



THE Prodigal

THEY TOLD HIM HE HAD TO DRINK TO BE A MAN. YET HE BECAME ONE, ONLY WHEN HE STOPPED. THEY SAID NOTHING WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN RUGBY. HE HOPED THEY WERE WRONG, BECAUSE RUGBY DIDN'T CURE HIS TROUBLES, IT GAVE THEM OXYGEN.

NEV MACEWAN WAS AN ALL BLACK. HE WAS ALSO AN ALCOHOLIC WHOSE PERSONAL DESCENT ALMOST CLAIMED EVERYTHING HE LOVED.

BUT THIS CANNOT BE JUST HIS STORY. THIS IS ALSO THE STORY OF A WIFE; A WOMAN OF COURAGE AND UNFAILING COMMITMENT.

IT'S THE STORY OF A SON WHO WANTED NOTHING MORE THAN TO REUNITE HIS FATHER WITH HIS PAST.

AND IT'S THE STORY OF THE JERSEY THAT MADE IT POSSIBLE.

BY ERIC YOUNG
PICTURES: ANDREW CORNAGA

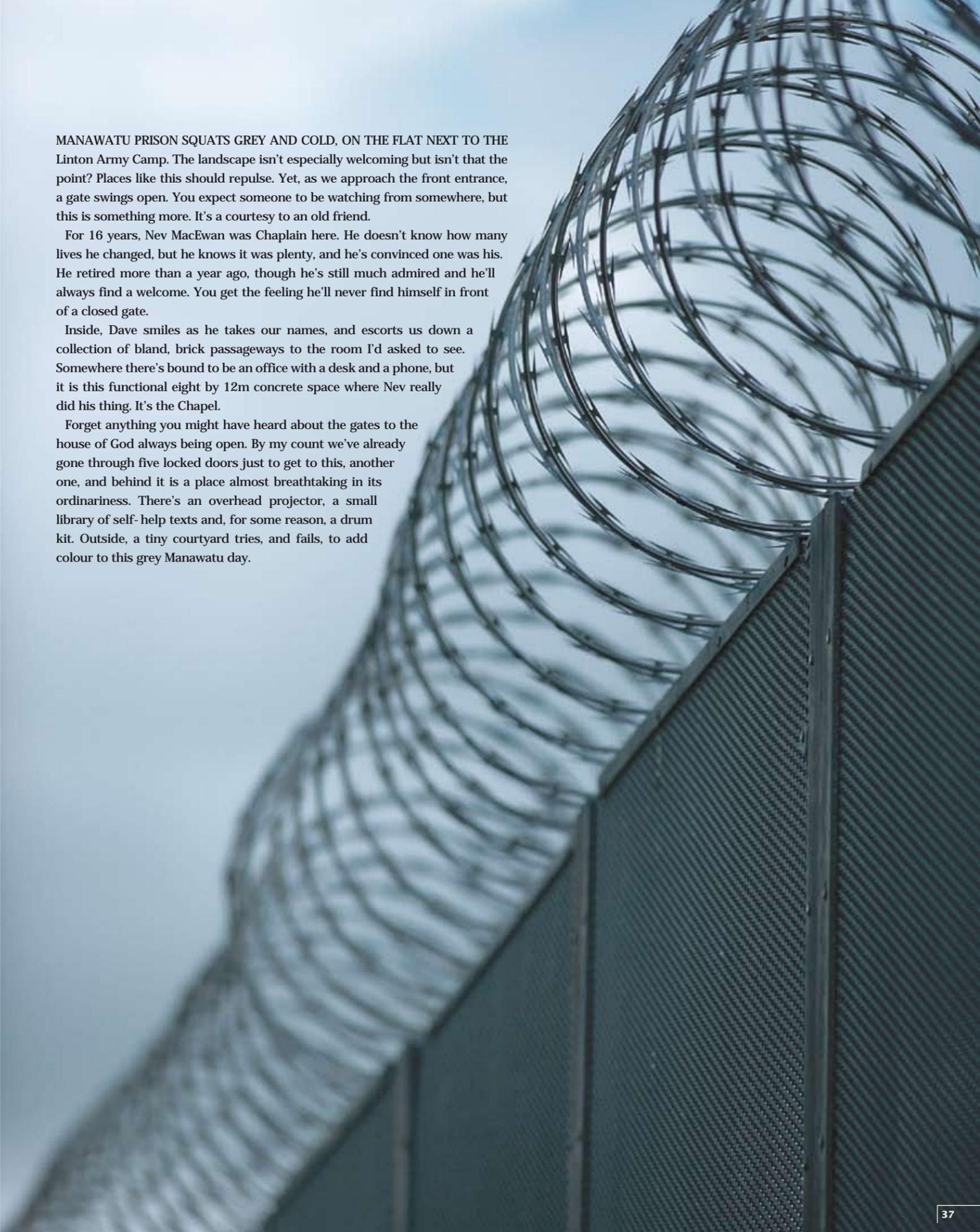


MANAWATU PRISON SQUATS GREY AND COLD, ON THE FLAT NEXT TO THE Linton Army Camp. The landscape isn't especially welcoming but isn't that the point? Places like this should repulse. Yet, as we approach the front entrance, a gate swings open. You expect someone to be watching from somewhere, but this is something more. It's a courtesy to an old friend.

For 16 years, Nev MacEwan was Chaplain here. He doesn't know how many lives he changed, but he knows it was plenty, and he's convinced one was his. He retired more than a year ago, though he's still much admired and he'll always find a welcome. You get the feeling he'll never find himself in front of a closed gate.

Inside, Dave smiles as he takes our names, and escorts us down a collection of bland, brick passageways to the room I'd asked to see. Somewhere there's bound to be an office with a desk and a phone, but it is this functional eight by 12m concrete space where Nev really did his thing. It's the Chapel.

Forget anything you might have heard about the gates to the house of God always being open. By my count we've already gone through five locked doors just to get to this, another one, and behind it is a place almost breathtaking in its ordinariness. There's an overhead projector, a small library of self-help texts and, for some reason, a drum kit. Outside, a tiny courtyard tries, and fails, to add colour to this grey Manawatu day.





PORTRAIT: ANDREW CORNAGA

YOU LOOK INTO HIS FACE. THE TURNED-down mouth beneath the platinum moustache and the eyes, flecked with flint and a lifetime of sadness. They can still dance though. They can still hold a room.

It is strangely unlined, this face. The man behind it turned 73 last month.

