Crossing the lines: the story of three homosexual New Zealand soldiers in WWII

The following is a transcript of a talk given by Brent Coutts and recorded live at Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa the National Library of New Zealand on 7 July 2021. A question and answer session that followed the talk is also included.

Transcript

Sarah Burgess: Kia ora, ko Sarah Burgess tōku ingoa, he Pou Hītori ki te Manatū Taonga. Hi there, I'm Sarah Burgess, a historian at Manatū Taonga, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage.

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Sarah: Tēnā koutou katoa, ko Sarah Burgess tōku ingoa, he Pou Hītori ki te Manatū Taonga.

Good afternoon everyone. I'm Sarah Burgess, a historian at Manatū Taonga the Ministry for Culture and Heritage. It's my great pleasure to welcome you all to our July Public History Talk and introduce today's speaker.

I'd like to welcome Brent Coutts who's going to speak to us about research for his latest book, *Crossing the lines: the story of three homosexual New Zealand soldiers in World War Two*. Brent is a writer and historian based in Auckland. In 2009, he was awarded a Royal Society Te Apārangi teaching fellowship, which allowed him to begin research into New Zealand soldiers' experiences during the Second World War. His book, *Crossing the lines*, published last year, was long listed in the 2021 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards, and was the result of his 10-year research project. The book brings to light the previously

untold history of New Zealand homosexual soldiers in the Second World War. Please join me in welcoming Brent.

[clapping]

Brent Coutts: Tēnā koutou. Thanks everyone for coming along today, I appreciate that. So, I've written I guess what is a military history, but it's also a social history, which I hope opens up a new understanding of our past, a new understanding about a group of homosexual men during World War Two, their lives before the war and after the war. And it focuses on three, three men here and we have them in uniform. [Brent speaks to photographs on slide.] And then we have them in a different type of uniform, in I guess we call it in today's language, drag. Although they did not consider what they did to be drag. It was female impersonation, and they were very firm on that. On the top left is Ralph Dyer and he is directly below in the second photo. In the middle at the top is Douglas Morison. He is here on the right in the lower picture. And the shorter figure is Harold Robinson on the right at the top and he's the one in the middle down below. I didn't get a photo that perfectly lined them up in military uniform and as a female impersonator.

So they're, they are all homosexual men and they use that term and they provide the central story, the central narrative, of this history. They were drafted into the war and they all performed in concert parties, providing entertainment for the troops.

Ralph and Douglas were in the Pacific Kiwi Concert Party up in New Caledonia, and they toured Vanuatu and the Solomons, particularly Guadalcanal, Vella Lavella and the Treasury Islands. They did get as far as Nissan Island and the Green Islands, which are part of Papua New Guinea on the far upper side of Bougainville, just north of Bougainville, where they sort of, the troops hopped, of course, hopped over Bougainville, which was still under Japanese control, to the Green Islands. So that's as far north as they, they performed. He [Harold] performed in the Tui Concert Party. So I'll tell you, I'll tell you about those, those later.

So I, I use the word homosexual in the book, and I was kind of interested that I didn't really get challenged by that, because it seems, I guess today, an outdated word for many young academics in particular. It was replaced by the word gay, I guess, and in modern academia replaced really by the word queer and

sort of queer theory, etc. But I use this word because at the time for these men, the word gay was not known. It didn't exist in New Zealand. And when I was interviewing Harold Robinson, he would scold me if I used the word gay. He didn't, he certainly didn't like the word queer either. But if I just mistakenly used the word gay, he would say, 'You're not listening to me, Brent. You're not listening to me'. And for him gay was a very political term. And he was, he would say, 'The gays destroyed everything'. Yet he was a gay man. It's a complicated labeling, a self-identifying there, that he had. Douglas Morison, however, did refer to himself as gay when I interviewed him in London.

