

Bill in the 1920s

When Bill, my father, signed up to fight in the “war to end all wars” he was young enough to believe the slogan. Weren’t they all?

It was going to be an adventure for all these young men: off from New Zealand on a ship that would take them all the way to Europe. And back in time for Christmas. They had no idea of what awaited them on the other side of the world. No idea of following idiotic commands from lads just out of posh schools. No idea of how it would be to sleep in dugouts full of water, of being ordered out of their trenches to act as human decoys while the men in London moved pins on maps to represent so many hundreds of young men drawing the fire of young Europeans. Who didn’t want to kill anyone any more than these Anzacs did.

He was sent to Ypres. “Wipers” as they called it. Because these young men were in it for fun, weren’t they? They were given guns and taught how to use them – after a fashion – but they were things you shot rabbits with. I doubt if any of them imagined how it would be to fire at someone like themselves, just speaking a different language.

Which is why, when he was detailed to take a group of young Germans at gunpoint back to a camp, he was lucky. He could have been ordered to shoot them. No doubt some of the lads were ordered to do just that. But Bill was ordered to march them back behind the lines where they were to be treated as prisoners of war. Marched? I suspect they shambled – all just grateful to have the front behind them. And when they stopped for a rest from the horrors of walking over bodies buried (or not quite buried) in that interminable mud they will have been sitting around on a log lighting up their cigarettes – because they were all issued with cigarettes, as a means of deadening the pain and disguising the smell of death – they somehow managed to communicate in fragments of their respective languages.

I imagine their conversation went something like this:

Bill: Why are you guys fighting?

Fritz: Damned if I know. Why are you fighting?

Bill: Damned if I know either.

Hardly sounds like the stuff of heroism, does it?

But when Bill returned on the military transport in 2020 he was rewarded by the New Zealand Government. All returning servicemen were awarded a pension and the choice of land or the means of setting themselves up in a modest business. One moment. Did I say *all* returning servicemen? Well no, that's not quite true. The European servicemen were offered reparation, but not the Maori.

Have you ever watched the All Blacks in the Rugby World Cup? Have you watched the performance of the Haka when they come on to the pitch? *Ka mate ka mate k'ora k'ora*, they chant, and surely this is a call to the men to stiffen *the sinews, summon up the blood* as Shakespeare had Henry V urge his men. And the Maori Battalion, rising from their trenches and charging forward into those idiotic and doomed sorties chanted just that: "*We live, We live, We die, We die!*"

Where did the land come from that the European servicemen were granted? Sadly, it was Maori land, granted to them in perpetuity by the Treaty of Waitangi.

My father, Bill Peet, didn't accept land as his repayment for risking his life. He wasn't a farmer. He was an engineer, and he chose instead to accept the financial means of setting up a garage in Helensville, north of Auckland. His venture into commerce didn't last for long. He was lumbered with a contaminated delivery of – he always called it benzene, but I suspect it was petrol – and it drove him bankrupt. It took him years, but eventually he paid back all his creditors, because my father was a true Socialist and always did what he believed to be right.

Which is why he spent the rest of his life campaigning for Maori affairs. I remember him stopping off on family excursions to disappear into the trees at intervals to check on Maori who had taken to the bush on their return. I remember him making impassioned speeches at election time when he stood for parliament, with not a hope in Hell of success. I remember him campaigning for a public library, for help from the state for the disabled.

Most of all, I remember his work for the Maori people, dispossessed, by people like himself, of their land.