

MAGAZINE

Few war memorials have an effect so haunting as Stratford's Hall of Remembrance.

GRAHAM HUCKER, who grew up with



the images of the soldiers honoured there, has done extensive research on the hall, the community that created it and the men it salutes. His work will help keep the memories alive



LONELY PLACE: Tania Williams (left, with baby Brooke), of Stratford and her mother, Robin Brooke, of Dunedin, pause in the Hall of Remembrance. Photos: MARK DWYER

STRATFORD'S Hall of Remembrance is a quiet, almost forgotten place. People seldom go there anymore except, perhaps, on Anzac Day. Those who visit do so fleetingly.

The white walls, grey concrete floors and sepia tones create a cool, funereal atmosphere. Spanning the rear of the hallway are the words — **HALL OF REMEMBRANCE** — flanked by six red poppies.

To one side hang 129 inscribed studio photo portraits in boxed frames of soldiers from the district who "fell" during the Great War of 1914-18. They are unsmiling and dressed in uniforms or civilian suits. On the other side hang 55 framed photo portraits of servicemen in uniforms who lost their lives in World War II. In contrast they are smiling.

This "gallery of the dead" is a distinctively different place from the world outside on the main street of Stratford.

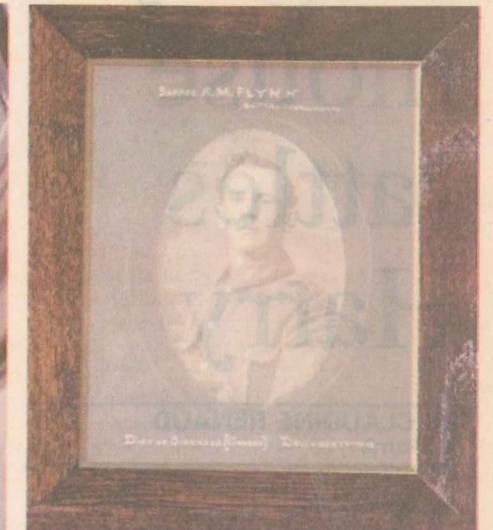
It is a place that I have known since the 1960s. As a child I would visit the public library that used to be located on the floor above the Hall of Remembrance. With each visit to the library,

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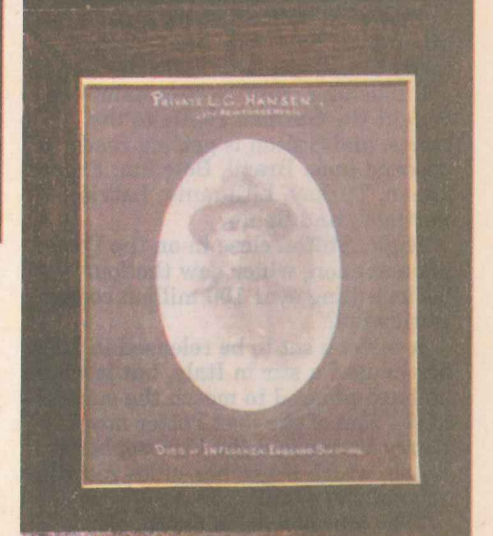
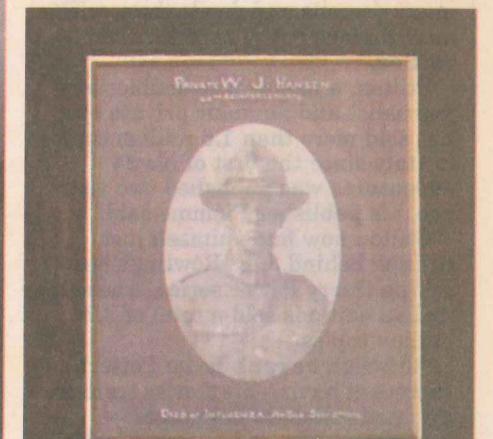
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ANSELM M. FLYNN



TWIN LOSS: William (top) and Leonard Hansen.

Remember them



help keep the memories alive

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It is a place that I have known since the 1960s. As a child I would visit the public library that used to be located on the floor above the Hall of Remembrance. With each visit to the library I became curious, even captivated by the photos and who they depicted; a captivation that I have not been able to escape. Some years ago while sitting at the bottom of the stairs gazing at the photos, I began to wonder about who those soldiers were and the community that put them there. I decided to find some answers.

