

# We are at war...

In September 1939, Britain, Australia and New Zealand declared war on Nazi Germany. At that time the focus of much of the fighting was on the other side of the world – though that would soon change.

Three echelons of New Zealand soldiers departed for Egypt in 1940, along with New Zealand aircrews and pilots joining the RAF. The New Zealand Navy, meanwhile, was under British Admiralty orders.

With most of our fighting force overseas, New Zealanders were coming to terms with danger in our own back yard. German raiders – Q ships – were patrolling the southern Pacific, including New Zealand. One of these, the *Orion*, layed a field of sea mines off Northland, sinking two New Zealand ships, the *Niagara* and *Puriri*.

The *Orion* also shelled and sunk the *Turakina*, while the German raider *Komet* sunk the *Holmwood* and the



Map of Japanese Expansion

*Rangitane*. The *Komet* also damaged the wharf at Nauru stopping the supply of phosphate fertiliser to New Zealand farms.

The fight was coming closer to home.

## Northland in their sights

**Faced with the reality of the threat of Japanese attack, New Zealand military chiefs identified Northland as the most likely place where an invasion force would land. They immediately set about improving defences, and creating 'fortress Northland'.**

With its low population, large coastline and a number of safe, east coast water anchorages perfect for an invasion force to land, Northland was the logical place to defend from attack. Whangaroa Harbour, the Bay of Islands and Whangarei Harbour were seen as likely targets, as well as Doubtless Bay. These places were either mined or had gun emplacements erected.

The Public Works Department – with incredible speed and efficiency – built defensive structures all over Northland including airfields, radar stations, Army camps, roads and other vital infrastructure needed for defence; all of which operated under varying degrees of secrecy.

**Militarisation of Northland during World War II was much more intense than was realised by the general public. Only recently has the full extent of Northland's military network come to light.**

## Eyes on the horizon

**New Zealand's defenders were largely a mix of enlisted men who had not yet been sent overseas and the Home Guard. One of the first priorities was to get as many eyes watching for invasion as possible.**

All over Northland, prefabricated coast-watching stations were trucked into position in places as diverse as the Karikari Peninsula, Waipapakauri Ramp at Ninety Mile Beach and Reef Point at the headland west of Ahipara, along with many other sites that had been identified as being militarily strategic.

As Northland's defence network expanded, the coast watchers were quickly joined by other New Zealand personnel from the army, air force and navy who were all actively engaged in the defence of Northland.

From mid-1942, they were joined by large numbers of United States forces in New Zealand for defence and training as part of Operation Lone Wolf (in camps around Whangarei and Warworth areas) before their later engagement in the Pacific.



Home Guard volunteers gather in Waikato. Source: Hamilton City Council



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## Moturoa Camp B Section

Identified as a strategic point within the defence plan developed for the Bay of Islands, Moturoa Island contained several bases within a few square kilometres.

Gun emplacements for four large 6 inch breech-loading Mk VII coastal defence guns and eight 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns were built, along with a naval post to control a mine field that stretched across to the island of Moturua.

Accommodation was also built for the soldiers who operated and protected these defence installations, some of whom were also involved in building works – including roads.

In all, Moturoa had the gun emplacement and gunners' camp as well as camps for supporting infantry, and a separate camp for naval personnel in various roles, including transport, communication, observation and mining. Although comparatively small, Moturoa was armed to the teeth.



*Moturoa Island gun emplacement*

## Remuera Camp – Base For The Maori 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion

Named after the nearby Remuera settlement near Ohaeawai, the base camp for the Maori 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion consisted of about 200 buildings on the site including workshops, storage, accommodation, cook houses, washing facilities, vehicle cleaning stations, ammunition storage and every other necessity for a newly formed infantry battalion.

The Public Works Department rapidly built a comprehensive training and services camp for Maori recruits dedicated to domestic defence. While many of their whanau were already in battle, in 1942, in Africa and soon in Europe, these new soldiers began the work of training and fortification to repel any invaders at home.

Organised on a tribal basis, the men of the Maori Battalion from North Auckland were based at Remuera Camp. Comprised mainly of men from Ngapuhi and subtribes, they formed A Company.



