

# The Children's War

by Jock Phillips



*For four long years, from 4 August 1914 until 11 November 1918, New Zealand, as part of the **British Empire**, was at war. Tens of thousands of New Zealand men were fighting on the other side of the globe: on the steep slopes of Gallipoli, in the deserts of the Middle East, in the muddy trenches of France and Belgium. These places were a world away from the classrooms of peaceful New Zealand – so how did the war reach children here? And how did it involve them?*

People at home closely followed the war's progress, especially with so many loved ones away. They read articles in their local newspapers (many of which had been censored). They got letters and postcards from the soldiers themselves, which had also been checked by the authorities. And they scanned the lists of **casualties** that were published each day and discussed the **telegrams** that could arrive at any time.

Because war was everywhere, it was impossible to keep children from hearing about it. Besides, most of them were directly affected. Countless fathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins had been shipped overseas as soldiers – and children had gone to the wharves and railway stations to wave goodbye. These men were often gone for several years. One in five of them would never come back.

In the beginning, people were excited about the war, especially many young men, who saw it as the chance for a great adventure. The recruitment of soldiers began straight away – and although the New Zealand government had offered eight thousand men to Britain, within just four days, fourteen thousand had volunteered. Most thought they'd be home by Christmas. But they weren't – the war dragged on.

For many New Zealanders, 1917 was a turning point. The war was at a stalemate, and the flood of men eager to fight had reduced to a trickle. The previous year, the government had been forced to introduce **conscription**. Then came the horror of Passchendaele, when more than eight hundred New Zealanders were killed in a single day. Morale plummeted – for both soldiers and civilians – and people became despondent. The enormous death toll was more and more difficult to justify.

The government wanted people to stay positive about the war, even children. It wanted people to see the war as a joint effort – and for those back home to believe that the sacrifices were worth it. Women kept busy fundraising and organising care parcels for soldiers. Children were expected to be good for their mothers – and be useful. It was their duty to help win the war. They were even encouraged to see themselves as soldiers of the British Empire, just like their fathers at the front.





## Honouring the Flag

Children were expected to show their support for the war each morning, before they even got inside their classrooms. Most schools had a flagpole, and the school day would begin with students saluting the flag – something that became a government order in 1917. To increase the feelings of unity and pride, children were asked to sing a special song during flag-raising ceremonies.

Although some of these songs mentioned “our native country’s flag” (meaning the New Zealand flag), the government preferred that children saluted the “flag of Empire”, which was the Union Jack. This ritual was usually followed by a patriotic talk from the head teacher, who was sure to mention the British king (George V), the Empire, and the “boys” overseas.



*We love our native country's flag,  
to it our hearts are true.  
Above we wave in splendid folds,  
the red and white and blue.  
Then hail the flag, the bonny flag,  
of red and white and blue.*

(a song published in the *School Journal*, 1914)



1914

**4 AUGUST:**

Germany invades Belgium, and so Britain declares war on Germany.

**29 AUGUST:**

New Zealand troops capture German Sāmoa.

**16 SEPTEMBER:**

The New Zealand government announces a Māori **Contingent**.

**16 OCTOBER:**

The **New Zealand Expeditionary Force** leaves the country.

**24–25 DECEMBER:**

The unofficial Christmas truce is held on the **Western Front**.

## War Stories

Inside the classroom, students spent the day surrounded by maps of the Western Front and photos of Empire heroes. During lessons, they worked their way through the *School Journal*. Between 1914 and 1918, the Journal contained a lot of material about the war – with one catch: it avoided the unpleasant truth about the soldiers’ experiences. Instead, the war was given a positive spin, with stories of heroism and success. Students were told about New Zealand’s “conquest” of German Sāmoa, “without a shot being fired”.<sup>1</sup> When they learned about Gallipoli, they were told of the success of the landing, not of the ultimate defeat. The Journal reassured readers that officers at Gallipoli had led their men “splendidly”.

