

HMS MONOWAI. ARMED MERCHANT CRUISER.. 1940 – 1943

By Jim Calder.

The following is Jim's own account in his own words and contains personal reminiscences and observations.

Forgotten in the Naval History of NZ by the Navy, because of the Glamour accorded to Achilles and Leander, by Admiralty and NZ navy and the NZ Govt. of the time, all would have been in desperate straights without her and the 97% NZ crew, not withstanding the other ships.

HMS MONOWAI Redesignated HMNZS on 1/10/1942.

The MONOWAI was built as the RMS RASMAK. For the P&O Coy.

Laid down after WW1 at the Harland & Wolff yard on the Clyde

Construction ceased in 1922 due to the world depression.

Construction resumed later in the 1920's, when the vessel was moved to the H & W yard in Belfast, Nth Ireland for completion. Approx 13000 tons.

Twin Screw, Quod Recip. Cruising 16 knots, Top Speed 18 knots. 98 revs.

After WW1 the Admiralty decided to subsidize the building of selected ships so that in the event of hostilities they could be modified and used as Armed Merchant Cruisers. These ships had special strengthening to accommodate armament and its associated paraphernalia. Rasmak was one of these.

Rasmak was used by the P&O Coy, on the England to India route for a number of years then transferred to the Union Steam Ship Coy. [which was a subsidiary of P & O] and renamed Monowai for use on the Australia- NZ- America route.

At the outbreak of WW2 she was requisitioned by Admiralty and converted to an Armed Merchant Cruiser in the Admiralty Dockyard at Devonport Auckland.

Equipped with 6 inch guns etc. and given extra floatation by incorporating many 44 gal. Drums to keep her afloat during action.

At here commissioning in August 1940 Princess Te Puia presented the Captain with a Maori Cloak. Similar to the one presented to the HMS New Zealand for protection during action. This cloak was accompanied by Small Model Maori Canoe. She also gave the ship a Motto Waikato Taniwharau.

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DOB 16 July 1922. Sydenham, Christchurch.

West Christchurch District High School. Primary and Intermediate.

Christchurch Technical College.

Employed by NZ Farmers Coop. Junior Clerk.

Service Joined RNVR NZ Div Royal Navy May 1939. Age 16 yr. And mths.

Called up for sea training late 1939. Ordinary seaman {P}

Drafted to Navy Office Lyttelton. As Ord Smn [T]. Duties as Ord Smn messenger and General Dogs Body. Assnt on Relief Inspection Vessel.

P- Provisional. T- Trained.

Manning of HMS MONOWAI.

July 1939 Drafted to RNVR HQ ChCh for training and Ship Company Monowai. Made Able Seaman {P}. Fully kitted out for sea draft. Training carried out by CPO E. Blakiston Ch GM.

On the 29th Aug 1940 the Otago draft came up on the Dn-Ch Express and was joined by the ChCh draft and boarded the ferry to Wellington where we were joined by the Wn. draft and so to Auckland. We marched to Admiralty steps, then across the harbour to Philomal, to meet up with the Rockies ex Achilles. A meal in the Harbour Board shed and so to the commissioning. 30th Aug. 1940.

The HMS Monowai was manned by RN, RNR, RNVR and T124s.

The RN compliment, were Capt McKlintock, Commdr Lewis, Gunner Marjo {spelling may be astray} MAA Hunter, CPO Fordyce, CGM and a number of regular NZD ABs etc.

The RNR consisted of Upper deck, Engineers, Electricians, Paymasters, Petty Officers and below from the Naval Reserve. Those who had served their time, 12 yrs etc. and had been placed on the RN reserve. Incidentally these were the actual backbone of the ships company which ultimately made us into an efficient fighting unit.

There were a number of ratings who had been given a Kings Pardon, after I think desertion, before the War. This may not be factual but I remember. Bill Nant, Shadie Lane, Tanky Tiller. as those who were said to be in this category but I know there are others who may have been in this group.

RNVR from the four divisions.

After commissioning we were occupied cleaning up all the gash and rubbish left by the dock yard mateys. As the crew were in the main very green there was a lot of training to catch up, so we were kept very busy. Part of ship was allocated along with Action stations, cruising stations, and watches, both two and three.

Extensive gun drills on the 8 x Mk7 6 inch guns took place, to make sure we knew which end to load. These guns had a max range of 14000 yds and were made in 1900, 1901, having, we were to learn, been used in the Boer war and WW1, very primitive, lanyard fired and open telescopic sights.

My part of ship was forecastle, Action Station rangefinder trainer on the main finder, Cruising rangetaker of the watch, starboard/red watch.