*Members of the 28th Maori Battalion march up Nias Track to the Waitangi Treaty Grounds in 1940*

*Photo: PF Nash, NZ Herald glass plate collection*

## Waimate North Camp

**When enlisted soldier Trevor McKenzie was moved to Waimate North in 1942 as part of the 18th Antitank Regiment, he and his comrades initially camped under camouflage in trees about 200 metres from the Waimate North Show Grounds.**

Not for long however. The Public Works Department speedily erected 33 buildings, including accommodation huts along with storage and work buildings for large equipment – all of which became the Waimate North Camp.

Mobile and relatively independent, the antitank regiment's role was to contain and destroy armoured intrusions by the enemy. With the possibility of a feared Japanese landing in or near the Bay of Islands, establishing a large anti-tank unit well connected by roads to possible points of landing was a top priority.

Neighbouring camps included the Maori Battalion at Remuera, an ambulance unit and a heavy local air strip – though the anti-tank unit would have been the first posted to the area.

Vehicles Trevor used at the camp included 4x4 Marmon-Herrington gun carriers with canvas sides which sat two in the front and six soldiers in the back; as well as Bren gun carriers armed with Hotchkiss .303 machine guns. Trevor later drove Stuart tanks, which arrived at Okaihau – complete with 35mm guns on the turrets.



*Stuart Tank. Source: Internet*



*Marmon-Herrington armoured car Source: Internet*



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## Whangaroa Gun Emplacement Camp

Although virtually invisible until boats are at its mouth, the Whangaroa Harbour's safe anchorage and vulnerability to attack were obvious. Compared to the Bay of Islands, with its established network of rail and road, the Whangaroa Harbour posed a different problem.

Its isolation and comparatively poor infrastructure meant defence troops would struggle to get there to oppose a small heavily armed force – for example – who could establish a beach-head in the harbour, and then await further reinforcements.

The defence solution for the 300m harbour mouth was obvious. In early 1942 a mine control station – under Navy command – was built to monitor, and if necessary activate, a chain of sea mines that were laid across the harbour mouth.

In addition, an artillery observation post was built together with large gun emplacements still visible from the water today. The works were completed by the middle of that same year – a reflection of the high priority military command placed on defending Whangaroa from enemy attack.



*Whangaroa gun emplacement map. Source: NZ Archives, 1944*



*Whangaroa mine observation post  
Source: Heritage New Zealand, Pouhere Taonga*

## Front-line Defences at Waitangi

Better known for its association with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, Te Tii Marae and the wider Treaty grounds were seen as a possible landing place for Japanese invading forces.

Two military camps were established to defend the zone – Waitangi Camp covering the river mouth and bridge area, and Cactus Camp built further north on the site of what is the golf course today.

Both camps served as the operational home to the 4th North Auckland Battalion, an infantry unit for defence and rapid response based in what became known as The Box – the military administrative zone covering the southern end of the Bay of Islands.

New Zealand military command had established a strong defence force here running from the Paihia foreshore up to Waitangi – the site of 'Cactus Camp' – westwards along Mt Bledisloe, then south along Haruru Falls Road to Puketona Road, and back to Paihia.

The 4th North Auckland Regiment hastily dug weapon pits for the battalion's support artillery which eventually included four 6-inch Howitzers.

For the troops who manned the Box, routine and hard work were the norm – including digging pits, wiring of beaches and even planting fields of potato and kumara. Troops soon became familiar with the road from Waitangi to Kerikeri as they regularly marched its full 35km. As if walking the roads wasn't enough, many were also involved in constructing them.

Waitangi was at the epicentre of The Box, which played a central role in the defence plan for the Bay of Islands and – by extension – the rest of New Zealand.



*Waitangi Camp map. Source: NZ Archives, 1944*



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## Sweetwater Camp Defence of the Far North

The camp at Sweetwater – known also as Lake Ngatu – was geared up for the demanding task of patrolling Ninety Mile Beach. As well as observation posts at Reef Point near Ahipara and the Karikari Peninsula, the camp at Waipapakauri north of Kaitia had the role of spotting any enemy invasion that might take place along the 88km-long beach – and then act as a front line of defence.

