

Sergeant Robert Richard Rennie[©]

Regimental number: 6/127

1st Canterbury Infantry Battalion

born: 25 July 1889–died: 21 July 1916

Robert Richard Rennie was born on 25 July 1889 in Tasmania, Australia, the son of Robert Rennie and Matilda Jane, née Higgins.¹ He was their eldest son and third child, the other children being Catherine Annie (b. 1887),² Mary Jane (b. 1888),³ Charles Joseph (b. 1891),⁴ Matilda Jane (b. 1893),⁵ Minnie Margaret (b. 1896),⁶ Leonard (b. 1898),⁷ Janet May (b. 1901),⁸ and Hazel Elizabeth (b. 1904).⁹

Robert Richard's father was a farmer in Moonah, Tasmania.¹⁰ He had married Matilda Jane in February 1885.¹¹ She was the daughter of Richard Daniel Higgins,¹² also a farmer in Tasmania.¹³

Robert Richard enlisted in the army in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 14 August 1914.¹⁴ His service record indicates that he had two years' prior military service with the Derwent Regiment in Tasmania, but his residence at the time of enlistment was Rakaia, New Zealand, and he was a labourer with S. J. Holmes in Rakaia. So why was he living in New Zealand? There is no evidence that his parents ever lived in New Zealand, but his eldest sister, Catherine Annie, married a New Zealander, Theodore Albert Alfred Parker, in 1909 in New Zealand.¹⁵ However, they lived in Wellington, North Island,¹⁶ whereas Rakaia is on the South Island. Sister Matilda Jane also moved to New Zealand (see below), but not until after the war.

On enlistment, Robert Richard joined the 1st Canterbury Infantry Battalion as a private. The battalion trained in New Zealand until 16 October 1914, then proceeded abroad as part of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. It embarked for the Dardanelles on 12 April 1915 from Alexandria, Egypt, to serve in the Gallipoli campaign. According to the battalion's unit war diaries,¹⁷ the battalion saw action in Monash Gully on 31 May 1915, during which it lost 4 killed and 26 wounded. Private Rennie was one of those wounded, but apparently not seriously, as he rejoined his unit the next day.

However, four days later he was wounded again, with bullet wounds to his right hand and arm. This time the battalion came under heavy fire while defending a captured trench, which they were forced to vacate.¹⁸ The battalion suffered 11 killed, 53 wounded and 4 missing. Private Rennie was admitted to the 4th Australian Field Ambulance and transported to the Valetta Hospital in Malta. He was subsequently sent to England on 4 July 1915 and finally discharged from hospital on 24 July. He was taken on strength at the Monte Video Camp in Weymouth, finally rejoining his unit in the Dardanelles on 18 September, more than three months after he was wounded.

A week later he was promoted to lance corporal, and four days after that was admitted to No. 2 Australian Stationary Hospital with diphtheria. He was discharged to duty on 6 October 1915 and appointed a temporary sergeant on 21 October, effective from 1 October.

The battalion disembarked at Alexandria on 30 December 1915, its role in the Gallipoli campaign over, and was stationed in Ismailia. Here Robert Richard Rennie was promoted to corporal on 19 February 1916, and again to sergeant on 4 March. On 6 April the battalion embarked on the SS *Franconia* for France.

The *Franconia* arrived in Marseilles on 11 April 1916; the battalion disembarked and took a train to Steenbecque.¹⁹ It then marched to Morbecque, two miles from Hazebrouck. According to the *History of the Canterbury Regiment, N.Z.E.F. 1914–1919*²⁰ (the war diaries for this period not being available), the battalion remained in reserve in Morbecque until May 9, then moved to Armentières, before finally going into the line on May 20. The battalion then endured almost three months of trench warfare, during which time they lost 2 officers and 71 other ranks (non-officers) killed or died of wounds.

One of the wounded was Sergeant Rennie. He suffered gunshot wounds to his back and spine on 20 July 1916 and was transferred to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station at Bailleul, where he was operated on but died shortly afterward.²¹ He was buried in the Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, Nord, Reference II. F. 4.²² There is no inscription on his headstone. The cemetery lies in the east end of the town of Bailleul, in the Nord department of the Hauts-de-France region; it contains the remains of 4344 soldiers from the two world wars.

Sergeant Robert Richard Rennie received the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre) and the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) for his service. He also received the 1914–15 Star, for service in any theatre of the war in 1914–15.