Children were also provided with heart-warming or benign stories about the war. They read about pigeons and dogs in war (“our four-footed soldiers”); about the use of **dirigible balloons**, the wireless, and motorcycles. In 1915, an article called “Christmas and War” was published in the Journal. This told of the unofficial truce the previous year, when German and British soldiers on the Western Front left their trenches on Christmas Eve to talk and sing together. Readers were informed that “friend and foe mingled freely, each side more than a little surprised to find what good fellows, after all, the others were.”

<sup>1</sup> All of the quotes in this article are from the *School Journal* 1914–1918.



1915

**3 FEBRUARY:**

New Zealand troops become involved in their first combat, helping to defend the Suez Canal.

**25 APRIL:**

New Zealand soldiers land at Gallipoli.

**6–10 AUGUST:**

The Battle for Chunuk Bair takes place, with around 850 New Zealanders killed.

**15–20 DECEMBER:**

The **Allies** are evacuated from Gallipoli, where more than 120 000 on both sides died.



## Empire Pride

The government was especially keen that children receive “short lessons on the history of the Empire” and their “duties to it”. In many ways, this was the kind of material the *School Journal* had always contained. During the war, children read about how New Zealand joined the British Empire through the Treaty of Waitangi. They were reminded that the Empire covered a quarter of the earth’s surface and contained a quarter of the world’s people. They learned about other children in the British Empire – in Canada, Australia, South Africa, and India. This was to make readers feel part of one big Empire family.

New Zealand children were also encouraged to love England, the “motherland”. The *Journal* contained poems that expressed this idea, like Robert Browning’s “Oh, to be in England/Now that April’s there!” and Rupert Brooke’s poem “The Soldier”, published in the *Journal* a few months after he died in 1915: “If I should die, think only this of me:/ That there’s some corner of a foreign field/That is for ever England.”

Children dressed up to show their patriotism



1916

**10 MARCH:**  
The tunnellers are the first New Zealanders to arrive on the Western Front.

**1 AUGUST:**  
Conscription is introduced in New Zealand.

**4 AUGUST:**  
The Battle of Romani takes place in the Sinai Desert.

**15 SEPTEMBER:**  
New Zealanders attack on the Somme.



The desolation of the Western Front: something *School Journal* readers weren't told about

One of the most important lessons was for children to think of themselves as future heroes. Who knew when the war would end ... and when another generation of soldiers would be needed? In 1917 – when New Zealand soldiers were dying at Messines and Passchendaele – the *Journal* asked children: “Now, what can you do for your Empire?” The answer was to “learn all you can of the brave men and women who made the Empire great, and try to be like them.” So the *Journal* published articles about British explorers like David Livingstone, naval heroes like Lord Nelson, and the great English navigator James Cook. It also followed the adventures of Ernest Shackleton, whose team’s perilous journey to Antarctica began in 1914. Shackleton was the perfect example of a contemporary Empire hero: courageous, resilient, and self-sacrificing.

1917

**9 APRIL–16 MAY:**  
The Battle of Arras takes place.

**7–9 JUNE:**  
New Zealand soldiers fight in the Battle of Messines.

**4 OCTOBER:**  
The Third Battle of Ypres begins.

**12 OCTOBER:**  
New Zealand has its “blackest day” of the war, with over 800 New Zealand soldiers killed at Passchendaele.



## "Little Crusaders"

"The Empire expects every child this day to do his or her duty."  
(Lord Nelson, quoted in the *School Journal*)

Children were expected to help with the war in practical ways too, not just read about it. They knitted scarves and socks, stitched handkerchiefs, and wrote cheerful letters – all of which were sent to the soldiers. Children were also expected to make sacrifices. The Secretary of Education was quick to suggest this when, in the second month of the war, his ideas about money for war ambulances were published in the *School Journal*: "Any sums offered should be donations from the children themselves, and not from the parents ... or, if a parent be called upon to help for the moment, the child should deny himself or herself some pleasure or make some sacrifice until the parent is repaid." In this way, the secretary believed that the gift would be "truly noble".



