

MY NEW ZEALAND STORY

Journey to
TANGIWA

The diary of Peter Cotterill, Napier, 1953

Written by **David Hill**

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To the many branches of the Marshall Family



≡ **JANUARY** ≡

It's creepy when I think back on it.

Here I was, an ordinary guy with an ordinary name (Peter Cotterill), living in an ordinary New Zealand town (Napier). It seemed an ordinary year (1953).

But in another part of the country, something had started that would change my life, and the lives of thousands of other NZers. Something I'll never forget ...

Thursday, January 1st, 1953

I hate diaries. So why am I keeping this one? Because my Great-Aunt Ethel sent it for my 13th birthday. And Mum will check on whether I'm keeping it.

I'm only going to write when I feel like it, or if something happens. I'm off on Saturday to Uncle Hugh's for a week. There'll be plenty to write about there.

Monday, January 12th

There was plenty to write about at Uncle Hugh's. But I forgot to take my blasted diary! I've just come back and it's after tea, so I'll catch up tomorrow.

Tuesday, January 13th

I had a really good week at Uncle Hugh's. He has this little farm just ten miles from Napier. He's the youngest of Mum's brothers, and I've known him all my life. U. Hugh is a hero for something he did on the island of Crete in World War 2, but he won't talk about it.

Dad says Hugh needs to get over the war, settle down, and make his farm into something. Okay, so some days he just sits and reads. But other days, when I was there, I'd wake up at 6 a.m. and he'd already be out working.

Our next-door neighbours, the Masons, used to have a holiday place just up the road from U. Hugh's, but they've

sold it and bought a bach at Taupo. I suppose you can afford that when you're a doctor. It'll give Barbara Mason something else to skite about.

U. Hugh drove me home in his old Morris Cowley farm truck, clattering over the shingle road. He drove with a roll-yer-own smoke hanging out of his mouth. Hugh started smoking during the war, and the first two fingers on his right hand are stained yellow with nicotine. Mum reckons he smokes too much and doesn't eat enough.

We don't have a car. The Masons do (of course). Mum and Dad are saving for one, but the car factories switched over to making planes and tanks during World War 2, so cars are still scarce. Every morning, Dad walks two miles down Napier Hill to his job at the wool store, and back up the hill every night.

"Big year coming up, Pete mate?" U. Hugh asked as we got near to Napier. I like it when he calls me that.

"Yeah, I'll be at high school this year. And I'm starting my paper round next Monday."

"Your Mum and Dad happy about the paper round?"

"They don't mind." Well, Dad doesn't mind. Mum's not keen on me biking home around the time the pubs shut at 6 o'clock. The money will be good, though – 14 shillings and sixpence a week.

He asked me how Scouts was going. We're still on

holiday at the moment, but I'm leader of the Gannet Patrol of Napier West Troop, and we're going to be the best patrol this year.

U. Hugh parked outside our pokey little house. I hoped Barbara Mason would see his car with its bits of hay and fencing wire on the back. That'd make her nose go up in the air. She was standing at their front gate in her St John's Ambulance uniform. "Hello, Peter," she said.

"G'day," I grunted.

U. Hugh grinned at her and asked if she'd nurse him if he got crook. She giggled. I grabbed my suitcase from the back of the truck and marched inside.

Wednesday, January 14th

U. Hugh's staying for a few days. "I suppose he's going to see his Commie mates," I heard Dad saying, while U. Hugh was out on the back verandah having a wash in the tub.

I went round to Tom Sanders' place – he's patrol second of the Gannets – and we talked about Scouts restarting in a couple of weeks. Tom's starting high school with me. Good. I'm a bit nervous.

Thursday, January 15th

U. Hugh helped fix a puncture on my bike. Wish I had a bike with gears. Barbara Mason's has three-speed gears,

and she passed me once while I was trying to ride up Napier Hill. I was so wild!

