

Chapter 4

Stokoes in New Zealand & World Ward 11 1939 - 1952



Tom and Bella - April 1, 1939. It was their Wedding Day

Tommy: Dad enjoyed telling this story of how he and mum first met. He said he was walking around Apia and came to the Vaisigano River where several Samoan girls were doing their washing. He called out, "Which one of you would like to marry me? Your mother stood up and yelled "I will!" But mum tells a different story. In her early twenties she had a uncle whose family made their living by brewing beer for tourists. She had recently returned from Hawaii and spoke a little English. Tom was on vacation from the Social Security office in New Zealand and had stopped in for a beer. He asked if there was anyone there who spoke English? They visited for

a long time. Then Tom, Bella and her girlfriend went swimming by Mulifanua Plantation and enjoyed a picnic there. Sometime later Tom invited Bella to come to New Zealand.

“If I pay your fare will you come?” he asked. She did not believe he would send money for her fare, so she agreed. Two weeks later a letter arrived by registered mail. A friend who worked at the post office told Bella they were holding a registered letter for her. When she opened it she was surprised to find a steamship ticket on the Matua. At first she did not want to go. However her friend encouraged her to accept Tom’s offer. “Bella where in Samoa can you find a white man to marry? There are only Chinese and Samoans here and the Samoans beat their wives. You better go to New Zealand. So she got ready and left.

When the boat docked in Auckland, Tom and Mary Jensen, her sister’s good friend, were waiting at the dock. Mom stayed with Mary until New Years and then went to her sister’s home. She went by train to Louisa’s house in Wanganui for Christmas. Bella lived with her sister Louisa Stent and got a job. The pay was one pound or about \$10 a month. She thought that was very good money. She bought a dress and a hat for her wedding.

Bella lived in Wanganui about a year. Tom visited and took her to movies, for walks or they just visited. Her sister advised, “if I were you Bella, I would marry Tom when he proposes. Don’t run around with your friends and get pregnant.” Bella was twenty-four and Tom twenty-eight. Tom was working for Thomas Cook. When he got off work he came over. They got married on April 1st, 1939 because it was Tom’s day off. They were married by a proselyting Elder at her sister’s house. There were people from the church and a few friends. Then Bella moved to Wellington where Tom had an apartment. They lived there from 1939 until 1940 when Tom was drafted into New Zealand’s army.

Social Security Department, Wellington, New Zealand. August 31, 1940

Dear Lily,

You may be surprised to receive a letter from me, perhaps already given up for lost, but as at this moment there are fewer things on hand to occupy my attention. I write without further apology for not having done so before.

As you will know so many things have taken place during the last two years and my working hours became so long that I largely lost interest in outside affairs while trying to cope with personal matters near at hand. Life was very simple in the bush but when in the latter days of 1938 I came out and lived in Wellington following my voyage to the islands, it became complicated. I do not intend to dwell upon all the events leading up to my present position suffice to say that on the outbreak of war my job with Messre Cook terminated but as they were a most niggardly concern and never anything like the old company to work for, that is since conducted by the grasping French common of wagons- Sets, I was well rid of them. Within twenty four hours of leaving them I was into the Civil Service and entered into a long period of work also, o work also, overtime till 9 p.m. for weeks on end.

Under similar conditions any man in England would have had a comfortable home, but this is not England, and an acute shortage of houses of any description renders Wellington a most expensive and uncomfortable place in which to reside.

Consequently my wife and I are not much better off than when we married but have to make the best of our surroundings. The war is not likely to make things easier but we do have the advantage of being well away from the conflict. At least for some time. While wishing you safety from all perils of war I have nevertheless a feeling of unreality towards it, for six years absence has made Europe just another continent in my eyes, although the results of war will, I realize, have far reaching effects even to the ends of the earth.

You may be interested to hear that you are now an Aunt. Thomas Alexander Stokoe was born at Wanganui on August 15th and is a strong and loud voiced infant, eight and a half pounds at birth and with every possibility of healthy survival. Bella is very proud of her son and I look forward to the time when she returns to Wellington.

