

In the company of battlefield brothers

The photograph of the three old soldiers was taken on the wide veranda of the Ranfurly Veterans Home. They are wearing uniform jackets and caps, disreputable trousers and their medals. They have magnificent white beards and moustaches.

This picture hangs in the gently fading grand lobby at Ranfurly with the gold embossed honour boards and the winding staircase.

The picture was taken in 1905. The soldiers had fought in the South African Wars. Then, the home was for men who were, in a word from another era, indigent.

On Anzac Day, a century and a year on from when that photograph was taken, you might wander into the old part of Ranfurly, look at this picture and the many others of old soldiers, examine the case of medals by the front door, the cabinet of old battered books: thirteen volumes of *The Great War*; leather-bound *Harper's* magazines, the earliest from 1894; a large tome with a grim title, *Bloody Gallipoli*.

The history of war and the honouring of the men who fought in them is everywhere at Ranfurly. The place is living history, the staff say, again and again.

You will see history on Anzac Day when the men put good jackets over a best pair of trousers. You'll see them in the halls, some staggering a little under the weight of their medals.

In Wing Two lounge you'll find three old sailors sitting in a row. Albert Martin's is the red easy chair on the left. Jack Noble and Ron O'Neill sit in the blue chairs. There is an empty chair between them.

"Oh, yes, we talk," says Noble. "But we're not in each other's arms, as it were."

They sit here most of the day, looking out at the endless traffic where Mt Albert Rd meets Mt Eden Rd.

If it is near enough to 11am Martin might have a glass of Blenheimer medium white wine, or a couple of cans of Ranfurly lager. That's lunch.

He can't be blowed going up the hall to the dining room where there are two large Peter McIntyre paintings and nicely laid out tables with placemats and place names.

Tonight for dinner there might be lamb medallions with red currant gravy; apple cake and custard.

The staff put flowers on the tables once but that didn't go down well. Vets don't really go for flowers on a dining table.

Martin has a little grumble about the lunches. "Soup and sandwiches, soup and sandwiches." It is mild, as grumbles go. Because here, "it's family", he says. You're allowed a little grumble about family.

In the lounge he and Jack Noble tell a good story about life at Ranfurly. The one about the bloke who got on the grog, took to the halls on his walker and toppled over.

The lads from Wing Two Lounge went to his aid. "We'd help anyone," Noble says. They all laugh at this because "we couldn't lift him." Not with Albert's leg, and Jack's epilepsy and Ron's Parkinson's and their collective years. But they would help, if they could, that's the point of the story.

"Well, we're all ex-Navy," says Martin. "Not that we're talking about that all the time. But it's, oh, the way we were then, I suppose." And Noble says, "you rely on each other. You might do something wrong, which could be detrimental to the whole company".

Two weeks before Anzac Day Albert Martin is talking about "when I had my leg off". This did not happen in the war. Having the Martin bird tattooed on his wrist did. He says, "we don't talk about the bloody war".

This place is living history, says the Ranfurly administration officer and war history buff, Barbara Smith, who can reel off the backgrounds of any of the 115 men. And exactly what they did in the war. This is helpful because they are not big talkers about such things. So the staff might say "he's not good on today" about a man who, at the end of his life, finds the beginning of an adulthood he has seldom spoken about more vivid than today.

"It often becomes very frightening at the end of their lives," Barbara Smith says. "They're still in battle. They need to know they're safe now."

There are men here who have what would now be called post-traumatic stress syndrome. A man who was in solitary confinement in a German POW camp will need to have his light on at night.

There are men here who might, while having their fingernails cut, be cast back in a traumatic moment in a Japanese POW camp. There is no real point in giving such things names. "How do you treat a guy of 80?" says Ranfurly's CEO, Bob Storey.

With "gentle caring". And, says Barbara Smith, by letting "the men know they are honoured and respected for who they are".

The staff who have looked after a man will, if there is warning of his dying, make a last visit to carry out a last duty: "A kiss and [to wish] them a good journey".

"We at Ranfurly consider our admissions list part of Auckland's roll of honour," Storey says.

On the doors of the rooms are the names of the returned servicemen and the names of their regiments - printed on strips of paper. This is practical, and moving.