Friday, January 16th

Helped Mum and U. Hugh clean out the front room. He and I moved furniture, while Mum washed the cracked lino. “Hope the Queen doesn’t pop in for a cup of tea,” she joked. Yeah, the Queen’s visiting NZ later this year, after her Coronation.

U. Hugh didn’t smile. “If countries stopped wasting money and lives on war and royal families, there’d be good homes for everyone, Molly.”

“Don’t you start that!” Mum pushed the wet mop at her young brother. Next minute, they were wrestling and laughing like kids. Then U. Hugh started coughing and had to go outside. Mum stopped laughing and followed him.

Saturday, January 17th

Tom says there’s going to be a big First Aid contest for all Scout troops at the end of the year. Gannet Patrol is going to win!

This afternoon I got shown over my paper round. It’s on a steep part of Napier Hill. I have 46 papers, and I get a free one for Mum and Dad – they’re pleased about that.

Monday, January 19th

Did the newspaper round by myself today. U. Hugh's gone back to his farm. Just as well – he and Dad had a big row last night. We'd listened to 'Dad and Dave' on the wireless, then the news talked about the war in Korea, and how President Eisenhower of America said his country would stand firm against the Communist menace.

“Stand firm to make money for his war-loving factory owners, more likely,” grunted Hugh.

“Been listening to your Conchie friends again?” Dad asked.

Hugh sighed. “For God's sake, Bob! Your own brother's over there, and what's he fighting for? You really believe North Korea or China is a threat to New Zealand? Adam could die so American millionaires get richer!”

Uncle Adam is with the NZ navy in Korea. I know that North Korea is Communist and it invaded South Korea. America and the United Nations are helping the South, while China and Russia are helping the North. When a telegram came to our place one day, Dad went white until he found it was a message that Mum's cousin had had a baby.

What I don't understand, though, is why a war hero like Uncle Hugh is so much against war.

Tuesday, January 20th

Paper round again. Barbara Mason has a new white skirt-guard on the back wheel of her bike. Be terrible if she got oil on her new Girls' High uniform. And I bet hers IS new. Bet she didn't get a second-hand blazer like I had to.

Friday, January 23rd

Scouts starts again on Monday. Can't wait.

I've started reading the paper now we get it free. There's a NZ sheep shearer called Godfrey Bowen who's set a WORLD record by shearing 486 sheep in one day. 486 woolly jumpers!

Sunday, January 25th

Spent yesterday morning at Tom's. He's going to take French this year too. They stopped teaching Latin and Greek at Boys' High last year.

Tom's mother is sick most of the time. Their house is an old dump, even worse than ours. The wallpaper's peeling off, and the outside has rotten boards. Tom and his sister Gael do what they can. Their father came home from the war all messed up. He couldn't hold down a job. Then one day, he took off. He sends them money when he's got some. Tom doesn't know where he is now.

Monday, January 26th

High school starts in a week.

First Scout night of the year. We've got a new guy, Howard, in the Gannet Patrol. He's just come up from Cubs. Rua, the scoutmaster, had us doing knots and rope-lashings. Then we had a tracking game. We Gannets laid a trail through the streets for other patrols to follow.

Wednesday, January 28th

In today's paper they're talking about building a Harbour Bridge in Auckland, right across part of the sea to the North Shore. Boy! I'd love to see that!

Friday, January 30th

Saw Barbara M. as I came back from the paper round. I pretended I hadn't seen her, but she stopped to ask me if I was nervous about going to high school. I didn't really want to talk to her, so it went something like this:

"Nah," I said.

"I'm doing French. Are you?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I'm getting bored with St John's. How's Scouts?"

"All right," I said.

"How's your Uncle Hugh?"

"Okay," I said.

The Masons are snobs. Dad doesn't mind them, but Mum says they think they're better than others, just because Mr Mason is a doctor, and was an officer in the army. One wet day, Mum and I were walking up from town. Mrs Mason stopped her big flash car and offered us a lift. "We're happy to walk, thank you," Mum said. Mrs Mason looked embarrassed and drove on. Serves her right.