It was while visiting her in the nursing home by the Wanganui river that she said, "Your sister sent you a letter and 10 pounds for your birthday, why do you not write her." So I tried to think back to that time and although so much has happened since, many thanks all the same.

Next time you look at a silver dish or article marketed "Elkington Plate" think of d'Muville Island. This Birmingham family may not recognize their relatives should they see them, for a John Elkington who came to this country during the Maori Wars decided to return to England, married the daughter of a Waikato Chief and became the head of a numerous family now thirty eight in number.

When Jim McCarthy and I took our tents over to the island early this year, we were received with wonderful hospitality by these people. The Maories, indeed all the Polynesians, are noted for their love of feasting and enjoying life. This particular family had five thousand acres of grazing and spent their spare time hunting the numerous wild cattle and pigs, fishing for large snapper and grops and collecting mutton birds off their small islands here and there in the surrounding seas.

They took us on a picnic in which a whole sheep was baked upon hot stone buried in the ground and everyone ate until they could eat no more. Masses of steamed vegetables, fruit and various snacks completed the meal, including kumaras, a sweet vegetable peculiar to the South Seas.

I understand that their Birmingham relatives made some attempt to return the father of the present head of the family to England, but without avail. Bella's cousin, Fitisemanu Malietoa, a famous High Chief in his country, came over recently as guest of the N.Z. Government. He is an immense person in bulk, count interpreter, senior native policeman in the Mandated Territory and a splendid orator both in Samoan and English. Immediately upon his arrival he sought us out, Bella having lived with him as a girl. I was by right expected to slaughter a bullock and give a feast in his honor, but this being impracticable in the city, we provided various meals prepared by

my wife in the Samoan manner. Cases of taro, cooking bananas, mangoes and other tropical fruits would arrive from time to time following which the chief and one or more of his party would arrive to eat after their custom.



He presented me with twenty handmade mats and tapas (mulberry bark cloth) assigned to Bella some of the family lands for a cocoa plantation (her sister has the large plantation in Savai'i) and in fact took quite a fancy to me. This was the first time he had been outside the tropics and the cold was trying, but he was a rare sight in sandals, lava lava and usual dress of rank under which however he was provided with woolen singlet.

Although unable to proceed to Samoa immediately because of wartime restrictions and the possibility also of my being called up, I fully intend to pay that country another visit. We presented the chief with an organ for his mission, also a cabinet gramophone and fifty records.

More important perhaps is the new suggesting of growing a useful plant the possibilities of which I brought to her notice, and with the co-operation of the Agricultural Department of Fiji a quantity of these will be transferred in the territory to establish a new paying crop on his lands. That is the chief news of interest excepting that Mrs. Becket died in Christchurch according to a newspaper obituary notice on Aug. 21st. Poor Mrs. B. Was a nice old soul, but I hold the opinion that she should not have left England at sixty years of age and started roaming around. Excepting for two years of her life. John had always lived with his mother and when transferred to Australia she told Tom B. to stop courting and marry, sold up, packed up and set sail.

All went well until the landlady's daughter chased John B. From W.a. to N.Z. and that resulted in Mrs. Beckett being left floating. She had some small means to float with I'll grant, but not enough to keep up a home and fireside of her own and her various attempt of sharing houses with new friends failed without exception.

She did make one attempt to get her daughter-in-law (now a widow with one child) to join her but some last hitch squashed the plant. Mrs. B. found herself alone and she was not the sort of woman who could live happily alone. In England she had a home, in Australia and later in N.Z. never. During her last two years she entertained notions of returning to England but this raised the problem of where she could go. Her passage was as good as booked one day but someone pointed out that it may be alright for blood relations to drop in and say "How-do" after several years absence but that people change and she would likely be as good as stranded with none of her family left to care for her.

