

## 11. PROPOSED MEMORIAL TO SERGEANT HENRY JAMES NICHOLAS VC

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The purpose of this report is to seek endorsement for the creation of a commemorative site on the riverbank north of the Bridge of Remembrance to honour Sergeant Henry James Nicholas VC.

The Bridge of Remembrance is an important feature of Christchurch and is particularly significant to the Avon River corridor. The parkland area just north of the bridge on the riverbank between the Avon River and Durham Street already has two trees with plaques commemorating armed services activity. The area could, in the future, become a suitable site for further commemorations, in particular overseas peacekeeping activity. This is a logical progression from the Bridge which could, in time, become cluttered with commemorative plaques unless alternative sites are identified and planned now.

This idea of a commemorative zone is already starting to occur on the ground between the Bridge of Remembrance and Gloucester Street. In the up and coming Avon River Strategy it is likely to be suggested that the area be formally set aside for a variety of commemorative themes such as the armed services, women's suffrage etc. An area commemorating the armed services could be reinforced between the Bridge of Remembrance and Hereford Street.

Heritage staff consider that creating a commemorative site to Sergeant Nicholas is entirely appropriate and support the idea of locating it on the riverbank adjacent to the Bridge of Remembrance. They agree that there is a risk of cluttering the Bridge of Remembrance with future commemorative plaques and therefore concur with the creation of an additional area near the Bridge.

This land is held by the Council under the Christchurch City (Reserves) Empowering Act 1971, being vested as reserves for the use of the inhabitants of the City of Christchurch for the purposes of lawns, ornamental gardens and ornamental buildings. The proposed use fits within this purpose.

Recently staff met with members of the Returned Services Association (RSA) to discuss how Henry James Nicholas, a World War I Victoria Cross recipient from Canterbury, could be recognised within the city. The two other VC winners, Charles Upham and Jack Hinton, each have a plaque on the front of the Bridge of Remembrance with additional commemorative features within the Canterbury area. Charles Upham has a bronze artwork in Amberley and the Jack Hinton Reserve adjacent to the Avon River in Bexley was named after Jack Hinton last year because he used to stroll around the area. In addition, these two Victoria Cross recipients have streets named after them.

Although Henry Nicholas is recognised by a memorial in France, he has not yet been acknowledged in New Zealand. Consequently the Returned Services Association would like to develop a commemorative feature for a site near the Bridge of Remembrance in his memory and to tell the extraordinary story of his heroism.

He was awarded the Victoria Cross in December 1917 and in October 1918 was awarded the Military Medal for gallantry in the field. He was killed in action near Le Quesnoy, France on 23 October 1918 (only 19 days before the Armistice), and is buried in the Vertigneul Churchyard, Romeries, France.

The citation for his posthumous award of the Victoria Cross appeared in the London Gazette of 8 January 1919:

*"For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty in an attack at Polderhoek, Belgium on 3 December 1917."*

The citation also reads *"Private Nicholas, who was one of a Lewis-gun section, had orders to form a defensive flank to the right of the advance, which was subsequently checked by heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from an enemy strongpoint."*

*Whereupon, followed by the remainder of his section at an interval of about 25 yards, Private Nicholas rushed forward alone, shot the officer in command of the strongpoint, and overcame the remainder of the garrison of 16 by means of bombs and bayonet, capturing four wounded prisoners and a machine-gun.*

*He captured the strongpoint practically singlehanded and thereby saved many casualties. Subsequently, when the advance had reached its limit, Private Nicholas collected ammunition under heavy machine-gun and rifle fire.*

*His exceptional valour and coolness throughout the operations afforded an inspiring example to all."*

Discussion to date has only occurred between Council staff, representatives of the Returned Services Association and the French Consulate. However, the site could be highlighted within the Avon River (Central City) Strategy, which will be available for public comment by the end of this year.

The Returned Services Association would like to work with the Christchurch City Council, and supported by the French Consulate, develop a feature near the Bridge of Remembrance which would tell the story of Sergeant Nicholas and provide a point of interest for residents and visitors alike. In order to advance the commemorative area the Returned Services Association would seek funding from various funding agencies, but to do this, endorsement of a riverbank site near the Bridge of Remembrance from the Council is needed.

It is envisaged that an area of no more than twenty square metres would be required for a commemorative site. The most suitable site is within the area of riverbank, north of the Bridge of Remembrance and adjacent to Durham Street (see attached plan). Long-term, this area could be further designed to provide for future recognition of armed services' activity, such as recent peace keeping in East Timor as indicated above.

To date, Victoria Cross recipient Henry James Nicholas, has not been recognised by the city for his heroic actions at the village of Le Quesnoy during World War I. The Returned Services Association would like to commemorate Sergeant Nicholas in some way on a suitable site near the Bridge of Remembrance.

**Chairman's**

**Recommendation:** That the information be received.