Saturday, January 31st

Listened to the wireless – 'Dad and Dave' and a good detective serial called 'Night Beat'. Kept thinking about Uncle Hugh. I told snobby Barbara he was all right, but I'm not really sure. Sometimes he is; sometimes he isn't.

Mum says that when U. Hugh joined the army in WW 2 (I was just a baby then), he thought it would be a big adventure. He and his battalion went to Egypt, then they were rushed to Greece, where the Germans had suddenly invaded. The Germans had far more men and planes, plus they were better trained. (Dad got angry when U. Hugh said that.)

The NZers had to retreat, with planes bombing and machine-gunning them. A lot were killed or captured. Others, including U. Hugh, escaped to the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea. The Germans invaded there, too. Thousands of paratroopers dropped from a clear blue

sky on a May morning. The NZers shot hundreds of them dead as they drifted down.

I only heard U. Hugh mention it once. “Poor sods,” he said. “We could hear them screaming.” His hands started to shake, and he stopped. Dad stared at the floor. Mum put her arm around Hugh’s shoulders.

But there were so many Germans that U. Hugh’s battalion was pushed back. He and some others helped the King and Crown Prince of Greece to escape. They walked with them for two days and nights, right across to the other side of Crete, where the British navy waited. It was like walking from Napier to Taupo, U. Hugh said.

Then he went back to find what happened to his friends. That’s when he took part in a bayonet charge against the Germans. (He’s never mentioned this but I read it on the certificate that came with the medal he got.)

Finally, he escaped from Crete. He fought in the big battles of the Western Desert and in Italy. Mum said that when he got back to NZ, she saw this skinny guy who looked about 20 years older than her little brother, and who smoked like a chimney. She didn’t even recognise him.

U. Hugh threw his medal away. He never goes to R.S.A. meetings with the other returned servicemen. He never marches on Anzac Day. Some of his best friends are

Conchies – Conscientious Objectors who refused to fight in the war because they believed it was evil.

Good on them, U. Hugh says. If he had a son, he wouldn't let him be killed just so governments could play silly cows. Yes, some of his Conchie mates believe in Communism. So what? Communists just want to share things among the people – to stop the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. He and Dad had an argument about that, too.

So he lives alone on his little farm, and he reads, and he smokes, and he's sick sometimes with flu. He's my favourite uncle; hope I grow up like him.

I start high school the day after tomorrow.

≡ **FEBRUARY** ≡

The hottest month. Through the days when tar melted on the roads, IT was forming and growing, too, all those miles away.

Monday, February 2nd

I know – I’m still writing in this diary. Only when I want to, though. Like today, my first day at Napier Boys’ High School.

I put on my uniform: light-coloured khaki shorts and shirt, roman sandals, NBHS school cap. Mum and Dad gave me a fountain pen with my initials on it. First time I’ve had a fountain pen of my own. We have to carry our own ink bottles around with us. (Hope they don’t leak!) There’s no inkwells like we had at Intermediate.

Tom met me at the corner, and we biked down the hill. There were lots of boys heading towards the high school. The older ones all wore their caps pushed back on their heads, so Tom and I did the same.

At school, we wandered around. I’d heard about the initiations they do to third formers – hanging you by the shirt collar from coat hooks in the corridor, or making you run through a tunnel of blokes who thump you with folded-up caps. None of that seemed to be happening. Just as well – some of the Lower 6ths and Upper 6ths were HUGE.

I’m taking the core subjects (English, Maths, Science, Social Studies, PT, Art, Music) plus my French option. I’m in 3B (the classes go from A–F, depending how clever they think you are.) Tom’s in 3B, too, so that’s good.

Paper round. Scouts. As well as the new kid, Howard, the others in the Gannets are Stafford Bell and the Kellond twins – Bill and Ray. The twins hardly ever need to speak to each other. They seem to know what each other is thinking.

