

SOUTH WAIRARAPA DISTRICT COUNCIL

28 JUNE 2017

AGENDA ITEM E1

REPORT FROM HER WORSHIP THE MAYOR

Purpose of Report

To update Council on the Messines Centenary Commemoration in Belgium.

Recommendations

Her Worship the Mayor recommends that Council:

1. *Receives the information.*

1. Battle of Messines 100th Commemorations

It was a privilege to be able to represent Featherston and South Wairarapa at the commemoration service last week in Messines.

The Mayor Sandy Evrard and CEO Patrick Florissoone made us very welcome. We attended two New Zealand services, the morning one was the formal service where the Governor General, the NZ Ambassador to Belgium and the NZ Chief of the NZ Armed Forces along with Belgium officials and youth representatives from Belgium, New Zealand and Germany spoke. Each speaker gave personal accounts of soldiers who had fought in the battle. It was an extremely moving and emotional service.

I lay a wreath alongside Mayor Sandy. At the end of the service I helped lay the wreaths from the ANZAC Club and the Featherston RSA.

The evening service was performed by the NZ Armed Forces, they used music to tell the story of the battle. The combined band was outstanding. The evening ended with all the military present singing Tu tiramai nga iwi and performing a Haka. It was very moving. This service was very different to any other service that day, it had a very strong NZ flavour.

We had lunch in the church which was provided by the local councils, provincial (Flanders) and Belgium government. It was interesting talking to various diplomats and local officials. We were not able to attend the Australian or Irish ceremonies due to constrained numbers.

There is a new memorial that was unveiled by the Governor General and a Helen Pollock sculpture depicting soldiers feet that has travelled from New Zealand and is now in the town square. There is an exhibition featuring the stories of 100 soldiers from the battle, which includes Wairarapa men, in the Mesen Museum in the old council offices.

The day ended with a good Kiwi barbecue. This also was a great opportunity to talk to the locals and find out how Belgium Local Government works. Councils are funded to the tune of 40% by Federal taxes, regional taxes are also provided and the rest is by property taxes and personal taxes.

Messines is the smallest council in Belgium with a budget of \$1 million euros. The neighbouring council has 6 small towns and approx. 8000 people. The Federal government has decreed that Messines is not allowed to amalgamate as it is the buffer between the different speaking areas of the country. Belgium has 3 languages, Flemish, French and German.

The local Belgium people and especially the people from Messines show an enormous gratitude to New Zealanders for liberating their town especially when there were so many New Zealand deaths and injuries. The whole town was completely obliterated; every building including the historic church was rubble. The town including the church has been rebuilt.

It is so hard to comprehend how terrible these Western Front battles were, there are endless Commonwealth War Cemeteries around the area from the French border to Messines, Ypres, Passendale and beyond. The Tyne Cot cemetery (near Passendale) has 12000 headstones the majority are of soldiers who were not able to be identified.

We visited the local school and presented the letters and artwork produced by Featherston, South Featherston and St Teresa's schools to the Principal. He was very appreciative and keen to make contact with all three schools. The school has around 150 students. The kids start school as 2 ½ year olds and are there until they are 13 year olds. The class sizes are small the biggest about 15. All the primary aged kids are very aware of Featherston and its relationship with Messines. They understand that the "twinning" is long standing and important to both towns.

The school's motto is "Little Stars", the Matariki artwork that Featherston School had done was very applicable. The artwork will be hung in every classroom. It was very humbling to see the next generation understanding and valuing the relationship between our two towns.

The day after the ceremonies we met with Mayor Sandy and Patrick and presented them with our gifts. Sandy loved the swamp totara chopping board, he is a butcher and loves cooking. They were particularly impressed by the RSA pins and the small quilt. We went with Sandy to the Irish Peace Tower and met up with the designer and builder of the tower and a group of Northern Irish school children who had sung at the Irish ceremony the previous day. They presented Sandy with a plaque.

It was wonderful talking to the designer and the teachers. They were also aware of the relationship between Featherston and Messines.

I have invited Mayor Sandy to consider attending the unveiling of the Paul Dibble Sculpture in November 2018. He will consider this and let us know.

It was appropriate that I attended the commemorations, there is certainly a strong bond between our two towns and this has been made stronger by the visit. The Mayor was very impressed with the numbers who turned up

for the Featherston ceremony. I hope we will be able to host Mayor Sandy in 2018. Thank you for the opportunity to represent SWDC at the 100th commemorations it was amazing to be there.

Prepared By: Her Worship the Mayor, Viv Napier