However she had passed on and maybe will be happier in the next world. I hope you will survive this conflict and I wish you all safety. Give my kind regards to Miss Gibson and boys if still on deck. Trusting you are well,

Yours, Tom



Seeing Action in World War 11

World War 11 was well under way in the Pacific when Dad was drafted. He was assigned to an Artillery Union and he shipped off to New Caledonia aboard the "Maui," a ship brought out of retirement to carry troops, guns and explosives. There were 3,000 soldiers aboard.

As they arrived in New Caledonia the U.S. Fleet was sailing out to sea. Of the eight destroyers leaving only one returned. He remembered seeing it limping back listing at a 45 degree angle. Three cruisers were also lost plus the Australian cruiser, Canberra. Dad said the morale was low and they all felt depressed. His unit set up anti-aircraft guns on New Caledonia.

From New Caledonia he moved with his unit to Guadalcanal arriving in 1943, then on to Vela la Vela. He recalled a missionary bringing cannibals out of the jungle. They had been converted to Christianity and promised not to eat any more people. They put on a show for the troops with singing and dancing but the troops were told not to clap or sing as that would be insulting to the Vela la Vela natives.

Next he moved out to the Green Islands, 4 degrees south of the equator. As they arrived they were attacked by planes of the Japanese Air Force. Dad and a few others were put ashore under cover of night to find suitable locations for setting up anti-aircraft guns. He discovered a telegraph wire leading up to a Japanese machine gun post. He cut the wire with his knife. He later rendezvoused at the beach and was picked up and taken back to the ship. That night they were bombed by Japanese airplanes. The next day the battle intensified. Eighteen American destroyers pounded the island and the Japanese forces began to evacuate.

From Green Island dad's unit returned to new Zealand where after a short leave it sailed for Egypt. He arrived in Cairo and after spending some time in Egypt was shipped to Sarafan, a big British military depot near Tel Aviv in what would later become the state of Israel.

He went to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, saw the tomb of Hagar, the 2nd wife of Abraham and the Dome of the Rock, a sacred Muslim Mosque and second most holy place in Islam. Then he returned to Egypt and shipped out to Italy. Arriving in Torrento his unit journeyed northward up the Italian peninsula. This was in 1945 towards the end of the war.

He and a Sargent Major obtained a truck, loaded it with odds and ends and journeyed over the Italian border into Croatia, Yugoslavia in the hope of selling their wares. Entering an inn dad shouted in German, "We have items for sale if anyone is interested."

A Croatian man stuck a colt 45 in his back and said they had been robbed the previous day by bandits masquerading in military uniform. They were not going to let it happen a second time. Dad was grateful he could speak German and explained they were not bandits but real British soldiers in uniform. So the Croations let them go and they drove their truck back to Italy.

There were many German prisoners behind barbed wire in prison camps. Dad felt sorry for them and on one occasion he and a fellow soldier went up to the guards and told them they needed a few prisoners for a special work detail. They took five of them to a nearby farm where he traded tobacco for wine and gave the wine to the prisoners. He later returned them to the prison camp. They were grateful to dad for his kindness.

Dad enjoyed traveling and got a few days leave. He hitchhiked through Italy and whenever he got hungry he would just look for a chow line with British soldiers and go join in. Because he was wearing a British uniform he just blended in with everyone else.

He crossed into Austria and got within 15 miles of the Hungarian frontier which was occupied by Russians. He saw some real Mongolian troops who had deserted the Russian army and joined the Germans. They were later returned to the Russians and shot.

Back with his unit he and 15 others took a truck, put drums of gasoline on the back and took off sightseeing. They were not supposed to go far but drove from Italy into France and Monte Carlo where military police of the American 1st Army made them leave.

They drove from France into Austria enjoying more sight- seeing. Dad especially enjoyed the Dolomites, big long mountains made of limestone that looked like church steeples. They returned to their unit in Italy and eventually the New Zealand troops returned home.



