

Kiwis at War: 1914: Riding Into War

By Susan Brocker

- Reading • Writing • Social Studies
- Science • Drama • Music



Synopsis

1914: Riding Into War is an enthralling fictional tale set among real events from World War One. Billy Bowman is a seventeen-year-old farmhand living in rural Manawatu. He is a talented horse rider and marksman, but still young and inexperienced in many ways, having never even visited a city. While the other farm workers are immediately riveted by the news of war breaking out, Billy is, at first, more interested in saving an orphaned lamb. It is his best mate, Jack, who persuades him to conceal his age and join the mounted rifles so that they can experience adventure and see the world together. Alice, the farmer's daughter, befriends the shy Billy and offers to take care of his orphaned lamb.

At Awapuni training camp in Palmerston North, Billy and Jack meet the other men who will fight alongside them, including Chopper, a brash and cocky man, who delights in teasing Billy about his young age and assumed lack of skills. In spite of this, Billy copes well and his beloved horse Tui is accepted as a suitable mount. Although the Defence Department pays him seventeen pounds for his horse, Billy is still responsible for caring for her and riding her.

In September 1914, Billy's troop joins up with others in Wellington, where the men and horses board the transport ship *Orari*. The ship forms part of a massive convoy of New Zealand and Australian ships. Life on board is uncomfortable for both the soldiers and the horses. The conditions are cramped and austere. At first, many of the men suffer seasickness, and Billy and Jack help out by spending all their spare moments tending to the horses. Chopper falls ill, but even when he recovers he fails to care for his horse adequately, and on several occasions it is Billy who comes to the horse's rescue. It is only when the horse nearly dies that Chopper finally realises he needs to take better care of it.

The men on board the ship fail to perceive the reality of war, and it is only when they narrowly miss being torpedoed by a German warship that they begin to seriously observe precautions such as preparing the blackout. The troopers are disappointed to discover their destination is Egypt rather than the front line. They disembark to spend months at a camp near Cairo, training and assisting their horses to regain fitness after the long sea journey. When news of the infantry's great losses in Gallipoli reaches them, the men are frustrated that they cannot help their fellow Anzacs. Billy, Jack and Chopper engage in races and visits to the city of Cairo to pass the time, and Chopper demonstrates that the events of the war and his association with Billy are changing him for the better when he comes to Billy's aid as Billy attempts to stop a drunkard from force-feeding beer to a donkey.

Synopsis continued

In May 1915, the troopers learn that they are being sent to Gallipoli as infantry. Their horses will stay behind because the terrain is unsuitable for them. On arriving in Gallipoli, the men immediately encounter the worst aspects of war. Bullets fly overhead, and the trenches are cramped, foul smelling and full of flies, maggots, lice and rats. The men are continually digging to extend the trenches. Those who risk putting their head above ground are often shot by Turkish snipers. As an excellent marksman, Billy is assigned to shoot the enemy, and Jack assists him by manning a periscope and identifying their targets.

On May 19th, the Turks attack the Anzac trenches, and Billy is involved in his first face-to-face combat. Deadly fighting ensues for many hours. It is when Billy stares into the eyes of a young Turk after fatally bayoneting him that the reality of war truly sinks in. He realises that this enemy soldier is a young man like himself and that he is somebody's son. When the battle is over and the Anzacs are victorious, Billy feels too numb to celebrate.

Billy receives letters from his mother and from Alice, the farmer's daughter. While at the front, Billy writes to Alice telling her about his experiences, but he cannot bring himself to post the letters as he thinks they are too distressing.

Billy, Jack and Chopper are involved in more fighting, and even when they are at 'rest' in Shrapnel Valley, their time is spent dodging bullets and hauling supplies. In the battle at No. 3 Outpost, Chopper disobeys orders to rescue a wounded man in no-man's land, but the man dies anyway. Death becomes a regular part of daily life, and the men's spirits are low. With the arrival of summer, conditions only worsen as diseases spread and the sun scorches the men's skin. Jack suffers dysentery and is removed to a troop hospital, but soon returns as able-bodied soldiers are becoming scarce.

Then, in August 1915, the weary men engage in the Battle of Chunuk Bair. Large numbers of reinforcements arrive and terrible fighting breaks out. There are great losses on both sides. Jack's arm is slashed, but he keeps on fighting in spite of the wound. Through day and night, the battle continues, and Jack gets weaker. Billy is forced to face the possibility of losing Jack when Jack makes him promise to look after his troubled horse, Spirit, after the war.

