

TE AURAKI

The Return

“Today we honour the memory and the sacrifice of 27 soldiers who died serving their country overseas. We’re bringing them home to their families, who have waited more than 60 years for this moment.”

“This project is about making sure the inequalities and inconsistencies of the past are put right and everyone is treated the same, regardless of wealth, rank or cause of death.”

Te Auraki (The Return) project manager,
Group Captain Carl Nixon



Lieutenant Laurence Macintosh whose 1 RNZIR soldiers provided the vigil for the men who were repatriated. Photo: Petty Officer Chris Weissenborn

There were tears, smiles and sighs of relief when the remains of service men, and one child, who had lain in the ground of foreign countries for decades were finally brought home recently.

The ceremonies were dignified and poignant as serving men and women carefully watched over the caskets and brought them to New Zealand soil to be finally laid to rest by the servicemen's families.

In the most recent tranche the remains of 27 soldiers and one child were repatriated from Malaysia and Singapore and returned to their families at a ramp ceremony at Auckland International Airport.

The New Zealand Army soldiers were serving in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam when they died. The child was the son of a member of the Army.

The remains were returned on a chartered Air New Zealand flight and were received with a traditional Māori welcome, before the caskets were carried past a guard of honour and handed back to their families.

A short private family service was held, followed by an NZDF haka as the hearses left the airport.

Earlier this year two Air Force airmen were repatriated from Fiji and a Navy mechanic from American Samoa.

Under Te Auraki (The Return) Service personnel and dependents buried overseas between 1955 and 1971 will be returned to New Zealand, following a change in Government policy.

Between 1955 and 1971 NZDF personnel who died while serving overseas were interred in overseas cemeteries unless their families paid repatriation costs.

Representatives from Malaysia and Singapore attended the soldiers' ramp ceremony. The NZDF also invited representatives from Veterans Affairs, the Returned and Services' Association, and Vietnam and Malayan veterans' organisations to witness the arrival home.

RNZAF Group Captain Carl Nixon said it was important to return the fallen personnel in a dignified manner, in accordance with NZDF's contemporary cultural, religious and military protocols.

"Today we honour the memory of a child and the sacrifice of 27 soldiers who died serving their country overseas. We're bringing them home to their families,



A soldier's remains are carried from the aircraft.

who have waited more than 60 years for this moment," Group Captain Nixon said.

"This project is about making sure the inequalities and inconsistencies of the past are put right and everyone is treated the same, regardless of wealth, rank or cause of death."

The remains have been reinterred at Service, public, or private cemeteries, depending on family preferences and the Service person's qualifying service. Memorials (headstones or plaques) have been provided and \$1000 was given towards a headstone for those who wish for their relative to be interred in a public/private cemetery.

The NZDF is not conducting military funerals because all of the deceased had military funerals before they were originally buried. Families have been provided with NZDF support, such as chaplains, buglers and pallbearers as required.

The NZDF deployed an expert disinterment team of bio archaeologists, forensic anthropologists and NZDF odontologists (dentists) to carry out the repatriation and identification process.

The team was led by an NZDF doctor and worked alongside the Malaysian Armed Forces, who provided logistic and forensic support.

Planning is already under way for the next two

tranches of project Te Auraki, under which two personnel will be repatriated from England later this month, and two from the Republic of Korea in October.

The New Zealand Government is funding the repatriation. The initial budget for the project was \$10 million. However, it is estimated the cost will not be more than \$7 million.

The families of those being repatriated have been the NZDF's key priority during Te Auraki, and each family has been consulted and supported by a liaison officer throughout the process. The decision to repatriate Service personnel was made by the families.

There is no cost to families for the disinterment, repatriation, and re-interment of their relative, and up to 12 members of each family are being invited to attend the arrival ceremony for their relative, at no cost to them. The NZDF is providing support (chaplains, buglers, pallbearers) for the re-interments as requested.

Families can reinter their relative at a place and time of their choosing in New Zealand. Remains can be reinterred at Service, public, or private cemeteries depending on family preferences and the Service person's qualifying service. Memorials (headstones or plaques) can be provided and \$1000 given towards a headstone for those who wish for their relative to be interred in a public/private cemetery.

REPATRIATION – AN UNPRECEDENTED OPERATION

By Rebecca Quilliam

Bringing home the bodies of dozens of servicemen who died and were buried overseas is an unprecedented mission for the New Zealand Defence Force, but the man at the fore of the operation said it was vital it was done right.

Group Captain (GPCAPT) Carl Nixon was offered the opportunity to lead the repatriation project in July last year.

"I knew immediately I was going to do it because it was such a great thing to do. It wasn't until I was walking back up the road that I thought 'Crickey, this is really important to so many people.'"

However, the first repatriation was completed without a hitch, he said.

"From the arrival into Fiji of all the teams and getting everyone over there in time, to the disinterment at the sites, to the pick up by the C-130 Hercules, to the on-time arrival at Base Ohakea and finally to the relief and the excitement and appreciation on the faces of the families."

The moment the aircraft touched down was the most poignant for the families because "they told us that was the moment it had become real", he said.

Reading the stories of those who died and how the family were treated in the aftermath was emotional for GPCAPT Nixon and he realised he needed to work with a certain amount of detachment.

