

Tairāwhiti's Second World War memories



2 Defence Preparations

As in the rest of New Zealand, initial preparations consisted of organisation and training. In March 1941 the St. John Ambulance Association commenced anti-gas classes for both civilians and members of the ambulance divisions. The training, which was based on procedures used in Britain, included definition and classification of gases, methods of discharge, personal protection, effects on the human body, first-aid treatment, contamination and de-contamination, use of respirator, the incendiary bomb, gas proofing of rooms, and the establishment of first aid posts.¹



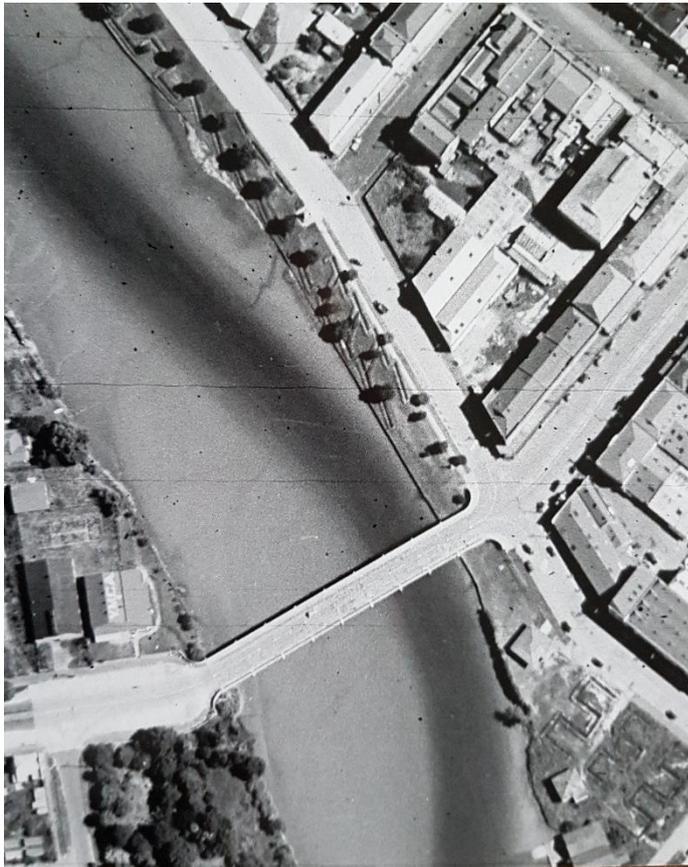
Waikanae Beach Slide with pill-box in the background
John Harold (Jack) Hollamby
Collection Tairāwhiti Museum, 20-1-3-4-5

Just over a week after New Zealand's declaration of war on Japan on the 8th December 1941, a prompt start with the digging of slit shelter trenches on the riverbank between the Peel street and Kaiti bridges was made by the Gisborne Borough Council's staff yesterday, and already the green slope to the river is scarred with newly-dug pits. A warning has been issued by the Borough Council against the use of the riverbank after dark, because of the danger of a fall into the excavations in the darkness.²

¹ The Gisborne Herald 10 March 1941

² The Gisborne Herald 18 December 1941

The Mayor announced that *every endeavour was being made to push on the building of further trenches at other vantage points, and he appealed for as many volunteers as possible to report at the Peel street bridge at 8 a.m. to-morrow to continue the work that had been going on since Wednesday.* Local residents who had inquired about the construction of trenches on or near their own properties were advised to contact the borough engineer.³



Trenches along the Taruheru River near the Peel Street Bridge.
RNZAF Museum

It was also announced that home-defence units in Gisborne would work *through the week-end to complete defence posts at tactical points.* As there was a shortage of materials, residents were asked to help provide timber, wire, and sacks suitable for use as sandbags, the sacks to be collected by members of the Boy Scouts and Boys' Brigade.⁴

But not everyone was convinced that the trenches would be satisfactory in the event of an air raid, and there were many others who believed *that the digging of trenches is not warranted so far as Gisborne is concerned.*⁵ Nevertheless, hundreds of men and women, including civilians

as well as members of the National Military Reserve, the Home Guard, and the Womens' War Service Auxiliary gathered to construct shelter trenches in the town area.

