



FINDING GEORGE

by Henrietta Bollinger

My great-great-uncle George kept a diary. It wasn't an ordinary diary, filled with details about everyday life. It was a diary about being a soldier in the First World War.

George the New Zealander

George's father, Maximilian (Max) Bollinger, moved here from Germany in the 1870s. Max worked as a policeman and then as a farmer. He married Margaret Sproule, an Irish woman, whose first husband drowned at sea and left her with a baby daughter. Eventually, Max became a New Zealand citizen. This meant he had the same rights as people born here. If Max had children, they would be New Zealanders, too.

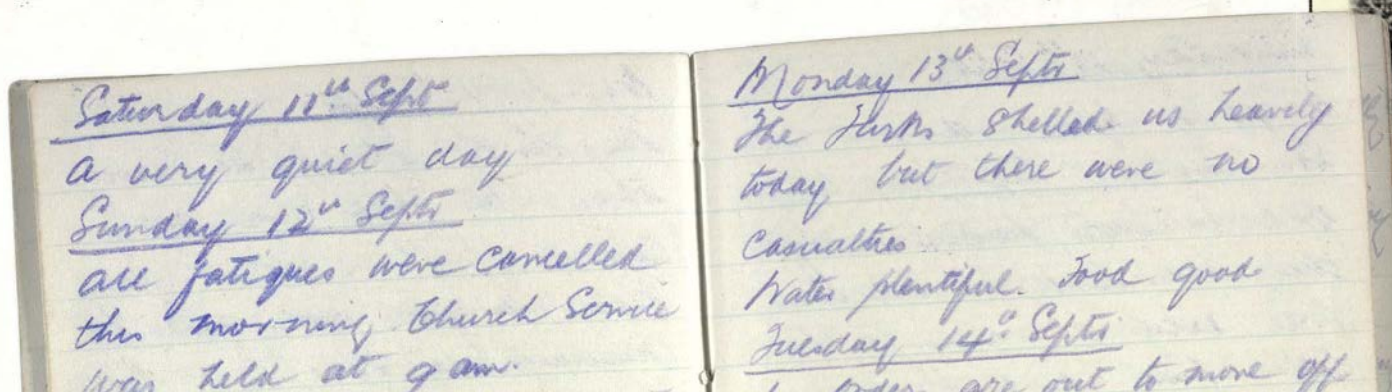
George was one of eight, including his half-sister, Fanny. The family lived in Ōmatā, in Taranaki. Naturally, they called themselves New Zealanders, but they still kept in touch with relatives in Germany, and a few of George's siblings even spent time there. One of his sisters worked in Germany as a governess, and a brother lived there with an aunt and uncle while he studied to be an engineer. Having strong connections with family in Germany seemed harmless at the time, but it would have terrible consequences.

George Wallace Bollinger was an ANZAC soldier at Gallipoli. Over a hundred thousand men died there in 1915, including almost 2,800 New Zealanders. My sister and I learnt about George when we researched a history project for school. It turned out that his diary was kept at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington. So we went there to take a look.

Along with the diary, we found George's letters and photos and will – all the usual things you might expect. But we also found something else: a letter from a private detective. He had been paid by the army to spy on George. It seemed that although my uncle thought of himself as an ordinary New Zealander, the same as his mates, not everyone saw it that way.



The Bollinger family in Ōmatā around 1895 (George on horseback on the far right, sitting behind his younger brother, Herman)





