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Peter Whitmore
Motuihe Trustee 2000-2025

Visiting Motuihe as a school sea cadet, 1961

When I started secondary school at Wellington College in 1957, the end of the Second World War was not far behind us. We had military cadet training one morning a fortnight during the first part of the school year, with one whole day devoted to this activity near the start of the year. We were issued with khaki jackets and caps, learned to march in formation, took part in large parades, and became familiar with old 303 rifles which we sometimes carried over our shoulders when we marched.

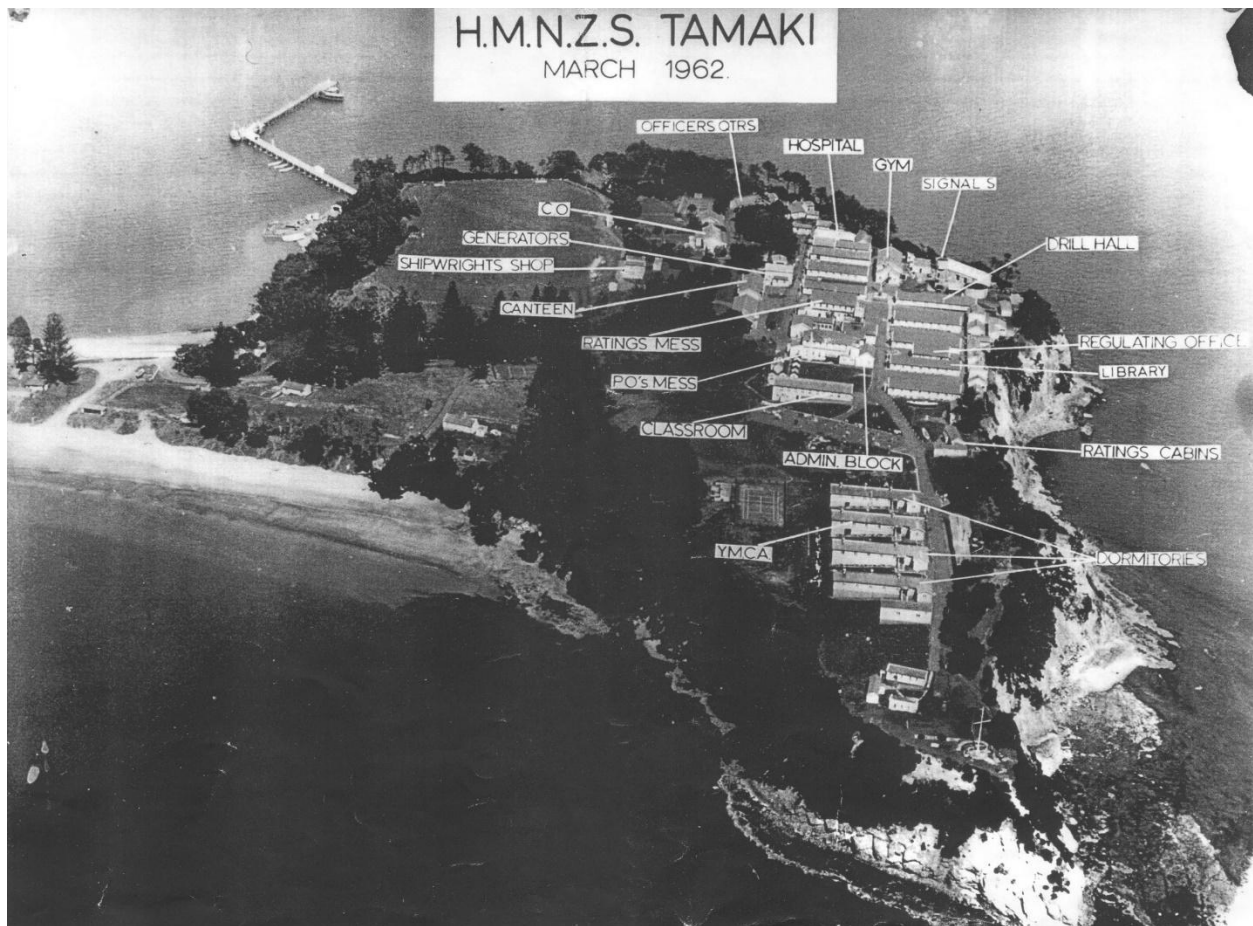
In our third year, there was the opportunity for a few of us to go into the Sea Cadets. I applied, and was accepted, probably because I had some experience with boating and my father had been in the navy during the war. We were now all issued with sailor's shirts, bell-bottom trousers, naval jackets, seaman's jerseys, lanyards, scarves, boots, and hats.

