

Blumine Island gun battery

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During World War II (1939–45), a number of large gun emplacements were built in the Marlborough Sounds, to provide protection for a (never used) secure anchorage for the US Navy in Queen Charlotte Sound. Two of these emplacements were built on Blumine Island 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 for the US navy. The War Cabinet approved a provisional estimate of £220,000 on 26 February 1942 for 6-inch guns covering the Pelorus and Queen Charlotte Sounds as well as Tory Channel. The two Blumine emplacements were completed by mid

June 1942 and those on Maud Island, Post Office Point and Maraetai by early July. An additional emplacement at Whekenui was completed in January 1943. The total cost of the batteries was more than £550,000. Ultimately, however, the US Navy never used Queen Charlotte Sound.

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 public works construction of the permanent emplacements (see Fig. 1).

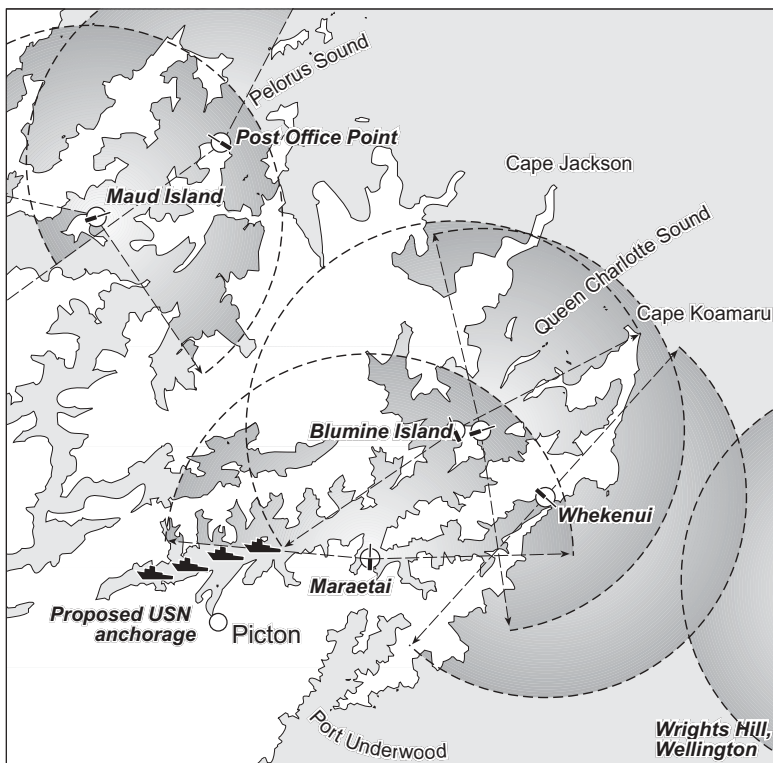
The construction process

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

What was built?

There were two guns, each with an observation post and magazine. There was also a separate works 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.

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



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

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, although from late 1943 there was one non-commissioned officer and seven other ranks. Most of the day-to-day work on the island was 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 Naval Reserve. The War Assets Realisation Board removed most structures during 1944-45 and the batteries were formally disestablished in December 1945.

Figure 2. View of first gun emplacement on Blumine Island and road to second emplacement.
Photo: NZ Aerial Mapping (F516, taken 1944).



Fig. 2 shows the first Blumine battery in 1944 (guns 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 public works camp was on an adjacent terrace; dam and hut remains can still be seen there. Up the old well-graded but not maintained road to the northwest is a magazine and then a track forking off which 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 and to the end of the track where there are 215 steps up to the army camp site.

Modern history of the island

Blumine Island is also known as Oruawairua and 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. Blumine Island is now administered as a scenic reserve by the Department of Conservation.

Further reading

Peter Cooke, 2000: *Defending New Zealand*. Defence Study Group, Wellington, Pp. 478-479, 851.

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