The book, as you, as you just heard in the introduction, took 10 years to research, write, edit and get to the bookshelves. And I spent a number of those initial years working with Harold Robinson in Auckland, and was able to also visit Douglas in London. With Harold, there's sort of nine formal oral history interviews, and in between it many informal groups, so informal meetings. I, I think the thing I learned about oral history or research is that it has to be personable, you have to build up trust. And so there was, there was many, many visits that were informal visits, where we also continued talking about the research on an informal level before having a formal interview. And the first interview was very formal. Harold was very sort of careful of his answers in that interview. However, I must have won his trust, because I did a second follow up interview, and he sort of 'came out' to me as homosexual and suddenly there were photos and letters and ephemera. And well, I'd already identified that he was gay because he was very flamboyant in his persona, and it was, there was no hiding that aspect of his personality.

So oral history played a really key part in the research of the book. And I think it's an important means of reclaiming the history for the homosexual, gay or queer community, however we want to phrase it and I'm not really hung up personally on the terms that are being used there. Many homosexual men refrained from keeping diaries and letters. I think writing down information that discussed an individual sexuality was in the past often seen by homosexual men as very unwise. Its discovery might lead to arrest, at the worst, I guess. It might lead to discrimination. If diaries and letters were at the time kept, I think they perhaps were often destroyed in order to protect the individual from homophobic discrimination. Families who stumbled upon these on the, on the death of a homosexual relative, may have also destroyed them due to their own homophobia. So this has meant that, that this particular community's history has often been lost. It's a hidden history. It's a fragmentary history. And

when, so, I was, when I came across Harold, I realised that this was finding the new as well, this was reclaiming an aspect of our past that perhaps we didn't have in a book, we didn't have in our archives.

When interviewing Harold, he would often retell the past with great detail. He had a very good memory of what happened, particularly during the war. And I in turn would then research the details further in the archives. I came down here quite a bit, went to Waiouru Army Museum a lot, often confirming the truth of what he was saying, looking to corroborate, looking to flesh out those facts. Then I would return to him for our next meeting, next further oral history interviews. I would share my findings with him. And in this way, the research during this time period sort of became a collaborative experience. It became kind of 'our' research. Harold was often leading the way as much as I was. And so it was a really special experience for me to work with someone. Harold by the end of his life was quite ill. He had, he was blind, or starting to, or basically blind. He was very deaf by the end. He was suffering from quite a few melanomas on his skin, on his face and the operations for those made him quite weak. And he was HIV positive. So it was really interesting for me to work with him. And I hadn't really had much contact with elderly people. I, you know, my grandparents lived to their eighties, but I never really had experience with people in their mid-nineties, you know. And there's a significant difference there. And it was really a growing experience for me in dealing with two older men and working with them on research.

The book's narrative spans from their childhood in the early 1920s until around about 1956, as I had to find a cut-off date. In the last chapter, I discuss the historical significance of this history and I kind of make reference to the historical relationship between past and present by connecting first to the post-war gay liberation movement of the 1970s. Their direct-action protest at ANZAC Day ceremonies was something that I highlighted. And then further forward to the present to the New Zealand Defence Force today and particularly referencing their group Overwatch, an official group within the New Zealand Defence Force for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans soldiers. I wanted to stress that there have been significant changes that have taken place in our armed forces and, and recently our armed forces were named the most inclusive military force in the world. So I think that's something we should be proud of. It's quite significant in terms of change.

So I started with their pre-war lives, because I think that their formative lives are what shaped them as queer men, as, as homosexual men. And all three had already acknowledged that aspect of their

identity, they'd acknowledged their sexuality. They were comfortable with it. They had an active, they were very active in pre-war, queer community in New Zealand. I particularly enjoyed researching Harold Robinson's Dunedin queer life. I went to university in Otago and the city is a place that I really like. And so it was quite fun for me personally to, to research what was it like and who are all this, this community that was there in Dunedin. And Harold was a rather precocious boy when he was a child. He took elocution lessons, singing lessons, he was in what's called the competition society where you learnt a piece of, to sing, or a piece of poetry to recite and got graded on that. He did ballet lessons as a young boy, and he was involved in theater. And he is from south Dunedin, a very, very working-class background. And I think through culture, through involvement there, he sort of finds a way out of that working-class life that his parents had. His pre-war boyfriend was Rowland Watson, who he met through theater.