George in Egypt on his way to Gallipoli

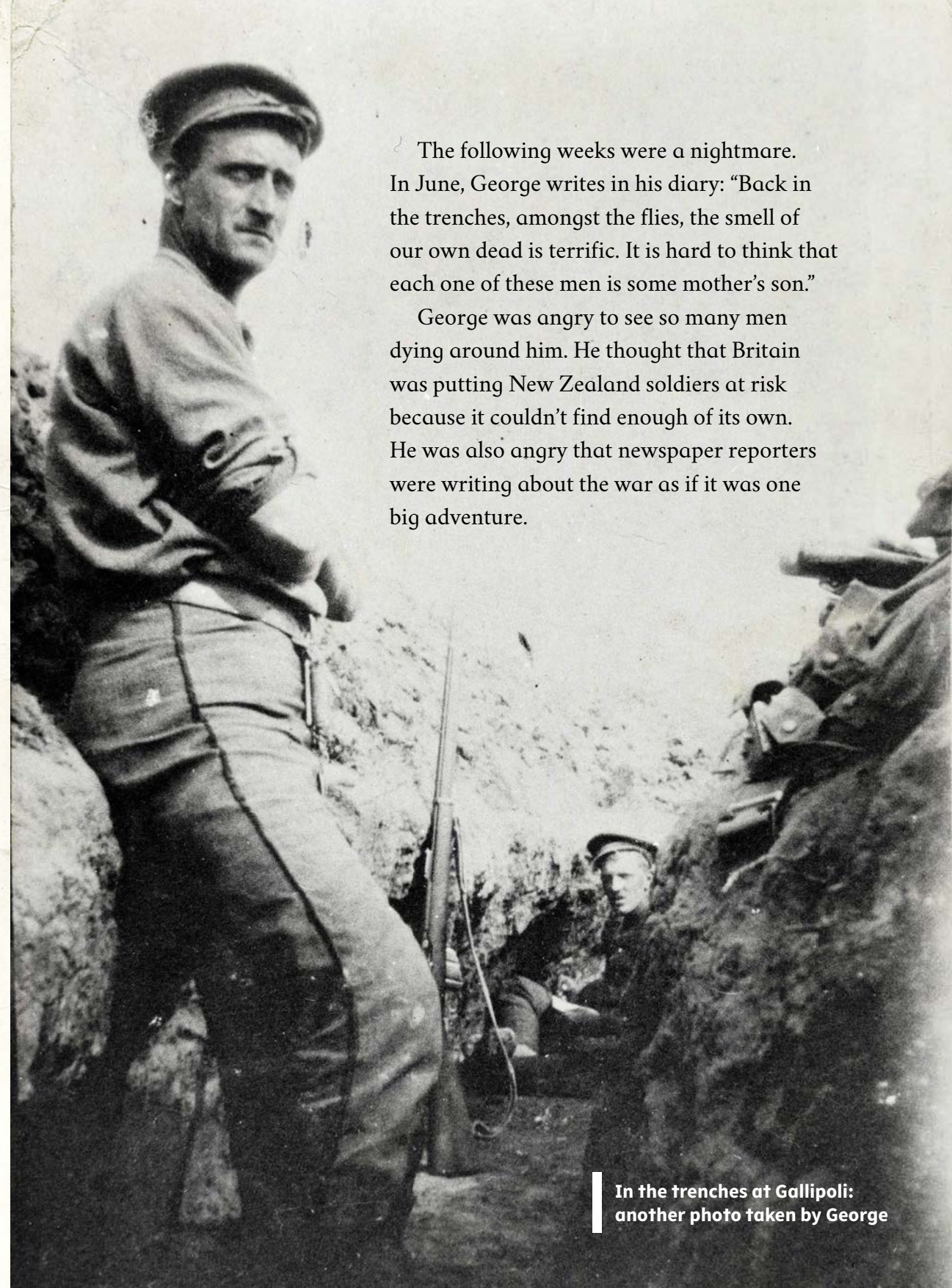
George the ANZAC

George was working in a bank when war was declared on 4 August 1914. He signed up nine days later. He had mixed feelings about leaving. In his diary, he writes about the wharf “crowded with thousands of sad faces” as people said goodbye. He also wrote: “How hard it is to realise that we are at last about to leave the shores of ‘God’s own Country.’”

George landed at Gallipoli on 26 April 1915. By ten that morning, he was “On shore in the thick of it”. He writes about the din and roar of the missiles, of climbing up to the firing line and seeing “awful sights”. The next day, George takes part in intense fighting. “On we rushed against a rain of bullets, and our men began to drop over before they fired a shot.”



Watching the bombardment: a photo taken by George on-board a boat the day before the Gallipoli landing



The following weeks were a nightmare. In June, George writes in his diary: “Back in the trenches, amongst the flies, the smell of our own dead is terrific. It is hard to think that each one of these men is some mother’s son.”

George was angry to see so many men dying around him. He thought that Britain was putting New Zealand soldiers at risk because it couldn’t find enough of its own. He was also angry that newspaper reporters were writing about the war as if it was one big adventure.

