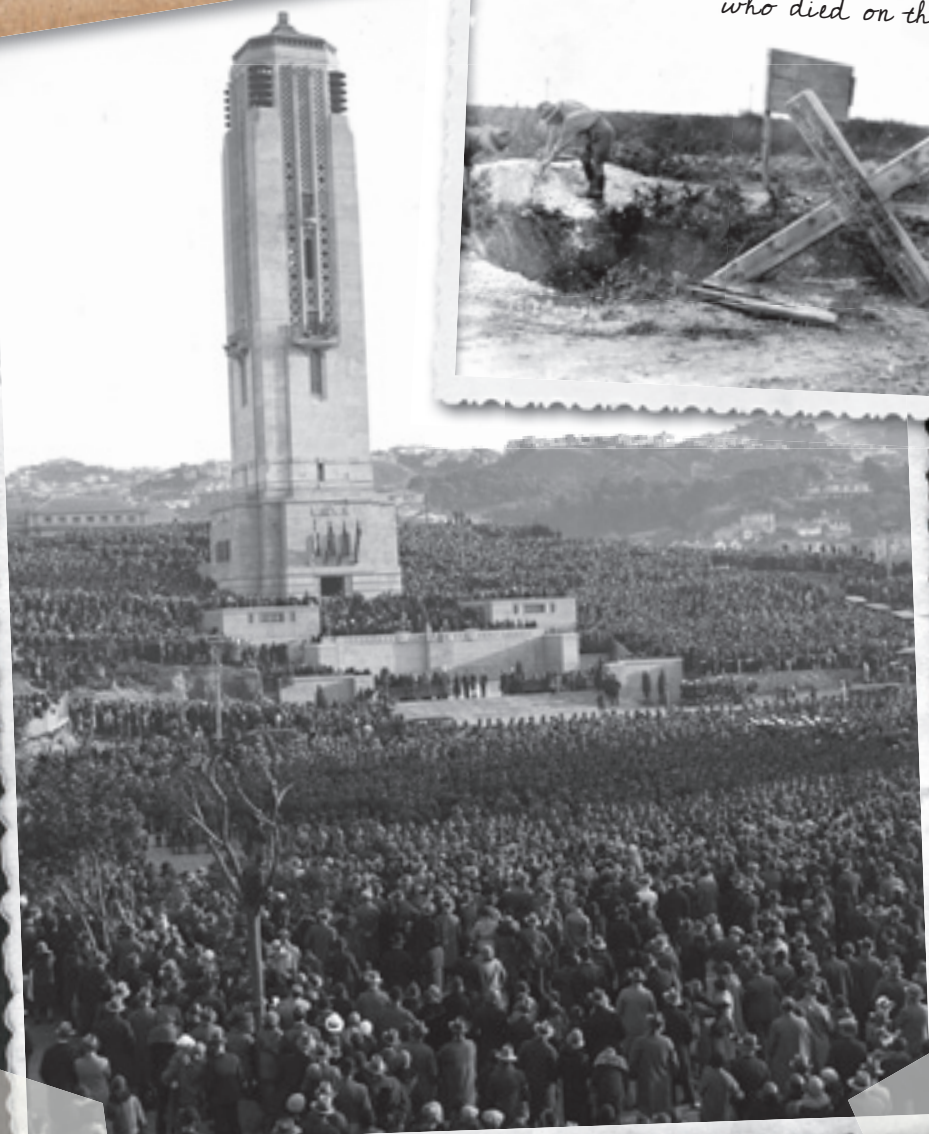


Lest We Forget

by Jane Tolerton

A cross to remember those who died on the Somme



The opening of the National War Memorial, Wellington, Anzac Day, 1932

Saving the Past

Oral history is the oldest way we have of remembering the past. Long ago, before people could write, it was the only way. People told stories, from one generation to the next, to share things like information and ideas. Māori have a rich oral tradition. Reciting whakapapa, for example, is the main way iwi trace common ancestors and pass on this knowledge.

Modern historians understand the importance of these oral traditions, and over the last few decades, there has been a growing interest in oral history as a way of capturing individual perspectives. This is done through recorded interviews. Sometimes an oral history will be about a person's life – the things they've done, the experiences they've had, and the society they were part of. Oral history can also focus on a specific topic, like the sinking of the *Wahine*, or the 1981 Springbok tour ... or the First World War. This kind of oral history gives an "eye witness" account of historical events.