"I could not possibly sustain that level of emotion in this project and what's really helped has been the family liaison lead, Yvonne Walden, getting the liaison officers out into the field and working with the families. Because that allowed me to step back, and at times, say no to things. We could not meet all the requests of the families.

"I am a military officer, so I will naturally default to the orders of the day. But this project is not like that. This is important to the families and also, it's important that we re-establish that trust with this group of New Zealanders that lost a lot of faith in their Government and their Defence Force at the time."

When the last of the bodies have been brought home to their families, it will bring a feeling of relief that the repatriation issue had been resolved, GPCAPT Nixon said.

"We will have contacted everyone, we will have brought everyone home that is in scope to bring home, so this issue is now closed off for New Zealand.

"Without doubt it will be very emotional for the project team, because every day I see how much work they do towards this. And that's not just about talking with the families and hearing their stories. It's also the straight administration of getting hundreds of people travelling and the mechanics of the project and the ceremonial aspects as well. They are engaged in it a heck of a lot," he said.



Group Captain Carl Nixon

The Commanding Officer, 2 Engineer Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Terry McDonald and his RSM, Warrant Officer Class One Greg Hinch travelled to Opotiki (Torere Marae) to represent The Royal New Zealand Engineers at the reinterment of SPR Waitawhiti Toni, RNZE. Sapper Toni died on active duty in Malaysia in 1966 and was buried at Terendak Camp.

“It was a really significant event for the Corps as he was the only Sapper to come home with Te Auraki and we thought it was important to let him, his family and friends know that the Corps remembers. It was a really poignant service for him and PTE Rongomai Honatana, RNZIR – the community welcomed us and showed strong support for the event. It was really well supported by Opotiki Cadet Forces and veterans, which was great.

“It was also good to hear about the long and proud military history of the community members – there are a number of gallantry awards that have been presented through various conflicts and campaigns, and the small community has a lot to be proud of with their sons and daughters.”

Lieutenant Colonel Tim Tuatini also travelled to the reinterment of SPR Toni, and that of Private Rongomai Honatana, who are both his second cousins. He said it was a memorable and moving experience. “My great aunt never expected to see her son returned, and his name was on a tombstone of his own with hers in the cemetery.”

LTCOL Tuatini said a huge crowd of locals turned out for the ceremonies, including a large number of Vietnam veterans. “They sung as we entered the marae, and the return was obviously very important to them. It’s a very small marae, but they have contributed so much to the armed forces.”



Relatives of one of The Returned at his reinterment.



Soldiers place the casket into the ground during the reinterment.



A continuous vigil was maintained over the caskets until they were repatriated to New Zealand.

NZ ARMY SOLDIERS' 24 HOUR VIGIL

One group of NZ Army soldiers was closer than most to the repatriation process, responsible for ensuring the fallen personnel were never left alone on their journey home.

After the remains were formally identified, a team of ten soldiers from 1 Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1 RNZIR) conducted a 24 hour vigil around the caskets until they were returned to their families in New Zealand.

The significance of the role was not lost on Private Sean Chapman who spent almost two months in Malaysia as part of the team who conducted the vigil every day in shifts, led by Lieutenant Lyle Patterson.

“The vigil is a way of always being there, every step of the way for them. It’s our way of saying you’re not left behind, you’re not forgotten, and we are there with you all the way until you get home.”

Pte Chapman said it was fitting that members of 1 RNZIR helped bring the remains home, as the majority of the repatriated personnel belonged to that battalion or its predecessors.

For PTE Chapman, who hails from Opotiki, it struck particularly close to home, with Private Nongoma Honatana being repatriated to his hometown.

“These guys are Kiwis, but it’s a lot closer to home, the possibility of knowing someone who is related to them or knew them, who is still alive now, is actually quite high because it wasn’t that long ago.”

The scale of the loss was particularly striking when conducting the vigil at a hall in the Malaysian Armed Forces’ Wardieburn Camp in Kuala Lumpur, where the caskets of the twenty-seven personnel and one child were transferred ahead of the flight back to New Zealand.

“It’s one of those experiences that I don’t think anyone else, hopefully, will have to experience.

“It’s quite eye opening when you see the impact they would have had on, not only their friends, their platoons, and on the Kiwis in general, when you have casualties of that size.

“It does take you back quite a bit when you see the cost of war and the cost that New Zealand paid to help get independence for Malaysia.”

Lieutenant Laurence Macintosh said being a part of the Te Auraki team that conducted the disinterment in both Malaysia and Singapore was a humbling and altogether moving experience for the soldiers of 1 RNZIR. “At all times during the operation, our soldiers provided overwatch for the caskets of the fallen and in some cases they were with them from their disinterment in Taiping to their burial in Taupiri.”

Private Benjamin Tana, from 1 RNZIR, was a member of the vigil team that kept a 24 hour watch over the soldiers in their caskets until they were returned to their families in New Zealand. He discovered he was related to Trooper Adrian Thomas through his mother’s great-uncle Paul Thomas (Adrian’s brother) who was one of the main instigators in bringing his brother and other fallen soldiers home.

He got to attend the reburial of Trooper Thomas in the family urupa in Kaeo. “It was a great honour to finally bring him back home after so many years resting overseas.”