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**THE STATUS AND  
SERVICE OF CIVILIANS  
IN NEW ZEALAND'S  
COASTWATCHING  
ORGANISATION  
DURING THE SECOND  
WORLD WAR**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two coastwatchers, one of whom is manning the radio, in a hut on the Auckland Islands in 1942.  
*Credit: Alexander Turnbull Library, Fleming, Lady: Glass negatives taken by Sir Charles Fleming on the Auckland Islands in 1942, 1/4-066868-G.*



This report was prompted by concerns about the lack of medallic recognition for civilian Cook Islanders employed by the New Zealand coastwatching organisation during the Second World War. It reviews the role that Cook Islanders and other civilians played in the coastwatching organisation outside mainland New Zealand, and outlines the conditions they were employed under. Late in 1942, it was decided that all New Zealand civilian coastwatchers should be attested in the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZE). The report concludes that this policy was never properly implemented in the Cook Islands; which

was administered by New Zealand. It appears that no consideration was given to attesting civilians in the Cook Islands who performed coastwatching duties very similar to those undertaken by attested military personnel. As a result, these civilian coastwatchers did not receive medallic recognition of their service. Because the Cook Islands civilian coastwatchers were never attested into the New Zealand Armed Forces and are now deceased, options for medallic recognition are limited, but should be explored further. In particular, their eligibility for the Defence Medal needs to be assessed.

# BACKGROUND

A post-war photograph of William Cuthers (Kiri) who at the age of 16 was employed as a coastwatching organisation radio operator in the Cook Islands. *Reproduced with permission of the Cuthers family.*



In 2019, the family of William Cuthers (deceased), a Cook Islands civilian employed on coastwatching duties during the Second World War, raised with the government the lack of medallic recognition of his service.<sup>1</sup> This report was commissioned to look into the background to the New Zealand government's employment of Cuthers and other civilians on coastwatching duties in the Cook Islands, as well as elsewhere outside mainland New Zealand. The report:

- outlines the history of the New Zealand coastwatching organisation;
- examines the different groups of personnel involved in the organisation;
- reviews the work and conditions of employment of civilian coastwatchers in the Cook Islands and elsewhere;
- sets out the background to and implementation of the decision in 1942 to attest New Zealand civilian coastwatching personnel into the Armed Forces; and
- investigates if the Cook Islands civilian coastwatchers were victims of deliberate discrimination with regard to medallic recognition.

The report concludes by reviewing what has been established about the role of civilian coastwatchers and recommends that further work should be done on finding an appropriate way to recognise these men's service.<sup>2</sup>

# THE NEW ZEALAND COASTWATCHING ORGANISATION

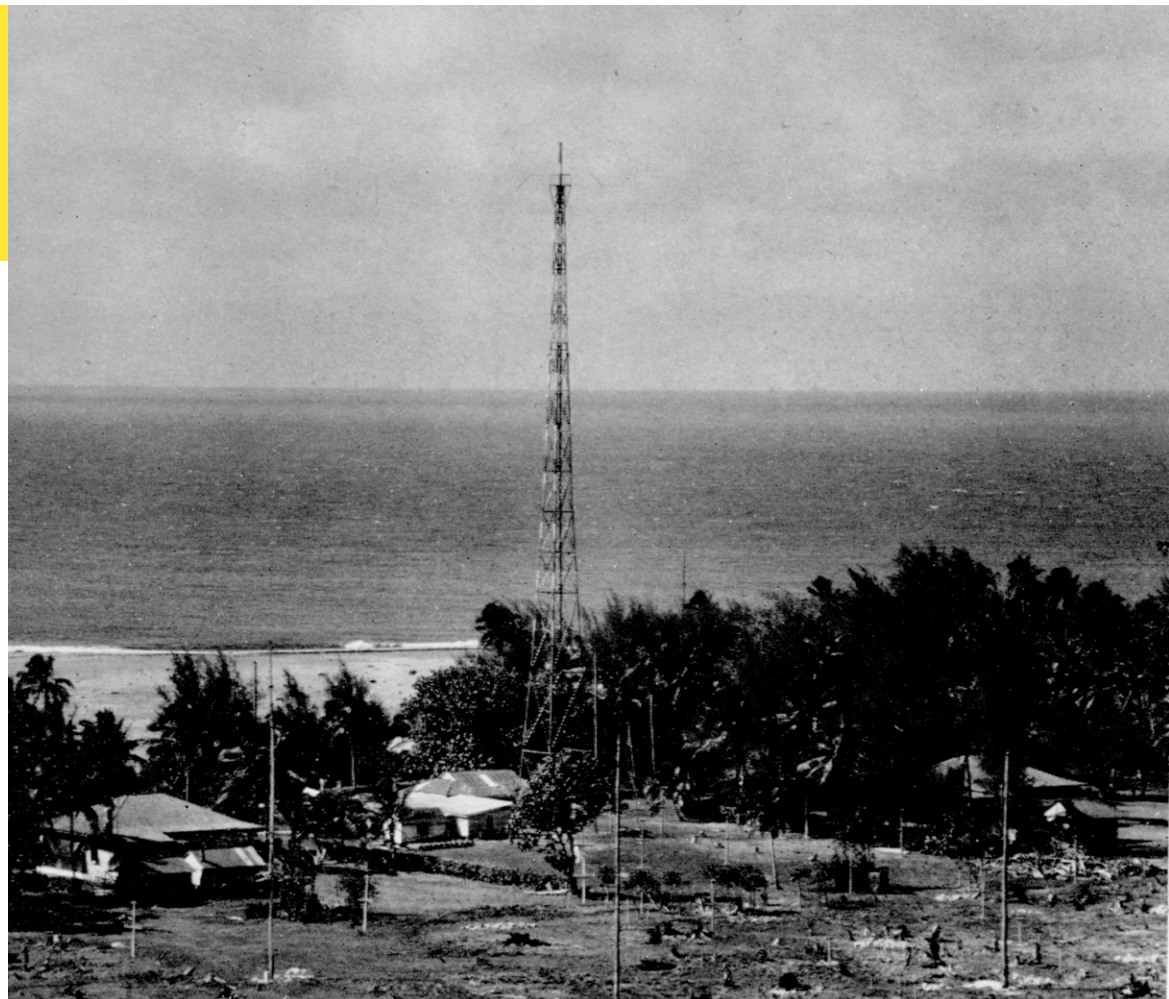
Plans for a comprehensive coastwatching organisation to look out for enemy aircraft and ships were prepared prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1939, after war broke out, the New Zealand Navy Office put these plans into effect. By March 1940, there were 62 coastwatching stations operating around the New Zealand coast. During 1941, with the agreement and support of the British colonial authorities in Fiji and the Western Pacific, as well as the Tongan government, a coastwatching system with 58 stations was established across the South Pacific. In addition to their main role, the coastwatching stations collected weather information and sometimes performed other tasks.