So Harold ends up in the 36th Battalion, the 8th Brigade, in the Pacific, first serving in Fiji, and then in Norfolk Island, where they garrisoned the island, then later on New Caledonia, Guadalcanal and the Treasuries. And it's the 36th Battalion that made the first opposed landing of New Zealand troops since Gallipoli. They make that on, in the Treasuries, on Mono Island, the village of Falamai, and Harold and his boyfriend provide a queer presence at the event. They are there at that landing. So I loved finding out that little presence.

So Harold finds himself with this figure, this is Major John Marshall. And there's an intriguing relationship, I think there. He was Marshall's batman, and a batman's like a personal servant to an officer – shaves him, gets him dressed, organises his quarters, makes him a cup of tea or runs errands for him. And it's an intriguing relationship because Marshall is a very conservative figure. He's, he was a fairly conservative Prime Minister, wasn't he? And yet he's got this rather flamboyant, if not one could say camp, batman, who in the evening was the battalion's female impersonator. And I guess the role of, of batman also gave Harold spare time in which he could make dresses, repair dresses, think about what his songs are going to be, practice them. So the two roles actually fitted together quite nicely.

So Harold I think attains what British historian Emma Vickers calls 'good fellow status' within the unit. So this not only signifies acceptance, value and a sense of belonging, but also led his unit to protect, to protecting the homosexual soldier. Harold Robinson had a very outgoing personality. He was accepted as one of the lads. He could entertain his brigade, his humor and quick wit bringing a laugh onstage

and offstage. His physical appearance, he's fit and healthy, he's strong and muscular, he's done years of athletics and ballet. And his enthusiasm to fit in as a good shot when handling a gun, I think, led to his unit respecting him. And for Harold mateship, mateship was seen as a really important value. And Harold Robinson was a loyal mate to all in his unit. He was, he was very loyal to the, to the reputations of his, the men in his unit and the reputation of Marshall right to his death. He wouldn't hear anything said wrong about Marshall in front of Harold.

Some homosexual soldiers perhaps could have been shunned by their peers, ostracised and of course found the experience of total war a negative one. But others like Harold, I think, worked very hard to fit in, to become accepted, to find a way of supporting the war effort. Robinson, of course, could give a cutting retort back to anyone who challenged him on his sexuality. And at one point he decks someone who decides to test that.

So I think one of the themes of the research and the themes of, that emerged in the research that's in the book, is the theme of, that key theme illustrating the ability of the homosexual, of homosexual men to integrate into communities of servicemen despite the official hostility towards same sex love and desire. Because homosexuality is illegal under our civil laws. Total war meant that conscription was introduced. It's introduced on the 22nd of July 1940. And everyone has to serve, so you get this diverse cross section of individuals that are drawn into the army for this greater cause. And I think in this, this regard we have a citizen's army that has to be inclusive, and homosexual men found that there was a place for them in the military. And in fact, in the book, there are 50 men that I found, 50 queer men, homosexual men who serve in the New Zealand military forces in either the Army, the Navy or the Air Force. I may highlight a few of them more than others but there are 50 men there and I think they all find roles or most of them find a role to fulfill.

So Harold is in the Tui Concert Parties. He often had time to design his own dresses and prepare them for the Tui Concert Party. He often makes them out of scraps of material, out of parachute, even parachute material, material American soldiers gave them. Eventually, people began sending dresses up to them in New Caledonia. So theater troops would send dresses and, and women who had spare dresses would send them on up. Harold's camp name – they all had feminine names – is 'Helena' after Helena Rubenstein, who they considered to be the ugliest woman in the world. And I think in World War Two she was also probably the richest woman in the world. But it is a joke that Harold never

presented himself really as a beautiful woman. He broke his nose as a child and so he has this rather prominent nose that perhaps disrupts the idea of him being a convincing woman.

