



## Charlie Savory

The name of Charlie Savory came up many times, in many various discussions, around Auckland football in the late Edwardian era and the early 1910s. You could hardly miss Savory – he was a giant for the time and would still be a very big man today – but he wouldn't play much today, because his on-field demeanour was dreadful and he'd gather so many suspensions that no team could afford to have him. He had a variety of reputations, but none of them were desirable. He didn't seem to care much, and carried on as usual.

You could say he was a piece of work, and a player who had the least appropriate name of any footballer in the country. You could also say that he wasn't someone you wanted to tangle with. You wouldn't have been on your own there.

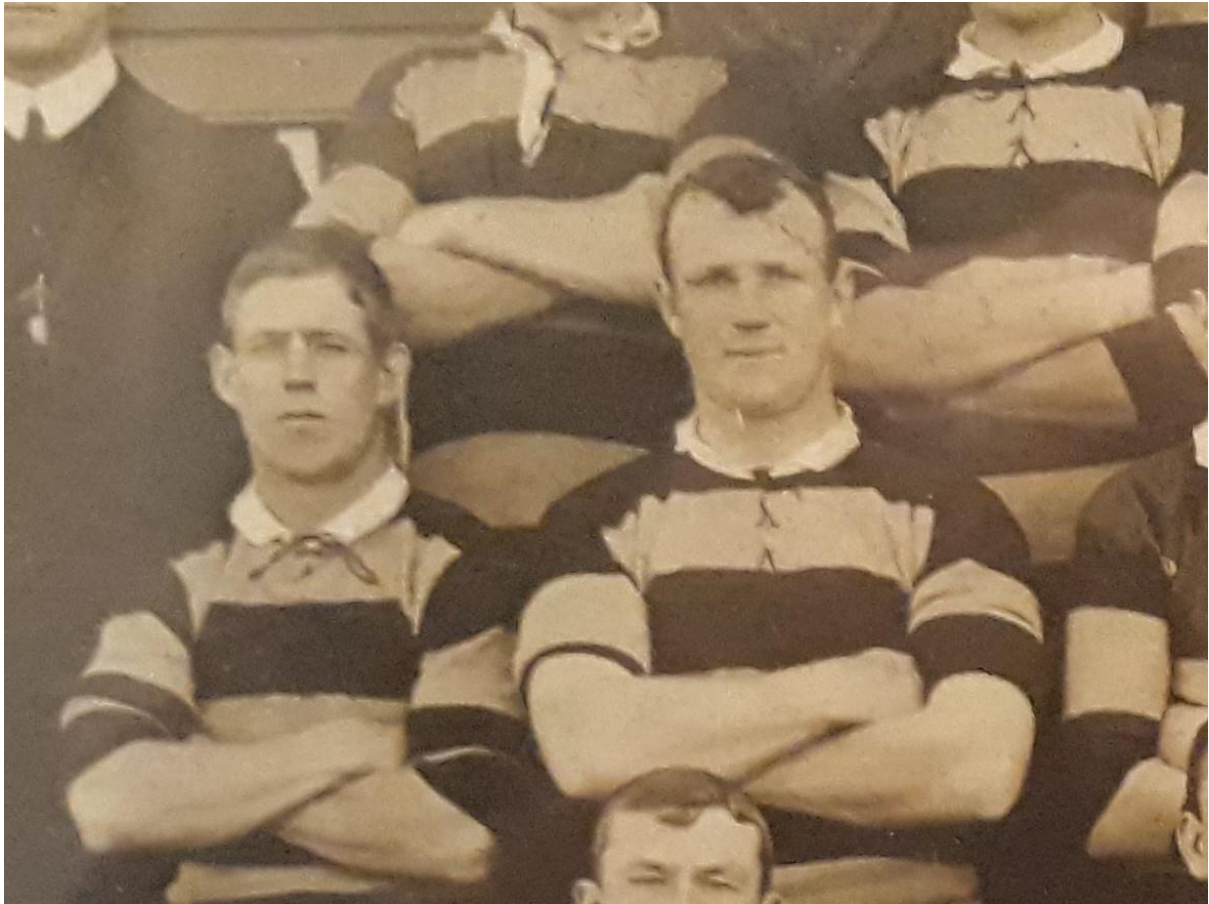
His willingness to hack at the ball with his feet, heedless of whatever else might be in the neighbourhood (like a head, or an arm, or a leg), didn't sit well with the rugby community. In his early days it was thought he'd gain discretion with experience, but experience said otherwise. In the end, in 1910, he was ordered off in the match against City after another solid kick had landed on flesh and bone rather than leather. He'd been warned earlier in the match, causing the crowd to give the ref three cheers, so it would be fair to say he wasn't a fan favourite.

