"Challenges: The Second World War at home"

Archives New Zealand

Feeling threatened

From early in 1940, New Zealanders began to live in fear of attack or invasion, first by the Germans and later by the Japanese.

By May 1940 the Germans occupied Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, and Britain faced the direct threat of invasion. Although appalled by events on the other side of the world, New Zealanders still felt far from the danger zone. But the sense of security was short-lived. German raiders, or armed merchant cruisers, were active in New Zealand waters, laying mines and attacking Allied ships. Their targets were the vessels that sailed to or from the country, transporting troops, freight and passengers. The raiders had some success: in the second half of 1940 they sank four ships in the seas around New Zealand, with the loss of more than 50 lives.

The Germans had other targets in the Pacific. The tiny island of Nauru, a British Commonwealth territory north of the Solomons, exported thousands of tons of phosphate each year to New Zealand, Australia and Britain. The chemical was essential to fertilise farms and grow much-needed food. But German raiders had the phosphate ships in their sights, sinking five of them in early December. The prisoners they took brought the total captured in the Pacific to nearly 700 in the space of six months.

Then, on 27 December 1940, the German raider Komet bombarded Nauru Island itself, destroying the phosphate plant. The attack provoked a stir in New Zealand. The Defence Force galvanised the Home Guard into action, and civilian authorities also prepared for the worst. Before the war began, the government had devised the Emergency Precautions Scheme (EPS), later to be renamed as Civil Defence, to cope with disasters. 'Enemy action' was one of the possible dangers listed in a 1939 EPS booklet, sent out to local authorities. Now, it was decided, the time had come to confront that menace.

The blackout began in coastal areas of New Zealand in February 1941. Black curtains, paper, or even paint, covered windows in most homes. Outside, street lighting was dimmed, making life difficult through the winter nights that followed.

On 7 December 1941, the tension rose dramatically. The Imperial Japanese Navy's planes bombed Pearl Harbor, an American naval base in Hawaii, killing more than 2400 people and sinking five battleships. It was an act of aggression that caused the United States to join the war, to the relief of many New Zealanders, but the Pearl Harbor attack was also unsettling.

Historians have since revealed that the Japanese threat was slight.

> Japanese strategists at no time gave serious consideration to an invasion of New Zealand … New Zealand just did not figure as a Japanese priority at this stage of the war; it was a long-term objective that would depend on the development of the situation.

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Those who lived through that period, however, recall genuine fear. Speculation was rife about where the Japanese would land, and what they would do to New Zealanders. People in exposed coastal areas felt especially vulnerable. Trench digging, air raid practices and complex emergency planning were under way in every city. Hospitals were ready for casualties.

There was a belief that no real defence of the country would be possible. Some regarded the precautions against attack sceptically. But others remember taking them very seriously. Joyce Harrison recalled that the air raid practices in trenches at her school 'brought it home to us that something might happen to us'.

Invasion fear did not last for the entire war, as two crucial events brought some relief to New Zealanders. In May 1942, the United States Navy got the upper hand in the Battle of the Coral Sea, turning back Japanese forces attempting to seize Port Moresby in New Guinea. The following month, in the Battle of Midway – named after an island in the Central Pacific – further American success turned the tide in the Allies' favour. United States forces destroyed four of Japan's aircraft carriers and the 'cream of the Japanese naval air crews'.

In short supply

Rationing of essential goods began early in the war, and books of coupons became common possessions. The first place consumers felt the pinch was at the petrol pump, following government fears that disruption to shipping would block supplies of 'motor spirits'. Private motorists were hardest hit. At the beginning of 1940, the limit on petrol was 8 to 12 gallons (36 to 54 litres) a month, depending on the size of the car. By 1942 this amount looked generous, when the most petrol a private motorist could buy in a month was just 2 gallons (9 litres). It remained at this level for most of the war.

Car owners had no choice but to accept restrictions on their mobility. Some, like the Maclean family in Paraparaumu, abandoned their vehicles for the duration. They parked their Dodge under a tree, and reverted to horse and cart for transport on the farm until the end of the war. Those who kept their cars running were on the alert for fuel. When Japan joined the conflict, motorists rushed to use all their petrol coupons. In Wellington:

> Califonts [water heaters], kegs, kettles, demijohns [large bottles], vinegar and whiskey bottles, tins of all descriptions, and even a new dustbin were produced to hold petrol as all available coupons were handed in.

The rationing of petrol outlasted the war and did not come to an end until May 1950.

Because of the petrol shortage, the attack on Pearl Harbor also resulted in good business for bicycle dealers. By midday on 16 December 1941, in the capital and the Hutt Valley:

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> it was a matter of extreme difficulty to purchase either a man's or a woman's bicycle. One determined suburbanite visited five shops in Lower Hutt and Petone before he succeeded in making a purchase, and he was told it was the last machine in that shop.

Rubber was also scarce and after Malaya and the Dutch East Indies fell to the Japanese, at the beginning of 1942, the shortage became critical, with 90% of the world's supply of raw rubber in enemy hands. Tyres were reserved for priority use, and private motorists were again the last in the queue. The rubber shortage affected other daily necessities too. To get a pair of gumboots, dairy farmers had to prove they owned at least 12 cows.

