

BANK OF NEW ZEALAND MEMOIR AWARD

WINNER: The Old Kuia with the VC Husayn Rawlings

A few miles south of Ruatoria the gravel road leaves the flats and winds slowly back and forth to the top of a hill. From here one sees Mt Hikurangi, spiritual home of the East Coast, presiding over an expansive natural basin which leads to Ruatoria on the opposite side.

We lived nine miles south of Ruatoria, and whenever we went 'into town' as country people say, we climbed the winding gravel road up this hill. To me, then about nine years old, this hill was special because on it we passed the house where Moana Ngarimu had grown up. The Ngarimu home was set back off the road where it was only partly visible up a long tree-lined driveway. As one continued past, following the main road down the other side, the house was more fully visible from below. One could look back and see it watching over the township three miles beyond it, holding constant vigil from its secluded setting, its restrained solitude enhanced by the variety of native and fruit trees surrounding it.

Moana Ngarimu was one of many young men from the district who had enlisted with the Maori Battalion to fight in the Second World War. Like many from this area, he never returned. Tales of the bravery and battles of these men were oftentimes recalled, and, when not openly spoken of, were still present in the names of the locals. I knew people called Amsterdam and Egypt who had been born while their fathers were in those places, and others called Major and Sergeant, born around the time their fathers received these promotions.

In the Ngarimu family there were no such names. There was now just the one person living in the house, his mother. All the children in the district knew of this old lady, and her special memento of the war. It was a very rare, very valuable souvenir - one that was imbued with such honour, so it was said, that only a King or Queen could bestow it. It was a medal, rarely given, called the Victoria Cross.

When I was young I fed off the tales of heroic adventures and conquering warriors. Stories from the Knights of King Arthur, the trials of Odysseus and other classical heroes, and tales of great Maori leaders such as Te Rauparaha, a chief who successfully and against all odds established one of the great tribal fiefdoms of pre-European New Zealand. All these people belonged to a distant past. But here - right here on the way to Ruatoria - was the home of a hero of my own time, of my own people. I decided to visit the home of Mrs Ngarimu, the 'Old Kuia' as she was respectfully known, or as we kids used to say, wide-eyed and nodding knowingly to each other, "the Old Kuia with the VC." I would visit her and ask to see the Victoria Cross.

Weeks passed, and I did nothing about it, each day busied by school or friends or chores of country living. Then one weekend, when at a loss for something to do, it suddenly occurred to me that today would be a good day to see the VC. I caught my horse and set out. The shortest route was across country, but this meant crossing The Mata, a river that claimed a victim every year and had not yet satisfied this year's quota. It was summer, so the river was very low and quite safe, yet it was unthinkable that I appear to tempt fate by crossing this river when going to visit the 'Old Kuia'. We kids were free to gallop about and yell like cowboys, scattering livestock in the paddocks. We could cull excess fruit from poorly fenced and unwatched orchards, and generally behave at the wide boundaries

of tolerance granted to country kids on the East Coast, except . . . except when visiting the Elders. In those times, when one visited the Elders, the visit began when one set out, and the process of quiet decorum on the journey was somehow perceived as part of the visit. So I set out following the road.

It was a still hot day as only the East Coast can provide, and because the roads were unsealed the occasional vehicle that passed caused the dust to fly into the air, billowing in the after-draught, then hang suspended, slowly fading until it finally settled. Fortunately there was little traffic for it was above an hour's ride - a long time to 'chew dust'.

My horse flattened his ears and turned his head from the road, sometimes shaking it and snorting in discomfort whenever a car sent dust billowing, but I wasn't bothered by it. For me there existed only the expectancy and excitement that finally, today, this very day, I would see Ngarimu's VC - that tangible emblem of his bravery and heroic action, made yet more precious and even 'holy' by having been earned at the cost of his life.

When I arrived I tied my horse inside the gate, then walked the long driveway to the house. The trees, which I had seen so often from the road, were much bigger and more fully branched than appeared when driving past, and filled with bird noise competing with the sound of cicadas. At the house I knocked and waited. For a long time I heard no movement, then suddenly the door opened. An old lady in black, standing very erect, with fine-boned features and white hair tied neatly to the back of her head, peered at me with uncomprehending eyes.

