

# The New Zealand Remembrance Army | An address from Simon Strombom



Established in June 2018 by former NZ Army Major Simon Strombom, the New Zealand Remembrance Army (NZRA) is now a nationwide volunteer network committed to remembering the people who served and to the restoration of all graves and memorials of those people.

## Achievements | Paetae of the NZ Remembrance Army

- Over 150,000 graves restored.
- Over 200,000 volunteer hours.
- Over 3,000 historical stories recorded.
- Over 5,000 volunteers and 57 regional teams established.
- Restoration of war graves in 80 cemeteries.
- 60 unmarked graves given.

The following is an abridged speech given by Simon to the Wellington Club in 2021 for Remembrance Day:

"Several years ago, I cleaned an overgrown grave for a forgotten soldier. It was in a neglected part of the Porirua cemetery.

I was there because of a social media post from Porirua War Stories. Their post featured Private John McGeehan. A proud, strong, young soldier who suffered shell shock at Courtney's Post, Gallipoli. He returned to New Zealand, but like so many veterans, he was never the same. He died at his own hands in the Porirua Sanatorium in 1926.

His story resonated with me.

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**I'd visited Gallipoli in 2004 while serving with the NZ Army, and saw first-hand the scale of the battlefield and I could easily imagine the hardships that the Anzacs had endured.**

Private McGeehan's grave was covered in moss and lichen, and lay forgotten.

I've been to the pristine commonwealth war graves of El Alamein, Kantara and also those in Israel. I thought that his neglected grave was an indictment of our society. I started to clean it, and as I looked around the cemetery, I realised that his grave wasn't the only one that had been forgotten.

This was the beginning of the New Zealand Remembrance Army.

There are thousands of service graves across New Zealand. Some date back to the land wars. These are the graves of ordinary men and woman, living in extraordinary times, doing extraordinary things for the country and for many, we have forgotten their stories. I want to remember them, hear their stories and honour them by ensuring that their grave is cared for.

Yes I want to clean and restore graves of service people, but my aim is for all of New Zealand to have an ongoing remembrance relationship with their people who gave everything for our country. The Remembrance Army is about their stories, it is about remembrance.

I began uncovering a lost generation of New Zealanders. The men who came back from World War I, many broken physically and or mentally. Some died without families. You can't tell who they are or identify their family ties. This isn't right. The very country these men served, isn't affording them the dignity and respect they deserve.

**There is an old saying that you die twice; once when you die, and once when the last person says your name.**

In restoring their graves and learning their stories, the Remembrance Army is saying their name once again. We have some amazing stories that need to be told.

Corporal Mose, buried in Porirua, epitomises our young nation and the courage showed by our young men going to fight in WW1. From Rarotonga, he moved to New Zealand when he was 17, and later joined the 6th reinforcements for the Wellington Regiment. He served at Gallipoli, before being transferred to the Māori Pioneers in France and fought in the major New Zealand campaigns of 1917. Promoted to Corporal, he was sent to the Sinai specifically to the Rarotongan Company. His descendants live in New Zealand, but he is well known in the Cook Islands where his great grand-daughter recently published a book on his life.

There are forgotten gems throughout New Zealand. Bernard Diamond VC lies in a quiet area of Masterson cemetery. He won his VC in the Indian Munity in 1856, and tragically, lying next to him is his son who was killed on the slopes of Gallipoli.

There are also the memorial graves. These memorials are for the sons that were killed overseas and they appear on their parent's graves. In Johnsonville, Wellington, there appears to be two graves, but on closer inspection, they're not graves but memorials to two sons.

One killed on Chunuk Bair, and the other in France. That family has gone to great effort to remember their lost sons. We cleaned and restored the marble, it's the least we can do. Yet sadly there are hundreds of these kinds of graves throughout New Zealand. The anguish of mothers and fathers lies forgotten.

In some cases, it's an only-child commemorated on a parent's grave. The family line ended by a war. It makes a councils' argument somewhat redundant about gaining family consent to restore a grave.

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Our research also uncovered graves with medals recognition that the service person never received, but there are many more instances where decorated service person is buried without the proper recognition of their bravery awards.

Frederick Goldsmith was a long-term employee of the Porirua Hospital. He fought in the Sinai campaign with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles and returned with a Military Medal for bravery under fire. He was a local identity and died in 1948 without any recognition on his grave. In 2018 the Remembrance Army and Porirua War Stories conducted a simple ceremony, and a plaque as placed on his grave befitting his courage.

We've also discovered many unmarked veterans' graves. We re-dedicated 8 soldiers' graves in Porirua. Seven were patients of the old Porirua Sanatorium and one a victim of the Influenza epidemic in 1918. There were another 30 unmarked graves at Lake View Cemetery, Marton – soldiers who died while at the Lake Alice Hospital. There are many more, all across New Zealand.

**By researching and publishing stories from Boer War to Afghanistan the Remembrance Army aims to help New Zealanders understand what their countrymen went through, and how their bravely and sometimes sacrifice helped shaped our nation.**

So, what now for war graves in New Zealand? The responsibility of the upkeep of these graves is spread across a number of organisations depending on the veteran and where they are buried. There is not one body responsible for these graves for those that returned or memorials for those that died overseas.

I'm advocating for an organisation similar to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to be established. An organisation that focuses on the management of all service graves and memorials. My vision is that it would provide a standardized level of grave and memorial maintenance, be a force for remembrance, and overcome the inconsistent local body management of these cemeteries.

Tired, unreadable and lost to all. We aren't honouring the legacy of our soldiers, and this shouldn't be reliant on the decision of a council employee, it should be the responsibility of a nation.

As the former NZ Army padre from Tologa Bay said to me.

**“Soldiers stand in straight lines, and their uniforms reflect their pride. Their bearing and dress is immaculate. Yet in their final resting places over New Zealand, they lie in lines overgrown, unkempt and neglected.”**

At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them."

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If you would like to join the Remembrance Army on one of their restoration projects, check out their Facebook page or send an email.

Facebook page for NZ Remembrance Army (<https://www.facebook.com/NZRemembranceArmy>) 

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Tags

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