In the trenches at Gallipoli: another photo taken by George

George got sick in July and eventually spent a month in hospital on the island of Lemnos. By the time he returned to battle in early November, two men he admired had been killed. His diary entry about this was very short. George had little time to write – the fighting was too intense.

The ANZAC soldiers were finally evacuated in December. George left Gallipoli a very different man from the proud soldier who'd arrived five months earlier. He believed the deaths of many of his fellow soldiers were avoidable. "We will not be terribly proud of our Gallipoli bar," he wrote.

George the Officer

George returned to New Zealand at the beginning of 1916. He was no longer an ordinary soldier; now he was an officer, one of only six New Zealanders who had served at Gallipoli to be promoted. In April, George was sent to Trentham army camp. His job was to train new soldiers.

It's hard to know how George felt about this work. He'd stopped writing in his diary by this time. But we do know home wasn't the safe haven he'd dreamt of. News of George's promotion spread, and some people were appalled. How could this happen? George wasn't a loyal New Zealand soldier – he was a German!

Trentham army camp in 1914



George the German

Things like this were said by members of a group known as the Women's Anti-German League. These women took protecting their country very seriously, and they were deeply suspicious of a German surname. They worried that families like the Bollingers secretly supported Germany. In their opinion, this made those families the enemy, too.

At the time, there was a lot of prejudice and fear. Many German New Zealanders were imprisoned on Matiu/Somes Island in Wellington Harbour, and a well-known German professor was fired because his university didn't want trouble. The police even received reports about people carrying lanterns at night. Maybe they were using them to signal to the enemy!

In fact, the government had received a complaint about George just one month after he enlisted. The following year, it paid for that private detective's report. Although George was declared to be of "very good character", this didn't stop the suspicion. When George was made an officer, members of the League wrote to the Minister of Defence. "We mothers who have sons at the front feel that they should not be led by German officers bearing German names," one woman wrote.

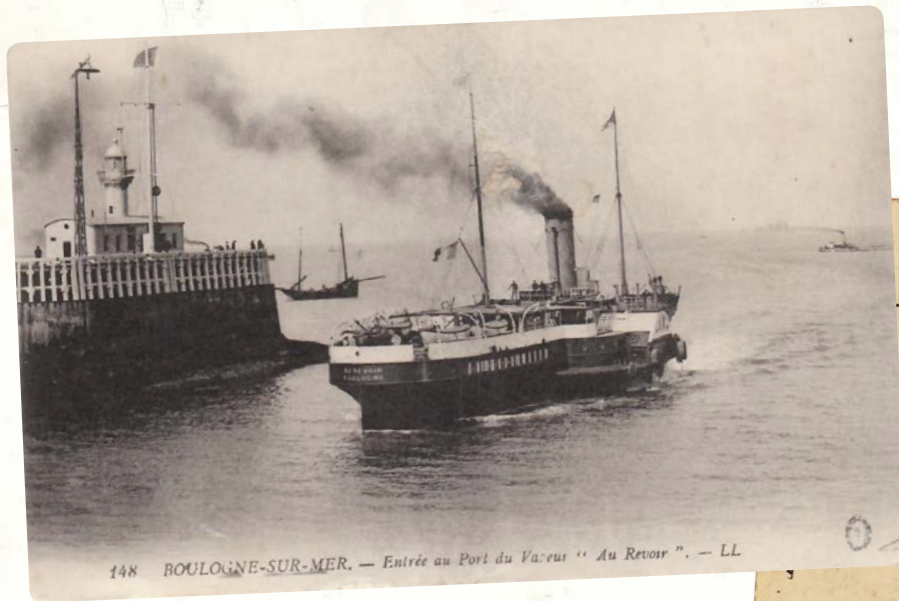
We mothers who have sons at the front feel that they should not be led by German officers bearing German names ...

