

CHAPTER 6 - 1968-1970 (With contributions from Sandy Watson)

In July 1968, I took leave and posting to HMNZS Wakefield. During the leave period, I was allocated a pool house for my family (Jenny and son, Tony) at 140 Bedford Street, Cannons Creek, Porirua East - two houses up from Bryan Crengle and his family. Rent for Defence personnel in pool housing was charged out a 6% of your salary.

1 August, posted into Wakefield and NCC Wellington. My POOW was Des Bretherton. ARD Colin Forrest and OSG Brian Chambers were also in the watch and when the watch socialised after hours, you learnt very quickly either to not go to the toilet the same time as Brian or stand as far away as you possibly could. Brian had very good sphincter control and could pass urine from several feet away. If you stood too close to him, your shoes and trouser bottoms got wet from the resulting splash from the back of the urinal.

The watch system hadn't changed from the last time that I was there - 0800 to 1600; 1600 to 0800. The area broadcasts had shifted to Iirangi and the only CW circuit left at NCC was 3192 kHz for the Local Command Net. Can't remember who else was in the watch but at NCC/MSO at the time were a few people that I do remember - Gary Bryenton, Dixie Kerr, Wayne and Ann Bennett. CRD Bryan Crengle was on the third floor at the Defence Tape Relay Centre.

As Killick of the Watch, I looked after the overseas Fixed Services - FX 601 (Canada), FX 501 (Canberra) and FX 602 (Honolulu). The daily (and frequency) crypto changes (Hotel Juliets) on the KW26s became a contest to see how quickly you could do card changes. If the circuit dropped out due to a frequency outage, then the operators would wave to each other using the meters on the front panels, initially in plain language, before the control station would change to the cypher mode first.

From memory, the Navy and Army commcens gradually closed down sometime in 1969 and all three commcens were combined on the third floor of the Defence Building, Stout Street. This commcen had been the RNZAF commcen.

DTRC had a Squadron Leader in charge, with an army 2IC (I think it was Bob Lancaster) and with CRD Bryan Crengle as the Operational Supervisor (like Iirangi's Chief at Receivers). My first shift supervisor was Keith (Peewee) Saunders, Frank's brother. I was the Assistant Supervisor, responsible for crypto changes out of hours, Services Supervisor (prick of a job) and man 3192 kHz as and when required. Lance Corporal Harry Dower was also in the watch - great guy and him and I got on very well. Also had LAC Roy Holmwood in the watch and a couple of baggies. Females only worked during the day (same as Navy MSO), Monday to Friday. They didn't want females in the watches in case they sexually harassed us males...Watch hours were different to NCC but similar to when I worked in the Post Office - 0800 to 1600, 1600 to 2300 and 2300 to 0800. They made the night shift 2300 so that we could use public transport and not the Public Service garage!

Signal Wrens seem to make up the bulk of the day staff - Sandy Watson, Margaret McBride, Lynn Edwards, Pauline Hayward, June Sutherland, Hazel Cerchi and Sue Trainor (Pete's wife). There were two army signals operators that I should mention. The first one is Mike Rolton. He was at the Post Office Telegraphists school with me but was a teletype op in the RNZ Sigs - he passed away from lung cancer several years ago. The other gentleman was an infantry radio operator who served in Viet Nam, stepped on a booby trap, which flicked up sharp spikes attached to a short, wooden pole into the lower half of his body (testicles, etc) and badly injured him. He was very tall and had he been shorter, would have ended up with life-threatening injuries to his stomach. He was invalided back to NZ and transferred to the RNZ Signal Corps as a teletype op.

There was a thick carpet on the floor at DTRC and we found that by rubbing our leather soled shoes on it, we could create static electricity. We would discharge this by touching the bare skin of those who had short-sleeved shirts, blouses, etc giving the recipient a zap. Wouldn't get away with that sort of thing these days - physical touching - good heavens no! They tried reducing the static electricity by introducing plants and spraying the carpet with a fine water mist.

Blue Bonce Godfrey and Cliff Cole (RNZAF) were assistant supervisors in two of the other watches. During the early morning shift, one of them dropped water bombs into the well of the building and let out a blood-curdling scream, just as the milkman was doing his deliveries. He dropped the bottles and nearly had a heart attack. He complained and the culprit got severely reprimanded.

Female army operators didn't have to type (or couldn't) in those days and it caused a lot of aggro with the girls from the other services.

Lunchtimes during the week became two hour odysseys at the Dungeon Bar (below street level), which had the Spook (a Wellington newspaper cartoon strip character), with long hair, a beard and a dirty white gown, sitting in a dungeon, chained to the wall, underneath the stairs. One went with one's superiors and one couldn't argue if one wanted to go back on watch. The bar was often full of officers from Defence Headquarters - obviously defence policy discussed in great detail there.

