
DANGER AT SEA: FROM RUSSIAN CONVOYS TO THE PORT OF ALGIERS

BIOGRAPHY BY KIM NEWTH

Being the first born into his family on 2nd March 1922, Francis Noel Smith had the honour of inheriting his father's Christian name. Yet having two family members with the same name proved confusing, so the youngster was soon called by his middle name, Noel.

His father – Francis William Smith – hailed originally from Invercargill and Noel believes his mother, Mabel, also came from there. By the time the couple started their family, they had moved to Christchurch where Francis had his own business for a time, a hardware store in Linwood. When this failed¹, he found work as a hardware manager for a Christchurch company.

Noel grew up with two younger brothers - Allan² and Trevor - and the boys went to school at Phillipstown Primary. Noel attended Christchurch Technical College³ from the age of 13 for some 12 months before being offered a job working for city hardware merchants Ashby Bergh and Co. Ltd⁴.

“At that time getting a job was pretty important ... It was getting towards the end of the depression years sort of thing and a job as message boy with Ashby Bergh and Company Limited was pretty attractive.”

The store's policy was to deliver hardware products it had sold to its customers. Noel remembers once trying to balance a hand mower on the handlebars of his bicycle for a customer who had requested an urgent delivery on that particular afternoon. From High Street, he only got as far as Manchester Street before someone cut in front of him causing the mower to go one way and him the other. “After that they bought me a message bike with a carrier on the front!” He remained with the company through to the outbreak of the war.

Noel recalls his father had served as a soldier in the First World War, but never spoke to him about his experiences. “In his time, they didn't talk too much about it.”

Through the 1930s, he was aware another war was looming. “But at my age it didn't really influence you to a great degree. You knew it was going on but you were looking forward to being called up and going on a trip overseas.”

Pacific service

In mid-1939, a few months after he had turned 17, former schoolmates persuaded Noel to consider joining the New Zealand Division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve

¹ Noel believes the arrival of Woolworths was to blame: “They fixed a lot of small businesses with their pricing.”

² Allan John Smith served in the merchant navy in the Second World War.

³ Founded in 1902, the college was ‘effectively a slightly glorified high school with a technical emphasis until the last quarter of the 20th century’. From *CONTEXTUAL HISTORICAL OVERVIEW - CHRISTCHURCH CITY*, p. 220, <http://resources.ccc.govt.nz/files/christchurchcitycontextualhistoryoverviewthemeVI-docs.pdf>

⁴ The firm had premises at 217 High Street, Christchurch. See the photo at this link: <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/Photos/Disc10/IMG0054.asp>

(RNVR). After taking a look one night at what was involved, he decided to join the Seaman's Division.

A trial unit of the RNVR had been established in Auckland in the mid-1920s. Its success led to divisions being opened in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. By 1939, 610 ratings had enlisted⁵. At the time Noel joined, the RNVR Canterbury Division was based in St Asaph Street, by New Zealand Breweries⁶.

His first experience at sea was on a two-week training period, based out of Wellington aboard the minesweeper HMS *Wakakura*. This 'Castle type' trawler had been purchased in 1925 with a view to fitting her out for training naval reservists in seamanship, minesweeping and gunnery. *Wakakura* was also put to work as a minesweeper to help counter the threat posed by minelaying to ships in New Zealand waters. Hundreds of RNVR men were trained on *Wakakura*⁷.

"*Wakakura* was employed at the time minesweeping out in Cook Strait ... That was quite an experience – it was never very calm in Cook Strait. Of course you were working; the best cure for [sea] sickness is work and minesweeping is fairly active."

After a day's training, *Wakakura* would return to Wellington Harbour for the night. The men did not go ashore but slept on the boat.

On completion of this training, Noel returned to Christchurch and resumed his post at Ashby Bergh and Co. Ltd for some six months. By this time he had been promoted to the position of shop assistant in the firm's High Street premises.

In February 1940, he was then mobilised and sent to Auckland to join HMS *Hector*. This vessel was a twin-screw passenger steamer of the Blue Funnel Line that had been converted to an armed merchant cruiser in India⁸. *Hector* arrived in Auckland from Bombay on 10 February 1940, before departing later that month to relieve garrison troops on Fanning Island⁹. On the return leg, *Hector* stopped at Apia, Samoa, and Suva¹⁰.

"It was 'showing the flag'. At the time it was suspected that there was a German raider loose in the Pacific. We used to put on displays. You'd go into Tonga and we'd do a landing of troops by sea boat crew just to give the population an idea they were not by themselves."

Noel recalls the ship's hold was full of airtight drums. They provided some reassurance that the cruiser would be slow to sink if torpedoed. The ship's guns provided added assurance. "To most of us it was a big adventure."

While *Hector* was a vessel of the squadron, the cruiser still carried reminders of its former life as a passenger liner in the Far East. A big lounge area converted into a mess was of deluxe standard. Noel says the ship had been provisioned in India¹¹ and the

⁵ From Navy website, *Naval Reserve History - The Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve*, <http://www.navy.mil.nz/np/naval-reserve/naval-reserve-history/default.htm>

⁶ Noel says this building was gutted by fire soon after the start of the war. A plaque to mark the site of the former RNVR headquarters was put up in the new building erected by the brewery. "Each year we would gather there and re-dedicated the plaque as guests of the brewery."

⁷ Source: *The Royal New Zealand Navy* by S.D. Waters, Historical Publications Branch, 1956, Wellington, Part of *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-1945*, p. 10. <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2Navy-c1.html>

⁸ She was fitted with eight 6-inch guns. Ibid, p. 79. <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2Navy-c6.html>

⁹ This island atoll had strategic importance as a central Pacific telephone relay and cable station. Source: *Australian Postal History & Social Philately - Melbourne to Fanning Island Wrapper*. <http://www.auspostalhistory.com/articles/12.php>

¹⁰ *The Royal New Zealand Navy* by S.D. Waters, p. 79.

¹¹ One item, in particular, stood out for Noel: Indian butter. "It was absolutely foul stuff."

engine room was staffed by Lascars¹². “They were the original engine room staff and had their own quarters down in the stern. It was interesting seeing them doing their prayers each day.”

The experienced Royal Naval Reserve (RNR)¹³ men aboard Hector ensured the contingent of new RNVR recruits was soon knocked into shape. Noel recalls carrying out general duties and being made part of the gun crews. “The regular crew manned the guns but we were incorporated into them to get a bit of practical experience.”

After arriving back in Auckland in late April, Noel travelled south. He enjoyed 24 hours’ leave at home in Christchurch before reporting back to the RNVR headquarters in Wellington, there to be told he would soon be departing for overseas service.

“We took part in a parade through Wellington of the Second Echelon and the RNVRs ... The next day we were marched down to the wharf and boarded the *Aquitania*.”

Second Echelon departs

Joining the *Aquitania* was the *Empress of Japan*. Between them, the two fast passenger liners had room enough to accommodate thousands of officers and troops¹⁴, along with a naval draft of 28 officers and 356 ratings, 219 of whom were men of the New Zealand RNVR selected for service in the Royal Navy¹⁵. Commander Ralph Newman¹⁶ led the naval draft.