The Navy Office was in overall operational control of the coastwatching organisation. Several other New Zealand government departments were also involved. By late 1941, the Wellington-based coastwatching organisation included 11 stations in the Cook Islands Group, three in the Tokelau Islands and five in Western Samoa; all of which were New Zealand administered territories.<sup>3</sup> By August 1942, the full complement of 14 stations were operating in the Cook Islands. After the outbreak of war with Japan, some stations were handed over to the United States forces. In particular, control of the coastwatching organisation in Western Samoa and the Tokelau Islands passed from New Zealand to the United States general in command of Samoa. The Australian Naval Board was responsible for a similar coastwatching network in the South West Pacific, including the Solomon Islands. The network of coastwatching stations in New Zealand and the islands was substantially reduced during 1944. Virtually all the remaining stations were closed with the end of the Second World War, but a few were retained as weather reporting stations.<sup>4</sup>



The government radio station in Rarotonga was the parent station for the coastwatching network in the Cook Islands.

*Credit: reproduced from D. O. W. Hall, Coastwatchers (Wellington: War History Branch, 1951).*



Generally, each coastwatching station in the South Pacific network had one or more lookout posts, which communicated with the station by messenger, radio or telephone. Most stations were grouped under parent stations. In the Cook Islands, for example, the parent station was at Rarotonga. Parent stations passed reports to Suva in Fiji where there was a powerful radio station. This radio station was placed under the direction of a New Zealand Post and Telegraph Department official, the Controller of Pacific Communications. Important information was then sent from Suva to the coastwatching organisation's headquarters in Wellington. The coastwatching stations on mainland New Zealand and its offshore also reported to the Wellington headquarters.<sup>5</sup>

From 1941 to 1945, an operation codenamed the 'Cape Expedition' established and operated coastwatching stations on the sub-Antarctic Auckland and Campbell Islands. In addition to their coastwatching duties, Cape Expedition personnel collected meteorological information and carried out other scientific work. A station was also established on Raoul Island in the Kermadecs.<sup>6</sup>

# MANNING THE COASTWATCHING NETWORK

From the outset, coastwatching stations in New Zealand were manned by a mixture of military personnel and civilians. Initially, most military personnel involved were from the National Military Reserve. The civilians who performed coastwatching duties were men employed specifically to carry out such work and were recruited from among the employees of a range of organisations, including various harbour boards and Marine Department lighthouse staff.<sup>7</sup> On the Chatham Islands, the original, rather ad hoc coastwatching arrangements were replaced by a detachment of 2NZEF personnel.<sup>8</sup>

In the Pacific, it was intended from early on that local personnel would have a key role in manning the coastwatching organisation, with a total of five “half-caste” and 86 “native” personnel employed. The pay of the locally employed coastwatching personnel was consistent with the very low rates prevailing in the Pacific Islands and were a fraction of what European personnel received.<sup>9</sup>

Civilian New Zealand Post and Telegraph Department radio operators who had volunteered for special duty had a central role in the coastwatching organisation. Initially, it was hoped that these New Zealand radio operators would only need to be employed for about six months until radio operators from the islands were trained to replace them. This did not prove feasible and the New Zealand operators continued to have a key role in the South Pacific coastwatching system throughout its life. In June 1941, the Chiefs of Staff Committee decided that each coastwatching station should employ at least three Europeans: the operator and two 2NZEF soldiers known as soldier companions. This policy was later changed to a minimum of two European personnel. In Fiji, and on some other islands, soldiers were also sent to supervise local radio operators.<sup>10</sup>



John Sorensen, a coastwatcher and Tulagi, one of a small group of young men from Niue employed by the New Zealand government to assist the coastwatchers in the Kermadec Islands. They appear to have just returned to their base at Boat Cove, Raoul Island, from a hunting expedition in 1944.

*Credit: Alexander Turnbull Library, Sorensen, John Herman, 1905–1982: Photographs relating to Campbell, Auckland and Kermadec Islands, 1/4-113609-F.*

From its establishment in 1941, the Raoul Island station in the Kermadecs was principally manned by 2NZEF personnel. At first, all the personnel at the stations in the sub-Antarctic Islands were civilians from the Public Works and Post and Telegraph departments. The Aerodrome Services Branch of the Public Works Department had overall responsibility for establishing and managing the stations on the islands. The first group of Cape Expedition personnel sailed for the sub-Antarctic in February 1941. The crew of the small ship carrying them consisted of merchant marine officers and eight Royal New Zealand Navy Volunteer Reserve ratings. They were instructed to pretend to be fishermen if they were challenged.

This unlikely cover story would not have explained the equipment and supplies their schooner carried. As D.O.W. Hall's official history, *Coastwatchers*, notes, if captured by a German raider, "even if the code-books they carried could have been successfully destroyed ... [there was] evidence ... enough to show them as civilians engaged upon a military enterprise ... [which] would have qualified them for execution as francs tireurs [guerrilla fighters]".<sup>11</sup> *Coastwatchers* clearly shows how poorly thought out the policy of using civilian personnel on such missions was. This was later recognised by the New Zealand authorities, and it was a sensitive issue when officials reviewed the manuscript of *Coastwatchers* in 1950 before its publication.<sup>12</sup> It appears that the original decision not to enlist the Post and Telegraph Department radio operators into 2NZEF when they were deployed in the Pacific was prompted by an ill-considered concern that they would suffer financially if transferred from civilian to military pay rates.<sup>13</sup>

# ATTESTING NEW ZEALAND CIVILIAN COASTWATCHERS

In 1941, as part of the expansion of the coastwatching network, stations were established in the Gilbert (now Kiribati) and Ellice (now Tuvalu) islands. These stations were manned by civilian New Zealand Post and Telegraph Department radio operators, soldier companions and, in some places, by local radio operators serving alongside the New Zealanders.<sup>14</sup>

Seven New Zealand coastwatchers were captured by Japanese forces in the northern Gilbert Islands in December 1941. These men were sent to Japan as prisoners of war. When the Japanese overran the rest of the Gilbert Islands in August and September 1942, a further 17 New Zealand civilian and military coastwatchers fell into their hands. They were imprisoned on the island of Betio in Tarawa.<sup>15</sup>

The capture of the New Zealand coastwatchers led to increasing concern about how the Japanese would treat any civilian coastwatchers who fell into their hands. In early September 1942, the British High Commissioner for the Western Pacific informed New Zealand “that he proposed to grant certain coast-watching operators in the Ellice Islands military rank”. He had deferred doing this, however, because the codes being used by these coastwatchers “were probably compromised” and that if the Japanese learnt of his plan it would probably

“have endangered the officers concerned”.<sup>16</sup> Later in the month, the New Zealand Chiefs of Staff Committee considered the question of enlisting the civilian personnel engaged in coastwatching in the Pacific. On 29 September 1942, the committee decided that all Post and Telegraph Department radio operators serving with the coastwatching service should be attested into the New Zealand Military Forces but continue to receive their higher civilian pay. This was considered to be appropriate “as they were engaged [in] military duties, and the enemy might capture them in civilian clothing and shoot them as franc tireurs”.<sup>17</sup>

