

‘Support crew’ have a special place

A museum dedicated to our military engineers is one of Manawatu’s best-kept secrets.

Just 20 minutes’ drive from Palmerston North, nestled inside Linton Military Camp, is a surprising but little-known museum. It’s dedicated to a special breed of soldier: the Corps of Royal New Zealand Engineers, also known as the Sappers.

The Engineer Corps Memorial Centre (ECMC) is a three-part complex of library, museum and chapel with almost 60,000 items, including books, maps, equipment, memorabilia, uniforms, weapons, war art, medals, photos, and displays from every war the Sappers have been involved in.

It’s run by the RNZE Charitable Trust. Joe Hollander, the trust board chair and associate curator, describes the centre as “one of Manawatu’s best-kept secrets”.

Open to the public on Thursdays from 8.30am to 4pm, this modest building isn’t the kind of place you can hurry through, so crammed is it with historic treasures.

But what exactly is a Sapper? Hollander explains. “It comes from the French word ‘sape’ (spadework, or trench), dating from the Battle of Hastings. The sappeurs, or sappers, were soldiers who dug covered trenches up to the walls of an enemy fort.”

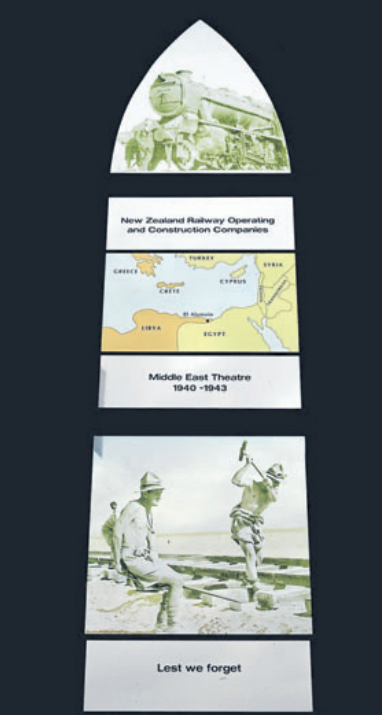
Once under the walls, the soldiers would collapse the tunnels, undermining the fort.

In a modern army, engineers are the ultimate battlefield support crew. They install portable bridges, tank traps and other constructions, dig trenches, and build supply roads, railways, barracks and fuel depots. They prepare survey maps, and risk their lives to disarm and dispose of mines and unexploded bombs and shells.

Currently, there are around 500 Sappers serving in the New Zealand Army.

At the ECMC, Hollander points out a diorama of an early New Zealand hilltop pa.

“Maori were the original military engineers of this country. Their pas and defensive works



Remembrance: A commemorative window honouring World War 2 North Africa campaign sappers in the Royal NZ Engineers’ memorial chapel of St Martin, which is also the Linton Camp garrison chapel.

were so intricate and tactically well-designed that battles such as Gate Pa (Pukehinahina) and Rangiriri are taught at military staff colleges overseas. Maori warriors and chieftains knew a lot about practical defences.”

The New Zealand corps started by linking with volunteer Royal Engineers from Britain during the 1860s New Zealand Wars era and up to 1910.

The British troops were based in



Military symbol: Assistant curator Joe Hollander with the Corps of Royal NZ Engineers’ flag. Photos: WARWICK SMITH/FAIRFAX NZ

Canterbury, Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin. Their eye-catching uniforms featured scarlet Garibaldi jackets with black facings and silver buttons, black trousers with a red stripe, and a shako with a white plume. After demobilisation, many stayed in New Zealand and became the forebears of many Kiwi families.

Sappers are “good ambassadors for the military both in peacetime and war”, says Hollander.

“They also established and developed the basic infrastructure of New Zealand – civil engineering came out of military engineering.”

The immaculately arranged museum tells the Sappers’ story in both world wars and on through more recent service, reconstruction and de-mining assignments in many countries – so many that one Sapper motto is “Ubique”, or “everywhere”. “There are six or seven



Tunnellers’ toil: Sappers photographed training at Tai Tapu, Canterbury, 1917.



Your Country Needs You: World War I leader Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, pictured at the museum.

thousand photos, slides and negatives we’re still cataloguing,” adds Hollander, who works with honorary curator and RNZE historian Howard Chamberlain, of Waikanae, and volunteers who pop in from time to time.

“It would be great to have more folk take an interest in the ECMC and assist us with cataloguing, conservancy and display tasks, as this has almost become a fulltime job.”

The library area of the museum

is the Hollander Wing. A mammoth array of books and technical reference material is stored here, including Gallipoli landscape paintings, a map collection dating back to 1916, and construction drawings of the early stages of Waiouru’s National Army Museum.

Hollander is himself a retired lieutenant-colonel of the corps (1969-1991) and currently a semi-retired engineering and construction industry consultant.

He has poured years of dedication into the ECMC. Why?

“If I hadn’t received the sort of expertise, training, knowledge and skills in my early years that the corps gave me, I wouldn’t have had a 40-plus-year successful career in the engineering profession,” he says.

“This is giving something back and preserving the heritage and history of the corps.”

The idea for the museum and library came in 1964. After a lot of planning and fundraising, it opened in January 1982, and extra library space was added in 1987-88.

Over the past four years it has been undergoing an extensive refurbishment.

Nearby stands the third part of the complex: the Royal NZ Engineers’ memorial (and Linton Camp garrison) Chapel of St Martin.

The chapel, originally dedicated in 1899 at Makotuku, near Norsewood, closed in the 1960s and was later offered to Linton Camp as a garrison church.

Transported to Linton in sections, it was rebuilt by the Sappers and ceremonially opened on July 20, 1974. The chapel is now the corps’ spiritual home and contains its rolls of honour.

Because the ECMC and museum is inside Linton Camp proper, there are security checks at the gate, but that hasn’t discouraged visitors. For a facility open only on Thursdays, it has attracted large numbers of civilians as well as retired military personnel, former Sappers and their families, and deployment reunions.

“Since early last year, we’ve had over 900 visitors through the ECMC,” Hollander says.

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