New Zealand children were indeed "noble" when it came to the war effort. In 1916, they raised £18,300 (about \$2 million today) by collecting glass bottles. These were worth a lot of money during the war because they were in short supply. The money from selling the bottles was sent to the "poor children of Belgium", whose suffering received a lot of attention during the war. Children also raised funds for the Red Cross – an organisation that supported hospitals and soldiers during the war. To get this money, they collected bottles and scrap iron, performed in patriotic concerts, sold pet lambs, and saved their pocket money. Near the end of the war, "copper trails" became popular. In 1918, Auckland challenged Wellington to build a trail of copper pennies along the main

trunk line. Schoolchildren along the way took part, and the trail's progress was reported in the newspapers.

While fundraising brought in a lot of money, it also taught wartime values. As the *Journal* noted in 1918, children were learning "to serve others". They were also learning "the lesson of thrift, which our Empire tells us will help to win the war. Bravo, little crusaders!"

Students stitching handkerchiefs for soldiers



1918

**MARCH:**  
The Germans launch a major **offensive** in a final effort to win the war.

**23 SEPTEMBER:**  
The last major action occurs in the Middle East.

**11 NOVEMBER:**  
The **armistice** with Germany is signed.

**20 DECEMBER:**  
The New Zealand Division arrives in Germany as part of the **Army of Occupation**.

1919

**25 MARCH:**  
The New Zealand Division disbands.

**23 APRIL:**  
The New Zealand Tunnelling Company arrives home.

**28 JUNE:**  
The Treaty of Versailles is signed, officially ending the war.

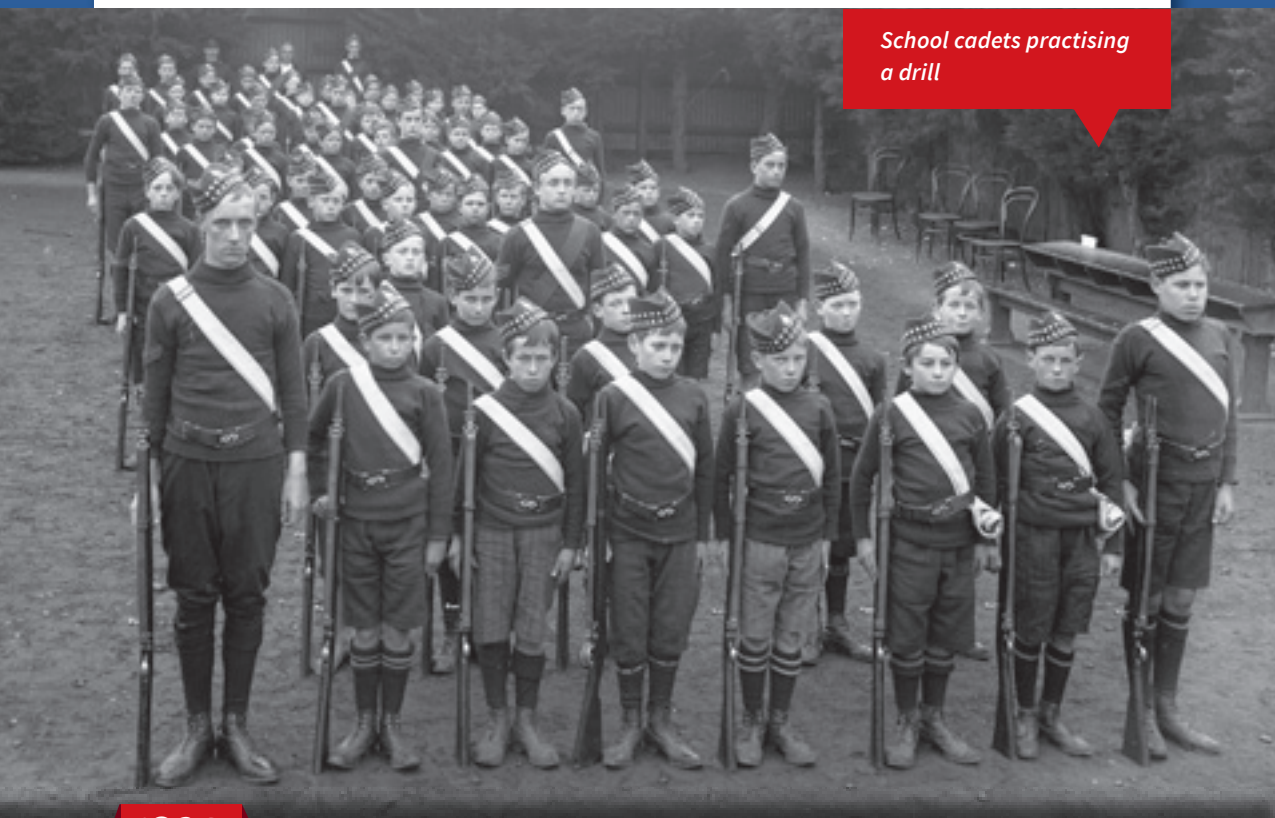
**19–21 JULY:**  
Official peace celebrations are held around New Zealand.