Although the initial documents about attesting civilian coastwatching personnel more often than not refer specifically to Post and Telegraph Department staff, the policy from early on covered New Zealand civilians engaged in coastwatching outside mainland New Zealand who were employed by other government agencies.<sup>18</sup> In March 1943, the coverage of the attestation policy was further expanded to include civilian personnel at the Suva radio station, which was a critical facility for the coastwatching organisation and other military and civilian communications.<sup>19</sup> As late as early September 1945, 2NZEF had more than 60 coastwatching personnel who were being paid their civilian salaries. The biggest group was the 39 men employed at the Suva radio station.<sup>20</sup>



In early 1943, the Chiefs of Staff decided to recommend to the Minister of Defence that the civilian coastwatching personnel already in the hands of the Japanese should be retrospectively enlisted in the New Zealand Military Forces and “should be entitled to the benefits provided in the War Pensions Act.” In the interests of these men’s safety, this decision was kept secret. The action was finally taken in July 1943. The senior Post and Telegraph Department personnel in the hands of the Japanese were appointed lieutenants in 2NZE and all the other civilian personnel were enlisted and made corporals. Although these men officially became members of the 2NZE, it was stipulated that they too should continue to receive their civilian pay.<sup>21</sup>

When the New Zealand Chiefs of Staff decided that the captured coastwatching personnel should become members of 2NZE, they did not know that the 17 New Zealand coastwatchers who had been imprisoned on Tarawa were already dead. They had been murdered, along with five other Allied prisoners, by Japanese personnel on 15 October 1942. The New Zealand government only became aware of the murders after American forces captured Tarawa in November 1943.<sup>22</sup>

The decision to attest all New Zealand civilian coastwatchers was implemented in a somewhat haphazard way. The statement in Hall’s official history that all civilian members of the Cape Expedition “were attested into the Army [2NZE] as privates in December 1942” is not correct.<sup>23</sup> The great majority of Cape Expedition personnel who served after the decision was made were attested into 2NZE, but a few, for reasons that are unclear, were not. For example, A.L. Carlson who, in 1943 and 1944 served as a crewman on the *Ranui*, the boat that supported the Cape Expedition, was not attested, whereas

other members of the crew were. Although a New Zealand Military Forces history-sheet was prepared for Carlson, he was never attested and did not receive any medallic recognition of his service. Civilian Cape Expedition personnel whose only service was before the implementation of the attestation policy were not retrospectively attested into 2NZE. This decision is consistent with the principal objective of the attestation policy, which was to offer some protection to personnel if they fell into enemy hands.<sup>24</sup> One of the coastwatchers, Robert Falla, was attested into the Naval Auxiliary Patrol Service rather than 2NZE, probably because he had previous naval service.<sup>25</sup>

The policy of attesting civilian coastwatchers was in some cases not implemented until long after the Chiefs of Staff Committee had directed that this should be done. The first coastwatching station in the New Zealand-run Pacific network was established on Pitcairn Island by a civilian, Nelson Dyett, in December 1939. It also served as a link in the Allied communication system, although Dyett “was a civilian operating his own equipment”. Dyett was not attested into 2NZE until May 1944. By this time, a full coastwatching station had been established on Pitcairn with four military radio operators sent from New Zealand as part of the Pan Expedition.<sup>26</sup> In May 1943, Henry Smart, a Post and Telegraph Department radio operator, was already serving at the coastwatching station on Suvorov Island, in the Cook Islands, when he was attested into 2NZE. Smart’s attesting officer was D.K. Matheson, the Master of the *Tagua*, which was one of the vessels purchased by the New Zealand government to support the coastwatching service. It is unclear that Matheson had the legal authority to act as an attesting officer.<sup>27</sup>



Some of the Niuean men employed to assist the coastwatching team on Raoul Island with a large kingfish in 1944. Fishing was one of the important tasks that Pacific islands support staff undertook for coastwatchers.

*Credit: Alexander Turnbull Library, Sorensen, John Herman, 1905–1982: Photographs relating to Campbell, Auckland and Kermadec Islands, 1/4-113582-F.*

In another case, a civilian radio operator was evacuated sick from his station before his attestation forms reached him. He was subsequently retrospectively attested into the forces for less than a month so that he would be “eligible for pension privileges and also to join the Returned Services Association”.<sup>28</sup> Philip Bruce Thorburn, who served as a Post and Telegraph coastwatching radio operator in the Gilbert and Ellice islands during 1941 and 1942, was retrospectively attested into 2NZEF in 1945.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Leslie Steele and James Hampton, who between May 1941 and March 1944 successively held the appointment of Controller of Pacific Communications in Fiji, were attested into the New Zealand Military Forces and granted honorary commissions in 1945.<sup>30</sup>

There were also problems with the actual attestation process for civilian coastwatchers. Some men signed a properly completed attestation form, but in other cases attestation forms were not fully completed and were not signed by the individual enlisting. Herbert Pittaway, for example, a Post and Telegraph radio operator, who served with the coastwatching service in the Cook Islands, signed his attestation form, but it is not dated and is not signed by an attesting officer.<sup>31</sup>

The total number of coastwatching personnel attested into 2NZEF is difficult to calculate. Late in February 1945, it was estimated that about 82 men from the Post and Telegraph and other government departments who had served or were serving with the coastwatching organisation in the Pacific or with the Cape Expedition had been attested. This total included the crew of one of the boats used to support these operations, but not the crews of the other two who had never been attested.<sup>32</sup> That the decision to attest all New Zealand civilian coastwatchers was not implemented in a timely or uniform manner is not surprising given the serious communication and other difficulties caused by the war and the scale of the organisation and its structure.<sup>33</sup>

# LOCALLY ENGAGED CIVILIAN COASTWATCHERS EMPLOYED BY NEW ZEALAND IN THE COOK ISLANDS AND ELSEWHERE IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

All of the significant New Zealand-administered islands in the South Pacific were part of the coastwatching organisation. In each territory, the New Zealand administration employed residents to undertake coastwatching. Unfortunately, few documents relating to the coastwatching organisation in Western Samoa, the Tokelau Islands and Niue appear to have survived.

