



The Home Guard monitored the Taranaki coastline from pillboxes like this one in World War II, waiting for a possible invasion by the Japanese.

Nervous eyes on the horizon

GRAEME DUCKETT

The coast of New Zealand was as much under threat as any other country in the Pacific during World War II. The northern end of Australia was on full alert, with the Japanese taking control of many nearby islands.

Here in Taranaki, the threat was real, and concrete observation bunkers were built of thick concrete and dotted the sea frontages, manned by the army as observation posts.

Built to specification, they all seemed to look the same, with their L shape and open gun slits.

The one by the freezing works was full of smelly water and debris, and we never went in there. I remember there being mesh over the small side windows when I was very young.

As kids, we dug the sand and stones



The Waitara Territorials held rifle and machinegun training just north of Waitara at Birdlings Bay during World War II.

out of the "pillbox" on West Beach and played war. It's amazing how long the bunker lasted, with it being relentlessly hammered by the sea over the years.

Here in Waitara we had three "pillboxes", as we called them as children – one on West Beach, on the Battscombe Tce seafront; another on the river frontage by the wharf; and a circular one at the top of Big Jim's Hill on the New Plymouth side of the bridge. According to Bob Fletcher of Urenui,

now in his 90s: "I did a bit of courting in that one. It was just a stone's throw from my father's house."

My friend Gary Stimpson, who was born in Waitara, told me: "The pillbox at West Beach was on a grassy terrace when I was a kid, and the sea was just starting to eat its way up to it. We would walk down the concrete steps into it at the back and play in it."

His wife Raewyn told me: "The threat of a Japanese invasion was real. A lady we knew was going to chloroform her kids if the Japs arrived."

Shop and house windows around the cities and towns had to be blacked out. Those allowed to drive at night had to have blackout lights fitted with thin slits across the headlights.

The Home Guard was formed to monitor the coastline. In North Taranaki, the Urenui troop was in control of the searchlights and signalling operations to various locations at an observation post on the Kaipikari Rd,

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Raewyn Stimpson

according to Cyril Smith.

"We saw a submarine on the coastline and rang through to Bell Block air base," he said.

"A plane was up in no time to check it out, but luckily, it was one of ours. It caused a bit of excitement.

"I was about 16 at the time, and the air force observation post was on my parents' farm.

"My sister Margaret and Jean Andrews helped out, and others too, of course, but many volunteers couldn't get there, as they didn't have cars.

"We had the only direct line on the Kaipikari Rd – all the rest were on a party line – so were linked straight to the air base at Bell Block. The Home Guard also had a rifle range on Dad's farm, where they did target shooting."

Our local troop at Waitara trained at Birdlings Bay just north of the township, having target practice and machinegun training there.

There was another troop at Waipapa, a little further north. On an old map I have, there's a marked concrete vault built by the army to store ammunition and explosives during this period. I wonder if it's still there under the sand dunes on the golf course?

Thomas Borthwicks, being a meat processing plant, would no doubt have been a target for the enemy. I don't know what protection the pillbox, which was upstream by the town wharf, offered, but I can imagine the flurry if a Japanese submarine came up the river and popped up.