These two troopships, along with the *Empress of Britain* and accompanied by HMS *Leander* and HMAS *Australia*, sailed from Wellington in the morning of 2 May 1940¹⁷. They were joined in Cook Strait by HMAS *Canberra* and HMS *Andes*.

The departure of these large liners must have been a spectacular and haunting sight.

Noel was struck, too, by the luxurious interior of the former Cunard White Star liner, now turned troopship, on which he had embarked.

¹² This word was first coined by the East India Company in the 17th century. Source:

<http://www.rmg.co.uk/explore/sea-and-ships/facts/faqs/people/why-were-indian-sailors-called-lascars>

¹³ They were merchant seamen whose professional skills in navigation and seamanship were essential to the Royal Navy in wartime. ‘According to a popular saying, the RNR were sailors trying to be gentlemen, the RNVR were gentlemen trying to be sailors...’ From *In Which They Serve, The Royal Navy Officer Experience in the Second World War* by Brian Lavery, 2008, London, Conway, p. 29.

¹⁴ The *Aquitania* carried the main body of the 28th (Māori) Battalion and more than 2000 other men of the 2nd Echelon of 2NZEF. At the time, it was the biggest merchant ship ever to have visited New Zealand. From *28th Māori Battalion - Aquitania sails from Wellington, 1940*,

<http://www.28maoribattalion.org.nz/photo/aquitania-sails-wellington-1940>

Aquitania was a Cunard White Star liner that had been pressed into service as a troopship. She was both fast and luxurious. From *Troopship Aquitania*, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/troopship-aquitania> (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 15-Jul-2013. A photo of the *Aquitania* in Wellington Harbour in 1940, loaded with troops of the Second Echelon, is at this link.

¹⁵ From *The Royal New Zealand Navy* by S.D. Waters, Historical Publications Branch, 1956, Wellington, Part of *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-1945*, p. 82.

<http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2Navy-c6.html>

¹⁶ By mid-1943 he had been put in charge of all minesweeping operations in the Adriatic. From Navy website, *Captain R (Ralph) Newman, CBE, DSO, VRD, RNZNVR*, <http://www.navy.mil.nz/np/naval-reserve/op/captain-ralph-newman-rnznvr.htm> Noel remembers him being a solicitous commander on board the *Aquitania*. “He was out and about, very concerned about our accommodation, that sort of thing, making sure we were happy.”

¹⁷ From *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, edited by A. H. McLintock, 1966.

<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/wars-second-world-war/page-3>

“On the *Aquitania* they had not fully converted to troop carrying so at meal times we sat at tables and [were] served by waiters¹⁸.”

The cabins had been converted to troop accommodation, with six men per cabin.

After crossing the Tasman the convoy of regal liners was joined by *Queen Mary*¹⁹ and *Mauretania*, carrying Australian troops, together with HMAS Perth. *Empress of Canada* joined the convoy in Bass Strait.

From Freemantle, the now substantial convoy initially set a course for Egypt, via Ceylon (Colombo)²⁰. This plan was derailed when Italy invaded Eritrea and occupied territory by the Red Sea. To have proceeded would have rendered the convoy vulnerable to attack from the air. Instead the ships were diverted towards the Cape of Good Hope²¹.

Landfall was made on 26 May²² at Simon’s Town, near Cape Town in South Africa. Noel had a day ashore and travelled by train into Cape Town.

“The Māori Battalion was in that convoy too and they were there. The pubs in the centre area ran out of beer. Evidently the brewery was at the top of the road, which was up the hill a bit, and these Māori went up to the brewery and commandeered the barrels and rolled them down!”

The civilian population was no doubt a little relieved when the convoy departed for Freetown. There was just a short stop there for water and oil before the convoy set off up the Atlantic.

By the time they reached the Bay of Biscay, the convoy of big ocean liners had been joined by a fleet of British destroyers and aircraft carriers as escorts.

“It was a fantastic sight which will probably never be repeated again. We had the cream of the Royal Navy and the cream of the British Mercantile Marine all joined together²³ ... Afterwards it brought home to us the importance of us arriving in the UK because of the situation in Europe.”

¹⁸ “The interior construction of the vessel was quite superb. Everything was spruce and had a touch of class...For some unknown reason the ship’s peacetime staff had been retained. Consequently the excellent Atlantic-type service was still available on the vessel.’ From *The Soldier Tourist, A Personal Account of World War II* by Gunner N.H. (Joe) Brewer, Reed Books, Auckland, 1999, p. 13 – *Travelling in Style*.

¹⁹ For most of the journey to Scotland, *Queen Mary*’s position in the convoy was ahead of *Aquitania*. Ibid, p. 19.

²⁰ *The Royal New Zealand Navy* by S.D. Waters, p. 84. <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2Navy-c6.html>

²¹ *The Soldier Tourist, A Personal Account of World War II* by Gunner N.H. (Joe) Brewer, p. 19 – *Across the Atlantic*.

²² Ibid, p. 19. Noel says the convoy was split on arrival: some of the ships went into Cape Town and some went into Simon’s Town.

²³ HMS *Hood*, the largest ship in the Royal Navy, along with the aircraft carrier HMS *Argus* and eight aircraft carriers had joined the escort by mid-June. The convoy was also protected by Sunderland flying boats. From *Across the Sea to War: Australian and New Zealand Troop Convoys from 1865 Through Two World Wars to Korea and Vietnam, Volume 1* (Google eBook), By Peter Plowman, p. 141. https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=FHG2TTT0XdQC&pg=PA145&lpg=PA145&dq=Aquitania+arrives+in+Greenock%2B1940&source=bl&ots=Qt0vp8munj&sig=SB7znORALr02Z8EZ7xLcM0GUDeM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=qZ7_VPaRCNa68gWc-4KwCw&ved=0CDQQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=Aquitania%20arrives%20in%20Greenock%2B1940&f=false

In *The Soldier Tourist*, Gunner Joe Brewer also recalls the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* joining the escort for the Atlantic Ocean part of the voyage. “There were usually several warships in attendance at any one time. Each vessel would remain for perhaps two or three days then quietly depart at night. In the morning

In May, Germany had invaded the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France. The Dunkirk evacuation was underway by May 26²⁴. As they travelled towards Europe, Italy entered the war. These were dark days: the safe arrival of the Australian and New Zealand troops would have been welcome news indeed.

The convoy arrived unscathed at Greenock on the River Clyde in Scotland on 16 June 1940²⁵.

“We were immediately offloaded onto a big tug. We were out in the stream, anchored out, and somebody from the Admiralty was there to welcome us ... We were then taken ashore and divided up into three lots: one lot went to Chatham, one lot went to Portsmouth, one lot went to Devonport.” Noel, now rated as an AB or able seaman, was with the group sent to HMS *Drake* in Devonport, travelling there by train.

