



## 75 Years of the New Zealand Navy

**N**EW ZEALAND, with no frontiers but its coasts, is truly a maritime nation, yet because of its domestic history and its role in Commonwealth affairs, military emphasis has generally been on the Army. Our Navy has carried on the British tradition of a 'Silent Service'. Naval historians, however, have not been so silent and the Hocken Library has a rich array of books to tell of the ships, men, women and events of the RNZN in its 69 years of peace and six of war.

The 19th century Russian scare and concepts of imperial federation and a truly imperial navy influenced early discussions about the best naval defence for NZ. Though loyalty to the imperial idea was demonstrated in 1908 with a proposal to finance the battle-cruiser *New Zealand* for the Royal Navy, it was decided in 1913 that this country would begin to provide its own naval force. HMS *Philomel* arrived in July 1914 as its first unit, but the advent of war the following month meant that, despite some individual exploits, NZ had no national role in ocean warfare.

The idea of its own Navy was not forgotten, however, and in 1919 Admiral Lord Jellicoe arrived here in HMS *New Zealand* to report. His plans provided for a naval force of 3 cruisers, 6 submarines and, for local defence, 8 old destroyers or P-boats, 18 minesweeping trawlers and 4 boom defence vessels. NZ would also participate in an eastern fleet based on Singapore. Government parsimony put an end to the first part and the Washington Conference, removing some of the naval rivalry with Japan and America, to the second.

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### Start is made

New Zealand's first cruiser, HMS *Chatham*, arrived in January 1921, a distinctive four-funnelled coal-burner chosen because oil bunkering was not then available. The RN also lent two sloops, *Laburnum* and *Veronica*, which were to remain in these waters till 1934–35. At the same time the *Philomel*, lying at Wellington since 1917, was taken to Devonport for alongside-training in time to receive the first classes of NZ ratings who had signed on for 12 years. The NZ Naval Board, created by Order-in-Council on 14 March 1921, consisted mainly of the cruiser's officers.

*Chatham* was replaced by the *Dunedin* in 1924, and *Diomedé* was added in 1926 when the Government felt a pause in payments towards the Singapore base allowed it to afford the maintenance of a second cruiser. Problems of oil supplies remained and the tanker *Nucula* was obtained from the RN. The intended establishment of RNVR divisions in the four main ports led to the acquisition of the *Wakakura*, a Canadian-built wartime trawler, for their training.

These ships spent much time on the NZ coast, touring the Pacific islands or exercising with the Australian Navy. The public saw more of their navy than they do now and the quarterdecks of the cruisers were ideal for entertaining civic dignitaries and such supporters as the Navy League. The practical effect of naval help was seen in the Napier earthquake. The *Veronica* had just berthed when the earthquake struck, lifting the seabed under her, and her radio signals brought the two cruisers with much needed assistance.

Between 1934 and 1937 there was a complete change of ships. Two modern cruisers arrived, *Achilles* and *Leander*, and two new sloops, *Wellington* and *Leith*. The Devonport naval base had been slowly developing and differences with the Auckland Harbour

Board over the dry dock had been settled, but progress was hampered by the Depression and the cost of the Singapore base. Though some essential surveying of the New Zealand coasts had been done by the sloops, the long-term up-dating of charts had been neglected. HMS *Endeavour* arrived in 1937 to remedy this, but only 10 charts had been made when the war began.

Material on the period 1921–39 can be found in the general histories.

## World War II

The many books in the Hocken provide all the detail necessary about the battles of World War II. In 1939 there were 8 officers and 716 men in the NZ Naval Division; 14 officers and 172 ratings merchant service training in the Royal Naval Reserve; and 78 officers and 610 men in the RNVR. The liner *Monowai*, being refitted as an armed merchant cruiser with eight 6in guns, required manning and so did the new minesweepers, the rest of the available manpower serving in the RN or as gun crews on defensively armed merchantmen. The extent of the NZ commitment can be seen in the fact that of 10,635 men in the RNZN in September 1943, 1,242 officers and 3659 ratings were serving in RN ships or the Fleet Air Arm. Those with educational qualifications went to Britain under Scheme B, and after a period at sea were posted to HMS *King Alfred*, a shore training establishment, where completion of the course brought promotion to Sub-lieutenant RNZNVR. This met the vast demand for officers who, together with the men, served, and died, in every type of ship in every operational theatre.

