

CHAPTER 9

WRNZNS

The recruitment of women for naval service was first discussed by the Naval Board in May, 1941 but almost 12 months passed before the organising of what became the Women's Royal New Zealand Naval Service was started. Previously, all women in the Navy Department were employed in a civilian capacity, mainly on clerical duties under the control of the Public Service Commissioner. A proportion of these civilian employees afterwards joined the Wrens and were given an antedated seniority which made them eligible for earlier promotion. Initially there was considerable discussion of the conditions of service in the WRNZNS, which was finally modelled largely on the British pattern.

At a conference in August, 1941, one of the main points discussed was whether women could be asked to work at night. In the final outcome Wrens were employed with no limitations on their times of duty up to 44 hours a week, which if considered necessary might be extended with no additional payment. The establishment of the WRNZNS was approved by the War Cabinet on 11 April, 1942 with the appointment of Miss R. Herrick as Director. The regulations for the general administration of the WRNZNS were contained in Navy Order 769 of 18 March, 1943.

Up to January, 1943, 870 applications for the WRNZNS had been received, of which 350 had been rejected for various reasons and 330 were under consideration. By September an acute shortage was developing and even a year later nearly every establishment in which Wrens were employed was short of its complement. Despite having an authorised establishment of 700, the Wrens attained a peak strength of only 519, by October, 1944.

The Wrens quickly settled into the routine of the Navy and proved themselves able and adaptable in their varied and exacting duties. Wrens proved themselves efficient visual signallers, coders and telegraphists at the various ports and at Waiouru radio station. The degaussing ranges and radar and visual signalling stations at Wellington and Auckland were staffed by Wrens, who also manned the launches under the technical and administrative control of their own officers. Wrens worked in three daily eight-hour watches as plotters in the Wellington control room of the radio direction-finding network and 8 others manned a wireless station near Blenheim.

When the Admiralty sought in January, 1945, the loan of 200 Wrens for duty in the Australian bases of the British Pacific Fleet, the request could not be met as their strength was approximately that number below establishment and barely forty applications to join were in hand. That the WRNZNS was the only N.Z. women's service which did not send some of its members overseas was a great disappointment to Wrens, particularly those who had carried out long and good service at home. By 1946 the WRNZNS had almost ceased to exist, though certain individuals did resist the closure. It was fully reconstituted in May 1947 as a permanent part of the Royal New Zealand Navy, which it was to remain until the women's service was integrated into the RNZN in 1978.

For an appreciation of the role of the wartime telegraphists at Waiouru we are fortunate in having her impressions recorded by one of the participants, Noeline De Courcy, [nee Fanning], who served at Waiouru from 1943 to the end of 1945.



Noeline, tuning one of the B28-based triple diversity receivers

Here then is her story, written some 30 years later in June 1975. “Twenty girls enlisted in the Navy in June, 1942 as the first class of telegraphists and we became the first Wrens in New Zealand – apart from two officers, Miss Herrick and Hirn Fenwick and one driver. My number was WRNZNS 12. Our first training, while still working at civilian jobs, was evenings with the WWSA [Womens’ War Service Auxiliary] [or, as they were sometimes irreverently known, Women Without Sex Appeal] in Wellington,,reaching a speed of 20 words per minute. Our naval training was a concentrated six-week W/T course at Navy Office under Mr E. Biggs.

“We were then put into watches at the combined Post Office Navy Radio Station on Tinakori Hill, Wellington, [ZLP] for a year, coming and going from the Wrens hostel in Hobson Street or home. I was among the first draft of Wrens to Waiouru Naval W/T Station [ZLO], 5 miles south of the Army camp, in the midst of a snowfall in August, 1943. We comprised 4 telegraphists, 4 teleprinter operators and one driver. More Wrens were drafted as the radio equipment was installed and the radio schedules gradually taken over from ZLP.