In spite of the sack collection and pleas to residents, they were hampered by a shortage of materials,⁶ to the extent that members of the National Military Reserve were assigned to the task of raking through the town rubbish dump for

³ The Gisborne Herald 19 December 1941

⁴ The Gisborne Herald 19 December 1941

⁵ The Gisborne Herald 20 December 1941

⁶ The Gisborne Herald 22 December 1941

anything that could be used in the construction of defensive positions.⁷ Some local organisations took matters into their own hands and it was hoped that others would follow the example of the Emergency Fire Service, who dug slit trenches in the area between the fire station and the Plunket rooms.⁸

Other defensive preparations such as the gun emplacement on Kaiti Hill, pill-boxes, defences of bridges and the stationing of No. 30 Squadron and No. 30 Servicing Unit at Darton Field, were not commented on in the paper at the time, apart from a couple of notices advising of hazardous or restricted areas, such as the warning given by the defence authorities in April 1942 against visiting areas on the foreshore,⁹ and the February 1943 declaration that Kaiti Hill was prohibited place under the defence emergency regulations.

It is the news articles written later in the war and after it ended which give more idea of the extent of local defences. In November 1943 the Main Highways Board was advised by the Army that the tank traps on roads throughout New Zealand would be removed.¹⁰ Tank traps were not the only defences which were now regarded as potentially hazardous: although in February 1942 the mayor had announced that anyone wishing to build an air raid shelter could contact the Borough Council for information,¹¹ it appears that most if not all the shelters constructed in Gisborne were at schools. However by 1943 some of these were now regarded as dangerous. After a flood in September the shelters at Te Hapara School had filled with water and a child had fallen into one. It was felt that *the shelters had now outlived their usefulness, so far as could be seen at present.*¹² In January 1944 a child fell into a trench on the foreshore, receiving cuts from a broken bottle. It was pointed out that the *location of most of the trenches was now difficult to see, because of the long growth of grass, and some action should be taken to fill them in or protect people from falling into them.*¹³

Except for a small area around the actual gun site, Kaiti Hill was reopened to the public in July 1944.¹⁴ By the beginning of 1945 work was underway to locate defence works such as weapon pits, some of which were *sited in out-of-the-way places, in patches of bush and on hillsides where they are not likely to cause trouble, but others occupy sites on public areas where there is a danger of injury to people and to stock. An effort is being made to locate all these works, and to*

⁷ The Gisborne Herald 29 December 1941

⁸ The Gisborne Herald 23 December 1941

⁹ The Gisborne Herald 16 April 1942

¹⁰ The Gisborne Herald 10 November 1943

¹¹ The Gisborne Herald 25 February 1942

¹² The Gisborne Herald 20 September 1943

¹³ The Gisborne Herald 12 January 1944

¹⁴ The Gisborne Herald 12 July 1944

*have the hazards to stock and traffic removed. Mr. R. Graham, on behalf of the Cook Battalion, Home Guard, has invited landowners in the Cook area to advise him of the location of any such works, so that steps can be taken to remove them; and similar action is being taken on the East Coast. The Army Department will probably take the necessary steps to have defence works near Gisborne demolished, through the agency of the Works Department.*¹⁵ In February, it was suggested that farmers in need of barbed wire could take it from under the Peel street bridge. It was now regarded as *making the spot untidy*.¹⁶

Some of the bridge defences remained however – it was not until February 1946 that the Gisborne Borough Council decided that the *relics of road blocks on the Whataupoko side of the Peel street bridge and on the Kaiti Hill should be removed entirely*.¹⁷ Later again it was decided to *request the Works Department to permanently fill in the cavities made in the bridge approaches to anchor road blocks during the emergency period of the war*.¹⁸

In 1944 the R.N.Z.A.F. station at Darton Field was closed, and the aerodrome was opened to the public as part of the Victory Loan campaign. This was the first time that Gisborne residents had had unrestricted access to the station, and thousands of people took advantage of the opportunity to visit.¹⁹ By 1947, although the aerodrome was still under the control of the R.N.Z.A.F. only three Air Force personnel remained on site. During the war the aerodrome had been one of the busiest flying fields in the country, with almost 1000 personnel stationed there during its peak use in 1943. *This consisted of men and W.A.A.F.s directly connected with the main flying station and members of the Aerodrome Defence Unit, which consisted of men waiting to enter aircrew training. These men were housed in separate camps on the outskirts of the airfield.* The main camp, which had been at the Park racecourse, was closed in 1945 and the quarters moved to the airfield.²⁰

¹⁵ The Gisborne Herald 20 January 1945

¹⁶ The Gisborne Herald 14 February 1945

¹⁷ The Gisborne Herald 13 February 1946

¹⁸ The Gisborne Herald 14 August 1946

¹⁹ The Gisborne Herald 25 September 1944

²⁰ The Gisborne Herald 14 January 1947