

Eion Roland Merry Gibbs was in Tanzania in November 2017, on an eco-project reforesting Mount Kilimanjaro, and came across the grave of his great-great uncle Noel Martin Gibbs. He reports:

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Moshi is a quietly bustling town of close to 200,000 people on the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro. I'd moved there to film interviews with those that relied on the iconic glacier atop the mountain. 80% of it had disappeared in the last 100 years and the farmers, who rely on the snowmelt for irrigation and fertile soil, are getting exponentially concerned with its disappearance.

I arrived and had a week before my colleague and Swahili translator would get there, so there was time to find my own feet. A new place far from home, before friends are made, can make one feel a little lonely initially. To snap myself out of those feelings and to put some perspective on it all, I thought I'd go and have a look around the Commonwealth cemetery, to see the names of those that came out here before but never returned home.

It was especially hot that day as I walked to the centre of the large cemetery. An equatorial sun is difficult to escape as it sits so high in the sky and only small shadows are cast on the ground. The cemetery is vast and open with sparse avenues of trees. On the outskirts are the graves of the locals, rectangular mounds encircled by stones with white crosses for headstones. The ground around them is largely unkempt. In the centre are four separate square plots, each one demarcated by hedges. The first plot is for the African dead from 1939-1945 and it is by far the neatest. Their regimented headstones are the most symmetrical and a bench is placed between two trees from where you can sit and read the inscription of everyone resting there.

The next plot is for the German dead of the Great War and the Askari. It is overgrown and they are all buried together and cannot be made separate. They are remembered on a memorial, and if you were to leave flowers for one interned there, you would be leaving them for everyone as there are no headstones to say who is where. With no measured graves that have parameters to be tended, the plants and trees have been allowed more freedom here and have redeemed a small wilderness in the centre of a large town.

Then I came to the Commonwealth cemetery of those allies killed in the First World War. A groundskeeper was laid across three graves, using the shallow shade of the headstones as a place for a midday snooze. I walked back and forth down the lines noticing a few Greek civilians, a large contingent of South Africans and a dozen or so Brits. One headstone that caught my attention over the others was that of N. M. Gibbs, a trooper in the East African Mounted Rifles who had died on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1916. I've seen and heard our surname about the place many times attached to very unrelated people and I was sure this was just another of those instances so thought little more of it.

Then that evening I decided to do a little more digging and was surprised to find out that it was the grave of Noel Martin Gibbs, my great-great-uncle. He had moved to East Africa to become a farmer at the age of 22 a little under a decade before WW1 broke out and once it had, he joined the EAMR. I tracked down a man online who owned a very expensive book called "*Captain Wilson's The Story of the East African Mounted Rifles*" that held the details of Noel's death and he very kindly explained a few things for me and typed out the specific entries.

He said, "The EAMR was a war raised unit and consisted almost entirely of old public school boys and university graduates, who were either farming or following some other occupation out in South Africa in 1914. As such they were volunteers and although in the main from an officer class background there were not enough vacancies for them all to become officers within this one unit. When the EAMR were disbanded in late 1916 or so, many of its members volunteered their services again and some were commissioned into the King's African Rifles. Noel Gibbs would almost certainly have followed that route had he not been killed."

Noel was shot by a sniper whilst bathing in the Ruva River by Kahe, not far from Moshi. He was the only one killed in that contact.

The entry from Wilson's book reads, "'During that day an unfortunate and tragic incident occurred. An enemy patrol sneaked up on the far side of the river and surprised a watering party of our men. There was a sudden burst of firing, a general scattering of men and animals, and then silence. The roll was called and nobody found missing from any of the squadrons.

Late in the evening it was discovered that Trooper N. M. Gibbs, the Colonel's orderly, had not been seen since the watering party had been surprised. It was full moon that night and when the moon had risen, a small party went across the river to search for the missing man, but without success. It was not until the next day that his body was found under the bank of the river, where he had been shot down whilst bathing."

Noel's obituary is moving and outlines a dependable man on the up and up killed on the verge of being commissioned. Lord Cranworth wrote "he had done so well as a soldier, and had shown himself very brave and reliable". An officer of the EAMR had this to say, "He was simply full of pluck, and a man on whom you could absolutely rely in any sort of a tight corner." Colonel Laverton, the Commanding Officer to whom Noel was Orderly to, said, "A week or two before his death I had recommended him for a commission in the King's African Mounted Infantry, and I think he would certainly have got it, and a real good officer he would have made. He was a real good, keen soldier and if only he had been spared, would have made a dashing officer."

Noel, one of the 9 children of Henry Martin Gibbs, never married and never had any children of his own. He died at the age of 31 in a far-off land and his story was totally unknown to me or my family even though he was my grandfather's uncle. Then by complete chance I stumbled across his grave in the Moshi cemetery and felt a little less alone once I'd worked out who he was. So if you're a believer, like I am, that we have two deaths – once when you breathe no more and once when your name is mentioned last – I hope that this chance encounter is in a small way a revival of Noel.

I was still in Moshi for Remembrance Sunday and returned to an empty cemetery and stood at the foot of his grave for the two minute silence, remembering by all accounts a brave young man, who I am proud to be the great-great-nephew of.