

1918 FLU FEVER DREAM

Patrick Craddock

An original stage play on the 1918 Flu Epidemic in New Zealand.

15 January 2021

Revision: Third Draft

Notes to Theatre Director: This is a story of the death of soldiers, sailors, doctors, medical workers and civilians dying World War One comes to an end.

The stage set includes two single beds, a small table, chairs and a screen for projecting photographic images of the 1918 Flu Epidemic. The screen and the projector are not essential to the play. They are an enhancement.

Some actors will have to sing a few words of popular World War One songs played to the accompaniment of a piano, violin, saxophone, guitar or harmonica. The words of songs will be changed from the original to fit the requirements of the play. New words can be created by the Director and cast. A music sample is included with this text.

This music is out of copyright. Costumes are of the period.

Cast

NURSE  
DOCTOR  
VOICE 1  
VOICE 2  
JIM  
BILLY  
SOLDIER ONE  
SOLDIER TWO  
WOMAN ONE  
WOMAN TWO  
DOCTOR MARGARET  
ANN  
BOY  
NURSE MABEL  
DOCTOR MARTIN  
DOCTOR JOHNSTON  
SENTRY  
PRIEST  
COMMANDING OFFICER  
GEORGE RUSSELL

The stage darkens and we hear the sound of a ship's horn and the voices of two young men. They are happy and excited singing to the tune "Roses are shining in Picardy" being played on a mouth organ.

New words for song: "All the girls are swinging in Featherston. Girls there are waiting for me..."

As the theatre lights come up we see the two young men wearing NZ army uniforms. On one side of the stage there is a woman dressed as a nurse. She looks at them and waves.

NURSE

Welcome home soldier boys.

JIM

Look Billy. A real Kiwi woman. She looks good, eh.

Billy shouts to her.

BILLY

Hi, there sis. My name's Billy. You wanna marry me?

The boys start singing to the tune "I want to go home"

New words for song: "We're just coming home, I'm just going to go home. I don't wanna hear of this war anymore, I'm just going to go home."

The Nurse waves to them and smiles. We hear a formal male voice on a loudspeaker.

VOICE

We have now arrived in New Zealand.

Both the soldiers laugh and shout with joy.

JIM

We fucking well know that.

BILLY

We're home. We're home.

## VOICE

The "Niagara" is now berthed in the port of Auckland. The following procedures will be observed. Prime Minister William Massey and the Deputy Prime Minister, Sir Joseph Ward will be the first to disembark. They will be followed by the sick, the injured and the deceased. Other personnel will disembark later. Lower the gang plank.

The stage lights change. A doctor with a stethoscope and two nurses in uniform comes on stage helping an injured man with bandages to his head and arms. They slowly exit with him on the far side of the stage. Jim and Billy watch quietly. We hear a voice on the loudspeaker.

## VOICE

You soldiers on deck, there. We need more stretcher bearers. Go immediately to the hospital bay.

Jim and Billy leave the stage and a few moments later they re-enter carrying a soldier on a stretcher. They cross over the stage and exit. The Narrator Nurse talks to the doctor.

## DOCTOR

How many sick people have we?

## NURSE

Apart from the soldiers we have another twenty-nine men from the crew who are sick.

## DOCTOR

Six people died of the flu in Auckland in the last three days.

## NURSE

What an awful welcome home from the war.

Jim and Billy come on stage again

## JIM

When do we go home, Sir?

## DOCTOR

Not yet. Where you from, son?

## JIM

Wairarapa, Sir. Me Dad's an orchardist. I wanna see him... Mum and my sister.

DOCTOR

In good time. You'll be sent to the Featherston Military camp. So, you'll be close to home. After a medical checkup and clearance, you'll be demobbed.

JIM

I can't wait, Sir.

DOCTOR

You've got to wait a little longer, son. We want you to go home fit and strong.

JIM

I am ,Sir.

DOCTOR

Some are, some aren't. Even those of you who look good probably have internal nasties in your guts like dysentery. Your Mum won't like that. Trust me son. We all want to go home.

BILLY

Me too. I got a girl in Waimate. We went to school together. I'm gonna marry her.

JIM

Have you asked her?

BILLY

She don't know yet. But, it'll happen. She's mine.

JIM

You're sure. Lots of guys are home now and they want all the girls.

BILLY

I know me Ann. She's waiting. Always has been. You got a girl, Jim?

JIM

Nah. But, I'll find one... chat her up and she'll be right. I want a family and time to play with my children...but not war games.

BILLY

Doctor. What date is it, Sir? I lost count on the ship.

DOCTOR

The twelfth of October, 1918.

Jim and Billy once more break into song

JIM/BILLY (happy)

"We're gonna go home, We're gonna go home. We've left all the trenches, we've left all the Boche. We're on our way home."

The Doctor beckons the Nurse.

DOCTOR

Have we final counts for the sick and dying today?

