

Rifleman Middleton Beckett[©]

Regimental number: 24/971

“D” Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd New Zealand Rifle Brigade (Trentham Rifle Brigade)

born: 17 August 1896–died: 28 May 1916

Rifleman Middleton Beckett was probably born on 17 August 1896 in Norsewood, New Zealand.¹ Norsewood is on the North Island, about 200 kilometres northeast of Wellington. Middleton’s attestation form indicates he was born on 17 August 1894. However, his birth is cited in the July–September 1896 registration records. It is likely that the day and month of his birth were correctly reported in his attestation, but the year was changed to make him appear two years older when he enlisted.

He was the son of William Middleton Beckett² and his wife, the former Mary Ann Hogg, who had married in New Zealand in 1895.³ Middleton’s mother Mary Ann was born in New Zealand in about 1870,⁴ but his father was born in Rock Ferry, Cheshire, England.⁵

It appears that Middleton’s father immigrated to New Zealand sometime in the 1880s because, in 1890, he was a farmer in Avon, Canterbury,⁶ which is close to Christchurch on the South Island. The rest of his father’s family⁷ obviously made the same move because, by the mid-1890s, Middleton’s grandfather and all his uncles were living in New Zealand. His grandfather William Henry Beckett and his uncle Edward Goldthorp Beckett were farming on the South Island.⁸ They had requested that their names be placed on rolls for two properties in Rangitata, south of Christchurch in 1892.⁹ Middleton’s father probably moved to the North Island and was living near Hawke’s Bay in 1896.¹⁰ Another uncle, Arthur Henry Beckett, a carpenter, was also living near Hawke’s Bay¹¹ and his youngest uncle, Cecil Ives Brayne Beckett, was a station hand in Waiapu on the North Island.¹²

Middleton was first child in his family. Five more children followed: Helen Mary (born in 1898),¹³ Gerald Elley (born in 1900),¹⁴ Guy (born in 1902),¹⁵ William Reginald (born on 20 October 1906)¹⁶ and Maurice Musgrove (born in 1909).¹⁷

The family stayed in Norsewood, near Hawkes Bay, for some time. At some point, his parents moved further north to Church Road, in Greenmeadows, near Napier,¹⁸ but by 1919 his parents had moved south again and were living at “Brent Toi” on Stuckey Street, in Levin,¹⁹ 90 kilometres north of Wellington. Middleton was educated at Wanganui Collegiate School, 200 kilometres north of Wellington.²⁰

Middleton enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force on 29 May 1915 at Trentham (near Wellington).²¹ When he enlisted, he claimed that he was born on 17 August 1894, making him 20



Middleton Beckett and his sister Helen Mary
Source: *Museum of New Zealand*



Middleton Beckett

Source: *Museum of New Zealand*

patch on his service cap was the temporary identification for his battalion—a rectangle of black cloth for the 2nd Battalion. This means that the pictures can be dated to a week's leave that he had from 20–27 August 1915.²⁴

On the morning of 8 October 1915, the 2nd Battalion went by train to Wellington and, on arrival, boarded the troopships.²⁵ The following day, the men marched off the ships and paraded for a farewell march through town.

The quick swinging march of the Rifle Battalions with their arms at the trail was new to the great crowds that had assembled to watch the parade. The troops, having returned to the docks, re-embarked, and the troopships moved into the stream and anchored at 5 p.m.²⁶

At 6 a.m. on 10 October, the 2nd Battalion set sail on the *Tahiti* (Transport No. 31) in a convoy with four other ships. The journey was largely uneventful. Time was passed with drills, lectures, boxing tournaments and impromptu concerts.

The first port of call was Albany, in Western Australia, where the convoy divided. The *Tahiti*, carrying the 2nd Battalion, and two other ships headed for the Suez, by way of Colombo, Sri Lanka. They reached Colombo on 1 November and, after a short break ashore, sailed on to the Suez.