If you pass by Ranfurly on a day that is not an official day of remembrance and the flag out the front is flying at half mast, you will know that one of the old soldiers has died.

Here are some things you won't hear at Ranfurly: Cellphones. Swearing, at least in front of ladies. The very rude words to a Navy song that Jack Noble, impervious to days of pleading, refuses to share. War stories.

Some things you will hear at Ranfurly: Men who call you "sweetheart" and say "God bless." Transistor radios. Jack Middleton saying "TTFN" (tata for now) when you leave. Albert Martin saying how when Jack had his gallstones "he nearly pegged it. But now he's right as rain".

You see some innovative things at Ranfurly. The rabbit ears aerial on a television set used to dry a flannel. An official photograph of Charles' and Camilla's wedding day, used to keep the flies off a glass of orange juice. A bloke using his walker to transport a dozen beer.

Some time between 2008 and 2012, Ranfurly Veterans Home and Hospital will have no World War II veterans left to care for. Ranfurly will adapt, Storey says. He sees blokes he knew in Vietnam outside city missions. In the future, you might come to Ranfurly and find three men in Wing Two lounge who are here for treatment for trauma or addiction.

They will likely be doing much as Albert and Jack and Ron have been for the past six months, sitting in their easy chairs, having an easy chat. Often not talking much at all. They are, they say, at ease in the company of other men: they spent the formative parts of their adulthood in such company.

They count themselves lucky to have found each other. Still, Ron says quietly, "I keep telling myself to stop staring out the window. It can be a very long day here."

At 75 he's the youngster of the trio. He wasn't in the war. "I wonder if some of them think 'what business has he got being here?' "

Every business, according to his Ranfurly mates: he did his compulsory military training.

Nobody talks about the war, anyway. But there was, anecdotally, once a chap here who wasn't a vet. The other men ostracised him.

There is, says Bob Storey, a sense of community which comes from shared, mostly unspoken experience.

"Well," says Jack Middleton, "there's no other people outside knows what went on, what happened. It doesn't have to be talked about and, no, its not talked about much."

He wanted to come to Ranfurly because, "I don't know. Just to be among returned soldiers, I suppose."

Some stories about the war. Jack Middleton, 88, NZ Army, 18th Battalion Reg No 2869. "I went away with them in 1940. I went in the Army on the 3rd of October, 1939 and I turned 22 on the 27th of October.

"We left for the Middle East on the Orion. Lovely boat. She was still in her passenger state. We had two-berth cabins. Full orchestra. There was plenty of beer aboard."

Anything else? "Oh, it was all right. It had its bad days, had its good days. I got a decoration. A Mentioned in Dispatches. At El Alamein. What for I don't know! The food was pretty logical, as I always call it."

Frank Walter Jones, 84, RAF, regimental number: 184772. Flight lieutenant, bomber command. Navigator. He wears his Lancaster cap every day. "I'm proud of it. It was the finest bomber in the world at the time."

He doesn't talk about the war. "Because I'm not proud of bombing beautiful cities."

Patrick Quail, 90. Royal Navy. 1st Lieutenant, minesweeper. On HMS Kelly under Lord Mountbatten. "We used to call him The Mad Devil."

There is a picture of the Kelly on his wall, and a picture of Quail aged about 25. What a handsome lad he was.

At 90 he's just as dapper. He wears a tie every day, and some days, a suit jacket under his fleece.

He has the photo of Charles and Camilla on their wedding day. It is signed on the back: "Pat, L, Charles." This is in recognition of Quail's association with Mountbatten who Charles loved dearly. The Mad Devil took Quail under his wing; gave him his commission.

"When he was in a good mood he would call me Patrick. When he was in a bad mood it was 'you'."

It can be a long day at Ranfurly. So Albert Martin says "if you get tired, you can have a lie down in my room while I'm at the RSA". His room, like most, measures 2.6m by 4.5m. It has pale blue walls, built-in drawers and a wardrobe, a bedside table and doors which open on to green spaces. These are small spaces in which to store your memories. Here is Albert Martin's Battle of the River Plate reunion plaque. The row of medals he'll put on for Anzac Day: "Just another day."

Under his bed is his life in boxes. The rest went to the Sallies.

Jack Middleton does tapestry in his room. He's been doing them since 1951: something to do on the farm on the Hauraki Plains on long winter evenings. It costs around \$58 for the patterns and wool.

