

Heroes of the museum

Volunteers keep exhibits fighting fit

By RICHARD MAYS

Sappers – in medieval times they dug dykes and trenches or saps, and burrowed under castle walls during sieges to weaken their foundations.

They were the original military moles, but their roles extended to above ground construction, bridges, roading and later railways, buildings and supply depots.

Maori knew the value of a well engineered pa, one with earthworks and palisades that could withstand bombardment, while New Zealand tunnellers earned recognition for their skills in World War I on the Western Front.

There's a memorial to the activities of Kiwi sappers dating from the 1860s to the present day at Linton Camp, known as the Engineer Corps Memorial Centre (ECMC).

Sappers are often the unsung heroes of any military operation, and the museum is something of an understatement, too.

Staffed on a volunteer basis, this hidden trove is open to the public only one day a week – Thursday 8.30am to 4pm, and visitors have to pass security at the gate.

That it exists at all next door to St Martin's Chapel on Puttick Rd, is due largely to the generosity of the New Zealand Army coupled with the tireless work of honorary curator and RNZE historian Howard "Clas" Chamberlain, his former commanding officer retired Lieutenant-Colonel, Joe Hollander, and a number of other volunteers. These men help with classifying and cataloguing a host of archived artifacts, equipment, memorabilia, uniforms, medals, books, paintings, photographs and maps for research and display.

In the stack-room are original linen-backed maps of the front lines at Gallipoli and Flanders, of World War II's Cassino, Trieste, Firenze



Standard bearer: Curator Howard "Clas" Chamberlain at Linton Camp's Engineer Corps Memorial Centre with the Corps of Royal NZ Engineers' flag. The original flag was stolen from the camp in 1980, and this replacement was made by the city's Robert Embroideries.

Photo: DAVID UNWIN / FAIRFAX NZ

and Guadalcanal.

"We have between 8 and 10,000 photographs, plates and negatives – and about 60,000 items altogether," Joe says.

At the door of the unassuming building, hang portraits of New Zealand's VC winners from Charles Heaphy in 1867 to Willie Apiata. Inside, they can browse through the display cabinets arranged from the New Zealand Wars and the foundation of the corps in the early 1860s to arrival at Linton in 1953 and UN peacekeeping activity from 1988 – 2013.

Though some of the cases are works in progress, the Engineers

motto "Ubique" or "Everywhere" seems nowhere more appropriate.

"People have really been great in what they've given us," Clas says. "All we've done is bring it all together."

The compact museum also enjoys input from curators at Te Manawa and the Rugby Museum.

Administered by the Royal New Zealand Engineer Charitable Trust, ECMC opened in 1982 and the reference library called the Hollander Wing in 1988. Along with rare books, a relief model of the Gallipoli Peninsula, copies of the Gallipoli water-colours painted by Kiwi sapper Horace Moore-Jones are displayed,

including the famous "Simpson" and his donkey – actually a painting of Dick Henderson of the New Zealand Medical Corps.

"[Moore-Jones] offered the paintings to the New Zealand government after the war, who didn't want to pay for them. The Australian government took them and the originals are in the War Memorial Museum in Canberra," Joe says.

The historic chapel next door, donated by the people of Makotuku in southern Hawkes Bay contains one of only two copies of the memorial honour rolls to New Zealanders killed in World War I.

"The other is in St Pauls in London," Clas says.

He comes in and reverentially turns one page every week.

Given that 2014 marks 100 years since World War I commenced and with the Gallipoli centenary next year, both men are hoping more people will make their way through the museum to commemorate the servicemen and women, their campaigns and their stories.

900 have already passed through in the last 12 months, and those wanting further information about the museum for research, to browse or to volunteer can learn more by calling 351 9367.