When Jack realises he cannot shoot with his wounded arm, he goes above ground to gather fresh weapons, and it is then that he is shot and killed. Billy is devastated but is immediately caught up in more fighting. A shell explodes nearby, and Chopper is knocked unconscious. Billy risks his own life to pull Chopper to safety in spite of Chopper soon regaining consciousness and begging Billy to put his own safety first. It is as Billy finally pulls Chopper into a protected hollow that he is shot.

Billy has a wounded leg and is in great pain. He slips in and out of consciousness. Chopper is with him, but they have no water. Eventually, Chopper bandages Billy's leg and helps him get out of the firing line. Eventually, medics arrive and take Billy to the beach, where he learns that the Turks won the battle.

Billy begs Chopper to bury Jack properly, which Chopper manages to do. Meanwhile, Billy is taken by ship to a hospital in Alexandria, where the lower half of his right leg is amputated. At the hospital, Billy encounters his cousin Harriet, a bossy member of the nursing staff. Harriet finds Billy's letters to Alice and secretly sends them to her.

When Billy finally arrives back in New Zealand, Alice meets him in Wellington. She takes him back to the farm, where he is employed with tasks that he can do without his right leg. While life is much improved, Billy is depressed because of all he has seen and lost. It is not until he manages to ride Jack's difficult horse, Spirit, that his own spirits lift — the horse and rider help heal one another's grief.

About the Author

Susan Brocker has built a career writing about the things she loves: animals and history. Horses, dogs and even wolves feature in her most recent books for young people. *1914: Riding Into War* is her second book about the New Zealand horses that took part in World War One. Her earlier title, *Brave Bess and the ANZAC Horses*, is the true story of a horse that returned to New Zealand after the war. Some of her other novels that bring history to life include *The Drover's Quest*, set in the West Coast gold fields and Southern Alps, and *Dreams of Warriors*, set near a World War Two Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Featherston.

Susan earned a BA in history from Waikato University and later worked as an in-house editor for Shortland Publications, where she had the opportunity to write her first book, *What Am I?* Since then, she has written more than 60 novels and non-fiction books for children and teenagers. Four of her books have been listed as Storylines Notable Books within different categories, and three titles have been short-listed for Lianza Esther Glen Awards. She lives in on a farm near Tauranga with her husband and many animals, including horses.



Writing Style

1914: *Riding Into War* is firstly an engrossing story and secondly an interesting way to learn about the experiences of New Zealand troopers during World War One. Billy Bowman is a likeable main character: a mixture of youthful innocence, outstanding physical abilities and a natural skill with animals. Young readers will both identify with and admire him. Through his experiences, they will come to understand more of what it was like to be a real soldier – during both the heroic moments and the horrific ones. They will also discover the tight bonds of friendship that carried the men through such terrible times.

The book is written in the third person and in the past tense. It is brought to life with lively, realistic dialogue and punchy descriptions. The text is powerful for being unsentimental, allowing readers to reach their own conclusions.

Billy's letters to and from home are displayed in cursive type for students to read first hand, and so more fully enter into Billy's experiences. Short, descriptive chapter headings reflect army language, and beneath the headings are dates. There is also a timeline at the end of the book, allowing readers to more easily follow the passage of time.

Shared Learning and Discussion Points

SHARING THE NOVEL:

During the shared sessions encourage the students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of the words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them describe the setting of the story and identify which elements are fictional and which relate to real events. Encourage the students to make predictions about what will happen next and to identify important themes and ideas.

INTRODUCING THE NOVEL:

Tell the students to study the front cover and read the back-cover blurb. Then ask:

- What can you tell about the setting of this book? Which war does it involve? Which countries might be included?
- What kind of novel do you think it is? Is it realistic or fantasy? Is it serious or funny? What sort of ending might the book have? What makes you think this?
- What sort of person is Billy? What can we tell about him from the text on the back cover?
- What was the Mounted Rifles Regiment? Who is Tui?
- Billy and Jack are looking for adventure. What sort of 'adventures' do you think they will have?

PREPARING FOR WAR, CHAPTERS 1 TO 4:

