

MAGAZINE

The day World War II touched New Plymouth

Fifty-five years ago tomorrow, World War II literally touched New Plymouth. A rogue German naval contact mine floated in from somewhere out in the Tasman Sea, and crashed ashore in heavy seas directly below the Belt Road campsite. The mine was lethal. Carrying 450lbs of TNT, its blast would kill anyone within a 300-metre radius and would break windows a kilometre away. It had to be quickly removed from one of the most densely populated areas of the city. That responsibility lay with a small and little-known wartime organisation — New Plymouth-based 2/C Company Bomb Disposal Group, a bunch of Taranaki men hastily formed in mid-1942 to assist in the defence of New Zealand against threatened invasion by the Japanese. ROB MAETZIG backgrounds a tale of heroism and hair-raising antics all those years ago, on February 15, 1943 ...

IN JUNE 1942 New Plymouth apprentice engineer George Wood said he was 18. Actually he was 17, but he'd just raised his age by a year to become a part of preparations taking place throughout New Zealand to counter the threat of invasion by the Japanese.

Up until then, World War II had been a remote sort of event taking place on the other side of the world.

But in December 1941 the Japanese entered the conflict when they attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii, then rapidly conquered Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. And when Darwin in Australia was flattened by Japanese bombs, the possibility of invasion here became frighteningly real.

New Plymouth responded to this threat with urgency because it was considered that the city, featuring the only deep-water port along New Zealand's western seaboard, was a prime potential target. Pill boxes and tank traps were constructed at strategic points, home owners dug slit trenches, barbed wire entanglements were erected along beaches, the army occupied cottages at Ngamotu Beach, a Second Battalion Taranaki Regiment was formed and stationed in the Waiwakaiho Valley, a home guard was recruited, and a transport section was formed for the distribution of supplies.

And to prepare for the expected air raids, a special bomb disposal group was recruited to be trained in the potentially deadly art of disarming and disposing unexploded bombs.

Teenager George Wood, caught up in the surge of patriotism that swept Taranaki and indeed all of New Zealand, could not wait to become involved in all the action about him. So, in June 1942, he raised his age and applied to join the 2/C Company Bomb Disposal Group. After an interview he was duly accepted as a sapper with this New Plymouth-based branch of the Army Engineers and he and 37 others began intensive training.

This involved hours of lectures and practical work on a wide variety of bombs including high-explosive types, anti-personnel and incendiary bombs, nose fuses, tail fuses and delayed fuses.

There were also regular call-out duties throughout Taranaki to deal with such problems as dud hand grenades, unexploded aerial bombs and mortar shells that had drifted ashore. While a good portion of the early training concentrated on explosives likely to be delivered from the air by Japanese aircraft, the Japanese were not the only enemy threatening New Zealand. Off the coast were the Germans who had built up a fleet of mines which were heavily disguised converted merchant ships, carrying guns, torpedo tubes, seaplanes — and between 200 and 400 mines.

Mines proved deadly to shipping worldwide during World War II. The mine most common was the contact moored type, which was mounted on an anchor box housing a mooring cable and drum. A plummet weight was also attached by rope to a brake on the cable drum.

When the entire setup was pushed over the stern of the mine-laying vessel, the mine would float while the anchor box would begin to sink and unwind the mooring cable. The plummet weight would be positioned a slight distance below the box and would hit the seabed



PRICKLY SITUATION: The mines were meant to disarm when they broke free, but often didn't.

first, and the subsequent loss of weight would cause the cable drum to brake. The box would continue downwards until it also hit the seabed, and in doing so it would anchor the mine slightly below the surface of the sea.

And that action of dragging the mine below the surface also did something else — it extended a mooring spindle from the bottom on the mine's casing, and armed it.

WHILE hundreds of these contact mines were laid at strategic locations in Hauraki Gulf, none was laid off the Taranaki coast — but way to the west, the vessels Pinguin and a captured Norwegian tanker, renamed *Passat*, busied themselves laying several hundred contact mines between Tasmania and mainland Australia late in 1941.

Some broke free, became caught in the westerly seaward drift known as the Roaring Forties and floated towards New Zealand.