HMS *Drake*

Devonport is home to one of three Royal Navy operating bases in the UK. From 1934, the site’s naval barracks was named HMS *Drake*²⁶. When Noel arrived there, it was crammed with naval personnel and also with troops evacuated from Dunkirk.

“Originally it was an artillery barracks and it was converted to the Navy for six thousand personnel and when we went in ... there were twenty three thousand.”

At first the new arrivals were assigned to the barracks’ main mess decks, which were full to overflowing. Noel recalls that those who failed to sling their hammock by 4pm would invariably miss out on a space. When New Zealand High Commissioner William Joseph Jordan²⁷ arrived to see how they were settling in, the men complained about this situation.

“He [the NZ High Commissioner] evidently tackled the commander and ... so they put up tents on the football field and that’s where we ended up.”

With four to a tent, it was infinitely preferable to jostling for space in the main buildings. “New Zealanders - we’re used to tents!”

Meal times were “a scramble”: queues of men lined up at big mess halls, waiting for their turn to go in. “The NAAFI²⁸ canteen got quite a good patronage from the New Zealanders.” Canteen food was an understandably popular supplement to mess meals.

Training at the gunnery school involved parade ground drill and learning about the mechanics and operation of guns including 4.7 inch naval artillery guns, anti-aircraft

we would notice that another vessel had taken the place of the departed one.’ *The Soldier Tourist* by Gunner N.H. (Joe) Brewer, p. 20.

²⁴ From Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Dunkirk evacuation*, last updated 7-24-2014,

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/970448/Dunkirk-evacuation>

²⁵ From *Across the Sea to War, Volume 1* (Google eBook), By Peter Plowman, p. 143

https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=FHG2TTT0XdQC&pg=PA145&lpg=PA145&dq=Aquitania+arrives+i+n+Greenock%2B1940&source=bl&ots=Qt0vp8munj&sig=SB7znORALr02Z8EZ7xLcM0GUDeM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=qZ7_VPaRCNa68gWc-4KwCw&ved=0CDQQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=Aquitania%20arrives%20in%20Greenock%2B1940&f=false

²⁶ From *HMNB Devonport*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMNB_Devonport

²⁷ See photo online: *William Joseph Jordan visits RNZNVR ratings in England, date: possibly August 1940*.

Ref: DA-00585-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23096188>

²⁸ NAAFI – the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes - was created by the British government in 1921 to run recreational establishments needed by the British Armed Forces, and to sell goods to servicemen and their families. From *Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes*, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navy,_Army_and_Air_Force_Institutes

guns and machine guns. After three months, Noel qualified with an LR3 rating – Layer Rating 3rd Class.

One memorable experience Noel had at Devonport not long after this was being detailed off with a group of other New Zealanders to de-ammunition two battleships of the French Navy that had surrendered. The defused munitions were to be loaded onto barges moored alongside.

“In the Royal Navy you are not allowed to smoke on your mess decks but in the French [Navy] they evidently would smoke and, of course, French cigarettes smell quite different from English cigarettes.” The lingering smell of these French cigarettes, plus the fact that the ships had been closed up for a while, combined to produce a fairly bad smell below decks. “[But] We got on and did the job and it was all completed.”

First draft chit

Given the crowded conditions at Devonport, it was a relief for Noel to get his first draft chit and travel by rail to the small Essex coastal town of Brightling Sea, at the mouth of the River Colne.

Some half a dozen patrol boats, converted fishing boats, were based there. Getting out to sea required crossing a sand bar. Around the time Noel arrived, one of these patrol craft was sunk with a loss of life by magnetic mines the Germans had laid on the bar.

“Soon after that the naval authorities decided to move us down to Harwich, once again a little place on the East Coast down towards London.”

There Noel was assigned to HMT *Pelagos*, a coal-burning fishing trawler converted for patrol and minesweeping duties.

“She had been armed with a twelve pounder dual purpose on the stern²⁹ with two Hotchkiss machine guns³⁰ in the waist plus rockets each side of the bridge.”

Noel was one of only three Navy personnel on board³¹, the rest being fishermen who had been enlisted into the Navy as T124³² ratings. Out of these fishermen, a gun crew had to be formed. Fortunately, the men were enthusiastic and ready to accept training for their new responsibilities.

Once they were ready for sea duty, they began working in the Channel to provide protection for coastal convoys of motorised barges, mostly carrying cargos of coal. “They used to go up and down the coast and we used to stand off and provide protection for the sector that we were patrolling.”

The routine was four days at sea and two days in port. Sometimes they would be close enough to the French coast to see trains passing. Their duties included keeping an eye out for any suspicious activity that could presage an invasion. In that event they were to

²⁹ It had high and low angle capability so could be used against aircraft or other ships.

³⁰ Noel says these dated from the First World War. “The ammunition was on a metal strip and you fed it into the side. Being from 1914-18, a lot of these clips had started to rust. You’d fire a couple of shots and then it would jam.”

³¹ The other two men were an Irishman and a Newfoundland fisherman who had joined the Navy.

³² Arrangements had been made for the entry of crews of requisitioned trawlers and other merchant vessels taken over for naval purposes, under what was termed a T.124 agreement. It was a form of group entry on special conditions. From *Medical Services in New Zealand and the Pacific* by T. Stout and M. Duncan, Historical Publications Branch, 1958, Wellington. Part of *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945*, p. 164. <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2PMed-pt3-c3-1.html>

send a radio signal, drop a smoke float and head for home at full speed, (eight or nine knots).

Often the patrols would spot German aircraft laying mines and would radio this information back so the minesweepers could then clear them³³.

Patrol craft would also fire at low flying, sometimes damaged, German aircraft returning from raids on London. "Quite a number of these aircraft were claimed by patrol craft."

Dangers posed by air raids meant they were soon moved upriver to a safer base at Ipswich. Being quieter, it was also an easier place for the patrol boat to take on coal. Wharf space had been getting tight at Harwich, crowded with destroyers and submarines.

The only downside was the difficulty of having to negotiate the tides when going up the river: tidal rise and fall was such that it was all too easy to end up on a mud bank waiting for the next tide. "One or two times we got stuck in the mud there."

Conditions aboard *Pelagos* were very cramped. The trawler had not been altered to accommodate the extra crew; the seamen were in the foc's'le. It was only made bearable through having two watches. The skipper, an RNVR lieutenant, slept under the bridge in what had been the captain's cabin. Stoking crew, in aft accommodation, also found it tight with extra engine room crew on board.

Return to *Drake*, drafted to *Neptune*

By February 1941 Noel had returned to HMS *Drake* and had been put to work, with a group of other New Zealanders, making degaussing cables. These were installed on Navy vessels as a defence against magnetic mines. They worked by effectively dampening down ships' magnetic fields³⁴.

The depot's commanding officer had picked the Kiwis out at parade one morning for this work. They were told to collect their overalls and then report back.

"We were told that from now on we would be known as the degaussing party. Degaussing didn't mean a thing to us, but we were marched off down to the dockyard and finished up in the ropery³⁵."

