The Aitutaki Home Guard
New Zealand's shortest-lived unit?

By Barry O'Sullivan

During WW2 the Cook Islands were a territory of New Zealand and as such should be considered part of the New Zealand war effort. The Cook Islands group is divided into the lower islands of, Aitutaki, Atiu, Mauke, Mitiaro, Mangaia and the northern islands of Penrhyn, Manihiki, Rakahanga, Pukapuka, Palmerston, Nassau, Suwarrow, Rarotonga and a number of other smaller islands. Rarotonga and Aitutaki are the only islands that had a unit of the New Zealand Defence Force in the form of local forces. The total population Aitutaki in 1941 was 2,006[i].

In late January 1943 a request was made on the NZ Government by the US Authorities stationed on Aitutaki for the establishment of a locally raised force to help defend the island. The NZ Government was not keen on the idea of forming a force but decided that if the NZ Defence Department and the US Authorities wanted a force then it would go ahead. It was suggested by the US that Mr H.H Hickling[ii] the Resident Agent on the island be called up for active service as he had local knowledge and was familiar with the US authorities. This suggestion was not endorsed by the NZ Government as they thought that he had enough to do as resident agent. The matter was discussed at the War Cabinet on 3/4th February 1943 and the establishment of the Aitutaki Home Guard was authorised on 5th February 1943 using the regulations drawn up for the Cook Island Local Defence Force 1941/60 of 9th April 1941. While the NZ Government agreed they still wanted a different unit commander.

The Home Guard unit was to consist for between 50-100 men on a non-mobilized basis i.e. not full time. The company was to be under the higher command of the US with the NZ Government to supply uniforms, helmets, gas masks, pay and an officer. The US were to supply rifles, equipment and instructors. The men were to be paid 5 shillings per week but no rations or accommodation was supplied. The NZ Army was asked to supply an officer but this was turned down as they did not want to appoint an officer into a part time roll. Hickling agreed to be the unit commander if someone could be found to help him with the duties of Resident Agent. A unit commander was found and in June 1943 Mr R S Ridgley was appointed to the role of commanding officer of the Aitutaki Home Guard with the rank of Lieutenant which was to be on a part time unpaid basis. He was given the job of Head-Master of the school on Aitutaki. Ridgley, who had previously held a commission in the Fiji Military Forces, arrived on Aitutaki to take up the position with his wife. Local men were recruited and given a brief medical exam by the US medical doctor.
In July the locals started to ask for 3 shillings per 8-hour day that they paraded as they were giving up their jobs with the US Authorities who were paying between 4 and 5 shillings a day. This was agreed to.
In July 1915 uniform and equipment were ordered from New Zealand

| | |
|---|---|
| Boots | 100 pairs |
| Gas Masks | 100 |
| Puttees | 100 pairs |
| Shorts | 100 |
| Shirts | 100 |
| Helmets | 100 |
| Belts | 100 |

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Pre-1948 New Zealand militaria (uniforms and accoutrements)
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| | |
|---|---|
| Overcoats | 100 |
| Crowns | 4 |
| Hat badges | 100 |
| Chevrons, sergeant | 4 sets |
| Chevrons, corporal | 3 sets |
| Chevrons, Lance corporal | 6 sets |
| Stars | 12 |
| Whistles | 9 |

The commanding officer was also supplied with a uniform from NZ which consisted of boots, shoes, forage cap, helmet, Sam Browne, Stockings, Putties, complete set web equipment (1937 pattern), Dress and Field uniforms, pistol and ammunition, tie and shirt, overcoat, and badges. But the uniform did not arrive in Rarotonga until the 29th November 1943, after the unit had been disbanded and the package was returned unopened. In August 1943 only a month after the first parade on 30th June 194, the NZ Army suggested that the guard should be disbanded due to the reduced possibility of enemy action and suggested that the force should now parade only once every three months.

In September 1943 the CO of the Home Guard requested materials for the building of a building to store to rifles and stores. It was suggested that the same type of building built by the Cook Islands Local Defence Force on Rarotonga be suitable, but this building was not built as it was found that stores for the unit could be stored in US buildings and at other buildings on the island. At the beginning of October 1943 permission was sort by the NZ Army from the NZ Minister of Defence for the disbanding of the unit of which the US authorities agreed. Payment for parades was sought and the same rates of pay for the Cook Islands Local Defence Force was used to pay the Home Guard on Aitutaki.

| | |
|---|---|
| Private | 3/- |
| Lance Corporal | 3/3 |
| Corporal | 3/6 |
| Sergeant | 4/- |
| Quartermaster Sergeant | 5/6 |
| Sergeant Major | 6/6 |
| | per 8-hour day parade |

Although Ridgley was a public servant and being paid in his role as head master he was also pair 12 shilling a parade for his role as an officer in the Home Guard as it was known that he undertook Home Guard duties on other none parade days. Approval for the disbanding of the Home Guard was given on 8th November 1943 but by 26th November the US Authorities had a different view and wanted the Home Guard to be incorporated into the new defence plan for the island. The unit held its last parade in mid-November (possibility on the 15th) having held 19 parades which means that on some weeks they paraded more than once.

In January 1944 all the stores were packed ready for their return to New Zealand via Rarotonga. The men were allowed to keep their issue boots but all other uniform and equipment had to be returned. Authority was sort for permission for the locals to be able to buy the shirts and shorts at £1 per set. Permission was given as these items were made locally from khaki drill fabric that had come from New Zealand. The shirts and shorts were not Army pattern. 44 KD Shorts and 50 KD Shirts were held until payment was received.