A year later they began arriving. The first to be washed ashore in Taranaki was spotted on November 28, 1942, on a remote beach near Bell Block, and 2/C Company Bomb Disposal Group assisted a naval mine disposal detachment drag the mine into shallow water and disarm



SAND-BLASTING: The New Plymouth-based 2/C Company Bomb Disposal Group during a war-time practice session in the Bell Block sand dunes.

it. Five days later a second mine washed ashore at Mokuu, but because it landed on the northern side of the river it became the responsibility of a bomb disposal group based in Auckland. Today that mine is mounted on a concrete base in front of the Mokuu shops.

Then on February 15, 1943, another mine washed ashore in Taranaki — but this time the location was uncomfortably close. A freshening northerly sea pushed it on to the coast below Bell Road, right in the middle of New Plymouth, and each time another wave broke it pounded the mine on the rocks.

The men of 2/C Company were called to the scene and it was quickly obvious they needed to move fast to secure the potentially explosive situation. The heavy seas made it too risky to attempt to disarm the mine on the spot, so it was decided they had to tow it off the rocks and away from the heavily built-up urban area.

Meanwhile, in Wellington, the commander of the Army Engineers, a Major Hornbrook, was an extremely nervous man. He knew that under the Geneva Convention, a mine was meant to be designed so that if it parted from the anchor cable, the loss of tension on the mooring spindle was supposed to allow the arming device to slide back in, dis-



MATE OF MINE: George Wood (left) and Frank Morine revisit the rocky beach at the foot of Bell Rd where a German mine once threatened the city.

arm the mine. However, this often failed to happen due to marine growth or rust forming on the exposed parts of the spindle.

Was the mine bouncing on the rocks in New Plymouth armed or disarmed? And if it was disarmed, did the men of 2/C Company know that under no circumstances were they to attach a rope to or even touch that spindle for fear that the mine might re-arm itself?

Major Hornbrook tried to contact the Company's commander, New Plymouth refrigeration engineer Dick Naylor, at his home. His wife, May, busy caring for their baby, advised that he had already left for the Bell Rd site.

The major asked if Mrs Naylor would get an urgent message to her husband. "Tell him that whatever he does, for Christ's sake don't touch or attach anything to the mooring spindle. It can be lethal." Get that message to him quickly," he said, and hung up.

Mrs Naylor lived on Barrett St, Westown. In a panic, she strapped her baby — now well-known Taranaki photographer Fay Looney — into a pram and took off at full speed for Bell Rd two kilometres away. When she breathlessly reached a police road block she passed the message on to the authorities, who very quickly contacted O/C Naylor.

But the bomb disposal men knew what they were doing. They had kept well clear of the spindle, attaching the rope to a lug on the mine's casing. Port Taranaki's pilot launch was called to the scene and it positioned itself just off the breaker line, and attempts then began to get the rope out to it.

A dinghy put off from the vessel, but it was unable to negotiate the surf. Then young George Wood had an idea. A strong swimmer, he volunteered to take the rope out to the waiting dinghy.

A large bowline loop was tied in the end of the rope so he could free himself should it become entangled, and Wood entered the water. Rope in hand, he battled through the breakers to reach the waiting dinghy, which was being rowed by Harbour Master Captain McIntyre and, together, they headed out to the pilot launch, secured the rope, and took up the tow.

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The explosions lasted the entire day — and at the end of it all, after a year — a half of active heroism and hair-raising antics, 2/C Company Bomb Disposal Group disappeared as quickly as it was created.

As a consequence, the decision was taken to disband all bomb disposal units. New Plymouth's 2/C Company held its final active parade in December 1943, then had a field day at its Bell Block training ground where it blew up every type of explosive it had left.

It was a memorable day of big bangs. Large 250lb bombs, anti-personnel bombs, mortar shells, hand grenades, demolition dynamite and gelignite had all exploded. Some of the gelignite had started to sweat and was considered unstable, so it was detonated by the boxful.

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On this weekend the remaining members of the original 38-man group gather in New Plymouth to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the Bell Road incident. The men — Ben Dixon, Herbert Firth, Eric Gready, Sid Holt, Alan Johnston, Pat Morrison, George Wood and Frank Morine — will attend a special dinner in the city tonight.