

CHAPTER 11 - HMNZS Irirangi (Again)

Posted back to Irirangi 9 January 1978 and allocated a house in Officer Country - No3 Park Lane, opposite Thorne Park and adjacent to the Old Camp. Vic Fifield was still the CO, Brian Ward was XO relieved by Richard Jackson, Lt Cory Benjes was SO, SCO was LT Ross George Garnett Sanson and the EO was Lt Johnson, who was relieved by Lt Cdr Pop Pokai.

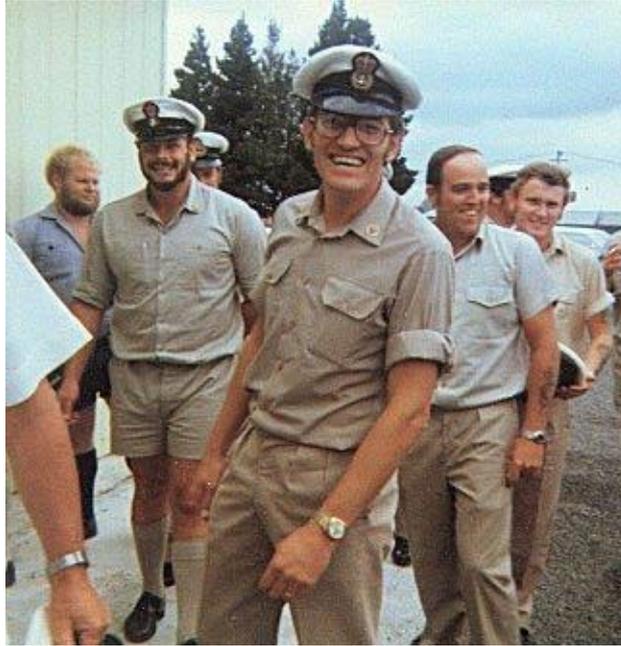
Scouse Newell had posted back to Waiouru before me and was living in the "Pleurisy Point" area with his wife Marie and their four children. The youngest, Rachel, had been born the last time we were living in Waiouru. The day after her birth at Wanganui Hospital, Scouse asked me to go down with him to see Marie and the baby. We drove down and as we got near the hospital, he stopped at a florist and bought a bunch of flowers. The entrance to the maternity wing had a security lock and you had to ring the bell to get someone's attention. Scouse gave me the flowers to hold, rang the bell and a very grumpy matron came to the door. "We only allow the husbands to visit. Which one of you is it?" she asked. Scouse replied "I'm the husband and (pointing to me) and this is the father..." Her jaw dropped and she grudgingly said that we had both better come in. Scouse had the four women in Marie's room in fits of laughter as he told them of the encounter with the matron.

Sadly, Marie was to shortly suffer from severe depression and passed away as a result of an accident. Scouse was in charge at Transmitters and whilst he was a work, Rachel, who was now three or four years old, was cared for by Judy Hudson - Rock's wife. This was the first time that I had met Robyn (Rock) Hudson and he would become another great friend and another bad influence...Rock was the Chief RM at Receivers.

WORS Neal Catley took over as SCO not long after I had arrived and him and his family took up residence in No1 Park Lane. Lt Cdr Dai Davies took over as CO from Vic Fifield at the beginning of March 1978.



Change of Command - Neal Catley, Mick Burrett and Wade Marshall.



Change of Command - AB Boris Smith, PORs Brian Henman, CPORM Mick Burrett, WORM Garry Cousins and CPORS Jim Dell. Behind me is PORs Bob Paul and to the right - PORs Kerry Brooker.

The Toyota Landcruiser pictured above was kept at Park Lane by the SCO for use by the officers/warrant officers when doing Duty Commanding Officer. We used to use it at night for hunting rabbits off the Desert Road. Neal had a decent .22 rifle, not like my battered model, and I had a scope that could be attached easily to it. We would drive down to the Frigate Block and pick up Brian Henman and one other to go hunting. Dead rabbits were skinned on the spot and the pelts left for the hawks. We would deliver rabbits to those that wanted them. I know, I know - misappropriation of government assets - the rabbits were on Defence property...

A significant change at Receivers was that Fixed Services was now run by the Sparkers and the old Civvy Tech, Geordie Parkinson, refused to give out any details on how everything was wired. It was all in his head with nothing written down. Rock set about methodically going through Fixed Services and came up with schematics and block diagrams. This made it easier to produce a simpler set of procedural instructions for the operators.