NZ ships had a proud record. *Achilles* acquitted itself well at the River Plate with its young NZ crew component, as did *Leander* in the Indian Ocean. Later damaged in the Solomon Islands, *Achilles* was repaired in Britain and returned to serve in the British Pacific Fleet.

*Leander*, grievously damaged by a torpedo in the Kula Gulf, went to the US for repairs and ended its NZ connection. *Gambia*, her replacement, also joined the British Pacific Fleet. The *Monowai*, as an armed merchant cruiser, patrolled Pacific waters and exchanged gunfire with the Japanese submarine *I-20* off Fiji before being converted in 1943 to an assault landing ship. A major tragedy on 19 December 1941 was the loss of HMS *Neptune*, sister ship to *Achilles* and *Leander*. She was en route to serve in the RNZN with 150 New Zealanders in her crew when she was diverted temporarily to the Mediterranean, ran into a minefield off Tunisia and could not be reached by her companion ships. All but one of her crew of 750 died.

It was a sad event to mark the transformation of the NZ Division into the RNZN, which had occurred six weeks earlier, on 1 October. Promotion on the battlefield has always had a special cachet, and the fact that the NZ men and ships had, through their war service, been promoted to become an independent navy was a matter for some pride. There was little real change, as the RN continued to supply senior officers for the cruisers and the NZ naval administration. The smaller ships, however, were all commanded and manned by New Zealanders, with some modification of long-standing British traditions. Captain Roskill, later author of the official *History of the War at Sea*, found when serving in *Leander* that NZ ratings always wanted to know the reason for an order. He acknowledged that

an understanding was reached without undue harm to discipline.

The wisdom of keeping a cruiser and the *Monowai* in NZ waters was shown by the activities of German raiders. After mining the *Niagara* in the Hauraki Gulf on 13 June 1940 the raider *Orion* sank the cargo ship *Turakina* (perhaps the first gun action in the Tasman, because the captain vigorously defended his ship) and then, with the *Komet*, sank the *Holmwood* and the *Rangitane*. Early in 1941 mines also sank HMS *Puriri*, a coaster newly commissioned as a minesweeper, for the seriousness of the mine threat had led to the building of 12 minesweeping trawlers—7 at Port Chalmers, 4 in Auckland and one in Wellington. The *Kiwi*, *Moa* and *Tui*, ordered before the war, now joined the NZ flotilla, along with four more minesweeping trawlers provided by the Admiralty. Though the threat of the ocean raider had now passed, these new vessels helped the RNZN play its role in the Pacific war.

American action in the Solomons led to full involvement of the RNZN cruisers, minesweepers and Fairmiles (built by NZ shipbuilders). *Achilles* and *Leander* were damaged and the *Moa* sunk by bombers, but the *Kiwi* and *Tui* sank two Japanese submarines. Other ships of the 25th Minesweeping Flotilla spent their time on patrol.

After a Royal Commission in 1942 the Devonport naval base dock was lengthened to take American heavy cruisers, and barracks, a wardroom and a hospital were built. Some pressure was taken off the base by transferring recruit training to Motuihe Island, HMNZS *Tamaki*. More deep-water berths were provided while tunnels in the hill provided fuel storage and a power sub-station.

The Women's Royal NZ Naval Service was formed on 9 June 1942 with a potential strength of 700, though the peak reached in 1944 was 519. Chief Officer Ruth Herrick, given the daunting tasks of administration, policy, recruiting and training with only an assistant director and a clerk to help, showed great ability. Though the purpose was to release men for sea service, the women effectively handled a wide variety of tasks, often doing a better job than the men they replaced. The true measure of their work was, that though disbanded in December 1946, the WRNZNS was given permanent status by a 1949 Act of Parliament.

