

Tireless voice in name of protest

Protesting against the presence of the Waihopai satellite communications station for the fourth time last month was a 78-year-old Lyttelton man who has a history of taking principled stands against what he sees as the injustices of the world. DAVID GEE speaks to Stan Hemsley about his life and times.

Wherever Stan Hemsley finds injustice, he will pursue it like a terrier — and he does not mind who knows about it. He says he hates most politicians, probably all of them, and has written to the Queen in protest.

Stan Hemsley, 78, of Lyttelton, is a man of high principles. Even at school he took four whacks of the strap for another boy and once resigned in protest from a job when a fellow worker was sacked in what he thought was an unjustified way. Although life has not been easy for him, he is not bitter about his hardships. But he is bitter about injustices.

He is bitter that thousands of New Zealanders died in two world wars to preserve democracy — something which he says New Zealand does not enjoy. He asks, therefore, if their deaths were in vain. And he is bitter about many political matters.

Stanley Horace Hemsley was named after an uncle who died in World War 1. Stan was born in 1918 to a father who came from London and a mother who was half French. His father, as far as Stan knows, was an orphan who was put on a sailing ship in his youth and jumped ship in Timaru in 1898. He walked to Christchurch, married Stan's mother, and they had 10 children. He worked on the Lyttelton wharves when he could get work.

Stan was the ninth child and went to the primary section of the Lyttelton District High School in the Depression years. He tells of his barefooted years and then says: "We were very poor, but we had plenty of love. It was the same for many families. I found out about poverty early. Once I was walking through a puddle near the police station with a school mate when he said I would get my underpants wet. 'I asked what they were, and he pulled his trousers down and I saw these white things, and the inside of his trousers had a shiny material. My mother made our trousers without a fly, but just a dicky hole. I went home and told mother about the underpants. I can still see her bursting out crying. We were too poor for luxuries like that. They were terrible days.'

He left school at 14 and could not find work, so he went fishing for no wages — it was just fish for the family. He still had no footwear, but the crew found him sea-boots. He received no wages for two years and then he was paid "a couple of bob". At 18 he went to sea as an ordinary seaman aboard the Tees, later to become the Holmwood.

He made more than 70 trips to the Chatham Islands and recalls bringing home swan eggs and pigs for his family and neighbours. He was paid £16 a month and keep. "I bought mother a washing machine, and the neighbours used to come in to see, as there were few around in those days," he says.

He was on board the Tees in Greymouth when World War 2 was declared, and he spent his war with the merchant navy. He married during wartime and came ashore six months before war's end. Then he began a series of jobs.

In the 1951 Waterfront Strike, as a Seamen's Union member, he stopped work in sympathy with the wharfies and experienced a period of hardship without income. "The only thing that saved me was that I owned my house. I lived in absolute poverty for 151 days. I would never give in. It made me very humble to accept charity from friends and my mum," he says. He had two children then, and now has four, and five grandchildren.

In the next years he had a series of jobs, including welding for Andersons foundry for about five years. He retired at 65 and has since concentrated on his protest actions. He has not been involved in all protests over the years, but the nuclear issue was always important for him. He is a member of Greenpeace, the NZ Nuclear Free Peacemaking Association, and other groups.

For years he regularly held a banner high in Cathedral Square protesting about the nuclear issue, and once built a five-metre missile with oil drums to make his point in the Square. His banner read: "Is this our children's destiny?" Last month he attended a meeting which protested about the Treaty of