10 female ROs had posted in November 1977 and in April 1978 this was supplemented by an additional 9 female ROs and 5 female comcen operators. Dai Davies, who had been responsible for the re-introduction of female sparkers in the RNZN, had said that the male operators would be replaced over a period of six years - it had been done in six months. All the females had task books to complete for promotion to able rate. The communications staff at Navcommsta Waiouru was now a CPORS, four PORs, four LROs, 1 ARO, 19 female OROs and 5 female OCOs. I had lost my day staff except for myself and ARO Alan Padgett. I wrote a letter to the CO (Dai) outlining my concerns on how we were now predominantly a Training Establishment. Unbeknown to me, my letter was forwarded to the Commodore Auckland who sent a terse signal to Irirangi thanking me for my letter but that the current complement would stand - in other words, pull your head in Chief.

Dai was also responsible for a couple of other things:

1. He had Irirangi's uniform code changed to that of the Auckland Command so that when Auckland changed to summer rig, so did we. I was Officer of the Day, Christmas Day 1978 and it snowed. I was sitting in the Senior Rates Mess in my No 10s - white, short-sleeved shirt, white shorts, socks and shoes. Under the old system, I would have been wearing a more appropriate rig.

Dai came down to wish me and anyone else a Merry Christmas and asked me if I was cold. Yes! He asked why didn't I wear my woolly pully. To which I replied that said pullover was winter rig and shouldn't be worn with summer uniform. I think this may have been the start of all naval establishments in New Zealand having to conform to when Auckland changed uniform.

2. He was a stickler for divisions and even got the ships company involved in a large Army parade. The Army weren't too keen but Dai insisted and wanted a platoon of at least 30 made up of males and females. The watches had to be shuffled around so that the same people received the training. Typical Army Parade - "Parade will march past in Review Order. By the left, quick march". Members of each platoon had to march 10 abreast, take off simultaneously, march forward 15 paces, come to a halt, then be inspected by the Platoon Leader. This was followed by the platoons marching past the reviewing officer, who was a Brigadier General from Wellington. I hadn't done this type of parade since School Cadets.

I was kept busy at Receivers. As well as being the Station Chief, I was also Fire Chief and I/C Training Fixed Services. The Supervisors did their best in trying to keep the females Task Books up to date but when it was busy, training went out the window as they and their Leading Hands were constantly supervising the young females. Most of the females couldn't cook either so that was another task undertaken by the depleted male staff during the evenings and weekends, with Mick Kereti, the GSH, cooking lunches during the week.

We originally had a long wheel base landrover and trailer as the Fire Appliances at Receivers but this was changed to a lightweight truck so that a heavy duty licence wasn't required. We were responsible for first aid firefighting (first on the scene) at Receivers, NR1, Park Lane and CO's House, the old camp, surrounding farms and attending motor vehicle accidents. In my time there as Chief, we put out two chimney fires, emptied out farmers swimming pools and water reservoirs for cleaning, topped them up again whilst enjoying a BBQ and a couple of drinks and put out a fire in a VW on State Highway 1.

On the odd occasion to get away from Receivers, I would borrow a long wheel based, radio-equipped landrover from the School of Signals and Alan Padgett and myself would take off up to Mt Ruapehu to acquaint ourselves with the AN/PRC 47 (an HF transceiver) to test out different aerials and communicate back to NCS Waiouru. Worked extremely well and came in handy for Commodore's Inspections.

Privately, Neal had qualified educationally for a SD(C) commission and encouraged me to do likewise - although I had reservations about going through for a commission. I had most of the qualifications except for maths. I enrolled in a correspondence course for NZ Certificate of Commerce, which included maths, and subsequently passed. This kept me busy at night for several months.

In the meantime, my marriage had deteriorated to such an extent that my wife and I decided to separate. This was about mid-78. The CO said that my family could stay in Park Lane until everything was sorted out. I took one set of drawers with me for my clothes and went to live with Scouse. I left the car and everything else with my wife. I think the Senior Rates Accommodation in the Frigate Block was full and I didn't want to live in the WOs and Sgts Mess Accommodation. Anyway, since Marie had passed away, Scouse was glad of the company. We became known as "The Odd Couple".

Over the next couple of years there would be several Senior Rate changes at Receivers. Rod and Chuck Berry joined, Gary and Anne Hine, Ack Alder and Paul Murray. A couple of LROs I remember were Bob Overton and George Randell.

In 1978, the Turoa skifield was officially opened and Irirangi took part in the Turoa Day at Ohakune. Ohakune was barricaded at either end of the main street and those wishing to enter, had to buy a passport. It snowed, was bloody freezing and several displays and events were put on to entertain the crowds. Myself, Rock and Scouse were involved with a large Uckers (Ludo) Board and we were some of the pieces. After the day was finished, we adjourned to the Ohakune Club to have some warm refreshments and the odd tot where I ran across my old Seaman Instructor from Tamaki, Pete Coffey, who was the civilian caretaker at the Navy Ski Lodge in Ohakune.



Dai Davies far left, Rock dressed as a Pirate in the middle with fag hanging out of his mouth, Scouse next to him and me dressed as a half frozen diver. The cutlass-wielding rating in the front is an LRF whose name escapes me. The other two adults look like Gary and Anne Hine (on my left).