My old shipmate Bud Abbott came down from Auckland to marry a Wellington girl (Heather) whom he had met whilst he was on Inverell and asked me to be his best man. He was staying in Petone with one of his sister-in-laws to be and I met him at a hotel there. He was nervous as hell so I bought him a couple of whiskeys to calm him down. We were both wearing No1s for the occasion and I took his blue ribbon off and replaced it with a long white one, same as the one that I was wearing.

My second son, Mike, was born at Kenepuru Hospital, in May 1969, and whilst my eldest son was being looked after by my in-laws in Wellington, Jenny Crengle made sure that I didn't go hungry.

My shift supervisor left and was replaced by airforce Sergeant, Spike Povey. We had the evening shift on the Friday night before the Airforce staff went on Christmas leave 1969. They had had a party, left, left the office unlocked, which we discovered, because we were doing rounds...found a whole lot of opened bottles of spirits and proceeded to have our own party. The result was that the following Monday, it was discovered that the Airforce staff imagined that they had drunk more than they had thought and eventually decided to blame the DTRC Friday night shift. The inquest finally filtered down to the Sqn Ldr of the unit who asked Bonga Crengle to look into it. He knew who had the Friday evening shift and all he said was "they shouldn't have left the office unlocked..."

Cannons Creek Tavern was just down the road from Bonga and I, and on Saturdays (when I wasn't on watch), the three armed services and the police who lived in the area, got together in the Lounge Bar and proceeded to drink pints of beer like it was going out of fashion. A hard school to keep up with, especially without having anything to eat.

I was nominated for the Advanced Radio Course and posted from Wakefield, 5 March 1970. Once again took leave and posting and was allocated a navy house at 31 Hillary Crescent Belmont. The rent was a lot cheaper.

I did my Posting-In routine to Philomel, 6 March, and joined my classmates for the Advanced Radio Course 1/70. They were Greg Hartley, Tony Locke and Gary Johnstone. The advanced Signals course started the same day but the only one that springs to mind was Frank Saunders. On the Parade Ground at Philomel, when Frank was I/C Platoon, he used to march with left arm to left left, right arm to right leg. This caused great consternation with the GIs who used to make our platoon go around again.

The Queen visited NZ in March and Pat Green was in charge of Communications at all the entry points to the Naval Base. The four of us, dressed in No6s, webbing and each carrying the UHF portable Type 634, were directed to our respective entry points. I had the Stanley Bay Gate and consequently didn't see HM. Pat Green failed his R/T Procedure. "OVER" didn't exist and he used "GO" instead. EG: "Stanley Bay this is Control - GO". I always felt that it was pointless us having to do Procedural classes (WTP, ATP, RTP, VSP, etc) as Petty Officer Communicators were supposed to be Supervisors, not operators. The senior operators were the Leading Communicators. Better time could have been spent on Radio Communication Organisation for sparkers, bunk making for the gollies and probably Fleetwork for buntings.

We did Duty Leading Hand and Duty Corporal of the Guard. The permanent CoG was one L/Sea John Dodd, who worked Monday to Friday. Duty CoG was a breeze if the cells were empty but busy if all four cells were full. During the week, Duty CoG started in the evening. You would have to escort the prisoners, one at a time, to the J/Rs Dining Hall so that they could get their meal on their tin plate, a drink in their tin mug and then escort them back to the cells where they consumed their meal with their one utensil - a tin spoon. There were two fannies (no, not wrens...) at the end of the cell block in which to wash their plate, mug and spoon. Evening rounds you opened one cell door at a time, put your right arm across the entrance so that the OOD wouldn't get hit, whilst he asked if they had any complaints. In the morning, you got them up at 0600. They then had to scrub out their cells before having a shower, then breakfast. No wonder so many communicators joined the Police Force - they would have had plenty of practice at Philomel! After many years of the cells being scrubbed out, they still had that distinctive smell.

Class instructors were Pat Green (RCE and Radio Theory). Tug Wilson (RCO), can't remember some of the others but I think that Arthur Venus was Crypto Instructor, who was also the Vault Custodian. I seem to recall that we were the last class to be taught radio theory. (The knee bone was connected to the thigh bone...). Prior to passing out of the school (we still had the Fleet Examination Centre Exams to pass), Tug Wilson came up to me in class and whispered in my ear "ZMMG". I was going to take Blackpool back to the UK! FEC Exams were another point of contention. If you had successfully passed an Advanced Course, why have to do an external exam, which in those days was multi-choice and you either had to have had a bad case of nerves or be extremely hungover and not pass.

We passed our Command Examination for PO, 27 July 1970 and the Advanced Radio Course 31 July. August was spent at the NBCD School and passed the Standard NBCD Course 31 August. The same day our results for the Professional Exams for PRD came out and we had all passed. I posted out of Philomel 3 September and onto Waikato the next day! What bloody happened to my Blackpool draft?

More to follow...