A year or so later, we were told that over the summer there would be an opportunity to gain more experience at an event to be held in Auckland, on an island called Motuihe, which I think none of us had heard of. Several of us decided that this could be an interesting experience and put our names down to go.

In early 1961, we assembled in our uniforms at the Wellington railway station, from where we caught the overnight train to Auckland. When we arrived, we were taken down to the wharf where a boat was waiting, and after a short voyage we arrived at our destination.

Motuihe Island had earlier been a quarantine station, an internment camp and a health camp, but following the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1941 the existing buildings were taken over, and new buildings were also put in place to create a naval training base, which was named HMNZS Tamaki. Until it was closed in 1963, many naval people did their initial training there, typically staying on the island for around 3 months and getting "broken in" to the navy way of life.

After landing at the wharf, we were led along the track by the shore and up the road, past some houses, towards the top of the north-west end of the island. There were many buildings up there, linked by a road which ran along the top of this island from a little past the flagpole near the southwestern end of this area – foundations recently still existed – most of the way to the cemetery at the northeastern end.



Naval training base on Motuihe - HMNZS Tamaki, March 1962

Besides the buildings, there were a couple of tennis courts down below the road leading to the cemetery. The people we saw playing there looked like they were all officers rather than cadets. On the way to the cemetery there was also a single barrel gun, mounted on the ground, which I understand was used for training purposes.

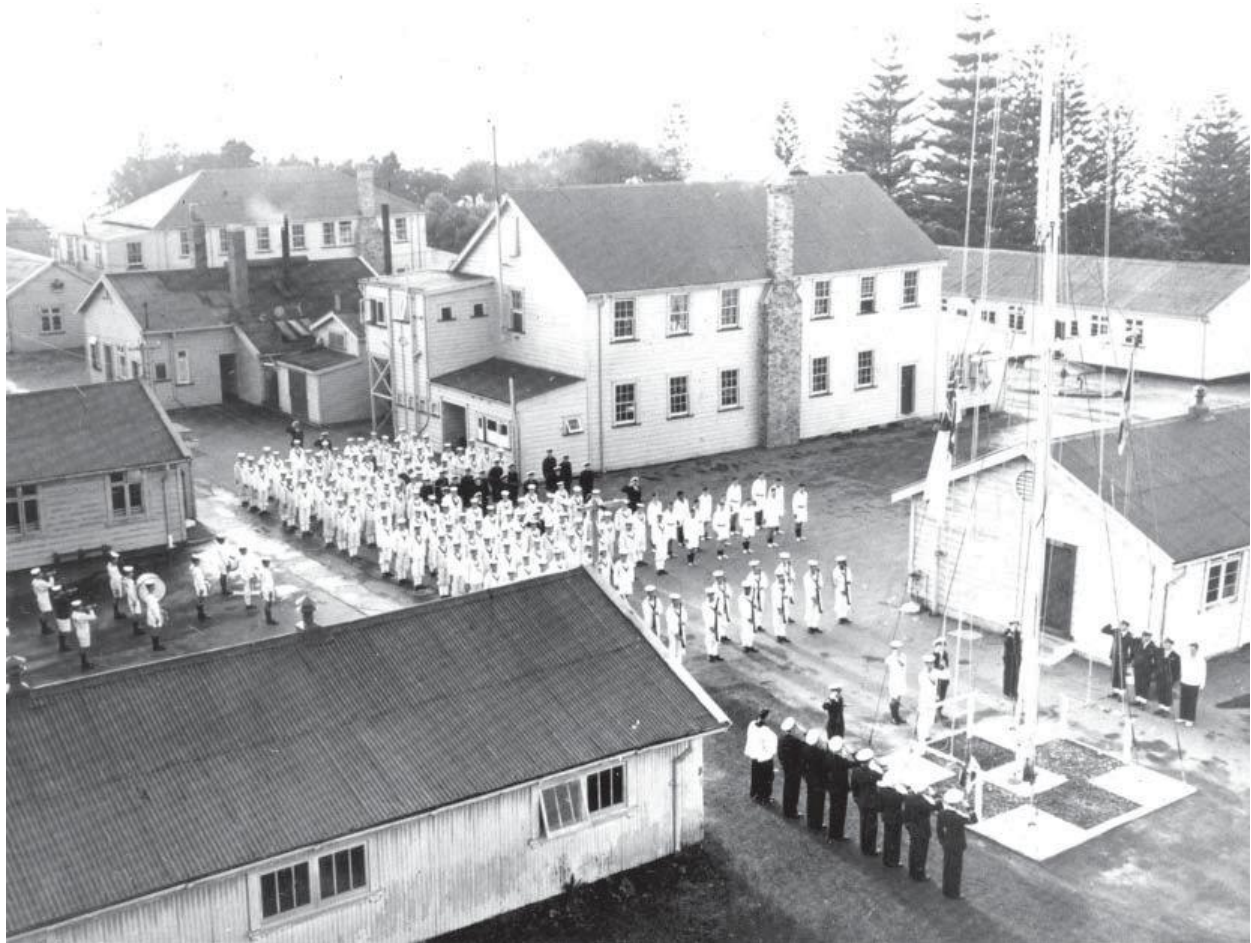
While we were there, lots of proper naval cadets were also on the island, undergoing their basic training. I am fairly sure that at that time they were all males, and so were all the officers, though some of the officers had their wives living with them.

