**ANZAC 2015**

4.45 am. Hastings is still; the blanketing fog invades my many layers. There is an eerie silence this time of the morning. Hands fisted in pockets, my breath mists as I stride out trying to create warmth with every step. We walk quietly. As we draw near a hush settles over the gathering crowd, a sense of anticipation and reverence haunts the whispers and softened voices; the occasion makes demands of its own. The insidious mist muffles the steady beat of feet on tarmac but fails to dampen spirits. As the parade passes we follow at a respectful distance and head toward the cenotaph. Red blankets bathe the trees; poppy petals appear luminous in the artificial light, a considered brush of colour on the inky darkness out of which they grow. This morning’s National Anthem carries the pride of the 8000 who are there, and the service begins. Together we remember those who “risked and lost their lives on that beach, and in other major battles including Messines, Passchendaele and the Battle of the Somme, [whose] courage and compassion we remember each ANZAC Day.” Qualities that have become known as the Spirit of the ANZAC and are forever etched in the hearts of New Zealanders.

As part of this year’s commemorative proceedings there is an unveiling. Major General Sir Andrew Russell was one of Hawke’s Bay’s “most famous and admired sons”, Mayor Yule tells the crowd, “he earned a fearsome reputation for his tactical skills, insistence on strict discipline, care for his men and his personal courage. Under his leadership, the New Zealand force was regarded as one of the finest in the allied army. On his return from war he was greeted with a hero’s welcome in Wellington, and hailed in Maori as ‘Ariki Toa’: the fighting chief sent forward to lead.”

Sir Russell’s men were instrumental in the seizure of Chunuk Bair and his efforts at Gallipoli earned him a knighthood. He led the New Zealand Division in France and was tasked with the capture of the town of Messines. After Messines, some of the New Zealand Division were stationed at Brocton Camp on Cannock Chase. The number of connections New Zealand has to the chase is surprising; there is something heartening about the ties my parents’ favourite walking area has to what is now my second home. It makes the distance smaller. Under the supervision of the New Zealand troops, German prisoners of war built a model of the Belgian village of Messines. This terrain model, believed to be the last of its kind, helped save thousands of lives. Homes, churches, trenches were all depicted in painstaking detail. The New Zealand troops gifted the model to Stafford when they left for home. Philip Atkins, leader of Staffordshire County Council, described the recent archaeological dig to uncover the model “as a poignant reminder of those who helped change the course of history for all of us [that] will help the legacy of the men who served at Brocton Camp to be remembered for generations to come.”

As the service draws to its close distant lights break the dark horizon . . .



Notes:

Further information, quotes and pictures of the ANZAC Day service can be found on the Hastings City Council website: <http://www.hastingsdc.govt.nz/anzac>. The New Zealand History website (<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz>) has more details on Sir Andrew Russell.

Information on the archaeological dig was taken from “The Excavation and Survey 2013 Report,” written by Martin Brown and Kirsty Nichol and available on the *Staffordshire County Council Great War* website: <http://www.staffordshiregreatwar.com>; “2013 The First World War 1918 Messines Ridge model on Cannock Chase,” by John Wilcock on the *Stafford and Mid-Staffs Archaeological Society* website: <http://www.fcet.staffs.ac.uk/jdw1/samas>. The quote from Philip Atkins came from the article “Cannock Chase War Excavation Extended as More Details Uncovered” on the *Express and Star* website: <http://www.expressandstar.com>.

Unless named all photos are by the author.