

World War II rifle pits discovered during roadworks on highway

Archaeologist Daniel McCurdy believes the Home Guard pits were built between 1941 and 1942

TARANAKI
Helen Harvey

Roadworks on State Highway 3 north of New Plymouth have uncovered preparations made for a war that fortunately never arrived on New Zealand shores.

Two World War II era rifle pits were found during Te Ara Tūtohu – the roadworks programme being carried out by the New Zealand Transport Agency Waka Kotahi (NZTA), between Waitara and Bell Block.

The Home Guard rifle pits, found to the north of the intersection of SH3 and De Havilland Dr in Bell Block, were “textbook” Home Guard pits, project archaeologist Daniel McCurdy said.

“These are so textbook, that in fact one of them conforms exactly – within a few inches – to the standard set out for the Home Guard. However, instead of an optional drainage trench at the base, the men chose to place timbers instead, likely reclaimed from the local farm.”

The pits were probably constructed between 1941 and 1942 as a defensive position to protect the Bell Block Aerodrome on Te Aroi Rd, which was being used as a Royal New Zealand Air Force training base, from a potential invasion by Japanese forces.

The Home Guard was formed in 1940 in response to the potential threat posed by



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the Empire of Japan during WWII. Membership was initially voluntary but became compulsory from 1942 for men aged 35-50.

The rifle pits weren't the first relics of the Home Guard defence initiative to be discovered during roadworks.

Years ago concrete blocks, constructed by the Home Guard in 1943 to block roads in the event of a Japanese invasion, were discovered while work was being done

on Egmont Rd. Finding historical remains during roadworks was not uncommon in Taranaki.

In the early 2000s Transit New Zealand commissioned an archaeological assessment of the route for the Bell Block bypass.

Shards of china, old pennies, rotten boots, ancient fireplaces and a greenstone adze were revealed during excavation work at the Bell Block site.

In 2015 evidence of what could have

been a pa or marae was found during earthworks on the Normanby overpass realignment project north of Hāwera.

And it's not just artefacts that come to light. An extremely rare native plant was discovered during roadworks on the Forgotten World Highway, the sealing of the remote Tāngarākau Gorge, between Whangamōmona and Taumarunui.

Ngāti Maru quickly took steps to preserve the manawa kawa (brachyglottis turneri), which was similar to an orchid. Their efforts resulted in a successful propagation project.

Since works began on the roadworks between Bell Block and Waitara in 2023 there have been a number of archaeological finds.

The project works closely with archaeologists and cultural monitors in these instances.

Depending on what is found, the find may be removed or documented and left in place, project manager Calvin Rorke said.

“The area we are working in is historically significant. It's important that whenever we come across a potential archaeological find in the course of our work that we take the time necessary to investigate.

“I know that I, and many of us working on Te Ara Tūtohu, have learnt a lot about the history of this area through our work on the project.”