

Soldiers' home launches \$10m funding drive

By Nick Smith

Stan Kerr was crossing the Sangro River in the winter of 1943, in one of the first major battles for the New Zealand Division in the Italian campaign.

A year later, the bridge builder and sergeant with the Fifth Field Company was "in and out of Cassino all the time because every time we built a bridge [the Germans] would blow it up."

A bomb blast which destroyed Sergeant Kerr's hearing was to end his war and send him back to civilian life.

More than 50 years on, health problems after a couple of falls have reunited him with fellow veterans, in an atmosphere of care and camaraderie.

Yesterday, the 81-year-old was enjoying another day at Auckland's Ranfurly Home for war veterans - a place he describes as the "most marvellous place" and "absolutely fantastic."

Yet the refuge for the men and women who have served their country and are now in their twilight years is potentially under threat as money dries up.

The Ranfurly Trust chairman, Graeme McKay, and Homes Community chairman, John O'Brien, say that the Patriotic and Canteen Funds Board is increasingly devolving responsibility for homes to the community.

To forestall the expected crisis, the trust yesterday launched a funding drive.

The money raised will be used to ensure that future veterans, such as the Kiwi soldiers serving in Timor, will still have a sanctuary in their later years.

Most of the 140 residents, predominantly Second World War veterans, are single or divorced and are humble servicemen or women with limited financial means.

Without Ranfurly, they would be at the mercy of the market-driven health reforms, possibly eking out a living in a less salubrious rest-home.

Mr McKay is imploring businesses and individuals to help to save Ranfurly in a drive to raise \$10 million, the interest from which will finance operating costs.

The campaign was given impetus with the donation of \$270,000 from the Ponsonby and Herne Bay Returned Services Association, from surplus operating costs.

"This is the first major donation we have received and it's a beauty," said Mr McKay.

Established in 1903 after the end of the Boer War in South Africa, the original kauri home is on 3ha in Mt Roskill.

Survivors from the Crimean War, the 1857 Indian Mutiny, the Boer War, the two world wars and the Korean War find solace at Ranfurly, named after the Earl of Ranfurly, at that time the Governor of the colony of New Zealand.

Once a home for indigent soldiers, Ranfurly performs a different function today, with most requiring fulltime care and many residents housed in the hospital or dementia wing.

"Rest-home is a euphemism for geriatric care facilities," said Mr O'Brien.

"By the time they are admitted here, they are very, very frail.

"Our military involvement in East Timor underscores the importance of maintaining a facility like this."

Mr McKay said: "A young guy who steps on a landmine might be in here at 35 rather than 55."

At Ranfurly, old empty shell casings prop open doors and on each bedroom door is recorded the name, rank and serial number of the occupant.

Residents might forget the names of children or wives but often the last memory to disappear is their serial number, proving how "service had a profound impact and influence on their lives."