Middleton arrived in the Suez on 18 November 1915. On 22 November his battalion left by train for Alexandria, to join the Western Frontier Force on the line of communications in the direction of Dabaa (about 170 kilometres west of Alexandria). It was stationed near Alexandria and established posts at railway stations or near the larger native villages, with small garrisons at the small importer points and larger garrisons at the rail-heads. The garrisons worked to prepare their

years old instead of just 18. Apparently, he had tried to enlist earlier but had been rejected because he was too young. The second time he lied about his age to enlist.

He was 5' 9" tall and had a dark complexion, blue eyes and brown hair. He was a bank clerk, employed at the Bank of New South Wales in Christchurch. The bank, the first set up in Australia, was established in Sydney in 1817. Over the next 200 years, the bank opened other branches, not only in Australia, but also in the region. The branch in New Zealand opened in 1861.²²

Middleton enlisted for the period of the war with the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd New Zealand Rifle Brigade (known as the Trentham Rifle Brigade). He had already served for three months in the 1st Canterbury Regiment and then as a cadet in Wanganui for two years and in Napier for two and a half years. Middleton trained at the new camp at Rangiotu in the Manawatu, near Wanganui.²³

He had pictures taken before he went overseas—including a picture with his sister Helen. Since metal badges had not yet issued to the Rifle Brigade, the

defences and bring in supplies of food, water and ammunition. But the enthusiasm of the troops was waning because they came prepared for a confrontation with the enemy, not patrolling in the desert.

Perhaps the most exciting incident was that experienced by the garrison of a newly-established post at the village of Hammam. In the dusk of the evening of the first day on duty, streams of men and beasts of burden appeared to be converging on the post from all points of the horizon. Later on, camp-fires gleamed on every side, and the officer in command of the post came to the conclusion that the end of all things was at hand. After standing to arms all night, the men of the little garrison were somewhat relieved in the morning to find that the sudden growth of population in the neighbourhood was merely the accompaniment to the holding of the periodic and peaceful market, warning of which had not reached the post.²⁷

The troops were apparently pleased to hear on 19 December that they would be relieved within a few days. The 2nd Battalion went back Alexandria to rest and refit. In mid-January 1916, the battalion took over responsibility for the defence of the Mariut Canal, southwest of Alexandria. Middleton's unit, which was "D" Company, was sent out to hold all railway and traffic bridges over the Canal. By 18 January, the 2nd Battalion had moved from Alexandria to Ismailia.

In February 1916, discussions were underway to separate the Australian and New Zealand troops within the Anzac Corps and, by 1 March, the New Zealand Division was created within the 1st Anzac Corps.

In early March, the New Zealand Division moved to the camp at Ferry Port, just east of the Suez Canal, where it took over the defensive sector from the 2nd Australian Division. The battalion served on the Suez Canal for a few days and was then relieved and went to Ismailia to await transfer to France. While parades, route marches, staff rides, night operations, trench-digging, specialist training and trench work continued as the battalion waited, there were also opportunities for relaxation. The troops were allowed visits to Cairo, Ismailia and its beautiful plantations and gardens, Lake Timsah and the Suez Canal for bathing, and even visits to the open desert and the remains of long-lost civilizations.

As the departure from Egypt approached, troop preparations were underway. Paratyphoid inoculations were carried out, kits were reduced by sending away all personal belongings, forage caps were handed in and the previously issued Magazine Lee-Enfield long rifles were replaced with shorter rifles.

An advance party left for Europe on 5 April, but Middleton left Ismailia on 6 April with the 2nd Battalion and sailed from Alexandria aboard the *Arcadian*. Although there were frequent scares, his three-day trip was uneventful. There was limited space on the ship for training activities, so the soldiers attended lectures on trench warfare and preventive measures against gas attacks.

