



allowed on the upper deck." After D-Day, DUCHESS OF FIFE stayed busy sweeping for mines in front of convoys sailing to the invasion areas. "I can't remember the days. Every day was a day, a day, a day."

He came to New Zealand after the war because times were hard in England and Commonwealth navies were recruiting. "The Canada pay was good but I couldn't stand the cold. Australia didn't appeal – my brother went out there and he reckoned foreigners were more tolerated than accepted. In 1952, the first day I landed in Wellington, I saw this whole lamb hanging up in Cuba Street for 21 shillings. A whole lamb! In England a leg would be 21 shillings."

He served in the Royal New Zealand Navy from 1952 to 1969. As a communicator, Mr Blackburn was away for long periods in ships or postings, and he knows it was not easy on his wife Joan and the children, settled back in Devonport. "Joan brought our three boys up," he says. He would come home and would almost be a disruption to the household routine.

"You were either at sea, or you were at Waiouru, or Navy Office in Wellington. The kids worked out I was away more than two-thirds of the time. They would say: 'you're never here, Dad!'" It is much better in the Navy today, he says. "Back then, bloody Admirals, thinking they're still fighting the Second World War, and sending ships off for 15 months."

One of those "15 months" stints was in Dido-class cruiser HMNZS ROYALIST on deployment to Malaya in 1957/58, which contributed to his "living like pigs" reference. "I was 11 stone 4 when I went on, and came off 8 stone 3. The meals were terrible. It was frequently 110 degrees in my bunk in ROYALIST. There was no air down there, and I was right beside an exhaust pipe of a diesel generator. I would wake up in the morning, covered in asbestos dust. When we went from ROYALIST to OTAGO, it was like going to a five-star hotel."

How is he still alive? "I've got the start of asbestosis now," he says, shrugging. "Back then, they used to pipe 'hands to sunbathe'. And

now, they wonder why we have skin cancer."

In fact, Mr Blackburn appears to enjoy excellent health. He acknowledges some deafness in both ears, which he blames on Oerlikon machine guns – "the worst gun for your ears – plus many years of wearing microphones." As a 'labour of love', he spends most Fridays at the Senior Rates' Mess at Devonport Naval Base, helping to cook lunch. He effectively founded the mess, overseeing an unenthusiastic amalgamation of the Petty Officers and Chief Petty Officers messes, and was its first president.

He watched the progress of his great-grandson and classmates via Navy social media. "I enjoy the graduations. It's good to see the kids so enthusiastic. Ben's done very well. That could have been me 77 years ago – although he's seven inches taller."