Rua said he'd have news of the First Aid competition soon. We practised building a bridge with our staffs and some ropes across the hall. Just as well there wasn't a river underneath, 'cos the bridge collapsed when we were halfway across!!

Wednesday, February 4th

You have to buy your textbooks at high school. They had a sale in the quadrangle at lunchtime, with blokes selling the books they used last year. I got most of the ones I needed.

Really hot day today. Had a cold wash when I got home. Wish we had a shower. The Masons do.

Friday, February 6th

Hotter. Mum had all the windows open while she cooked tea. Our place has an old gas stove, but Mum prefers the coal range, which makes the kitchen really hot. It heats the water, too.

The Masons have hot water from electricity, of course. Snobby B.M. came over once to buy eggs (we used to

keep bantams down the back) and she said, “Oh, do you still get your hot water from the stove?”

Quick as a flash, Mum said, “Some of us have to use what we can afford.” Barbara went red and looked silly. Served her right, too.

I’ve survived one week of high school. Will I survive all three terms?

The subjects are all right. Some blokes take Book-keeping, or Agriculture (NBHS has its own farm), or Metalwork and Woodwork. We’ve got a boring Science teacher and a good English teacher. All the high school teachers wear those black academic gown things.

The headmaster said in assembly that if he heard of anyone trying to initiate 3rd formers, he’d initiate *them* into being the first boys caned in 1953!!

Hope I never get caned. I got strapped on the hand once at Intermediate, and that hurt! Being belted with a bamboo cane across your backside must be murder.

Sunday, February 8th

Tom and I were wandering along by the primary school and ran into Barbara Mason. She told us she’d just been to Bible Class. “Boring!” she said.

I grunted. But Tom, the traitor, stopped and talked to her!

She says Girls' High is all right. They have to wear their hats all the way home, or they get 50 lines to write. She wants to be a lawyer when she leaves school.

"Can women be lawyers?" Tom asked, and Barbara went pink.

"Why not?"

She gabbed on about the holidays and how they'd been to Taupo. "Took us four hours to go 98 miles! The road's awful!"

"I wish we still had our bach up the river by your uncle's place," she told me suddenly. "He's so interesting."

Stuck-up cow. She sounded like she was talking about a servant. I just walked away.

Monday, February 9th

Scouts. We had a night stalking game inside, all wearing our scarves for blindfolds. Bill Kellond knew exactly where Ray Kellond was. Ray knew exactly where Bill was. Must be weird being a twin!

Friday, February 13th

School. Paper round. Homework. Dad and Mum make sure I do all my homework, because they both left school when they were 13. Mum worked as a housemaid on a big farm and Dad was a brick-maker before he taught

himself wool-classing. They want me to be a vet or a teacher.

But I'm not doing any homework tonight, because it's Friday. Friday the 13th, AARGGH! And because Dad's gone to a R.S.A. meeting with Mr Mason. They went in the Masons' car, which Mum wasn't too pleased about.

Dad was in the air force during WW 2. Because he was married, he didn't go overseas till later in the war, and he was a ground crew worker in the Pacific. He still calls Mr Mason 'Sir' sometimes. Mum isn't pleased about that, either.

Mr Mason was a major in the army. He doesn't like the way Hugh's changed. "Pity to see a good man falling in with those Conchies," he told Dad once. Mum was so wild, I thought she was going to go next door and tear a strip off him.

Saturday, February 14th

Chops, spuds, peas and carrots for tea. Wish we had a refrigerator, then we could have ice cream. Actually wasn't very hungry 'cos I got paid for my paper round today, so I took Tom to the Palm Grove Milk Bar, and we both had a 'log cabin' – a big slab of ice cream with chocolate sauce and cherries on top, pink wafers and passionfruit flavouring. Beaut! Cost half-a-crown for both of us – hope

Mum doesn't find out. Tom's mother is sick again.