On Niue, the Resident Commissioner employed local people as coastwatchers and paid them two shillings a day.<sup>34</sup> Plans prepared in early 1941 called for the employment of nine local coastwatching staff at the three lookout posts on the island. Four posts were, it appears, eventually established on Niue.<sup>35</sup>

The full extent of the coastwatching system in Western Samoa is a little unclear but it is known that, in January 1942, eight coastwatching stations were operating in the territory. There were five stations on Savaii, one run by a Resident Commissioner (a New Zealand official), one by a “Native Constable”, and three by “Native Supervisors”. It appears that at each station there was a locally employed radio operator along with three men employed as lookouts. The three stations on Upolu were all manned and operated by the Samoa Local Defence Force. The parent station for the network in Samoa was at Apia. It appears that ten stations were eventually established. One, from the start, was at a United States seaplane base and controlled by the American forces. A small number of 2NZEF personnel also served with the coastwatching organisation in Western Samoa. By January 1942, there were three coastwatching stations in the Tokelau Islands, with no associated lookout posts. At each of these stations, three residents were employed under the direction of a “native supervisor”.<sup>36</sup>



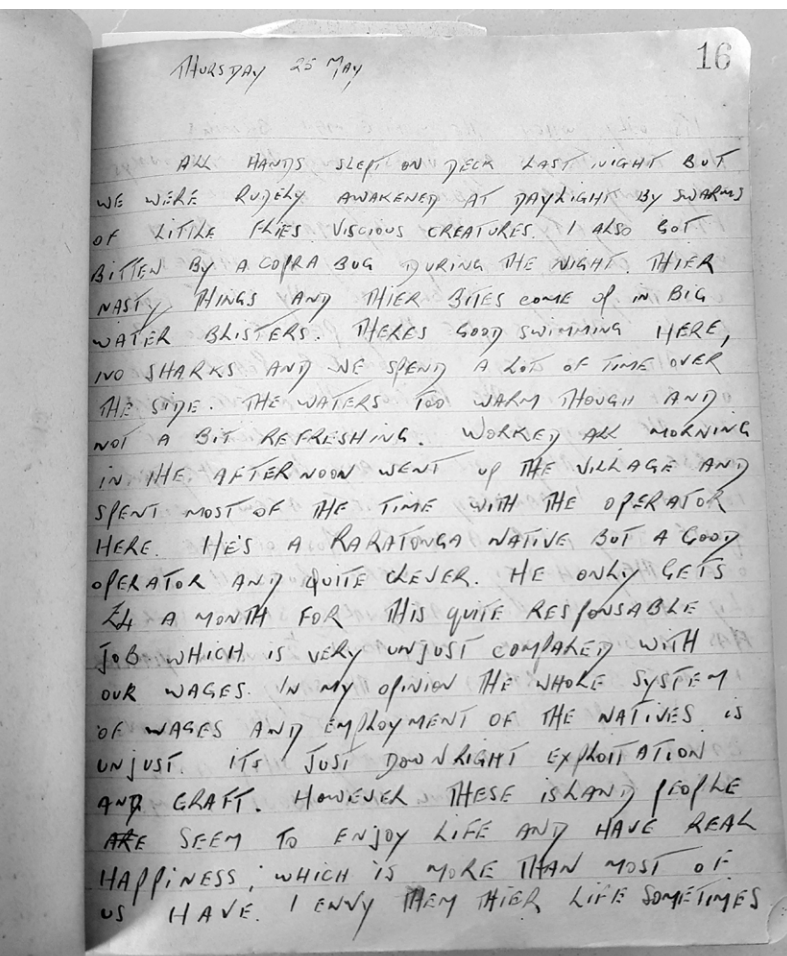
Tai Nicholas, a 'Polynesian cadet' at work at the government radio station in Rarotonga. Nicholas was one of the locally recruited, civilian radio operators who had a central role in the Cook Islands coastwatching network.

*Credit: An Archives New Zealand photograph reproduced with permission of the Nicholas family.*

Although some important files have not survived, there is more material relating to coastwatching in the Cook Islands.<sup>37</sup> Initially, the only coastwatching station was at Rarotonga, which was where the New Zealand administration was based and the site of its main radio station. At first, the members of the town's Boys' Brigade acted as the station's lookouts. They were replaced in mid-1941 by a group of local First World War veterans who were employed as constables and carried out police duties when not working as coastwatchers. They were paid £4 a month.<sup>38</sup> During the second half of 1941, the network in the Cook Islands was expanded. In mid-November, the New Zealand Resident Agent for the islands of Mauke and Mitiaro, Mr D. Brown, and George Robinson, the Superintendent of the Rarotonga radio station, visited Mitiaro to set up a coastwatching station there.

Accompanying them was William Kiri (William Cutthers), who was 16 years old and had recently completed his radio operator's training. The New Zealand government's employment of civilian minors to undertake such potentially dangerous military duties was reprehensible. Brown and Robinson held discussions with the Island Council, and it was agreed that they would organise a roster of two-strong teams of local men who would take it in turns to spend a week carrying out coastwatching duties. These men, who were to be paid one shilling a day for this work, reported to the radio operator who sent regular reports to Rarotonga. The council agreed to arrange for a plot of land to be made available to William Kiri so that he could grow his own food, and also to renovate a small hut for him. Kiri was to be paid £36 per annum with increments of six pounds per year to a maximum of £48 per annum. The New Zealand officials then travelled to Manuae Island where arrangements were made to establish another coastwatching station with a "native operator", Rua Nia Rua.<sup>39</sup> As noted earlier, pay rates for European coastwatching service radio operators were much higher. Junior European radio operators in the Cook Islands at this time were paid £350 per annum.<sup>40</sup>





A page from the 1944 diary of Leading Aircraftman Ian McKenzie, a Royal New Zealand Air Force radio operator serving on the ketch *New Golden Hind*. The entry concerns a visit to the coastwatching station on Suvarov [Suwarrow] Island in the northern Cook Islands during which he met the locally recruited, civilian radio operator. The *New Golden Hind* and other small ships played a key role in supporting the coastwatching network in the South Pacific. Credit: Reproduced with the permission of the McKenzie family.

In the Cook Islands, Pākehā New Zealanders and local radio operators employed by the Cook Islands Administration both carried out coastwatching duties. In August 1942, a Cook Islands Administration document lists the staff involved in operating the coastwatching radio network in the islands. A total of 24 personnel are identified. There were seven Pākehā staff: three of whom worked for the administration (including one or two Post and Telegraph Department radio operators seconded for service with the Cook Islands Administration) and four were Post and Telegraph operators sent from New Zealand for coastwatching duties. There were also 11 “Polynesian Operators”, including William Kiri, and six “Polynesian cadets”. The indigenous personnel were at 14 different locations in the Cook Islands. At several stations, they were the only radio operators.<sup>41</sup> Lists of Cook Islands radio operators, prepared in April 1943 and January 1944 indicate that a small number of additional staff (probably fewer than ten) were involved in coastwatching duties later in the war.<sup>42</sup>

Instructions were issued in December 1942 that the three Post and Telegraph operators serving in the Cook Islands should be attested into the 2NZEF. At the same time, instructions were issued to attest the seven Post and Telegraph radio operators based in Fiji and the five serving in Tonga. Arms, equipment, uniforms and 2NZEF identity certificates were to be issued to them after they were attested.<sup>43</sup> Because of the far-flung and isolated position of many of the coastwatching stations, attesting them took quite some time. Henry Smart, for example, was not attested on Suvarov Island in the Cook Islands until 15 May 1943 when the support ship *Tagua* visited his station.<sup>44</sup>