The face has a story, many stories. The All Black. The drunk. The Chaplain. The thief. Which to tell? They all played a part, and all left their scars; recurring roles in the intricate drama of a complicated man.

Some of those stories are reasonably well known. Nev's been quite generous with them over the years, sharing them with anyone he believes they will help, and doing it with a missionary honesty which never fails to make his son Angus uncomfortable.

But that's just because he loves the man. He knows what Nev went through because he was also in the room. He knows the price, because the family paid it. His instinct for protection is both understandable and predictable.

When I point out Nev's story is essentially a parable of redemption, and therefore with much to offer, there's a silence down the line.

Without much enthusiasm, he sighs: "I just say to Dad 'why would you want to bring all this stuff up again?'"

Another beat. "But he does. It is, after all, HIS story." And Nev was the first to write it. As part of his therapy, he was encouraged to note down his thoughts. Thoughts became sentences. Sentences became chapters; chapters became a personal history: *When the Crowd Stops Roaring*.

You are moved first by its message, but mostly by its honesty and one passage in particular stands out because it seems to go to the heart of everything.

"A lot of it came," Nev writes, "*of trying to be a man*."

"*When I was a kid, I liked to smell flowers. When someone found out about this and asked what my favourite flower was, I said 'pansies,' and got called 'Pansy Mac.'*

"*It hurt. Then, when I played rugby, they said: 'Be more rugged.' Then after the game, they said a man had to drink his pint. So I drank my pint. The alcohol certainly helped me to face the world, after their image.*

"*It gave me the wings to fly. But it took away the blue sky.*"

Finding the blue sky would become Nev's new addiction. But first, he'd have to lose the wings.

"IT GAVE ME THE WINGS TO FLY. BUT IT TOOK AWAY THE BLUE SKY." FINDING THE BLUE SKY WOULD BECOME NEV'S NEW ADDICTION. BUT FIRST, HE'D HAVE TO LOSE THE WINGS.

YOU FIND THIS MAN AT THE END OF A LONG driveway. Keep on going, past the place on the right where his daughter lives with a talented husband and two happy children. You find him with Jeannette in a simple home with little trace of his previous lives. There's the striking All Black portrait; arms folded chin out, and that's about it.

