



New Zealand's First World War Centenary Programme

Historical information sheet on the Armistice centenary

November 2018

This information sheet provides an overview of the history of the Armistice that ended the First World War.

What is the history behind Armistice Day?

11 November 2018 marks the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War. After four terrible years, the First World War finally came to an end with the signing of an Armistice between the Allied Powers and Germany on 11 November 1918. The fighting ceased at 11 a.m. – the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

At the time there were around 58,000 New Zealand troops serving overseas, including more than 24,000 on the Western Front. Some of these men had been in action as recently as the week before the Armistice, famously liberating the walled French town of Le Quesnoy on 4 November. In late December New Zealand troops arrived in Cologne to form part of the Allied occupation force in Germany, but most were sent home between January and March 1919.

On the morning of 12 November, when news of the Armistice was announced in New Zealand, people celebrated enthusiastically in cities and towns across the country: bells rang, sirens sounded and children banged on kerosene tin drums. Communities came together, speeches were made and songs sung. More organised celebrations followed later in the day. Bunting went up and torchlight processions, fireworks and bonfires lit up the night in many centres.

As New Zealanders had recently celebrated the surrenders of the three other Central Powers – Bulgaria, Turkey and Austria-Hungary – as well as premature news of an armistice with Germany, many people anticipated the Armistice and had made plans in advance. However, public events in some centres – notably Auckland – were more subdued due to the deadly influenza pandemic that was then sweeping the country.

Armistice Day was formally inaugurated throughout the Commonwealth on 11 November 1919, when King George V requested that all British subjects observe two minutes' silence to remember the fallen. Although New Zealanders continued to mark Armistice Day every year, as a commemorative event it was increasingly overshadowed by Anzac Day. After the Second World

War the Dominions, including New Zealand, decided to change its name to Remembrance Day and observe it on the Sunday preceding the 11th (later moved to the second Sunday in November).

Public interest in Armistice Day declined in New Zealand in the second half of the twentieth century, but in the 1990s there were signs of a revival. Since its 75th anniversary in 1993, it has been marked throughout New Zealand with services at the National War Memorial in Wellington and at local war memorials.

Historical quotes and readings for speeches

1. A description of Wellington's Armistice Day celebrations:

"Happy people quickly filled the streets. Desks and benches, and counters were soon deserted. Ships and buildings, shop fronts, and the raiment of men and women, boys and vehicles, motor-cars and carts flashed the colours of the triumphant nations. There were songs and cheers, miscellaneous pipings and blastings, and tootings and rattlings – a roaring chorus of gladsome sounds. The people gave themselves wholly to an ebullition of thanksgiving."

Source: *Evening Post*, 12 Nov 1918

2. A description of Stratford's Armistice Day celebrations:

"The ringing of the fire-bell, whistles blowing, the tin-can band of the boys, and other devices with which to make a noise joyfully, soon spread the great news over the countryside. There was such a sigh of relief that it could be almost felt. People beamed in each other's faces. Not much was said. There were a few silent hand-shakes. The pent-up feelings of years could not be expressed in words all at once. Perhaps, it was the thought of a dear one for ever gone, of the empty sleeve, maimed limb, or disfigured feature of a relative or close friend; may be, the thought of the Hell of the past four years welled up in the heart and made all else matter nothing for the time being. It almost seemed good to be sad for a moment, and then Joy won, and the rest of the day was spent with the spirit of

thankfulness uppermost, and with an exuberance of pleasure, tempered with the remembrance of the dignity of Victory.”

Source: *Stratford Evening Post*, 13 Nov 1918

3. Armistice scenes from Masterton as reported in the Wairarapa Daily Times:

“Masterton literally went mad yesterday. Dull care, and likewise business, was scattered to the four winds, and young and old simply 'let themselves go'. The sick, the halt, the lame, the blind--all joined in making merry over the final success of the Allied arms and the end of the war. Whistles screeched out, bells rang, people cheered and screeched with joy, bands played, and there was a scene in Queen Street such as never before has been recorded.”

Source: *Wairarapa Daily Times*, 13 Nov 1918

4. Bert Stokes recalls the end of the war in 1918:

“The Battle of Le Quesnoy was over and the battery was forward in what they called the Forest of Mormal. It was winter – November – and the forest was pretty miserable. And then on the 11th we got word to say we were going back to rest. So we all got ready and just as we were about to leave, word came that the Armistice was going to be signed at eleven o'clock.

“Well now, you know, there was no cheering. I mean the chaps didn't get excited or anything like that. It was just a matter of relief; we didn't celebrate at all.”

Source: Nicholas Boyack & Jane Tolerton, *In the Shadow of War: New Zealand Soldiers Talk about World War One and their Lives*, Auckland, 1990

5. Memories of Armistice Day from Corporal Colin Gordon, NZ Medical Corps, who was serving at a hospital in England:

“It was no surprise to me that eventually we came to an armistice, because you could see it in the daily reports in the newspapers. And on the 11th of November it was announced. Now, in the village we had no factories or anything to have hooters, but all the church bells rang and that was the signal that at eleven o'clock the Armistice had been signed.

“Discipline in the hospital went pretty much by the board at that moment and my friend Carl Howarth and I decided immediately to go to London for Armistice night.

