

Speech for ANZAC day

I consider it a great privilege to be in the position to deliver a speech on ANZAC day in any year but more so on this particular day because exactly 100 years ago, on April 25 1917, two years after the Gallipoli landings, the conflict was very much alive for our soldiers on the Western front .April 1917 marked the first time that the two ANZAC Corps ,separated since Gallipoli ,would come together to fight at the battle of Arras ,a battle that was considered one of the few successes of the Western front. In a short few months there would be another success, at the battle of Messines and then very soon after, there would come the terrible Third battle of Ypres, which resulted in the loss of so many Anzac lives, that we now have just a single word to sum up this great horror: Passchendaele

As we move forward in time each succeeding generation that attends these ANZAC ceremonies witnesses the addition of a new layer to the collective whakapapa of the ANZACs we commemorate.

Whakapapa conjures up images of stone slabs and the visualisation is of building layer after layer upon the past towards the present and beyond. Whakapapa includes the human stories that flesh out the solid purely genealogical backbone.

Each new generation IS the layer and as such we have work to do as part of our contribution to our whakapapa .This is particularly important for those of us who have had the fortune never to experience the horrors of war. If we cannot in some way reach back to our forebears, at least in our imaginations, and try to consider the magnitude of their hardships then we will be ignorant and our contribution will be as dull slabs of stone or clay, as useful as an unmarked grave in a lonely place and, in our ignorance, we will not see until too late a new war that will roll right over the top of us.

Today is also a significant day for me in that for the first time I have the privilege of wearing the medal of one of my relatives, George Duffill. My family on my fathers side, have two sets of medals from the First World War, this single one of Georges and three that belonged to Alexander Henderson. They were both my great uncles and they have been passed down to us because neither of these men returned to New Zealand to raise families of their own. George is buried in Belgium and Alexander in Egypt, the latter dying of gunshot wounds he received at Gallipoli. Their names are recorded together on the War memorial in the small town of Inglewood in Taranaki. These medals are our families taonga and because they can only be worn by us on certain days ,they also form part of a collective taonga .They are precious to us particularly because in some instances they are the only physical reminders we have of those of our relatives who went away and never returned.

The medal I am wearing at the moment is not actually a medal, it is an award, even though it is called a medal; it is The Serbian Gold Medal for bravery. It is also known as the medal of Milos Obilic.

In researching this award I discovered some things that I did not know. Serbia was our ally at the time, with a population about the same size as New Zealand today. Serbian soldiers suffered the highest proportionate loss of life of all the allied forces, with over 25% of those mobilised and what is even more tragic, these losses were compounded by the deaths of vast numbers of Serbian civilians. A total of 1.2 million people altogether.

My great uncle was awarded the medal at Gallipoli. We know almost nothing about the circumstances other than that two were awarded to ANZACs who served with the Wellington Regiment. It appears that early in the war allied sides exchanged medals and awards such that they could then be awarded by the side that received them, to their own soldiers.

I have not been able to find out where this award stands in relation to our own military awards but I will keep trying. It is of note that despite the Serbia of WW1 no longer being in existence, the Gold Medal is still awarded. It was stated on one web site that the recipients of this medal, at least in Serbia, were entitled to never have to pay tax again.

George went on from Gallipoli to the Western front and tragically he was killed during the attack on Gravenstafel Spur, October 04 1917. This attack was considered a success for the ANZACs despite heavy losses: 500 men died on that day, my great uncle included. Ironically the success of the ANZACs led the British High Command to make a fatal miscalculation and a few days later, on October 12 New Zealand suffered 3700 casualties with 950 men either dead or mortally wounded. It is the blackest day in our military history. It was Passchendaele.

I chose to talk about my great uncle and about his medal, not to pick him out especially in his own right but more as an example of the real value there is for us to explore our whakapapa. When I received the medal from my brother so that I could wear it today I knew virtually nothing about George. Since undertaking research on him I have been, in a small way, to Gallipoli, Alexandria in Egypt, to Salonika, to the dreadful carnage of the Western front in 1917 and I have also read and understood something of the suffering of Serbia, the nation where the whole conflagration was ignited. The connection to Serbia also feels appropriate here, in West Auckland, considering our strong Dalmatian heritage.

It is my understanding that this is the work that we and future generations need to continue to do to make our ANZACs come alive for us .lest we forget.



Serbian Gold medal awarded to George Duffill of the Wellington regiment



ANZAC Day 2017