



IT'S MINE: New Plymouth World War II bomb disposal group members George Wood (left) and Frank Morine (centre) reacquaint themselves with the mine they disarmed in 1942. Its former owner, Mike Zeier, looks on. Photo: MARK DWYER

Taranaki wartime memories back to the surface as old mine returns

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By AIDAN RODLEY

A PIECE of Taranaki war history, bought for two dozen beer and used as a garden ornament, has been donated to the New Plymouth RSA.

The German floating mine, which washed up on the Belt Rd foreshore in November, 1942, was thought lost for the past 57 years.

That was until a chance remark led to its rediscovery earlier this year.

The mine created an emergency for Taranaki's home-based Defence Force. It was laid off the coast of South Australia by a German warship, but broke free from its mooring and was carried by westerly currents across the Tasman Sea.

The mine was found washed up on the Belt Rd foreshore, with each breaking wave pounding it on to the rocks.

Members of New Plymouth's 2C Company Bomb Disposal Group were taking no chances.

"The thing is, mines rust and get barnacles on them. It's hard to tell if they are disarmed or not and you can only get it wrong once. You have to regard them as armed," bomb disposal

squad member George Wood recalled yesterday.

Mr Wood attached a rope to the mine and swam it out to a row-boat which then towed the mine to Waiwakaiho Beach, where it was disarmed.

The mine was then taken to the bomb squad headquarters on Devon St, and it was still there when the squad disbanded on December 12, 1943.

"I hadn't seen it from that day until this year," Mr Wood said.

"Several people had asked what happened to it. It's not the kind of thing you can just get rid of, but nobody knew."

It was by coincidence the mine was recovered. Mr Wood and RSA vice-president Tony House were being interviewed for RSA archives by Joy Peckham and were discussing the mine incident. Mrs Peckham remarked she had seen a mine at a house opposite the RSA on Devon St.

"I said to Tony: 'Just on the off-chance, we'll go and take a look'. It was a long-shot but, sure enough, it was there. It was the only five-horn which had come in intact."

The owner of the mine's new residence, Mike Zeier, shed some light

on what had become of the World War II hazard after it was made safe in 1942.

"It used to be in the Marine Park in Waitara, but it must have been unsafe, so it was left in the Waitara Borough Council depot," he said. "I worked there at the time and I offered them a couple of dozen beers and had it moved to my lawn as an ornament. It was good watching people's expressions as they walked by!"

Mr Zeier said he was only too pleased to donate the mine to the RSA when he learnt of its history.

"These guys deserve it. George almost died getting it, so I'm more than pleased to give it to them."

The mine was positioned outside the New Plymouth RSA on Tuesday and was yesterday the focus of the official handover from Mr Zeier to RSA president Peter Peckham.

"We have a bit of war history, and not only the RSA's but also the city's history, back here. It's a prized memento from the war," Mr Peckham said.

"Apart from the Victoria Cross won at the Battle of Waireka, it's the only thing of significance to us here really."