

Looking back at my mea culpa

I've got a personal version of the *Stuff* Māori mea culpa. It dates back 34 years and was unintentional yet lamentable in its ignorance of things Māori.

It happened in my days as editor of the *Sunday Star*, when on August 29, 1986, I despatched a team to the East Coast by charter plane to cover the tangi of George Nepia (Ngāti Rākaipaaka), a 19-year-old sensation on the Invincible All Blacks' tour of 1924-25.

The photographer produced an arresting image showing George Nepia in his open casket, near enough for me to double-take. I asked him if we had permission.

Recalling it now, he says more than that, an elder urged him to take photos of the scene in the meeting house.

“Everyone there knew who we were. It wasn't a random anyone who approached me - he was an elder who had spoken on the marae that day. He could see I was itching to raise my camera and he encouraged me to get the pic.

“I was in a group of them and nobody showed any negative or otherwise reaction. The elder egged me on to take the shot. I later used it as part of a Qantas (Media Awards photography section) portfolio, which won something.”

I okayed the photo for the front page of the paper. Nobody complained afterwards, so I concluded we'd done nothing to offend. I learned otherwise when 18 months later I took a new job running the journalism course at Auckland Institute of Technology (now AUT).

One of my perks was a carpark below our classrooms in the Bledisloe Building near Aotea Square. On my second day into work, there was a car in “my” slot. I parked behind and complained to someone.

Next day when I arrived, my parking space was occupied not by a vehicle but a group of large Māori men. They told me I had offended their kaiako, who used the park for only short time to drop something off, there being nowhere else to stop.

I somehow escaped more than a telling off but went upstairs to a stronger one from my teaching colleague, Susan Boyd-Bell. I'd offended her as well because she had befriended the owner of the car, Mavis Tuoro, head tutor of the neighbouring diploma for Māori social work.

No doubt sussing that not only was the new head journalism tutor in need of some education in tikanga but also that most of our charges would be similarly uninformed, Susan and Mavis decided we would join her class at Hoani Waititi Marae for a few days.

It went well, did my first-ever visit to a marae (at age 40). On the first day we received a full welcome to what is regarded as a pan-tribal marae, and were later addressed by esteemed leader Pita Sharples, who in 2004 co-founded the Māori Party.

Whakapiripiri (which translates to “bunch together”) began that night about 9pm and involved people standing up and introducing themselves.

I got to go last...luckily. The first speakers were the Māori students, many of them adults, and they spoke to a common theme – about the offence to George Nepia's whānau perpetrated by the *Sunday Star* the previous year. Hell, I thought (a much worse word, actually).

One after the other they castigated the paper...but not me. They didn't need to. I rose to tell them who I was and what I'd done for a living up to that point, as if they didn't know.

I owned up and apologised, ending with a question: why didn't you complain? They did, they said – a couple of people rang talkback radio and had a go there. Why not us, me? No point, they said. Every point, I said. Nah.

Next day, I was treated with the same courtesy as the day before, even though I would find out over succeeding years that I'd breached protocol during that visit. As the oldest male leader when we went on to the marae I should have acknowledged the welcome with my kōrero in te reo. Later, I learned how from one of our Māori students.

Those moments of embarrassment had the right impact. I made every effort to educate myself about the country's indigenous people, especially marae protocol. I hope it made me a better teacher of the next generation of journalists who came my way.