

## JACK LYON MEMORIAL SPEECH

The Honourable Wayne Mapp

Phil Twyford MP

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour to be able to give this second Jack Lyon Memorial Address

I thank Phil Twyford for inviting me to do so

I must say though I was a little daunted when I read the details of the inaugural address and how well that had gone.

First to give the Jack Lyon Memorial Address was the Honourable Bob Tizard

I quote now from the report of the event on *Red Alert*, the Labour MP's blog:

The dinner is planned as an annual event to reflect on New Zealand in war and peace, on internationalism and on national identity. The first one was a cracker, featuring a brilliant 25 minute speech by the Hon Bob Tizard ranging over decades of politics and history, delivered without notes.

If ever the words: "hard act to follow" have been apt, they certainly are now.

But here goes:

The theme of my talk is to explore a natural tension that has existed in New Zealand's past and still persists to this day. That tension is between an acute awareness of the evils and terrible cost of war with a strong desire to prevent war if at all possible.

Yet there is also a willingness to be involved in conflicts as an engaged, concerned international citizenry, and when the need arises, New Zealand has proved adept at producing skilled, capable and courageous warfighters.

No Less a person than the esteemed military historian Sir John Keegan, when writing on Gallipoli, noted:

The New Zealander's settler independence and skills with rifle and spade would win them a reputation as the best soldiers in the world during the twentieth century.

But as one of these superb soldiers of the First World War, all too aware of its cost, wrote:

Few serious thinkers to-day would endeavour to justify the [First] World War. It was beyond reasonable doubt the major insanity and the most profoundly immoral act of our time.

[Ormond Burton, *Silent Division*, p.319]

Looking at the cost of the war, the atrocities against civilians in the East/West, perhaps the first genocide who could argue with this.

Yet many serious and well-respected military historians around the world are doing exactly that, something I will return to later in this talk.

To ensure his Commander-in-Chief never forgot the human cost of waging war, the Senior United States General of the Second World War, General George C. Marshall presented each week to Franklin Roosevelt a summary of each week's casualties with the losses listed in vivid colours.

General Marshall, who would later be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to rebuild Western Europe, found it necessary to do this explaining: "It was essential to remember the sacrifices because it is so easy to get hardened to them"

It was a ritual George Marshall never deviated from even when his stepson was listed amongst those casualties having been killed in action at Anzio in Italy.

And at his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace prize, General Marshall made the cost of war his main theme. I quote from his speech:

I know a great deal of the horrors and tragedies of war. Today, as chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission, it is my duty to supervise the construction and maintenance of military cemeteries in many countries overseas, particularly in Western Europe. The cost of war in human lives is constantly spread before me, written neatly in many ledgers whose columns are gravestones ... Almost daily I hear from the wives, or mothers, or families of the fallen. The tragedy of the aftermath is almost constantly before me.

In June 1941, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, did not need to be shown any lists to know and remember the human cost of war. At that time Peter Fraser was in the Middle East where he witnessed a defeated Army return from Crete. Fraser had been instrumental in persuading the Royal Navy to undertake an additional lift of men from Crete, but he was well aware that many New Zealanders would not be returning from this latest military debacle.

Left behind on Crete were 2180 New Zealand prisoners of war and 671 New Zealand soldiers killed in action. Many of those killed, wounded or captured were personally known to Peter Fraser.

One of those left behind on Crete was his parliamentary colleague William John Lyon – Jack Lyon – whom we commemorate in this talk today.

In many ways Jack Lyon epitomizes the theme of my talk – that tension between knowing the horrors and evils of war yet that need to be involved as a concerned international citizen.

Jack Lyon certainly knew of the horror and tragedy of war from an early age.

- In 1914, aged just 17, Jack Lyon turned his back on a scholarship from Oxford University to enlist in an infantry regiment
- He advanced his age by four years to ensure he would see active service
- And he saw plenty of it  
Four years on the Western Front

Twice Mentioned in Dispatches

Commissioned from the ranks

Health permanently damaged by effects of mustard gas

Jack's war experiences, as part of the PBI, convinced him of the need for radical changes in British society and in the international system.