Upon arriving in Marseilles, the troops began a long train journey from the Mediterranean to the English Channel. The only distraction was the sun in the south and "green fields, early flowers, trees putting forth their first buds, extensive and orderly vineyards, quaint villages, ancient towns and thriving cities"²⁸ that made a change from the monotony of the Egyptian deserts. Upon arrival, the 2nd Battalion was stationed in Steenbecque. The troops

... found the inhabitants of the district kindly and obliging to a degree, and such good people as those of La Belle Hotesse and the other hamlets and villages will long be remembered for their solicitude on our behalf. . . . Usually the greatest kindness was displayed by those who had suffered most. The war, it will be remembered, was already drawing to the close of its second year, and signs of its effects were not wanting. There was a marked absence of able-bodied men; in the fields women and old men followed the plough or executed other forms of manual labour from daylight till dark; and as the people wended their way to church, on Sundays and Saints' days, one noticed that the majority of the women and children wore mourning.²⁹

The troops began training immediately upon arrival. This included general training, specialist work, route marching and training for dealing with gas attacks.

On 1 May, the troops marched the 15 miles from Steenbecque to Estaires and had its first experience of a gas attack. While they had heard the rumble of distant artillery fire and seen flashes of gun fire in Steenbecque, in Estaires the machine gun fire was frequent and very intense. On 6 May, the 2nd Battalion went to Armentières for a 24-hour tour in the trenches. This provided the troops with valuable information on the new conditions under which they would be operating. Three days later, the battalions marched back to Morbecque for a special course in musketry and practical Lewis and Vickers gun training.

On 13 May, the 2nd Battalion marched down to Doulieu, 18 kilometres east of Morbecque. The troops moved closer to the Front two days later, when they marched to Armentières as part of divisional reserve. When the troop arrived in Armentières, many inhabitants were still there and the troops had excellent billets, mainly in abandoned factories.

One of our battalions was, during a spell out of the line, billeted in a large building that had been a Girls' College, and the lady-principal was still in residence. It is worthy of note that this lady was able to tell us of our next move into the line some time before official warning or definite orders reached the headquarters of the battalion, and she complained most bitterly that, apparently through the soldiers' unguarded talk, such information frequently filtered out till it reached the civilian residents, amongst whom it became the common topic of conversation.³⁰

On the night of 22/23 May, the NZ Rifle Brigade began its first tour in the trenches in France. The 2nd Battalion came in on the following night, relieving the 2nd Battalion of the Canterbury Regiment in the Pont Ballot sub-sector. The relief went smoothly and the NZ Rifle Brigade was now, for the first time, serving in the trenches on the Western Front.

Middleton's "D" Company was supporting "B" Company, which was responsible for three smaller localities. The troops adapted quickly to the conditions in the trenches and became proficient in trench warfare, as well as maintaining the extensive trench system. But what had been sufficient cover for their predecessors was not deemed sufficient for the NZ troops. So, they began to raise all trench walls by adding layers of sandbags, repairing damage caused by shell fire and adding existing wire. With the backup of the NZ snipers and efficient patrols, the troops were eventually moving about No Man's Land with great boldness and cunning. All troops took their share of patrol duties.

On 26 May 1916, Middleton received a gunshot wound to his right loin while taking part in a wiring party. He had only been in the trenches on the Western Front for three days when he was taken to

No. 2 Field Ambulance and, from there, to No. 8 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station. He transferred to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station, where he died at 12:35 a.m. on 28 May. He was probably one of five Other Ranks killed in that month³¹ and probably one of the first members of the Rifle Brigade to die on the Western Front. He was only 19 years old.

Middleton was buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, Nord cemetery (Plot I, Row A, Grave 30) with Rev. John S. O’Gorman attending. Bailleul was occupied in October 1914 and became an important hospital centre for not just No. 1 CCCS but also No. 1 Australian and five British Army casualty clearing stations.³²

A letter was sent to Middleton’s father, who was then living in Greenmeadows, Napier, to notify him of his son’s death.³³ His father also received the three medals that were awarded to Middleton posthumously—the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918), the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre) and the 1914–15 Star (for service in the war against Germany between 5 August 1914 and 31 December 1915).

