

## **INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC 1918 – A SOLDIER’S STORY.**

The Spanish Influenza Epidemic hit New Zealand in 1918 with the arrival from Europe of the warship *Niagara*, carrying sick and wounded troops home from the First World War.<sup>1</sup> This event was towards the end of hostilities. The disease quickly spread throughout the country as the troops on board were released into camp hospitals. Auckland city was soon swept by the epidemic with hundreds dying. The grandstand in a local park was turned into a morgue and bodies were burnt and buried in mass graves.<sup>2</sup>

The severity of the illness was not initially appreciated further south in the country because a common influenza had recently been in the community.

Sergeant Douglas Brown Stewart aged 28 years<sup>3</sup>, a member of the Medical Corps in the New Zealand Army, was on orderly duty at the hospital in the military camp which was stationed on the Awapuni Race Course near Palmerston North.<sup>4</sup> One Saturday afternoon it was very quiet so his superior decided to take leave for the afternoon. This meant Douglas was alone with a few patients.

A little later in the day men began returning to camp, and collapsing in all directions. The camp hospital soon became full of patients, and as well as attending these men, Douglas had to set about erecting tents for accommodating others who were coming in. The next morning it became a serious situation. Suddenly the Y.M.C.A. Hall in the camp was required to be turned into a hospital, and was also soon filled. Those men still on their feet, were fumigated and the camp was put under strict isolation. (History does not tell us the method of fumigation).

Because of the communications of the time, Douglas was unable to contact his wife Ann, who was so worried that she walked a long distance to the camp gate to enquire where he was, and why he had not come home, as he had permission to live out of camp in the community. After she had waited a short while, he arrived at the gate, but stood a long distance away, as he recalled “so that he would not contaminate her”.

A few days later, on getting up one morning after a very restless night, he felt most unwell, and was ordered to bed. He had no recollection of how long he was in hospital, but his military records indicate he was hospitalised for seven days with moderately severe influenza.<sup>5</sup> On discharge from the hospital, he made his way to the mess tent at 10am. What a reception he received as the soldiers all laughed at how unsteady he was, but he was just as amazed when he saw them, and described them as “walking skeletons, absolutely bloodless looking, and all wearing black beards as they had been too sick to shave”.

Douglas was upset when he found out that some of his mates had died of this illness. One of the victims was his very good friend, the bugler, with whom, at one stage, he had shared a house in Palmerston North.

He recalled the constant military funerals, with the bagpipes playing their laments, while troops slow-marched through the streets of Palmerston North to the cemetery. Often they passed others returning back from the cemetery from earlier funerals. He described it as a “sorrowful” time.

While the camp was still under isolation, a train travelling on a nearby line, went past continually whistling, “Hip Hip Hoorah. Hip Hip Hoorah”. The troops immediately knew that peace had been declared. The Mayor of Palmerston North decided that a procession through the streets would be appropriate. Of course the men in camp would not miss that! They broke camp and started running towards the middle of the town. An attempt was made to stop them, but many were not caught, and it is believed that this was how the infection spread into Palmerston North, as a few days later the local people fell ill.

A call was issued from the Mayor for help in nursing the sick. Appeals for help also came from other surrounding towns. Douglas volunteered to help in Palmerston North where a relief depot was set up in the centre of the town.

Sergeant Douglas Stewart reported to the Mayor and was immediately put on patrol duty in a block of the city, and was instructed to visit every house searching for victims. After determining their condition and their needs, he was required to return to the depot for medicine and other necessities and deliver them back to the patients. He was informed that if the door was unlocked, he was to walk straight in, as he was in his Medical Corps Army uniform.

In one case he found two small boys in a house alone. They were very sick and they had no idea what had happened to their parents.

In another home he found a woman with pneumonia. He took her temperature and told her if she needed any help to send for him.

On one occasion he had spent the day walking his section of the town and had one house to visit before his duty was over. In his hand he had one orange left in his bag. The lady who was in bed, was not impressed that all he could offer her was one orange. After a grueling day he went home quite distressed that he was unable to give her more help.

The Mayor then called for night nurses. Douglas volunteered for night nursing, and found that this was in addition to his day shift. He was sent to a home where both parents and their three children were all very ill. At the end of his day patrol, he went straight on night duty and nursed this family all night. Next morning he was relieved by a female nurse, so he decided to return home to have some sleep.

He had only just settled into bed when a call came that the lady with pneumonia needed urgent help. He rushed to his dangerously ill patient, and it was obvious to him that a doctor was required immediately, but it took him all day to find one. The doctor eventually arrived at the house at 5pm, and ordered the patient be sent to an emergency

hospital set up in the YMCA building. Douglas arranged for the ambulance and personally escorted the lady to hospital.

It was now time to be back on night duty in the home of the family of five. He had just spent the last 36 hours among the sick and without any rest. At 5am the next day a doctor came on his rounds. He examined the five patients and then, as he was leaving, turned to Douglas and said “You are going to lose the children – there is no hope for them”. The baby died soon after. The other children were transferred to an emergency children’s hospital in a local hall, where they both recovered.

His friends told him that he would kill himself with overwork, but he carried on, and when the worst was over, spent a day resting in Palmerston North with his wife Ann, and their baby daughter, Dolina<sup>7</sup>.

When the epidemic began to wane he returned to camp to be told “You have been having an easy time”. He was posted to orderly sergeant duty for several weeks, and was not impressed that this meant there would not be any leave granted.

Christmas time approached and at last he was given leave. He took his wife and daughter to Auckland to see the family. When it was time to return to camp, he left them with Ann’s parents in Auckland<sup>8</sup>. On arrival back at camp at Awapuni, he found there was little happening, so he decided it was time to put in his application for discharge.

The Camp Commandant tried to persuade him to stay on, as calls were being sent out for volunteers to go the Pacific Island of Fiji where the influenza was rife. Douglas felt he had done his utmost under the conditions he had found himself in, and it was now time to move on.

#### Reference:

1. Enclopaedia of New Zealand, Volume 1, 1966
  2. Life and Experiences of D B Stewart (written for his children)
  3. Douglas Brown Stewart was born 24 May 1890 – New Zealand Birth Records
  4. Personnel Records New Zealand Expeditionary Force
  5. Medical History from above.
  6. Reported by Douglas’ sister in *Black November* – Geoffrey W Rice
  7. Anne (England) Stewart born 17 December 1892, Dolina Ellen Stewart born 15 January 1918 – New Zealand Birth Records.
  8. William John England born 25 September 1860 – English Birth Records, and Dolina Finlayson born 10 December 1868 – New Zealand Birth Records.
- The remainder of this story is from information taken from his book *Life and Experiences of D B Stewart* (written for his children)

