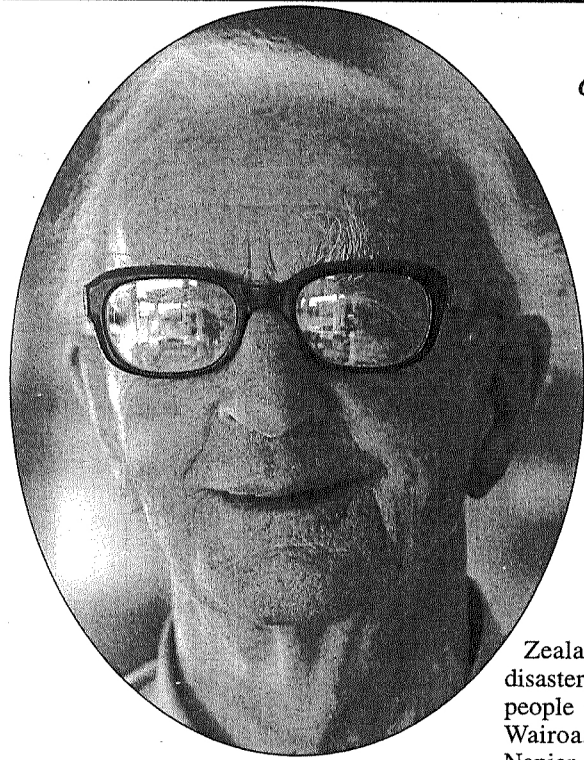


Our kind of people



They also serve who only stand and watch – Ray Griffiths spent 15 months during World War II on a remote coral atoll with other Kiwis, keeping a look-out for enemies who might try to disrupt the vital cable link from the South Pacific to the rest of the world...

Ray served his country on a remote coral atoll

by Sue Hawkins

Ray Griffiths' secondary schooling in New Zealand got off to a shaky start. It was his first day at Napier Boys' High School and the date was February 3.

The entire school had been gathered in the new assembly hall earlier that morning, but the boys were back in their classrooms at 10.46am. The year was 1931 and a mere 46.3 seconds later disaster struck.

An earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter Scale with an epicentre 15.2 km north of Napier hit, resulting in New

Zealand's greatest natural disaster. The death toll was 258 people in Napier, Hastings and Wairoa, with 162 deaths in Napier.

At Napier Boys' the new assembly hall collapsed like a pack of cards.

The main quake lasted two and a half minutes and there were about 150 aftershocks in the next 12 hours.

Within minutes fires spread through the city of Napier – mostly starting in chemist shops where Bunsen burners were operated close to flammable materials.

Young Ray was in a classroom with room teacher Rupert Worker and, along with other students, fled from the room.

"We grabbed our bikes and took off."

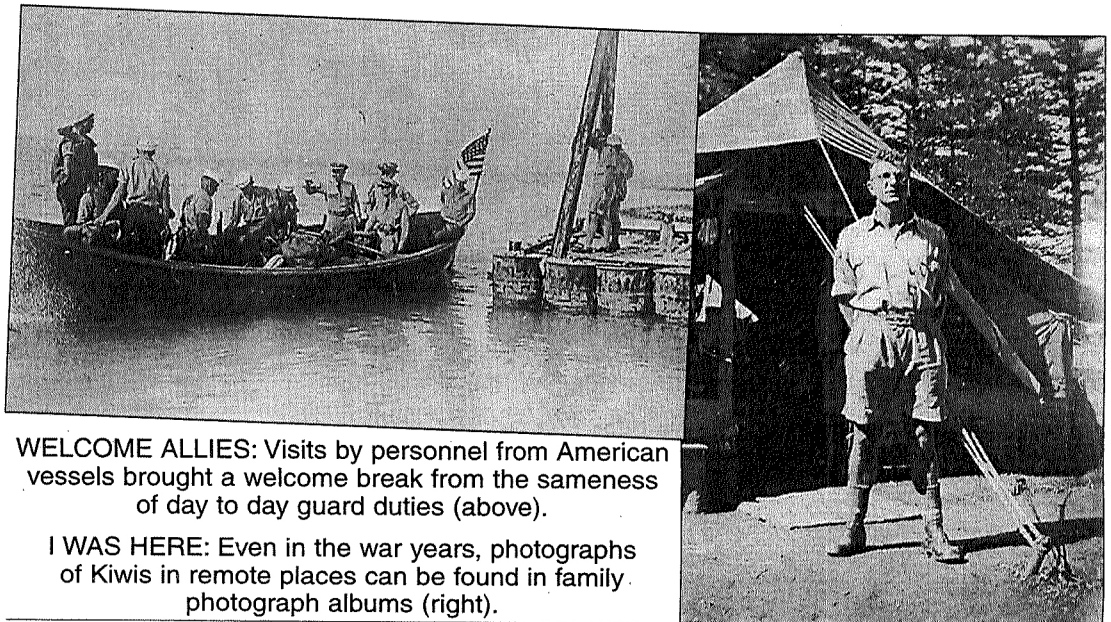
Damaged buildings blocked his usual route home along Emerson St and the fires were already starting.