“The camp was shared with the Air Force at first, but the radio stations were separate. The IR Force were there for the same purpose. The place seemed to be swarming with WAAFs when we arrived and we soon had the impression that the Navy worked more “economically”. For example, apart from the fact that we could do 20 WPM Morse on enlisting, we had been trained in all aspects of the particular job to be done in just six weeks then “put to work”, whereas the Air Force girls had spent months doing what seemed to us a great deal of irrelevant training. I cannot recall how long we shared camp with the Air Force but it was apparent that, administratively, it was not a happy arrangement. The Waafs were sent else-where and the Air Force men moved to the Army camp. Our camp then became noticeably more “ship-shape”.

“There would have been 80-90 Wrens at the camp and 60-70 men. Miss Mary Chesney, [commonly known as “Ches”, who later married our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant

Philpott, for most of the time we were there] was Wren Officer and was liked and respected, The girls under her included 4-5 Petty Officer Telegraphists, a P.O. Stores, a P.O. in charge of food and menus, Leading Wrens in various branches and Wren cooks, stewards, stores, one sickbay, one secretary, telephonists, teleprinter operators and telegraphists. Each girl had her particular job to do and it would be fair to say that it was done well. There seemed to be very little overlapping of jobs, although at times we complained of being overworked! [our pay was 4 shillings and 6 pence [45c] a day.

“The Wren drivers did a terrific job. They ferried the radio ,mechanics back and forth to the transmitting stations 5 or 6 miles a day, sometimes in atrocious conditions, back and forth to the railway station, Army camp etc., and drove the large troop carriers in and out of Taihape on the old winding road. The return trip from Taihape, after most of the matelots had taken the opportunity of inspecting local brewery, must have been a trial indeed. Many a time, a stop was made before turning off the main road into camp for a keg or dozen to be “planted”.

“The Wrens joined in local sport at Taihape and each tennis team in summer. The personnel of teams fluctuated somewhat because of watchkeeping of course. We were never short of sideline supporters who came along to loudly cheer on the basketball team and also the mens' rugby team. A proper tennis court never quite eventuated at the camp during the war, but Mr Biggs and his wife rented a house from a neighbouring farmer and the Army at their camp. Athletic meetings were occasionally held down at the back of the Q.M.'s hut and the girls were sometimes allowed to join in cricket there also.

“The most useful sports facility though, was our 9-hole golf course. The farmers who owned land next to the camp and across the road allowed it's use for golf and this was very much appreciated. After some golfing enthusiasts among the men had made 9 greens, the little course was a joy to have. One could always find at least one other person to play with, or sometimes a whole watch would go around together after coming off watch at 0800 and having breakfast. After some years of “sparker” watchkeeping, nerves were getting a bit taut and we found that we sank into a deep sleep after “winding down” out on the golf course and having a hot shower.

“Many a dance or concert was held in the YMCA and it was bad luck for those who had to go on watch that night, or for those who were on at 0200 and had to be in bed by 2100!. The camp had an energetic social committee and they organised all sorts of dress-up dances and much fun was had by all. We even had our own excellent band. It was nice to be able to return hospitality by inviting neighbouring civilians on these occasions.

“As can be assumed, the camp was something of a matrimonial bureau! Our officers had, from the outset, decided against imposing non-fraternisation, and to all intents and purposes, this trust in the young people under their command paid off. There were friendships and some eventual marriages amongst the Wrens and men working in and around the camp, but because the Radio Mechanics were stuck at Waiouru with their specialised job, they and the Wrens seemed to pair off. Some of our girls were already engaged to boys overseas and two or three of these lost their fiancées while serving.

“The Wrens, and probably a lot of the men too, owed a debt of gratitude to the neighbouring farmers. Most of us were welcomed into a particular home and it was such a pleasure to leave the camp once in a while for a “normal” fireside.

“The receiving and transmitting stations were established at Waiouru mainly because of the clarity of the atmosphere. We worked in four watches [except at leave time when we worked in three], and for a while there were more seven per watch – a male Petty Officer, Wren Leading Telegraphist, 1 male Tel, 3 Wren tells and 1 Wren teleprinter operator. All messages were sent between Navy Office and Waiouru via teleprinter landline. Watches later increased to about 5 male tels and 8 Wren tels, plus the others.