NURSE

Here's the list, Sir. There are hospital beds ready for them as they come off the ship. Two more died today.

DOCTOR

God bless them. Only the dead know real peace. You have letters for the soldiers?

NURSE

Yes, Sir. Here they are.

DOCTOR

Good. We'll distribute them as I do my rounds. That's the good news. Letters from home will be a balm against the bad news as I look at their war wounds.

NURSE

I have a letter for you too, Sir.

The Doctor opens the letter

DOCTOR

Oh..tt's from James, a friend of mine. He's working in the South Island.

He reads the letter aloud

"Dear Patrick. Each day I see people die of this damned Spanish Flu. Odd name, Spanish Flu. I am working with Doctor Margaret Cruickshank. Among the many things she does is to organise the Waimate Red Cross. I'm told she also gives some of her own salary to support it. She feeds babies and milks cows. As a man I can't help but notice how beautiful she is. Did you know she was chosen as Waimate's carnival queen candidate to raise money for the war effort. Margaret is super stunning... so tall and gracious wearing a beautiful court dress of satin and lace and her fair hair arranged in a crown showing tints of gold.

People are also dying of this flu in Waimate.

As of today there are eight people dead and more are becoming sick. Margaret bicycles to see her patients and occasionally goes on a horse and gig."

VOICE (off stage)

More stretcher bearers required.

Two stretchers are brought onstage. Both have an injured man on them. One has bandages around his head and he can't see. They are laid on beds.

SOLDIER ONE (in panic)

Where am I. My head is sore. Where am I. I can't see anymore. Doctor???

SOLDIER TWO

You're home mate. This is New Zealand.

SOLDIER ONE

But..I want to see.I can't see anymore. My eyes hurt. Doctor, nurse...please, please.

The Doctor goes over to see him and takes his hand to feel a pulse. As he does, the patient goes into convulsions. Immediately the doctor uses his stethoscope to check the patient. The nurse goes to help. The patient suddenly stops his convulsions and he is still. The doctor checks him. He pauses for a moment and then checks his pulse. He checks again and looks worried

NARRATOR NURSE

Is he still with us,Sir?

The doctor checks again. He waits and then after a moment he covers the face of the patient.

DOCTOR

We've lost him, Nurse.

He shakes his head

NARRATOR NURSE

My God. Another. So many of them.

She turns to the other soldier and looks at him.

SOLDIER TWO

We were in the same company. We went through this bloody war together. He just wanted to go home.

NARRATOR NURSE

What was his name?

SOLDIER TWO

Blake, Sir. Private Blake. Peter.

NARRATOR NURSE

Do you know his parents?

SOLDIER TWO

No. He talked about them all the time.  
Fucking rotten luck.

He begins coughing and gives out a  
cry.

NARRATOR NURSE

How long have you had that cough?

BILLY

I've been coughing all night, nurse. Can't  
help it.

DOCTOR

Let me have a look at you.

BILLY

Can't breathe too well.

DOCTOR

These dark spots on your cheeks. Have they  
been there long?

BILLY

A few days, Sir.

DOCTOR

Well. We'll do all we can. Rest is good.

NARRATOR NURSE

I've some letters here. What your name?

BILLY

Billy, Nurse. Billy Smithson. Corporal  
Smithson. I got promotion during the last  
days of that bloody fight.

NARRATOR NURSE

I have a letter for you, Billy. Here you  
are.

She hands him the letter and he  
starts to read it. The Narrator  
turns from the bed and the stage  
lights change. The nurse moves to  
the side of the stage with the  
doctor. The lights face darkness  
and then come up. The bed where  
Billy was is empty. A nurse is  
tidying the bed. A soldier enters



JIM

I'm looking for my mate, nurse.

NURSE

We've got lots of mates here. You'll need to give me a name.

JIM

Billy. My mate's Billy.

NURSE

You mean Billy Smithson.

JIM

Yup. That's him. He got that bleeding cough and the doctor put him in here. He's been here for a couple of days. I hadn't heard from Billy so I thought I'd come round to check on him.

NURSE

You are talking about Corporal Billy Smithson.

JIM (laughing)

Yeah. That his military name. I'm still a private and he's a corporal ...but, he's just Billy to me.

The nurse looks serious.

NURSE

Jim. I have bad news. Corporal Smithson...Billy...he got extra sick during the night. The doctor and I did all we could, but he got worse and he died early this morning. There was nothing else we could do.

Jim is shocked and sits down on the chair.

JIM

But..he was ok a few days ago. We wuz talking and he was talking about going home. He was looking forward to seeing his Mum and his girlfriend. Fuck this bloody war. Fuck this bloody flu. Billy and I. We been together for year. We went everywhere. Even that bloody Passchendale couldn't kill him and now he comes home to New Zealand and the poor bugger is dead.

NURSE

Jim. I'm sorry Jim. We tried. We tried so hard to save him. Is there anything I can do for you?