Neither of Robert Richard's brothers appear to have done any military service. **Charles Joseph** was working as a baker in New Town in 1914, age 23.²³ He married Amy Catherine Langdon in 1916.²⁴ In 1927 he lost three fingers caught in a dough making machine²⁵ but continued to work as a baker.²⁶ He died in 1974, age 83.²⁷

The youngest brother, **Leonard**, would have been only 16 when the war began. In 1917 he was a telegraph messenger in New Town, Tasmania, at a salary of £52, but on 29 June he was promoted to a postman in the mail branch, with a substantial salary increase to £72.²⁸ In 1924 he married Essie Jane Elizabeth O'Brien.²⁹ They lived in Hobart, Tasmania, where he worked as a commonwealth servant.³⁰ (This may have been what all public servants were called, including postmen). Leonard died in 1980.³¹

Robert Richard's eldest sister, **Catherine Annie**, married a New Zealander, Theodore Albert Alfred Parker, as stated above, and moved to Wellington, New Zealand. Theodore was on the New Zealand Army Reserve Rolls in 1917³² but does not appear to have been called up. He worked as a butcher.³³

Second sister **Mary Jane** married Robert Hickman in 1904.³⁴ They were still living in Moonah, Tasmania, when they celebrated their golden wedding anniversary in 1954.³⁵ Mary Jane died in 1969.³⁶

The third sister, **Matilda Jane**, married John Arthur Peach in 1920.³⁷ He had served in France in 1916 and 1917 with the 1st Battalion, Wellington Infantry Regiment, before being declared unfit due to a knee injury.³⁸ He subsequently re-enlisted in 1941 in the 6th Composite Works Company, New Zealand Engineers. He and Matilda Jane lived in Wellington, New Zealand,³⁹ where she died in 1962.⁴⁰

Fourth sister **Minnie Margaret** married Reginald Harry Hawkins in 1916 in Tasmania.⁴¹ She died in 1927, at the young age of 31.⁴²

Fifth sister **Janet May** married John Thomas Miller in 1926.⁴³ He had enlisted in the Field Artillery in 1916, having already served for six years in the Light Horse before the war.⁴⁴ He served in France

in 1917 and returned to Australia in 1919. His profession was soap manufacturer. After their marriage, he and Janet May lived in Queenborough, Denison, a suburb of Hobart, Tasmania.⁴⁵

The youngest sister, **Hazel Elizabeth**, married Melvyn Frank Allen in 1926.⁴⁶ They lived on the mainland in Victoria after their marriage.⁴⁷ He was initially a draper but had turned to sales by 1931.⁴⁸ Hazel Elizabeth died in 2003, age 99.⁴⁹

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¹ "Australia, Birth Index, 1788–1922," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 February 2024), entry for Robert Richard Rennie

² "Australia, Birth Index, 1788–1922," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 February 2024), entry for Catherine Annie Rennie

³ The year of birth has not been verified. Most *Ancestry* family trees and the *Geneanet* Community Trees Index give the year as 1888, but the age on her headstone, as shown in the *Ancestry* database "Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s–Current" for Mary Jane Hickman would suggest a birth year of 1886.

⁴ "Australia, Birth Index, 1788–1922," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 February 2024), entry for Charles Joseph Rennie

⁵ "Australia, Birth Index, 1788–1922," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 February 2024), entry for Matilda Jane Rennie

⁶ "Australia, Birth Index, 1788–1922," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 February 2024), entry for Minnie Margaret Rennie

⁷ "Australia, Birth Index, 1788–1922," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 February 2024), entry for Leonard Rennie

⁸ "Australia, Birth Index, 1788–1922," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 February 2024), entry for Janet May Rennie

⁹ The official birth record has not been found, but most family trees, the *Geneanet* Community Trees Index, and the *Ancestry* database "Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s–Current," for Hazel Elizabeth Allen all give a birth date of 27 April 1904.

¹⁰ "Australia, City Directories, 1845–1948," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 12 February 2024), entry for Robert Rennie, 1903

¹¹ "Australia, Marriage Index, 1788–1950," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Robert Rennie

¹² "Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Matilda Jane Rennie

¹³ "Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903–1980," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Richard Higgins, 1904

¹⁴ "New Zealand, WW1 Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Robert Rennie, service number WW1 6/127. Unless otherwise specified, all information about his military service comes from this source.