Interwar years saw Jack embrace:

- Democratic socialism
- The rights of workers world-wide
- Fabian principles
- International organisations committed to peace

These principles would see Jack join the British Labour Party, and after his emigration to New Zealand in 1927 for health reasons, the New Zealand Labour Party.

In 1935 Jack Lyon became the first Labour MP to win the seat of Waitemata (North Shore) and became part of Michael Savage's first Labour government.

Jack was aligned with the left wing of the party, then led by his close friend (and fellow ex-soldier) John A. Lee.

Jack was a member of the committee that established the country's free national health service and benefit. He was identified by many, as a future leader of the party.

He remained interested in defence issues, kept informed on international affairs and fervently believed New Zealand should not stand aside from world affairs or threats to peace.

He addressed the House in 1936:

Some people have suggested that a Labour Government would be completely pacifist in outlook ... this Government does intent to fulfil its obligation to the League of Nations and it will work to the uttermost to secure to this country and to every other country ... some form of collective security to maintain world peace.

Jack Lyon was as good as his word and followed his principles.

In 1939, with the outbreak of war, he sought leave from his parliamentary duties and joined the military forces of his adopted country.

He was the first MP to enlist although several more soon followed him. In fact, this time Jack had to lower his age to ensure overseas service.

His previous military experience saw Jack Lyon retain his captain's commission and him being appointed to command of an infantry company in the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the first of the Auckland Infantry Battalions raised for the Second World War.

While leading this company on the long withdrawal to the port of Sphakia during the Crete campaign. Captain Jack Lyon was killed on 26 May 1941 when his company was strafed by German planes.

The Battalion history records:

Down came the planes. Again and again they circled and dived, machine guns hammering away, peppering the whole area. A Company caught most of it before it could take cover. Captain Lyon and five others were killed, another half dozen wounded – a bad knock for A Company, already very short of men. The battalion could not afford to lose many like Captain Lyon, one of its few senior officers still on their feet. Though physically worn out by the Greek campaign, he had kept going on Crete and refused to give in, setting an example to many men younger than himself – he had dropped several years off his age to come overseas. He was the first New Zealand MP to lose his life in the Second World War.

W. D. Dawson

18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment

p.157

Jack Lyon was 43 years old at the time of his death.

It was indeed a considerable loss.

And if Peter Fraser needed any further confirmation that this was going to be a long and bloody conflict he certainly received it in the next battle fought by the New Zealand Division.

This was in the Operation *Crusader* fought in the Western Desert in November 1941.

It is a tragic irony that this little-known battle was officially New Zealand's first successful military operation of the Second World War.

This is because this victory cost New Zealand more casualties than the two previous military disasters combined.

In truth, the Eighth Army won this victory due to Erwin Rommel's erratic generalship. Rommel really did snatch defeat from the jaws of victory on this occasion. So, *Crusader* was recorded as an Allied victory.

Total New Zealand losses were a staggering: 4,620 making this the most costly battle of the war.

Of this number some 879 had been killed in action

Several New Zealand MP's were amongst this number.

In fact in one day – 27 November 1941 – three New Zealand MP's became casualties.

As the New Zealand official historian, W. E. Murphy, noted: “27 November was a black day indeed for the House of Representatives.”

The three MP's were:

Lt Col John Manchester Allen, commanding Officer of 21 Battalion – National Party – Hauraki electorate

The second New Zealand MP to be killed in action

Arthur Nattle Grigg, National Party – MP for Mid-Canterbury

Died of wounds incurred on 27 November

Brigadier James Hargest, National Party – MP for Awarua (formerly Invercargill)

Captured on 27 November, but later killed in action by artillery fire on 12 August 1944

In addition, another New Zealand MP had died of influenza at the start of the battle. He was Axel Gordon Hultquist – Labour Party – MP for Bay of Plenty

The battle accounted for 4 MP's, out of a total of 80 (5 per cent)

MP casualties show, I think, how much New Zealand House of Representative was part of the New Zealand experience and truly representative it was.