Middleton’s father died on 14 September 1936 in Karori, Wellington,³⁴ leaving a considerable amount of money to local charities.³⁵ His mother died four years later, on 5 June 1940, also in Karori. Her gravestone carried the inscription “I triumph still if thou abide with me.”³⁶

All Middleton’s brothers were too young to serve in the Great War, but three—Gerald, Guy and Maurice—were called up under the *National Service Emergency Regulations 1940* for service with the Territorial Force in the Second World War. Their sister died before the war, but all his brothers survived the war and remained in New Zealand:

- Helen Mary died on 30 November 1936 in Karori, Wellington, at the age of 38. This inscription is included on her gravestone: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord;”³⁷
- Gerald Elley, a motor salesman,³⁸ married Elizabeth Webb Guthrie in 1923.³⁹ He survived his service in World War II and died in Napier in 1961;⁴⁰
- Guy, a grocer,⁴¹ married Kathleen Margaret Piper in 1934⁴² and died on 17 November 1960 in Wairarapa;⁴³
- William Reginald, an electrical technician,⁴⁴ married Audrey Juanita Butler in 1934⁴⁵ and died in 1992.⁴⁶ It is not known if he served in World War II; and
- Maurice Musgrove, a draper,⁴⁷ married Mary Ellen Piper in 1937⁴⁸ and died on 5 June 1988 in Thames Valley, Bay of Plenty.⁴⁹

£400 FOR CHARITIES

Under the will of the late Mr. William Middleton Beckett, who died in September last, £400 was bequeathed to charities. In accordance with the wish of the testator, the trustees have distributed the amount to the following institutions:—St. Barnabas Babies’ Home, £100; St. Mary’s Home, Karori, £50; Wellington City Mission, £50; Melanesian Mission, £100; St. Hilda’s Church, £50; St. Cuthbert’s Church, £50.

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Source: *Papers Past* (<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>: accessed 29 January 2019)

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¹ Middleton’s attestation form indicates he was born on 17 August 1894. (*DigitalNZ* (<http://www.digitalnz.org/>: accessed 22 December 2018), entry for Middleton Beckett). However, his birth was registered in July–September 1896. (“Birth search,” *Birth, Death and Marriage Historical Records*

(<https://bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/home>: accessed 22 January 2019), entry for Middleton Beckett, Registration number: 1896/11349)

² “No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station,” *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 22 December 2018), entry for Beckett, M.

³ “Marriage search,” *Births, Deaths & Marriages Historical Records* (<https://www.bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/home>: accessed 6 January 2019), entry for Mary Ann Hogg, Registration number: 1895/1323

⁴ “UK, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 6 January 2019), entry for William Beckett, Official number: 14481

⁵ “1881 England Census,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 15 January 2019), entry for William M. Beckett, Registration district: West Derby, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 6, Piece: 3696, Folio: 106, Page: 46

⁶ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for William Middleton Beckett, Electoral year: 1890

⁷ “1881 England Census,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 15 January 2019), entry for William M. Beckett

⁸ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for William Middleton Beckett, Electoral year: 1896; “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Edward Goldthorp Beckett, Electoral year: 1896

⁹ “Road Boards,” *Ashburton Guardian*, Volume XIV, Issue 2794, 8 October 1892, *Papers Past* (<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>: accessed 29 January 2019)

¹⁰ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for William Middleton Beckett, Electoral year: 1896

¹¹ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Arthur Beckett, Electoral year: 1896

¹² “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Cecil Ives Brayne Beckett, Electoral year: 1896

¹³ “Birth search,” *Births, Deaths & Marriages Historical Records* (<https://www.bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/home>: accessed 6 January 2019), entry for Helen Mary Beckett, Registration number: 1898/5653