George the Brave

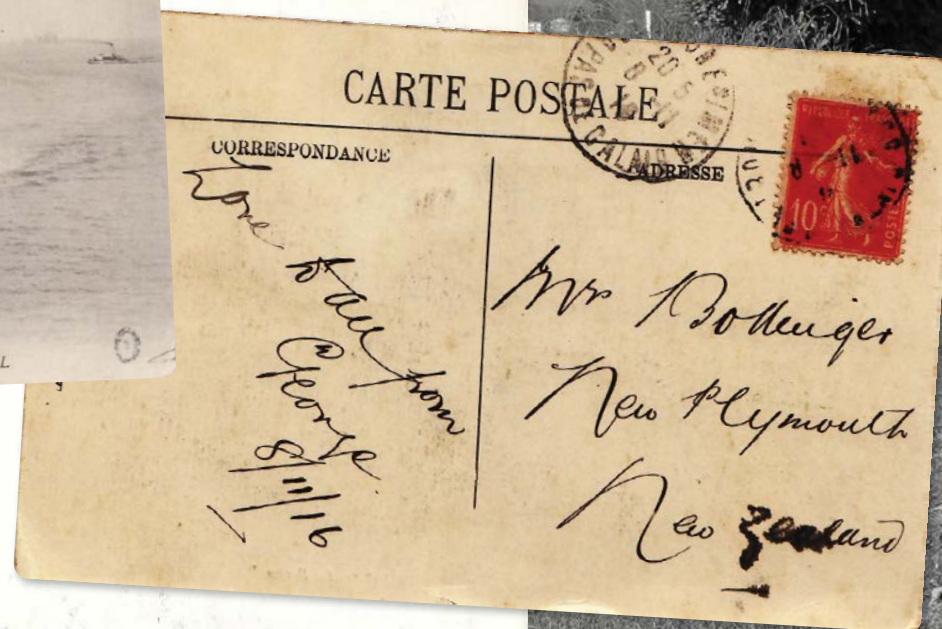
George was deeply affected by the things people were saying. Sometimes, they used more than words. The shops of some German businesspeople were vandalised and burnt down. In Taranaki, rocks were thrown at the Bollinger's home. George's parents moved to Wellington, and George volunteered to go back to the war.

My family believes George did this to prove his loyalty. He didn't have to return to the fighting. Despite this, he left New Zealand in August 1916. This time, he was headed for France and the Western Front. George fought at Messines, where he was shot. He died a few days later, on 10 June 1917. I've seen the telegram his mother was sent. "George killed" – that's all it said.

George left everything he owned to his brother Herman, but he died, too, from wounds received in the same part of France the following year. In Germany, the Bollinger family was also suffering. Eight of George and Herman's cousins died on the Western Front, fighting for the other side.



