

WARS - THE FORGOTTEN THOUSANDS

By Jim Calder, ex-Navy
C5464 RNVR NZD, Papanui RSA

This short essay was written to mark the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War and is primarily a tribute to my Mum and countless other Mums, wives and next of kin who shouldered the burden of the forgotten thousands.

My father was a First World War veteran. In 1914 as a single man, a carpenter and joiner, he answered the call. Initially he was rejected, on the grounds that he was not up to the required medical standard. I believe this was the outcome in numerous cases at this stage for the men who volunteered.

He had met my mother and they decided to go ahead, get engaged and subsequently married.

Due to the commitments for manpower given to the British Government regarding numbers of men to be made available for military service overseas – and as there was a paucity of volunteers to fight ‘the War to end all Wars’ - the then New Zealand Government enacted compulsory military service by a balloting system, without going to the country with a referendum. This was contrary to the Australian experience. The Australian Government had conducted a referendum and the result was that compulsory service could only be utilized if Australian territory was attacked, with all other military service being on a volunteer basis.

Consequently, my father was caught in the ballot in early 1917 for those married with one child, as by this time my sister had been born. He was passed fit according to the new lower entry standard and entered camp at Trentham for training and overseas draft, which I believed concluded with some time in Featherston and a march over the Rimutuka Hill for embarkation. By the time my father left my Mum was expecting my brother. “Too late,” she cried, as the saying goes.

Incidentally my Dad was a Papanui boy and was presented with a medallion for having served from Papanui.

Into the bloody trenches, and enough has been written about the conditions.

My Mum, like all the thousands of wives, sweethearts, children and family, was left in New Zealand, thousands of miles from those engaged in a “bloody conflict”, who had been compulsorily ordered by the government of the day to fight and probably get killed or seriously maimed. The only communication was by mail or by a Post Office telegraph message. This mail from the troops was heavily censored so that those who received it had little or no idea of the conditions and extreme dangers in the trenches. The newspapers of the day carried casualty lists and no doubt censored dispatches, which again were misleading. In reality, those at home were deliberately kept in the dark, notwithstanding the official line that there had to be closed security. The upshot of these conditions for the women at home was worry, worry, and extreme anguish.

The usual method used in the First World War to notify next of kin of death, wounding, missing or any other accident which may have happened to a soldier was by a telegraph

message delivered by a telegraph messenger. In most cases, this was a message boy. One cannot conceive the thoughts that would have traversed the mind of a recipient when the knock on the door came, especially in the middle of the night. It would have been traumatic and devastating.

Notwithstanding the mental wrench of my Dad's departure, the wait for the first letter would have been hard for Mum to bear. When it was eventually received it had been mutilated by some officer censor. This was in the belief that 'the enemy had ears'. So the only information she would have received was "I'm all right" and "Love you". So it went on until she received the message that he had been wounded - nothing else. Sometime later she was informed that it was serious and he was then in the army hospital, "Walton on Thames". More censored mail arrived and a further message to say he would be repatriated as 'medically unfit'. Mum found out later that he had been wounded by a shell burst, I understand, in the 2nd Battle of the Somme.

He came home in the hospital ship *Maheno* and again the news was delayed. This set of circumstances would have applied to all next of kin. The trauma must have been terrific for many hundreds of wives and mothers.

I was born later, making a family of three children.

So to the Second World War and because both my brother and I served as volunteers for the over six years of the war, my Mum had to again face the same set of circumstances, along with all like next of kin who had endured the First World War. My father told me on my first leave that Mum was suffering and to communicate as much as I could to help to relieve the mounting tension and apprehension. The New Zealand Government introduced compulsory conscription during the Second World War, with the same criteria as the First World War, so again there were many thousands of wives and mothers left at home to worry. At the time, when it was thought that Japan would get further south and possibly invade New Zealand, the government asked for volunteers from soldiers of the First World War to assist in manning coastal defenses and so again my father stepped forward and went into camp at Sumner/Taylor's Mistake.

These conditions no doubt were responsible for Mum becoming a diabetic and for hastening her passing, not long after the end of the conflict. Dad was discharged from the army in early 1945 and my brother and I survived the war and ultimately returned to civvy life.

The circumstances surrounding all armed conflicts involving overseas and dangerous service engender the same trauma for wives, mothers and next of kin, except that I understand the method of notifying casualties to next of kin has since been radically humanized.