He shows you to a room above the garage he calls The AB Studio; a concession to one of those lives, but also a false clue to the man who built it. There's nothing remotely rugby about this room until the man arrives, and fills its doorway.

Even now, more than 50 years after he first wore that famous black jersey with the iconic silver slash, he is imposing. He has promised to share his stories, and over the next few days he does, beginning at the end. Beginning with the jersey.

The one he gave Joe Rooney in 1974, when the Welshman was working on the Turangi power project.

"Joe asked me if I had a jersey, an All Black jersey, that I could make available to his club back in Wales. It was my second to last All Black jersey, a significant jersey, but I felt it was going to a very good cause, so I had no hesitation in letting it go.

"In 1974 my drinking was really right out of control. My whole life was out of control, so giving it away was probably one of the better things that I did."

"Why was it significant?" I ask, and there's genuine weight in his pause. "Because of what it represented," he says finally. "The person I had become."

It was a jersey from the All Blacks' 1960 tour of South Africa. Another of those brutal yet futile campaigns against a traditional enemy. They called them "tours", but these men were anything but tourists. They were foot-soldiers in battles fought 40 minutes a time. Was it coincidence that the year after the 1949 All Blacks were hammered 4-0 in the republic, George Orwell, a man noted for his vision, wrote "serious sport is war minus the shooting"?

If a South African tour is, then, a series of skirmishes, one of its most impenetrable citadels is Boet Erasmus in the unremarkable coastal sprawl of Port Elizabeth. Nev played there twice during the tour; in the final test lost 8-3, and an earlier match against Eastern Province during which he led the All Blacks for the second time. It should have been a moment of enormous pride. It was not.

"It was just an absolute brawl. It was almost as if that side had gone out wilfully to maim as many All Blacks as possible.

"At halftime I was reported as saying to the team; 'keep cool, keep focused, the game is important.'

"That's not what I said at all. What I said was 'every man for himself, and I'll see you back in the dressing room after the game'. It was just a shocker. Rugby wasn't the winner. Nobody really came out of it with any credit."

Ten days later, after the All Blacks had levelled the series with an 11-3 win in Cape Town, Nev's increasingly obvious drinking found a new level. It was called the top shelf.

"After that second test, I collapsed from exhaustion, and on doctors' advice left the team to recuperate. I actually went to stay with Basil Kenyon, who was then the convener of the South African selection panel, at his place in East London. Talk about living with the enemy.

"The advice I was given was that I needed to relax a bit more, and not to take myself so seriously."

In 1960 South Africa, "relaxing" meant drinking, and during those few days with Basil Kenyon, Nev was given an alcoholic master class.

"That's when my drinking really started from the top shelf. And of course alcohol was so cheap over there. You can't blame Basil, and I don't. I could have walked away from it and didn't. From then on it was a slow steady process."

Nev rejoined the team, but would never again feel the need to hide his drinking. "In that culture, nobody would have picked it up anyway, that I was drinking too much. But isn't that the best place to hide a drinker? Among other drinkers?"



BY THE TIME THE ALL BLACKS WALKED, devastated once more, from Boet Erasmus after the fourth Test, another heartbreaking series loss behind them, Nev had already lost the battle with his father's disease.

He kept the jersey he wore that day for 14 years, until Joe Rooney came looking for a favour, and did one for Nev instead.

More than 30 years later it was still hanging, crowded and unremarkable, in the glass case of an equally unremarkable Welsh rugby club.

It had become a curiosity and no more at the Cilfynydd RFC. A Polaroid, taken by a grateful

"But Angus is just such an incredible prankster," says Nev. "I thought it was one of his leg pulls. Until his wife called me the next day, and asked me what I thought of the trip."

As a boy, Angus had watched helplessly as his father, increasingly angry with rugby and what he saw as its role in his fall, traded away his past. Jerseys? Sold. Mementos? Given away. Rugby meant drinking which meant pain, which meant darkness. Rugby would give him stature and pride, yet hide the addiction which undermined both.

the lifestyle he'd built for himself. He describes his solution in *When the Crowd Stops Roaring*:

"When you're on the trail of impressing people, costs must not be seen to become a barrier," he writes. *"It's not cool. A way must be found."*

"Racehorses. You start with ten dollars, because that'll become a hundred. It might even do it once or twice. But it doesn't keep doing it. So you get a bit further behind. Then you've got to catch up on the outlay - you need a bigger deposit. It grows. It's a spiral. You put a bit more on it and get a bit further behind."