This was a long low building housing baited cables on big drums. "Our job was to run these cables out to specified lengths and different size cables. You then lashed them together in the number specified and also after being lashed together they were encased in a canvas covering, which we stitched up."

Noel says one of their cables was used for the *Queen Mary*³⁶. "We took quite a bit of pride in doing that particular job."

³³ Clappers – steel arms that repeatedly struck the side of the ship – were also used every time they went to sea to minimise the risks posed by acoustic mines. The idea was the noise would then explode any mines like this in the area before the vessel went over them. "Fortunately we didn't encounter any." Magnetic mines were dealt with at this time using wooden-hulled drifters, or herring boats, which trailed out long cables behind them. "They sent an electric pulse out, which evidently exploded these magnetic mines."

³⁴ These cables were fitted along the outer hull, projecting a "north pole up" field that neutralized the ship's magnetic signature. From *How Britain Beat Germany's Magnetic Sea Mines* by James Simpson, 23 November 2014, *War is Boring* website, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/how-britain-beat-germanys-wwii-magnetic-sea-mines-bfec5558704c>

³⁵ They got their by train – the large dockyard had its own rail system for moving personnel and gear.

³⁶ There is a photo online showing the *Queen Mary* with degaussing cable fitted, arriving in New York harbour, 20 June 1945. Source: U.S. Navy photo 80-GK-5645; U.S. Defense Visual Information Photo HD-SN-99-03026, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Degaussing>

At the end of April, Noel received his next draft chit, this time to the Royal Naval Cruiser HMS *Neptune*. A large number of New Zealanders had draft chits to the *Neptune*. They had been told this cruiser would soon be heading out, homeward bound, to New Zealand waters.

Noel joined the ship when it was still in dry dock and undergoing stationary basin trials and was still aboard for the sea trials that followed in the Medway, out of Chatham. "We did it all: away rescue stations and collision mats, the whole works."

Once these trials were finished, the ship spent the night in the Medway before preparing to sail the next day. That evening, whilst still in the Medway, a call went out for volunteers to join some soon to be finished minesweepers³⁷ that would be going back to New Zealand.

Having recently come off a small fishing vessel, the idea of working on a minesweeper appealed to Noel. He and five others – including two other men from Christchurch who were Noel's good mates - volunteered.

"I remember one of my best mates [on the *Neptune*] the night before, when I told him 'I'm going off in the morning' said [to me] 'what the heck you want to go doing that for?'"

The following morning the six volunteers were ordered to get their kit packed. Soon they were off the *Neptune* preparing to resume depot duties at HMS *Drake* in Devonport. "Next thing we heard, she [*Neptune*] had been sunk."

Instead of returning to New Zealand as planned in May 1941, *Neptune* was instead attached to the 7th Cruiser Squadron in the Mediterranean to help compensate for the heavy loss of cruisers during the Crete campaign. *Neptune* joined Admiral Cunningham's Malta-based Force K. On 18 December, Force K set out to intercept a supply convoy the Italians were sending to Tripoli, Libya. Early the following morning, 30km from Tripoli, they entered an uncharted deep-water minefield where *Neptune* triggered a mine. She triggered two more trying to reverse out. Other ships tried to assist without success³⁸. Another mine was struck a few hours later and the ship sank within minutes.

It would come to be remembered as New Zealand's worst naval tragedy³⁹: of the 757 men who lost their lives, 150 were New Zealanders. Only one man survived⁴⁰.

Knowing he could so easily have gone down with the *Neptune* but for a last minute change of plan was disturbing for Noel. He had also lost his good friend who had stayed aboard the doomed ship. Yet he and the other five men who had volunteered for the minesweepers were also thankful their own luck had held.

An Honours Board at *Pegasus*, the RNVR headquarters in Montreal Street, Christchurch lists the names of the New Zealanders who lost their lives on the *Neptune*.

³⁷ These Bird class multipurpose vessels – called *Moa*, *Kiwi* and *Tui* – were being built in Scotland. They were designed primarily for training and would become a part of New Zealand's new navy; the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy became the Royal New Zealand Navy on 1 October 1941. From *The Royal NZ Navy's Bird-class ships*, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/bird-class-minesweepers> (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012.

³⁸ The destroyer *Kandahar* also hit a mine; earlier HMS *Aurora* had also detonated a mine on entering the minefield. Source for this section: *HMS Neptune lost in Mediterranean minefield*, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/page/hms-neptune-lost-mediterranean> (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 19-Dec-2014.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ He was Able Seaman John Norman Walton. From Navy website, WWII: *HMS NEPTUNE*, http://www.navy.mil.nz/templates/content/generalfullformat.aspx@nrmode=published&nrnodeguid=257b5904b56a-dc60-4653-8826-7482807101ee_257d&nroriginalurl=252fnp_252fnavo03d6d04447.htm

There is also a naval memorial drinking fountain⁴¹ at the Bridge of Remembrance in Christchurch where rededication services have been held each year as close as possible to the anniversary of the *Neptune's* sinking. The tragedy has not been forgotten.

Into icy waters

Strangely, Noel never got aboard the new minesweepers⁴² but was instead held in reserve, back in the pool of men awaiting the next draft chit.

At *Drake's* pier head, he and two other New Zealanders⁴³ joined a small ferry tasked with taking ratings from the AA Gunnery School to a fort on the end of the breakwater at Plymouth Sound where target practice took place, and then transporting them back again at the end of the day.

The three Kiwis slept in hammocks on the ferry and did their own catering using rations drawn from the depot. Sleeping on the ferry was a welcome alternative to the overcrowded barracks. "We made ourselves at home."

This pleasant life lasted for some six or seven months before Noel, along with one other New Zealander also from Christchurch, received the next draft chit to HMS *Trinidad*, a Colony-Class light cruiser anchored at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. They were drafted two days before Christmas Day in 1941. Getting there involved a long journey by train to London and then to Thurso, the northernmost town on the British mainland. A steamer took them across to Scapa Flow. It was the middle of winter and a choppy night crossing. Noel remembers feeling "cold right through to the bone" as they came alongside *Trinidad*.

On the mess deck⁴⁴ he finally learned what this new draft entailed. "We were on Russian convoy duty and we were due for a convoy."

Noel, who was to serve as a gun layer on this ship, could not have known back then that Arctic convoys would come to be regarded as the most dangerous and uncomfortable of the war⁴⁵. They had to battle their way through pack ice and fog, roaring storms, perpetual winter nights and perpetual summer days, and faced the additional hazard of navigational errors through compasses being rendered unreliable at high latitudes. These convoys also faced constant threat of attack from the air and sea.

In total there would be 40 outward convoys from Britain to Russia involving more than 800 merchant ships, of which 58 were sunk (along with another 29 ships sunk on the return journey). The cost to the Royal Navy would be two cruisers, six destroyers, two sloops, one frigate, two corvettes, four minesweepers and an armed whaler⁴⁶.

The convoys made an invaluable contribution, carrying four million tons of supplies⁴⁷.

Over coming days Noel would become familiar with his new ship. "She hadn't long been completed⁴⁸. [There were] six inch triple turrets, two forward and two aft and plenty of AA [anti-aircraft] equipment, torpedo tubes, the whole works."