Even after the war in Europe was over, *Gambia*, *Achilles* and *Arbutus* were still involved in operations against the Japanese and it was fitting that an officer on the *Gambia* should have been one of the NZ signatories to the Japanese surrender on USS *Missouri*. The war had not only blooded the young navy, but had shown that NZ had the industrial and technical ability both to build small ships and to maintain and repair the cruisers. Of the young men who had proved themselves in warfare, the vast majority returned thankfully to a peacetime world, but a few committed themselves to a professional future in the service to which they had already contributed so much.

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## Post-war

Peace saw the replacement of the *Achilles* and *Leander* with the *Bellona* and *Black Prince*, and when 200 men left the service over a pay dispute, officers and men were recruited from the RN. Six Loch-class frigates—*Hawea*, *Kanieri*, *Pukaki*, *Rotoiti*, *Taupo* and *Tutira*—bought to counter the submarine threat, entered service in 1948–49 and played an important part for the next 15 years, including involvement in the Korean War and periods in Singapore with the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve. When the Cold War threat led to the introduction of Compulsory Military Training in 1949, *Tamaki* provided 14 weeks of training while the four RNZNVR Divisions, re-established in 1948, gave follow-up training for the next four years.

In 1952, Australia gave the RNZN 4 Bathurst corvettes—*Echuca*, *Inverell*, *Kiama* and *Stawell*. Also from Australia on loan (before it was purchased in 1963 for £16,000) was the converted frigate *Lachlan*, which from 1949 to 1974 carried out the long delayed systematic survey of the NZ coast (and, in the winters, the Pacific Islands). The hydrographic service, working closely with the NZ Survey Department and the Gov-

ernment Printer, produced charts of the highest quality. Oceanographic research was also carried out by the *Tui* from 1956 to 1967, followed in this important work by the USN *Charles H. Davis*, on loan from 1970 and renamed *Tui*.

To be in a wardroom in the early 1950s was to gain knowledge of a wider naval world from the RN officers then on loan. Gradually, however, the need for them diminished with the appointment of New Zealanders to higher posts: first command of a cruiser in 1955; first Captain in Charge Auckland, 1956; first Superintendent HMNZ Dockyard, 1958; first Chief of Naval Staff, 1960. The navy was often called on to undertake new tasks. Unexpected activities in 1951 were working in the coal mines, crewing merchant ships and controlling port equipment during the Maritime Strike state of emergency. To support the Trans-Antarctic Expedition, the navy bought the *John Biscoe*, renaming it *Endeavour*. It spent five seasons in Antarctic waters before being replaced by another *Endeavour* (the ex-USN tanker *Namakagon*) in 1962. Quite different was the work carried out by the *Hickleton* and *Santon*, which in 1965–66 took part in anti-infiltration patrols off Malaysia. Manpower shortages were temporarily met by calling on the RNZNVR for assistance.

The ageing of the Loch-class frigates led to the decision to order two Type 12 frigates, *Otago* and *Taranaki*, in 1957 and the Improved Type 12 frigates, *Waikato* in 1963 and *Canterbury* in 1968. In addition, HMS *Blackpool* was hired between 1966 and 1971. These ships provided a modern anti-submarine force which could show its professional ability in competition with USN units in Pearl Harbour exercises, an important part of maintaining standards in a small navy. The *Royalist*, however, had a serious boiler breakdown, being decommissioned five months early, and between 1961 and 1967 *Royalist*, *Black Prince* and the Loch-class frigates were sold to Asian ship breakers.

Other matters of importance were the transfer of *Tamaki*, the training establishment, from Motuihe Island to Takapuna in 1963; the creation of the Ministry of Defence in 1964; and the design of a NZ White Ensign, the Queen herself presenting the new colours at *Philomel* on 24 March, 1970. The Ministry was intended to improve savings and efficiency, but the Navy, which had a strong team of civilians in Navy Office, had to greatly increase the number of officers in administration at the expense of postings to ships.

The 1970s saw the despatch of the *Otago* and then the *Canterbury* to Mururoa as an official protest against the French nuclear tests—an operation which showed the inadequacy of the navy's support strength, as the Australian Navy had to offer HMAS *Supply* to provide fuel and food.