When he got home to Shakespeare Rd the family house was still standing, but minus the chimney.

Like other Napier people, as the after shocks continued and the stability of housing was threatened, the Griffiths family took off to sleep on the beach.

The Navy was on hand with HMS Veronica moored at West Quay.

The ship's radio alerted the outside world to the disaster and within 24 hours another two ships, Dunedin and Diomedes, arrived bringing medical staff and equipment and supplies for rescue work and



WELCOME ALLIES: Visits by personnel from American vessels brought a welcome break from the sameness of day to day guard duties (above).

I WAS HERE: Even in the war years, photographs of Kiwis in remote places can be found in family photograph albums (right).

survival.

Palmerston North became the main "refugee" centre as hundreds of people – mainly the elderly or mothers and children – were evacuated there.

Ray was supposed to have attended Palmerston North Boys' High while living there.

"I went a couple of times and then I didn't go back."

They returned to Napier after Easter.

Many classes at Napier Boys' were held in marquees while damaged classrooms were repaired. Only the assembly hall collapsed completely.

Today Ray says the earthquake and its aftermath may have been devastating for adults, but was more of an adventure for the schoolboys of the day.

Despite the shaky start, he made good friends at Napier Boys' – one fact who was to influence his wife Eunice and Ray to make Taupo their retirement home 22 years

ago.

He was John Greenfield, and the two men shared a love of fly-fishing.

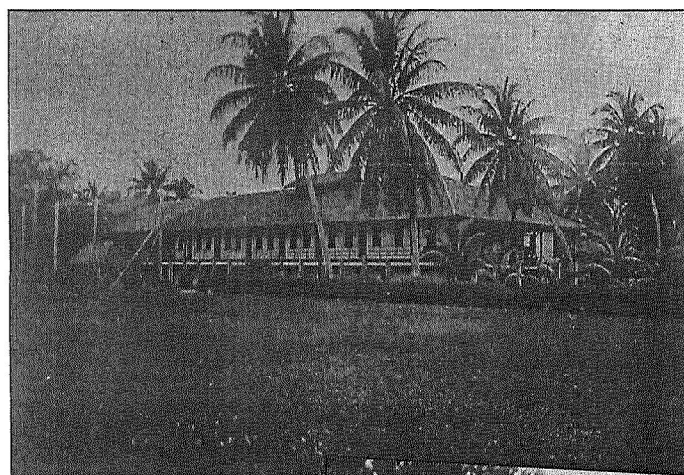
John also persuaded Ray to take on the role of secretary at the Taupo District Museum and Art Society.

Ray had come to New Zealand as a six-year-old in 1923 when his parents decided New Zealand offered a better life than England.

His most vivid memories of the long sea voyage were the fairly primitive conditions in third class and the vivid sunsets. "Very similar to those we have here in Taupo."

After secondary school, the depression years meant he faced a tough time getting work.

While he landed a job as a clerk in an insurance company, he had tried joining the Navy. But poor eyesight was to prove a bar and also stopped him joining the newly-formed New Zealand Air Force, even in any role outside of flying.



CABLE STATION: The all-important cable station (left) which was run by Australians and guarded by New Zealanders during World War II.

KEEPING WATCH: Lookout posts up coconut palms were manned on a weekly basis as the men watched out for any signs of enemy ships.



After World War II broke out, he volunteered when second echelon was about to head overseas, but again his eyesight let him down

Ray finally got an opportunity to sign up with the Territorials, but that involved another eyesight test.

"By that time, I had memorised the chart so I got a grade one ranking with grade three eyesight."

Fifteen months of his World War II service was spent on the remote Fanning Island.

The coral atoll was a vital communication link where cable ran from Australia and New Zealand to Fiji and Fanning Island and on to Hawaii.

In World War I the cable had been cut by a German raider which then tried dragging it away, but it snagged on the reef. Australia operated the cable station, and it was feared another attempt would be made to sabotage the link.