"This chap across the road here, he's a regimental sergeant major in the Grenadier Guards, he's bought about 13 off me." Middleton sells them for \$60. "I'm big time. This is what you call a two-dollar shop."

He has an exercycle which he rides for quarter of an hour a day: "I'm flat out going nowhere." He has a framed certificate from the Greek government. He likes to talk about tapestry and his dog, Trish.

Trish now lives with his son and Middleton tells a tall story about how she arrived as an abandoned pup "and I was going to kill it". What nonsense. "I was. With a hammer.

"You know," he says, "they say of a dog, she never forgets you.

"If you see them today and don't see them until six months later, they just think it's yesterday."

This is both comforting and sad. It works with people, too. At Ranfurly, you'll be told, "you should talk to so and so. He did the most amazing things. He's just not so good on today." So off you go to talk to a man who did the most amazing things and who just thinks it's yesterday.

Is it sad to be living, as another Jack does, in the days when he was a little more than a boy in the Navy? Jack kisses my hand. Actually, he misses and kisses his own hand, but the thought was there. He says "I'm in the Navy."

He is about 20 years old. He loves it in the Navy but, oh boy, he has to talk his way out if it, quick smart, when he's caught kissing the hand of an officer's girlfriend.

In the day room in the unit is a life-sized poster of Marilyn Monroe.

"Not a bad place to be stuck, is it?" says CEO Storey.

Settling in can be hard. Jan Bennett, the nursing services manager, likens it to the first weeks at boarding school.

That is the case at any home for elderly. But for all the stoicism of the men, they have a special vulnerability, she says. Perhaps as a result of the effects of war. They didn't talk about the war when they came home.

"Now they have more time to think. As we get older we're not looking forward, we're looking back and for some men, the past is not particularly pleasant."

How do you treat isolation, you wonder, when you meet a sweet man with no family who sits in his little room, with its blank walls who says: "It's nice to have somebody to talk to. Thank you for bringing Christmas."

Bennett says "so often in life, loneliness is present, isn't it? I think [all you can do] is recognise it."

There is a sort of hierarchy, too. It is one not based on rank but, as Jack Middleton puts it: "Oh, you've got to pick and choose, because there's a lot away with the fairies."

When Albert Martin first came to Ranfurly six months ago, "I didn't think you'd be allowed a drink.

"Then I saw a bloke here and he had a flagon so I thought, 'well, good enough for him.' "

Bob Storey says, "Should we stop them drinking? Probably. Should we stop them smoking? Probably."

At the Bob Reed Unit where veterans with dementia live, the first person we see is a jolly-

looking chap rushing along on his walker, a fag stuck in the corner of his mouth.

"As you can see," says Storey, "we are a non-smoking facility."

There are strict rules about animals, too. Four cats live here and a couple of dogs. Pets are by negotiation. "You probably couldn't bring an elephant," says Storey.

His hobby is racing huskies. He brings them to work sometimes.

He is a Vietnam vet although "I was a career soldier, these guys are citizen soldiers. I owe them".

He says "our facilities are ageing, like our people", but this is just not wanting to be seen to be skiting. Vets don't do skiting.

In the hallway we meet the much-decorated Richard Pepper who was in Japan in World War II, then in Korea and Vietnam.

He was Storey's warrant officer when he was "a newly commissioned lieutenant, 23 years old ... and knew everything.

"Richard quickly demonstrated that this was not so. It was an absolute thrill to meet Richard again. Here was the opportunity for me to repay, in some small way, the contribution Richard made to the RNZAC and to the development of blokes like me."

Pepper, Storey says, was known for his dry humour. We talk about Ranfurly and Pepper says, "I'd rather be there, flying helicopters in Korea."

On our last day at Ranfurly Albert Martin says, all right, then, he will tell a story about the bloody war. The story is about a mate of his, Jack Lynch, killed in a freak accident on a day on HMS Garth in the English Channel.

During target practice the pom pom guns hit a piece of glass on deck which shattered, hit Jack Lynch and killed him outright. Martin didn't cry. "No. I was a man. Although I was only 19." He'll think about him on Anzac Day. "Oh yes, I will do. Although he's much younger than me. He's only 21 still."