹ was born in 1881 in London, England, and served as a machine gunner in the New Zealand Machine Gun Battalion. Burton died in May 1918, at an English service hospital



1914-1915 Star awarded to Temporary Corporal Francis William Desmond 8/2896 [Ref: AF091:0:7].
Photo: Wellington City Archives

of wounds received in action in France or Belgium. He was buried in Brookwood Cemetery. His service record is perhaps the most poignant, as it shows repeated attempts to locate his next-of-kin, his wife Selena Dorothy Burton. Several different addresses are noted, the first being c/o the Verdun Dining Room in Featherston, and two more in Auckland. The file notes that the medals were returned from one address in 1921, and the scroll was returned unclaimed, prior to their being sent to the USSCo.

James Lovell¹⁰ was born in England in 1874 and had been in the 1st and 2nd Border Regiment. He enlisted in January 1915 and recorded his address as "Sailors' Home, Auckland". He was sent to Samoa in the Samoa Relief force. On 11 May 1915 Lovell was admitted to hospital in Apia in "a state of collapse" and died nine days later of pleurisy and pericarditis. On his enlistment form he had noted his next of kin as his brother, William Lovell, with the address simply "Calcutta, India". His service record notes that his illuminated certificate of service had been issued and "held", which explains why it is not with the rest of the USSCo collection. Perhaps it is still somewhere in Army records.

Other sources provided further information about two of the men. The Auckland Museum's Online Cenotaph¹¹ provided a photograph of Percy Burton from the Auckland Weekly News, and Papers Past had an item from the Christchurch Press from 24 February 1921 about the granting of probate to Francis Desmond's fiancée despite the absence of a written will.¹²

The USSCo records also reveal an interesting, less official, side to the 'medal action' from the NZEF. Among the formal correspondence accompanying the medals and other items is an 'unofficial' letter from the Chief Clerk NZEF War Records and Accounts. The letter suggests that the medals should be mounted and displayed, and that a small function



HE whom this scroll commemorates
was numbered among those who,
at the call of King and Country, left all
that was dear to them, endured hardness,
faced danger; and finally passed out of
the sight of men by the path of duty
and self-sacrifice, giving up their own
lives that others might live in freedom.
Let those who come after see to it
that his name be not forgotten.

*Pte. Percy Burton.
New Zealand Machine Gun Bn.*

Memorial scroll for Percy Burton 40433
[Ref: AF091:0:4].

Photo: Wellington City Archives

should be held to mark the occasion: "The writer has dealt with many similar instances, and from experience judges that if you arrange for your staff to attend the function and issue an invitation through the Secretary, Seamen's Union for Seamen and Firemen in port to be present and then for short speeches to be made ... the action would tend to eliminate some of the feeling of distrust which at present exists between employee and employer."¹³ The writer notes that he does not make the suggestion officially and trusts the company will "pardon my making this suggestion".¹⁴

Even more of the human side can be seen in the delivery of James Lovell's memorial plaque, the one that is still in its original wrapper. A note on his service record explains why the wrapping did not have any stamps or postmarks. It reads "P & S [plaque and scroll] delivered personally". I like to think of the clerk in Wellington deciding to take a stroll, perhaps in his lunch break, putting on his hat and coat, walking out of his building in Buckle Street over to the USSCo offices on the waterfront, and hand delivering the wrapped plaque and the accompanying scroll.

The reason we can know so much about this collection of medals and memorials, these men, and the process by which their medals and memorials were delivered to and received by the USSCo is the recordkeeping by both NZEF and the USSCo. The medals and memorials themselves only reveal so much; it is the records that tell the story.

Postscript

Not long after the ARANZ Conference in Auckland, I received a call at WCA from my friend and colleague Ken Scadden. Addressing me as 'comrade Skudder', as was his wont, he asked if he could come and see the medals. Ken was the Director of the Museum of City and Sea at the time of the agreement to store the records at WCA, and had a keen interest in medals as well as maritime history. We spent an hour together while he looked at the medals and read the documentation, all the while enthusing about the great condition of the objects. It is one of many fond memories I have of Ken.

Endnotes

1. Originally known as Wellington Maritime Museum, and from 1999 until 2015, as the Museum of Wellington City and Sea.
2. 'War medals – war certificates – for deceased soldiers – left in charge of Union SS Co. & correspondence in re, 1923' (c1923). AF091. Wellington City Archives.
3. www.greatwar.co.uk. 'The Next of Kin Memorial Plaque & Scroll'. Accessed 14 November, 2016, <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/memorials/memorial-plaque.htm>.
4. 'War medals – war certificates – for deceased soldiers – left in charge of Union SS Co. & correspondence in re, 1923', AF091. Wellington City Archives.
5. New Zealand Expeditionary Force War Accounts and Records Office [correspondence] (1923). 'War medals – war certificates – for deceased soldiers – left in charge of Union SS Co. & correspondence in re, 1923' (c1923). AF091. Wellington City Archives.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. 'Desmond, Francis William – WW1 8/2896 – Army' (1914-1917). AABK 18805 W5544 Box 30/0033483. Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga.
9. 'Burton, Percy – WW1 40433 – Army' (1914-1917). AABK 18805 W5544 Box 25/0020942. Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga.
10. 'Lovell, James – WW1 5/194 – Army' (1914-1915) AABK 18805 W5544 Box 30/0069437. Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga.
11. Auckland War Memorial Museum. Online Cenotaph, <http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/search>.
12. "Soldier's Spoken Will", *Press*, Volume LVII (Issue 17078), 24 February, 1921. Accessed 14 November, 2016, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19210224.2.9?query=soldier%27s%20spoken%20will>.
13. New Zealand Expeditionary Force War Accounts and Records Office [correspondence].
14. Ibid.