

Tour of duty nears an end

By RUTH KERR

Somewhere between 2008 and 2012, Ranfurly Veterans Home and Hospital will have no World War II veterans left to care for.

But when Auckland has repaid its debt to the last of these old diggers, what will become of the Three Kings landmark that has cared for veterans for 100 years?

Will the revered institution have completed its last tour of duty?

As New Zealand's active involvement in worldwide conflicts declines in favour of increased peacekeeping duties, it's a question the Ranfurly Trust that oversees the \$7 million operation must consider.

Ranfurly was set up to provide a home for soldiers and sailors who were "indigent (poor) or otherwise unable to provide for themselves".

It opened on December 10, 1903, with funds raised through a National Patriotic Appeal, sponsored by the then governor-general, the Fifth Earl of Ranfurly.

The earl said at the time: "The present system of herding the veterans with the waifs and strays of humanity is not a fitting nor a honourable thing."

Ranfurly was established as a memorial to the 272 servicemen who died between 1899 and 1902 in the South African War (also known as the Boer War because Boers invaded British territories).

The first 40 occupants of the Auckland Veterans Home were, however, veterans of the New Zealand Wars of 1845-70 (also known as the Maori Wars), the Crimean War of 1853-56 (between Russia and the allied powers of England, France, Turkey and Sardinia over French mistrust of Russia's ambitions in the Balkans) and the Indian Mutiny of 1857-1858 when the Bengal Army revolted against the British in India.

Ranfurly chief executive and Vietnam War veteran Bob Storey says many of the early residents came back from the Crimea with problems.

"Basically, a home was built in what was then rural Auckland to house these guys," Mr Storey says.

World War I and World War II created more veterans with needs specific to their wartime experiences.

Many went to war with very little training and some WWII veterans were on active service in pretty grim conditions for up to six years, Mr Storey says.

"War Pension statistics indicate that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder affects some 40 per cent of Vietnam veterans. It is reasonable to assume that the rate among WWI and WWII veterans was at least as high.

"Veterans have special needs. Physical disability, chronic illness and psychiatric conditions are recognised legacies of service. Over 60 per cent of our residents have problems related to their wartime experiences.

"Some either never established or never re-established normal domestic relations after they were discharged. They became isolated."

Many never recovered their postwar prospects in the civilian workforce either and repatriation schemes were limited.

Some lucky ones went back to school and got qualifications under an initiative that involved headmasters from Auckland's top schools rehabilitating returned servicemen.

A great camaraderie was established within this group, which went on to university and became Auckland's business leaders from the 1950s to 1980s.

"They were the lucky ones," Mr Storey says. "Typically, our residents are single, widowed or divorced and some have no, or few close relatives, to take an interest in their well-being."

From 1950 to 1980, Ranfurly grew to accommodate the needs of the thousands of WWII veterans approaching old age.

It now has an 82-single room resthome, a 35-bed hospital and a 24-bed dementia unit. They house 141 veterans, including six women and some couples, who have single rooms but access to each other.

But at a time when retirement villages are mushrooming to meet the demands of an ageing population, Ranfurly's clientele is rapidly declining.

What happens, come 2012, when the last of the old diggers has gone and there aren't enough new veterans to sustain Ranfurly?

It's a challenge Mr Storey is pursuing with enthusiasm. He doesn't think New Zealand will ever have mass conscription again, but we will always have veterans.

"Whether you agree with war or not, there will always be veterans. They may be more involved in peacekeeping than in straight combat but as far as I'm concerned, if you have live bullets in your gun you are talking about war."

New Zealand peacekeeping forces are involved in the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan.

One solution would be to change Ranfurly's direction, to create sheltered accommodation for servicemen who need rehabilitation to get back into civilian life.

"Australian research indicates there is a real need in this area, it's a matter of making sure we don't duplicate existing services," Mr Storey says.

He is working on funding for a research project into the needs of future veterans.

"Another idea is to provide a retirement community which has access to continuing health care. There will always be veterans and we have a mandate to care for them," he says.

"The important thing now is to establish what their needs will be and make sure we are in position to meet them. Underlying our future is a commitment to remembering the contribution of the ex-service community and to ensure their care needs are met."

Meanwhile, looking after former Fire Service and police staff is keeping Ranfurly workers busy, Mr Storey says.

"We're at a crossroads but we've got a lot of options. Closing down is not one of them. This would fly in the face of Lord Ranfurly's original mandate - to care for veterans."