



Survivors' Reunion held at Motuihe Island

More than 100 “Survivors of the Rock” reunited on Motuihe Island in February and once again, the matelots climbed the island’s notorious hill to what was the site of HMNZS TAMAKI for 22 years.

Motuihe Island was known as ‘the Rock’ to more than 15,000 new naval recruits who trained there between 1941 and 1963.

Most hadn’t been back to ‘the Rock’ since that basic naval training, and this time they didn’t have to carry up two buckets of wet sand or fall in and run a circuit of the island.

Just as well, as the oldest recruits are in their late 90s now and the youngest are in their 70s.

The exchange of dits flowed among the Navy veterans as they gathered on the island for a ceremonial unveiling of a memorial plaque and were addressed by the Chief of Navy, Rear Admiral David Proctor.

The plaque says, “This memorial marks the site of HMNZS TAMAKI where more than 15,000 recruits undertook their naval training during the establishment’s 22 years on Motuihe Island. This commemorative plaque is dedicated to the officers, instructors, ship’s company and trainees who served here. Their Spirit lives on. Pursue the path of excellence” and was followed by a karakia.

Despite their age, they were still able to muster an efficient guard for the occasion led by former Gunnery Instructor, Jack Donnelly, and at the end of the ceremony, the survivors tossed their hats high again, as they gave three rowdy cheers.

One of the oldest survivors at the reunion, former sailor Brian Breen (now 94 years old), did his basic training on the Rock when he was 16 years old.

He says his most enduring memories were the experiences from, “learning to do as I was told, paying attention, following directions and getting fit.”

“The first time I got the rattle, was on our morning run, up at 5.30am, left our camp, down the hill, through the grove, up to the farm, around the water tower and back. On the way back through the grove we decided to have an acorn fight. We had a bit of boys’ fun, but the leading boy reported us.

“That was my first introduction to ‘jankers’ ... getting up early in the morning, doing an hour’s exercise with a rifle, held out in front or above your head, frog hopping ... and then extra work at 4.30pm.

“Another time, we were in the gunnery getting instruction and the Petty Officer asked me a question, but I had dozed off

and didn't know the question, so he introduced me to Jimmy.

“Jimmy was a six-inch 112 pound projectile, and I had to carry it along and down the hill, and back up. I had a few harsh words to say about him ... later on when I was on a ship, he was the coxswain and he was one of the finest people you could ever wish to meet.”

Former Chief Engineer Leon Kovaleski says he came up on the 2.40am railcar from New Plymouth to Auckland, and joined up at 17.5 years in 1963.

“I was in the very last intake, and I had no idea what I was getting into. I had no idea what was going to meet me and I had no idea what the next three months held.

“The instructors made you do things and at the time you had no idea what these things were going to contribute - like going down to the beach to collect a wet bucket of sand.

“What it did do in later years was in-still this idea of being dedicated to one thing and being absolutely under orders and doing what you are told.”

Mr Kovalski served 21.5 years in the Navy, doing his part two training in Devonport and then posted to a then new ship, HMNZS TARANAKI, for his first 2.5 years. He served as an electrical engineer for all his time with the Navy.

The eldest survivor was Mr Richard Rigalsford, now 97 years old, who remembers the island as it was when he arrived in May 1941. There were four dormitories or huts, an administration block, a dining hall and the kitchen and instructors block plus the Captain's residence.

“At the end of your training turn, we were taken ashore to Auckland to one of the baths for a swimming test, and jumped in in our uniform and did a couple of lengths of the baths. The gunnery instructor, a Petty Officer took us over in groups of 25-30 at a time, marching us from the Admiralty steps up to the baths.

“I don't think he was very familiar with Auckland, because on the way back we finished up in Gleeson's Hotel. The memory is fading a bit, but that was almost 80 years ago now.”

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