The wartime career of James Hartigan illustrates many of the problems with the implementation of the attestation policy. Hartigan was a Post and Telegraph Department radio operator who was seconded to the Cook Islands Administration on a three-year contract in 1940. He was one of the men listed in the August 1942 document. In 1941, it appears he was medically examined for service in the New Zealand Military Forces, but was not attested. After completing his service in the Cook Islands, Hartigan returned to New Zealand. In August 1944, he was attested into 2NZEF, but he did not enter camp until February the following year when he embarked to serve as a radio operator at the coastwatching station on Raoul Island in the Kermadecs. As in other such cases, Hartigan, although attested into 2NZEF, continued to receive his civilian pay. In recognition of his service on Raoul Island he received the War Medal and the New Zealand War Service Medal.<sup>45</sup>

As well as the local radio operators, another 30 to 40 Cook Islanders were employed on coastwatching duties as “general assistants” to the New Zealand personnel.<sup>46</sup> They were sometimes referred to as “native coastwatchers” or “native watchers”.<sup>47</sup> It appears that the first men in this group were recruited in the second half of 1941. All of them signed an employment contract, which was drawn up by the Resident Commissioner’s Office in Rarotonga.

The examples that have been located vary in details, but are essentially the same. One contract, for example, dated 16 May 1944, states that the agreement is between the “Cook Islands Administration on behalf of the New Zealand Navy Department” and the named individuals.<sup>48</sup> Initially, the contracts were for a period of two years, but later this was reduced to one year. The contracts stipulated that the men were to work for the Cook Islands Administration as general assistants to the European coastwatchers stationed on a particular island. The men were to “obey all just and reasonable demands”, be paid £2 per month (later £2 and 10 shillings), and receive food rations and tobacco. The Cook Islanders also received equipment including canoes and fishing tackle so that

they could catch fish for themselves and the New Zealand coastwatchers.<sup>49</sup> Generally, the locally employed men manned the lookout or observation posts and the New Zealand personnel remained at the central station where the radio was located. The locally employed civilian coastwatchers split their time between working at the observation posts and other duties such as fishing.<sup>50</sup> The Cook Islands coastwatchers worked alongside New Zealand civilian Post and Telegraph radio operators and later, after the implementation of the attestation policy, with 2NZEF personnel. Some stations were manned entirely by local personnel.<sup>51</sup>

Other Cook Islanders were, at least on the island of Mangaia (the southernmost island in the Cook group) employed on a somewhat ad hoc part-time basis to carry out coastwatching duties. On Mangaia, 44 men, who were First World War veterans, members of the Island Council or police constables, were engaged by the island’s administrator to man the island’s observation posts.<sup>52</sup>

One Pākehā New Zealander resident in the Cook Islands, Mr W. O’Bryan, was employed on coastwatching duties similar to those undertaken by the general assistants. He appears to have had a supervisory role and is described in one document as “a civilian employed on Army pay and conditions” and in another as having filled a role that would otherwise have been occupied by a member of 2NZEF.<sup>53</sup> O’Bryan was issued with “the full scale military clothing supplied to [2NZEF] coastwatchers”.<sup>54</sup> Amongst the equipment issued to O’Bryan was a rifle, which he took over from the 2NZEF coastwatcher he replaced.<sup>55</sup> In 1946, O’Bryan was granted a gratuity and other allowances on the same basis as approved for members of the Cook Islands Local Defence Force. He did not, however, receive any medals for his wartime service.<sup>56</sup> O’Bryan was in virtually all respects indistinguishable from a 2NZEF coastwatcher, but was never attested. O’Bryan’s situation is the most clear-cut evidence of just how flawed the implementation of the policy of attesting civilian coastwatchers was with respect to the Cook Islands.

The total number of Cook Islanders employed as coastwatching radio operators or as general assistants was probably about 60.<sup>57</sup> Men in Western Samoa, Niue and the Tokelau Islands may well have been employed under similar arrangements as those in the Cook Islands. The paucity of records about coastwatching arrangements in these territories means that no definite conclusion can be reached on this point.<sup>58</sup>

The Cook Islanders who signed contracts with the New Zealand government to work as part of the coastwatching organisation undertook to carry out duties of a military nature for which they were equipped by the New Zealand authorities. In many respects, their duties were very similar to those of the New Zealand military personnel with whom they worked. In the case of the Cook Islands Administration's New Zealand and Cook Islands radio operators, their duties were probably almost identical to those of their Post and Telegraph and later 2NZEF counterparts. Had they been captured by the enemy, the Cook Islands civilian coastwatchers could, as the New Zealand authorities belatedly recognised in regard to New Zealand civilians serving elsewhere, be treated as *francs tireurs* and executed. If this is accepted, there can be little doubt that the appropriate action would have been to attest the Cook Islanders and other locally employed coastwatchers in New Zealand-administered territories into the New Zealand Military Forces. In the case of the Cook Islanders, they should have been attested into the Cook Islands Local Defence Force.

Yet it seems highly probable, based on the information in the surviving documents, that no consideration was given to attesting the local men employed on coastwatching duties in the Cook Islands and the other New Zealand administered territories in the Pacific. There was certainly no mention of this failure to attest indigenous coastwatching personnel at an inter-departmental meeting held in April 1946 "to discuss the status of personnel who served in the Cape Expedition and also in the Pacific Coast-Watching Organisation, particularly in relation to Service gratuities and other special payments which accrue to members of the Armed Forces".<sup>59</sup> The record of this meeting states with respect to the attestation of coastwatching personnel that:

*All personnel recruited after the Gilbert Island [sic] capture were attested in Army. Not desirous to attest all civilians as this would include Fiji Aerodrome Construction Unit who were not due for any special consideration.*<sup>60</sup>

The officials at this meeting were certainly aware of other problems caused by the flawed attestation policy for coastwatching personnel. The representative of the pensions department stated that the Secretary of War Pensions was prepared to consider applications for War pensions from the Cape Expedition and coastwatching personnel, but noted that "no medical examination was made before departure".<sup>61</sup> More generally, it was recognised that the employment of civilians on essentially military tasks during the war had created significant anomalies. Particular attention was paid to the position of three Department of Scientific and Industrial Research radar scientists who served with the United States forces in the Pacific and who had taken "part in many landings and had many operational flying hours".<sup>62</sup>

# WERE CIVILIAN PACIFIC ISLANDER COASTWATCHERS DISCRIMINATED AGAINST WITH RESPECT TO MEDALLIC RECOGNITION BECAUSE OF THEIR RACE?

The research conducted for this report has not found any evidence that Cook Islanders employed on coastwatching duties were not attested into the New Zealand Military Forces and, therefore, did not receive any medallic recognition because of explicit racial discrimination. As noted above, that civilian Pākehā New Zealanders and Cook Islanders employed on coastwatching duties in the Cook Islands were all treated in the same way in this respect strongly supports this conclusion.