"Who can you ask for a loan, of say eighty dollars, or a hundred? You don't want to ask a bank, or get all formal over that kind of thing. It's a bit much, though, to touch a friend for. Anyway, your friends all think you're cool. Who's going to make such a loan?"

"The right person at work might do it. He'd need to be someone who was controlling the flow of money through various accounts. Then he could direct a bit your way, cover it up on the books, and make it good later, when you'd paid it back. Matter of fact, if that's all that's involved, you could do it yourself."

"So that's how it started. Over maybe three years, dealing with fairly modest amounts each time, I paid myself 'tide-over' sums to deal with self-induced crises. I paid these sums back, but it was a betrayal of trust."

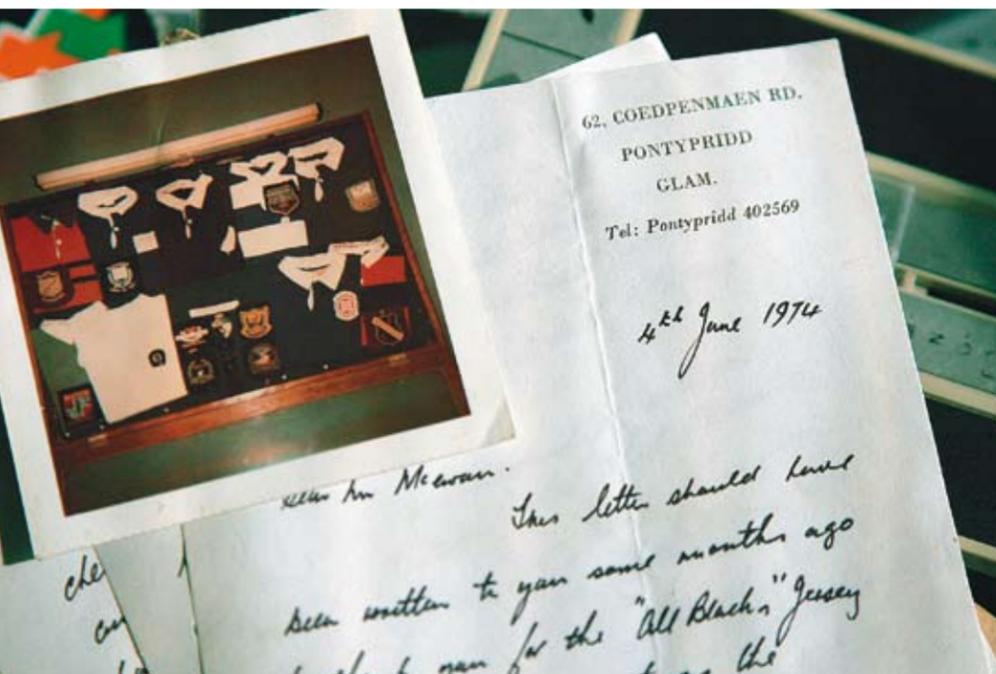
Nev wasn't an especially good thief. He didn't take much, certainly not enough to support the sort of lavish lifestyle which theft as a servant implies. But as he says, it was a betrayal, and betrayals come with a price.

His was a conviction and a \$500 fine. He barely escaped a prison term; sentenced instead to a lifetime of regret. Forever the target of whispered conversations and pointed fingers.

The jerseys disappeared over time, but the alcohol got cleaned out in one swoop.

"It was a lot quieter," notes Angus. "Mum had gone to great lengths to hide us kids from a lot of it, but there had been some pretty heinous stuff going on in that house for a while."

Jeannette MacEwan remembers trying to protect her children in that loud and angry house. She also remembers her parents' attempt at trying to protect her.



club member and sent with a letter of thanks, shows it fighting for space among provincial jerseys from Auckland and Canterbury.

Nev MacEwan had no relationship with the club. Not really. He just knew a man who did. But in the way that time attaches importance to most things, the jersey assumed a certain status behind the glass. Parts of his story had travelled halfway around the world, and isn't the detritus of a flawed icon so much more interesting?