Listened to the wireless at night: 'It's In The Bag'.
A lady from Timaru won a hundred pounds!

Sunday, February 15th

Mum in a bad mood 'cos we've run out of tea leaves.
Sunday, so no shops open.

Monday, February 16th

School. Still getting used to being called by my last name.
When teachers say 'Cotterill,' I think I've done something
wrong!

Paper round. Scouts. First Aid details next week.

Thursday, February 19th

I was pushing my bike up the hill after my paper round
and the Masons drove past in their flash car. It's dark green
on the bottom half and light green on the top half, with
black running boards at the side. B.M. waved. Her father
nodded. Reckon he expected me to salute. I didn't.

Friday, February 20th

Went to the pictures with Mum and Dad. Asked Tom if he
wanted to go, but he said no. Don't think they've got any
money just now. Gael is walking to school because they

can't afford a new tube for her bike.

Saw 'High Noon', a really good western where this sheriff has to face three crooks coming back to kill him. His wife is a Quaker, and says she'll leave him if he shoots anyone. (Made me think of U. Hugh.) When we all stood for the National Anthem at the beginning, it felt really strange to sing God Save the Queen instead of God Save the King! It's fifty years since the British Empire had a Queen.

Sunday, February 22nd

Tom and I mucked about most of the weekend. Did French homework. Bonjour, je suis Pierre. Ironed my Scout uniform. On our sideboard, there's army photos of Dad and Hugh and Adam in lemon-squeezer hats like my Scout one. Makes them look like a bunch of Senior Scouts.

Monday, February 23rd

U. Hugh came last night. He and Mum and Dad talked for ages. U. Hugh's even skinnier, and he keeps coughing. Mum reckons the smoking's not doing him any good. But smoking can't hurt you, can it? The tobacco companies would tell you if it did.

Anyway, they talked about U. Adam in Korea, and whether he was on the ships that have been bombarding

North Korean ports. His letters have bits chopped out by the military censor.

“Typical war-loving government official,” grunted Hugh.

Mum changed the subject. “Have you been to see Dick Finlay?”

Hugh coughed and nodded. Dad frowned. Dick Finlay’s a Conscientious Objector. When he got his call-up papers for the war, he refused to go. He was sent to prison for a month, then to a CO’s camp out in the backblocks. They were kept in little wooden huts behind barbed wire. People insulted his wife in the street and in shops. They wrote her letters saying Dick was a coward and a traitor, and he should be shot. He was in the CO camp for nearly a year after the war ended. When they finally let him out, hardly anyone would give him a job.

“I’m sure the bloke believed in what he was doing,” Dad said, “but what would happen if everyone behaved like him?”

“Then there’d be no armies to fight wars,” Hugh said, grinning. Dad got wild.

Tuesday, February 24th

Why can’t Tom Sanders keep his mouth shut? At Scouts last night Rua told us about the First Aid contest.

“One patrol is selected from each troop. Then there’s

the district finals – Hawke’s Bay for us – in August or September. The district winners go to the national finals in Auckland in December.”

I’ve never been to Auckland. I decided then and there that our patrol is going to win the Hawke’s Bay finals!

“We’ll select our own patrol,” Rua went on, “but we need an instructor to help us train for the district finals. Any ideas?”

And loudmouth Tom went, “How about Mr Mason? The doctor?”

Rua nodded. “Great idea. He lives next door to you, doesn’t he, Peter? Could you ask him?” Under my breath, I groaned. Out loud, I grunted.

Thursday, February 26th

School. Paper round. Homework. Maths and Science are boring! French is okay. English is really good.

In today’s paper it says they’re going to start making a new type of cheese in NZ. It’s called Blue Vein Cheese, and they let germs live in the cheese for a while, to give it flavour! Yuck! Nobody’s ever going to eat that!

