

Blumine Island (Oruawairua) gun battery



During World War II (1939–45), a number of large gun emplacements were built in the Marlborough Sounds as protection for a (never used) secure anchorage for the US Navy in Queen Charlotte Sound (Totaranui). Two of these emplacements were built on Blumine Island (Oruawairua), and parts of them and their associated facilities can still be seen.

Why were the gun emplacements built?

The British military recommended that New Zealand establish major coastal defences in the Marlborough Sounds in late 1941. When Japan entered the war in December 1941, plans were updated to provide a secure anchorage in Queen Charlotte Sound (Totaranui) for the US Navy. On 26 February 1942, the New Zealand war cabinet approved a provisional estimate of £220,000 for 6-inch guns to be installed to cover Pelorus Sound (Te Hoiere) and Queen Charlotte Sound (Totaranui) as well as Tory Channel. The two Blumine emplacements were completed by mid-June 1942, and those on Maud Island (Te Hoiere), Post Office

Point and Maraetai Bay by early July of the same year. An additional emplacement at Whakenui Bay was completed in January 1943. The total cost of the batteries was more than £550,000. Ultimately, however, the US Navy never used the anchorage in Queen Charlotte Sound (Totaranui).

The military organisation

The 84 Heavy Battery had its headquarters in a house in Broadway Street, Picton. Captain H.G. Thomas commanded the temporary 6-inch howitzer batteries established at Maraetai Bay, Clark Point and Ketu Bay in January 1942, and oversaw the military input into construction by the Public Works Department (PWD) of the permanent emplacements (see Figure 1).

The construction process

Two scows were used to move materials to the inaccessible Blumine site. The PWD built a substantial wharf to land workers and supplies. The island's very steep slopes and soft rock caused construction delays.

What was built?

Two guns were installed on Blumine Island (Oruawairua), each with an observation post and magazine. Military barracks were built to accommodate the personnel manning the guns. There was also a separate PWD camp and a water and power supply. The Blumine emplacements each had a 6-inch BL MkVII gun on a naval P.III mount, 156–160 ft ASL, range c 13.5 km.

The guns were ready for action by September 1942 and proof fired on 9 March 1943.

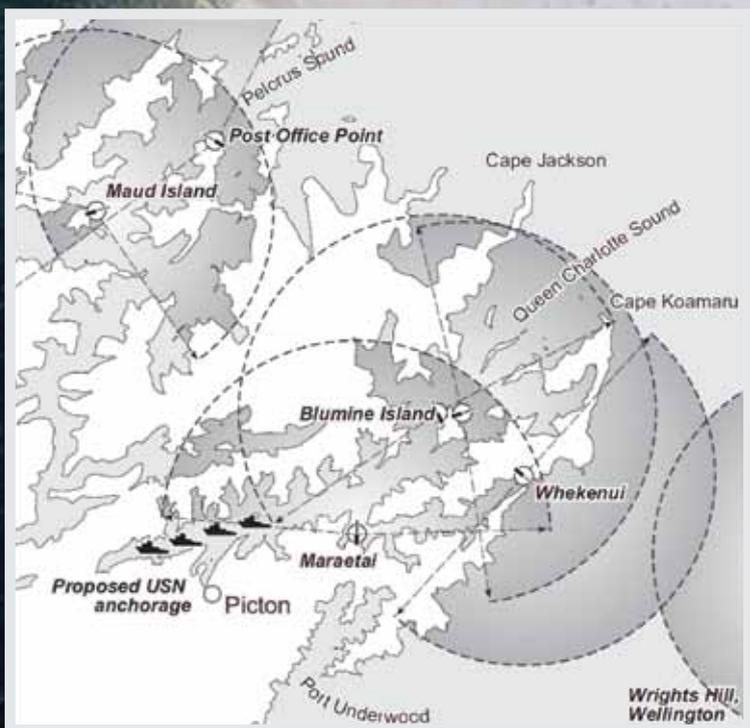


Figure 1. Location of WWII gun emplacements in the Marlborough Sounds and their ranges.
Map: Chris Edkins.

Staffing and day-to-day operation

The 84 Heavy Battery initially consisted of 5 officers and 69 men. Two officers and up to 20 men were usually stationed on Blumine Island (Oruawairua), although from late 1943, there was one non-commissioned officer and seven other ranks.

Most of the day-to-day work on the island comprised monitoring ship movements.

What happened to the gun emplacements?

The threat of enemy action gradually declined after the Battle of Midway in June 1942, and the battery went onto 'care and maintenance' in September 1943. A month later, the guns were dismounted and sent to the Auckland Division of the Naval Reserve. The War Assets Realisation Board removed most structures from 1944 to 1945, and the batteries were formally disestablished in December 1945. Figure 2 shows the first Blumine battery in 1944 (after the guns had been removed).

What can you see today?

Two metal poles mark the site of the old wharf on the north-western side of the island. The PWD camp was on an adjacent terrace; dam and hut remains can still be seen there. Up the well-graded historic road to the north-west is a magazine, and a track forking off that leads to the first gun emplacement.

A 20-minute walk further up the road takes you to the second emplacement. Another 10 minutes takes you past the second magazine to the 215 steps leading to the ruins of the army barracks site.

Modern history of the island

Blumine Island (Oruawairua) is also known as Pig Island. It was declared a Pilot and Signal Station Reserve in 1865, but was thereafter used for sheep farming. A 113-acre scenic reserve was established at the southern end of the island in 1912. After World War II, the army passed the land to the Department of Lands and Survey. The structures are registered and protected as historic sites in the Historic Places Trust Register and in the Marlborough District Plan. Blumine Island (Oruawairua) is now administered as a scenic reserve by the Department of Conservation.

Further reading

Peter Cooke, 2000: *Defending New Zealand: ramparts on the sea 1840-1950s*. Defence of New Zealand Study Group, Wellington. Pp. 478-79, 851.

Kerry Neal and Nola Leov, 1999: *The Price of Vigilance: the Building of Gun Emplacements in the Marlborough Sounds, 1942*. Privately printed, Nelson.

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Figure 2. View of first gun emplacement on Blumine Island (Oruawairua) and road to second emplacement.

Photo: NZ Aerial Mapping (F516, taken 1944).

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