Angus knew it had a place, and it wasn't on some featureless wall in Wales. For more than a year he dreamed schoolboy dreams of liberating it, but did nothing until his guilt overcame his indifference. Out of the blue, he rang his father and announced they were going on a rescue mission.

So everything had to go and on a certain level, even Angus the boy must have recognised it for what it was. A purification. A cleansing, and not just of the cupboards.

"I was saying 'you can't do this', and Dad just said, 'they're only jerseys.'"

But getting rid of them served a dual purpose for the other Nev MacEwan; the one who was still lost. It removed the reminders of a time of which he had become not particularly proud.

And of more practical use, it helped him hold on to the family home, which had been threatened when some creative accounting finally caught up with him.

Nev liked to drink only slightly more than he liked to have other drinkers around him. The problem was one of economics. He simply didn't have the income to support

"My mother had it all planned. I was going to take the kids and live in Nelson. Then one day my sister-in-law said to me, 'I can see you without Nev, but I can't see Nev without you'.

"That brought it home to me really. And I thought of my wedding vows. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer. Well at that time it was definitely worse and poorer.

"It was a terrible time. But I never cried in front of the children. I only ever cried in the car.

"I didn't even know if I still loved Nev at that stage. But I saw him make an effort to change back to the person that I married and that was enough. I stayed."

Palmerston North is a small place. Sure, it's one of our larger provincial centres, but cities aren't measured by population alone and Palmy turned its collective back on the man it had once feted.

"I VOWED AND DECLARED I WOULD NEVER, EVER DRINK. I WAS FIVE. AND OF COURSE IT WAS TO DESTROY ME. THE VERY THING THAT I HATED, WAS THE VERY THING I WAS TO BECOME."

Doors which had opened to the former All Black, city councillor and public relations officer, slammed instead on the convicted thief. Bruised provincial pride exacted its revenge.

But nothing would be as critical or as cathartic as the revenge Nev tried to inflict on himself. He now accepts the attempt on his own life was more a statement than a suicide, and he woke to a second chance in Ward 5 at Palmerston North Hospital. The detox unit.

It was 1979, the first detour from a destructive path he'd been on his whole life.

He pauses again in the telling. No, he says, this wasn't a detour. This was a seismic shift.

"Alcohol had always been a part of my life. Long before I learned to drink."

We go back to the beginning. To the tiny South Island community of Richmond and the day his alcoholic father came home in a drunken rage. Every downstairs window became a target for his anger and none survived the fury.

"Then to break every window in the upstairs, he took the shotgun. I was absolutely petrified. I vowed and declared I would never, ever drink. I was five. And of course it was to destroy me. The very thing that I hated, was the very thing I was to become."



could understand. For a while, he was one of them. The convicted thief brought down by too much pride, too much alcohol, and not enough courage to arrest the excess.

But how does a man of rugby become a man of God?

Partly because his attempted suicide in 1979 succeeded on one level at least. He killed off the old Nev MacEwan. The abusive drunk would disappear, replaced by a quieter, less selfish, less angry man. The first metamorphosis of the man we see today. It was never just alcohol, which took him so low, but also anger and pride. So with an enormous effort and the support of those around him, he removed them. The wings were clipped.

AA would show him the signposts with a 12-step programme delivered in a letter to his father. The All Black was disappearing by degrees and the good man was emerging; all he needed was a push in the right direction.

"What are you going to do now?" the visitor to the detox unit asked. Nev had no idea and told the Vicar so. "But I also told him I was at home with these people I'd been living with in Ward 5. The ones who were down and out. I really didn't even know what I was saying at the time, let alone realise it would be my life for the next 26 years."

And so he began to share his story. Of his fall and of his rise. Of his conviction. Of his conversion. Of his Christianity, and before long, the telling of the story became the story. In 1979 a shamed Nev MacEwan was so terrified of jail he made a vague attempt at ending his life. Now you could barely keep him out of them.



“DURING MY FIRST EVER VISIT, THESE GUYS STARTED TO COME IN, AND THEY WERE JUST PEOPLE LIKE ME. AND IN THAT MEETING, AN ABSOLUTE PEACE I’D NEVER EXPERIENCED CAME OVER ME. I KNEW I HAD TO GO BACK.”



“The first was Kaitoke Prison. I’d been invited by an inmate to share the hope that I’d found in AA. I have no idea why I accepted.

