

Devonport Field of Remembrance – First Steps

It was unfortunate that the early work of the Passchendaele Society and the Fields of Remembrance Trust did not capitalise on the preparatory work that had been done. However, we were encouraged by the Fields already active, particularly in Whangarei and Napier, and by the WW100 website. This website, <http://ww100.govt.nz> is very comprehensive and provides a wealth of leads for ideas, inspiration and support. Our first step, and we strongly recommend it be yours, is to sign up with WW100 and take advantage of the rich environment that MCH have created.

As with any project, there is always the early and chilling reality of actually defining what it was we were doing. Were we a facilitator, a funding resource, a leader, a follower, etc. We decided we would take the leadership role and drive the project for our community. We were confident to do this following our 2009 experience and the knowledge we already had via our membership of the Passchendaele Society. It also fitted our goal of being an active and relevant force in our community.

Then followed a somewhat iterative examination of scope and timetable, mixed in with the early research. We were fortunate that the Devonport Museum had already done some work on a display of First and Second World War casualties and we knew we had only two Devonport lads killed in the Boer War. With more research, we established that there were 167¹ World War One deaths of men that had an identifiable connection with Devonport. How did we do that – by using a mix of resources including:

- Names on memorials – not be taken as infallibly accurate as even stonemasons can get a name wrong
- Names on Rolls of Honour in schools and churches – also not infallible
- A wildcard search of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website by just entering “Devonport” in the last field for ‘Additional Information’
- The Cenotaph database at the Auckland War Memorial Museum

We needed this core information to define our intended scope which we concluded was:

- a) To place a cross in the Field for every son of Devonport killed, irrespective of the circumstances²
- b) To begin by concentrating on World War One and expanding the Field to include World War Two and casualties from other conflicts later
- c) To fund the cost of making crosses for the sons of Devonport, but to make specifications available and a place in the Field for others to place crosses for their relatives, provided they were legitimate wartime casualties who were in the service of their country³

¹ This number has been refined as more information has become known, an unsurprising development.

² As others will no doubt find, we have men killed while under training, others who met with accidents such as drowning on the way to the action, and so on. We made a conscious decision to be very inclusive and not attempt to judge one death as being more worthy than another. While we have none of the five New Zealanders executed following a Court Martial, if we had, they would be welcome in our Field for example.

³ This policy therefore does not exclude nationals of other countries being remembered, but makes the family responsible for the care and maintenance of that cross, while we only define when and where it is displayed. It does not however include allowance for civilian casualties to be included.

On the question of timetable, we decided we would make a start for Remembrance Day 2013 to make an early play for recognition in the community. This decision was made more easily because of the work already done by the Devonport Museum, as it provided an available source of photographs for about half our World War One numbers.⁴ That goal was achieved and 156 crosses were placed in the initial Field. The next goal is to have crosses, even if photographs are unavailable, for all Boer War, World War 1 and World War 2 casualties by Anzac Day 2014.

⁴ Obtaining photographs to go on the crosses makes the Field real for the community rather than just another list of names, which are already generally available on existing memorials. However, although the Auckland Weekly News and DigitalNZ are good sources of photographs, it is a painstaking exercise to find suitable material. We achieved over 50% crosses with photographs for Remembrance Day 2013.