## Fit for War

Finally, children were taught that it was good to be fit and healthy – on the inside as well as the outside. Being fit meant they would be ready to serve their country. Boys from the age of fourteen did compulsory military training, and many high schools had a cadet force, in which boys learned a soldier's skills. From 1914, every school had to teach a certain number of hours of physical education.

Children were also given lessons in morality, including stern warnings about the dangers of alcohol and cigarettes. Soldiers of the future could not afford to have vices. And at home, while their mothers were “sad and anxious” over absent “soldier fathers and brothers”, children were instructed to be busy and cheerful, truthful, and obedient. Being hard working and good would help to win the war.



*School cadets practising a drill*

**1920**

### **MAY:**

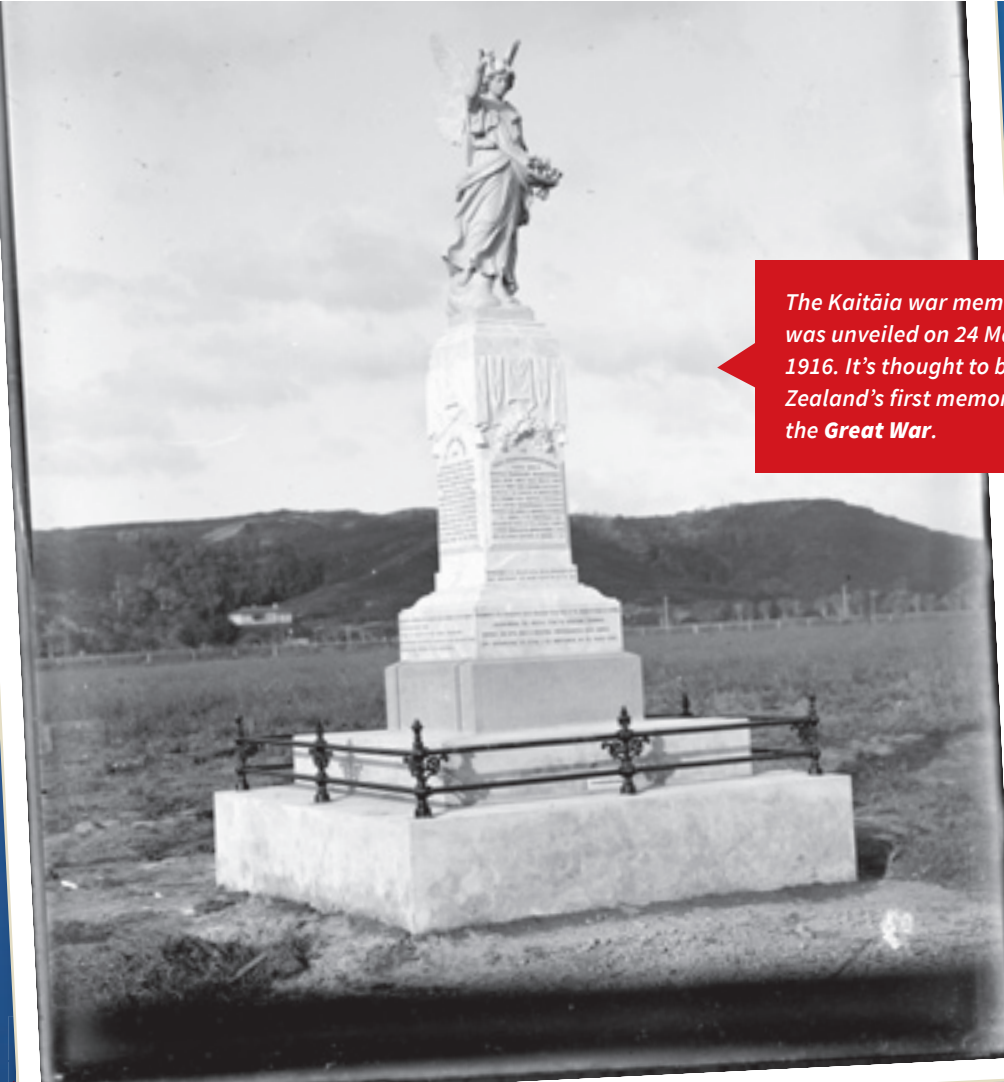
The last New Zealand troops arrive home.