Jim shakes his head and exits. The nurse watches him leave and sits down on the chair. She is upset and wipes her eyes. After a few moments she gets up and begins tidying the bed again.

The stage lights change and stretcher bearers cross the stage carrying a dead soldier to the sound of church bells ringing and a voice on a loudspeaker.

VOICE

Instructions to Nurses or family attendants looking after patients with the Spanish Flu

1. All patients are to be in well ventilated rooms. Be sure that windows open fully.

2. Gargle three times a day with salt and borax.

3. Use pieces of rag for sputum and then burn them.

4. If there is a haemorrhage or bleeding from the mouth send for the doctor at once

The stage lights change and the body of another person is carried across stage. The soldiers stop for a rest and we hear a voice.

VOICE

During August 1918 there were 8 Maori deaths from the flu. In September there were 29 deaths. In November, 200 Maori deaths. In December, 1918 950 Maori died from respiratory infections. The high mortality rate in Maori is believed to be caused by the lack of acquired immunity to disease and communal living.

The soldiers pick up the stretcher and exit the stage. The stage lights cross-fade and a boy comes on stage.

BOY (calling out loud)

Mrs. Smithson. Mrs. Smithson.

He waits and calls again.

BOY

Mrs. Smithson. You there?

A teenage girl appears.

ANN

What you want, Ben? Don't you know Mrs. Smithson is sick with the cough flu. She doesn't want to hear your noisy voice. The whole of Waimate can hear it. Buggar off.

BOY

I got a letter for her.

ANN

OK. I'll take it.

She takes the letter and the boy leaves. The girl looks at the envelope and a woman enters onstage. She is carrying a medical bag.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Did I hear a boy calling?

ANN

Yes, Doctor Margaret. Was Ben from the village. He has a letter for Mrs. Smithson. It's from the government. I know them marks on it.

DOCTOR MARGARET

May I see it?

ANN

Shall I take it in to her?

DOCTOR MARGARET

Not just at the moment. Mrs. Smithson is ill from the flu and sleeping. I'll give it to her when she wakes up.

She takes the letter and puts it in her pocket.

ANN

Can I make you a cup of tea, Doctor? You look tired.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Yes. Thank you. But, I need to talk with you. Sit down.

ANN

Is it bad news, Doctor Margaret. I'm frightened.

DOCTOR MARGARET

You are doing an important job, Ann. After Mr. Smithson died and Mrs. Smithson got sick, you have been so good at helping her.

ANN

I try, Ma'am. My Mum and Dad also die. They gone. I feel lonely. I know this family. Me and their son Billy used to play together when we small. We have good times. I want to see him again. He's back now. Soldier. Is in Featherston. Maybe he want to marry me. I want to marry him.

The doctor takes her hands and holds them tight.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Ann. The war in Europe killed many people and this illness is now killing more people in New Zealand.

There is a cry from inside the room

ANN

I'll go to her.

DOCTOR MARGARET

No. You wait. I will go. You wait here. We will continue our talk.

She gets up and goes into the room and looks back for a moment at the young woman. A few moments later the Doctor re-enters. They sit down together.

ANN

Did Mrs. Smithson have a good sleep?

DOCTOR MARGARET

She is resting.

ANN (worried)

What you mean, Doctor? She been resting all the time.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Ann. You have seen death.

The girl nods and begins to sob

ANN

Is Mrs. Smithson, she dead too?

The Doctor nods and embraces the girl.

DOCTOR MARGARET

I knew this morning she would soon die. That's why I stayed here. I didn't want you to be alone.

ANN (upset)

Oh...oh...

DOCTOR MARGARET

She was in a lot of pain. Her pain is over.

ANN

Mrs. Smithson was kind to me when my Mum and Dad died. What do I do now?

DOCTOR MARGARET

I would be happy if you would help me. There are other sick people in Waimate who need my help and yours too?

ANN

I would like to help you, Doctor.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Thank you, Ann. Now. The letter for Mrs. Smithson. You saw it had a government stamp.

ANN

Yes, Doctor. I know that often means bad news is coming. Is it more bad news?

The Doctor opens the letter and sees that there are two different pages. She looks at each page.

DOCTOR

Shall I read it?

ANN (fearful)

It's bad, I know.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Yes. Ann. It is bad news.

ANN (upset)

Is it about Billy?

The Doctor nods

ANN (agitated)

Is Billy dead too?

DOCTOR MARGARET

Yes. He is dead. That's what this letter says.

ANN

Then I want to die too. I love my Billy.

She burst into tears

DOCTOR MARGARET

Ann. Here. Come to me.

She embraces the sad teenager

ANN

How did he die? He come home from the war,  
he wuz OK.

DOCTOR MARGARET

The letter says that he died of the flu.

ANN

How come he died? He was young and strong.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Soldiers suffered in the war. The food was  
poor and the winters were cold. Soldiers  
fought in the wet and cold and got injured  
and many became sick.