Oral history adds character and personality – the human details – to our knowledge of the past. This is because everyone has their own story and their own way of telling it. But perhaps most importantly, oral history is a way of "saving" the past. Recordings of interviews are sometimes kept together in a special archive, a bit like books in a library. Most can be listened to, some of them online.

In Their Own Words

In the late 1980s, two New Zealand historians began a special oral history project: they interviewed **veterans** of the First World War. Over two years, eighty-five men were interviewed and the conversations recorded. These interviews are now held at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington and form one of the largest collections of its kind in New Zealand. Anyone can listen to these interviews.

Most men who came home from the war were reluctant to talk about their experiences, and so their families couldn't really ask them questions. Historian Jock Phillips says this resulted in a kind of "national amnesia" about the war. People wanted to forget about it. But of course the soldiers remembered it. Some remembered it vividly, and as they got older, they became more willing to talk. They wanted people to know about the war – how it really was and how it affected their lives. The following memories come from those veterans.



Adventure

Many of those who went to the First World War were looking for adventure, but most also had a strong sense of duty to serve New Zealand and the **British Empire**. Fred Dill mentioned both of these motivations. Fred lived on a farm near Warkworth, and he joined up with his three best friends just two days after the war began. "We were frightened that we wouldn't get there before it had finished," he said.

Frederick Tate signed up the day he turned twenty. "I regarded that as a birthday present to myself. That was the spirit of the time." Sydney Stanfield, who lied about his age and arrived on the **Western Front** when he was still only fifteen, was also caught up by the sense of excitement. "I thought it would be a great adventure, and it'd be real fun. And so it was – up to a point. Past that point, it wasn't funny at all!" The newspapers, which were the only mass media at the time, promoted these ideas. They often wrote about "our boys" on their "great adventure", even when they were also publishing long lists of the dead and wounded.



Sightseeing in the Middle East



A camel ride in Egypt



Eating porridge in the Sinai Desert

Going into Battle

Frank Hunt arrived at Gallipoli three months after the first New Zealanders landed. He said the atmosphere before they got there was like going to a football match. "We were in a jolly mood and ... looking forward to going and joining the chaps we knew." This quickly changed when the newcomers saw the poor condition of their friends, who'd only had tinned corned beef, "hard tack" (which was a bit like a dog biscuit), and jam to eat.

Shortly afterwards, going up to Chunuk Bair, Frank was hit by **shrapnel**. He was carried down to the beach and "put on the heap with the dead people". A family friend came to see Frank's body so that he could tell Frank's parents he'd seen him. The friend saw Frank's foot twitch, which saved his life.

Jack White remembered walking forward at the Battle of the Somme, on the Western Front, when events happened very quickly: "... one chap had his rifle knocked out of his hands. Another chap suddenly staggered out of the line, fell flat on his face and turned over

and grunted – and that was all. Our set orders were if our friends were wounded, we were not allowed to look after them or even talk to them, just go on walking past.

"Suddenly there was a roar like an eruption of a volcano and four shells landed amongst this long line. I was hoisted into the air and I felt a sting in my right shoulder, and I'm walking on air – my feet were going, but I wasn't touching the ground. I was just going along with the air pressure. Then I fell into a big shell hole." Jack's friends thought he had been "blown to pieces" as he disappeared into the mud, and they sent letters to his relatives saying he was dead. But Jack survived. "One thing I'll say for the Germans: as far as soldiers went, they played the game. They could have shot me easily as anything because [when I got up again] I was walking in front of one of their lines. A couple of Red Cross men with a stretcher came up. I said, 'Never mind the stretcher, I want to get the hell out of here.'"



New Zealand troops on the Western Front

Like Jack White, Bert Stokes also had an amazing stroke of luck. During the Battle of Messines, he was sheltering in a shell hole when it was sprayed with shrapnel. "Our officer was wounded in the leg, and our **NCO** in the arm," Bert explained. "It wasn't till after we'd been looking after them that I suddenly looked down and saw my tunic was torn."