### **15 NOVEMBER:**

The Āwhitu war memorial is unveiled, one of many built in the 1920s around New Zealand.

### **DECEMBER:**

The League of Nations mandates New Zealand to administer the former German Sāmoa.



*The Kaitiāia war memorial was unveiled on 24 March 1916. It's thought to be New Zealand's first memorial to the Great War.*

## Remembering

The First World War had a profound impact on New Zealanders. Around 42 000 of our soldiers were injured, and 18 000 died. This was a casualty rate of over 50 percent, one of the highest of any country in the British Empire.

Most New Zealand soldiers were buried on the battlefields of Europe, Gallipoli, and the Middle East – distant places most relatives would never visit. So to commemorate their dead, almost every community built a war memorial.

Many were on the main street, where they couldn't be missed. Some memorials were the traditional obelisk, a stone pillar that points to the sky. Others showed the figure of a soldier. Memorials also took the form of school gates, community halls, bridges, and arches. Eventually, more than five hundred public memorials were built around New Zealand. To see some of them, and to learn more about the First World War, go to: [www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/first-world-war](http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/first-world-war)

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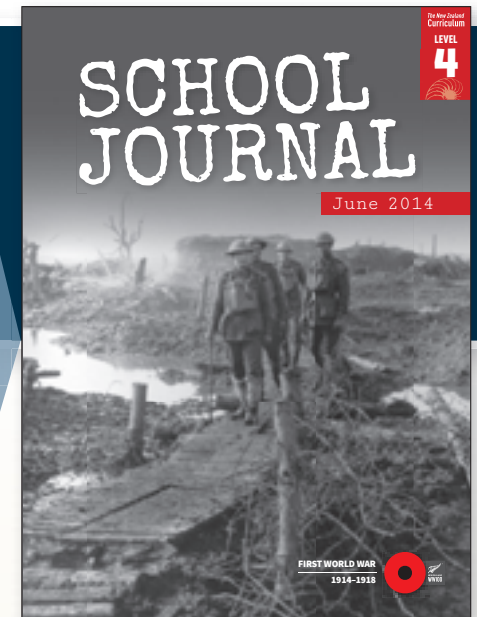
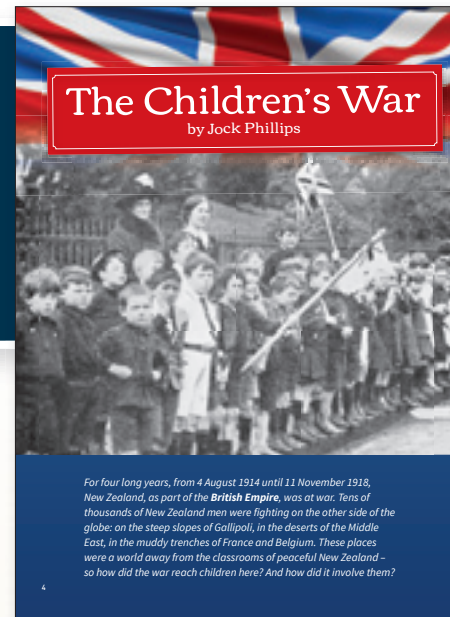
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