The ARFU committee was having a crack-down on foul play, and it was an even-money bet they were expecting to see Savory sooner rather than later. Instead of the usual suspension, for the rest of the season, he got three times that and was banned until the end of the 1912 season. So he did what any self-respecting suspended rugby player did in those days and switched to Northern Union (rugby league), where the suspensions were not upheld, and started playing again.

He was quickly recognised as one of the better players in his new code – he could play, all right, but just had no control once he crossed the touchline – and was soon in provincial and, later, New Zealand teams. Then, in 1912, he was sent off for kicking a man in the Ponsonby United v Manukau game early in the season, but the process was poorly handled from the start and his life suspension quickly became a hot issue. No doubt the Rugby Union committee wished their league counterparts well, all the while thanking the stars it wasn't their problem.

Eventually the New Zealand League got involved, and overturned the ban. As one could expect, that didn't sit well with the Auckland body, and fur started flying in all directions. In the

middle of it, Savory sat still and kept mum. He could tell which way the wind was blowing, and so stayed out of it. He was reinstated for the 1913 season, returned to international rugby league and also to boxing, at which he won the New Zealand amateur heavyweight title. When war came he was one of the first notable sportsmen to sign on.



All Black forward George Sellars (left) is dwarfed by the massive Charlie Savory in this 1909 Ponsonby photo, taken in Sydney during the tour. Both men were World War I casualties.

For the balance of the story, I'm indebted to Dunedin scholar and historian, Ron Palenski. I've reprinted it exactly as Ron sent it to me. PN

Such was the unprecedented scale of deaths, injuries and sickness during the Gallipoli campaign, the strain on the system adopted for getting information home was enormous. As a result, relatives and friends became increasingly anxious and angry with conflicting reports about what had happened, or not happened, to loved ones at a place they had probably never heard of before.

Concerns about the reporting and accuracy of casualty lists seemed to reach a head over the tragically muddled news about the fate of a figure well-known in New Zealand, Charlie Savory.

Savory was known nationally as a sportsman: he played rugby in Auckland for Ponsonby, then switched to rugby league and played for New Zealand as well as being one of four New Zealanders in

the Australasian team that toured Britain in the summer of 1911-12. He gained some notoriety for being banned for life by the Auckland league for supposedly kicking a player during a match but the ban was not upheld by the New Zealand league and instead, it suspended the Auckland board. Savory missed the 1912 season because of the ban but again toured Australia in 1913 and played in a test match against Great Britain in 1914. The league ban also kept him out of his other chosen sport, boxing, while authorities pondered whether a person banned from one sport could take part in another. Savory was back in the ring in 1914 and won the heavyweight title at the national amateur championships in Wanganui – the last championships before the war. (So-called professionals from league were allowed to compete in amateur sports other than rugby).

Savory thus went to war with the Auckland Infantry Battalion as a rugby league international and a national boxing champion.

During an early part of the campaign on Gallipoli, reports reached New Zealand of a “giant Australian” and a burly Turk battling it out hand-to-hand on the edge of a cliff. Both went over and plunged into the water below, so the story went, where the fight was resumed and eventually the “Australian” won and the Turk was drowned.

The story was seen in some quarters as a wind-up by Australian soldiers who were keen on pricking the pomposity of the English reporter, Ellis Ashmead Bartlett. A similar story, solemnly filed by Bartlett, was about a platoon of Australians comprising only millionaires who, if the truth had been told, had barely a couple of bob between them.

A couple of weeks later, however, it was reported the story about the grappling Turk and “Australian,” although picturesque and short on detail, was substantially true. But there was one significant difference. The hero of the affair, reported the New Zealand Herald, was not an Australian at all, but none other than Charlie Savory.

By the time this was reported – news stories sometimes took two months to get from Gallipoli to New Zealand – there had been several conflicting stories about Savory’s fate. When he was eventually confirmed dead, the New Zealand Herald was critical of mistakes and delays by authorities.

“Many extraordinary cases of delay and error in the notification of casualties have come to light since the New Zealanders went into action,” it said, “but the circumstances connected with the death of Corporal Savory probably strengthens more than any previous blunder the plea for more effective, and if necessary, civil control of the Records Department in Egypt.”

The Herald printed chapter and verse of the mistakes and delays. Savory had been killed on May 8, but his name first appeared in a casualty list on June 16, five weeks later. He was then reported to have been wounded. His brother George of Auckland, who was named as his next of kin, received a telegram from the Defence Minister, James Allen: “Regret to inform you that a cable received today reports your brother, Private C Savory, wounded. Please accept my sympathy and hopes for a speedy recovery.” The Prime Minister, William Massey, sent a similar message.

Relatives were entitled to three messages of inquiry (the restriction was imposed because of the high rate of cable traffic between New Zealand, Australia and Egypt). On June 25, nine days after

being told Savory was wounded, brother George received a telegram: "C. Savory – no particulars given – progressing favourably." (By this time, he had been dead for seven weeks).

Five days later George sent another inquiry and received another reply: "C. Savory progressing favourably."

