

The Kuaotunu Fire Brigade up to 2018

The best report of what was probably Kuaotunu's first Fire Brigade is in Alf Simpson's book 'This is Kuaotunu'. It covers the busy gold mining days through the late 1800s to early 1900s and talks about the bucket chain and the manually operated lever pumps. Apparently fires were quite frequent and if one thinks about it it's not surprising considering the building materials available and the methods of heating and lighting. Lack of alarms would have delayed any response.

Once gold mining virtually ceased and the large population left the area there was no fire brigade and even the Whitianga Brigade was very small. Electricity came to our district in 1962 and the Matarangi development started in the mid to late 70s bringing a surge in the population.

On a wet and stormy night during June 1979 a nearly new Lockwood house on the Kuaotunu beachfront near Davis road burnt right down. This was despite the heroic efforts of nearby residents. The Whitianga Fire Brigade was alerted by a Kuaotunu resident driving to Whitianga and waking their members because the phone lines were out.

This got locals talking which resulted in a public meeting being held in the Kuaotunu Hall on 13-8-1979 to discuss the need for a fire brigade. The Whitianga Fire Chief and others attended to assist us. We also attended meetings at the Whitianga Brigade to learn about running a fire brigade. One such meeting that is etched in the minds of those attendees is on the day of the Air NZ Mt Erebus disaster. A phone call received during that meeting advised us that the flight's return to Christchurch was 'overdue'.

As a result of these meetings fundraising started and an abandoned piece of land made available. This land is where the Fire Station is today which used to be the main highway before the bridge collapsed when two Coromandel Council trucks were too much for the old structure (photo inside the Fire Station).

A 5.4 x 5.4 m tin shed was purchased at mate's rates, working bees held, the tin shed erected with gravel floor (concrete added later when funds allowed), a trailer borrowed and fire fighting gear on the trailer either purchased, borrowed or given. A lot of assistance came from the Whitianga Brigade in the form of help, advice and gear surplus to their needs.

A meeting in the new tin shed on 10-1-1980 saw the start of our present brigade officially called a Fire Party with 24 members. After work on Wednesdays became practice sessions where members were required to become familiar in using the gear so as to be ready for action in any trying situation. Eventually a fridge was loaned and a beer after practice became an important part of getting to know your buddies and what they had been up to over the past week. The fireproof gear we wore was all old hand me down stuff and we were often referred to as Dad's Army but we were still called when there was a need.

To call the Fire Brigade one needed to alert the 'telephone tree' by ringing a member or two (party lines then and no cellphones). Those members would rush off to the tin shed and anyone available was required to ring other members and so on. Of course to connect to the trailer at least one of the responding vehicles had to have a tow ball.

Membership reached 27 in 1987 and has averaged around 20 since then.



In 1981 we acquired a 1953 SWB Landrover fire engine. Earlier in its life it had been Whitianga's first fire engine. It was slow and at times a bit temperamental to operate but with practice it did the job and was always popular with the kids at Christmas parties. It left us and served in other Brigades on the Peninsula but luckily we got it back. After a stint at Opito Bay we now have it in storage as a museum item. It has done only 8,000 miles.

By 1986 the tin shed was too small so after more planning, fundraising etc a new amenities room was built on the north side of the tin shed. We were fortunate to be always well off for practical members. Farmers, tradesmen and good common sense people who were able to get things done. Nowadays it is more paid specialists because of more people having less free time, plus the OSH factor.

In 1997 the tin shed was sold and 'walked' by tractor over the road to what was then the local garage (now the café/gallery) and used as storage for oil and mechanic materials. After a second shift of only a few metres it is now the bar at the local pizza restaurant. In its place after yet more working bees stands the appliance bay which we are now talking about extending again. Both the appliance bay and the amenities room have seen several alterations and additions.

In 1990 we got the use of a farm shed at Opito Bay in which we housed yet another trailer containing firefighting and other equipment. This has progressed to the purchase in 2010 of the present 2005 Mazda extra cab ute on which we added the canopy and rehoused the gear. It now lives in a bigger shed on a more central farm.

In the early days putting out fires was all we did and looking back we put out a lot. Big, little, house, shed, scrub, forestry fires. Some simple and some devastating. Some out and home quickly, others taking days. False alarms and so often confusing information. All by volunteers who were missing sleep or family time or were needed back at their jobs. One call not so long ago via the 111 system we were called to Opito Bay but couldn't find the problem. It turned out that Opito Bay north of Whangarei was the call. And more than once we have been driving around trying to find a nonexistent address sometimes with the caller wondering 'where are they?'



As the years have passed we have, as have all brigades, got involved much more in medical responses and calls to vehicle accidents, setting up and sometimes lighting helicopter pads etc. One would expect us to carry water, hoses and ladders but we also have a long list of specialized equipment including car cutting gear, chainsaw, a heart defibrillator and stretchers. Nowadays female members perform all the tasks that used to be male dominated.

Being in a rural area creates a problem with water supply. Urban areas have water hydrant connections whereas we need to access water tanks, streams or whatever is available. Finding these, especially at night can sometimes be challenging. The sea is a last resort.

Fundraising is a constant necessity. TCDC own and insure our buildings and vehicles and for most of the life of our brigade we have received an annual council grant but to progress efficiently that was never enough. Updating and replacing gear is never ending. Our annual raffle and fishing competition plus takings from the bar and donations keep us afloat.

In 2017 all brigades in NZ were taken over by FENZ (Fire and Emergency NZ) which will no doubt create a new chapter in the life of our Brigade.

Over the years we have had several fire engines and water tankers come and go. As at 2018 we have a 1989 Hino as our main fire engine - a 1995 Mitsubishi 4wd double cab very versatile second vehicle, registration number SMOKIE - the Mazda ute at Opito - a 2018 Ford Transit 9 seater operational support vehicle, as well as the landrover.