Aitutaki Home Guard Stores returned to New Zealand via Rarotonga July 1944

| | |
|---|---|
| Respirators, Anti Gas | 101 |
| Greatcoats, Dismounted Service | 110 |
| Belts, waist, B.E.M.R. Pattern B[iii] | 100 |
| Belts, waist, Sam Browne | 1 |
| Belts, shoulder | 1 |
| Puttees, service dress, pairs | 101 |
| Hats, felt | 111 |
| Bands, hat | 75 |
| Shirts, officers with 2 collars | 1 |
| Caps, Field Service, officers | 1 |
| Hats, Service Dress, officers | 1 |
| Ties, officers | 1 |
| Helmets, steel | 101 |

Stores taken out of Aitutaki
Home Guard materials for the Cook Island Local Defence Force
before return to New Zealand

| | |
|---|---|
| Caps, Field Service | 110 |
| Chevrons, 3 bar | 15 |
| Chevrons, 2 bar | 12 |
| Chevrons, 1 bar | 22 |
| Badges, arm worsted, crown, large | 4 |
| Badges, cap brass, N.Z. Pioneer | 100 |
| Bands, hat, N.Z. Infantry | 46 |
| Whistles, artillery | 6 |
| Cotton, drill, khaki, yards | 158 |
| Attachments, brace, W.E. Patt 37 | 2 |
| Belts, waist | 1 |
| Bottles, water, Mk VI | 1 |
| Braces, W.E. Patt. 37 left | 1 |
| Braces, W.E. Patt. 37 right | 1 |
| Carriers, W.E. | 1 |
| Cases, binoculars, W.E. Patt. 37 | 1 |
| Cases, pistol, W.E. Patt. 37 | 1 |
| Haversacks, W.E. Patt. 37 | 1 |
| Haversacks, officers, W.E. Patt. 37 | 1 |
| Lanyards, pistol | 1 |
| Pouches, ammunition, W.E. Patt. 37 | 1 |
| Straps, haversack, W.E. Patt. 37, left | 1 |
| Straps, haversack, W.E. Patt. 37, right | 1 |
| Tins, mess | 1 |
| Badges, shoulder, gilt stars | 12 |
| Trousers, khaki drill (local make) pairs | 47 |

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This unit is most likely the Aitutaki Home Guard due to the brown leather New Zealand Mounted Rifles belts that they were known to have been issued and are wearing. Because the unit was disbanded in Mid November 1943 and the visit didn't take place until late December 1944 is can be presumed that the unit was reformed especially for the visit. (screen shot from Weekly Review number 179, titled *Official Visit Pacific Islands*)

From the stores lists we can see that the local members of the Home Guard were dress in locally made khaki drill shirts, and shorts and wore NZ made boots and wool service dress puttees. Their head dress was a felt hat with a khaki/red/khaki New Zealand infantry puggaree and the WW1 badge of the NZ Pioneers. For battle order/patrol dress they carried a steel helmet, gas mask in a haversack and wore a serge field service cap. They were issued great coats for night sentry duties.

The leather belts worn were an obsolete New Zealand Mounted Rifles pattern which featured a large flat brass buckle to the front and four brass dees along the top edge. According to film taken at the time of the Prime Ministers visit they are also wearing NZMR brown leather slide on pouches. These pouches carried ammunition and they are seen to be wearing two on each side. Because the US supplied the arms, they would have been using the Springfield .30-06 calibre rifle or the M-1 Garand rifle. The official visit took place from 27th to 31st December 1944. The Prime Minister Mr Peter Fraser, Mr AG Osborne M.P.[iv] and the official party visited Penrhyn, Aitutaki and Rarotonga[v]. This visit was captured on film by the New Zealand National Film unit. The footage was released to the public as Weekly Review number 179 and titled *Official Visit Pacific Islands*. Today the film can be seen on 'You Tube' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJbhAwZ8S2c and is the third of four short films on the newsreel archived and uploaded by Archives New Zealand. Because of the way the film has been cut it is difficult to identify which scene was filmed on which island (The film features a Catalina aircraft and aircraft on air strips (the US built air strips on Penrhyn (1942) and Aitutaki (1943) and the New Zealand Government built the airstrip on Rarotonga (1944).

The Aitutaki Home Guard may not have existed for long or had a defined role but they still served and they still did their bit when called!

In anyone has any more information, photos or names of those that served in New Zealand shortest lived unit – The Aitutaki Home Guard then I would like to hear from you.

Those who served
R. S. Ridgley, Lieutenant
Tamatoa Ariki, (1st Lieutenant) WW1 veteran
Matareka Nooroa, private (also served with the CILDF)
John Metua Samuela, private (also served with the CILDF as a lance Corporal)

Barry O'Sullivan
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References
Archives New Zealand 'Aitutaki Home Guard' R17963849 ACGA 8280 It1 667/ IT 122/2/5

[i] AJHR Report of the Cook Islands Administration. Section A 3 for the year ending 31st March 1941
[ii] 2nd Lieutenant Waikato Infantry Regiment, 1927, Hauraki regiment and Reserve of officers 1932
[iii] Described in the 1938 New Zealand Vocabulary of Army Ordnance Stores, Section A 1 as Brown leather with 2-inch-wide flat brass buckle and 4 brass dees.
[iv] Mr A G Osborne Parliamentary Under-secretary to the Prime Minister
[v] AJHR Report of the Cook Islands Administration. Section A 3 25th July 1945