So Harold has a lover in the army, Bob Murphy. Bob Murphy is from Ohakune, his nickname is 'Spud'. He's a beer drinking, rugby playing guy, almost the opposite of, of Harold, but opposites do attract sometimes. They – what's the term? – hook up. They get together on Norfolk Island and remain together during the war and when they come back from the war back to New Zealand. I think the story of Harold Robinson shows that homosexual men found ways to maneuver in their private lives during the wartime, their wartime military service, and pursue their sexual interests. And I think being away from home, away from the scrutiny of family, away from the scrutiny of community, it gave men a freedom that perhaps they may never have had if there hadn't been war. And I think for Bob Murphy, that was, that was the case.

And associated with that there's a context of homosociality within the military forces. And I think that's a key theme I pick up during the writing, during the, in the book. So the homosocial nature of relationships in the armed forces during wartime was really, was really quite large. It meant that bonds between men were very, very close. You had your mate. And there was an intense intimacy that led to profound friendships, mateship bonds, between men on an interpersonal and a platonic level. Most of it is platonic. But these bonds could also provide a cover for sexual intimacy between men. And for some men, that homosocial environment lead to sexual experiences that might be defined as experimental, might be defined as situational, situational homosexuality, for the situation of the war. For others, it perhaps confirmed the nature of their sexual desires. Whatever though it's clear that men were reasonably successful in creating satisfying sexual relationships and close affectional bonds. I think, what I, what I came to the conclusion and what I found is that it was quite clear that it's only after the war that identities begin to solidify between heterosexual and homosexual and I think that would stand up in other literature from Britain and from the United States. So it is a time where those perhaps, identities are not as solid as they, they became in the post-war era.

So, we've got the three soldiers, the other soldier that I was, who was still alive that I could interview was Douglas Morrison. So he's in the Pacific Kiwi Concert Party, along with Ralph Dyer. I also deal, dealt with his formative years in Auckland, and how he negotiated being queer in a pre-war period. Douglas attended Mt Albert Grammar. Douglas played the plain Jane type of woman. He was the, the girl next

door who was not that attractive, all right. He was the mother figure in the skits, someone had to play mum, or great aunt. So he tended to play those, those parts. His feminine name, his camp name was Beulah BBC. BBC because he had a rather posh radio voice. Yes, he had had elocution lessons as well. And actually, in fact, he very briefly worked at 1ZB radio in Auckland before being drafted. And he still had that BBC posh voice when I interviewed him. Harold, you know, was still in contact with him. So that's how I was able to go and meet him.

He actually leaves New Zealand in 1945 as part of the reinforcements that go to Egypt, and later moves on to, with the Pay Corps to Italy, and convinces a lover in a higher position to allow him to be demobilized in London, which was quite unusual because the New Zealand government had a policy to bring the men back home first. If they wanted to stay in the Middle East, they were told no, you can't stay in Cairo and live here the rest of your life, you're coming back. And so it's, it's quite unusual that he gets to be demobilized in London. He wanted to be in repertory. So he dreamed of not – and he also said he couldn't imagine coming back to New Zealand and living as a homosexual man in New Zealand. So London was where it was going to be for him. So I took a flight to London to see him. And then later on, when in New Zealand I found a diary that he kept in New Caledonia between 1942 and ‘43 at the Kippenberger Research Library at the Waiouru Army Museum. They also hold many hundreds and hundreds of letters that he sent back to his two aunts and the letters go right through to about the 1980s, recording his life. And so at that point, when I, when I met him, he had actually lost contact with all his family in New Zealand. And so what I did is I decided to track down some of his family members, because when I saw a photo Harold had, there were some very younger sisters there who were, one of them was about three when he left, I think. And I tracked Meg down through the electoral rolls, because I'm, you know, you can. And they'd all thought he had died years beforehand. So they were quite delighted that he was alive. And in fact, two of his stepsisters, they then quickly made arrangements, and they did make a trip to London. And they did meet for two afternoons with Douglas at that point, just before he died. So that was kind of a lovely thing, which I was kind of pleased that I facilitated.