In the breast pocket of his tunic, Bert had a little leather folder – a pocketbook given to him by his cousin Gladys when he left for the war. He had wondered how it could possibly be of any use and had finally decided to use it for family photos. "I took out my pocketbook – and because it was made of two bits of sheet metal, I didn't realise I'd been hit." What Bert had initially thought of as a useless gift had saved his life. Later, Bert's mother kept the pocketbook in a frame. "She wouldn't let anybody handle it!"



Bert Stokes at Trentham Army Camp (third from right)



Bert Stokes with his pocketbook



Sydney Stanfield, who joined up at the age of fifteen

Emotions

Sydney Stanfield was in the **infantry**. He described going into battle: "You just blunder along and hope you don't get shot at . . . You're not afraid because the movement takes all the fear out of you. It's sitting in little wet holes and being shot at with big stuff, heavy shell fire, high explosive – that's the nerve-racking part."

Often, the soldiers became fatalistic, believing that if they were going to be hit, there was nothing they could do. "It's not long before you develop a spirit that says, 'Well, if your number is on it, you'll cop it,'" Gordon Neill said. Many commented that it was the living conditions – the bad food, the lack of sleep, the rats, the lice, the constant danger, and the feeling that it would never be over – that really got them down.

Sydney Stanfield again: "I felt that the war was never going to end – it was going to go on forever. I felt it was not possible that I would survive the war. I can remember feeling that I'd be quite happy to engage in any sort of slavery at all if I could be taken away from this misery." Many men suffered from **shell shock**. One soldier, who didn't want to be named, said, "I wasn't aware of having shell-shock symptoms, but I had this absolute horror of going back into trench warfare . . . this feeling of horror was part of the shell shock. It affects your nervous system. Your whole nervous system went taut, like a banjo string."



Gordon Neill

*Tent mates at
Trentham: Of these
eight men only one
(fourth from right)
would survive.*



Comradeship

During the war, because they were in the same stressful and dangerous situation, most soldiers formed very close friendships. When Charles Hartley was wounded at Gallipoli and transferred to hospital, he asked the doctor to fix him up as soon as possible. He was worried about his friends – and he said that when he rejoined his regiment, “I was glad to get back, back to the mates again.”

Thomas Eltringham was also very focused on his comrades: “Never let your mates down.” That was a good motto. People used to say

to me, ‘Were you scared?’ I’d say, ‘Yes, who wouldn’t be?’ But my biggest worry was not to let my mates think I was scared.”

The mounted troops had the extra comfort of being with their horses. “I had a glorious horse, the most beautiful horse I have ever ridden. They took it away from me, and I was heartbroken,” said Harry Porter, remembering the end of the war when the horses were no longer needed. Only four horses out of the original ten thousand came back to New Zealand after the war.



Coming Home

After the **armistice**, the New Zealand Division marched to Germany, where the soldiers became part of the **Army of Occupation**. Some of the men stayed with German families. Bert Stokes remembers that the locals were quite friendly. “We sat in restaurants talking to them as much as we could. We even talked to German men who were also at the Battle of Passchendaele. After we’d been there for a while, we thought that we shouldn’t have been fighting with these people.”

After a couple of months in Germany, the New Zealanders went to England to wait for a ship home. Some waited a long time because so many ships had been sunk in the war. Once the men finally got home, fitting back into society wasn’t easy. Many had nightmares for years or became depressed. A lot said they didn’t want to talk about the war – not that they were ever asked many questions. Claude Wysocki was surprised when people treated him as if he’d been on holiday. “Well, you’re back. Did you have a good time? Did you have a good journey?” Claude remembered they would ask him. “No one said, ‘You must have had a crook time, overrun with lice and living on horseflesh.’”

Many of the returned soldiers said that people back home had no idea of the reality of war. This made them feel isolated – a feeling that was intensified by the fact that almost every soldier had lost close friends. Fred Dill was wounded in Egypt when a bullet went through his left lung and passed out his back. He eventually came home, the only survivor out of his group of best friends.

Almost all of the men interviewed for the World War One Oral History Archive were in their nineties (the oldest was ninety-nine). The project gave them a chance to talk about the war properly, before it was too late. “The important thing is to enter into discussion, no matter how difficult it is,” said Gordon Neill, who had been a prisoner of war in Germany. He hoped that being interviewed would save future generations from a similar experience.