¹⁵ "New Zealand, Marriage Index, 1840–1937," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Theodore Albert Alfred Parker

¹⁶ "New Zealand Electoral Rolls, 1853–2010," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Catherine Annie Parker

¹⁷ "Australian Imperial Force unit war diaries, 1914–18 war, AWM4 Subclass 35/19 - Canterbury Battalion," *Australian War Memorial* (<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1339817?image=10>: accessed 18 February 2024)

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- ¹⁸ "Australian Imperial Force unit war diaries, 1914–18 war, AWM4 Subclass 35/19 - Canterbury Battalion," *Australian War Memorial* (<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1339818?image=3>: accessed 18 February 2024)
- ¹⁹ "Australian Imperial Force unit war diaries, 1914–18 war, AWM4 Subclass 35/19 - Canterbury Battalion," *Australian War Memorial* (<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1339816?image=3>: accessed 18 February 2024)
- ²⁰ Captain David Ferguson, "The History of the Canterbury Regiment, N.Z.E.F. 1914 - 1919, Chapter VI. - From Egypt to France: Trench Warfare at Armentières," *New Zealand Electronic Text Collection* (<https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH1-Cant-t1-body-d6.html>: accessed 18 February 2024)
- ²¹ "BIFHSGO Name Index" (<https://www.bifhsgo.ca/search-name-index>: accessed 19 February 2024), search for Rennie, R.
- ²² *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 19 February 2024), entry for Robert Rennie, Service No: 6/127
- ²³ "Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903–1980," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Charles Joseph Rennie, 1914
- ²⁴ "Australia, Marriage Index, 1788–1950," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Charles Joseph Rennie.
- ²⁵ "Three Fingers Lost," in *The Mercury* (Hobart, Tas.: 1860–1954), Saturday, 26 Nov 1927 - Page 10, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/24196776?searchTerm=%22Charles%20Rennie%22>: accessed 19 February 2024), search for Charles Rennie
- ²⁶ "Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903–1980," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Charles Joseph Rennie, 1937
- ²⁷ "Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Charles Joseph Rennie
- ²⁸ "Tasmania. Promotions," *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette* (National: 1901–1973), Thu 13 Dec 1917, Page 3361, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/232450338?searchTerm=%22Leonard%20Rennie%22>: accessed 20 February 2024), search for Leonard Rennie
- ²⁹ "Tasmania, Australia, Index to Marriage Notices in The Mercury, 1854–1962," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 21 February 2024), search for Leonard Rennie
- ³⁰ "Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903–1980," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Leonard Rennie, 1928
- ³¹ "Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Leonard Rennie
- ³² "New Zealand, World War I Army Reserve Rolls, 1916–1917," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 22 February 2024), entry for Theodore Parker
- ³³ "New Zealand Electoral Rolls, 1853–2010," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Theodore Albert Alfred Parker
- ³⁴ "Australia, Marriage Index, 1788–1950," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Mary Jane Rennie
- ³⁵ "Golden Wedding," *The Mercury* (Hobart, Tas: 1860–1954) 4 Dec 1954, Page 23, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/27240576?searchTerm=%22Robert%20Hickman%22>: accessed 22 February 2024), search for Robert Hickman
- ³⁶ "Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Mary Jane Hickman
- ³⁷ "New Zealand, Marriage Index, 1840–1937," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Matilda Jane Rennie.

³⁸ “New Zealand, WW1 Service Records, 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 25 February 2024), entry for John Arthur Peach, service number WW1 12698. Unless otherwise specified, all information about his military service comes from this source.

³⁹ “New Zealand Electoral Rolls, 1853–2010,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Matilda Jane Peach

⁴⁰ “New Zealand, Death Index, 1848–1966,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 22 February 2024), entry for Matilda Jane Peach

⁴¹ “Australia, Marriage Index, 1788–1950,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Minnie Margaret Rennie

⁴² “Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Minnie Margaret Hawkins

⁴³ The marriage information was taken from various *Ancestry* trees. No official record was found.

⁴⁴ “Australia, WW1 Service Records, 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for John Thomas Miller, service number 30801. Unless otherwise specified, all information about his military service comes from this source.

⁴⁵ “Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903–1980,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Janet May Millar [sic], 1928.

⁴⁶ “Victoria, Australia, Marriage Index, 1837–1950,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 24 February 2024), entry for Hazel Elizth [sic] Rennie

⁴⁷ “Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903–1980,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Mervyn Frank Allen, 1928

⁴⁸ “Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903–1980,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Mervyn Frank Allen, 1931

⁴⁹ “Australia and New Zealand, Find a Grave Index, 1800s–Current,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 17 February 2024), entry for Hazel Elizabeth Allen