- Follow the sea route of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force shown on the map on pages 6 and 7. Where did its journey start and end? Where did it stop along the way?
- What do you already know about Gallipoli? Why might it be marked on this map?
- Why do you think the author included the part about Billy taking care of the orphaned lamb? What does it tell us about Billy?
- How did Billy's family regard his Uncle Tom, who had fought in the Boer War? How might this influence Billy?
- Billy the Kid was a tough teenage outlaw in the American Wild West. Why did the farm workers in this novel think it was funny to call Billy Bowman 'Billy the Kid'?
- What sort of person is Jack? How can you tell he is a good friend to Billy? In what ways is he different from Billy?
- What things did Jack and Alice talk Billy into doing that he might not have done otherwise?
- Do you think the recruitment officer knew Billy was too young to enlist? If so, why did he let Billy sign up?
- What did most young men think going to war would be like? Were they right?
- Why were so many young men keen to get to the front line as soon as possible?
- What was the difference between the infantry and the cavalry? (Use the glossary on pages 208 to 211.)
- What do the words trooper, squadron and regiment mean? Trooper Bowman, or Billy, was assigned to which squadron and regiment (see chapter three)?
- On page 36, the author says that even the townies weren't soft. What does she mean by this, and why did she mention that they came from pioneering families?
- What sort of person was Chopper when Billy met him? Was Billy right to ignore much of his bullying?
- In 1914, many people earned less than a pound a week, so the seventeen pounds paid to Billy for Tui was a great deal of money. Why do you think the Defence Department bought the troopers' horses off them? How would you have felt about that if it were your horse?
- Horses had been used in wars for centuries before World War One. What do you think were the advantages and disadvantages of using horses in battles?

ON BOARD SHIP, CHAPTERS 5 TO 7:

- What were conditions like on the transport ship for the horses? What were they like for the men?
- What do Billy and Jack spend most of their time on board ship doing?
- What was the blackout? How did the battle with the warship *Emden* change the young men's attitudes?
- Name three things Billy does while on board the ship to help Chopper's horse, Trojan, cope with the journey.
- How has Chopper changed by the end of the journey?
- Why weren't the men told where they were going?
- Why were many of the men disappointed to find out they were going to Egypt?
- What does Chopper mean when he calls the identity discs 'cold meat medals'?

TRAINING IN EGYPT, CHAPTERS 8 TO 10:

- Why weren't the troopers allowed to ride the horses for several weeks after disembarking the ship?
- Why do you think Chopper, Jack and the other troopers were more interested in reading their own letters than in continuing to tease Billy about his letter from Alice?
- How was life changing back home in New Zealand?
- How would you describe the Egyptian desert? What about the city of Cairo?
- Many country lads like Billy had never even been to a city before the war. Which things do you think would have made the biggest impression on them in Egypt?
- Read about how the troopers planned to use the horses in war (p.92). Do you think this plan would have worked well during a battle? Why?
- Billy and Jack climb an Egyptian pyramid and carve their names into the top (p.95). Would tourists today be allowed to do this? Why?
- Read about the horse race on pages 101 to 104. What does this incident tell us about Billy and about Chopper? How is Chopper's attitude to Billy starting to change?
- How does Chopper help Billy when Billy tries to stop a drunk soldier feeding beer to a donkey (pp.106–108)?

- What were 'weary willies'?
- Why did the troopers want to go to Gallipoli with the infantry?
- Why did the troopers leave their horses behind and become infantry when they went to Gallipoli?

GALLIPOLI, CHAPTERS 11 TO 15:

- The men had found training in the Egyptian desert hard. What do you think they thought about the training once they were at the front line?
- What is a periscope? How did periscopes save soldiers' lives in the trenches?
- On page 120, Billy is pleased that he doesn't have to face the men he shoots. Why do you think he feels this way?
- Why does Billy pretend he is pig hunting during the Turkish attack (see chapter 15).
- What realisation does Billy make after he gazes into 'the wide, staring eyes of a young Turkish soldier'? How does this affect him?
- On page 125, an older trooper says: "If their mothers could see these boys now, this blasted war would be over today." What do you think he means by this?
- During the short truce, the soldiers from both sides came above ground to bury their dead. Why do you think the soldiers observed the truce and didn't shoot the enemy while they were above ground and vulnerable?
- When the men were relieved from the front line, they got to 'rest' in Shrapnel Valley. What was life really like there?
- What things did the Australians call 'cricket balls'? Why did Billy find them the most frightening part of a battle?
- What order did Chopper 'cheerfully disobey'? Do you think he should have disobeyed that order? Why?
- Why doesn't Billy send his letters to Alice?
- Why did sickness and disease start to kill more people than the actual fighting?
- Read the New Zealand newspaper headings relating to the fighting at Gallipoli (p.148). What sort of impression do you think the people back home were getting about the war? Was it realistic? Why do you think the articles were written this way?

- Why does Chopper jokingly call the good meal fed to the men before the Battle of Chunuk Bair ‘The Last Supper’?
- When Jack and Billy are talking about how fighting is like pig hunting, Jack says: “Yeah ... but this time we’re the pigs.” What does he mean by this?
- What is Billy having to admit to himself when he agrees to look after Jack’s horse, Spirit, after the war?
- Why does Billy try to save Chopper when he finds him lying unconscious on the ground?
- What does the author mean on page 173 when she says that Billy is riding Tui over the farm hills?

