



BLOCKHOUSE BAY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
INCORPORATED

NEWSLETTER

June 2023. Number 113

NEXT MEETING The Blockhouse Bay Historical Society next meeting is on Wednesday 7th June at 1.15 pm in the Community Centre.

SPEAKER Local Archeologists: DR. HANS-DIETER BADER & DR. JANICE ADAMSON have done considerable research into our Bay's early history. The talk will discuss the original Maori settlement in and around Te Whau Pa (Blockhouse Bay). Come along and bring a friend for a very interesting afternoon.

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

The month of May is particularly special for us this year. No, not because the sun finally managed to break through the relentless rain over an actual weekend - although that is a good enough reason to celebrate. Our celebration is because 100 years ago - in May 1923 - two baby girls were born, one in New Zealand and one on the other side of the world, in England. Both are longstanding members of the historical society and well known to many of us.

Nancy Howlett (nee Turner) was born in Wellington on 18 May 1923. She met her husband Ray at Victoria University and both embarked on very long careers as teachers. They initially were country school teachers, mainly around Hawkes Bay. Nancy at one stage drove the school bus, and they raised their three children in rural communities.



Then in the early 70s they moved to Mt Roskill and each taught at various West Auckland schools, including Three Kings, Laingholm and Avondale Intermediate, so some members may well remember them from this time. Nancy together with her late husband joined the Historical Society in 2005, and over the years has continued her interest, and enjoyed the Newsletters. She still lives independently in her home and is enjoying birthday celebrations with all her family and friends.

We look forward to sharing more of Nancy's story with you in a later newsletter.

Sheila Sekula (nee Drennan) was born in London on 16 May 1923. During WWII she joined the WAAF and was stationed at an Air Force base near Cambridge, eventually rising to the rank of Watchkeeper. Of the strength of the W.A.A.F., some 18 per cent., comprising officers and airwomen, were engaged on watchkeeping duties in radar, operations rooms, intelligence, meteorology and on cypher duties.

Sheila, her late husband, Wojciech and their two sons arrived in New Zealand in 1953 and came to live in Blockhouse Bay. The area at that time was known as the back blocks. She spent her first months here chasing the neighbours cows out of her

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Visit our website; www.blockhousebayhistoricalsociety.com

garden every morning, before running down the road to catch the bus into the city for work. The old bus was a Bedford with wooden slat seats. The scenery she saw consisted of paddocks, hills and bush. Sheila admits this was a shock after living in London, but she soon fell in love with the area and has lived here ever since. Bringing up four sons and being actively involved in the community. She was a founding committee member of the St Dominic's Church Building Fund Housie Group in 1977, alongside good friends Kath Vickers and Alan Ryan. All three played an important role for over 40 years, as well as being long standing members of the historical society. Sheila lives independently in the home she and Wojciech built in the Bay in 1960; walking regularly from there to the village and to attend our bi-monthly meetings.

We would like to join with our right honourable Prime Minister Chris Hipkins and his royal highness King Charles in congratulating Nancy and Sheila on their very special birthdays.

I am also excited to announce we have recently recommenced our journey to video record local residents sharing their personal stories. You may remember **The Living History Project film made in 2009**. Where among others, the personal stories of Trevor Welch and Johnny Green were digitally recorded. The first of our new interviews took place in February and April with Yvonne Dabb and Sheila Sekula. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them both for taking part so enthusiastically. Our time spent together was not only entertaining and informative, but thoroughly enjoyable as well. What amazing memories you both have - thank you! The article below entitled: WAAF On Charge is an excerpt from our interview with Sheila.

This year's **Heritage Festival** will run from 23 September to 8 October. The theme is **Peace, Love and Protest**. Our local library has chosen to focus on Love - in particular, weddings. We have

decided to compile a display in Armanasco House in conjunction with their Weddings display and activities.

To this end, we need to borrow your favourite wedding photo, story, outfit or accessory. We will take good care of these and return them safely to you. The wedding need not have taken place in the bay; your association is enough.

Everyone who lends us a wedding item will be rewarded with a chocolate fish. So go on, search out those old albums, hat and dress boxes and encourage family members, friends and neighbours to do the same.



Photo credit: Murray Freer Photos
AKL Libraries Kura ID: Footprints 06980

Ideally we would like to have enough images to form a wall sized photo montage, complimented by interesting items of clothing and accessories. All photos will be copied and returned straight away. The sooner you can get them to us, the better idea we will have of how to design the montage. All other items will only be required for the duration of the festival, but if you could let us know earlier what these are, that would be greatly appreciated.

Thanks in advance
Krystene



WAAF On Charge - Sheila Sekula

From our video interview with Sheila on 20 April 2023

When I was in the Air Force. One day, I was in Control where my office was, and this huge american plane landed. I can't remember the name of it. It was the biggest plane I've ever seen. The crew came up and they were talking away and laughing, and they said: "Would you like to see the plane?" "Oh yes", I said. "I'd love it. I'll be off duty in a minute." It was lunch time. So I said: "Okay, I'll come with you". When I got there, they were showing me all these magnificent things on the front of the plane. There was another Kiwi officer there, too. They said: "We're just going home for lunch. Would you like to come?" I said: "Oh yes, that would be nice. So I stayed on the plane and they showed me where the parachute was under the seat. I sat next to the pilot. We took off and went up to their station. It wasn't very far flying, just a few miles because it was such a big plane. We landed and we had a lovely lunch.

Then the next morning, I was put on a charge for flying in an American plane without a parachute! And so I had to go in front and be Court Martialed - left right left right. I was a real prisoner. They asked me all kinds of questions. My solicitor was talking for me, and then at the end he said: "Would you like to say something?" I said: "Yes I would." I told them we didn't fly high enough for me to jump out even if I had the parachute on! And that's the story - full-stop. But they replied it was against regulations. Even though I'd never heard of it before.