⁴¹ This was designed by Noel's son, architect David Smith. The memorial was the brainchild of the Naval Associations Combined Committee (NACC) in Christchurch.

⁴² He surmises the reason was they probably already had the number of gunnery rates they needed by then. In effect, he was surplus to requirements and put back in the pool.

⁴³ They were both South Islanders: "Snowy" was from Invercargill and the other was from Otago.

⁴⁴ On the mess deck he also met a fellow New Zealander from the Canterbury Division of the RNVR called Jimmy Keenan. "I knew him and we had quite a bit of back slapping for a few minutes in a small reunion."

⁴⁵ Info for this section from *Engage the Enemy More Closely* by Correlli Barnett, Penguin Books, London, 1991, p. 694.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 694-5. Noel says the worst convoy he was told about saw 30 ships set out and only 14 arrive.

⁴⁷ These supplies included 5000 tanks and over 7000 aircraft. *Ibid*, p. 694.

From the crew, who had completed their first convoy duty, he learned what was in store. “The general opinion was on the Russian convoys you had two enemies: the Germans and the weather.”

His first convoy was much like any other. Each convoy, with merchant ships from Canada, the United States and the UK, would assemble off Iceland and then travel for 10 to 14 days to reach Murmansk.

“[After being] two or three days underway we would be picked up by German Blohm and Voss flying boats that would radio back the position of the convoy. The first contact we’d have would be submarine.”

To try and evade the submarines, a zigzag course was taken. Depth charges were also regularly dropped while on the way to Murmansk. Inevitably there were losses amongst the merchant ships. “All of a sudden you’d see a big explosion and when it all died down there was nothing there.”

As they got closer to Murmansk in summer, bombers from Norway would then close in⁴⁹. White-outs during summer offered some protective cover during the perpetual hours of sunshine. “You were able to change direction and confuse the dive bombers.”

Keeping busy with his duties helped Noel live with the dangers and he also remembers feeling confident of the ship’s capabilities. “It was the latest cruiser. It had just been completed as the war broke out. It had the latest [equipment] including radar which wasn’t very common at that time.”

Once at Murmansk, the convoy would anchor out in the sound. Merchant ships would then be called in to the wharf with cargo hoisted out and immediately taken away. Nothing was stored at the wharves which Noel recalls was “more or less a scorched area”.

The return trip involved escorting empty merchant ships although Noel recalls that on his first return trip they also transported some 20 to 30 Polish Army officers and non-commissioned ranks who had been prisoners of war of the Russians. They had been in internment camps but had been released to join the Polish forces in the UK.

Winter was hard to endure on these convoys. Heating of the mess decks did not prevent water condensation turning to ice on the inside of the ship⁵⁰. Ice would accumulate on the upper deck; spray would turn to slushy ice by the time it hit the deck. Exposed watch keeping duties were restricted to two hours. Lifelines were rigged around the ship to reduce the risks of slipping over on the icy deck. The seas themselves could be ferocious.

“One of the turrets – they had three six inch guns in them – at one stage the sea came aboard and it hit the deck under the turret and lifted the turret up and back down again. I don’t know how many tonnes would be in a turret plus all the crew which were inside.”

Turrets and anti-aircraft armament had to be trained and elevated constantly to prevent the lubricants in them from freezing up. Noel says fires were initially lit under the guns so they would rotate though this was later rectified with improved lubricants.

⁴⁸ HMS *Trinidad* was launched on 21 March 1940. From *SERVICE HISTORIES of ROYAL NAVY WARSHIPS in WORLD WAR 2* by Lt Cdr Geoffrey B Mason RN (Rtd) (c) 2004. *HMS TRINIDAD - Colony-type Light Cruiser including Convoy Escort Movements*, <http://www.naval-history.net/xGM-Chrono-06CL-Trinidad.htm>

⁴⁹ However, these were not encountered in winter during the season of perpetual darkness.

⁵⁰ Returning to warmer outside temperatures, all this ice turned back to water necessitating a big mop up operation.

A Navy tradition welcomed by all was hot cocoa. Made from slab chocolate, a cup of cocoa was always available, even on watch.

Noel was involved in three convoys, during which his main role was to coordinate the anti-aircraft guns. “On each side of the ship there were two batteries of anti-aircraft guns and the director was controlled from the bridge. The gunnery officer, who was the key, fed information into the director and the director fed that into the AA guns. As gun layer I was manoeuvring the director around and relaying the settings of the gun. The purpose of it was to control, on any particular side of the ship all those AA guns as one.” He remembers shots being fired off at the Blohm and Voss flying boats, though not with any real hope of shooting them down since they always flew out of range.

After each return convoy, HMS *Trinidad* would return to Scapa Flow for fresh provisions and to refuel and re-ammunition. This would be followed by two weeks of “Black Patrol” between the Orkneys and Iceland, designed to try and contain the German battleship *Tirpitz* and pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer* at Trondheim in Norway. Both posed a serious threat to the convoys⁵¹. The men carrying out these patrols found them fairly tedious.

“It was just a matter of back, forwards, backwards and forwards and then you’d come in to refuel and that sort of thing.” These patrols were also at reduced speed; it meant the ship rolled more than usual making life for those on board fairly uncomfortable.

Sometimes the *Trinidad* also acted as an escort for minelayers since there were extensive minefields in the patrol area.

Trinidad’s last voyage – and last convoy duty – began in late March 1942. It began in the usual way: assembling the convoy off Iceland before being spotted by German reconnaissance aircraft several days out.

Then, on March 29, four German destroyers intercepted the convoy’s British escort. It was a freezing day of snowstorms, bringing frequent whiteout conditions. As the German destroyers closed in, *Trinidad* fired torpedoes at one of these destroyers. Two of the torpedoes failed to leave the tube due to ice but the destroyer was sunk. *Trinidad* paid a price for this encounter though, being seriously damaged by a torpedo going into one of the engine rooms⁵². It was later found that *Trinidad* had torpedoed herself. This was ‘owing to the effect of intense cold on the oils in the torpedo’s motor and gyroscope⁵³’.

Trinidad, moving slowly and with a heavy list, managed to limp into Murmansk to be patched up on 30 March. It was a huge relief to its crew to reach dry dock. “If the Germans had known [of the *Trinidad*’s damaged status] they could have come in and wiped us off, no problem.”

⁵¹ *Engage the Enemy More Closely* by Correlli Barnett, p. 696.

⁵² [The torpedo] hit the ship on port side forward of Bridge structure. Forward Boiler Room flooded with oil fuel which ignited causing further major damage ... April 7th Docked for repair during which 32 bodies were recovered..’ From Naval History website, *SERVICE HISTORIES of ROYAL NAVY WARSHIPS in WORLD WAR 2* by Lt Cdr Geoffrey B Mason RN (Rtd) (c) 2004, *HMS TRINIDAD - Colony-type Light Cruiser including Convoy Escort Movements*, <http://www.naval-history.net/xGM-Chrono-06CL-Trinidad.htm> Noel says the dead were buried in Murmansk.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 703. Info for this paragraph is from this source. Noel says the torpedoes were set at a range and, once achieved, were set to go around in a circle. “We ran into the circle of it ... Years afterwards when we mentioned that we were on the *Trinidad* we used to get a bit of ragging about ‘the cruiser that sank itself.’”

