

KEVIN MILNE

The beloved broadcaster's reflections on life



Trinket & a TRAGEDY

Kevin follows his keepsake to the battlefield, where three brothers were lost

I'd always thought a little antique gold ball among my family keepsakes had once been part of an elaborate necklace or bracelet. But I recently photographed it and zoomed in for a closer look. To my surprise and delight, it turned out to be a tiny 2.5cm gold rugby ball. On it is engraved: 7 A Side 3-6-15 L P Donohue 2nd Grade.

The L P Donohue referred to is my late great-uncle Laurence Donohue. When he received that award, he was a month short of his 19th birthday. He was better known by his nickname "Tiny", to distinguish him from his identical twin Leo, named "Jum" (Jumbo). Maybe Laurence

looked a touch shorter, though they were both tall boys. They were also talented athletes, very handsome and the much-loved "babies" in a family of 11.

I'm not sure what rugby club presented these awards. But my research reveals the Banks Peninsula Rugby Club was presenting similar mementos around 1915. That would fit because Laurence was from Christchurch.

The year before the award was presented, World War I had broken out. And the year after, Laurence and Leo – Tiny and Jum – signed up to fight on the battlefields of Europe. They'd be following their 40-year-old

eldest brother Ernest, who'd volunteered two years earlier and was already over there.

Of course, like so many young New Zealanders who answered the call to fight in Europe, they had no idea what they were in for. In fact, they'd not long signed up when news came back that Ernest had been killed in action in France.

Eight months later, young Laurence is also in Europe. Because of his strength and fitness, he's assigned to be a stretcher-bearer for the No 4 NZ Field Ambulance Company near the French/Belgian border. But after five months evacuating wounded men from the front lines, often under fire, he was severely affected by mustard gas and had to be evacuated. He died a week later in a Belgian hospital.

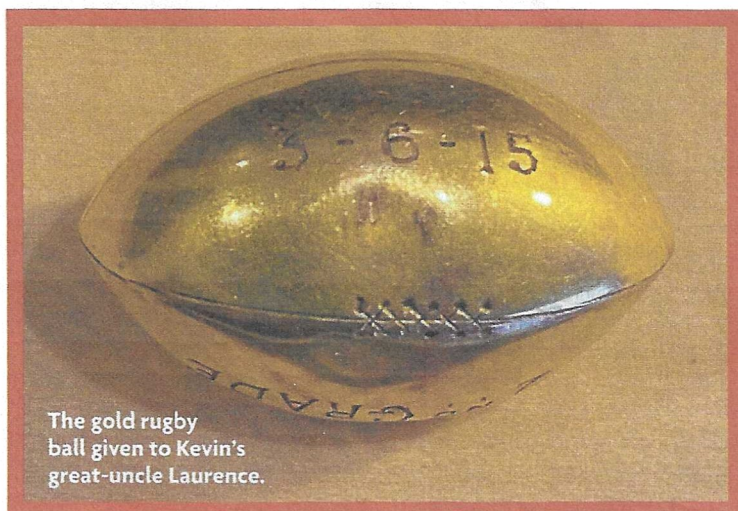
But only six weeks after that, having survived the famous Battle of Passchendaele, Laurence's identical twin brother Leo was also killed in action in Belgium. Whether Leo had ever found out he'd lost his twin I don't know. But three brothers from one family, two just 21, never to return home.

And I have the tiny gold rugby ball that Laurence was awarded two years earlier.

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The gold rugby ball given to Kevin's great-uncle Laurence.