They put me on 7 Days Hard Labour. Every morning, I had to report to the Guard House with my full pack, my tin helmet and my gas mask and everything else I had. I turned up the first morning and the sergeant said: "I don't know what to do with you. I've never had a woman prisoner before. Oh, maybe you can clean the windows." I thought, oh golly I've never cleaned windows in my life. So I said, how do you do it? And he said, you put this powder on the glass and then you come back and wipe it off. Well of course it was a long time between when I put the powder on the first window pane to when I finished. So when I came back to wipe it off, it was stuck on and I couldn't

move it. I told him I can't do them because I can't get the powder off. "Oh well", he said "never mind, just forget it. I'll get one of the boys to do it."

Next morning, he said: "I think I'll take you to the kitchen and see if they've got anything you can do." So he asked the chappies and they said yes you can peel the potatoes for lunch. Never peeled a potato in my life! He took me to a little iron thing that looked like a stove with a pipe and an electric thing. He said: "You put the potatoes in there and you put the top on and then you switch it on. The water comes and it pushes them all together and it takes the skin off." So I did that and I'm sitting there wondering how long I have to do it for. I haven't got a clue. So in the end, being nose-y, I opened the top and they were all like little gourmet potatoes, which they didn't use in the Air Force. So, they took me back to the guard house. Oh well, no we didn't have any success.

For the third day, I turned up and he said we've got these big petrol drums - 40 gallon petrol drums. They're empty and we want them taken down to the other end of the station. I thought oh my gosh. I got my bicycle and some string. They had a little hook on the top, so I tied them



The B-17E, the first mass-produced model of the Flying Fortress, carried nine machine guns and a 4,000-pound bomb load. It was several tons heavier than the prototypes and bristled with armament. It was the first Boeing airplane with the distinctive — and enormous — tail for improved control and stability during high-altitude bombing.

on. I had about three or four each side of the handlebars. I started up and I made the most terrible noise. They were banging and clanging and I got halfway there and one of the crews were just coming back from an operation. They asked: "What are you doing?" I said: "Well, I've got to move all these drums down to the....." "Oh, forget it." they said. "We'll take them." So they got them off my bicycle and they all carried them down to the dump. When I got back to the guard house he said: "How did you do it so quickly?" Oh well I said, I had a little bit of assistance. Exasperated he replied: "I think you better go back to your billet and don't go out for the rest of the day! And don't come back here because I don't know what to do with you!" So thank you very much, goodbye. So I went back and that was the end of my hard labour.

So, you know, it was an episode and I shouldn't have been proud of it. But I couldn't help getting my spoke in, you know. I didn't do anything really wrong at all.

AN UNSUNG WARTIME HEROINE

- first published in The Herald -
The Aucklander on 9 Nov, 2006

In a sleepy Blockhouse Bay rest home resides a woman with a heroic history. With Armistice Day approaching, she spoke to Merilee Andrews.

She still remembers the parcels of food she carried up into the mountains. In short snatches, she can just see the faces of the young men who hid out there, and waited for her to come. Theresia Neumann, 91 in January (2007), was a war heroine, an Austrian national recruited in World War II to join the underground movement, and help the Allied soldiers who found themselves inside enemy territory. But as Armistice Day (November 11) looms, the day meant to mark and remember the brave deeds of wartime, the unassuming rest home resident has only the sketchiest threads of her own story. With no family here and no children to remind her of it, her friend Sheila Sekula has become her memory.

The two women first met in 1953 in Blockhouse Bay, and from that time, Sheila was one of the few to know the Austrian's story. Theresia didn't tell everyone about her past, but Sheila, herself an emigre from England, discovered her friend had moved here with her husband the year before, at the invitation of the New Zealand government. Sheila remembers seeing a citation, and other papers and photos from the time - tragically lost when Theresia's house was burgled more than 10 years ago. Sheila's recollection, still sharp as a bayonet, was that the famous food packages had made their way to several of our chaps, and the powers of the land were duly grateful. "There was a system there

And was that lunch worth it?

Oh yes, it was beautiful. They said to me at the end, we're having a dance at the end of the month and we don't have enough women. Do you think you could talk some of your WAAFs into coming? I said, oh yes, I'm sure they'd love to come. So I went to the CO (Commanding Officer). She said, oh yes, as long as you take chaperones. So you can go as a chaperone. Lord, help me, I thought. We had a beautiful dance. When it was time to go home, we had to get them back onto the lorry - a big old army lorry. Couldn't find half of them! So we spent half the night looking for them in the men's quarters. Everybody enjoyed it. After that, every month they had a dance, we took the WAAFs down there. They loved it!So I was redeemed.

"I'm just trying to think of the plane. I don't think it was the Liberator. It was a huge plane. Great long thing."

[in Austria], if anyone escaped from the camps they were passed from house to house and other hide-outs. But they had to be careful. She got away with it." The Gestapo were always about to pick up on any whiff of insurrection, and Theresia's own husband, Hans, was a conscript in the Austrian army: "He was on one side and she was on the other. That was life in those days. Your life wasn't your own."

Theresia believes there were roughly 15 men hiding out that she helped, and since coming to New Zealand she has met some of the survivors and their families. Others she helped after the war, when she worked with the displaced persons unit in Vienna, before leaving Europe behind her and settling on Donovan St. Her friend testifies that Theresia was vibrant, beautiful, probably a bit of a flirt, and "pretty tough". She also believes her story has earned its place in history: *'She deserves to be remembered.'*