Bella writes, Tommy was one year and 11 months when Tom left for World War 11. He left in July 1942. We moved from Wellington to Hamilton because Tom had changed jobs. He was

a clerk for the social Security in Hamilton. When Tom left I had to move to Wanganui to be near my sister because I did not know anyone in Hamilton. Before Tom left he said to me: "Bella, I am going away now. From today on, you take care of yourself and Tommy. Here is money. You're going to get money. It will come regular every month—a check from the army, dependence allowance. If you starve, it's your own fault. You've got to take care of yourself, pay your bills and buy your food so he went. Tommy and I took the train to Wanganui. We stayed with my sister for a while. Then I rented a house at Balgonie Avenue right next to the freezing works where they slaughtered the animals. Tom wrote regularly. My sister and her daughters lived nearby so it was easier.



1940 – 1947. We lived in this house on Kelvin Street in Aramaho, Wanganui. I took this photo in 2011. I don't think the house has been painted totally since we left.

One day my sister say to me, "Bella, I like to take Tommy to sleep with us overnight. My sister and her girls were very fond of Tommy being only a baby at the time so I said, "Okay, take him." They thought the world of Tommy. They loved him so I said "Take him." You know I could not sleep the whole night. I got up early and got on my bike. I biked over to 61 Smithfield Road, Gonville at 5 o'clock in the morning and knocked on the door. When my sister opened the door and she said, "Hey what are you doing here at 5 o'clock in the morning?" I say, "I can't sleep, I miss my boy." It was only him and me in that big house. It was very lonesome and scary. So I did not want my boy go and sleep with them again.

I made a few friends. I got busy working. I worked for a company that made shirts and blouses. I sewed the cuffs and neck and pockets. If you are fast you make a bonus. If you are slow you don't. In winter time when it was very cold, I biked to work. I sat down and I cry. My feet were frozen. My fingers and my ears were stiff. I went near the heater to keep warm. But I was happy to work among the girls. I enjoyed the work and it shortened the time.



Tommy and Bella



Tommy with Thurl Sansom

Before Tommy started school there was a neighbor who used to take care of him. She took him to the Salvation Army. Tommy used to sing over there, "My cup is running over." They taught the children how to sing and do the action to each song. Tommy was a real good singer. The church would ask him to go and sing over there. I used to pay Mrs. Mosen down the road 15 shillings every two weeks to tend Tommy.

She had a little adopted girl named Heather who always came to get him and play with him on weekends. Tommy would go and play with her but after a few minutes he would come back. I asked why, he would say, "I don't want to play with Heather Mosen. She is too bossy. I am not going to play with her anymore." Heather was blond with a face full of freckles.

Once my sister said, "Why you give the boy too much milk?" I said, "He wanted milk." My sister said, "You give him only a little. We cannot afford to waste the milk." So I say, "Tommy come on, let's go home." I put him on the back of my bike and I took him home. We did not go back. I was mad because she was so stingy. Even a little milk she makes a fuss over. Tommy said, "Why can't we go to Auntie?" He cried and cried. I did not like her telling me what to do.

She said that if I loved my son I should be strict with him. She tells me to put my son in

order. I was mad. I was burning inside. Your own girls run away and do not help wash the dishes and wash the clothes. I end up doing all that. Her girls fight over the dishes and she tells me about my son. She tells me to put him right. But she loves Tommy. All of them love him. Still she says I spoil my son. She had no right to tell me how to raise him. Then my niece write a letter and tells me to come over and visit. So I decided to let bygones be bygones. She apologized and we made up.

Later, we rented a house in Aramoho. I used to live at 19 Kelvin Street next to the train station. Also we lived opposite the Woolen Mill. But I did not work there for I worked at Lamba Wool where they make toys and rugs and sheep skin items. When the war ended I was still working there.

We had friends who lived across the road named Bill and Mary Green. They were taking care of the lama wool factory. We always went there on weekends when there was no school. Tommy took his little truck over there and asked Bill to play with him. Tommy asked Bill one year at Christmas time, "Bill did Father Christmas come to you?" Bill said "No, what about you." Tommy said, "Ya, Father Christmas came last night while I was sleeping and he gave me this dump truck." Tommy was very happy. Bill said, "That Father Christmas is no good. He doesn't give me nothing and I think if I see him I'll take my ax and chop his head off." That was where Tommy went to play. Bill and Mary were probably in their fifties.