While some accounts suggest a violent storm had scattered the convoy ahead of this action⁵⁴, Noel recalls the order to scatter was made after radar had picked up the approaching German destroyers. In whiteout conditions, radar gave *Trinidad* and two accompanying destroyers a real tactical advantage. Noel recollects two other German destroyers were also seriously damaged in the course of the close fought action⁵⁵. *Trinidad* was patched up with concrete in dry dock at Murmansk, after having been expertly camouflaged by the Russians to hide her presence.

“It was really unbelievable when we saw just what size a gash it was. I had estimated sixty foot by sixty foot – you could drive a London bus through it. When you looked at it you thought ‘how the heck did we get here to survive that lot’.⁵⁶”

Noel says “a small army” of Russian dockyard workers descended on the ship to do the repair work, many of them women. Each was armed with a rifle and none were prepared to enter into conversation. Security was very tight. The dock area was overlooked by a landscape of barren hills. The bleak atmosphere was not alleviated by having to subsist off reindeer meat and seagulls⁵⁷ supplied by the Russians, since the refrigeration facilities were out of action.

Once repaired, destroyers were arranged to act as escort for *Trinidad*⁵⁸. Noel says the Russians had promised 24 hours of air cover, but in reality this evaporated as soon as they got outside the harbour.

“Of course the German dive bombers came over and just blew the patch off!” Soon the decision was made to abandon ship. The men lined up across the quarterdeck as the destroyer escorts came alongside, one after the other, to take them off. “We were very lucky that the sea was calm⁵⁹.”

After the evacuation was over, *Trinidad* was sunk on 15 May with torpedoes fired from one of the destroyers, (HMS *Matchless*).

Travelling at high speed, the destroyers were then met several days later by a large Home Fleet taskforce.

Eventually they arrived back at Greenock and were sent on survivor’s leave. It was surely leave well-earned after five months on Arctic convoys. “At the time [I thought] ‘thank goodness we’ve got rid of that lot!’⁶⁰”

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 702. The book states this convoy, PQ13, ran into a violent storm on 24 March so that by 27 March ‘not one merchantman remained within sight of the escort.’ Next day, the convoy lay scattered along 150 miles of sea south of Bear Island.

⁵⁵ Noel says one of these damaged destroyers also sank while the other made it back to base but “its future as a fighting unit was gone”.

⁵⁶ He remains full of admiration for the work done by the damage control parties who shored up the damaged areas of the ship so they were able to make it through to dry dock.

⁵⁷ In fact the seagulls proved too salty but the Navy cooks made a reasonable reindeer stew.

⁵⁸ ‘May 13th Sailed for UK escorted by HM Destroyers FORESIGHT, FORESTER, MATCHLESS and SOMALI ... May 14th Hit by several bombs in forward structure which wrecked repair work and caused an outbreak of several fires ... May 15th Survivors rescued by H M Destroyers MATCHLESS, FORESIGHT and FORESTER. Hulk sunk by three torpedoes from HMS MATCHLESS.’ From Naval History website, *SERVICE HISTORIES of ROYAL NAVY WARSHIPS in WORLD WAR 2* by Lt Cdr Geoffrey B Mason RN (Rtd) (c) 2004, *HMS TRINIDAD - Colony-type Light Cruiser including Convoy Escort Movements*, <http://www.naval-history.net/xGM-Chrono-06CL-Trinidad.htm>

⁵⁹ Anyone who had fallen into the sea would not have survived long. Noel says a doctor told him anyone who entered the water would have been dead within two minutes.

⁶⁰ Noel says he later heard there had been plans to publicise the *Trinidad*’s story as an important naval engagement, had she made it back to the UK. As it was, it only rated a mention. He also heard the ship would have gone to the US for a refit since UK dockyard facilities were under extreme pressure by then.

Mysterious mission aboard HMS *Broke*

Once back in London, Noel stayed with the aunt of one of his RNVR friends, Arthur Williams⁶¹. Noel hadn't had time to write but received a warm welcome at her home just outside London.

The very next day his friend Arthur arrived. "He'd just lost a ship too⁶² – he was on a sloop, which is between a destroyer and a cruiser – and he was on survivor's leave too!" In retrospect, Noel realises it must have been hard for Arthur's aunt having them suddenly turn up, given rationing was in place. (While they had ration cards to take with them, Noel still thinks she did a fantastic job under the circumstances).

Having used his survivor's leave, Noel then returned once more to HMS *Drake*. For the following six months, he resumed something of his former life off the pier head, this time aboard a former pleasure tripper being used to take ratings to the AA Gunnery School to the port on the end of the breakwater for practical AA training. The pleasure boat was crewed by four New Zealanders with an RNR chief as skipper and an RNR chief in the engine room. As had been the case with the ferry in the previous year, the crew slept on board and were self-catering.

Finally in October, he received his next draft chit and railway warrant, this time to travel to Liverpool to report to HMS *Broke*, a 1920s era destroyer⁶³. Again, his shipboard job would be as gun layer⁶⁴. On arrival, Noel found the *Broke* was in dry dock with most of the crew on leave. Unusual modifications were being carried out by the dockyard staff.

"On the bow there was a great big steel arm coming out and also they were putting steel plate round the fo'c'sle, round the guardrails with slots in them⁶⁵. Talking to one of the dockyard workers, he said 'that arm, we've just filled in behind that with concrete.'"

By the time the crew came back off leave and *Broke* put to sea, the rumour mill was in top gear. As yet, their destination was unknown. Many on board wondered if they were about to be engaged in a similar operation to the raid that had taken place at the port of St Nazaire in German occupied France in late March that year⁶⁶.

With the approach of nightfall⁶⁷, they entered Belfast harbour where they were soon met by truckloads of American Army personnel who came on board and inspected the mess decks before disappearing again in their trucks. "This had us really guessing."

⁶¹ Arthur was one of the former schoolmates who had persuaded Noel to join the RNVR back in New Zealand.

⁶² In the Irish Sea.

⁶³ The build of this destroyer was completed on 20 January 1925. From Naval History website. *SERVICE HISTORIES of ROYAL NAVY WARSHIPS in WORLD WAR 2* by Lt Cdr Geoffrey B Mason RN (Rtd) (c) 2004, *HMS BROKE (D 83) - Shakespeare-class Flotilla Leader including Convoy Escort Movements*, http://www.naval-history.net/xGM-Chrono-10DD-01Shakes-HMS_Broke.htm

⁶⁴ This time he would be on a 4.7 inch surface gun.

⁶⁵ He recalls that steel plates were also being welded to the deck. "Also four trench mortars arrived and were welded to the deck on the fo'c'sle."