The experience of Cook Islands Local Defence Force personnel was also consistent with this conclusion. The Cook Islands Local Defence Force, which was a unit of the New Zealand Military Force, was established in 1941 and continued to operate until 1945. Its personnel were attested into the force, served part time, wore uniforms, were issued with weapons and equipment and carried out training and a variety of duties.<sup>63</sup> The papers on the Island Territories Department file relating to the force make it clear that there was no question about them not receiving appropriate medallic recognition for their service. Depending on the details of their service, members of the local defence force received the Defence, War and New Zealand War Service Medals or just the War and New Zealand War Service Medals.<sup>64</sup> These are the same medals received by former Post and Telegraph Department radio operators who attested into the 2NZEF and served in the Cook Islands.<sup>65</sup>



# CONCLUSION

When New Zealand established its substantial coastwatching organisation early in the Second World War, an ill-conceived decision was made to deploy some civilian personnel outside mainland New Zealand in what was clearly a military role. When it was recognised that this policy placed the men concerned at real risk of being executed if captured, it was decided that all New Zealand civilian coastwatchers should be enlisted into 2NZE. This policy was implemented in a somewhat haphazard way. Some New Zealand civilians continued to be employed on coastwatching duties for some time after they should have been attested into the Armed Forces. A few who should have been attested never were. In addition, the actual attestation of some of the personnel concerned was undertaken in a highly irregular manner.

One aspect of the flawed implementation of the policy of attesting civilian coastwatchers was a failure to consider attesting into the New Zealand Armed Forces the local civilian coastwatchers employed in the Cook Islands and in other New Zealand-controlled territories. Given that the duties carried out by these men were very similar to those undertaken by the New Zealand civilian coastwatchers, it would have been appropriate for them to have been attested into an element of the New Zealand Military Forces such as the Cook Islands Local Defence Force. The New Zealand staff of the Cook Islands Administration and those in the other New Zealand territories who served as coastwatching radio operators should also have been attested. The Cook Islanders employed on coastwatching duties were not treated differently because of overt racial discrimination but, rather, were the victims of administrative failings.

Because the Cook Islands coastwatchers were never attested, they, like other civilian coastwatchers, cannot be awarded the full range of medals granted to the military personnel with whom they served. As they are all deceased, they cannot be retrospectively attested.<sup>66</sup> The Defence Medal can, however, be awarded to designated groups of civilians.<sup>67</sup> It is consequently recommended that awarding the Defence Medal to civilian coastwatchers in the Cook Islands and in other New Zealand territories and other options for appropriate recognition of their service, should be given further consideration.

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## John Crawford

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**Note:** Since the preparation of this report it has been established that the New Zealand Prime Minister does not have the authority to amend the eligibility criteria for the Defence Medal. Instead, the Prime Minister has agreed that a different form of recognition should be issued to recognise this important service.

## Endnotes

- 1 Chief of Defence Force to Minister of Defence, 29 May 2020, 'Retrospective Recognition for Pacific Island Civilian Coast Watchers during the Second World War' and related papers, HQNZDF.
- 2 The preparation of this report has been greatly facilitated by the assistance I received from my colleagues Donald Anderson, Matthew Buck and Jack Hayes.
- 3 Naval Secretary, 'Coast Watching and Communications in the Pacific Islands', 16 June 1941 and related papers, WAI 1, DA 371/FAI/1, R20109686, Archives New Zealand Wellington (ANZ); O.A. Gillespie, *The Pacific* (Wellington: War History Branch, 1952), 228-30.
- 4 Naval Secretary, 'Coast Watching and Communications in the Pacific Islands', 16 June 1941 and related papers, WAI 1, DA 371/FAI/1, R 2010 9686; Robinson Superintendent Wireless Station at Rarotonga to Officer Commanding Suva , 3 August 1942 and enclosure, N1, 20/8, R21466725, ANZ; Gillespie, *The Pacific*, 228-30; Adams to the Administrator Western Samoa, 22 February 1944 , IT1, 122/6, R127963922, ANZ; Naval Secretary to Secretary of Island Territories, 6 March 1944, IT1, 120/3, R17963818. By 1942 organisations involved in the watching system included the New Zealand military headquarters in Fiji, the Fiji Harbour Board and Post and Telegraph Department. The New Zealand bodies involved were in the Navy, Army, RNZAF, Island Territories, Post and Telegraph Department, Public Works (Aerodrome Branch) Department, Defence Development Section of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and the Meteorological Office. 'Narrative of Coast Watching Service in the Pacific Jan 41-Dec 44', Archives Section, Army Headquarters, Wellington, 1945 WAI 1, DA401.364/1, ANZ; D O W Hall, *Coastwatchers* (Wellington: War History Branch, 1951), 3-4; Dale Williamson, *For Special Duty Outside New Zealand: The New Zealand Coastwatching Service During WWII* (Wellington, the author, 2011), 166-89.
- 5 Chief of Naval Staff to Secretary Organisation for National Security, 1 April 1941, N2, 030/19/1, R22042344, ANZ; Hall, *Coastwatchers*, 4, 6-7; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 14, 18-20, 180-89.
- 6 Hall, *Coastwatchers*, 29-33; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 40, 203-04.
- 7 Army Secretary to the Secretary Organisation for National Security, 11 December 1939 and related papers, EA1, 94/2/5, R18872569, ANZ; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 166-67, 180-89.
- 8 Puttick to Secretary Organisation for National Security, 9 May 1942, AIR1, 132/10/5, R21078701, ANZ; Scheduled Number Two of Minutes of the Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting, 22 May 1942, Naval Secretary to the Secretary of the Organisation for National Security, 2 June 1942 and related papers, EA1, 86/22/4, R 18871600, ANZ; Conway to Chief of Naval Staff, 18 August 1943, Conway to Naval Secretary, 8 February 1944 and related papers, N1, 20/8/3, R21466729, ANZ; Hall, *Coastwatchers*, 5; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 40.
- 9 Appendix II to C.O.S. Paper 75, 5 February 1941, EA1, 86/26/1 R22242545, ANZ.
- 10 Organisation for National Security, Coast Watching Organisation in the South Pacific, O.N.S. Paper 170, 19 March 1941, EA1, 86/26/1; Colonel General Staff to Commander 6th Brigade Group, 1 April 1941, N2, 030/19/1, R22042344, ANZ; Naval Secretary to Minister of Defence, 20 January 1943, AD1, 323/5/10, R22438954, ANZ; Hall, *Coastwatchers*, 5.
- 11 Hall, *Coastwatchers*, 31.
- 12 Kippenberger to Permanent Head Prime Minister's Department, 31 August 1950 and related papers, EA, W2619, 86/26/1, R22242545, ANZ.
- 13 Schedule No, 3 of the Minutes of the 111th Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 12 March 1943, Air1, 105/3/3, R21077698, ANZ; Director of Mobilization to Director Base Records, 14 July 1943, Allan Leicester Taylor Personal File [P/F], No. 297352, New Zealand Defence Force Archives [NZDFA], Wellington.
- 14 D.L. Vaughan, *Report on Coastwatching Radio Stations in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, 1941-45* (Raumati South: the author, 1990); Williamson, *Special Duty*, 93-94.
- 15 Williamson, *Special Duty*, 100-02.
- 16 Minutes of the 103rd Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 29 September 1942, Schedule No. 5 [incorrectly dated 19 September], Air1, 105/3/3, R21077699, ANZ.
- 17 Shanahan to Chiefs of Staff, 30 March 1943, draft Chiefs of staff paper 'Coast-Watching Organization in the Pacific', N1, 13/4/19, R21465310, ANZ; Schedule No. 5 of the Minutes of the 103rd Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 29 September 1942, AIR1, 105/3/3, R21077699, ANZ.
- 18 Shanahan to Chief of Air Staff, 14 December 1942 and related papers, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ.
- 19 Schedule No, 3 of the minutes of the 111th meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 12 March 1943, Air1, 105/3/3, R21077698, ANZ; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 36-37.
- 20 Minutes of a Meeting, 13 September 1945, IT1, 122/6, R14640453, ANZ.
- 21 Schedule No, 3 of the Minutes of the 111th Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 12 March 1943, Air1, 105/3/3, R21077698, ANZ; Director of Mobilization to Director Base Records, 14 July 1943, Allan Leicester Taylor No. 297352, PF, NZDFPA.
- 22 'Narrative of Coast Watching Service in the Pacific Jan 41-Dec 44', DA 401.364/1; Hall, *Coastwatchers*, 3-8, 25-28.
- 23 Hall, *Coastwatching*, 32.
- 24 List compiled from R.A. Falla, 'Coast-Watching Parties on Auckland and Campbell Island's 1941-45: Reports Compiled for Archive Section, September-October 1945', WAI 1, 420.364/1, ANZ; List of Cape Expedition personnel showing who had been attested into the Armed Forces and who had not been, this list is at the bottom of a post-war letter from W.J.C. Proffit, Naval Secretary probably to the Returned Services Association, copy in author's possession; A. L. Carlson history-sheet (copy) attached to email Edney to Hayes, 24 August 2020, HQ NZDF.
- 25 Naval Auxiliary Patrol Service enlistment form, dated 24 January 1942, Robert Alexander Falla, NA 9669, PF, NZDFPA.
- 26 Gillespie, *The Pacific*, 228; New Zealand Military Forces Attestation Form, Dated 6 May 1944, Nelson Dalmain Dyett, No. 808589, PF, NZDFPA; Hall, *Coastwatching*, 28-29; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 52-55.
- 27 New Zealand Military Forces attestation form, dated 15 May 1943, Henry Smart, No. 252391, PF, NZDFPA.
- 28 'Narrative of Coast Watching Service in the Pacific Jan 41-Dec 44', WAI 1, 420.364/1, 19.