¹⁴ “Birth search,” *Births, Deaths & Marriages Historical Records* (<https://www.bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/home>: accessed 6 January 2019), entry for Gerald Elley Beckett, Registration number: 1900/15446

¹⁵ “Birth search,” *Births, Deaths & Marriages Historical Records* (<https://www.bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/home>: accessed 6 January 2019), entry for Guy Beckett, Registration number: 1902/7285

¹⁶ “Birth search,” *Births, Deaths & Marriages Historical Records* (<https://www.bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/home>: accessed 6 January 2019), entry for William Reginald Beckett, Registration number: 1992/41050

¹⁷ “Birth search,” *Births, Deaths & Marriages Historical Records* (<https://www.bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/home>: accessed 6 January 2019), entry for Maurice Musgrove Beckett, Registration number: 1909/11988

¹⁸ *DigitalNZ* (<http://www.digitalnz.org/>: accessed 22 December 2018), entry for Middleton Beckett

¹⁹ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for William Middleton Beckett, Electoral year: 1919

²⁰ “Middleton Beckett,” 1915, Wellington, by Berry & Co. Purchased 1998 with New Zealand Lottery Grants Board funds. Te Papa (B.045035), Museum of New Zealand (<https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/365909>)

²¹ *DigitalNZ* (<http://www.digitalnz.org/>: accessed 22 December 2018), entry for Middleton Beckett. Unless otherwise stated, all information about Middleton’s military career comes from this source.

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- ²² “Bank of New South Wales.” *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bank_of_New_South_Wales: accessed 5 January 2019)
- ²³ “Middleton Beckett,” op. cit.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ “The Official History of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade,” *Victoria University of Wellington Library* (<http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH1-NZRI.html>: accessed 22 January 2019). Unless otherwise stated, all information about the movements of the 2nd Battalion come from this source.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, page 16
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, page 29
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, page 69
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, page 71
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, page 76
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, page 93
- ³² “Bailleul Community Cemetery, Nord,” *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 17 January 2017)
- ³³ “No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station,” *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 22 December 2019), entry for Beckett, M.
- ³⁴ “New Zealand, Cemetery Records, 1800–2007,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for William Middleton Beckett
- ³⁵ “£400 for charities,” *Evening Post*, Volume CXXIII, Issue 81, 7 April 1937, *Papers Past*, (<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>: accessed 29 January 2019)
- ³⁶ “New Zealand, Cemetery Records, 1800–2007,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Mary Ann Beckett
- ³⁷ “New Zealand, Cemetery Records, 1800–2007,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Helen Mary Beckett
- ³⁸ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Gerald Elley Beckett, 1949
- ³⁹ “New Zealand, Marriage Index, 1840–1934,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 22 January 2019), entry for Gerald Elley Beckett, Folio number: 6768
- ⁴⁰ “New Zealand, Cemetery Records, 1800–2007,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Gerald Elley Beckett
- ⁴¹ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Guy Beckett, 1940
- ⁴² “New Zealand, Marriage Index, 1840–1937” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Guy Beckett, Folio number: 6434
- ⁴³ “New Zealand, Cemetery Records, 1800–2007,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Guy Beckett
- ⁴⁴ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for William Reginald Beckett, 1940
- ⁴⁵ “New Zealand, Marriage Index, 1840–1937” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for William Reginald Beckett, Folio number: 9260
- ⁴⁶ “Death search,” *Births, Deaths & Marriages Online* (<https://www.bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/home>: accessed 6 January 2019), entry for William Reginald Beckett, Registration number: 1992/41050
- ⁴⁷ “New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Maurice Musgrove Beckett, 1963
- ⁴⁸ “New Zealand, Marriage Index, 1840–1937” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Maurice Musgrove Beckett, Folio number: 4983

⁴⁹ "New Zealand, Cemetery Records, 1800–2007," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 23 January 2019), entry for Maurice Musgrove Beckett