

## **Company Sergeant Major John James Cowan<sup>©</sup>**

**Regimental number: 12/330**

**1st Battalion, Auckland Infantry Regiment**

**born: 2 August 1891–died: 16 July 1916**

John James Cowan was born in Gosforth, Northumberland, England, on 2 August 1891,<sup>1</sup> the son of John Cowans (later Cowan) and Harriett Anna, née Gosling. He had an older brother, Robert, born in 1888.<sup>2</sup>

In 1901 the family was living in Ornsby Hill, Lanchester, County Durham.<sup>3</sup> John was a farmer, and the family consisted of John, Harriett, Robert, John James, and adopted daughter Emma Jackson, born Harriet Emma Jackson, 18, who was the daughter of Harriett's sister Mary and Henry Jackson.<sup>4</sup>

Three years later, on 16 November 1904, the whole family departed from London on the SS *Ionic*, sailing to Wellington, New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> Emma was listed as Harriet Cowan.

In 1906, John, Harriett and Harriet Emma were living at Point Farm, Mangere Bridge, in the electoral district of Manukau, just south of Auckland.<sup>6</sup> John is listed as Farm Manager. Robert is not listed with them in 1906, but in 1911 he is working with his father as a farmer, now in Gordon Settlement, Ohinemori, Waikato, Te Aroha.<sup>7</sup> Earlier that year, Harriet Emma had married John Brown,<sup>8</sup> and they were living in Te Awamutu.<sup>9</sup>

Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, and New Zealand followed the next day.<sup>10</sup> Just eight days later John James Cowan enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force.<sup>11</sup> Four days later he was promoted to the rank of corporal in the Auckland Infantry Battalion.<sup>12</sup>

Corporal John James Cowan embarked on active service from New Zealand on 23 September 1914, and was in Egypt by 5 December.<sup>13</sup> His unit left Alexandria for the Dardanelles on 12 April 1915,<sup>14</sup> where New Zealand forces participated in the unsuccessful and costly Gallipoli campaign against the Ottomans.<sup>15</sup> A month later, on 8 May, he was wounded in action.<sup>16</sup> He was admitted the same day to the hospital ship HMS *Braemar Castle* with a bullet wound to the foot.<sup>17</sup> HMS *Braemar Castle* took him to Malta, where he was admitted to St George's Hospital on 18 May. While there he was promoted to sergeant.<sup>18</sup>

Sergeant Cowan was discharged from the hospital on 13 June 1915 to the Pembroke Convalescent Camp in Malta, eventually making his way back to rejoin his unit in the Dardanelles on 16 August.<sup>19</sup> However, two weeks later he was back in Egypt,<sup>20</sup> where he stayed until April 1916, other than a short spell working at the Mudros Convalescent Camp with his unit on the island of Lemnos.<sup>21</sup>

In early 1916, Sergeant Cowan was promoted twice, first to Sergeant Major (SM) on March 6, then to Warrant Officer 2nd Class (WO2) on 5 April.<sup>22</sup> [While his rank was now WO2, he was usually referred to by his appointment as Company Sergeant Major (CSM)].<sup>23</sup> One day later, he arrived on the Western Front.<sup>24</sup> His unit, now the 1st Battalion of the Auckland Infantry Regiment,<sup>25</sup> was stationed for a few months near Armentières before heading south to take part in the devastating Battle of the Somme in September 1916.<sup>26</sup>

CSM Cowan did not make it that far: on 16 July he was shot in the head and taken to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station at Bailleul, where he died of his wounds.<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup> He was buried in the Bailleul

Communal Cemetery Extension, Nord, Reference II. E. 17.<sup>29</sup> The cemetery lies in the east end of the town of Bailleul, in the region of Nord, and contains the remains of over 4500 soldiers from the two world wars.<sup>30</sup>

Company Sergeant Major Cowan 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, as well as the 1914–15 Star.<sup>31</sup>

John James' older brother Robert was listed in the New Zealand Army Reserve Rolls in 1916<sup>32</sup> but did not serve during the war.

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<sup>1</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for John James Cowan, Registration district: Castle Ward, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 321

<sup>2</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for Robert Cowans, Registration district: Alnwick, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 373

<sup>3</sup> "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 22 April 2020), entry for John Cowan, Registration district: Lanchester, Sub-registration district: Lanchester, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 08, Piece: 4672, Folio: 31, Page: 2, Household schedule number: 12

<sup>4</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 22 April 2020), entry for Harriet Emma Jackson, Registration district: Cirencester, Inferred county: Gloucestershire, Volume: 6a, Page: 392

<sup>5</sup> "UK and Ireland, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890-1960," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for Jno Cowan [*sic*]

<sup>6</sup> "New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for John Cowan

<sup>7</sup> "New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for Robert Cowan

<sup>8</sup> "New Zealand, Marriage Index, 1840–1937," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 22 April 2020), entry for Harriet Emma Jackson [*sic*]

<sup>9</sup> "New Zealand, Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 22 April 2020), entry for Harriet Emma Brown

<sup>10</sup> "New Zealand enters the First World War," *New Zealand History* (<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/page/new-zealand-enters-first-world-war>: accessed 23 April 2020)

<sup>11</sup> "New Zealand, World War 1 Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for John James Cowan, page 1084

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, page 1094

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, page 1090

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, page 1086

<sup>15</sup> "The Gallipoli Campaign," *New Zealand History* (<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-gallipoli-campaign/introduction>: accessed 23 April 2020)

<sup>16</sup> "New Zealand, World War 1 Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for John James Cowan, page 1086

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., page 1090
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., page 1094
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., page 1086
- <sup>23</sup> "Warrant Officer, United Kingdom", *Wikipedia* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warrant\\_officer\\_\(United\\_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warrant_officer_(United_Kingdom))): accessed 9 Nov 2020)
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., page 1090
- <sup>25</sup> "Infantry Units," *New Zealand History* (<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/infantry-units/auckland-infantry-regiment>): accessed 23 April 2020)
- <sup>26</sup> "Armentières and the Battle of the Somme," *New Zealand History* (<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-battle-of-the-somme>): accessed 23 April 2020)
- <sup>27</sup> "New Zealand, World War 1 Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca)): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for John James Cowan, page 1087
- <sup>28</sup> "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* ([www.bifhsgo.ca](http://www.bifhsgo.ca)): accessed 22 April 2020), entry for Serg J J Cowan. Note that this reference lists the date of death as 17 July 1916, but a number of other sources (including references 26 and 28) all give the date of death as 16 July 1916.
- <sup>29</sup> *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* ([www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org)): accessed 30 March 2020), entry for Cowan, John James, Service No: 12/330
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., entry for Bailleul Communal Cemetery
- <sup>31</sup> *Archives New Zealand* ([https://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE14773949](https://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE14773949)): accessed 24 April 2020), entry for Cowan, John James
- <sup>32</sup> "New Zealand Army WW1 Reserve Rolls, 1916-1917," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca)): accessed 18 April 2020), entry for Robert Cowan [*sic*]