For the most part, Wrens were there for the duration, but the men telegraphists just came for short rest periods from serving at sea. We had in each watch an older telegraphist [usually ex N.Z. Post Office] whose job it was to monitor Japanese signals. Apparently Japanese shipping did not observe radio silence as ours did, and we believe that the interception of their signals was of importance to Intelligence. Each watch later had one male telegraphist [also ex Post Office] who worked or read a “bug” with NIT Honolulu [this was probably after America came into the war].

“Except for some high speed work [which was typed on to paper tape and then put through a Creed if conditions were perfect], all of the radio work was done by hand key Morse. One’s day was made if one received an X50 – Your Morse is good!]. The receiving station positively bristled with electricity and Morse. We worked schedules with Admiralty, Australia, Suva, Canada, Papeete, India, read G.M.s [general messages for British Navy all over the world] and monitored three ship-shore frequencies. The Suva skeda carried the messages for shipping in the Pacific – messages being sent and then repeated back to the sender. We worked “duplex” whenever necessary with Admiralty or Australia – that is, one operator sending and one receiving on two frequencies. One person per watch was tea boats’n. One of the Wren Tels would work out duty rosters for a week or two ahead [all very democratic] and we would go to that sked on arrival on watch. Trouble was, that the more experienced ones often had to be taken off easy skeds when the going got hard and conditions poor on the busier ones.

“The watches we worked were 0800 – 1300, 1300 – 1900, 1900 – 0200, 0200 – 0800. We worked one on and two off, then 36 hours break. We peeled the potatoes and other vegetables for the whole camp on that morning off and the wardroom steward supplied wonderful coffee.

“Our busiest time occurred between VE and VJ day, when the British Fleet moved out to the Indian Ocean [or thereabouts] to assemble preparatory to finishing off the Japanese – but of course the Americans did it with the atom bomb. We went on watch and worked at tremendous pressure for the whole watch without even time to dash along to the loo! We became quite used to putting aside a stack of messages to make way for those of higher priority which in turn made way for ones of even higher priority. The reason for this was that ZLO was acting as link between the fleet and Admiralty. After the “bomb” the Armistice signing was of course just as important and just as busy. It must be remembered that everything was coded and we had no idea of what was contained in the messages we handled. Later though, the lists of released prisoners of war started to come through in plain language. It was sad to see one of our girls, whose fiancée had gone missing at Singapore, vainly looking through the lists each time she came on watch.

“ The radio station was never fenced or guarded during the war. Certainly, no civilians were allowed in. Various V.I.P.s were escorted through by Lt Philpott on occasions, but I cannot

remember whom. We were usually too busy to take much notice. It was only in the later stages that we were driven over to the station, unless the weather was very bad. We enjoyed the walk, no matter how cold, and of course there was many a snowball fight on the way. At 0200 the walk back in the fresh quiet atmosphere was balm itself after the noise and pressure of the watch just completed. The girls were issued with proper oilskins, "sou'westers", gumboots and bellbottoms. We needed them



A WRNZNS telegraphists' course at HMNZS Tasman in 1944. The Wrens are, back row, left to right: Valerie Scott, Ruby Naish, Lynda Shirley, Jill Woodward, Yvonne Webb, Audrey Rambost, Ann Beetham, Riwia Apanui. Middle row: Jackie Bremner, Ursula Kay, Maureen Piper, Sylvia Denton, Betty Larmer, Yvonne Aronsen, Mary Newton. Front row: Mary Cholmondley, Shirley Crawley, June Gasson, Joan Moffatt, Joyce Law, Elizabeth Smythe, Jean Baigent and Pauline Hansen. The instructor is Petty Officer George Gibbs.