“The crowds covered the streets from pavement to pavement. Wheel traffic was an impossibility. I've never seen such crowds in my life – joyous and happy people, shouting and going on, bands of all sorts, musical instruments. And one thing I remember very clearly that amused me was to see an American Army officer with his girl cake-walking down the middle of the street – the crowds parted to let them through – and they were singing at the tops of their voices.”

Source: Nicholas Boyack & Jane Tolerton, *In the shadow of war: New Zealand soldiers talk about World War One and their lives*, Auckland, 1990.

6. Len Wilton writes to his sweetheart in New Zealand, Ilma McLachlan (nicknamed 'Chick'), from No.1 General Hospital, Brockenhurst, England, 14 December 1918

“It was getting very hard towards the end. We could see the end in the distance and it made everybody more keen to get through without getting smashed at the finish. One of my best mates was killed just after we crossed the canal, in fact, three out of four on the one gun were killed and three more on the guns were wounded. That was the news we got when we arrived at the battery position to take the guns forward again and away we had to go and leave the three lying just where they were killed ...

“Everywhere you would look you would see the poor white faced boys making their way back wounded and could only just manage to get along. Then there was the boy who could not walk and had to be carried out. They were generally carried by the German prisoners. Chick I suppose I should not be telling you so much of this sort of thing but really nobody could ever imagine what it was like ... and then it would be hard to believe what they would see at times. I know for myself there were times I used to wonder was it all true or was I in some mad dream.

“Never mind, it is all over now and let's hope it will be a lesson to those who have been connected and suffered through this war. I am very glad to have been right through and seen what there was to be seen. I will be able to return now and feel that I have done my bit.”

Source: Beth Sutherland, *My Dear Chick: A New Zealand Love Story, 1911-1948*, Fraser, Masterton, 2008

7. The Governor-General's reply to the King's armistice message:

"New Zealand thanks Your Majesty for your gracious message today. This Dominion, in common with Your Majesty's whole Empire and the Allies, rejoices at the cessation of hostilities and feels that however great the sacrifices have been, the issue leaves no doubt that they have not been made in vain. New Zealand earnestly prays that by the blessing of Providence Your Majesty may long be spared to reign over an Empire at peace and united not only for the good of its own peoples, but for the welfare of the whole world."

8. Editorial from the *New Zealand Herald*:

"Into our rejoicing comes the solemn recognition of the great cost at which it has been won. Not that the price of victory can be measured. It cannot. There are parts of the price that defy calculation. Financiers will compute the millions spent and the millions needed to make good the material property destroyed ... But what of the levy of life? The Allies' military records will ere long furnish the full lists of our dead and missing, lists that will be all numbers and names ... But behind the dread array of numbers and names there walks a legion of tragic sorrows, each unit of which assails some hearts of the living. Personal and poignant grief is among us because of this part of the price of triumph. The cypress mingles with the bay in wreath of victory. We do not, we cannot, forget the debt our ransomed world owes to the gallant fellows who have proved that for the sake of its freedom they counted not their lives dear unto them; and to their bereaved beloved we all would extend a sympathy as sincere as our gratitude is great. And so of the sick and the maimed, some of whom have been, and others will be, brought among us in this country by the cruel ruthlessness of war. They have our regard, and here shall have our practical aid. Ours is a debt incalculable to all, dead and living, who have stood for us in "the imminent deadly breach". They have, by their shielding of us, made us all their next-of-kin. We cannot measure their sacrifice any more than they could gauge it; but their lost lives, their broken careers, their spent health, will make them the perpetual pensioners of our quickened affection."

Source: *NZ Herald*, 13 Nov 1918

9. From a letter by Major Lindsay Inglis MC to his fiancée, 16 Nov 1918:

"Peace is now assured to us. Great to think of; but its 'greatness' is quite lost upon us all here – we don't quite realise it and we seem just to have slid from war into peace. Our routine is exactly the same as that of a division in reserve.

"The present condition of affairs seemed to occur quite naturally, and as far as our part of the show was concerned there wasn't the slightest demonstration or celebration to mark it. One or two 'Tommy' outfits went a bit dotty and fired coloured lights and got 'lit' themselves – that was all. Now one feels unaccountably restless. The job feels over and I for one am impatient to be quit of it."

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, MS-Papers-0421-09

10. Thanks to all the nations involved on the Allied side, from celebrations at Southbridge:

"Thanks should be rendered to God for the magnificent work of the British Navy, for the great fight put up by Britain's first 100,000 soldiers ... for the deeds accomplished by the Anzacs on Gallipoli, for the wonderful bravery and tenacity of the French, Belgians and Italians, for the aid rendered by America, Rumania, the Algerian natives, Morocco, by the Chinese labourers, the Japanese Navy, which had escorted so many thousands of New Zealand soldiers overseas, for the vigilance of the Australian Navy, the bravery of our airmen and submarine crews, and for men such as our King, our statesmen, King Albert, President Wilson and M[onsieur] Clemenceau."

Source: *Ellesmere Guardian*, 16 Nov 1918

Where can I get more information?

More information is available at:

- WW100.govt.nz
- firstworldwar.govt.nz
- Free to use available at WW100.govt.nz/publicity-images