To people in central Taranaki who lived through the great wars of the 20th Century the Hall of Remembrance is a representation of regional and generational war experiences. Its setting in a disused municipal building gives the impression of modern day abandonment and a lost connection with a past community. And yet, reading the brief inscriptions accompanying the photos,



LONELY PLACE: Tania Williams (left, with baby Brooke), of Stratford and her mother, Robin Brooke, of Dunedin, pause in the Hall of Remembrance. Photos: MARK DWYER

Remember them

one senses that the language is not ephemeral, but intended to connect with future generations. The language is coded in places and thought-provoking as if past communities wanted their war experiences to be read, discussed and remembered rather than forgotten. The language is often moving and reveals much about the attitudes and values held by people in central Taranaki in the aftermath of war.

The idea for a Hall of Remembrance originated in 1917 — the year of the Battles of Messines and Passchendaele. The Great War had already claimed the lives of at least 82 soldiers from the region and Mayor John McMillan thought the time had arrived for the institution of a Roll of Honour. McMillan believed that commemoration of the district's "fallen" soldiers should indicate more than a name, that a photograph should be included.

Construction of the Hall of Remembrance took place over a period of 18 months. By the fourth anniversary of the landings at Gallipoli 28 portraits hung in the arcade and another 28 were in waiting. They had already gained some meaning in the public's imagination, as the Stratford Evening Post suggested: "One of the most touching silent tributes to those of our brave ones who fell on Anzac Day, at the 'Landing in the Dawn', and on other glorious fields was the decoration of the Roll of Honour portraits in the Stratford Municipal Arcade. Lovely wreaths were hung at intervals over the group of portraits, and festoons of white and purple ribbon artistically draped the length of the walls."

In 1920, when Edward, Prince of Wales, officially unveiled the Roll of Honour, 121 portraits hung in the Hall of Remembrance.

What can the photos tell us today of central Taranaki's experiences of the Great War? What attitudes and values did those communities have towards their war dead and why is the Hall of Remembrance a significant, meaningful place?

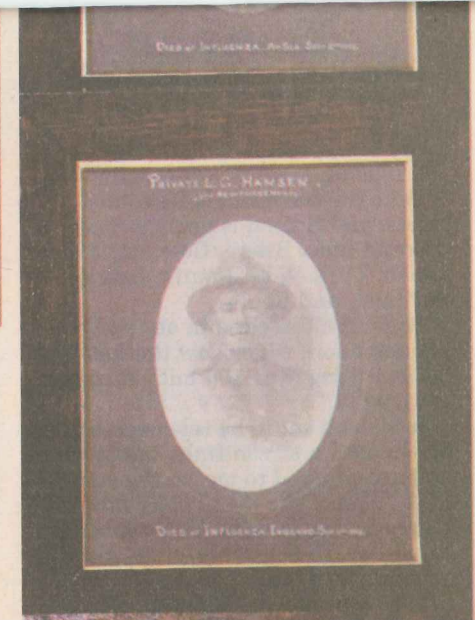
The inscriptions, location and the continued existence of such a place strongly suggest that the Hall of Remembrance has meaning. It is a secular, civic construction. There is an underpinning of Christian ideals, but there is an absence of Christian iconography.

At first glance there is no pattern to the placement of the photos. They are not arranged alphabetically, according to rank or regiment, year of death or even place of death. I know because I found myself pacing up and down in front of the photos thinking that there had to be a pattern, and then I realised the absence of an immediately recognis-

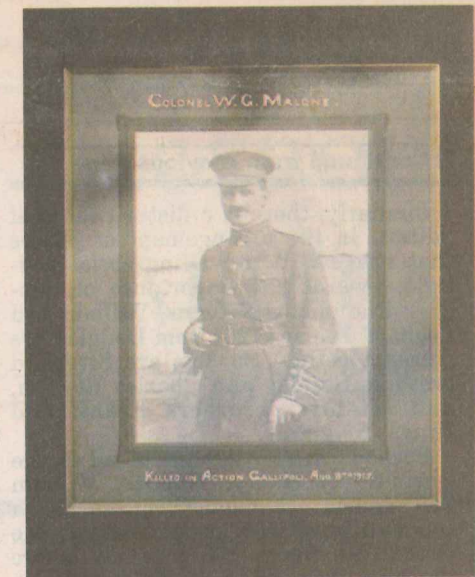
able pattern was in itself a pattern. The placement of the photos in no apparent order suggests equity and democracy.