A photo of the last wartime Wren Telegraphists class. Those of an enquiring mind will note some rather intriguing items. First, why were these girls being trained at Tasman, when all Telegraphist training had, two years earlier, been transferred to HMNZS Tamaki on Motuihe. Island. Reading Noeline Fanning's essay she remarked on

that first class being sent to the NZ Post Office radio station on Tinakori Hill for on-air training, yet there does not appear to be any record of subsequent classes doing so. In fact there does not appear to be any records of any further classes being trained in Wellington at all, though whether this is possibly because the only available tutor, Mr Biggs was required elsewhere, at Waiouru , where he became the nominal Clerk of Works of the fledgling radio station. Or was it because the initial six-week course was found to be so inadequate that it required an extended period of Post Office follow-up training. . Will we ever know?

A Well Kept Secret

The official biographer on the history of the RNZN during World War 2 either deliberately or accidentally skipped very lightly over one of the most secret radio stations operated by the N.Z. Navy when he talks about a station near Blenheim where “very highly specialised and secret work was performed”.

S.D. Water's Official History of the Royal New Zealand Navy in the Second World War devotes just 17 words to their work; “Eight others (Wrens) manned a wireless station near Blenheim where ‘very highly specialised and secret work was performed.’”

The saga of the Blenheim brigade almost certainly began on 17 August, 1942, when the deputy Director, Helen Fenwick [Phibbs] visited Mr Bob Dosser's farm at Rapaura, about five miles from Blenheim at the end of a long dusty road. With her were Lieutenant Brian Philpott and Lieutenant Merlin Minshall, two communications officers who were to look over the site while she checked the farm house which would accommodate any Wrens chosen to man the proposed station. The site and house suited the Navy's purposes.

From that point the plan gathered speed and after very careful screening eight girls were hand picked to man the Rapaura station. There was a need for caution, for the Navy intended to shut them away in what today would seem nun-like seclusion. Compatibility was essential if eight young women were to share the same house and work long and often broken hours for an unspecified term, sometimes under extreme pressure.



Had the Japanese High Command known about these Wrens and the work they were doing, there is little doubt that it would have put a price on each of their heads. The Rapaura team of the 1940's was (left to right). Back row: Margaret Scott, Nell Luttrell (Collie), Marguerite Boxer (Scott), Dorothy Shroff (Moore). Front row: Bunty Pigott (Longuet), Philippa Tweed (Corkill), Nan Barker (Quirk) and Marion Pitt (Murdoch).
 Negative supplied by Marion Murdoch

The Navy did its 'homework' well and the eight Wrens chosen read something like a "Who's Who" from N.Z.'s top girls' schools –Nga Tawa, Rangirua, Hilton St James, St Cuthbert's, Nelson Girls' College and Auckland Diocesan being among them. Included in the team was a generous sprinkling of former head girls and prefects.

"Without putting too fine a point upon it, we were a pretty select bunch," Philippa Tweed recalled. "From memory I think I was the only one without a university degree. When we were chosen, we were told the job really merited a commission for each of us but that to have eight young Wren officers living in a farmhouse miles from Blenheim might arouse suspicion about what we were doing. And so Wrens we remained. In the end we all made leading rate and some of us went on to become Petty Officers and Chiefs."

Perhaps the oddest twist of all was that before being chosen to man the Naval W/T Station Rapaura, the girls had not the slightest idea of what they were going to do. It was a daunting task. They were split into two teams of four, one training as radio operators, the other as classifiers, an assignment shrouded in secrecy. On arrival at Blenheim they were to operate an R.E.B. station. Even those initials were deliberately misleading. The true title was R.F.P. or Radio Finger Printing. To the average person any form of wireless telegraphy sounds very much the same, a jumble of dots and dashes, but a skilled operator learns to pick up another's "fist". Rapaura not only concentrated on listening for various Japanese "fists" but it photographed them as well.

The 'brain' of the station was a special radio receiver sent to New Zealand by the Admiralty, and it incorporated a cathode ray tube which gave a continuous picture of the dots and dashes made by Japanese wireless telegraphy operators afloat and ashore. Camera equipment photographed the display and the film, when processed, was examined minutely by the classifiers, who tried to establish the source of each signal. Their principal targets were call signs and these and other results were passed to Naval Intelligence in Wellington over a special "scrambler" telephone.