Security from observation was important to the mission, as Japanese intelligence operatives were known to be active in New Zealand and Australia. Hidden in the “not very healthy” (according to one soldier) low wet hollows and scrub hills in the dunes behind 90 Mile Beach, the camp was so well concealed most locals didn’t know it existed.

Equipped with tracked Bren Gun carriers, the 2nd Light Armoured Fighting Vehicle Regiment’s job was to find and then oppose any hostile landing. According to soldier and civilian interviews, the carriers ran up and down the beaches and the access roads in support of the coast watch mission.

With the port of Awanui close by, and the Waipapakauri and Kaitia airfields literally down the road, the Sweetwater Camp and wider district formed an integral part of Northland’s defence strategy. According to some locals, the whole Aupouri Peninsula north of Awanui was said to have been restricted to pass-holding local residents only for the duration of the war – a reflection of the area’s strategic importance.



*Bren Gun carrier (universal carrier)*  
Source: National Army Museum



*Sweetwater camp.* Source: Internet

## Whangarei Heads Camp

Dug into the hillside at Home Point – also known as Bushy Point – the Bream Head Gun Emplacement is still a visible feature of the Whangarei Heads.

Here, a quick-firing US 5-inch naval gun covered the mouth of the harbour against a possible naval attack. Because of its exposed position, artillerymen were given two concrete dugouts – described as ‘war shelters’ in the Public Works Department inventory of 1943.

Unlike many of the prefab buildings that made up the vast majority of Northland’s defence network, the buildings constructed for the Bream Head gun emplacement were built to purpose, and built on site from specific designs.

## Army Camps, Kaipara Flats

The idea of establishing the Dome Line – a series of army camps running from Port Albert and the Kaipara Flats through to the Whangapiro Valley – was conceived in the early weeks of 1942, not long after the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

The network of camps was designed to provide a blocking force against an enemy attack down State Highway 1 heading towards Auckland. By the end of April 1942, senior Army officers arrived in Warkworth and laid out a system of camps within about five miles of the town which would become a line of defence against Japanese attack. Less than three months later, the camps had been built, and soldiers were already at attention.

Two of the camps – the N1 and N4 Kaipara Flats Camps – stood in a critical location at the modern site of Kaipara Flats where the railway line crosses the road system nearest Warkworth. A vital logistical centre, it was also one of the forward camps behind the Dome Line, and is within easy reach of Woodcock’s Road Camp – a relatively larger infantry camp.

With the lessening threat of Japanese invasion, most of the military infrastructure in the north was decommissioned from about 1943, though these camps were retained, and began a second life as training bases for American Army units.

The American Army used bases in the North for intensive pre-combat training on their way to the South Pacific. Following operations, many of these men returned for some rest and recreation, before being relaunched into the island campaigns.



*Warkworth HQ 2.* Source: Warkworth Museum



*Bream Head.* Source: Heritage New Zealand, Pouhere Taonga

Today, only the rock-solid concrete war shelters remain in place as features of the Bream Head Gun Battery exhibit on the Council reserve now occupying the land.



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## The Camps at Maungatapere

A complex of six large army camps was built on State Highway 14 near Maungatapere as an important element of Northland's defence plan.

The most likely scenario of attack envisaged by military command was the Japanese landing in Northland – probably in the Bay of Islands – and then driving south towards Auckland. The only way any invader could do that, however, was by using existing roads, as the valleys, unbridged streams and forested hilltops between the north and Auckland were impassable by vehicle.

For that reason six camps were clustered around the main highway north of Whangarei, forming both a checkpoint for defence and a logistical hub for dispersing defence assets – including a small tank unit stationed at Camp M1.

The Maungatapere camps were built under emergency in 1942 to accommodate literally hundreds of personnel following the attack on Pearl Harbour, and the general expectation that the Japanese were on their way.

American soldiers are also understood to have occupied these camps.



*Maungatapere camps map*

## NORTHLAND'S RADAR STATIONS SPARK A NEW SCIENCE

Around the country, radar stations were hastily constructed and commissioned to strengthen New Zealand's defence position against any foreign invader.