A noteworthy example is the placement of Lieutenant-Colonel William George Malone's photo. Malone, aged 56, is the oldest and highest ranking officer in the Hall of Remembrance. Before the war Malone held prominent public positions in Stratford, and yet his photo does not hang in the centre, or at the top, but among the soldiers. The remaining 28 officers are similarly dispersed. Military hierarchy is not observed, rather all served and all lost their lives for the same issues that confronted the generation of 1914-18. Equality of sacrifice as a rural community value of the Great War is evident in the Hall of Remembrance.

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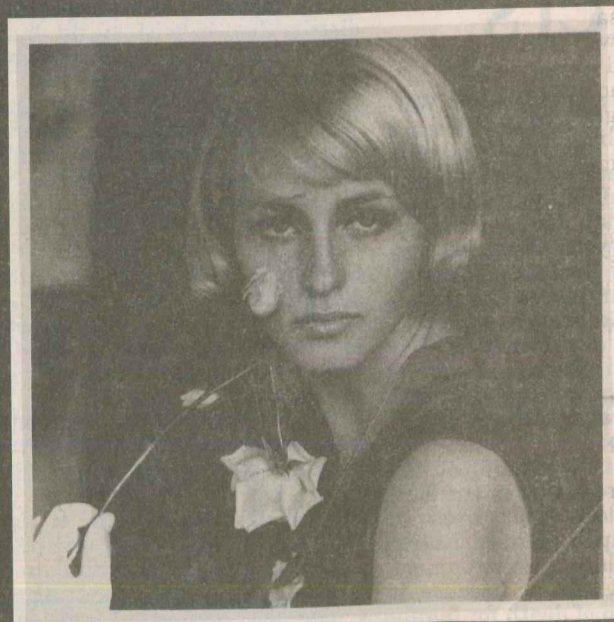


TWIN LOSS: William (top) and Leonard Hansen.



COLONEL WILLIAM MALONE

Icon New Zealand photographs



MARTI



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5 DOOR HATCH

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- Low emissions and excellent fuel economy are good for life on the planet.
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- Excellent sound damping so you'll hear more of your favourite radio or CD tunes.
- Efficient air-conditioning makes life thoroughly pleasant all year round.
- Room for 5 life-size adults to stretch out in

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Similarly, there is a distinct familial pattern in the arrangement of photos that suggests a prevailing social attitude towards the importance of families. The photos of twins, William and Leonard Hansen (20) from Douglas are placed together. So, too, are Stratford brothers Stanley and Charles Rowson, and Midhirst brothers Frank and Ernest Keightley.

Perhaps most poignant of all is the grouping of Henry, Thomas, William and James Hamblyn from Tariki, a community of 505 people during the Great War. Henry (26), a farmer before the war, was killed at the Somme in October 1916. Thomas and William, also farmers, were killed at Messines on the same day in June 1917. James (30) was killed in action one month later.

For the rest of the Hamblyn family the sorrow and misery of war continued into 1918 with the loss of their father and youngest brother to influenza. In just over two years Mary Ann Hamblyn, wife and mother, had lost all of the men in her family to war and disease.

Less subtle than the familial and democratic patterns of the photos are the revelations in the inscriptions. The absence of ages, the manner of death, place and environment combine to reveal loaded messages about a community and the Great War.

The absence of ages at death from all but one photo is a salient feature of the emerging narrative. It is a curious omission, but one that gives an insight into the community's attitude towards youth in 1917. At a Stratford Borough Council meeting on 20 August, councillors strongly opposed suggestions to lower the age of enlistment to 19, insisting that "it will never be necessary to enlist lads of 19".

Nearly two months later, on October 12, Private Francis P. McCullough was killed in action in France. The inscription on his photo reads "age 19 years".

McCullough's photo shows a wide-eyed teenager, in what appears to be an over-sized uniform, caught up in the maelstrom of a global conflict. How his family reacted to news of his death or upon seeing his photo hanging in the Hall of Remembrance is one of those frustrating unanswerable questions that confront the historian. However, with nearly half (47%) of Stratford's Great War dead in the Hall of Remembrance aged in their twenties, McCullough's inscription is an emotive representation of a rural community's sorrow over the loss of its young men in the Great War. Moreover, it is an anti-war statement.

