

WWII HISTORY IN THE HAURAKI GULF

By Tony Bouzaid

Built as a Church Hall in 1927 the Port FitzRoy Boating Club later became a schoolroom but when the Japanese entered the war in 1942 the army took over the hall as their mess and Head Quarters. Port FitzRoy was considered a strategic asset because of the excellent deep-water harbour with 2 entrances. It was seen as an ideal staging post for the enemy fleet to begin their invasion of New Zealand.

In 1941 two 4inch guns and two 6inch guns were recommended for Great Barrier and minefields for the entrances to Port FitzRoy. General mobilization in December required two 6inch howitzers to be sent to the island to cover these entrances and, if possible, the anchorage at Port Abercrombie. These were to be a stopgap measure because permanent fixed armament was planned for Great Barrier.



In 1942 when the army and navy moved into Port FitzRoy they set up two camps. One was situated at the Port FitzRoy hall and the other at the top of the ridge between Port FitzRoy and Okiwi. This Operation Post was known as the 'Mountain Camp'. The two howitzers arrived at Port FitzRoy in January 1942 but with no tractor available at the time the howitzers and 3,000 of the 100lb shells were manhandled up the winding road from Port FitzRoy to the gun pits at 'Mountain Camp'. From this ridge they could command a half-dozen bays and beaches. When the army test fired these guns their first shell landed over at Whangapoua and destroyed a barn. After adjusting the range fortunately the second shot went out to sea.

Early in 1942 officers made a recce of Great Barrier and found a suitable site for a Base Operations Post with one fixed breech loading 6 inch gun on the eastern side of the channel covering Port Abercrombie, between Kaikoura Island and the mainland. Both entrances to Port Abercrombie were considered too high but the Man O' War Pass, south of Kaikoura was considered suitable to be mined. Work was given the go-ahead in late April 1942 but with the increase of fixed 6inch guns to two in July another recce was needed. Five sites were short-listed and because the HMS Diomede had successfully negotiated the Man O' War Passage it was also suggested that a 4inch MkVII be mounted south of the passage. This gun was to come from Takapuna and had even been readied for shipment to the island before the idea was abandoned. The allotment of 6inch guns was dropped back down to one as the second one had been sent to the Pacific. The Command Post was to be replaced by a Base Operations Post but the emplacements were cancelled and the guns never mounted. The 6inch Howitzer battery quit the island in 1943.

The Navy laid mines in both entrances to Port FitzRoy at Port Abercrombie and Man of War Passage. At Bradshaw's Cove they built underground bunkers and barracks for about 20 men. The bunkers are still there today. A cable was laid across the harbour from the radar station on Moors Peak at Nagle Cove. The radar station had a commanding view of the Hauraki Gulf as far as Whangarei and down to Cuvier Island and the phone link ensured that the controlled minefield at Bradshaw's Cove could be detonated upon the enemy's approach. As an interesting aside the locals at Nagle Cove and Kaikoura Island hooked up to the cable after the war and had their own private telephone line.

A D8 bulldozer was used to make a road from Nagle Cove up to the top of the ridge where concrete steps were then built up the rock to the radar station. At the time this was top secret and only Navy personnel running the site were permitted there. On the backface of the hill they built barracks and generator sheds for two 30kva generators. The concrete steps and radar platform are still there and the foundations and chimneys of the other buildings are all that is left hidden in the scrub.

The Man of War Passage was the more difficult of the two entrances. Here the Navy built a coast watch and gun emplacement on the outside of the peninsular. Inshore a wharf was built and a short railway line up the steep face to haul the building materials. The concrete bunker for the generator and the concrete steps are still there but the foundations of the barracks and other buildings which housed about 20 men and the steel girders that supported the wharf are all that remain. The photo of the RNZN "Ballona" approaching Man of War Passage was taken in 1949 when Port FitzRoy was the base of operations for a naval exercise, which included another cruiser and 5 frigates. The barracks buildings, wharf, short railway, concrete steps and bunker are still very much in evidence in this photo.



In the National Archives in Wellington there is an interesting note attached to the Public Works Department files about construction of fortifications in Port FitzRoy which reads as follows: "The delivery of materials was attended with serious difficulties. These had to be loaded on barges, hauled long distances by water, unloaded onto beaches and then carried up to sites. At one site near the southern entrance to Port FitzRoy the barges were run onto a steeply sloping beach at high tide and shingle, steel etc. dumped over the side into the water. Later when the tide had receded, the shingle was bagged and along with the steel and other waterproof goods hauled up the face of a cliff with a winch. Timber, cement and similar materials, which could not be immersed in water, were hauled up direct from the barges. From the top of the cliff the supplies would have to be transported to the building sites, sometimes involving the use of packhorses. On other occasions it would be necessary to send a bulldozer ahead to cut a track from the beach to the landing place. The bulk of the work on Great Barrier Island was carried out between July and December 1942."

At war's end the navy blew the mines in both entrances and really disappointed the locals who would have liked some forewarning so they could view the event. There must have been a lot of dead fish around!