ANN

Will Billy be brought home for his funeral,  
Doctor?

DOCTOR MARGARET

No. He will already have been buried in  
Featherston where he died. Ann. There is a  
letter here too. It's from Billy. He wrote  
to his Mum before he died. I'll read it if  
you'd like. It mentions you.

The girl sits down and waits while  
the Doctor looks at the letter.

ANN

Was Billy sad when he died?

DOCTOR MARGARET

I don't know. But he was happy to be back in  
New Zealand.

She reads the letter aloud,

"Dear Mum. I am in the Wairarapa  
at the Army Camp. The food is  
lousy, Mum, but is better than  
where I've been. I miss you and am  
looking forward to coming home. I  
got a few small hurts when I was  
in the army, but the army medicos  
are fixing me up. I got a small  
cough too. It hurts. Will you tell  
Ann I want to see her when I get  
home. We had good times when we  
were small. I think about her many  
times."

DOCTOR MARGARET

The letter is unfinished. That's all.

ANN

Can I hold it, please?

The Doctor hands the letter to the girl, who looks at it and begins to cry.

ANN

I can't read. I don't know how to read and I want to read this letter myself.

She burst into tears.

ANN

Doctor Margaret. Can I keep Billy's letter?

DOCTOR MARGARET

No. I'm sorry Ann. It belongs to the next of kin.

ANN

But Billy ain't got any. His Mum and Dad are dead from this flu thing. It ain't fair.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Ann. I'd like you to stay here while I contact Father O'Reilly. He will come and arrange for Mrs. Smithson to be taken to the church for a funeral service.

ANN

I want to go to the church with her. I pray for Billy too.

DOCTOR MARGARET

Of course. Ann. We will work together from now on. You will be like a little sister to me and be my personal nurse. That's the first smile I've seen on you. We have a lot of work to do. I'll get you a bicycle so we can visit patients together. Can you ride a bicycle?

ANN

No. I can learn and I will.

The stage lights change and we are at the Featherston Military Camp. A sign at the back of the stage says " Officers Mess. Featherston Military Camp". A doctor in uniform enters and sits down. He looks at a paper with names on it.

JOHNSTON

My God. Five dead today.

He starts coughing as another doctor in uniform enters.

MARTIN

You okay, mate?

JOHNSTON

Yeah. I've had it for days, but it's on the way out. Tired though. But, I'm getting better.

MARTIN

I wish I could say that for the guys I've been seeing this morning. One died this morning as I was treating him. He was nineteen.

JOHNSTON

Some are developing alarming symptoms between twenty four and thirty six hours.

MARTIN

Yes, My patients complain of chest pains, bleeding of the nose, lungs and sometimes the rectum.

JOHNSTON

I was watching a patient yesterday. He has now got pleurisy and his blueness is getting worse. His face is now starting to link black. I fear he will die soon.

MARTIN

A Hippocratic oath to help seems bloody useless. So many soldiers are dropping...many of them little more than kids.

He picks up a bottle of whisky and pours two drinks. They sit down to drink as a nurse enters dressed in uniform. She is offered a drink but declines it.

NURSE MABEL

Some more news from Head Office. Soldiers with orthopaedic problems will now go to the Trentham Camp hospital. We look after heart problems and Queen Mary Hospital at Hanmer Springs will treat those with psychological and nervous conditions.

MARTIN

It's the suddenness of this damned flu I find so hard to take.

JOHNSTON

We will need to have another meeting this morning. I don't want anymore patients to live in tents. We will need to convert somewhere in the camp to another medical ward.



NURSE MABEL

I agree. One of the canteens could become a ward.

MARTIN

I'll check out the logistics of it now and we can talk with the Camp Commander.

MABEL

I feel so tired. Yesterday one man committed suicide. He cut his throat with a knife. I got there too late. His mates talked with him...then just gave up trying. I was angry at them but it's my job to help...not to get angry. There is ...fatalism among these young soldiers. They accept what life offers. Good and bad.

MARTIN

We've already had over a hundred deaths. It just doesn't stop.

NURSE MABEL

How do you fill your spare time in the evenings, Martin?

Martin smiles

MARTIN

There aren't many free evenings. I was due one last night, but I went on the ward and saw you there too, Mabel.

NURSE MABEL

Yes. I think we are all like that.

JOHNSTON

I do a little reading. I got a letter from a friend working at the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Scotland. One of his patients was suffering from shell shock and wrote poetry during his recovery. Then the poor buggar went back to the bloody war-zone and got killed the week before the Armistice began.

NURSE MABEL

What's it about?

JOHNSTON

The poem?

NURSE MABEL

May I hear it?

JOHNSTON

It's at home but, I already know most of it by heart... about a young soldier who has been killed.

"Move him into the sun -  
Gently it's touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields  
half-sown.  
Always it awoke him, even in  
France,  
Until this morning and this snow.  
If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know."

NURSE MABEL

We bury them in the sun. Everyday.