On July 7, George Savory asked again about his brother. This time the reply from the Defence Department said: "Alexandria reports no further reports received since reported wounded."

By this time, news independent of official channels had filtered back. Savory was such a well-known figure that it was not surprising he was mentioned in soldiers' letters home. One of these said: "Charlie Savory was one of the first killed."

Hearing of this, George Savory wrote to Base Records in Wellington, a much-harassed and overworked section that was responsible for the official records of all soldiers. (Such was its workload it moved to bigger premises three times in the first year of the war). The reply hardly set George's mind at rest. "I note the replies you received in the three service telegrams sent on your behalf," the letter said, "and I regret that the third reply cannot be considered satisfactory. I should like to point out, however, that the authorities at the base furnish progress reports on the condition of all sick and wounded soldiers from time to time, particularly regarding those whose condition is not satisfactory. As your brother has not been reported since the 15th May, I think you may conclude that his case is not one for anxiety."

As much as the family would have wanted to believe the official reports, the unofficial ones were increasingly emphatic. Another league-playing soldier who knew Savory well, Albert Cross of the Newton club, wrote in a letter from Gallipoli: "Savory was killed by a shell in the head – a terrible sight." (Cross himself was killed at the Somme the following year).

Then the first shipments of wounded started arriving home and some among them confirmed that Savory was dead. On August 16, three months after Savory was killed, James Allen sent another telegram to George Savory: "Regret to advise you cable received this day reports your brother Private Charles Savory previously reported wounded, further reported died of wounds 8th May. Please accept my sincerest sympathy in the loss which you and New Zealand have sustained."

Allen, whose second son Hugh was killed on Gallipoli in early June, was so concerned about erroneous reporting from Egypt that he dispatched a cabinet minister and army officer, Heaton Rhodes, to look into various administrative shortcomings. Rhodes subsequently reported that in the initial stages of the campaign, and again in August when fighting was at its height, confusing and conflicting messages were sent from Gallipoli to the New Zealand Records Section in Alexandria. He wrote in his report to Allen: "For instance, a unit would report a man as wounded and, a few days later, as missing. In one case a New Zealander reported as killed in action was subsequently reported from Malta as being in hospital. Another posted as missing was later found to be acting as orderly to an imperial officer."

"Mistakes such as these must be attributed to the difficulty of obtaining accurate information from the units, the members of which were then fighting for their own lives. I am sure they did everything possible to report casualties correctly but mistakes were unavoidable owing to stress of action and the difficulties of communication."

The commanding officer in Alexandria, Colonel Alexander Charters, independently dispatched a lengthy report to Allen about the procedures adopted and how mistakes occurred. Allen made the report public. In it, Charters said: "The friends in New Zealand are naturally worrying over the delay to definite information in certain cases, but they can have no idea of the class of country at the front nor of the closeness of the fighting. In many cases the trenches are so close that hand grenades are easily thrown from our trenches into those of the Turks and vice versa." Turkish submarines in the Mediterranean and shelling of the Gallipoli beaches also made communication more difficult, he wrote.

Those circumstances and the human error caused by extreme stress were compounded by people in Alexandria trying to do soldiers a favour. Wounded men arriving on the wharves asked Red Cross, Salvation Army or YMCA people to let their relatives and friends in New Zealand know how they were. Sometimes they did but sometimes the information was wrong and the army did not know messages had already gone.

New Zealand's only war correspondent, Malcolm Ross, also defended the system that was not foolproof. "Whatever may be said to the contrary, the method adopted is the best that could be devised. In fact, it is the only safe one and if people only knew the insuperable difficulties that have to be overcome ... due allowance would undoubtedly be made for the delays."

The Auckland weekly newspaper, the Observer, was also in support. "The New Zealand citizen appears to believe that it is only necessary to drop into the first post office on Gallipoli to wire a mother or a father at Whangomona. It seems impossible that war can disturb any mechanical or any human habit. Members of Parliament have plainly intimated that they consider New Zealand officers in Egypt fools. And the remedy? Send civilians to look after the business side in Egypt."

The paper pointed out that New Zealand's soldiers were, for the most part, civilians anyway and only temporarily (they hoped) in uniform. Post office and telegraph staff in the army were civilians who were re-assigned. "Colonel Allen has truly said that a man may wear uniform and brains at the same time," the paper said. After the last doubts about Savory had been removed, "A Friend" in NZ Truth wrote: "Charlie Savory lived and died a sport. He died a true sport fighting for his country."

There was a poignant reminder of Savory's sporting life in the will that he, like most soldiers, prepared before he left Auckland. Rather than list his possessions collectively, he left a detailed accounting of his goods and specified where they should go. "My NZ (1911) football group to Linda Pardington ... My NZ (1913) football group to Katherine Sarah Lapon Dye ... My Australasian football cap and a silver fern to Frank Savory." His wishes were eventually carried out in May 1920.