“And when I arrived there, I was petrified. I was shaking.

“But during my first ever visit, these guys started to come in, and they were just people like me. And in that meeting, an absolute peace I’d never experienced came over me. I knew I had to go back.

“And that was the start.”

The good man emerged. The man Jeannette married, replaced the one she had endured. By the late 1980s, Nev’s informal attempts at connecting with inmates were in the past. He was now on the payroll.

What does a prison Chaplain do exactly? Put simply, he gives men hope when none before existed and Nev was good at it because he’d walked in their shoes.

Yet for 16 years, inmates at Manawatu Prison made the daily mistake of thinking **he** was helping **them**.

NEV HAD BEEN A TERRIFIC ALL BLACK WHO could have been a great one. He had all the credentials, making his debut in a 1956 team which would become one of the most deified in our rugby history.

Clarke. White. Skinner. Names even now, whispered with reverence. Some would go on to play better rugby, but could anything they later achieved be of more consequence than a first series win over a famous enemy?

Nev played just one test in that series, the second at Athletic Park where he was used out of position in the only game the All Blacks lost. Peter Jones was brought in for the third, and scored the series'-winning try in the fourth. Jones would tell an unguarded microphone he was “absolutely buggered”, and a shocked yet joyous nation would eventually forgive him for his honesty. Different times.

Nev’s selection in that series, brief as it was, put him quite literally alongside his hero. As a promising young Wellington forward, he’d written to Tiny White, then a powerful presence in the international game, asking for any encouragement he could offer. Anything.

White wrote back to the young MacEwan, who clearly not only appreciated, but also utilised the advice. It was 1954. Two years later they were packing down in the same All Black scrum. Even now, when asked the greatest lock he’d ever stood alongside, he’ll

smile, tiptoe delicately over the subject of a couple of Meads brothers, a Hill and a Horsley, and tell you with utter conviction: “I played one game with Tiny White.”

ONE NOVEMBER THURSDAY, A NERVOUS Angus MacEwan sat next to his father on a plane heading north.

He had dreamed of this moment for years yet he was now struck by the uncomfortable feeling the trip was no longer about reacquainting his father with his past.

“I began to get really worried that it was more about me. Don’t get me wrong, it was important for Dad, but he seemed pretty relaxed about the whole thing.”

He was. To Nev, the trip had never really been just about a jersey. For years he’d blamed rugby for providing the culture of acceptance, behind which he successfully hid his drinking problem.

But not any more. He’d made his peace with the game a long time ago. Of course he was excited by the trip, but recovering the jersey itself was already starting to diminish in importance next to the time he would spend with his son.

That son, even now, can’t speak of his father, without the pride shining through. His voice smiles when he tells you his own wedding ring fits easily inside Nev’s.

And he whispers when he describes the speech his father gave to the Cilfynydd club, on the night it hosted them both.

“When he spoke, he had them in the palm of his hand. He is an incredible speaker. But he’s also a very humble man. That just came out more and more.”

Nev wasn’t just humble that night. He was overwhelmed. That particular part of Wales isn’t especially known for its prosperity,

“I TOOK AWAY HEALING. THAT NIGHT I TOOK AWAY MUCH MORE THAN I GAVE. THE JERSEY WAS JUST A SYMBOL OF A GREATER PART OF ME THAT I HAD REFUSED TO ACCEPT.”

yet little expense had been spared. A full Welsh choir was assembled and no one who was there that night will forget Nev’s speech of gratitude.

He spoke, as he always speaks, from the heart. The angry man is long gone.

“On those sorts of occasions, it can be easy to say the wrong thing at the wrong time,” he says.

“But I just felt I couldn’t let down my son or my family. I was just so grateful. Not just for the jersey, but also for the opportunity to tell them what it represented.

“It was as if everything I had done in my life had been moving towards that moment. It was the coming together of all that I was and had been.”

Thanks were offered, gifts were exchanged and many days later Nev and Angus got back on a plane heading south.

Ask Nev now what he got most out of that trip, and the answer won’t be a jersey.

“I took away healing. That night I took away much more than I gave. The jersey was just a symbol of a greater part of me that I had refused to accept.”

Now he accepts what he was. Embraces it in a way he hadn’t for decades. An overwhelmed Nev arrived back in New Zealand with the jersey that symbolised his decades-long divorce from rugby was over.

