

# 'Death Penny' given

## Medal reunited with family of soldier killed in WW1

**SALLY.BROOKER**  
@oamarumail.co.nz

An Oamaru family has received a bronze plaque commemorating a relative killed in World War 1.

Margaret Goodall and her daughters Marise Martin and Sharyn Price were presented with the plaque for Private Ernest Ashworth, Mrs Goodall's great-uncle, who died in the Battle of the Somme in October 1916 — just nine days after arriving on the notorious French battlefield.

The plaque was brought to Oamaru recently by Major Ian Martyn (retired), the Nelson-based founder of Medals Reunited New Zealand.

His volunteer organisation made the connection with the family after Mrs Martin placed an online message on Pte Ashworth's Auckland War Memorial Museum Cenotaph page on Anzac Day last year.

Ernest Ashworth was born near Eketahuna in 1877.

In World War 1, the unmarried farm labourer enlisted with the Wellington Infantry Regiment, trained in England, then joined the 2nd Wellington Battalion in France on September 22, 1916. On October 2, he was reported missing.

Two Courts of Inquiry investigated his



**Private Ernest Ashworth**

disappearance before he was officially declared killed in action. "Given the heavy fighting in the Wellington's northern sector on the Belgian border, the pulverised nature and consuming mud of the Somme battlefields, and the random and sometimes wayward artillery shelling, Ernest could have met his fate in any number of ways — we will never know for sure," Mr Martyn said.

"Pte Ashworth's death is commemorated on the Memorial to the Missing at Caterpillar Valley Cemetery, Longueval, France."

The plaque is one of more than a million issued to the next of kin of all British and Commonwealth servicemen and women killed in the war or who died of war wounds until January 1920. They became known as "The Death Penny", "Dead Man's Penny" or "The Widow's Penny", and were rejected by many families.

Pte Ashworth's ended up in the care of a Rotorua ex-soldier named John, who was looking after the belongings of a fellow soldier who went to Australia in 1905. After 17 years, John could

not trace his friend and had to dispose of his possessions.

"It was during this process that Pte Ashworth's memorial plaque surfaced," Mr Martyn said.

"John retained the plaque with the intention of trying to find family to return it to.

"As a result of spotting the Medals Reunited New Zealand advertisement in the RSA Review, John then sent the plaque to Brian [from Medals Reunited New Zealand], a former infantry colleague, to hopefully trace the family of Ernest Ashworth.

"The irony in this story is that at the time John was asked to look after his friend's gear, John's mate had been living in Eketahuna since he had left the army."

Thanks to Mrs Martin's online message, Brian traced her to Oamaru.

Mr Martyn spent some time with the family. Mrs Goodall showed him a needlepoint commemoration she had stitched, featuring Flanders poppies and her great-uncle's name and dates.

It was "a very moving occasion for a close and delighted family", Mr Martyn said. He was interested to learn of Pte Ashworth's nephew, Bombadier Ernest Somme Ashworth, who served in the New Zealand Artillery in World War 2, returning home to live to the age of 98. He was still making Anzac biscuits in his 90s and died in Timaru this year.