

## Would we go to war again?

The big question in my mind is, would we do it again? Rush off to war, I mean, as though it's an adventure not to be missed.

Common sense says no. Never again will so many young men and women and their families be swayed by a sense of duty to a distant "mother country" and the prospect of travel to unknown places to achieve something important for a cause everybody must surely support.

Well, you'd think that. I'm not so sure. Political leaders have a way of manipulating public opinion to war causes that offer tantalising opportunities to secure their own positions of power. It's a scourge that hasn't gone away, despite the horrors remembered so magnificently in Taranaki last weekend with the Armistice Day commemorations.

Within a generation of that terrible conflagration, it happened again. Again, few families in New Zealand went unscathed. Both my wife and I lost uncles, mine felled in Crete, hers entombed in a torpedoed ship. As a prisoner of war, her Dad met Rommel in the desert campaign.

I stood at Uncle Ted's grave in Suda Bay on Crete and wept for him, for my mother and grandmother, for the futility of it, for the distance that separated him from us.

My brother and I were born straight after World War II and within its fresh memories. Not only was Uncle Ted's presence never far from the family mind, but my Dad had been to war, too. He wanted to be in the air force, but was denied by poor eyesight, so instead ran a vast air base kitchen in Fiji.

Grandad went to the Boer War. "The bullets killed you just the same," he'd say to anyone doubting its significance. An Aussie, he and his twin brother tried to enlist in Melbourne when they were 17 but were turned away. So they rode their horses across Australia and the Nullarbor Plain to Perth and lied their way into the British Army. He came home wounded.

It gave all these men a sense of comradeship, of belonging, of achievement. But there were downsides. Some who thrived in the pressures found it difficult to adjust when it was over. For years in the 1950s, men would knock on our door, be given a meal and a few bob, and they'd wander off. To our quizzical looks, the response would be "he was in the war", as though that explained everything.

At school, teachers who carried out their everyday role with quiet dignity and occasional outbursts of corporal punishment, became someone different when they put on uniforms again to lead our military parades.

For most of us, military drill and sandpaper suits were tolerated only because of the prospect of getting our hands on old rifles, and once a year marching down to the Rewa Rewa rifle range to watch seagulls being blasted to hell by the Army using nearly every weapon known to man.

Flower Power and the great silent marches – and many deaths - of young Americans against and in the Vietnam War averted some sort of repeat, and some, maybe many, in my generation of Kiwis similarly made an internal resolution not to be conned again.

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Perhaps “conned” is an unwise choice of word. Despite the uncomfortable overlay of militarism during last weekend’s ceremonies, the remembrance sentiment seemed foremost and suggests that no modern generation would respond the same way. Maybe.

New Plymouth man John Chapman summed it up, when - as he laid a wreath for his great uncle - he said: “It’s so far gone, but it’s one that needs to be remembered. It’s uncertain times, isn’t it.”

It is, John. The historical accounts of those who got us into these messes – Kennedy and Johnson and Vietnam (the “domino effect”), Thatcher and the Falklands, Bush and Blair and Iraq (“weapons of mass destruction”) – show the complexities of war-mongering, but also its straight-forward appeal to those who want to keep on ruling.

And now there is Trump. Read *Washington Post* journalist Bob Woodward’s revealing book, *Fear!* and be unnerved by the insider accounts of how the US president arrives at his “decisions”. On one hand he wants to save money by pulling America out of Afghanistan, South Korea and other expensive deployments, but on the other he was at one point very close to engaging in nuclear war with North Korea.

If the balloon goes up again, what might we all do?