When I went to see Meg, she had a trunk, a metal trunk. And really, that's when I thought, okay, this is going to work. Because in that metal trunk, which he had left in 1945, were a whole pile of, there was some Kiwi Concert Party scripts, there was some bad poetry, there was programs from the, the

performances up in the Pacific, there was also a whole lot of letters, also, that he'd written to his stepmother. So it was a little treasure trove. And as an historian and a researcher, it's kind of that moment of, 'Yeah I've got it, I've got the stuff. This will work as, as a narrative and as a book'. And of course, there was also lots of, lots more photos there that he had left in this trunk and they really hadn't looked at the trunk, I was quite fascinated by that. It just remained there, not thrown out, but not knowing what to do with it, not really looking at it or knowing what's in it.

Ralph Dyer is our third figure. He was known to gay men as Crystal or Chrysie. He played the Rita Hayworth type of glamorous woman in the troops, you know, the sexy woman, the, the movie star. And in the Alexander Turnbull Library, right above us in the archives, I found an album of photographs and newspaper clippings about Ralph Dyer, he had gifted this album to the library here in Wellington, just before he died, and it's a real treasure. I used not all the photos, there's a lot of photos there. So there's more photos that are sort of unpublished from that album here.

He's probably the, the most well-known of the men, because when they went, went to Egypt as the three, the three of them go to Egypt as reinforcements, he gets transferred to Italy to the Middle East Kiwi Concert Party, and he performs for the last few months of the war with that concert party. He comes back to New Zealand with the Middle East Kiwi Concert Party. And then later on, in the 1950s, he toured, tours with the post-war Kiwi Revue, which was made up of men from both the Pacific and the Middle East concert parties and men who never went to war but were just good at theater. So often people call that Kiwi Revue the Kiwi Concert Party. It wasn't all men, men who, who fought in the war. But they know him from that point. So there's a lot of publicity material about him, but he was the most elusive because I didn't have diaries or letters from him. So he was harder to research.

Here they are on their makeshift stage. They, by about their second tour, they get a truck with a collapsible stage where they can drive round New Caledonia and quickly put up the stage. Until that point, they would turn up and it would be very makeshift stage, it would depend on what the camp was or what the battalion who they were performing in front of were like. If they were friendly, they might have made a stage for you, but they might not have. So getting a stage was really quite important for them. They didn't just do song. They did a lot of skits. They also did a lot of tours, not just of New Zealand troops in the Pacific, but American soldiers, of course. Further up to the forward area, the stages become quite makeshift once again.

So during the war, Ralph and Douglas meet and become close friends with Harold Robinson. They don't know each other before the war. And it's really a story of wartime mateship amongst these three men. However, they also became good friends and had good times with American homosexual soldiers. And I think that homosexual men found each other during the war, they formed their own community within the armed forces that they served in. These groups are sometimes facilitated by pre-war links between men. So men who knew each other in Auckland or knew each other in Wellington, and end up in the same battalions or meeting each other in the war, they form community. They bring other people together. Another way that community forms though, is around these female impersonators in the concert parties. So these entertainment units offer a kind of focus point for meeting other homosexual men. Men stay behind after the show. They meet them backstage, they want to talk, they want to flirt. They want to date, possibly, although Howard always said they always, they always, they never met me in a dress. They always met me in my uniform.

So American queer soldiers, Douglas records, soldiers passing notes to him through the window of their vehicle asking to meet up the next day. And meet up they do. In Nouméa, at one point, in 1943, August 1943, an American soldier named Hal Schaeffer came up to the camp where they were doing a show. He watches the show. Afterwards, he stayed and introduced himself to Morrison, who later walked him down to his transport. And Morrison writes in his diary that he found Schaeffer 'a very nice boy and exceedingly interesting'. The next day, in the afternoon, they have a show at the Red Cross hut at Camp Barnes, which is an American camp just outside Nouméa. Morrison met up with Schaeffer again, they go back into town, they go to Le Grand theater and saw a film before going on to coffee. And Morrison wrote in his diary, 'We romanced until it was time for me to return to camp'. He's quite smitten in his diary about, about Hal. And the rest of the day he describes as a blur. His diary at the very end for that day, when he's back at camp records, 'The spell is broken, the day meant little else to me'. So they are, they are meeting each other, and in fact, Morrison and Schaeffer, have a week meeting each day spending every moment they can together. I guess the difficulty of, of a relationship in that respect is that you're, the concert parties were always on the move. And the relationships perhaps were quite temporary. But it seems that queer soldiers made themselves known to each other. And there are many incidents like this as they toured the islands, which are discussed in the book. So they easily found some time to have privacy and make, have liaisons.