⁶⁶ 'Packed with tons of high explosives a destroyer was rammed into the gates of the only dry dock capable of servicing the German battleship *Tirpitz*. Such was the damage that the dry dock was rendered unusable for the remainder of the war'. Based on an article by James Paul. From Combined Operations Command website, *OPERATION CHARIOT ~ ST. NAZAIRE - 28th MAR 1942*, <http://www.combinedops.com/St%20Nazaire.htm>

⁶⁷ Noel says the crew had earlier been ordered to put reflective tape and paint on stanchions on the upper deck to make it easier for anyone trying to find their way along the deck at night.

By dawn they put back to sea to meet a merchant convoy going south, escorting them through the Bay of Biscay before breaking off to enter the harbour at Gibraltar. The men continued to speculate on where they would head next.

When they put to sea again it was to enter the Mediterranean to join another convoy, this time a large convoy of merchant and troop ships. Before too long they were ordered alongside one of the troop ships. Another destroyer, HMS *Malcolm*, joined them. The Americans they had seen at Belfast then came aboard, now identified as rangers⁶⁸.

“We [then] cast off and left the convoy.”

Soon afterwards they were finally told where they were headed: the port of Algiers. “The skipper came on the loud hailer and said ‘we are now proceeding to ram the boom defences at Algiers harbour and [we’re going to] put our passengers [ashore]. It is their job to secure the port.”

The goal was to prevent French forces scuttling ships and sabotaging the dock⁶⁹. Noel says the crew received the news calmly enough. The attitude was “let’s get on with it”. Forward and aft gun crews were issued with Tommy guns and told how to use them, in case of direct attack from the shore.

In the dark pre-dawn, the destroyers approached the harbour entrance and immediately came under fire from coastal defences. *Malcolm* soon sustained serious damage and was forced to withdraw⁷⁰ but the decision was made for *Broke* to proceed.

As dawn broke, the ship rammed through the boom at high speed and proceeded to get alongside the wharf and disembark the rangers⁷¹. Noel remembers looking up and seeing something rare: they were flying both their own White Ensign as well as the Stars and Stripes.

They stayed alongside to provide support for the rangers, but soon came under sniper fire from surrounding warehouse rooftops. Noel, at his action station on the upper deck by the after 4.7 gun, was shot in his right foot and then assisted to the wardroom, by now a casualty station. All the settees were already occupied by wounded men so he was laid down on the wardroom deck.

There had been some heavy explosions heard in the harbour. Afterwards, Noel found out these were buildings being destroyed to enable the coastal defences to get a bearing on the *Broke*. The ship was coming under heavy shell attack by the time the decision was taken to depart at high speed⁷².

Down in the wardroom, the doctor was looking at Noel’s wound when a shell came in and exploded.

“That’s when I got wounded and the doctor, but I don’t think any others in there survived⁷³ ... Water started to come in too and I said to the doc ‘it’s time for us to go’. I pushed him up the ladder [to] the upper deck ... and then pulled myself up.”

There they were forced to take shelter from small arm’s fire peppering the ship as she went through the harbour entrance. By this time Noel was lying flat on the deck, immobilised by his wounds.

⁶⁸ Noel says 150 came aboard the *Broke* and another 150 aboard the *Malcolm*.

⁶⁹ *Engage the Enemy More Closely* by Correlli Barnett, p. 564.

⁷⁰ ‘At the third approach heavy shells smashed into the *Malcolm*, forcing her to limp away.’ Ibid, p. 564.

⁷¹ ‘The soldiers swiftly occupied the power station and the oil storage depot.’ Ibid, p. 564.

⁷² The *Broke* endured four hours before putting to sea. ‘But on her way out she was hit so heavily that she sank next day under tow.’ Ibid, p. 564.

⁷³ Noel believes they survived because he was on the deck and the doctor was bending over him at the time.

The doctor had been badly wounded in one arm. When Noel was later assessed he was found to have gunshot wounds in both legs and his right foot and left hand, along with compound fractures in his hand.

Noel spent several days on a hospital ship in the harbour before being transferred to a shore hospital which had been taken over by a British medical unit. He remembers getting taken off the *Broke* by way of a crane from a destroyer that came alongside. He was put on a stretcher that wrapped around him, hooked onto the crane and swung across.

From the shore hospital, he was transferred by hospital ship down the coast to Oran and an American evacuation hospital, set up in tents but well-supplied. After a week there, he was shifted again to a former holiday home overlooking the sea. The Americans had converted a number of these homes to accommodate patients⁷⁴.

It must have been of some consolation to Noel during all of this to know the assault on Algiers had been a success, clinched with air cover from the carriers *Victorious*, *Formidable*, *Argus* and *Avenger* and troop reinforcements⁷⁵.

Once shrapnel had been removed from one of Noel's legs, he fairly quickly began to regain his mobility. Eventually he was put on board a hospital ship bound for the UK. His uniform had been cut off him when he was wounded, so the Americans fitted him out for the trip as an American GI, "right down to boots".

On arrival at the naval hospital outside Bristol⁷⁶, no-one was sure what to make of this Kiwi dressed as a GI. "The rumours started. 'He's one of those Special Service guys...'" He soon set the record straight.

After further assessment and treatment⁷⁷, Noel was classified fit for shore service only and, in December 1943, was sent back to HMS *Drake*.

PUNS, home to NZ

Once he'd entered the barracks and been kitted out, Noel reported to the regulating officer who initially did not believe he was ex-HMS *Broke*, since it had been just over 12 months since the landing at Algiers.

His shore service draft was to Kings Tamerton School on the outskirts of Plymouth. Noel says the Admiralty had taken over the school and converted it as accommodation for motor mechanics who would be working on landing craft for the coming invasion of Europe⁷⁸. The mechanics were collected from the school each morning, delivered to their place of instruction and then returned to Kings Tamerton at the end of the day.

During his time on the staff there, Noel met his future wife, Iris Houghton. He had been on leave in London when he had met up with a friend from New Zealand, who then introduced Noel to his girlfriend's cousin – Iris. They got along well and caught up after that whenever Noel had weekend leave. Iris had been working as a shorthand typist for one of the government ministries during the war.

The couple soon decided to marry. It was getting close to the Normandy landings by this stage and virtually all leave had been cancelled. Noel initially applied to his

⁷⁴ "These mansions were really deluxe buildings evidently belonging to very well off European people."

⁷⁵ *Engage the Enemy More Closely* by Correlli Barnett, p. 564.

⁷⁶ RN Hospital Barrow Gurney.

⁷⁷ This was mostly physiotherapy.

⁷⁸ The Normandy landings commenced on 6 June 1944. Naval History website, *CAMPAIGN SUMMARIES OF WORLD WAR 2, NORMANDY LANDINGS, Operation "OVERLORD" 6th June 1944*, <http://www.naval-history.net/WW2CampaignsNormandy.htm>

commander at Kings Tamerton for leave, who then referred it onto *Drake*. He was granted 24 hours leave. Once back at Kings Tamerton, Noel and his commander agreed that 24 hours was not really long enough to get to London, get married and get back again. Instead he issued Noel with a seven day leave pass.