As if the job itself was not daunting enough, the demands of war made life more difficult. The first girls to go to Rapaura had no uniforms. "I was in mufti, wearing a cotton summer frock, when the original party sailed on board the Tamahine from Wellington," Phillippa Tweed said. "Schneidemann's, a firm of Wellington tailors, had not finished my coat and skirt. Our uniforms were made from officer's tropical serge because the serge issued to sailors was deemed too hot. There were four of us in that original draft – Marguerite Boxer, Neil Luttrell, Nan Barker and me. In charge was Mrs Jetta Keye who had been the matron of a preparatory school for boys. The rest of our team arrived about 10 days later."

Uniforms were not the only problems. Wrens who served at Rapaura recalled that when they arrived there were wire mattresses in the bedrooms but no beds. The cupboards were stocked with crockery and cutlery but there was no food! Not all the shortcomings worked to their disadvantage. The "hush-hush" equipment was still being installed by L/Tel Allen Packer, a man for whom they had unstinted praise. He not only showed them how the equipment worked but the very necessary precautions to follow when handling high voltage gear. There was also no aerial at first, an essential item for any radio station. A quote to have it slung by hand between two massive poplar trees on the farm was 400 pounds (\$800). Lieutenant Minshall, a Naval Reserve officer, had a better idea. Using a bow and not a few arrows, he finally shot the aerial from tree to tree, and there it remained "for the duration."

In a war that was to include the use of the atom bomb, Lt Minshall was, perhaps responsible for the most bizarre stores demand in those troubled years. To help him sling his aerial between the two 100 foot trees he had indented for:

"Bow, wooden, 6ft 6in, 40lb pull, complete with bowstring.....

"Arrows, wooden, aluminium knocks, three shillings and sixpence, feathered....12" (His reference to 3s 6d is from the old medieval practice of calculating the weight of an arrow in newly minted coins.)

As he made plain in his book *Guilt Edged*, Lt Minshall had another reason for wanting to rig the aerial himself. He wished to keep the Public Works Department, [author of the \$800 quote], out of the picture. The less they knew about the aerial and its 100ft high unorthodox "masts" the better, for Lt Minshall had established the Z intelligence set up in Navy Office and was well aware of the need for absolute secrecy. His efforts were apparently in vain, for he wrote, "I was so secretive about the way I used these (arrows) for shooting up my aerials that the local press didn't get in an article about it until the following week."

With the war in the Pacific going full blast, tuning and testing of the station went ahead at a cracking pace, one not matched by that of Public Works carpenters who were doing some

necessary alterations and additions to the house, building a bathroom and kitchen on to the back of the secret shore establishment.

Once on air the Wrens quickly got down to the business of listening to Japanese traffic and recording it. It was hard work and much of it was done at night. The Japanese did nothing to help by changing their call signs almost daily but they played into Rapaura's hands by not maintaining radio silence. Some of their operating, Bunty Pigott said, was sloppy and she and other operators got to know many "fists" well. She recalled one night when a familiar operator repeated a call sign over and over but got no response. Finally, "he lost his cool, banged down the key and kept it down. The racket nearly blew my eardrums out." Such outbursts were few but with the Japanese habit of transmitting "all over the place" they helped establish a pattern of finger prints which gave the Navy a remarkably accurate picture of enemy naval activity in the Pacific.

Fortunately for the Wrens at Rapaura all was not dull routine. While they were forced to live in isolation they made a lot of their own fun while some it was provided for them. "Basically, we were a bunch of townies dumped in the country to do a particular job," Dorothy Shroff said. "Only Bunty Pigott and I had known each other previously, but although we were all strangers to begin with we got along marvellously well together. Some of the things which helped were that we all read a lot, were interested in music and all played sports of some kind. People thought that a group of women together in an isolated house at the bottom of a dead-end road would have been chaos, but it wasn't so."

