

An adventurer not retiring anytime soon: Malayan Emergency veteran Neil Ake

Neil Ake (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāti Maru) joined the New Zealand Army in the late 1950s because he wanted to see the world. It wasn't the first time he had a longing for adventure.

"I went on tour once when I was three. We were living in Pongakawa at the time and I decided it was time to see the world. Everyone else could go out, so off I went – down a hill and across a bridge. I looked around and there's this woman running down the hill. By the jingus! Skirts up round her neck and hurrying."

That was the end of Neil's touring for a while.



Neil Ake working as a crane operator

Born in 1937 and the oldest of seven children, Neil was raised in Tauranga Moana. His father, Joseph Ake, served in the Hauraki Regiment as part of the Home Guard during the Second World War. Neil was five-years-old when his father reported for duty.

"I remember dad going into the Army, they left from the Mount. It was dad and the neighbour up the road, Jack Forsyth, sitting in the back of the truck. Mum was driving the car with us behind them."

Neil decided to enlist in the Army after he had finished teachers college and was having drinks with friends at the Whakatane pub. He deployed to Malaya in 1959 and served there for two years with 2nd Battalion. He was in the 2 NZ Regiment band and played baritone horn, tuba, and trombone.

Neil was one of the youngest members of the band which played at events for soldiers, the High Commissioner, and cross-military events throughout his time there. When he was posted to Singapore he was able to visit his uncle, who served in the Air Force, his aunt, and baby cousin Lila. He would carry Lila, whose first language was Mandarin, through the streets of Singapore.

Neil served for three years in the regular force and for a further five years as a reservist. During his time in the Army he

saw a lot New Zealand during his postings to Papakura, Waiouru, and Burnham Camps.

After leaving the Army he moved to Auckland and became a crane operator, which he still is over 50 years later. He has owned his own business and has been a sole contractor since 1994. He loves a good cup of tea and has strong views on how to make a good one – “it’s a cardinal sin to wash a teapot.”

He is the father of three children and has six grandchildren. As a child Neil learned how to dive and collect kaimoana, which is one of the few activities he can’t do anymore. He has passed the skill on to his children as well as his nieces and nephews.

Neil has been a member of the Tuhua Board of Trustees since 1988, a role that he took over after the death of his father. The Trust administers and maintains the wildlife refuge of Tuhua (Mayor Island).

Neil has survived bowel cancer, is living with diabetes, and has hearing loss which he manages with hearing aids funded by Veterans’ Affairs. He doesn’t want any other help though as he can still do just about everything that he wants to do, including repairs to his house. “I can still paint the roof. I only do it every 10 years, so I’ll be 90 when I do the roof again.”

When asked if he thinks that he’ll retire anytime soon, Neil’s answer is best summed up as ‘maybe’. “I might have already retired and didn’t know it. I’ve still got a crane sitting at home and there’s a digger down the country that I’ve got. So I might retire.”

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