

Weekend June 23 1991

"Two Taras" a brief but valued existence

When Japan entered the war on December 7 1941 with her attack on the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour, New Zealand had every cause to be worried. And when, within an alarmingly short period of time, the ensuing Japanese expansion into the Pacific had reached far enough south to enable bombing raids to be carried out on the northern Australian ports of Darwin and Broome, New Zealanders' worst fears seemed to be in imminent danger of being realised.

The main weight of New Zealand's war effort had already been committed to a distant part of the world — an Army division serving in the Middle East and naval and air elements deeply involved with the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Back home the country's training resources were geared almost to the limit to keep those forces operating.

As news came through of each new Japanese conquest New Zealanders looked more and more anxiously at their long and vulnerable coastline. In each of the main Army training camps — Papakura, Trentham, Waiouru and Burnham — men who had been recently recruited as reinforcements for the Middle East were hastily formed into mobile strike battalions to be rushed to any part of the country should an invasion come.

Inadequately trained

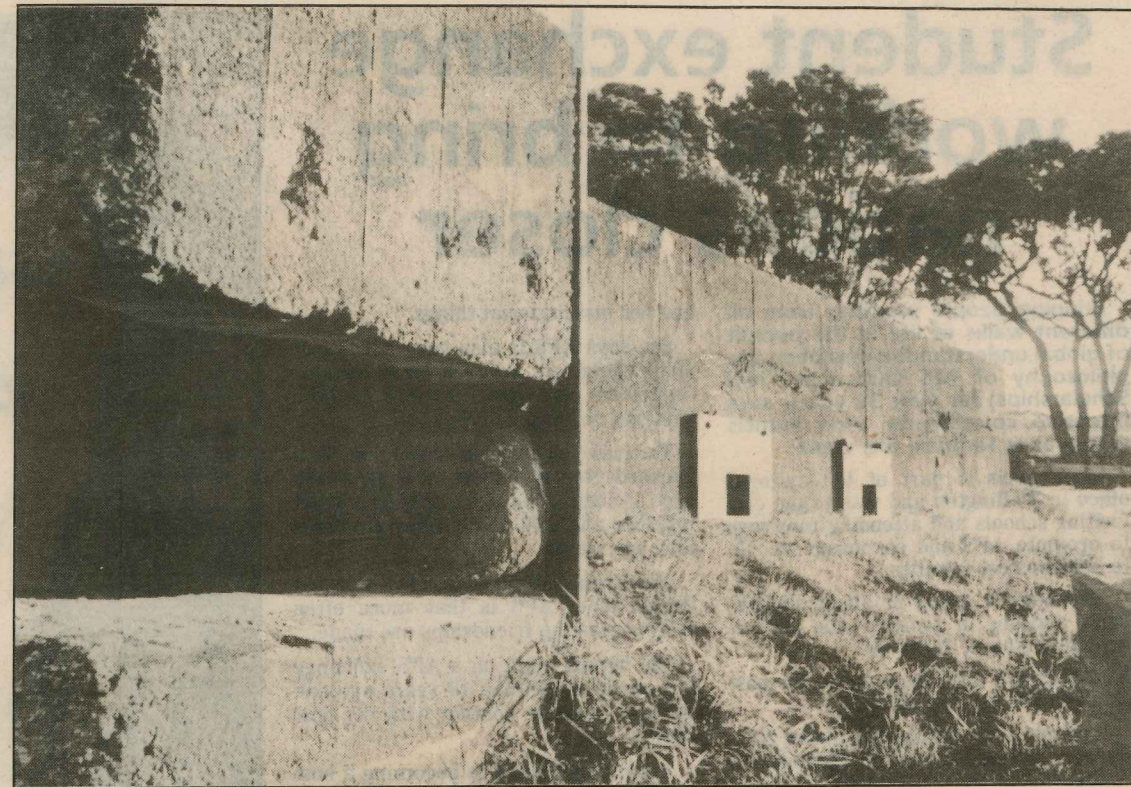
and equipped though they were, these battalions represented New Zealand's first line of defence, with their backing coming from the recently mobilised Territorial Force units. But they were still too few in number and a call went out to veterans of the First World War to offer their experience and expertise to a third-line force.