JOHNSTON (angrily)

This poem nourishes. It keeps me awake and alert. But there is bad...damn...awful useless poetry about. Mothers who think their sons are dying for a good cause. Some loving but deranged mother wrote a poem to the newspaper about her son growing up and dying for a great cause. She then had a go at mothers who don't send their sons to war. Silly bitch.

"He was so strong and splendid  
So clean of limb and mind,  
Pride softens grief with we who lose.  
I pity most those mothers whose  
Strong sons have stayed behind."

NURSE MABEL

King and country.

JOHNSTON

Bloody farce. The only Germans I know of lived in Samoa. And we captured them all when the war started. They don't fight and now we look after them when they get sick. Crazy world.

NURSE MABEL

Johnston. You are tired. We all are. We help. You're not responsible for the virus.

She starts coughing.

JOHNSTON

Are you Ok?

NURSE MABEL

I'm getting over it. Tiredness.

Another officer enters.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Good morning all. A few words about the planned Armistice March in Featherston. Indoor gatherings are banned. Outdoors is allowed.

(MORE)

## COMMANDING OFFICER (CONT'D)

I have made a decision that the procession of motorcars we were going to have in Featherston for the Armistice is cancelled. This is out of respect for those soldiers who died in the last forty-eight hours. We bury them today with full military honours. Usual time. Any questions.

There is silence.

## COMMANDING OFFICER

That will be all. Good morning Gentlemen and Ladies.

He exits.

## MARTIN

It's my turn to officiate at the funerals today. I need to wash and dress. See you later, team.

The stage lights change and the theatre audience become the audience for a public meeting. A rostrum is brought on stage and several people enter including Dr. Margaret Cruickshank and a man dressed in a smart suit.

## DOCTOR MARGARET

Welcome to you all. I am Doctor Margaret Cruickshank. I am sorry that I have taken many of you away from the good work you are doing with this Flu pandemic. Without further ado, let me introduce you to the Health Minister, the Honourable George Russell.

## GEORGE RUSSELL

Thank you Margaret. I will be brief. Most of the time I am not, but today I do have an exceptional busy schedule because of this flu virus. My task today is to inform you, the medical profession, that we are about to set up throughout the country a number of inhalation sprayers that disperse a solution of zinc sulphate to combat the influenza. We are planning to regularly disinfect streets and public buildings during the pandemic. In Christchurch we are going to use the airbrakes in trams. What happens is that the air brakes are to be used to fill the trams with the disinfectant vapour. People will enter the tram at one end, breathe deeply as they move through it and then exit the tram at the other end. The Chief Medical Officer has been briefed and he will give you further details of our plans. I thank you for coming. Got bless you all.

He exits. Margaret stands up.

DOCTOR MARGARET

In a few minutes we will discuss the Minister's plans. But I want to say a few words on another matter. I am from Waimate and we have set up a local Red Cross unit there. But, we do need more Red Cross Units to be established in the Christchurch region and we need more volunteers. Anyone who can help is welcome. That is my message.

She begins coughing and can't stop

DOCTOR MARGARET

Excuse my cough. It's just tiredness. I'll let Dr. O'Malley take over.

DOCTOR

Thank you Margaret. I would just like to give you some more information on the new health spraying stations. We have a team of men working on converting fourteen trams to use spray hoses. These disinfectant points will be placed for public use on loops at the end of the tram ride routes.

The lights cross-fade to a room with two medical beds. We see Ann with an ailing Doctor Margaret Cruickshank. She is unwell and is accompanied by a nurse who helps into the bed.

DOCTOR MARGARET (coughing)

What a fuss. I'm sure it's nothing but a bad cold and tiredness. Thank you, Ann for preparing the bed. I bet you didn't expect to see me as a patient.

ANN

Oh, Ma'am. You work too hard. You are resting now. Can I get you anything?

DOCTOR MARGARET

A glass of water would help. Then I want to sleep. Tomorrow you and I will talk about getting more members to support the Waimate Red Cross. You are so good at caring for people, Ann. Perhaps, you should become a nurse. Would you like that?

Ann drops her head. She does not know what to say.  
The stage lights cross-fade to the Featherston Military Camp. The camp commander is working at his desk. There is a knock on the door.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Enter.

A young soldier in uniform enters  
and salutes.

SOLDIER

There is a young woman to see you, Sir.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Show her in.

Ann enters.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Good morning, Miss. How can I help you?

ANN

I've come from Waimate, Sir.

COMMANDING OFFICER

My. That's a long journey. It must of taken  
you a long time.

ANN

Almost a week, Sir.

COMMANDING OFFICER

What is your name?

ANN

I'm called Ann, Sir

COMMANDING OFFICER

How may I help you, Ann? Have you a relative  
on camp?

Ann is acutely embarrassed.

