

Anzac Day

Padre found Hiroshima a 'shattering experience'

Mike Crean

Hiroshima after the bomb is seared into Ian Dixon's brain.

The ruined city was a "shattering experience" for the New Zealand army padre on occupation duties in Japan after World War 2.

The 91-year-old Christchurch man says he carried "appalling" visions of destruction with him for years. He had to wrestle with his religious conviction until he found a way of accommodating God in his thinking again.

Mr Dixon joined the army from his Pleasant Point, South Canterbury, parish in 1942. He served as chaplain at a camp near Blenheim until he was shipped to Egypt, and then Italy, in 1944.

The war in Europe was nearly over and much of his work involved dealing with "very angry Italian mommas" whose daughters' virtue

had been compromised by Kiwi soldiers.

He remembers the BBC news announcement of the atomic bomb blast at Hiroshima. A New Zealander who had been doing an honours degree in physics before the war became almost hysterical.

"I remember clearly he said, 'This is the end of the world'. He explained the atomic bomb put creation into reverse."

Mr Dixon was shipped with the J-Force to Japan in early 1946. When their train was forced to stop for several hours at Hiroshima, Mr Dixon got out to look around.

"My first sight of Hiroshima was of a horror I can never, ever, describe. I had seen the destruction caused by 1000-pound bombs in Europe. I still cannot describe the desolation of Hiroshima. Some buildings were still standing but everything was empty, everything

was gone. The hillsides were just black. Then, to my horror, I saw shadows on the footpaths and roads and I realised people had dissolved physically and only their shadows were left."

For four months, he had to carry on as padre, helping men who were traumatised by the sights and the suffering they met.

Back in New Zealand, Mr Dixon established the new Naenae parish, near Wellington. Later he became chaplain at Otago University and Professor of Pastoral Theology at Knox College in Dunedin.

All this time, he found New Zealanders did not want to know about Hiroshima. Only in the last 10 years have they listened.

Public acknowledgement of the horrors of war, on Anzac Day, and growing indignation at the arms trade and war in Iraq, give him hope for the future of the world.

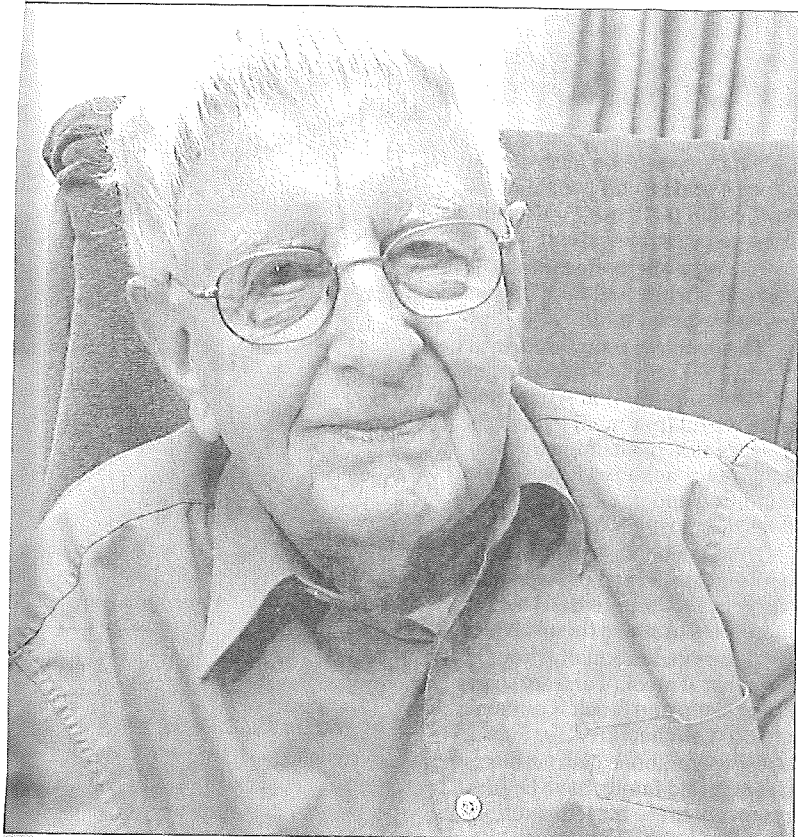


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Appalling visions of war: Ian Dixon wrestled with his religious convictions.