Mum’s in a good mood, because Dad and Hugh didn’t argue while U. Hugh was here. (He left yesterday, to stay with Dick Finlay.) And because a letter arrived from U. Adam in Korea. The envelope was a brown army one,

covered with labels saying 'PASSED BY MILITARY CENSOR'. It didn't tell us much. He'd been at sea for a month. The weather was freezing, with so much ice on the decks and guns they had to hack it off with axes, in case the weight made them capsize.

Suppose I'll have to see Mr Mason soon.

Friday, February 27th

Mum's in a bad mood. She was painting the inside of our old metal bath and was leaning over it when her bottom false teeth fell out. They broke in half and went rolling vroom-vroom, vroom-vroom, up and down inside the bath! Now she has to eat with just her top teeth till she can get the others fixed.

She and Dad both have false teeth. They keep making me brush mine, and when I was at primary school, they made me go to the Dental Clinic (the Murder House) every time I had anything sore. I hated that old grinding treadle drill. Now I'm at high school, I get to go to a dentist instead. He's got a high-speed electric drill, and it hardly hurts at all. I've got lots of fillings. Nearly everyone has. Or they've got false teeth, like Mum and Dad. And Uncle Hugh – he had all his teeth pulled out when he was 18.

Saturday, February 28th

Finally went next door, to ask if Mr Mason would be our first aid instructor. When Mum heard where I was going, she made me put on my good blue short-sleeved jersey, and some socks with my roman sandals. She told me I wasn't going there looking like a street urchin.

The Masons' place has a big verandah around two sides, and a button you push at the front door. I hoped it wouldn't be snobby Barbara who answered.

It was. She wore yellow slacks and a white blouse. It was the first time for a while we'd stood in front of each other, if you know what I mean. She's got taller. I asked if I could see her dad.

"I'll just go and find him," she said. "Come in."

"Aw, it's all right – I'll just wait . . ." But she'd turned away, and was heading down the hall. I followed her.

I'd forgotten how big their place is. Our whole house could almost fit into their sitting room. Mind you, our house and section could almost fit onto their tennis court.

Mrs Mason was there, reading a magazine. "I'll get Dad," Barbara said. I stood in the middle of the floor and looked down at the carpet. It had flowers all over it.

"Hello, Peter." Mrs M. is tall, and always smells like a flower shop. "How are you?"

I told her I was all right. I told her Mum was all right. Dad and Uncle Hugh were all right. I didn't sit down, even though she asked me to. I felt awkward, like my hands and feet had suddenly grown big and red.

Mr M. marched in. He moves like he's still leading his army battalion or something. "Hello, young Peter. What can I do for you?"

Barbara leaned over the back of the sofa, listening. Snoopy cow.

I told him about the First Aid competition, and what big-mouth Tom had said, and how Rua reckoned it would be great if he could instruct us. I stammered a bit, but I got it said. Mr M. listened till I'd finished, then asked which night it was.

"Monday."

"Hours?"

"We start at seven and finish about nine."

"District finals when?"

"About August or September."

"Find out exactly, please. 'About' is too vague."

I felt annoyed. I wasn't one of his men. I opened my mouth to say . . . something . . . but he beat me to it.

"I'll come for three alternate Mondays and see how it works. Tell me when the patrol is chosen. And Peter, please tell your Scoutmaster that if I'm giving my time, I expect

people to work.” That made me really mad. Mum says people like the Masons don’t know what real work is.

Mr M. nodded at me. “Say hello to your Mum and Dad.”

Barbara led me back to the front door. She grinned at me suddenly. “Dad still thinks he’s in the army. Yes, sir. No, sir. Three bags full, sir.”

I mumbled something, and got away fast – down the swept concrete path and through their gate with a brass sign saying ‘Roseville’. I’d make sure Gannet Patrol won. I’d show all the stuck-up Masons how hard we could work.

I stamped down our cracked concrete path and into our house. U. Hugh had arrived, and he and Dad were having a real ding-dong.