Their isolation was completed by a two-meter barbed wire fence around the station and constant patrols by soldiers of the Guards Vital Points. They were mainly soldiers who served in World War 1 and were too old for the next, they allowed no one to enter the station unless armed with a pass signed by Lt Philpott, then in Naval Intelligence, Wellington. But once, and only once, did someone penetrate the screen. An Army intelligence officer, bearing a pass signed by the Navy Secretary, got past the guards but not into the house. Dorothy Shroff said, "We refused to show him through because he did not have a pass from Lt Philpott. The atmosphere became very tense and he left, saying he would complain to the Navy Secretary. He claimed he knew what we were doing but gave himself away with some of the questions he asked. Anyway, we didn't hear anything more about it, so we must have done the right thing." Bunty Piggott confirmed that it was an electric situation. "It was a case of 'I'm sorry, sir but our orders are that no one can come in here without Lt Philpott's permission.' He [the Army officer] was very angry but there was no way we were going to let him into the house.'"

There was another occasion on which the GVPs [Guards Vital Points] slipped up but it had nothing to do with Army officers. Bunty Pigott, on duty in the middle watch, was alarmed to hear a faint knocking at the front door at 0200. No one knocked at that hour. Not a little frightened she went to the door to find one of the GVPs there, looking pale and even more frightened than she was. "The poor chap looked so dreadful that I made him some toast and a cup of cocoa. It seems he fell asleep while on guard duty and awoke to find two eyes peering at him out of the dark. In his half sleepy state he thought the eyes were those of a Japanese soldier and he promptly fainted! When he came to, he knew he dare not tell his mates he had been asleep on duty and he also could not admit he had fainted, so he came to us for help. We never did let on to the other guards what had happened."

Not all the laughs were on the Guards Vital Points, for while the Rapaura Wrens were top of the class for security, they were at the bottom for discipline. Marion Pitt [Murdoch] recalled that they were probably the only naval establishment in history to tell an inspecting officer that he would have to wait to begin his rounds, "because we're not ready yet. What's more, we got away with it. He simply got back in his car and sat there until we were ready. We really were the most undisciplined crowd of Wrens. In my own case I came direct from civvy street and didn't even know how to salute. My selection was based, I presume, on the fact that I was a school teacher with a science degree and a knowledge of maths."

Service discipline finally caught up with the girls when their supervisor, Petty Officer Keye, was summoned to HMNZS Philomel for a course in parade training. She returned to Rapaura fired with enthusiasm and determined to smarten up her brood. Our Army guards nearly died laughing when they saw us drilling," Marion said. "Their laughter turned to near hysteria when poor Jetta forgot the command "Halt", froze, and marched us over the stopbank of the Wairau River and down towards the water. She finally yelled "Stop" and we did."

If service discipline left a lot to be desired, the exacting task of finger printing imposed its own. From January, 1943, Japanese submarines were very active in the South Pacific and although they largely neglected New Zealand they concentrated on the east coast of Australia. They operated there for some six months and one of their victims was the Union Steam Ship Company's *Kalingo*, of 2050 tons, torpedoed and sunk about 100 miles east of Sydney while on passage to New Plymouth. Signals made by the various Japanese submarines were reported by the Rapaura Wrens but they were not entirely happy with the fate of their intelligence. "We told the RAN [Royal Australian Navy] about the submarines but they did not believe us," Dorothy Shroff said. "They paid the price for ignoring our advice." The "price" was no fewer than five cargo ships and a tanker between 17 January and 8 February. Fortunately two of the ships were towed back to harbour for repairs.

Although no ships were attacked on the N.Z. coast, there is no doubt that Japanese submarines were in our waters. Towards the end of February, 1943, one passed through Cook Strait and cruised up the east coast of the North Island. The suspected presence of another submarine in Pegasus Bay on 25 February saw the inter-island ferry provided with an anti-submarine escort. Over the next four months Japanese submarines sank a further 13 merchant ships totalling 78,369 tons in the South Pacific, eight of them off the east coast of Australia. While some of these went down in N.Z. waters the activities of the Japanese provided plenty of work for the Rapaura finger printers.