I was not very active in the church then so I often went there to drink tea. Mary was a good cook and made very good marmalade. In New Zealand, they say Father Christmas instead of Santa Clause. Tommy say, "Oh, I'm not going to sleep Mom. I'm going to wait for Father Christmas to come down the chimney. Then he said, "Did you clean the chimney?" I said "Oh, even if you don't clean, he will come just the same." When he went to school he said to me when he came home, "Mom, I know who Father Christmas is. It's your our own father and mother. I said, "Who told you that?" He said, "The kids at school." I said, "Oh, the kids spoil all the fun."

When the school finish at the end of the year, Tommy said, "Mom, I need to take a hammer to school." I said, "What for?" Tommy said, "The school is going to break up tomorrow. "So you are going to break up the school?" I said. "Yes," Tommy said, "The school's going to break up tomorrow." He thought they were going to break down the building.

Sometimes the kids picked on Tommy. I bought him a bike to ride to school. These two Duncan sisters, quite older than him, every time they saw Tommy on the bike, they tripped him or did something to make him fall. So Tommy came home and told me. I went to the police. They talked to the parents.

A habit Tommy had when he bought a loaf of bread home after school, he ate the inside of it. He left only the outside crust. He did this quite a lot. Because I worked in the morning he had to get up and cook his own breakfast. He moved the chair near the stove and stirred his own porridge. Then he sat down and ate while I got ready for work.

Tommy was one year and 11 months when Tom left for World War 11. He left in July 1942.

We moved from Wellington to Hamilton because Tom had changed jobs. He was a clerk for the social Security in Hamilton. When Tom left I had to move to Wanganui to be near my sister because I did not know anyone in Hamilton. Before Tom left he said to me: "Bella, I am going away now. From today on, you take care of yourself and Tommy. Here is money. You're going to get money. It will come regular every month—a check from the army, dependence allowance. If you starve, it's your own fault. You've got to take care of yourself, pay your bills and buy your food so he went. Tommy and I took the train to Wanganui. We stayed with my sister for a while. Then I rented a house at Balgonie Avenue right next to the freezing works where they slaughtered the animals. Tom wrote regularly. My sister and her daughters lived nearby so it was easier.



Our fourteen acre farm in Westmere, Wanganui. On a visit in 2011 we found that this house had replaced the one our family had lived in.

Tommy: Dad returned to New Zealand on January 14, 1946 after a five year absence. The war was over. It was peace time. Throughout the war mum was always fearful she might receive a telegram indicating that her husband was killed in action as was the case with some families who lived on our street. Mum was grateful her husband had survived the war.

New Zealand from 1946 through April, 1952.

Tom wrote and said he was coming home. Tommy and I went to the railway station and waited for him. It is kind of hard to pick out your husband when everyone is wearing uniforms and looked alike. Same clothes, same hat. I said, "Tommy, here is your father." He said, "That's not my father." But anyway, we went home. Tom picked Tommy up and we went home. Tom had been gone to war. Before the war ended Tom visited his sister in England.

Tommy was not used to a father. He was very jealous of his father and sometimes when we were shelling peas for Christmas, he dropped some peas on the floor. The father spanked his hand

and said, "Naughty boy! When I die I won't leave you any money." Tommy said, "Dad, when you die you take your money with you, and mind, don't drop it." We were very surprised to hear a little boy say that.

Tommy:

I did not like that strange man giving my mother kisses. Dad wanted to try his hand at farming so he bought a fourteen acre farm in Westmere, Wanganui. We grew potatoes, had one cow dad named Tiddlewinks and several hundred chickens. He also worked full time at the freezing works riding a motor cycle to and from work. It was here on the farm that Leo and Lilian were born." Lilian was a very beautiful baby and one of the neighbors always referred to her as "that beautiful little doll." We had potatoes and chickens. We had machines to dig the potatoes up. We followed behind and picked up the potatoes.