“It makes me angry when I think of the terrible loss of life and the things we had to put up with in the war,” Gordon says. “If anything I’m saying now will dissuade people from human destruction and war, I have spent my time well.”



Becoming an Oral Historian

Anyone can learn to become an oral historian – if they are prepared to listen – and anyone can be interviewed. One of the best things about oral history is that it explores the lives or experiences of ordinary people, capturing an “unofficial” version of the past. Often oral history gives a voice to people who might have remained unheard.

If you want to be an oral historian, whether you choose to do a life history or a topic-based interview, there are a few things to think about first.

Before the Interview

1. Make sure that the person you are interviewing is happy to be interviewed and has an idea of the topics you want to cover. Tell them what you hope to learn.
2. Arrange a good time for the interview, when neither of you will be rushed.
3. Prepare your list of questions. These need to be open-ended, starting with “What”, “When”, “Where”, “Why”, and “How”. Open-ended questions get people talking and produce more information. Don’t say “Did you like school?” (a closed question that can only be answered “yes” or “no”). Instead ask, “What do you remember about school?” Treat your questions as a starting point only. Don’t be scared to stray off the list – you never know where the conversation might lead.
4. Make sure that you have good recording equipment and know how to use it.
2. Let your subject do the talking. You want to get as much information from them as possible.
3. Instead of commenting, smile and nod to show that you’re interested.
4. Listen carefully. If something doesn’t make sense to you, it probably won’t make sense to a listener afterwards. If you’re confused, say things like “What do you mean by that?” or “Remind me how you know that person.”
5. People sometimes pause when they’re asked a question. Give them plenty of time to think and don’t worry about the silences. In the end, these won’t matter.
6. At the end of the interview, remember to thank the person for their time.
7. Make sure the person knows what you plan to do with their interview. Check if they are happy for other people to listen to the recording.

The Interview

1. Try out the recording equipment just before you start the interview to make sure that it’s working and that both of you are recording clearly.

For more information about how to record an oral history, go to:
www.nzhistory.net.nz/hands/a-guide-to-recording-oral-history
www.natlib.govt.nz
www.oralhistory.org.nz

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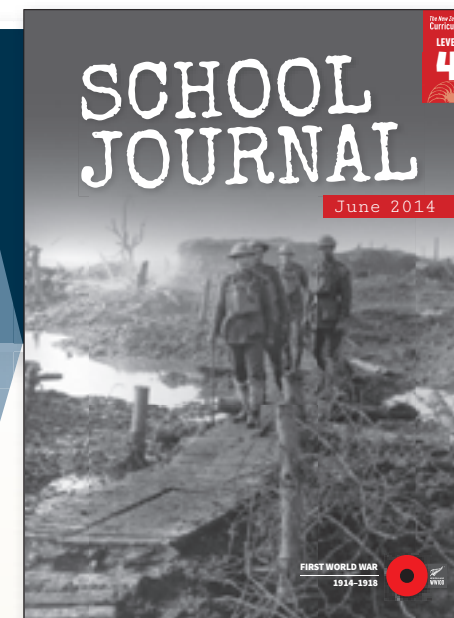
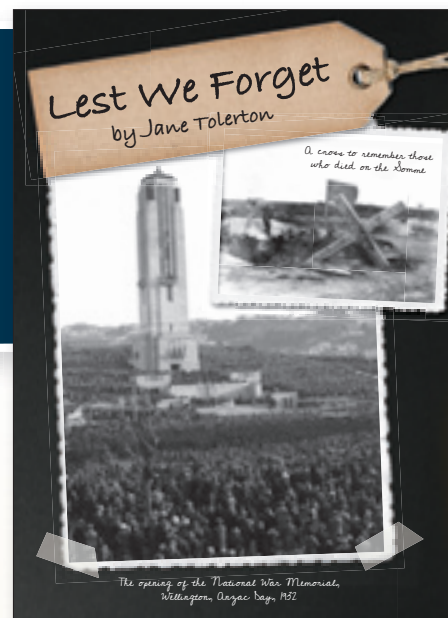
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