And for the first time in a long time, the man who once wore it, feels like an All Black again. The hurt has gone, replaced by a pride he hadn’t felt for years.

“For a long time I turned my back on rugby. But what I have learned is that what you achieve and what you are, is very important.

“In my rugby days, I never really appreciated or understood what I had achieved. I don’t know why not. Perhaps I was another person.”

Angus MacEwan’s job is done. His father’s second to last All Black jersey, which saw battle in South Africa, and found curiosity in Wales, is now home.

It hangs on a wall in the lounge but it won’t be lonely for long. Already random memorabilia and rugby minutiae are creeping back into the room. It’s still early days, but a 73-year-old Nev MacEwan is learning rugby all over again.



NEV’S INTERNATIONAL RUGBY CAREER ended in September 1962. The test was a dour, 3-0 win over the Wallabies at Carisbrook, and he was replaced for the third test at Eden Park by Colin Meads.

Yet even then he had no real expectation his time in the black jersey was over. The following year England would make a two-test tour, and at the end of 1963, the All Blacks would embark on an epic 36-match tour of Britain, France and Canada. They’d take away 30 players. Surely there’d be room.

Nev’s right knee, which had been giving him trouble for years, finally succumbed that year, and he had the cartilage removed. It was to take him out of a large part of Wellington’s season, but he was still hopeful of making it back into the All Blacks for the first test against England on May 25. He wasn’t in the team, his place gone to the rising Canterbury lock, A.J Stewart.

“There was a function after the team was picked to play England, when I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Neil McPhail (then a selector) came over and said ‘bad luck’ to me.

“And I said, ‘it’s got nothing to do with luck. You picked your best side’.

“He turned to me and said, ‘well I don’t know whether we have’.

“Well I just went through the roof. Later in the night I had words with the other two selectors, and really gave them broadsides.

“Which I probably wouldn’t have done, if I hadn’t had a skinful.”

THERE ARE TWO RUGBY HISTORIES IN New Zealand. There’s the official version, which lists the games played and the men who played them. It is deliberately, sometimes necessarily, anaemic and often the facts in no way reflect the truth.

Then there’s the unofficial history. The one that never quite makes it into print, and which only occasionally gets a whispered mention beyond those involved.

The official version of Nev’s exclusion from the 1963-64 tour to Britain and France, was that during his long lay-off with a knee injury other, better candidates had presented themselves.

Unofficially, even Nev knows that having a drunken spray at the three selectors, wasn’t the smartest way to prolong what until then had been a distinguished career. His drinking was making him unpredictable. Or maybe just predictably unreliable. Either way, he was a liquored-up liability.

“I don’t know whether I was a liability to anyone else, but I was certainly becoming a liability to myself.”

Nev would go on to play good and often great rugby for Wellington and his beloved Athletic, but on that day the door was politely but firmly closed on his All Black career.

What sort of player was he? It’s hard to make generational comparisons, but Nev’s still considered one of the great lineout forwards. Yet that official All Black biography doesn’t go much beyond the basic facts, nowhere near the heart of who he truly is, and certainly doesn’t touch what he really did.

In his 52-match All Black career, he played 20 tests, during which he scored just two tries, five years apart. Almost half of his tests were against Australia, and a quarter of them were at his other “home,” Athletic Park.

No mention of the wife who had stood by him, the father he’d hated, or the son who’d tried so hard.

No trace of the addiction he shares with many of his fellow men in black.

No hint of the man imprisoned by his past, who found freedom behind bars and barbed wire.

BACK ALONG CAMP ROAD, WEAK WINTER Manawatu sunshine is making patterns on the Chapel floor.

This place is a contradiction. It’s cold, but calming. Not all the chairs match, but that hardly matters. If you’re here, it’s not because you care about interior design. There isn’t a sign on the door, though one might have read: “Hope starts here”.

I’d wanted to come because I’d hoped to see Nev in something like his natural environment, and even now, nearly a year after retirement, two things are obvious. He still has authority. They still have affection. From somewhere comes the smell of institutional cooking, and not even that can blunt the smiles or the banter.

We leave an hour or so later, and I wonder what I’ve learned about Nev until I see him walk to the car. Just that little bit straighter. He’d loved being back. It’s like therapy that never ends. ©