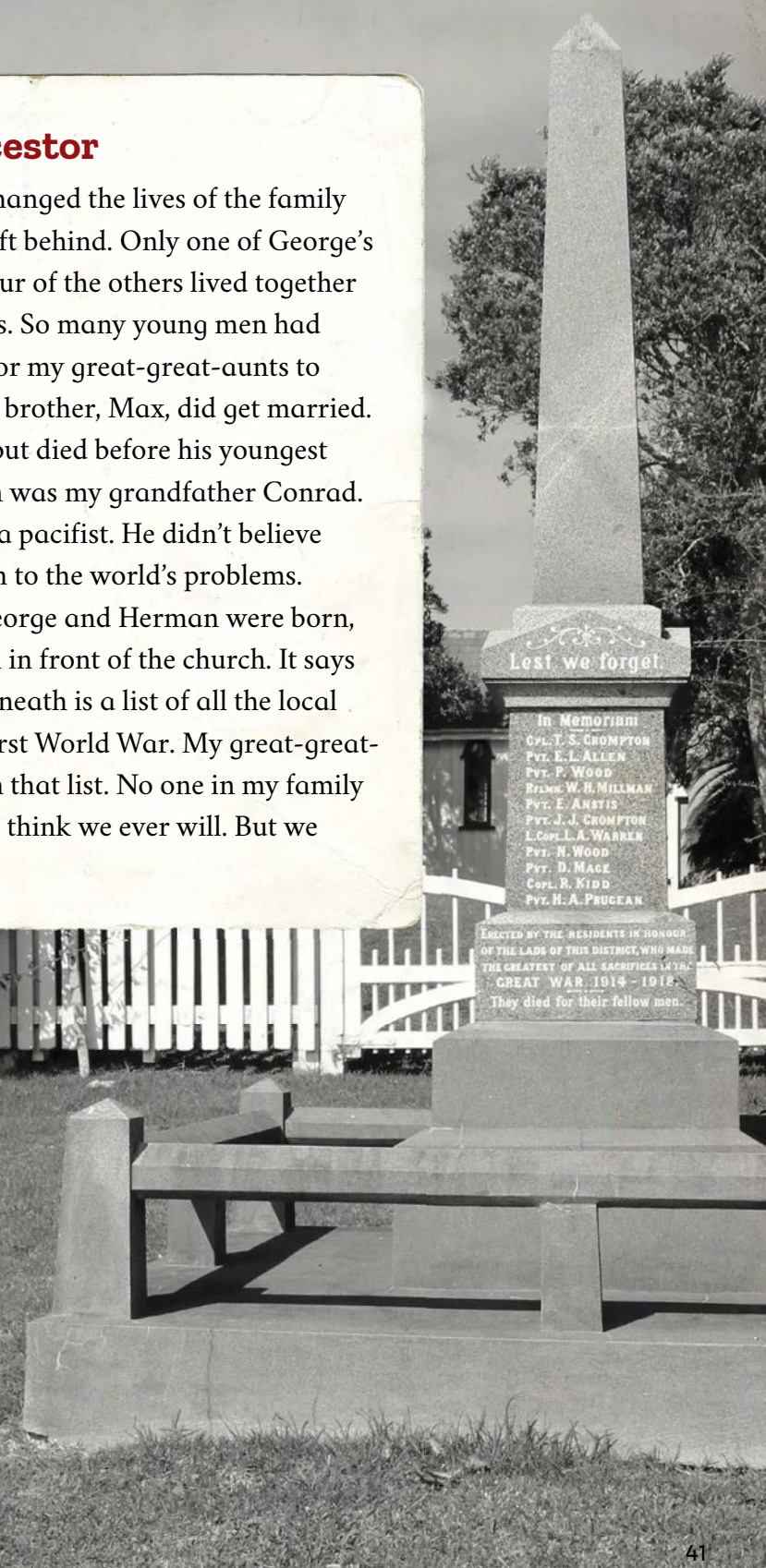
George's last postcard, sent to his mother from Calais, France, on his way back to the Western Front after leave in England



George the Ancestor

The First World War changed the lives of the family George and Herman left behind. Only one of George's sisters had children. Four of the others lived together for the rest of their lives. So many young men had died – who was there for my great-great-aunts to marry? George's oldest brother, Max, did get married. He had three children but died before his youngest son was born. That son was my grandfather Conrad. He grew up to become a pacifist. He didn't believe that war was a solution to the world's problems.

In Ōmatā, where George and Herman were born, there's a war memorial in front of the church. It says "Lest we forget". Underneath is a list of all the local men who died in the First World War. My great-great-uncles' names aren't on that list. No one in my family knows why, and I don't think we ever will. But we remember them.



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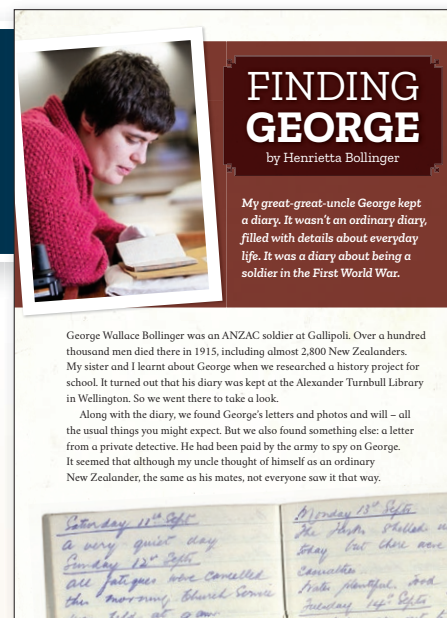
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Published 2018 by the Ministry of Education
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www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 344 3 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Liz Tui Morris
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 AUGUST 2018

Curriculum learning areas	English Social Sciences
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	bravery, courage, family history, family stories, fear, Gallipoli, George Bollinger, German ancestry, New Zealand history, Ōmatā, prejudice, private detectives, racism, soldiers, Taranaki, the Western Front, war, World War One