At the end of 1941, so similar to 1917 and Passchendaele, people in New Zealand “did not need to be told that the angel of death had passed over the land: they had heard the beating of its wings.”

[Michael King]

The soldiers on Gallipoli knew, very soon after landing on that fateful shore, that there was little glory in war and that they faced the real possibility of being killed or maimed.

Yet they persisted and many reflected on why they did so.

I am currently working on a book which will be an edited collection of letters written by soldiers who served at Gallipoli.

For the last two years my wife and I have collected over 600 letters of Gallipoli and the book will feature around 10-15 per cent of these.

I would like to read two of these letters. The first letter was written by Private J. C. Mullins of the Canterbury Battalion. It describes his experience and his feelings when taking part in the landing of 25 April, 1915:

## **The Press June 18 J C Mullins**

... As soon as we arrived we noticed several of our late comrades lying dead about the beach, and one must confess to a feeling of awe, and wondering whether one would share the same fate. The bursting of the enemy's shells did not look promising, but at this stage we were quite safe, and knew that we could come to no harm. When we mounted the first hill, however, and got right under fire, my feelings are hard to describe. Our lieutenant was just ahead of us, and in our new surroundings we felt like bolting for dear life, but somewhat unconsciously followed our leader. We advanced a little, and after occupying and vacating several trenches on our way, we came to still another one, and, of course, dropped into it. An order came that we were to leave the trench and take the cover offered by a mound directly behind. We jumped out of the trench, over it, and back again, and I am still wondering why we were not shot down while doing so, but luck was with us. Eventually we got down behind the mound, and then the bullets commenced to fly in earnest. They were chipping twigs apparently within an inch or two of our heads, and I can say that I did not hesitate to bury my nose in the dirt, with a view of getting my head a quarter of an inch further away from the bullets. This position got altogether too warm for us, and we followed our officer to another trench behind which a party of Australians were taking cover.

Every whistle of the shrapnel shells caused me to duck my head and turn my coat collar up, for what reason I do not know, but many others were doing exactly the same thing, and even in the actual firing-line nearly every collar was turned up. An Australian tendered me the advice that "You

needn't be scared, 'cos them that whistles won't hurt you." He had been there for the previous four hours, so I took his advice, and tried not to be scared. But as we advanced I still ducked my head, although I was not nearly so frightened as I had been half an hour earlier. As we tore up the hill, all I thought of was getting to the firing-line, where for some unexplainable reason I thought I would be fairly safe, and so it seemed for a little while. I flopped down behind a mound, and like a dozen others, lit a cigarette. I am an inveterate cigarette smoker, and maybe I did it from force of habit, but it seemed strange that in the face of a murderous fire every second fellow was smoking.

The second letter is written to the bereaved parents of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Peter Mackay, KIA during the assault on Chunuk Bair on 7 August.

It has a direct connection to an earlier part of this talk.

It reads:

No 2 General Hospital,  
Cairo.

28.8.15.

Dear Mr and Mrs Mackay

It is with great sorrow that I take up my pen to tell you of Peter's death. I know that long before this you will have been notified by the Military authorities but I think you would like to hear the particulars from one who was his friend. ... On Friday 6<sup>th</sup> we received orders that we were to advance and carry with the bayonet a long ridge known as Bauchop's Ridge. The advance was to take place at 9.30 that night and we had all day to get ready. Our squadron was in the centre and had to advance down a hill through a creek and up the ridge into the trenches. Capt Paddon, Peter and I mapped out our course and we were very confident of success.

Peter and I had a long talk that day. We knew it was a difficult task but we were in good spirits and the concern we had for the success of the adventure precluded any thought of the personal risk. After long weeks of trench warfare we were glad for the chance to move, and I remember now that Peter was particularly bright, which he continued to be so Lieut. Williams now here in hospital tells me. I led the first troop and Peter No. 3 and he was to reinforce in case of my being cut up. We went forward with empty rifles and in silence depending just on the bayonet and on silence and surprise.