To replace the ageing *Lachlan* in 1974 the Island trader *Moana Roa* was commissioned as the *Monowai* on 1 July 1975 and sent to Scotland for conversion as a survey ship. And to monitor fishing in our waters four patrol boats were purchased—*Hawea*, *Pukaki*, *Rotoiti* and *Taupo*; but these 32-metre boats were hard on their crews and soon proved inadequate for the Exclusive Economic Zone declared on 1 October 1977.

A very important change was the disbanding of the WRNZNS on 29 July 1977 and the integration of women into the navy with more sea-going opportunities in non-combatant ships. In 1978 the RNZNVR was also re-organised into only three branches—sea

service, shipping control and support services—concentrating on service rather than training; and to assist in this, new inshore patrol craft, *Moa*, *Kiwi*, *Wakakura* and *Hinau*, were delivered to the Reserves between 1983 and 1985.

*Taranaki* and *Otago*, having seen out their time patrolling the EEZ, were replaced by the frigates *Bacchante* (renamed *Wellington*) and *Dido* (*Southland*), and in 1988 the tanker *Endeavour* was commissioned to support the frigates in the Pacific.

One of the negative results of the Government's anti-nuclear stance from 1984 onwards was the loss of training contact with the RN and the USN, though training has continued with the Australians and also, under the Five Power Agreement, with Singapore and Malaysia. The need to build new frigates led to considerable public controversy, the main reasons for going ahead with the Meko design (two ordered at first, with an option for two more later) being compatibility with Australia and a spin-off for NZ industry. The Mekos have an advantage over the Leanders in range, economy of crew and running costs.

The Government's insistence on economy also led to a centralisation of training and support services in *Philomel* and the commercialisation of dockyard management under the firm of Babcock. Priority has been given to overseas exercises with our regional partners rather than to showing the flag in our own ports.

The versatility of the navy widened with the commissioning of the *Charles Upham* enabling the navy to transport about 150 troops and equipment as part of a Ready Response Force. However, *Southland* reached the end of its effective life, and the decommissioning of the *Tui* and the age of the *Monowai* led to the roles of research vessels being reviewed, with a recommendation that a ship be obtained from the US to carry out both tasks. New Zealand's commitment to UN peace-keeping included the deployment of the *Wellington* then the *Canterbury* to the Persian Gulf to monitor the ban on Iraqi trade.

Since 1921 the navy has grown from a cruiser manned by the RN and the first intake of seaman boys into an independent navy carrying out the Government's independent foreign policies. On the way it fought in a world war with distinction, and met the tasks set it by successive governments with quiet dedication. Limited public spending on defence forces is in line with our traditionally low-key approach to foreign policy, even though Australia in particular has been critical of this attitude at times, and the navy has faced manpower problems in meeting sudden demands on it. Yet it is ironic that at the very time when the navy has faced the most demanding financial curbs it is widening its capabilities. The RNZN has been an effective

statement of NZ's interest in the sea and its responsibilities in the Pacific and the wider world.

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#### Other sources

In addition to its naval books—far more than can be listed here—the Hocken also holds many photographs of NZ naval vessels, as well as of ships from other navies which have visited our waters. Consult the Gordon Black Shipping Index in which general photographs are listed under the various fleets, and individual vessels under their HMNZS, HMS etc. headings.

Little naval material is held in Hocken Archives, as the records of the Navy and its associated organisations, being part of government, go to National Archives. One fascinating item (85-133) tells how Captain Grams spirited the German vessel *Erlangen* away from Dunedin as the 1939 war was about to start, eluded *Leander* among the sub-Antarctic islands and safely reached Chile. The G.S. Kirby papers (91-76) include a file on Dunedin naval groups in the 1940s.

Hocken Pictures has a number of drawings and paintings of 19th century naval vessels, or done by naval draughtsmen, but little from the period since the NZ Navy was established.

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*Compiled for the Friends of the Hocken Collections by Neil Howard, with Hocken Library staff. Edited by George Griffiths. Designed by Gary Blackman.*