So then, the book also has a couple of chapters, just about their lives. So they all sort of separated at the end of the war, but they very quickly come back together, as mates, as friends in London, where they do the kind of overseas experience, the big OE in 1945. And they're really in London, on and off, I guess until 1959. So I have two chapters, which discusses that. And I think it illustrates the strength of that wartime mateship, all right, to actually go further in the narrative. It also illustrates the strains of post-war life that would eventually lead them to going their own ways. Harold got one of the very first soldier's bursaries and he got it to go and study ballet in, in, at the Sadler's Wells ballet school. So I'm not sure what other returned servicemen thought of one of the first bursaries going to a male ballerina.

Of course, Douglas was already in London, and he was in repertory. The third soldier to come back, to come and meet them in London, Ralph Dyer. He gets on a course in London in stage design, actually, with, becomes the assistant to Oliver Messel, very famous in stage design. There's a fourth person who meets them in London, and that is Freda Stark. Freda Stark had actually befriended Harold before they went to Egypt. So after the Pacific campaign all the soldiers are brought back here, they're put into the service of doing concerts in Wellington and in Auckland to raise money for the war effort. And they met her at a party just before they left for Egypt. And she's infamous for her role as Thelma Trott's lesbian lover in the 1936 trial of Eric Mareo, who had killed his wife Thelma. Later Stark was famous for dancing only in a G-string, her body painted in gold paint at the Civic during their, the wartime shows. Very popular she was with American soldiers. She joins them in London. And in fact, she briefly marries Harold. And Harold does, Harold always insisted that for the first six months they really did try to have a relationship. But she was lesbian. He was homosexual. It wasn't going to work. But they remained very, very good friends. And I think in a way Harold gives her a way out. She had, I guess she had some notoriety here in New Zealand and going to live in London allowed her to escape that notoriety that she had. They remained lifetime friends.

Just to finish up, I broadened this, the story to research other New Zealand homosexual soldiers. I wanted to see how many I could find. I wanted to see what their experiences were like. Were they comparative? Were they contrasting? Because I think that these three female impersonators, they had an exceptional war, they had a good war, they had a great war, and I wanted to see if that was the same. So the story does talk about a number of other soldiers.

The one soldier, the only soldier I found here to acknowledge is Noel Hulme. He's the only homosexual New Zealand man I found, who was, who is actually recorded as a homosexual soldier killed in action. And of course there will be lots of others. But they're not in the historical record, their families never recorded, or their friends never recorded that information about them. Hulme was killed in Minqar Qaim, in the western desert.

The Alexander Turnbull Library also has a lot of archives around Bill Pearson. So Bill Pearson is obviously someone who is well-known. He is a famous novelist, *Coal Flat* perhaps being his most famous novel. And he taught at the Auckland university in the English faculty. He's, I guess, a real contrasting individual because he's perhaps well in the closet at the time. But his experiences in Egypt were very formative, particularly in Cairo, where he had a number of liaisons with Egyptian men, yet, he's sort of at that time, he hasn't come to terms with his sexuality. But his diaries and some of his short stories relating to personal experiences are upstairs in the archives.