WOUNDED, CHAPTERS 16 TO 17:

- How does Chopper save Billy? What does this tell us about how war has changed Chopper?
- What big favour does Billy ask of Chopper? Why is it so important to him?
- Why do you think the terrible wound in Billy’s leg stops feeling painful?
- What sort of person was Billy’s cousin Harriet?
- Why doesn’t Billy rejoice when he hears that he’s going to make a full recovery?
- Why did Billy write to Jack’s parents? Why did he consider it the hardest thing he’d ever had to do?
- What does Chopper mean by his note: *I did as you asked. Jack rests in peace.*
- Do you think Billy and Chopper will remain friends after the war? Why?
- How does Billy feel about leaving Tui in Egypt? What might he think of his younger self who so readily sold Tui to the Defence Department?
- Billy makes two jokes on page 194. What are they? Why do you think he makes jokes at such a difficult time?
- How did Alice know Billy was arriving back in Wellington?
- How does Billy help Spirit? How does Spirit help Billy?

Activities

ACTIVITY 1: RESEARCH THE REAL THING

Although the author invented Billy, Jack and Chopper, their squadron and regiment really did exist. Ask students to look through chapter three to find out the names of both the squadron and the regiment. Then assist them in using the Internet to find out more about them (e.g., see www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/wellington-mounted-rifles/1914). They should skim read the articles and take notes.

Assist the students in using their notes to write a report about this squadron and regiment. Ensure they know to include a title, an introduction, some interesting factual information and a conclusion.

Alternatively, some students may wish to write a report about the role of New Zealand horses in World War One (e.g., see www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/nz-first-world-war-horses). Some of this material can be distressing, however, so use discernment.

ACTIVITY 2: WAR CHANGES PEOPLE

Tell your students that in a good novel, the main character often changes or develops because of the events in the plot. This is true of Billy, the main character in this novel. It is also true of the side-character Chopper.

Discuss some of the ways Billy changes as a result of his war experiences. Talk about how he is relatively innocent and inexperienced before the war. He is shy around women and tends to let others make decisions for him. Physically, however, he is fit and able. Encourage your students to find evidence for how these things change during the course of the story.

Next, divide your students into groups or pairs to discuss how the character of Chopper changes. Remind them that he will change in different ways to Billy. Each group or pair should create a list to discuss with the class.

ACTIVITY 3: MAKE A PERISCOPE

The soldiers in the trenches used periscopes so they could locate the enemy without having to stick their own heads above the ground and risk being shot.

Discuss what the students already know about periscopes. Then assist groups of students to make their own periscopes. You can find instructions and templates for making them on the Internet. Choose a set of instructions that is at the right level for your students.

Make sure the students understand that light travels in straight lines and bounces off the mirrors. When they have completed the task, provide an opportunity for them to use their own periscopes.

ACTIVITY 4: ROLE PLAYS

Ask your students to imagine that Billy and Chopper meet up twenty years later at a regimental reunion. Assist them in thinking about how these two war veterans might feel seeing one another again, especially having been through such difficult times together.

In pairs, ask the students to pretend to be Billy and Chopper. Ask them to talk about old times together and to inform each other about what has happened during the last twenty years. They should also discuss their experiences of settling back into life in New Zealand.

Choose selected pairs to perform their role plays for the class.

ACTIVITY 5: APPLY THE LEARNING TO LYRICS

Ask your students if they are familiar with the song *Billy, Don't Be a Hero* by Paper Lace. If some are, ask them to tell the class a little about it. Then tell the class that this song is not about the Billy in this novel, but was a chart-topping song in 1974, during the Vietnam War. Explain also that the song is set during the American Civil War, between 1861 and 1865, and that it expresses the opinion of a woman whose fiancé is going off to fight.

Play the song for the class (either download it or locate a video from an appropriate site). Then play it again while the students take notes about any similarities they can find between the experiences of the Billy in the book and the Billy in the song. You may need to play it a third time.

Then discuss the following:

- Were the writers of this song pro- or anti-war? How can you tell?
- What happened to the Billy in the song? Do you think he was a hero? Should he have done what he did? Together, write reasons For and Against his actions on the whiteboard. Discuss how it is not always straightforward to tell right from wrong.
- Why does Billy's fiancée throw the letter away?
- Would people in Billy Bowman's day have approved of a woman telling someone not to be a hero? Why?
- How do you think people's attitudes to war changed between the start of World War One and the last years of the Vietnam war in the 1970s? Why did they change?
- What different attitudes to war exist these days? Why?