



UNMUZZLED REPORT: "There was this almighty bang, half the city heard it." Peter Sharrock, the last gunner, renews an acquaintanceship with the howitzer that woke the town.

Photo: TREVOR READ

New location for historic howitzer

By DAVID BRUCE

THE old howitzer at New Plymouth's Kawaroa Park now has a new and uninterrupted field of fire.

For 81 years it stood on its concrete plinth guarding the squash club, but now it has moved about 20m across the road to make way for a new public toilet.

It is not the first move that the old gun has made. At the end of World War I it was brought here from the trenches of Belgium.

In the trenches outside Bapaume the howitzer was called Black Maria. Every time it hurled its 115kg shell across the 3000m of no-mans-land, troops dived for cover as the explosion threw up huge columns of mud and black smoke.

Finally, in August, 1918, a detachment from the New Zealand Rifle Brigade,

including New Plymouth man Thomas Bates, silenced its crew and captured Black Maria intact.

After the war, the Krupps seige howitzer was sent out from Belgium to Bates' home town, one of hundreds of pieces of seized German weaponry intended to serve again as war memorials.

Installed at Kawaroa Park, it seemed destined for a quiet life, pointing harmlessly out to sea, a plaything for small children to clamber over.

In the early '60s a bunch of likely lads decided it was time to liven the old gun up again.

Peter Sharrock (56) yesterday recalled the night he and his brother, Brian, with their cobbler, Brian Woodward, fired the howitzer for the last time. "We had got hold of a couple of sticks of gelignite from one of the boys and we sneaked some detonators and fuse from Dad's quarry."

The two Brians kept watch at the Kawaroa Park gates in case any cars or couples decided to call by, while Peter loaded the gun.

The sound of the explosion as the howitzer "fired" was heard all over the city.

"One of my mates was in bed out at Queens Rd and he heard it," he recalled.

The likely lads had scarpered long before the police worked out the source of the bang, but the boys in blue knew where to look.

When policeman Jock Bruce showed up at the Smart Rd quarry next morning and Sharrock senior checked the box of detonators, "Well, he knew we'd done it."

These days, there is nothing more dangerous than rocks, sand and scraps of waste paper in the barrel of the old gun, which has been remounted at a more convenient level for children to climb.

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