- 29 Royal New Zealand Air Force Certificate of the Service and Discharge of Philip Bruce Thorburn; Shanahan to Adjutant-General, 3 July 1945, Philip Bruce Thorburn, No.43943, PF, NZDFPA. Between 1943 and 1945 Thorburn served in the RNZAF.
- 30 Extract from the *New Zealand Gazette*, No. 26, 19 April 1945, page 411 and related papers, Leslie Harvey Steele No. 815386, PF, NZDFPA.
- 31 New Zealand Military Forces Attestation Form, Herbert Edwards Pittaway No. 001143, PF, NZDFPA. The issues with his attestation form did not affect Pittaway's eligibility for medallic recognition.
- 32 Adjutant-General to Minister of Defence, 20 February 1945, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ.
- 33 Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to Secretary of Island Territories, 9 February 1943, Adjutant-General to Secretary of Island Territories, 29 April 1943, IT1, 120/3, ANZ. Deputy Chief of the General Staff to the Secretary Chiefs of Staff Committee, 5 September 1945, AD12, 28/3, R3888101, ANZ.
- 34 Hall, *Coastwatching*, 5.
- 35 Appendix II to C.O.S. Paper 75, 5 February 1941, EA1, 86/26/1, R22242545, ANZ; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 199.
- 36 Appendices I and II to C.O.S. Paper 75, 5 February 1941, EA1, 86/26/1, R22242545, ANZ; Administration of Western Samoa to Controller of Pacific Communications, Suva, 8 January 1942, N2, 030/33/17, R 22045142, ANZ; Secretary Western Samoa Administration to Secretary of Island Territories, 1 August 1945 and related papers, IT1, 120/3, R17963816; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 200-01.
- 37 Unfortunately the first two of the four volumes of the Island Territories Department file on coastwatching in the Cook Islands appear to be lost. The surviving volumes of file IT1, 122/6, cover the period April 1944 until August 1950.
- 38 Mauragi and others to Secretary of Island Territories, 8 November 1945, IT1, 122/2/4, R17963847, ANZ; Hall, *Coastwatching*, 5.
- 39 Robinson Superintendent Wireless Station Rarotonga to Resident Commissioner Rarotonga, 30 November 1941, N2, 08/10/10, R22042424, ANZ; author's notes on a television documentary 'Coast Watchers - Operation Pacific', originally screened on Maori Television on Anzac Day 2020.
- 40 Organisation for National Security, Chiefs of Staff Committee, Coast Watching in the South Pacific, COS No.75, 5 February 1941, EA1, 86/26/1, R18871604, ANZ.
- 41 Robinson Superintendent Wireless Station at Rarotonga to Officer Commanding Suva [?], 3 August 1942 and enclosure, N1, 20/8, R 21466725, ANZ; List of coastwatching personnel, enclosure to Director-General of Post and Telegraph Department to Secretary Organisation for National Security, 23 October 1942, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 37-38, 197-99.
- 42 Superintendent Wireless Station at Rarotonga to New Zealand Naval Liaison Officer, Suva, 20 April 1943 N1, 20/8, R21466725, ANZ; 'Staffing List Covering the Wireless Stations for the Cook Islands Group', Wireless Station Rarotonga to New Zealand Naval Liaison Officer, Suva, 20 January 1944 N1, 20/8, R21466726, ANZ; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 37-38; List of Cook Islands coastwatching personnel compiled from various sources by Jack Hayes, HQ NZDF.
- 43 Adjutant-General to Secretary Organisation for National Security, 11 December 1942, Secretary Organisation for National Security to Director-General of Post and Telegraph Department, 14 December 1942, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ.
- 44 Henry Smart attestation form, dated 15 May 1943, Henry Smart No. 252391, PF, NZDFPA.
- 45 2NZE History-Sheet, 2NZE attestation form, dated 3 August 1944, James Martin Aloysius Hartigan, No.014665, PF, NZDFPA; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 37-38, 78, 82.
- 46 Agreement dated, 7 May 1945, IT1, 122/6, R14640453, ANZ; List of Cook Islands coastwatching personnel compiled from various sources by Jack Hayes, HQ NZDF.
- 47 Resident Commissioner to Secretary Island Territories Department, 20 September 1943, IT1, 120/3, R 17963816, ANZ.
- 48 Acting Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to the Secretary Department of Island Affairs, 31 May 1944 and enclosure, agreement dated 16 May 1944, IT1, 122/6, R17963922, ANZ; Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to the Secretary Department of Island Territories, 20 September 1943, enclosure, agreement dated 17 September 1943, IT1, 120/3, R17963816, ANZ.
- 49 Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to Officer in Charge Coastwatching Station Nassau, 18 September 1943, enclosure, agreement dated 17 September 1943 IT1, 120/3, ANZ; Acting Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to Secretary of Island Territories, 31 May 1944 and enclosed contract dated 16 May 1944, IT1, 122/6, R17963922, ANZ. The standard practice appears to be to supply each lookout post with one pair of binoculars, Superintendent Telegraph and Telephones Tonga to New Zealand Naval Liaison Officer Fiji, 12 November 1942, N1, 20/8, ANZ.
- 50 Mauragi and others to Secretary of Island Territories, 8 November 1945, IT1, 122/2/4, R17963848, ANZ; Acting Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to the Secretary Department of Island Affairs, 31 May 1944 and enclosure, agreement dated 16 May 1944, IT1, 122/6, R17963922, ANZ.
- 51 History-Sheet and related papers, Herbert Edwards Pittaway No. 001143, PF, NZDFPA; Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to Director-General Post and Telegraph Department, 19 June 1943, Army Headquarters Movement Order No. 239: 2NZE Coast Watching Duties, 17 August 1943, IT1, 120/3, R 17963816, ANZ; handwritten list showing the mixture of local and 2NZE personnel manning coastwatching stations in the Cooks, no date, below Naval Secretary to Island Territories, 13 July 1944, IT1, 122/6, R17963922, ANZ; 'Narrative of Coastwatching Service in the Pacific', 7-8, WAI, 1, DA401.364/1, ANZ.
- 52 Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to Secretary of Island Territories, 21 [?] August 1943 and related papers, IT1, 120/3, R17963816, ANZ.
- 53 Secretary of Island Territories to Adjutant-General, 27 September 1945, Secretary of Island Territories to acting Minister of Island Territories, 9 January 1946, marginalia by Nash, 16 January 1946, IT1, 122/6, R 14640453, ANZ; Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to the Secretary Cook Islands Department Wellington, 23 June 1945, IT1, 120/3, R17963816, ANZ.
- 54 Acting Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to O'Bryan, 19 November 1943, IT1, 120/3, R7963816, ANZ.