ANN

No, sir. Not a relative. It's about a boy I  
grew up with. We was children together. He's  
a soldier. But, he's dead now, Sir. I wanted  
to see his grave and put some flowers on it.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Please sit down, Miss.

ANN

Yes, Sir. He went to the war and come back  
and then he got sick and then he died.

COMMANDING OFFICER

How did you find out, Ann? Did his mother  
and father get a letter from the army?

ANN

His Mum and Dad are dead too, Sir. His Dad in  
the ordinary way, but his Mum got the flu  
and then she died. The letter came and  
Doctor Cruickshank read it for me.

COMMANDING OFFICER

I know Dr. Cruickshank. Good woman. Good doctor.

ANN

I was frightened. We worked together after Billy's Mum got sick and died, Sir. Then Doctor Cruickshank...she died too of the sickness, Sir.

COMMANDING OFFICER

I am so sorry to hear about Doctor Cruickshank.

ANN

Yes, Sir.

COMMANDING OFFICER

You said his name was, Billy. You are talking about Corporal Billy Smithson, I think.

Ann nods and the Camp Commander looks at her and refers to a piece of paper.

ANN

Will you help me, Sir. I come a long way.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Of course I will. Billy was a good soldier. He had a friend called Jim. I'll get him. He will take you to Billy's grave. He's buried with all the other soldiers. It's just a small walk away.

The commanding officer goes to the door, talks to the sentry and returns with a glass of water.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Here, Miss. Drink this. Were you born in Waimate?

Ann nods and sips her drink

ANN

Been there all my life.

COMMANDING OFFICER

What do your parents do?

ANN

Dad worked on a farm. Did odd jobs. Mum looked after the animals. They're both dead. I looked after Billy's Mum when she went down with this flu. That's how I met Doctor Margaret. I helped her.

COMMANDING OFFICER

What will you do after you've seen where Billy is buried?

ANN

Don't know, Sir. Don't know anyone here.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Well, Ann. I'll tell you what I think we can do. We have nurses working here. You can stay with them for a few days. When you want to leave, you can. Would you like that?

Ann nods and gives a small smile.  
The sentry enters with Jim.

SOLDIER

Sir. Private Jim Scott.

Jim Scott stands there at attention, but he is already looking at Ann and is puzzled.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Private Scott. I have a job for you. This young woman knew your late friend Corporal Billy Smithson. They were childhood friends. She's come from Waimate and wants to visit Billy's grave. I want you to help her.

JIM

Of course, Sir. I'd be happy to do that.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Good. I will leave you to talk with this lady, Miss Ann. And when you come back from the cemetery take Miss Ann to see our Chief Nurse. I'll go and talk with her now.

He rises and prepares to leave the room.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Miss Ann. I did not get your full name when we met.

ANN

Miss Ann Pondman.

COMMANDING OFFICER

Excellent. Nurse Mabel will be delighted to see you and make you welcome when you return to the camp with Private Scott.

He exits. Jim sits down with her.

JIM

Billy talked a lot about you Miss Ann. I didn't think I'd ever meet you. You come a long way.

ANN

Billy was my best friend when we were children. He always look after me.

JIM

Billy and me. We wuz together for much of the war. Best friends we were.

ANN

Was Billy sick for a long time?

JIM

No. He got sick when he got here and died quick.

ANN

I would have nursed Billy.

JIM

He told me about you and him being kids.

ANN

His Mum liked me.

JIM

Ann, we can go now to the cemetery. I know where the grave is. On the way I'll tell you about Billy and me. We both liked a song called Danny Boy. We used to sing different words to it to cheer us up. We sang ...Billy boy...not Danny boy. I can hum the tune.

Jim start humming "Danny Boy" See sample of music on mouth organ

Jim and Ann exit and then come back on the opposite side pf the stage to where Jim is buried. Ann is carrying some flowers. There is a small cross. They kneel by the grave.

ANN

Oh, Billy Boy. I come to see you. I come all the way all the way from home to see you, Billy. Why you die, Billy? I not understand. Why my Billy die, Jim?

Billy takes a flower from her and puts it on the grave.He shakes his head.

JIM

I don't know Ann. He was OK and then he just got sick and died.

ANN

I come specially for you, Billy. These flowers are for you. I pick them myself.



She turns to Jim who has just taken a mouth organ from his pocket.

JIM

Billy. You remember this. We bought this mouth organ. We hadn't enough money and you lent me some. Ann, me and Billy... we wuz both fighting in Passchendale and we scared shitless. This Scots fella played us tunes on his mouth organ to calm us down after the fighting. Made us happy and sad too, but when he play music we forget the bloody killing. Then this mouth organ man got killed one day. When the battle was over Billy and I so happy to leave that shit hole. Bloody awful place. We meet a boy and small girl who come to our camp. They got no money and want food. The boy want to sell us his mouth organ. Billy give him all his food for one day. So I share my rations with Billy. But neither of us know how to play this instrument. Billy like the mouth organ music called Danny Boy. We changed the words to Billy Boy.