One of the other soldiers that I, of the 50 soldiers that are in the book, that I spent a lot of time dealing with is David Wildey. He's from Christchurch, but he left his archive of diaries, letters and photographs to the Hocken Library, in Dunedin. Not sure why it ended up in Dunedin. But in Dunedin, it's organised in 58 folders of material. He literally kept diaries the whole of his life. He kept every letter sent to him. And in fact, he had a kind of, a way of writing letters like a receipt, like a Banda receipt book or something where he kept a copy of every letter he sent. He's meticulous. There are photos of most of his lovers, um, kept as well. So it's a very thorough archive of a life. And his 1943 war diary chronicles his, his time in New Caledonia and his sexual relationship with Charles 'Darkie' Boyd and perhaps he gives an insight into the difficulties for a homosexual man having a relationship with a soldier who might not be classified as homosexual. Even he, David Wildey, even says I don't think he's bisexual, even. Perhaps for Darkie Boyd it's, it's situational homosexuality for the time of the war. He very quickly gets married and has kids when Darkie comes back to Dunedin. And so I think he's an interesting contrast, he's someone who's, who's 21 and coming to terms with his time in war.

And the final figure who is there, I guess, prominently, is at some points is Brigadier Dove, second-in-command of the Pacific campaign after Barrowclough. Dove lived a very double life. He had a wife and two daughters and a house in Victoria Avenue in Remuera, Auckland, but he was very well-known amongst homosexual men in Auckland's queer community before the war. And so when they were up

in New Caledonia, he's someone who can be an ally. He can protect them. But he's a kind of a contrasting figure because he doesn't really fit into the queer social circles. He's uh, you know, so he's a potential ally. Yet his power and authority were regarded rather warily by the men. Robinson who was still in uniform, rebuffed Dove's sexual advances, considering him a creep. Yet David Wildey goes to Dove, explains to him, my boyfriend's been sent up to the, to the front line, I want to go up to meet him. David Wildey is a hospital orderly, he's nobody. And yet Dove manages to find a way to send him up to Vella Lavella to be reunited with Darkie Boyd. So he can be an ally. The soldiers make fun of him a lot, of Dove. John Waldie a friend of, an older gay man from Auckland, who's in the war, he's up there in New Caledonia. He has a joke that David Wildey, um, records John Waldie's joke: 'Bill Dove: Your name is in the book. But I've got the book.' And maybe that explains a little bit about the men's understanding of that, that they had something to hold over Dove too, even though he's in this kind of higher position.

So I hope the book will add a New Zealand perspective to published works on World War Two, particularly on the homosexual soldier and World War Two. I think it's a good example of how to find a needle in a haystack. And I found a few needles. And I hope it's an example of reclaiming history and reframing the past. And I hope it adds to our nation's understanding of the past. And I see it as kind of our contribution to the, to the literature that we have on World War Two on this topic. Thank you.

[clapping]

Sarah: Thank you very much, Brent. Do we have any questions? I think we can probably spare a little bit of time for a couple if there are any.

Audience member 1: Thank you for that. Was Harold Māori? He looked like he might have been Māori?

Brent: No, he, no he wasn't. His family are from Bradford in England. So no, he just had, he did have quite olive skin though. Yeah, I really, I looked, I looked really hard for Māori soldiers. There's one

photograph in the book of an airman that's a gay friend of David Wildey. That's in the Wildey archive. Of course, there would have been gay Māori soldiers. But they're not in the, if they're not in the historical record, it's really hard to reclaim them. But perhaps, perhaps in the future, some families might give their, their papers to the archive or publish their papers. I do, I do know a lot of Māori families do have significant diaries and letters that they've kept but keep them within the family. I know I was given some to look at by heterosexual soldiers. It was, it was letters that described in detail the brothels of Cairo. So the family, the family that I got them from are from Rotorua, and they still have all those archives, they just are not yet ready to gift them to an archive. Maybe in the future, we talked about that. And they thought that maybe in the future. Now that you can digitize or photocopy a letter, it's much easier to share it and keep the original perhaps. So that might change in the future.

Audience member 2: How did you find the three men that you interviewed?