The manner in which each soldier died is briefly noted. How death came is expressed without any attempt to protect the sensitivities of a community coping with loss. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the soldiers were "killed in action" and nearly a quarter (23%) "died of wounds". The language used conceals the actual means of death, but there is a strong suggestion that something dreadful had happened to them all.

Loved ones may very well have stood and gazed at the photos and tormented themselves by wondering what sort of



FALLEN FAMILY: Henry, Thomas, William and James Hamblyn of Tariki.

Poignant memorial to our young soldiers

wounds, and was death "in action" quick and without suffering?

For Private Thomas Gorton (25) of the New Zealand Medical Corps, who died in France in 1917, death would have followed suffering. Gorton's inscription reads "gassed and died". The inscription is significant because "gassed" is the only reference to a technological means of death in the Hall of Remembrance. Its inclusion reveals community anguish at the immorality of using such technology that was meant to torment, not kill.

Equally disconcerting for family and community would have been the mystery surrounding the disappearance and probable deaths of soldiers like J. R. Moir, "wounded and missing" at Anzac Bay, Gallipoli, on April 28, 1915, and Private William A. Jameson, also "missing" at Gallipoli. What became of them is unknown. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission holds no information on their deaths, burials or mem-

There, the fallen seemingly coexisted with the living, defying those who would forget

orials. Historian Joanna Bourke puts it best when she says, "surely 'missing' is the cruellest word in the language".

On each photo is inscribed the military unit or regiment of service. Those labels used in conjunction with the date of death can indicate to some extent whether soldiers volunteered or were conscripted. Private Irving Blackstock (20) and Sergeant-Major Archibald Bonar (39) volunteered and served in the "Main Body NZEF". In some respects the voluntary spirit of 1914 is encapsulated in that inscription. Blackstock enlisted in August 1914 and was

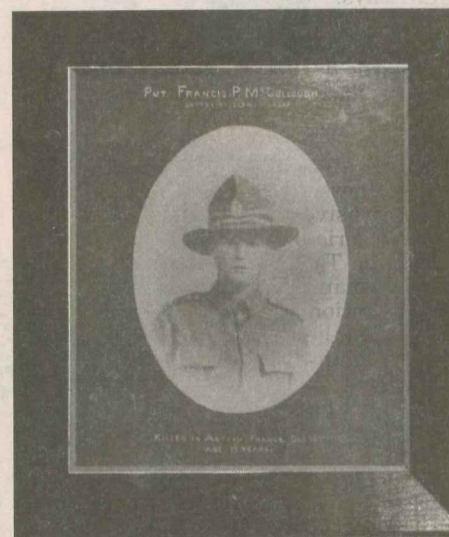
the first soldier from the Stratford district to make the "supreme sacrifice", being killed in action at Gallipoli on April 26. Bonar was killed two days later.

Families of those soldiers who "fell" and who had been awarded medals felt the need to demonstrate their pride by including the award in the inscription. Sergeant George Syme (28), a carpenter from Tariki, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Private Albert Johnson, a farmhand from East Rd in Stratford, received the Military Medal.

Sickness and disease have always been the scourge of military campaigning, more especially before 1914. Nearly 10% of the soldiers from the Great War in the Hall of Remembrance "died of sickness" or of "illness". For instance, Gunner George V. W. Falder of the New Zealand Field Artillery "died of enteric fever in Malta Hospital" in 1915. At least seven others died of influenza; six during the pandemic of 1918. Of those soldiers who died during the pandemic, Charles Henry Rowson and Anselm M. Flynn had been demobilised and were civilians in Stratford at the time of their deaths, and yet their photos hang in the Hall of Remembrance.

Rowson, a 22-year-old farmer, had recently returned from the Western Front where he served with the Wellington Regiment from 1916 to 1917. For one week in early November 1918, Rowson showed symptoms of influenza that were severe enough for admission to Stratford's Public Hospital. He died there on November 8. The inscription on his photo reads "died of illness". Rowson's death is significant, in part, because he was Stratford's first fatality in the pandemic of 1918. At the time of his death the war against Germany was still being fought and returned soldiers like Rowson were still linked to the conflict, at least through experience and memory.

Flynn, a 24-year-old farmer from Te Wera, served on the Western Front where he was "badly gassed" in October



FRANCIS P. McCULLOUGH: Wide-eyed teenager.

1917. One year later he arrived home and died as a result of "heart disease and influenza" during the pandemic on December 1, 1918. The inscription on his photo reads "died of sickness (Gassed)". The coded word in brackets adds to the significance of the inscription. Flynn died of influenza, but his resistance to the invasive nature of a virus had been weakened by the technology of war.

