

# A6 NEWS



Evelyn Hutchins, on the piano, with Elizabeth Marvelly, rear left, Gloria Norfolk and Mary Blackwell.

Photo: Grahame Cox

## OUR 'GRACIE FIELDS' STILL SINGS – FOR ANZAC DAY

### Wartime memories live on for a Kiwi singer aged 96. Tim Hume reports.

IT'S 24 years since Evelyn Hutchins sang before a large audience, but just minutes before recording for a nationwide broadcast, the 96-year-old is cool as a cucumber.

"It doesn't worry me, no. I've done it all my life," she says, bursting into song to prove her point.

Under her maiden name, Bovett, Hutchins was a big name in the 1940s' music scene, widely known as New Zealand's Gracie Fields. Last week she and friend Mary Blackwell, 94, relived those days when they flew from their Wellington homes to Maori Television's Auckland studios to

record a show for the network's Anzac Day programming. *Nga Manu Korero* (The Songbirds), will feature the Wellington singers gathering around the piano with Aucklanders Brian Schofield, 88, and youngsters Elizabeth Marvelly and Chris Powley, for a performance of wartime standards.

Hutchins began her musical career in Wanaka, accompanying her mother who was a pianist in a silent movie theatre. She wanted to be an opera singer, but her career took a turn when the tastes of wartime audiences turned to lighter fare.

Music was an important mor-

ale booster during the grim war years. She performed at concerts around the country – entertaining on bases, hospitals, from the back of a truck in Dunedin's Octagon – and even sang to the soldiers on her bus during her day job as a driver for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

"They seemed to remember me because I would sing to them while I drove," she says. "A lot of them were airmen pilots and they didn't come back. They were just young lads." Among them was her fiance, killed in a 1943 bombing raid over Germany.

Hutchins says the secret to her longevity isn't in her diet:

"Lots of chocolate, full cream milk, butter, sugar, you name it. I live on steak." She credits her long life to her genes, although she stresses they are "not all that good". "I'm a little bit deaf.

I've got a hearing aid but I'm like Selwyn Toogood, it's usually in the bag."

She is modest about her singing abilities these days. "You shouldn't sing solo after you're 60 years of age, because your voice isn't the same. I want people to remember me as I was." But she still rates her driving skills. "I've got a boy racer car – a Nissan Skyline, six-cylinder. I don't like little bumblebees."

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