- 55 Burge [?] to Secretary of Island Territories, 12 April 1944, and related papers, IT1, 120/3, R17963816, ANZ.
- 56 Secretary of Island Territories to Adjutant-General, 27 September 1945, Secretary of Island Territories to acting Minister of Island Territories, 9 January 1946 marginalia by Nash, 16 January 1946, IT1, 122/6, R 14640453, ANZ; Resident Commissioner Rarotonga to the Secretary Cook Islands Department Wellington, 23 June 1945, IT1, 120/3, R 17963816, ANZ.
- 57 List of Cook Islands coastwatching personnel compiled from various sources by Jack Hayes, HQ NZDF; Robinson Superintendent Wireless Station at Rarotonga to Officer Commanding Suva, 3 August 1942 and enclosure, Robinson to NZ Naval Liaison officer Suva, 20 April 1943, N1, 20/8, R 21466725, ANZ; Superintendent Wireless Station at Rarotonga to New Zealand Naval Liaison Officer, Suva, 20 April 1943 N1, 20/8, R 21466725, ANZ; 'Staffing List Covering the Wireless Stations for the Cook Islands Group', Wireless Station Rarotonga to New Zealand Naval Liaison Officer, Suva, 20 January 1944 N1, 20/8, R 21466726, ANZ.; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 197-99; Resident Commissioner to Secretary Island Territories Department, 20 September 1943, IT1, 120/3, R17963816, ANZ.
- 58 Local men were also employed in Fiji and Tonga. In Tonga, men employed on coastwatching duties were not initially paid, but received rations and other supplies. New Zealand Post and Telegraph radio operators and 2NZE established three coastwatching stations in the Tongan group during 1942. At the end of that year there were five New Zealand Post and Telegraph radio operators performing coastwatching duties in Tonga. In 1943 the Tongan Defence Force took over responsibility for coast watching in the kingdom. Following this change all the local Tongan coastwatching radio operators were attested into the defence force. As well, some at least, of the other local personnel involved in coastwatching were attested into the defence force at this time. Adjutant-General to Secretary Organisation for National Security, 11 December 1942, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ; 'Narrative of Coast Watching Service in the Pacific Jan 41-Dec 44', DA401.364/1, ANZ; 7, 10; Williamson, *Special Duty*, 196-97; Conway to Chief of Naval Staff, 10 May 1943, Stewart to Naval Secretary, 18 May 1943, Headquarters 16 Brigade Group to Army Headquarters, 20 October 1943, Air1, 132/5/11, R21078678, ANZ.
- 59 Secretary to the Treasury to the Permanent Head Prime Minister's Department, 11 April 1946, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ.
- 60 'Note for File', 20 April 1946, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ. The status of the Fiji Aerodrome Construction Unit personnel was a significant issue. In February 1945 it was noted by the Adjutant-General that claims by many of these men for "soldier privileges" had been disallowed. Adjutant-General to Minister of Defence, 20 February 1945, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ.
- 61 'Note for File', 20 April 1946, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ.
- 62 'Note for File', 20 April 1946, EA1, 86/26/2, R18871605, ANZ; Shanahan to Minister of Defence, 4 February 1947 and related papers, EA1, 86/26/3, R18871606, ANZ; Ross Galbraith, 'Dr Marsden and Admiral Halsey: New Zealand Radar Scientists in the Pacific War', in John Crawford ed., *Kia Kaha: New Zealand and the Second World War* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2000), 252-63.
- 63 Conway to Secretary of War Pensions, 29 June 1945 and related papers IT1, 122/2/4, R17963848, ANZ.
- 64 'Rarotonga Local Defence Force Members to Receive Defence, War and New Zealand War Service Medals', nd, but 1945? and related documents, IT1, 122/2/4, R17963847, ANZ.
- 65 See for example Statement of Service, Herbert Edwards Pittaway No. 001143, PF, NZDFPA.
- 66 Greig, Directorate of Legal services to HCP, 18 December 2019, HQ NZDF, Wellington
- 67 Army Council, *Campaign Stars and Commemorative Medals Instituted for the 1939-45* (War Office: London, 1947 or 48), 40-47.





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