When we arrived, we were shown into a rather basic wooden building, just beyond the top of the road running up the hill. Instead of beds, it was full of hammocks strung between walls and support posts. Most of us had never slept in a hammock before, but they actually turned out to be quite comfortable. From memory, there were no chairs – if you wanted to sit down, you just used your hammock as a seat. Further back in the building there were showers and toilets.

The way meals were served was also a rather new experience for most of us. This happened in a building which I think was known as the Ratings Mess, down the hill

slightly from the flat top area. Simple meals of bread and things were served without any plates or cutlery. You just ate off the table using your fingers.

As far as learning goes, we had some presentations in a classroom area, but what was covered I can no longer remember. There was also marching and parades, similar to what we had had at school. From memory, most mornings we used to march to the flagpole area and there, together with the naval trainees, stand in formation while a presentation was made and the flag was raised.



Cadets in formation near flagpole

Our uniforms were always required to be kept clean and neat, and I can remember during one of these events, while we were all standing in a straight line at “attention”, one of the officers came past and reviewed them. He indicated to me that mine was not up to standard, and I apologized, saying that the iron had not been available because others were using it. He seemed to accept this and moved on to the next person.

The most interesting part of our learning experience was probably a couple of trips out from Wharf Bay in whalers - quite large open hull clinker-built sailing boats, perhaps

around 8m long, that could comfortably accommodate maybe around 8 people. Now we were out at sea, picking up more sailing skills while exploring around the island and the surrounding area.

For part of the afternoon on some days, we got to do our own thing. What my friends and I enjoyed was going down to Ocean Beach for a swim and sunbathe. We also explored around the island a bit, but not most of the more southern area which was being farmed.

At one stage we were engaged in some activity, and our commanding officer was not satisfied, so he made us jog, in formation, up and down the road to the naval base area – up... about turn.... down... about turn... up... . After a while, some of those involved started to collapse in fatigue. A bit later, the officer decided that it had gone on long enough, and we all finally got to have a rest.

As a couple of us were coming back from doing our own thing, one afternoon, we walked up to the big flat grassy area where the campground was later located. A lot of the naval trainees were busy there with activities. As we arrived, a couple of the trainees came up from below, running slowly, each carrying a rock. It was a hot summer's day and they both appeared to be sweating profusely, pretty exhausted, and almost on the verge of collapse.

They ran across to an officer who was sitting on the bank at the edge of the area. He looked at his watch briefly and then said, "Too slow. Do it again." How far they had actually run carrying those rocks I don't know, but from the way they looked, it must have been quite a long way. They turned, in a state almost of despair, and slowly ran off again, still carrying their rocks.

Another person, perhaps it was John Mills who in 2009 became a Department of Conservation Ranger on Motuihe, later told me about an experience he had had while doing naval training on the island. The officer had asked them to bring several buckets of sand up the road from the beach. After they had spent quite a lot of time and energy doing this, the officer looked at the sand and said something like, "This is dry sand. I wanted wet sand." He then made them pack up all the dry sand again, take it down to the beach, and replace it with wet sand.

After probably about 1½ weeks our visit finished, and we got on a boat, went back to the Auckland railway station and caught the overnight train back to Wellington. Later, in 1963, the navy also left the island and moved their training base to the North Shore. Most of the around 70 buildings and structures were then demolished, except for the surgeon's cottage, the water tower and one other building near the southwest corner of the island, that may have been used during naval times as a signal station.

While the naval-related training had been a mixed experience, my friends and I had very much enjoyed our time on this interesting island, with its beautiful beaches, located so close to Auckland.

Peter Whitmore
2021

Many years later Peter Whitmore, his wife Jill, and their family moved to Auckland. Through a relative, they found out that Ronnie Harrison, who was then living on the island with her partner, Terry Gibbons, and assisting him with running the farm there, was also growing native trees and planting them out, with the longer term vision of restoring some of the original forested areas. Peter then contacted Ronnie to see whether this was something they, or the business they were running at the time, could support.

As a result, when Ronnie and Terry established the Motuihe Trust in 2000, Peter became one of the founding trustees, and was appointed as the first chairperson.



Peter Whitmore in his sea cadet uniform.