The ships rangetaker was Ldg smn D. Holmstrom a 3 badge qualified rangetaker who gave me extensive instruction on the operation of the rangefinder so that I could operate efficiently, on watch. The main rangefinder was a WW1 model, very simple of operation and definition. There was a further rangefinder, of even greater vintage aft as a back up and AA use. As all communication from rangefinder to transmitting station and the guns was by voice pipe [2 inch brass tube] I had to wear a hat like a SW helmet with a mouth pipe, whilst at action stations. "Allie same Boy Cornwall" WW1. No telephones for us intrepid sailors who were about to be sacrificed in the defence of the cause. Sometime later I was given further instruction in all the gun control facilities, TS and the other Nelsonian controls, then after a brief examination by guns Lt Com Bourke, Marjo and Coy and told the I was now an acting temp. probationary CR3.

No wonder the Rawlpindi with like armament went to its inevitable fate, as it had the same armament etc "It did not stand a show".

Our additional armament consisted of 2 x 3 inch HA of 1917 vintage, plus 2 x twin Lewis guns mounted either side of the bridge, to ward off dive bombers.

At the time I cannot remember any miss apprehension about our giving a good account of ourselves, if called upon.

Sea trials were carried out by the Dockyard staff, in the Gulf. In the meantime we had ammunitioned ship.

Gunnery trials were carried out by the Dockyard and Kauri Point staff involved firing the guns, this being the first for the guns crews, it was a proper shambles shipwise, because the guns were trained, elevated and depressed to the max allowable and a shot fired in each position. Bits fell off all over the place, necessitating Dockyard repairs and mods., but they assisted the efficiency of the guns crews, no end. Of the gun crews, the layers and breech workers were all experienced NZD Reservists, the remainder Rockies. RNVRs. The trials completed we had a practice shoot with Achilles, who opened up on the big Admiralty target when, from the RF, we could only see the mast tops on the horizon. Monowai opened fire at 14000 yds and I cannot remember the result,

We then set off for Wellington to escort the Rangitira to Fiji with what remained of the Third Echelon and the beginnings of the fourth. It was Labour Weekend 1940 and it was the time when Lord Galway had to be directed to the Naval Guard, as the Senior Service, when he was striding to the Army Guard.

Of the officers I remember:-

Capt. McKlintock RN Very good and gained the confidence of the ships company by keeping us in the picture with information on the ships movements. Quite a stern disciplinarian but would always speak when he was about the ship. He came to us as Acting Capt. and when made full Capt was appointed elsewhere. Capt Deverall RAN was appointed to command. He had a different style more laid back but again could dish out the punishment.

Commander Lewis RN a real gentleman but endeavoured to run a tight ship with the inexperienced crew he had to deal with.

Lt Com L Bourke RNR Gunnery Officer and Officer in charge of the focsl division. Well liked by the crew for both his seamanship and speciality.

Surg. Lt Com McPhail RNVR Cauty Rockie. Kept his bedside manner. A good Surgeon and Doctor. Later appointed to Leander where he was very conspicuous after she was torpedoed in the same exemplary manner as he did after the gun accident on the Monowai. He was replaced by Surg. Lt. D. Symes who did not have the same manner as McPhail, as he came straight from Med School, a bit of a butcher with no rapport, conscious of his rank.

Lt. Howard RNVR Auck. Second Officer of focsl. A nice guy and well respected .

Lt. S. Hicks RNVR Well. Signals Officer. Not liked or trusted by the ORs. Nice to your face but?????

Lt. J. Allan RNVR. Otago Aft Division, asnt. Gunnery Officer. Well respected.

Lt. Watson RNR. Midship division.

Sub. Lt. Cassie. RNVR Well. Focsl. division, Officer Quarters P1 gun, wounded at P1 gun accident. ex Ldg Tel Wellington RNVR.

Lt. Edwards RNR. was the asnt. Nav. Off. at commissioning. Made Nav. Off. when the original was appointed on promotion. A proper bastard. Very pin prickly and nasty with it. Not liked by the ORs at all. He was remembered for the incident when he called Shadie Lane a "Disruptive Red Fed B" and Shadie stated a complaint to the Capt. Whilst many of us, who there at the time, had to appear at the "Table" to corroborate the charge, Shadie got a pier head jump to Leander, we were told later by MAA hunter, Edwards was suitably reprimanded. I understand after the war he went

back to the USS co., and was given a shore job, as he caused too much trouble on the ships.

I was in sleeping space 9. In Charge Ldg Smn Holmstrom, plus Don Fraser, Jim Howell, Jim Bolt, Jim Thurston, Eddie Stevens, Jan Forgie, "Guts" McCormack also known as "Shit Bag", Bill Nant, Maurie Fox and myself. As there were 12 to 14 to a space I have forgotten some.

Gunner Marjo RN short in stature but very loud of voice. Typical of his rank.

Others I have remembered are:-

Chief Gunners Mate D. Fordyce. Tough but just. Helped nurtured us Rockies from a rabble in to a respectable disciplined crew. He especially trained all those used for the two Royal Guards and jetty sentry duties. Gave us all hell at gun drills and on the old mk7 loader, which was also used for punishment.