Brent: I was actually just doing general – I was looking for a writing topic. The wonderful thing about the Royal Fellowship is that you get a year on full pay with extra money, here and there, to read. And to look. I actually went to Egypt for a month. I was looking at the New Zealand geography of Cairo, going to all the bars and cinemas and, and cafes which are still there, absolutely preserved, not even restored one bit. And looking at whether that was a topic. I drove all the battlefields, I went to all the battlefields in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Greece. I was sort of looking at memory, how the local people don't remember anything, these sites don't really mean anything to them. So that kind of absence of memory. And then I came back and I was sort of, I was really looking, I was, you know, just testing the waters for topics. And I started doing some oral histories with veterans. And I didn't really know, I would go up to Whangaparāoa retirement home and interview someone and see what came out of it. Sometimes they were just a coastal watchman on the, on the end of Whangaparāoa. And it was like, okay, I've recorded a couple hours interview, someone will use that one day. But um, and then I just stumbled upon Harold, and it all centered from that first interview. So it was kind of this nice randomness to it. Yeah.

Audience member 3: Did these men identify as being homosexual when they enlisted?

Brent: The three, the three soldiers, Ralph, Douglas, and Harold, did. They, the first chapters, I deal with their pre-war communities, and their, their, in fact I include quite a number of homosexual men who were their, their friends in pre-war communities who didn't necessarily go to war. So there's probably, there's probably 15 other homosexual men that aren't, that are mentioned and discussed in the book, who did not go to war.

Audience member 3: Just a supplementary question: did you find any evidence of homophobia amongst the other soldiers towards these three men?

Brent: In the Pacific Kiwi Concert Party, there's some members of the orchestra who are a little bit uncomfortable with the, there's a term that they use 'the ladies on the hill'. With the, as opposed to … our soldiers that, the ones doing performance, sort of camped a little bit separate from the ones who were doing the orchestra. And they found that uncomfortable, but they really couldn't do anything about it, because they, they, they weren't the stars, they were playing the, the trumpets and other instruments backstage, you know, or on the side of the stage. Yeah. So there, it's, it's there in the book that they, they had, they were challenged by this, but I think, I think perhaps, Harold, Douglas and Ralph provided a lot of fun. And perhaps that was one way that they got used to their presence.

Audience member 4: Did any of the three continue with drag or female impersonation after the war?

Brent: Well, Ralph becomes part of the Kiwi Revue. But after that period, no, no. And it just wasn't part of their, it was, it was a job that they did. But, and it was female impersonator, impersonation, they would say. I was always saying the word drag and getting in trouble. But no, they didn't. Yeah. I think in answer just about the homophobia. I did look at the court martial files. I applied three times and finally, the judge advocate general allowed me to look at those files. They're sealed for 100 years, I

think. They're at Archives New Zealand, just down here. They are not indexed. So I had to just look through thousands of files. And it took me a couple of years coming down for a week here and a week there. I found ten men who were charged with, for homosexuality. I would have expected to find a lot more. But the, the records are quite fragmentary. And they tend to be men who, well they just chose the wrong person to make a sexual advance to. Or often in the case there's ... well, it's, I mean, yeah, they, many times their behavior was tolerated by the battalion. And then finally they got sick of it and they just dobbed them in. However, I did find at Trentham, looking at personnel files, a number of men who are court martialed and a few who are sent back, yet their court martial file doesn't survive in Archives New Zealand. So it's a very fragmentary record, but generally, and I think it's really interesting because I spoke at a Ministry of Defence function last year, the New Zealand Defence Force comes off quite well, at this point. They're, they're sort of pleased that it didn't taint their record. There really, there really isn't any case there in the court martial files that show that there was overbearing homophobia within the military forces at the time. I think the nature of a citizen's army is that it had to be inclusive. As Harold said, one of his sergeants was his butcher in South Dunedin, he said he proudly never once saluted him, because he said, 'I'm not gonna salute my butcher because after the war I'll go back, he'll be my butcher. I'm better than my butcher.' So there's a kind of leveling, there's a kind of a egalitarianism, there's a kind of inclusiveness, I think, there in the military at this time. Yeah.

Sarah: I think we might have to wrap up there, but please join me again in thanking Brent for a wonderful talk.

[clapping]

Brent: Thanks for coming.

[clapping continues]

Sarah: Thanks for listening to this New Zealand History podcast from Manatū Taonga. Don't forget to subscribe. And if you're looking for other content about New Zealand history, check out earlier talks in

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Mā te wā.