Several radar stations were built in Northland – one in the Whangaroa Harbour, one close to Cape Reinga, one at Cape Brett and another near Bayley's Beach.

Besides defence purposes, one completely unexpected benefit of having a network of radar stations in New Zealand and the Pacific was the development of the science of radio astronomy.

Cambridge University graduate, Dr Elizabeth Alexander, had followed her husband out to Singapore where she worked as a geologist. Following the outbreak of war, however, Alexander was assigned work in radio direction-finding with the rank of Captain. Prior to the fall of Singapore, she was evacuated from Singapore to New Zealand with her children in 1942.

Although Alexander had a doctorate in geology, she was given a role leading radio and radar research in New Zealand.

During this time, Dr Alexander was made aware of what became known as the Norfolk Island Effect – an unusual increase in radio interference at sunrise and sunset near Norfolk Island. The phenomenon was first discovered by an airman, though it was Alexander who confirmed her hunch that it was connected with radiation from the sun – an effect now known as sunspots.

Part of her research into the phenomenon was to study the effect recorded at four radar stations in Northland as well as one in Norfolk Island.

For three years Dr Alexander led radio and radar research in New Zealand with a clear focus on Northland. She pioneered radio meteorology, and her work in 1945 marked the beginning of radio astronomy in Australasia. Although a geologist, she found herself at the forefront of this new science which was fostered in part by her research that was carried out in the North.



*The radar station at Whangaroa (Unit 7).*  
Source: Internet



*Dr Elizabeth Alexander*  
Source: Internet



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# The tide turns

## The immediate threat of Japanese invasion of New Zealand began to decrease throughout 1942.

Two naval battles between the US Navy and the Japanese Imperial Navy were decisive in weakening Japanese power. The Battle of the Coral Sea (May 1942) and the Battle of Midway (June 1942) resulted in the Japanese Imperial Navy losing five large aircraft carriers – and with them Japan's ability to attack, and defend its newly gained territory.

Meanwhile US military action largely tied up the Japanese army at Guadalcanal and elsewhere in the Pacific, further limiting Japan's ability to expand its empire. Australian forces

fighting the Japanese on the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea safeguarded Port Moresby from Japanese capture, and reduced the danger of an invasion of the Australian mainland, even though Darwin and Broome were bombed 19 February and 3 March 1942.

**With Japan no longer seen as an immediate threat to New Zealand, the Public Works Department began the task of closing and decommissioning many buildings and structures associated with 'fortress Northland'. These often disappeared as quickly as they were built.**

### MYSTERIOUS GOINGS ON IN MANGONUI

This picture of a Martin Mariner flying boat was taken by Mangonui Primary School Principal Ivan Hall, probably in late 1943 or 1944, from the end of Colonel Mould Drive overlooking Mangonui Harbour.

The photo shows the plane in the harbour, popularly believed to have been on a 'hush hush' mission.

The Martin Mariner was used widely throughout the Pacific as a submarine spotter, rescue aircraft for downed airmen and lost seamen, as well as intelligence gathering. It wasn't widely used in New Zealand, however, which made its presence here all the more interesting.

The enigma behind the mysterious Martin Mariner flying boat was solved by Whangarei resident Rose Pera, who remembered the arrival of the seaplane when she was a student at the school.

The plane landed because it was damaged and needed fixing, and was towed by local resident Bob Marchant to his jetty at Butler Point where he carried out the minor repairs that were needed.

The crew came ashore to the Post Office to report on their whereabouts to base using Morse Code, and Rose's older sister – who worked at the Post Office – was invited by the American crew to dinner at the Marchant's house. Later she was given a tour of the plane.

The arrival of the float plane and her family's proximity to the Americans was the talk of the school for some time, and gave Rose instant school yard status.

Similarly mysterious is this picture of a Fairmile ship – also taken by Ivan Hall – seen here hugging the coast as it steams into Mangonui. The Fairmile ships were used mainly as motor torpedo boats and for mine clearance, though this particular ship doesn't appear to have any naval markings on its hull.



