

Remote valleys hold pain of lost promise

By CHRIS LONSDALE

IN THE valleys between Whangamomona and Tangarakau they still feel the pain of stolen lives — and stolen promise.

— And they do remember them. In a remote corner of Taranaki yesterday, 63 people, including a dozen children and teenagers, gathered at the Kohuratahi Hall to acknowledge the 131 young men who happily enlisted in what was supposed to be the adventure of World War I — and the cure to warfare.

Forty-one of them never came back.

They died in the filth of Flanders and Ypres and a dozen other battlefields in France and Belgium, disillusioned and terrified — or quietly resigned to never again seeing the steep hills that surrounded the remote and peaceful valleys of home.

Some of them would have been farewelled from this hall, and halls just like it in Whangamomona and Tahora.

Tangarakau had the curious distinction of not existing at the time of the War To End All Wars, and not existing again by the time the next one broke out a generation later. But some of the children born and raised in the temporary railway construction town of 1200 people, halfway between Stratford and



BACKCOUNTRY SALUTE: The children of Marco School place wreaths at the Kohuratahi Cenotaph, which bears the names of the 41 young men who died in World War I, and three in World War II.

Photo: MARK TAYLOR

Taumarunui, were among the 49 gold-painted names that crowd a second honours board in the main chamber of the Kohuratahi Hall.

Those who yesterday climbed thoughtfully from dusty cars and mud-splattered four-wheel-drive vehicles parked outside the hall were thankful that, at least the second time around 60 years ago, the toll had

not been so cruel. All but three survived.

But the valley's dwindling contribution to the repeated mass slaughter on the other side of the world was a mirror to their own faded dream.

Among the district's older citizens — those who placed their home-made cakes and biscuits on the tables in the

pale green and peach kitchen annex, and the men who shook one another's big hands in nodded neighbourly greetings — there is the soft but profound sadness that the valley's finest had been taken from their wives and mothers and grandmothers when the raw land, and the women, needed them most.

As the soldiers bled on battlefields

with unpronounceable names, and the post masters and mistresses from offices dotted along the road hand-delivered those terrible telegrams — sometimes twice and three times to the same families — the district's potential as a rural production house bled into the flanking Waitara and Tangarakau rivers.

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Even in the remotest of our country's valleys, they were remembered



COMING HOME: Francis Moore is remembered in this framed montage in his home town of Tangarakau and in a grave in Belgium.

Photo: MARK TAYLOR

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When the World War I servicemen returned there was a government pledge to make the land "fit for heroes", with roading funds and a railway project picking up steam again after a war's delay.

But the district never recovered the momentum lost during 1914-18 — closely followed by the murderous influenza epidemic, destructive floods and, in 1929, the stockmarket crash and Depression.

Tangarakau's day of glory, November 7, 1932 — when the last railway iron spike was driven home to complete the 31-year Stratford-Taumarunui project, and the town feasted on lamb and ham and hot vegetables, and jellies and trifles, and toasted The King, Parliament, The Public Works Department and Brighter Days For Farmers (in that order) — was also its death warrant.

It simply packed up everything, including its houses at £10 each, and disappeared.

Bruce Herbert now farms what used to be a town with its own shops and dance hall-picture theatre, and fields of playing children. On a dead-still night he swears you can still hear their laughter.

Surrounded by a bed of Love Lies Bleeding flowers, in the cookhouse of Mr Herbert's sideline camping ground, is a framed montage of photographs and military documents belonging to one of those former children, Francis Moore.

Five years ago Mr Moore's brother, Trevor, now of Hamilton, wanted the shrine-like assemblage returned to the place Francis had called home.

Coincidentally, a Belgian schoolteacher, apprehensive of causing offence by under-estimation, had written to "The Lord Mayor of Tangarakau" asking for information about a New Zealander, Leading Aircraftsman Francis Moore,

NZ404085, who was buried with the rest of his aircrew in a town near the German border. He wanted to know more about the young man who made that ultimate sacrifice.

Said Mr Herbert yesterday: "I wrote back and told him that he was a fine and popular young man from a loving family, who would never be forgotten, who had grown up in this little construction town, gone to this school here that is now my barn, played rugby against other clubs in the district, gone pig-hunting with his mates — and then gone off to war.

"I wonder about Frank Moore a lot, what he might have done with his life if he had survived that bombing run over Dusseldorf.

"He was typical — one of so many wasted lives."

So the adults in the Kohuratahi Hall yesterday listened to the children from nearby Marco School sing The Unknown Hero, to all the Francis Moores they would never know.

And they closed their eyes and said a heartfelt prayer, led by a guest minister, Chris Bedford, from Stratford. They sang Onward Christian Soldiers, straining a little on the less familiar second, third, fourth and fifth verses — like the previous century's coach-horses heading uphill — but returning to the chorus at a gallop.

The little crowd then wandered 100 metres down the road to a cenotaph ringed by a neatly mown lawn and three recently donated kauri, rimu and kowhai trees.

Under a leaden sky with a white hole melted by the sun, organiser Graham Fergus set up a boombox outside the hall and fitted a Last Post tape. Everyone stood still and silent for the hauntingly beautiful bugle call, simultaneously melancholy and defiant.

It drew an inquisitive bull's rumbling response in a nearby paddock — and, in the following minute's silence, invisible magpies joyously gargled musical notes.