"Yes what do you want?" she said in one unbroken sentence.

"Mrs Ngarimu," I replied in my best manners, "I've come to ask if I can see the Victoria Cross."

There was a long pause as she studied me.

"Who are you?"

I stammered out my name, embarrassed at having left her to make that enquiry, but it did not seem to register with her, so using the local custom I mentioned my father's name.

"Oh, you're Rewi's boy" she said, suddenly being able to place me, and using not the name I had given for my father but the name local Maori had given him shortly after he arrived on the East Coast as a 17-year-old fresh from his native land. There were even fewer pakeha on the East Coast then, and my father having come into its heartland was given that name.

"Yes" I replied, relieved that she had made some connection with me, and more hopeful now that I might achieve my goal.

"Who brought you here?" She walked past me, looking down the drive.

"I came by horse."

"So I see. Come in," she said, turning and walking slowly into the house.

The inside of the house was dark and I found it difficult to see after the bright sunlight outside. "Sit here," she said seating me at a table neatly covered with a lace cloth, while she went into an adjoining room.

“Would you like a drink of water?” she called in recognition of the heat outside and the distance I had come.

“No, thank you.” I was thirsty, but too shy.

While I waited my eyes adjusted to the relative darkness inside, and I could see various photos and family mementos arranged on surfaces around the room. Although it was a normal house, some of the walls were lined with tukutuku panels, of dyed flax woven into various designs. I recognized the poutana pattern on one of the panels, a design so special and difficult that very few people would weave it because to make a mistake in the weaving of it was to court death. To have this design in her own house showed she was a person of standing, in addition to the mana derived from her son. On a ledge to my right, set in pride of place amongst other family members was a large framed photo of Moana Ngarimu from the waist up and wearing his army uniform.

She returned and sat at the end of the table on my left, facing the portrait of Moana, and set before me a small box, taking the lid off so that its content was displayed. There before me was the Victoria Cross. I sat looking at it for some time, then asked if I might take it from the box. She lifted it out and handed it to me. I looked closely at it, struck by its plainness and simplicity. It was in the form of what I now know to be a Maltese Cross, made from bronze (one of the lowest or least valuable of metals) and providing an eloquent contrast with the fact that it is the Commonwealth’s highest military award for bravery. But at that time all I was aware of was that I held a Victoria Cross in my hand! Not just a Victoria Cross, but the Victoria Cross of Moana Ngarimu, first Maori to earn such an Honour.

I sat at Mrs Ngarimu’s table inspecting the medal in reverential silence. On the front of it was engraved the words “For Valor,” set around the bottom of a coat of arms. On the back of it was inscribed his full name, Moananui A Kiwa Ngarimu, and the date of the action for which the medal was awarded. The medal hung from a short purple ribbon, bordered at each end by a strip of bronze metal.

After I had been looking at it for some time, and sensing the great courtesy granted to me that I could actually handle the medal, I replaced it in its box, lined with purple velvet. I didn’t really know what to say, being shy and respectful, but felt that something needed to be said to acknowledge her son’s bravery and sacrifice. As I returned the box and medal to her hands I said, “You must be very proud of this Victoria Cross.”

She smiled, and said very quietly and kindly, “Oh, no. I would much rather have my son.” And she raised her eyes to look lovingly at the photo of Moana.

I lifted my head and looked with her at the photo of this handsome young man so poised and confident in his pose, so steady and assured in his gaze, looking past us into the unspoken promise of the fullness of life. In those few seconds my world was shaken so gently, and so profoundly. After a while she turned and smiled at me again, but I, still reeling in the face of this simple expression of love and loss, could now think only of leaving.

The ride home was long, the day had become even hotter, and the dust lingered for ages after each vehicle. As soon as it settled enough for my horse to breathe more freely I galloped on, hurrying home, only slowing to a walk for the infrequent vehicles that passed by. I had no thoughts then about my visit, only a troubling sense of disquiet that possessed me. And the gentle, kindly spoken words, following softly right behind me, “Oh no. I would much rather have my son.