*Martin Mariner Flying Boat.*  
Source: Kevin Hall Collection



*The Fairmile Ship at Mangonui*  
Source: Kevin Hall Collection



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## THE BAY OF ISLANDS – FRONT LINE AGAINST SEA-BORNE INVADERS

A striking photograph of HMNZS KILLEGRAY clearing sea mines in the Bay of Islands serves as a reminder of Northland's importance as a first line of defence against enemy invasion during World War II.

There's something quite confronting about this picture which captures these deadly mines bobbing in the water, with the Bay of Islands' distinctive Ninepin Rock – or Tikitiki – on the horizon. It's a seascape loved by thousands of visitors, and a place where many people enjoy recreational water activities today.

The sea mines are a stark reminder that Northland was a fortress on high alert against attack after the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

The photo was taken by Tudor Collins, who served as a petty officer in the Royal New Zealand Navy during the war. Prior to this, Collins had developed a reputation as a noted freelance who was one of the first photographers in Napier after the Hawke's Bay earthquake of 1931. He also recorded Auckland's Queen Street riots in 1932, and was the only photographer to meet the passengers and crew from the mined NIAGARA in June 1940.



*HMS Killegray retrieving sea mines*  
Source: Kevin Hall Collection

The mines shown here may have been part of a network of 13 loops of 16 contact mines in the channel between Moturoa and Moturua Islands, or more likely some of the 258 contact mines laid in three lines between Ninepin Rock and Whale Rock.

## THE SINKING OF THE PURIRI

On May 14, 1941 New Zealand was shocked to hear of the sinking of the navy minesweeper HMS PURIRI about 13km off Bream Head.

The PURIRI hit a mine while carrying out minesweeping operations with another ship, HMS GALE.

The ship sank so quickly no lifeboats were able to be launched. Five sailors were drowned as a result, including the ship's commanding officer, two stewards, a stoker and an able seaman. The 26 survivors were rescued out of the water by the GALE.

At an inquest held later that year, Lt Arthur Hyde – an eye-witness on board the PURIRI – said the ship sank within two to three minutes of striking the mine. It was the only naval loss in New Zealand waters.

Hyde also recalled that Lieutenant Blacklaws, who was on the bridge at the time, was "carried away" by the blast and last seen falling into the sea among stone ballast and other debris. Other seamen were below decks carrying out various tasks, and would have been "killed instantaneously".

The PURIRI highlighted the danger that many New Zealanders felt for the first time in June 1940, when the trans-Pacific liner NIAGARA also sank off Bream Head after hitting a mine that had also been laid by the ORION.

All 349 passengers and crew survived, though gold ingots worth 2.5 million pounds (about \$230 million today) sank to the bottom along with a secret cargo of small-arms ammunition. In late 1941 almost all of the gold was recovered in an epic salvage effort at a depth of 110m.



*HMS Puriri.* Source: [www.nzhistory.govt.nz](http://www.nzhistory.govt.nz)



*The Niagara.* Source: Wikipedia



*The Orion (Nazi Q ship).* Source: RNZN Communications Association



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## THE PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT – NEW ZEALAND'S DEFENCE SECRET WEAPON

Throughout Northland the Public Works Department planned and built a staggering 2400 buildings in more than 70 camps around the region – under wartime conditions, and with the pressing 'deadline' of the imminent arrival of a Japanese invader.

Not only was the sheer volume of construction impressive, so was its diversity – everything from prefabricated coast watch huts, to latrines blocks, mess halls, barracks and superbly designed and built gun emplacements which still stand rock solid 80 years after their construction.

The structures were also built to a high standard – indeed visiting US Marines arriving at their PWD-built barracks said they had never seen such quality work.

A nation of under two million people sent 140,000 of its citizens to fight in Europe and North Africa, and still built a large town's worth of defence structures scattered throughout its most remote northern regions, besides hosting tens of thousands of American troops for training for the Pacific reconquest.

Once the imminent threat of invasion had passed by mid-1943, the Public Works Department began disposing of buildings and clearing the sites just as efficiently – in most cases restoring the land, which had been requisitioned for defence purposes, back to its original condition. This efficiency at decommissioning buildings and sites is part of the reason this war effort was largely lost to the public mind and history; the sites were destroyed by policy.

### Acknowledgement

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