“We got married [in Ilford] and spent the honeymoon in Bournemouth down on the South Coast. At that time it was very evident that the second front was coming up. The countryside was chock a block full of tanks and Army lorries and the waterfront had a fair smattering of landing craft. So it was quite an exciting time. I did get the marriage in and the honeymoon.”

After the Normandy landings, the number of men accommodated at Kings Tamerton dropped considerably. Not long after this Noel remembers receiving a call to report before a medical board at *Drake*. There he was advised he was now classified as ‘PUNS’ – permanently unfit for naval service – and was sent to the regulating office where he was to receive a rail ticket to go home.

“When I went to the regulating office, they said ‘where do you want your rail ticket made out to?’ and I said ‘Christchurch’ and they ‘oh yeah, Christchurch’ and I said ‘no, Christchurch, *New Zealand*’.”

Clearly a rail ticket wasn’t going to do it, so Noel was sent to New Zealand House to await further instructions. Iris arranged to see the New Zealand High Commissioner William Joseph Jordan to ensure she could return with Noel. “He said, ‘we haven’t had to do this yet, my dear, sending wives home’. He said, ‘you go home and back a bag just in case. It might not be for two or three weeks or so’.”

Noel had been advised he would be departing from Liverpool and before too long Iris was given clearance to join him. They travelled to New Zealand aboard RMS *Rangitiki*⁷⁹. An uneventful passage saw them arrive safely in Wellington, where they were issued with leave passes and travel warrants.

After the expiry of his leave, Noel reported back to HMNZS *Philomel*, then being used as a training base at Devonport in Auckland⁸⁰, and was admitted to the base hospital for assessment and confirmation of his PUNS status before being discharged on 28 July 1945.

Post-war

Iris was an only child, so once the war was over her parents followed Noel and Iris out, under an assisted immigration scheme that had come into operation in July 1947⁸¹. Harold and Lily Houghton also settled in Christchurch.

A flat in Brighton is where Noel and Iris first lived after arriving in Christchurch. They soon started planning for a home of their own. Rehabilitation loans were available at reasonable rates so Noel got in contact with a builder who had some sections. The couple went ahead, bought a section and had a house built in Montana Avenue, Ilam.

⁷⁹ Both the *Rangitiki* and the *Rangitata* served as troopships during the war, carrying up to 2600 soldiers at a time. ‘Rangitiki was the first of the three famous ‘Rangi-Boats’ ordered by the New Zealand Shipping Company (NZSCo) on 16 August 1927 from the John Brown & Co., Ltd. shipyard at Clydebank, Scotland. She was launched on 29 August 1928.’ From *RMS RANGITIKI – A brief history*, from Richard Overall’s website dedicated to the Rangitiki, <http://www.rms-rangitiki.com/History.htm>

⁸⁰ *HMS Philomel - NZ's first warship*, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/hms-philomel> (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 18-Aug-2014.

⁸¹ *Peopling New Zealand*, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/assisted-immigration/administration> (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 19-Aug-2014.

They then started their family, raising three children: Christine, now living in Wellington; David, who lives in Christchurch; and Barry, who resides in Wellington.

Noel had the same view as many returning veterans: he felt starting a new life with a wife and family would be the best way to put the war behind him.

On returning from the war, Noel had resumed his former position with Ashby Bergh and Company Limited, feeling pleased to have left the Navy behind.

However, he was no longer content with just a retail assistant's role.

"I wanted to get into management ... so I did a [three-year] course at the Institute of Management at Technical College."

After Ashby Bergh's Noel got a job as sales manager for Max Mills Ltd, which was a refrigeration engineering firm. "They had the Prestcold - McAlpine - franchise. They opened a shop in Christchurch and employed me as retail manager."

From there he went to G.U.S. Wholesalers [Grocers United Stores]⁸² as hardware manager and subsequently formed a hardware group, based on experience he had gained through working with the cooperatives model. "I got permission from the board of directors to proceed ... [It] was called Value Rite Hardware." This group grew to cover most of the South Island, before expanding into the North Island.

"Mitre 10 then got interested in it ... In Auckland there was another group. The outcome was Mitre 10 took over Value Rite and amalgamated with the one in Auckland."

Noel remained in hardware store management with GUS Wholesalers through to his retirement.

He and Iris enjoyed a long married life together. Iris passed away 12 years' ago and Noel now lives next door to his son, David, in Merivale, Christchurch.

Over the years, Veterans Affairs⁸³ has been a welcome source of support for Noel.

"They pay for my toenails to be cut ... and they pay for my windows to be cleaned – they're fantastic. They ring up now and again and say 'how are you going? Anything else you want done?' ... And I get a pension from the Navy which helps quite considerably."

For many years, Noel was a member of the RNVR Veterans Associations, which later combined to become the Naval Associations Combined Committee (NACC). Its Board of Trustees coordinates activities for its members such as ANZAC Day and it also organised arrangements for the Naval Memorial drinking fountain to be installed at the Bridge of Remembrance. Leftover funds from this project have gone into grants to support sea cadet training.

Rededication services have been held there in past years, as close as possible to the anniversary of the sinking of the Neptune. For the past few years, since the Christchurch earthquakes, this has taken place at *Pegasus*, the Christchurch RNVR headquarters. "We parade every ANZAC Day at *Pegasus* too and read the names [of those lost on the *Neptune*] off the honours board."

In 2003, Noel received a Christchurch Civic Award in recognition of his services to Christchurch naval and community organisations⁸⁴.

⁸² GUS launched SuperValue in 1964. See *SuperValue Historical Photos*, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.467109166753979.1073741829.402719176526312&type=1>

⁸³ Veterans Affairs is part of the New Zealand Defence Force, see their website: <https://www.govt.nz/organisations/veterans-affairs-new-zealand/>

⁸⁴ Source: www.scoop.co.nz/stories/AK0312/S00033.htm

He regards today's troubled globe as still being at war with itself in many ways. Having lived through a world war, he understands another is always possible. Only next time its impact would be even greater.

Looking back, he sees little glamour in war and concludes that the only good to come out of the Second World War for him was meeting his wife.

Noel's main wish is for such a conflict never to happen again.

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PHOTOS – NOEL SMITH

I wish to acknowledge and thank Noel for giving permission to include these photos with his biography.



NOEL AND IRIS ON THEIR WEDDING DAY, 1945



THE MEDAL OF USHAKOV⁸⁵: RECEIVED IN RECOGNITION OF SERVICE WITH ALLIED FORCES ON ARCTIC CONVOYS

⁸⁵ 'In recognition of service during the Arctic Convoys of WW2, qualifying veterans of the Arctic Convoys resident in New Zealand were awarded this decoration at a ceremony at the Russian Embassy Wellington on Friday 14 September 2012.' Russian Convoy Club of New Zealand, New Zealand Veterans of the Arctic Convoys 1941-1945, Photo Album, <http://www.russianconvoyclub.org.nz/Photo%20Album.htm>