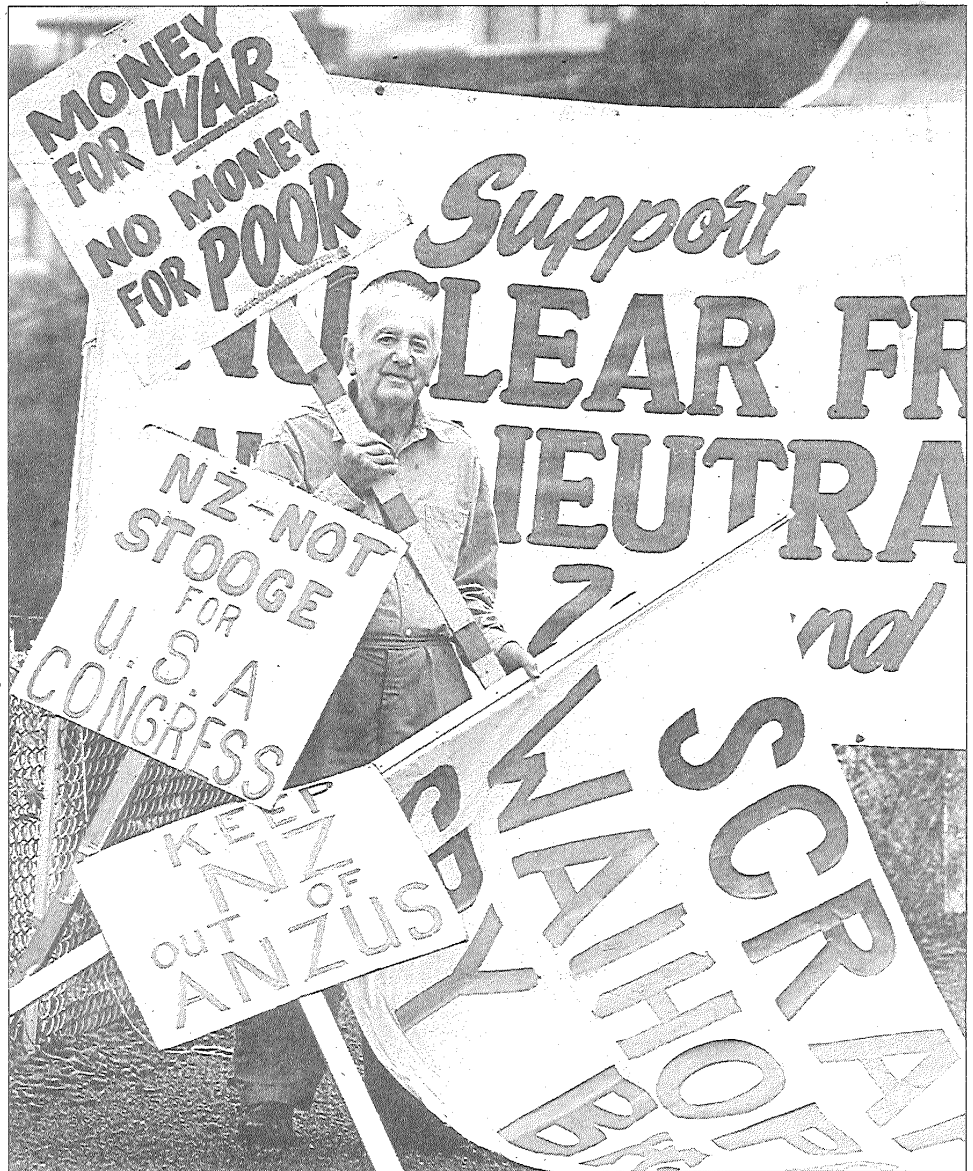


PHOTO: JOHN KIRK-ANDERSON

Stan Hemsley: once built a five-metre missile with oil drums as an anti-nuclear protest.

Waitangi and the way Maoris were "getting their way". He told the meeting that in 1989 Winston Peters had said the treaty would be renegotiated if he had the chance. Before that he spent days at the Waihopai communications station with 60 other protesters from the Anti-Bases Campaign who want the installation closed.

He once wrote to a French newspaper about the nuclear issue, and he also wrote to the Queen regarding democracy in New Zealand. Stan Hemsley was irritated when the Governor-General's secretary replied rather than the Queen herself. He says he promotes peace when he can, but he is bitter about what he sees as a lack of true democracy in New Zealand which the "needless lives of the best young men" failed to bring.

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Stan Hemsley

"They fought for democracy, but do we have democracy here? It's a shambles under MMP now. And we have Winston Peters in charge of the whole lot. What we have is an elected dictatorship — just as in the past. I've voted Labour all my life, except once when I voted for Harry Lake in Lyttelton. But I'm a Socialist at heart. I believe all land should be under State control and we pay \$25 a year for a piece of dirt," he says.

Stan Hemsley has a colourful turn of phrase when he gets really upset. Such expressions as: "A

shower of bastards" or a "pack of drongos", and "politicians are rogues and liars". And then: "Governments piss all over us because no-one cares." He believes in the death penalty for "the mongrels in society" and he thinks "it's bloody disgusting that those in prison don't work".

He believes that if people "realised the brevity of life they would change their outlook. I look the whole world in the face. I have never been in trouble with the law."

But Stanley Horace Hemsley was in court once. That was years ago, when he was a seaman aboard the Tees. He had a fox terrier which one day ran from his house down the hill to meet Stan as he left the ship. The police saw it running without a lead and charged him for having a dog without a lead.

He appeared before the magistrate ("A miserable buggar who liked his booze"). He pleaded not guilty, but the magistrate asked if he owned the dog. Stan said yes and the magistrate said that he must be guilty. Stan argued his case saying that he had seen seven dogs roaming the streets on the way to court. "Silence," yelled the policeman. "I started to argue and the policeman caught my arm and said: 'Shut up.'"

He was fined 15 shillings, and two shillings and sixpence for contempt for arguing. "He asked me if I had anything to say and would not let me say it," Stan says. Next day when he scraped together the fine the police sergeant told him that he had never heard of the charge being used before. Today, Stan Hemsley says the episode is another incident he feels bitter about.