We reached the dry water course in safety and then an awful fire broke out from machine guns, rifles, bomb throwers and a ----- all within 200yds. We darted across the flat, and now made as light as day by the rockets the enemy were sending up and reached the spur losing men all the way. The second troop paused and coming on lost direction. Peter, seeing this went forward in

an attempt to rectify it, then he came back and brought his own troop on. They came on gallantly and Peter fell at its head on the way up the spur. ...

I myself was wounded higher up but was able to go on until the morning so I never saw him again. I know you will feel his death so deeply, but I know there will be comfort in the thought that he felt no pain and that he died doing his duty at the head of his men. I was his closest friend and I feel our loss more deeply than I can say. He has many friends among the officers and he was respected by everyone he came in contact with, and I can say without exaggeration that his men fairly worshipped him. We had mutually promised that if anything happened to either, the one would see that the others personal affects went home, but being brought away myself I have been unable to look after his, but you will get it through the Base Record Office in due time. A box which he left with Cook and Sons, Cairo I will see about as soon as I get out of hospital, and I will also try and send his record from Alexandria if I can find its whereabouts.

If there is anything more that I can do for you I hope you will let me know, and I will gladly do it for Peter's sake. I will be going back to the Peninsula as soon as I am well, probably in three weeks, so I will write from there. Now I will close, trusting that, though your sorrow must be deep at your bereavement, it will be softened by the knowledge that it is shared by so many of his comrades.

I am your sincere friend,  
James Hargest

The same James Hargest MP, captured on 27 November, that black day of the House of Representatives.

The book should be available in all good book stores, and probably some bad ones too, in March next year.

So how do we reconcile this hatred of warfare; this realization that war brings suffering, devastation and is the great destroyer of families

How do we reconcile that knowledge, with the willingness to stand up and be counted, to be involved in conflict when we feel the cause is right?

That after all is what Jack Lyon, other MPs, and thousands of New Zealanders did in 1939. This is what many new Zealanders have done and continue to do since the end of that war too.

I believe it is possible to do so.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote:

“Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime.”

Yet in the middle of the Second World War he wrote:

I have seen much war in my lifetime and I hate it profoundly. But there are worse things than war; and all of them come with defeat.

We will fight this war to enjoy the rights and privileges conveyed to us by the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights, and woe to anyone who has any plans for taking those rights and privileges away from us under any guise or for any reason whatsoever.

In 1995, two of Australia's leading historians of the First World War, (although one is actually a New Zealander), were asked to address the rather leading question of whether Britain's sacrifice of some 700,000 war dead in the 1914-18 war had been worth the sacrifice.

Professors Trevor Wilson and Robin Prior's reply caught many by surprise. But I think it was an eloquent and convincing argument and one that I think explains the dilemma we see in Jack Lyon.

As Professors Prior and Wilson noted; there were big issues at stake in 1914; big issues that all too often have been ignored by historians.

Some of these included:

- the place of Britain and its Empire in the world
  - the rights of small nations to exist
  - the rights of the small nations to some form of protection
- and most importantly
- whether liberal values and the system of representative government emanating from the Enlightenment and constitutional reforms would survive.

As these two eminent historians stated:

These were not light matters, and in 1914 and the ensuing years they seemed worth fighting for. There is no reason to believe that, had Britons known that the war would cost them 700,000 lives, they would have turned their backs on the whole affair. In the almost

identical circumstances of 1939-40, confronted with the same challenge and in no doubt about the likely fearful cost of meeting it, the people and government of Britain did not make a different choice.

They go on ...

We may go further. Even in the perilous world of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberal states have persistently committed themselves to upholding national self-respect and the values they deem worthwhile against threatened aggression, whatever the probable cost. This makes it decidedly odd that, looking back at Britain's readiness to sustain heavy loss of life in a similar cause during the Great War, we should find such readiness difficult to comprehend and certainly needing of explanation.

So while anyone with a sense of history knows that, to use the words of William Tecumseh Sherman:

“War is cruelty and you cannot refine it”

Despite the destruction, the cost and sacrifice; in liberal democracies there have been (and will always be) ideals, principles and causes worth fighting for.

And we can be immensely thankful that we have men and women in this country who are prepared and willing to do just that.

Thank you