The latter part of 1943 saw a further flurry of submarine activity around N.Z. One contact was made in September and several in November. Dorothy Shroff remembered well the night of 4 November because she was hauled out of bed around 0300, following reports from a radar station at Cape Campbell of a possible submarine sighting. The inter-island ferry Maori was ordered to keep outside her normal course and to zig-zag near the cape. Motor launches from Wellington searched the area and at 0419 ML400 sighted an object due east of Cape Campbell. She and ML405 dropped depth charges but saw no result for their efforts. They broke off the action and escorted the ferry across the strait.

Perhaps the strangest finger print taken by the Rapaura station was one logged while Bunty Pigott was on watch. The call sign JJU "so loud it might have been in the next paddock. It

wasn't like a Japanese call sign and, in fact, was like nothing we heard before. We monitored the call on two successive nights and reported it to Navy Office. The signal remained a mystery until long after the end of the war when Philippa Teed's husband, on a visit to West Germany, met a doctor who said he had visited N.Z. about the time of the JJU call. "He said he was a member of the crew of a German U-boat which passed through Cook Strait," Philippa said. "He also claimed that the submarine fired torpedoes at an inter-island ferry but missed. As a passenger reported sighting torpedo tracks while he leaning against the ship's rail, it seems pretty certain there was an attack. Navy Office subsequently confirmed that a submarine did pass through the strait and S.D. Waters mentions the incident in his history. But German or Japanese, that submarine was among the last on the N.Z. coast.

As the Imperial Emperor's forces were driven north, the work load of the Rapaura station eased and it closed finally in May, 1944. The tiny staff was withdrawn to Navy Office, most of them to work alongside other Wrens in the intelligence or communications sections. In bidding farewell to Blenheim they left many friends and a few enemies. "In the time we spent at Drosser's farm we grew our own vegetables – the results of our "labour days – we got meat from the farms around about, and milk and cream from the farm next door. There were two huge walnut trees on the property as well as cherries and black and red currants. We lived very well and were all overweight."

The enemies were mainly the mosquitoes from the Wairau River and some members of the WRNZAF stationed at the Woodbourne Air Force base. "The mosquitoes were terrible," Marion said, "and we had to ask Navy Office for nets which we duly got." The Waafs were another story. The Wrens were in the habit of wearing Mufti to dances given in the officer's mess at Woodbourne, and the Waafs, forced to wear uniform, stated a complaint. The Wrens were equal to the occasion and phoned Navy Office to find out the correct rig. Eight days later back came an order stating that uniform, not evening dresses, had to be worn at Air Force dances. In the best traditions of their Service, the Wrens "did a Nelson," knowing full well that there was no one locally to check whether the order was being obeyed. But the situation still rankled and they wrote to Navy Office, requesting to see the captain to plead their case for plain clothes at dances. This action led to the girls being told firmly that by ignoring the navy order they were technically guilty of mutiny. A month later they were all back in Wellington, and perhaps it was just as well, for the draft put an end to both the Woodhouse dances and suggestions of mutinous conduct.

After Rapaura life at Navy Office, "taking down messages and passing them to intelligence," might have seemed a bit dull but the Wrens from Blenheim livened things up a bit. "In fact we turned Navy Office upside down, Dorothy Shroff said. "If we worked late we would come off watch anywhere from 2300 to 0100, and there was no transport to the Hobson Street hostel. We asked Miss Herrick for transport and we got it. We also got s bunk in the communications section for anyone off watch but on call."

The effect of the Rapaura girls on the hostel was not so good. Because of the nature of their previous duties they were completely unable to tell curious Wellington Wrens what they had been doing near Blenheim. Their silence, or evasive answers, earned them an undeserved reputation of being stand-offish or snobby.

Despite their unorthodox approach to the finer points of Navy life and discipline, most of the girls did very well, particularly in their top secret specialisation. Indeed at the end of the war the Rapaura Wrens and others who served at other associated N.Z. stations were commended in a number of official letters for their work. All emphasised the significant value of their service to the Allied war effort in the Pacific. Although none of the Rapaura girls was commissioned two, Nan Baker and Bunty Pigott, had a special reward when they were among the 12 Wrens chosen to represent the WRNZNS at the Victory Parade in London.

From Grant Howard's "Happy in the Service" .