At the time of his death Flynn was still linked to the war, just like Rowson. Together their deaths are significant because with them the commemoration of death through epidemic disease converged with the commemoration of death in war.

Both Rowson and Flynn are buried in the Kopuatama Cemetery near Stratford. They are the only soldiers from the Great War in the Hall of Remembrance who returned home to die. The rest lie elsewhere.

The diversity of place and environment is a dominant theme in the Hall of

Remembrance. Private Herbert Watkins (33) was killed in action in France in 1917. He served with the Australia Imperial Force. Watkins' world before the war, like that of others in the Hall of Remembrance, may not have included many places beyond Taranaki, region, let alone New Zealand. However, by the end of the war, places like Gallipoli, Palestine, and Zeebrugge, as well as environments like a prisoner of war camp in Hadji Keri, Turkey, hospitals in England and Malta; and "at sea" represented the diverse settings of service and death.

Just over two-thirds (67.4%) of the soldiers from the Great War in the Hall of Remembrance lost their lives in France, while Gallipoli claimed nearly 14%. Inscripting a place or environment on a photo was significant because it recorded the location of death for family and friends. This was important in the grieving process because it helped reduce the mystery that surrounded death in war, enabling people to cast their thoughts towards that destination.

For the families of privates Thomas Webb (27) and William Hansen, however, mystery would forever surround their location because they died somewhere "at sea" and were buried there. For nine other soldiers their places of death are unknown. Their families may have studied their loved ones' photos in the Hall of Remembrance in the years after the war and simply wondered — where?

Where Stratford's soldiers of the Great War are buried or memorialised is not included in the inscriptions. An examination of Commonwealth War Graves Commission files tells us that over half (56%) were buried in cemeteries. Forty-one bodies lie in France. Another 15 were buried in Belgium. Of the others, five were buried in Britain, four in Turkey, two each in Malta and Stratford, and one each in Iraq, Israel and Syria. Memorials record the names of just over a third (36%) of the soldiers

"whose graves are known only to God". Twenty-one names were inscribed on memorials in Belgium, 12 on French memorials, 11 on Turkish memorials and three in Wellington. For 10 soldiers there are no known graves or memorials anywhere. Such diversity in place and environment demonstrates the global scope of the Great War.

Stratford's Hall of Remembrance is unique because of its inscribed narrative. It is an historically significant site, not just in Taranaki, but in New Zealand.

Not all of Stratford district's Great War dead are depicted in the Hall of Remembrance, but those who are could be represented by a single soldier. He would have been a private aged between 25 and 26 who was killed in action in France in the summer of 1917, probably July, and whose remains are buried in French soil.

The year that construction began on the Hall of Remembrance — 1917 — is significant. It would have been a particularly difficult year for people in the district due, in part, to the high death toll. The battles of Messines and Passchendaele claimed the lives of nearly one-fifth (17.8%) of the Great War dead in the Hall of Remembrance. That year Mayor McMillan and the central Taranaki communities had to come to terms with the grim realities of a great war. Messines and Passchendaele, along with the battle of the Somme (1916) and the attack on Chunuk Bair at Gallipoli (1915), represented key military engagements where loss of life of soldiers from Stratford and the surrounding district was most pronounced.

Remembering those who fell is the key function of the Hall of Remembrance. The enduring images of the war dead, like that of young Private McCullough, and the use of words like "killed in action", "missing" and "gassed", had the potential to shock a community into not forgetting.

The most significant and meaningful aspect of the Hall of Remembrance is its location — the old civic centre of the borough of Stratford. There, the public once conducted business of a municipal nature and they unwittingly took part in a subtle ritual by passing through the Hall of Remembrance, not once, but twice, just like I did all those years ago while visiting the library.

The photos were difficult to ignore in the 1960s, just as they would have been in the 1920s. There, the fallen seemingly coexisted with the living, defying those who would forget.

All of the fallen once lived and worked in Stratford and in the surrounding district and yet, during the Great War, they were scattered to places far beyond New Zealand from which only two ever returned, and even then to die. In the Hall of Remembrance they have all been "brought back" and "gathered together" once again into the centre of their town to help form part of central Taranaki's collective remembrance of the Great War. □

● Graham Hucker is conducting PhD research at Massey University on the social impact and effects of the Great War on Taranaki from 1914 to about 1939.