Later we moved to Castlecliff half a mile from the beach where little three year old Leo almost burned down our garage. In the garage was stored some bales of hay and Leo thought it might be interesting to set them on fire. Some flames and smoke was billowing into the air and Leo came running to mum saying "Mum, fire, fire!" It seemed dad always enjoyed hearing mum recount this story. Mum did put the fire out with a garden hose before the fire engine arrived.

Bella:

We decided we wanted to live closer to town so we built a house at a place called Castlecliff. We built the house there. Bitlake was the name of our builder. We had chickens there. Chickens were Tommy's favorite. He used to feed them. He had warts on his knees and every time



Our home at 12 Kowhai Street in Castlecliff, Wanganui with the current owners.

he go out with his short pants the chickens came and pecked at his warts. I had to go and get medicine for his warts. Leo was very, very sick. The doctors told us that if I did not take him to a warm climate, he may not live. He was very skinny.

RECOLLECTIONS OF FITISEMANU

Alexander Sane Crichton and John Tuiloma Crichton were brothers. Their daughters Isabella Crichton and Alisa Crichton were cousins. Alisa Crichton was the wife of Fitisemanu who in his lifetime was a high ranking government official, Chief of Police, prominent L.D.S. leader in Western Samoa, and one of the biggest men in Samoa. Tommy writes his wife and I are second cousins.

I recall this event quite vividly because to me it was very funny and I enjoyed it immensely. In fact, to me it was absolutely hysterical. I believe it was in the year 1946 or there about and it occurred at our home on Kelvin Street, in the suburb of Aramoho, in the city of Wanganui, New Zealand. I was either 5 or 6 years old at the time.

One sunny day my mother informed me that some relatives from Samoa were coming to visit us and that I should help her clean the house. So we made our preparations including fixing some food. My mother was all excited and looked forward to the arrival of our guests because it was not every day that we had relatives visit us from Samoa.

Our home was a modest home with a wooden sofa and a few chairs in the front living room. The four wooden legs on the sofa were probably about 8 inches high and the cushions made it quite comfortable. Mum told me to be on the lookout for a vehicle with our guests and to let her know as soon as it arrived. So I kept looking out the window anticipating the arrival.

Soon a vehicle arrived and pulled up in front of the house. I yelled ‘They are here mum!’ She told me ‘Open the front door.’ I looked curiously at the vehicle as the doors opened. Then to my surprise out emerged the largest man I had ever seen in my life. He was a giant three times the size of an average man. He was absolutely huge and must have weighed over 500 pounds.

My mother rushed enthusiastically to greet him and wife Alisa, plus the other guests. Then they approached the house. Fitisemanu arrived at the door but was so huge he couldn’t fit through the door. So he turned sideways, inhaled and squeezed through into the living room. The guests stood conversing momentarily then mum invited Fitisemanu to sit down on the sofa. It was obvious no one else could fit on the sofa as Fitisemanu would occupy it entirely.

Fitisemanu approached the sofa with a big smile and plopped himself down. Immediately, the front of the sofa broke including two legs on one end, sending Fitisemanu rolling onto the floor. Everybody started laughing including Fitisemanu. It was absolutely hilarious and every one thoroughly enjoyed the mishap including me, for I had never seen a giant break a sofa before and roll upon the floor. Samoans laugh at something like this. It’s just part of Samoan nature. Fitisemanu apologized for breaking the sofa but said he preferred sitting on the floor anyway for

that was a Samoan custom. This Fitiseanu visit was not only memorable but an absolute joy.

When our family moved permanently to Western Samoa in 1952, I accompanied my mother on visits to Alisa and Fitiseanu at their home in the village of Vaivase. I looked around to see if there was a wooden sofa but didn't see one. Fitiseanu was a striking man, a commanding figure of stature and importance, dignified and majestic, with an overwhelming aura and physical presence. I have never forgotten those wonderful moments in New Zealand when the sofa broke sending Fitiseanu rolling on the floor. Those moments are the highlight of my Fitiseanu recollection.