In their homes, New Zealanders also learned to do without – or at least with less. From early in 1942, the regular cuppa had to be reconsidered, as first sugar and then tea were rationed.

Keeping the people of Britain fed, with dairy and meat exports, was the impetus for a further round of rationing towards the end of 1943. From October, each person was allowed 8 ounces (225 grams) of butter a week. Despite this being four times the British ration, there was grumbling. West Coast timber workers wanted twice the rationed amount of butter, and threatened to strike for it. They got their way, and within a fortnight an extra 4 ounces a week was granted to them and their coalmining counterparts.

Shopping at the butcher’s came under government control from March 1944. Shiploads of meat were steaming to the people of Britain at the same time as United States forces in the Pacific needed feeding. Again, to keep up with these essential supplies, New Zealanders were rationed to about 2½ pounds (just over 1 kg) per week – two-thirds of what they were used to.

The Americans in the Pacific also put a strain on vegetable supply. In the last four years of the war, they ate 137,000 tons of them from New Zealand. Mass production was increased and the Department of Agriculture did its bit too, starting a Services Vegetable Production Scheme. Farmland was taken over to grow potatoes and greens. Dehydration plants were built and canning factories and packing sheds extended. In communities and back gardens, growing vegetables became part of the war effort. In 1943, the Dig for Victory campaign persuaded citizens to get their hands dirty. Radio stations offered practical advice on vege gardening and there were record sales of seeds and seedlings.

Most New Zealanders adapted to wartime shortages without fuss. They stretched their dairy and meat supplies, saved food coupons for special occasions, travelled less and made do.

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From the front

The distance between those at home and their loved ones at war was vast. And in the days before instant communication, getting news was often trying.

Newspapers brought some information about the war into New Zealand homes. Most of what was published came to the telegraph office by overseas cable. But not all the news was considered fit to print. Government censors filtered the information before it was passed on to the Press Association, and there was tension between newspaper editors and the Director of Publicity, J.T. Paul, who had been appointed by the government at the beginning of the war. A powerful man, Paul often 'advised' newspapers about how they should react to wartime events, directing against any copy that might affect morale.

The media men working in the army's Public Relations Service, stationed with 2NZEF in the Middle East and later Italy, were government employees, and their work was subject to the same censorship as other international reports. George Kaye, the official stills photographer with the 2NZEF through the Italian campaign, was 'his own boss' and was given no instructions about what to shoot. He stayed with the troops and went as close to the front line as he could each day. However, all his work was censored, both in the field and in New Zealand. The same applied to film cameramen with the unit, who were not always near the action and sometimes reconstructed events.

In terms of media history, the Second World War can be seen as the 'radio war', with news provided directly from the BBC in London on the shortwave service. 'For the first time, New Zealanders were hearing about a war at first hand.' Many people listened to the BBC bulletins at the time of broadcast, on shortwave radio, while local YA stations recorded the bulletins for those without shortwave radio sets, and either rebroadcast or transcribed them, depending on the sound quality. Local news and other broadcast programmes were subject to strict controls, in case they contained hidden messages for the enemy. Radio censorship was so tight that from December 1940 even weather forecasts were banned until the end of the war.

The only personal contact possible with New Zealand men and women overseas was through letters. Again, censorship interrupted any intimacy, but the mail still provided a vital link. The army recognised its effect on the morale of troops, and the head of the Postal Corps was told, 'in words that were not meant to be entirely jocular, that he was the only officer in 2NZEF who could at all times have all the men he wanted'. At home, mail was equally important for morale.

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Not only letters left home for overseas. New Zealanders were aware that their 'boys' were living a relatively Spartan life in the forces. Within a month of war being declared, the government set up the National Patriotic Fund Board to co-ordinate efforts for welfare of those serving overseas and at home. A complimentary booklet, Comforts for the men in the armed forces, gave advice about what to send, and how to wrap goods, along with a few knitting patterns and recipes. The government provided some money, but provincial councils were also expected to raise funds. Local committees ran concerts and carnivals and, in a precursor to the telethon, radio got in on the act when 17 stations in the ZB network ran a telephone appeal that netted a massive £75,000 (equivalent to more than $6 million in 2011 money).

Bad news

Of all the Commonwealth countries, New Zealand lost the highest proportion of its population in the Second World War. The chilling casualty figures speak for themselves: nearly 12,000 dead, more than 15,000 wounded and 8000 captured.

Those at home usually learned the fateful news by telegram, often hand delivered. But communication was not always smooth. Immediately after the campaigns in Greece and Crete, the first battles in which New Zealand troops had fought, 2NZEF had some administrative problems. Lost records meant that there were delays before casualties could be confirmed. As a result, airmail letters of condolence from mates reached next of kin before the official telegram. After this, the army ruled that condolence letters were not to be written until the casualty appeared in the NZEF Times, the troops' newspaper. It is, however, 'doubtful the order was ever observed'.

Marian Beech's brother, Edgar, was killed while serving with the RAF in England. Her family heard of his death from a friend, clergyman Jasper Calder. The following morning, Marian recalls jumping out of the bath because the noise the water heater made reminded her of an aeroplane.