VOICE

To cope with the flu emergency inhalation sprayers that disperse Zine Sulphate are being installed in and near many public buildings. Please ensure that you use them.

The lights change and two women walk on stage. One is in a nurses's uniform.

NURSE

I tried using one of them smelly things in the government buildings. Bloody awful. Can't imagine why the Ministry of Health wants to make another smell.

WOMAN

Yeah. It supposes to help us. It smell worse than the chemistry laboratory at the medical school. They give me a cough.

NURSE

There are over a dozen tramcars in Christchurch with these inhalers. My son went through one and he got a card with his name and date to say he had done it. It's like a certificate.

WOMAN

I hear that some train station masters won't let you on a train until they see your certificate.

The stage lights cross-fade to the Featherston Military Camp. A man enters. He is dressed as a priest. He looks lost.  
Ann enters.

ANN

Hello father. Can I help you?

PRIEST

Thank you, my child. I have just come over from Wellington on the train. I have come to see my son.

ANN

I'll take you one of the army officers in charge, father.

They exit the stage and the lights change to the office. Johnston is sitting down making notes. He has a bottle of whisky on the table with him. Ann enters with the priest.

ANN

Excuse me, Sir

Johnston looks up. He seems tired and may be drunk too.

JOHNSTON

Hello Ann. How can I help you?

ANN

We have a visitor, Sir.

The priest enters. Johnston looks at him.

JOHNSTON

Thank you Ann. Sit down, Padre.

Ann exits

JOHNSTON

Have a whisky, Padre.

PRIEST

Thank you, but no. I have had a drink. There was plenty of time to do that on the train from Wellington. It's a long tiring journey. Noisy too.

JOHNSTON

How can I help you?

PRIEST

Two things. I have come about my son and brought some bibles with me. Your camp is a busy place.

JOHNSTON

You are from Wellington?

PRIEST

Trentham. My parish at the moment.

JOHNSTON

Featherston. My parish. But, we need don't need more bibles, Padre. We've enough for the funerals and there are far too many of those. Every bloody day we bury the poor buggars.

PRIEST

Prayer is important. It heals.

JOHNSTON

Heals. There is more death than healing goes on here. Have you asked your God why this is so?

PRIEST

I can't answer that. I wish I could. My job is to help and to comfort at all times.

JOHNSTON

So be it. I have little faith in God or in my ability as a doctor. Soldiers die daily. It's like the bloody war is still on. We have some soldiers living in tents. And it's been raining which encourages pneumonia. We set up temporary hospitals and as of today nearly three thousand men have been treated for flu symptoms. A hundred and forty men have died in this goddam hell. God has forsaken us, Padre.

PRIEST

There is no middle way we can take to avoid this plague. It is his way. If we do not accept what God has sent we have to choose to love or hate him. Who would choose to hate God?

JOHNSTON

Two days ago I attended a young soldier who knew he was dying. He told me that during the war his faith shattered into a billion irrecoverable shards and he couldn't get any aspect of it back. It was gone. He said that for his entire life, he'd been talking to God, loving God, like he was a parent. Then, one day, he realised he'd been talking to just... myself. There was no-one else just echoes in my head.

PRIEST

We cannot abandon God.

JOHNSTON

That soldier said he had been duped and life did not matter. But I choose life. It is my profession. I cannot abandon anyone.

PRIEST

We cannot abandon God. We need a total abandonment of one's self and even contempt for one's self. We must work without reward to help our fellow beings. The confusion and pain will eventually go away in God's own time and we will again play with our children and sit in the sun with our families.

JOHNSTON

Maybe that is what I am doing? I do have much confusion and pain.

PRIEST

My son was in the war too.

JOHNSTON

Padre. I'll get one of our duty staff to look around the camp and bring him here.

The Priest pauses as he is aware that Johnston has not realised why he has come to Featherston.

PRIEST

I have come here as I received a military notification that my son died of the flu. I wish to visit his grave and say prayers for him.

Johnston is taken aback as he realises that he had misunderstood why the Priest is at the camp, and that he may have insulted him. He feels embarrassed.

JOHNSTON

Padre. My apologies. I have been insensitive. Forgive me.

PRIEST

There is nothing to forgive.

Johnston rises

JOHNSTON

I should like to take you myself to your son's grave. I would feel honoured if you would let me do that.

PRIEST

Of course.

JOHNSTON

What is your full name, Padre, and the name of your late son.

PRIEST

I am the Reverend James McCaw of Lower Hutt, but I am working in Trentham. My son was Private Albert McCaw. Bert, we called him.

John refers to a sheet of paper and then puts on this military hat.

JOHNSTON

I know where his grave is. Please come along with me, Padre. We have a young lass here from Waimate. She came to see her friend who also died around the same time as Bert. I'll ask her to pick some flowers for us.

PRIEST

Thank you.

They both rise and at that moment a sentry walks in.