Don Gibson PO Focsl. later promoted to CPO. A real good guy to the Rockies and taught us a lot from the seamanship point of view. Had some "Queer" ideas, that caused problems at times.

CPO Canty "Lugs" PTI. Relieved by APO J. Quinn. "Gigilo Joe".

MAA Hunter. Always ensured we had and got a fair go. I met later in England, I think it was at Pompy.

RPO "Digger" Duke. did his job to the letter but you knew were you stood.

PO Supply Maurice Lynch T124 Later CPO. Was on the Monowai as

Head Storeman when the ship was taken over by the Navy and volunteered to serve as T124. As far as I can remember apart from Maurie all the Supply and Secretariat functions were carried out by RNR Paymasters Lts&Sub Lts led by Lt Comm Craik RNR. They all came from the Pursers Branch.

The Engineers & Electricians were all RNR, ranging from the Scots Chief as a Commander {E}, down to Sub.Lts. They had their own Wardroom on the fan deck as they refused to be in the main Wardroom. In fact the Chief only attended they Main Wardroom when ordered by the President, Comm Lewis. I can only remember the Chief in Naval Uniform once, at the Newall visit. The space they used on the fan deck was the original Engineers quarters and it had a lift down to the Engine Room . Old shades of P&O Lascar crew.

They mainly went a shore in civvies.

The following incidents occurred during my time on the ship.

Refusal of the T124 Fireman to take the ship to sea after our first sea trials, because of salt water showers and lack of adequate stokehold ventilation.

Problem with firemen who did not return off leave, I think on New Years eve, seriously delaying the ships departure.

Royal Guards twice in Wellington. For Galway & Newall.

Dental duty with WW1 gear, pedal driven. The Dentist was Army and made it quit clear to all that he did not want to be in the Navy.

Trooping to Fiji, and cargo of Airforce Planes. Escorted Rangitera, Wahine and AU trooper Manoora

Trooping Tahiti- Noumea with Free French Troops. Tahitian volunteers??? who ultimately acquitted themselves with some glory in the desert. Replacement garrison to Fanning Island and visit to Xmas Island to pick up 2 RN officers, who had been surveying the island for possible military use. The Lieut Comm gave use a very interesting talk on the destruction and surrender of the French fleet at Oran, North

Africa. He had been the Intelligence Officer to the Admiral IC of the British Naval Force.

Delivery of Australian Garrison to Nauru and Ocean Islands. On our first visit we escorted 2 Norge ships to Nauru because the German Raider had sunk 2 freighters loading at the island. Then destroyed the Cantilevers used to load the Phosphate. We hung about in case the raider returned and the two ships were loaded. All this was necessary as the farmers in NZ were out of fertiliser and urgent supply was called for by the NZ Govt. All the old garrison had been relieved before the Japs came in to the war, and their reliefs became POW and many were executed.

On our second visit the Ldg Tel, I think his name was Mason, using the DF gear, plotted Jap radio stations in the Marshalls and Carolines as we steamed North from Nauru. He was then rated to Admiralty made PO for the job he did. Hicks as Sig. Off. received extra seniority, for supervising from his bunk.

Convoy escort South and West. Two to four ships fully laden out of Wn and Ak.

Escorted down to the roaring forties and they then took off round Cape Horn
Submarine episode. After delivering troops to Suva and Lautoka, we were leaving Suva and outside the reef. There was a very loud explosion and water spout directly astern and quite close. Action Stations, a Jap sub was sighted surfacing.

Documentation after the war showed the Japs thought they had a large passenger ship in their sights. The torpedo they fired missed because we were starting to turn and it went off in our wake.

The Sub surfaced, manned its deck gun and started firing. We opened fire with our Stbd 4x 6 inch, and our salvos straddled the Sub. They immediately dived.

Gun accident. Four killed in the accident at a practice shoot in the gulf. Caused by a Hang Fire in P1 Gun [Port Side Fwd.]. Two were seriously injured and later discharged from the Navy. Two of those killed are interred in the Kaiapoi Soldiers Cemetery.

Ammunition run to Fremantle. We escorted two heavily laden, coal burning merchant ships, full of ammunition for the American Navy, from Meb. To Fremantle.

Accompanied by two American 4 stack destroyers. When the weather got very rough, in the Aussie Bight, they pulled out and went into Adelaide and left us too it
ANZAC Squadron Duties. Mainly Syd or Auck to the Islands with supplies. On one visit Noumea was visited by some Jap planes. Airaid.

Singapore Draft. 12 went to Singapore, 4 escaped and some were executed

Ramming the Queens wharf in Auckland city side.

I left the Monowai in July 1942 and entered the ASDIC Branch.

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