What was to have been a six-month posting to Fanning, turned into a 15-month stint when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour and the war entered a new phase.

The coral island with its lagoon and reef was mainly flat with hundreds of coconut palm trees.

Lookout posts were up tall palm trees and also an old ship's mast provided the vantage point for a third.

"We had one week on and one week off, which was spent back at camp."

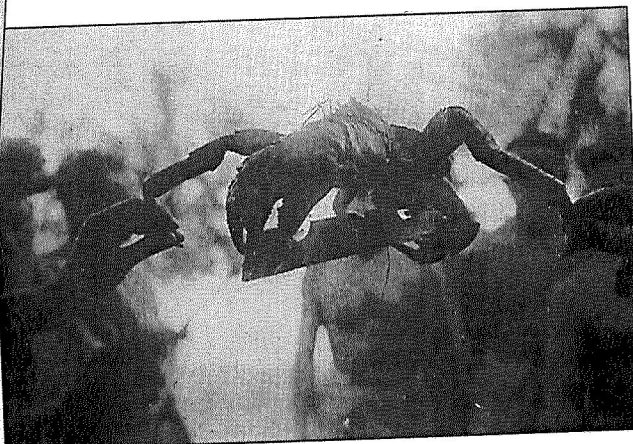
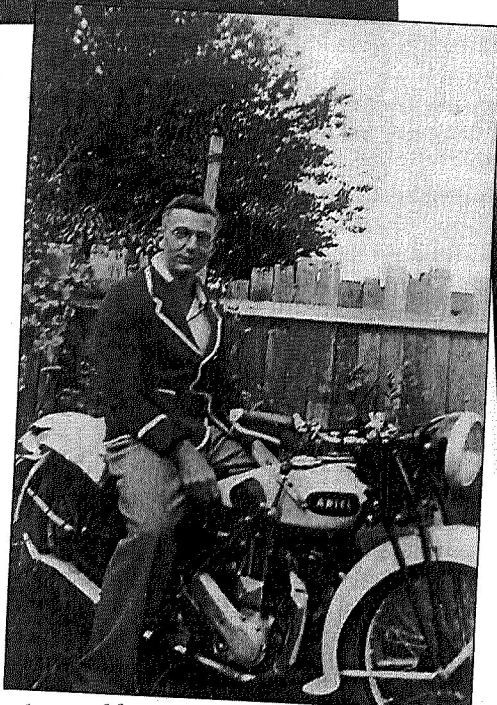
Long hours were spent reading or fishing in the lagoon – catches providing the only fresh food other, than coconut milk, that the guards were to get.

The odd visit by Catalina flying boats, and once even an American destroyer, served as welcome distractions. There was never to be any sign of the Japanese in those 15 months

Sending messages back home was limited to telegrams or cables which were tapped out in Morse code.

But a highly successful brief system left even today's text messaging for dead. A list of messages could be looked over, the number alongside each one would then be selected and tapped out.

Ray remembers selecting number 25, which ensured "Happy Birthday Mum" arrived at home for his mother's special day.



PERILOUS TIMES: Not all danger came from possible arrival of enemy shipping – coconut crabs (above) could make collecting coconuts a dangerous occupation.

TOP WHEELS: Every young man's dream is to have his own wheels (left).

"You couldn't select the actual words which went into the message, just the number."

It was also the way he was to send congratulations to his friends June and John Greenfield when they married.

His return to New Zealand and the post war years were to bring big changes. First there was his marriage to Eunice, who had been introduced to him by her sister.

"She had six sisters and as there was still rationing, their combined rations for sugar and eggs enabled them to make a wedding cake."

Ray attended university to pass his accountancy examinations and, after shifting to Auckland and living at Takapuna, he was able to build a boat for sailing in the harbour.

In the days before the Auckland Harbour Bridge was built he caught the daily ferry across to the city for work – a journey he says on which many people made friends.

The Griffiths have enjoyed their retirement years in Taupo, persuaded to come through the friendship with the Greenfields.

There was also the fishing which had already proved a pull over the years for Ray. He, John and other friends had an informal fishing circle and would spend many happy hours casting in rivers and lakes in the region.

"I'm the only one left these days."

The Griffiths' garden shows the signs they are keen gardeners.

The most impressive sight though is the kowhai tree standing sentinel at the garden gate. It is full of tuis – a good 20 of them chirping away – keeping a friendly guard on the man who once did that for adopted nation.