SENTRY

Captain Johnston, Sir.

JOHNSTON

Yes. What is it? I'm busy.

SENTRY

I have an urgent message from the hospital. Nurse Mabel is having difficulty breathing. You are required.

JOHNSTON

Oh, God help us. Padre, I need to immediately attend to Nurse Mabel. She has caught this damned flu.

PRIEST

Of course. I will wait.

JOHNSTON

I hope you will have dinner with us tonight, Padre, and stay the night.

PRIEST

I would be delighted.

JOHNSTON

Sentry. Take the Padre to meet Miss Ann. She should be at the Nurses Quarters.

He looks at the Priest.

JOHNSTON

As I said Miss Ann will collect some flowers for you. I'll leave a message for her to show you where your son is buried. She knows the cemetery well.

They exit from the stage as the lights change. We hear the sound of a ship's foghorn.

The stage lights change and a ship's horn is heard

VOICE

Are all the crew and passengers on deck. Right. Pay attention. We are approaching Samoa and we will be berthing the "Talune" in Apia in a few hours. I have been in contact with Colonel Logan, the Samoa Military Administrator. He has given permission for the "Talune" to enter the port of Apia and to disembark all passengers, crew and goods. The crew will now prepare the ship for entry to Apia harbour.

VOICE ONE (on megaphone)

The "Talune" is now berthed in Apia. All passengers are cleared for disembarkation.

VOICE TWO

The Captain of the "Talune" knew The Spanish Flu was on his ship. New Zealand Administrators in Western Samoa did not quarantine the ship although there were sick people on board. As the passengers from the ship spread out around the island, so did the flu. Some passengers went to Apia town, some to villages. A missionary with a hacking cough walked from village to village. Death struck quickly. Within two months over eight thousand people died. This was one-fifth of all the entire population of Samoa. The "Talune" left Apia and sailed to Tonga and Fiji. Within a few weeks the influenza had killed five percent of the Fijian population and seven percent of the Tongans.

The lights cross fade to Jim and Ann talking at the Featherston Army Camp.

ANN

I've learned so much more about Billy since I first met you, Jim. Now when we talk, I feel Billy is here with us.

JIM

And I feel I have known you a long time. Billy Smithson, he was a lucky man knowing you, Ann.

ANN

So, what are you going to do with your life, Jim?

JIM

Don't know, Ann. Mum and Dad have an orchard near Greytown. I go up and down to the camp and bring back apples and fruit for the boys here. They like that. We have so much fruit. It's a lot of work getting it off the trees and Dad's getting old now. So I'll pick apples and pears for my life. Simple really. What about you, Ann?

ANN

Dunno.

JIM

You want to back to Waimate?

ANN

Got no-one there. Me Mum and Dad died. And Doctor Cruickshank. She died too. Don't want to go back there. Bad memories.

JIM

So. What will you do?

ANN

Nurse Mabel says I can work here, if I want.

JIM

You want that?

There is a long silence. Ann shakes her head and looks at Jim.

ANN

Jim. You got a girl friend?

JIM

I'd like one, but nothing happens here. Not many girls to talk with.

ANN  
I will be your friend, Jim.

Jim look at her and then gives her  
a big smile.

JIM  
Would you?

Ann nods and smiles.

JIM  
I'd like that.

ANN  
But, I got nowhere to live except here. Will  
you come and see me?

JIM  
We got a big house. Spare rooms. Can you  
pick apples?

Ann nods

ANN  
I can work hard.

JIM  
I'll tell me Mum tomorrow... no...today. I  
need to tell her, now. I'll get a horse and  
you can meet them, me Mum and Dad. You okay,  
going on a horse?

ANN  
I can do that. Done that before. But can we  
did something else first? Let's go and tell  
Billy.

JIM  
Ok. We'll get some more flowers for. We've  
got a lot to tell Billy.

The stage lights cross fade and we  
see Ann and Jim coming to Billy's  
grave. They are holding hands.

ANN  
I got some more flowers for you. And Jim. He  
been telling me about you and him in the  
war. Billy. I got something special to tell  
you. I'm not going back to Waimate. Jim's  
Mum got a house in Greytown so I stay with  
her. I work in the orchard. So I come to see  
you often. Me and Jim. We both come.

Fade to black and we hear "Danny  
Boy" played on a mouth organ. It  
merges into "The Last Post" played  
on a bugle.



## VOICE ONE

Fourteen doctors and about thirty-seven registered nurses and nursing students died after succumbing to the flu caught from their patients. Featherston was the worse hit. Over three thousand people were treated for the flu and one hundred and seventy-seven people died. Dr. Peter Buck -Te Rangi Hiroa -said the impact of the flu on Maori was the most serious setback for Maori since the musket wars of the early 19th Century. Over two thousand Maori died of the flu. Throughout New Zealand an estimated nine thousand people died of the 1918 Flu Epidemic. The population of New Zealand at the time was just over one million.

The End

The End