They were formed initially into National Military Reserve companies. Then, as numbers increased through the mobilisation of younger men of Territorial Force age, these companies evolved into supplementary battalions. One such unit was the 2nd Battalion, Taranaki Regiment, which came into being early in 1942. While the 1st Battalion fulfilled a major coastal defence role in the Palmerston North area, the 2nd Battalion remained home based, its task being to guard the

coastline from the Waiwakaiho River to Omata.

One member of the 2nd Bn recalls turning up at the Waiwakaiho Showgrounds on February 23, 1942, the very first of the newly-called-up 18-year-olds. He joined 395 men who were either World War One veterans or former members of the between-the-wars Territorial Force. He has memories of being kitted out in World War One vintage uniform, sleeping in bell tents, training on Lewis guns and washing at one of only two taps at the showgrounds.

Part of the battalion's responsibility was to man the system of concrete pillboxes and section posts that had been hastily (but solidly) constructed at strategic points along the coast. (One of the last of those posts still remaining locally is on Ocean View Parade; it has been controversially



On Ocean View Parade stands one of New Plymouth's last remaining relics of the World War Two coastal defence system which members of the 2nd Battalion, Taranaki Regiment, knew well during their short period of service. This picture was taken before it was filled in to provide shelter for penguins.

modified for use as a penguin shelter, but at least it is still there as a valuable archaeological relic of those perilous times.)

From their first base at Waiwakaiho the 2nd Battalion moved to the racecourse where the headquarters, under the command of Colonel Burgess, with Major Bill Middleton second-in-command, Captain Bill McGaw adjutant, and Messrs Bert Hughes and Ces Grainger as RSM and Quartermaster respectively, was set up in the main grandstand. During the course of their post-manning stints battalion members were housed in a variety of billets, including the golf clubhouse at Fitzroy, requisitioned beach cottages at Nga-

motu, and unlined prefab huts and tents set up on empty sections along Breakwater Road.

From the vantage point of modern times it is easy to look back and to view the 2nd Battalion as something of a (to use a modern term) "Mickey Mouse" sort of unit whose value, had a Japanese invasion force tried to land on Ngamotu or Fitzroy Beach, might be thought questionable.

Agreed, its older members were pretty long in the tooth. There was a sergeant who had been sent back home from the Middle East after his supply of black hair dye had run out, and another who declined to wear his medal ribbons because they would have given away

the fact that he had served in the Boer War.

But they were experienced soldiers who knew what they were about, and who would never have let an invader get a foot onto dry land without making him pay the heaviest of costs. Younger members of the battalion still remember an ancient NCO who could approach even the most alert of sentries in the dark, absolutely undetected until, with a whisper of "God bless you boy," he would waft on by to prove to the next man in the line just how vulnerable he was.

At the other end of the scale were the callow youngsters, many of them just out of school, and some of them quite put

out over being "about turned" by their older companions when they tried to join them in a visit to a hotel bar.

In between were men who had been graded as unfit for overseas duty, and a few who were, for a variety of reasons (there were one or two chronic provost-thumpers, for example, and a couple who had been sent home from the Middle East because of certain antics in Cairo) regarded as persona non grata by their original units.

Some were so unsoldierly — like the 18 year-olds who were sent to guard the beach on their very first night in the army, complete with live ammunition in their totally unfamiliar rifles — that they surely posed a

far greater danger to themselves and their mates than to any potential landing force.

It would hard to deny that, had the Japanese come straight for New Zealand instead of going for New Guinea first, these oddly assorted soldiers would not have had the proverbial dog's show of even bothering them on the beach.

It took a few months for the unit to build to full strength, but once that had been achieved, once every man had a job and knew how to go about it, and once the youngsters had learned to share the benefits of the older hands' military experience, there would have been no man ashamed to tell the world that he was a "Two Tara."

The battalion served in New Plymouth until November 1943 when the reversal of Japanese fortunes in the Pacific moved New Zealand away from the danger of invasion. "Two Tara" then melted away with almost indecent haste. There were discharges for some and transfers to other units for the rest.

A former member of the battalion recently summed up his brief odyssey in New Plymouth: "We were of too little moment to have been written about, and the battalion was established around WW 1 veterans who are no longer with us. What made the outfit a little special will have died with them."