My wife took a job at the Turoa skifields and shifted to Ohakune with our two sons. I arranged for all the household effects to be moved and then cleaned out the house for the next occupants. I didn't have a car but when I went to Wellington (by train) to visit my Father, he gave me his old Austin 1800, known as a "Landcrab". I was able to go out to Ohakune to visit my sons and take them out on day trips.

I started going to Ship's Company events toward the end of 1978 and at one Wine and Cheese evening, ended up talking to one of the female ROs - Vicki Womphrey. We ended up meeting at other events, much to the horror of some at Irirangi and Dai Davies had me in to his office for a chat. There was a DELTEXT signal sitting in front of him which he was in the process of writing. He didn't tell me the contents of it but I can read upside down documents extremely well and was surprised to see what he had written about my wife, amongst other things. Anyway, the upshot of the discussion was that I had done nothing wrong but if Vicki and I were thinking of living together, we would have to wait until she was 20 as he was legally responsible for all ratings underage. He didn't want some doddery old chief whisking her away before her time. We eventually set up house after her 20th birthday.

In the meantime, I had left Scouse's place and was living in the kitchen end of Brian Peter's old Homestead which was beside the river near the turn off to the Old Camp. Doc and Bev Watts were living in one of the old farm hands houses diagonally opposite the Homestead. Doc had left Pussers and was working for NR1. I also found myself the owner of a three month old pup that was a Weimaraner/Labrador cross. He grew into a big dog and could leap gates and fences over 4 feet in height. He was already named Brownie when I got him and he wouldn't respond to any other name. He had been badly mistreated by his former owner and if I yelled at him inside the house, he would pee in fright over the floor. Terrific companion and we had him for 12 years before he had to be put down due to inoperable cancer.



March 1979

In 1979, Chris Farrow, who was the Chief Radio Instructor at CTS, came down to look over Fixed Services to prepare instructional notes for the first LRO(W) course that was to be held in 1980.

By now, Vicki and I had accumulated other animals on the farm. We had over three dozen hens, three ducks, two geese that we had since they were a day old, a one-horned goat named McGinty and acquired an orphan lamb - Sam the Ram. Tony Vickers had replaced Dicky Moa as the MAA and came down to the Homestead to live. We shifted into Doc's old place and Tony into the Homestead. Tony had found the original Frigate Block sign along with the signs that had the names of the six loch class frigates. We attached the Frigate Block sign to the gate at the bridge, the Homestead was Rotoiti, our house was Pukaki and the other four signs were put up on the other two houses and the two chook houses. The hens laid eggs every day and we sold these to the RA Ships Company so that we could buy poultry feed for the geese, hens and ducks and granules for the goat and ram as a treat from eating grass.

1979 also saw another Irirangi Reunion and myself, Rock, Scouse and Vicki formed a committee to organise it. The Reunion was held at the QA Squadron Tank Hangar and even though we washed down the floor, the females' long dresses ended up being dirty at the bottom.



We didn't have Mess Undress in those days. Instead it was No1s with bowtie.

The Irirangi shooting team was doing well at the annual Intership Shooting contests held at Whangaparoa every year and as in 1977 (before Rock and I were posted in) the team had cleaned up in all the Small Ships events. Rock and I took it in turns to be Range Conductor during practices which were held every Wednesday and Friday afternoons at the ATG firing ranges.

In March 1980, I had to appear at the Wanganui Family Court with Rock as a witness to attest that I had not cohabitated with my former wife for the set period that was laid down. A Decree Nisi was issued along with custody of both my sons at their request, although the youngest changed his mind and stayed with his mother. Tony, the eldest, was already living with us at the farm and went to Taihape College.

We had a lot of fun at the old farm. John Bullock was working in Navy Office, Wellington, and he would come up for Bourbon Weekends - arriving on a Friday and driving back on Sundays. We held quite a few BBQs to which a lot of the Irirangi crew joined in.



McGinty, Rod Berry and one of his daughters. Rod's the one in the middle...



Chris Farrow with one of the visiting courses.

In 1980, Dai Davies asked me if Vicki and I would like to live in No3 Park Lane. We declined as we were enjoying it down at the Homestead. My son, Tony, would take the .22 rifle and Brownie out rabbit shooting at the back of Peter's farm. The dog used to bark excitedly that much that the rabbits would scatter in all directions.

Neal Catley posted out, picked up his commission and became Comms Training Officer at North Head. Jeff Still posted in as the SCO. Lt Cdr Mick Mason relieved Dai Davies as CO at the end of August 1980.

All good things come to an end and in early 1981, a Posting Order came out for Vicki and I. I was going to HMNZS Canterbury (another ship to bring out of refit) and Vicki to Port Wireless, North Head.

