

Locally-made pumps did sterling service

by Russell Postlewaight

During the early years of the Second World War, the NZ Government of the day as part of the Emergency Protection Measures set up the Emergency Fire Service, an organisation which was anticipated to augment and support the regular fire brigades, mostly in the larger cities where identified strategic assets were located.

Equipped with army-style uniforms and helmets their essential piece of equipment was a trailer pump that could be towed by approved vehicles such as taxis in a manner similar to that then in use in British cities which were experiencing the horrors of the German blitz.

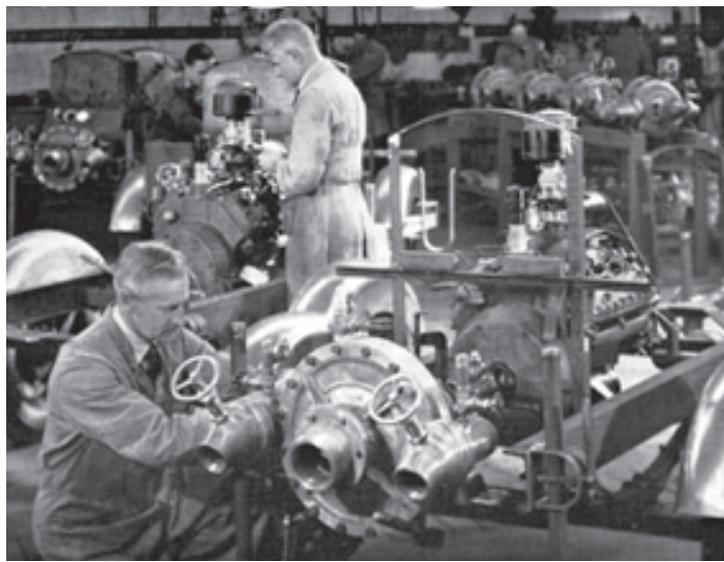
As a result of a conversation over dinner, my sister-in-law told me that her father worked on the project team at the Colonial Motor Company, then the Ford agents, in Wellington that designed the New Zealand version of the trailer pumps.

The Colonial Motor Company had experience in fire engine design and manufacture for the local market since the mid 1920s. From 1936 engineering staff began work on a light, portable trailer pump at their plant in Ebor St in central Wellington. They fitted a 90hp car V8 motor to a light but strong steel

trailer on to which the pump would be fitted. Later trials found that the better choice was the 100hp Ford Mercury V8 from Canada and it was this engine that powered the majority of the units.

This gave the pumps the capability to lift greater volumes of water. In this case the measuring stick was the 9 floor 30m Wellington Colmoco factory. During trials it was identified that the universal joint/coupling through which the motor drove the pump could be a weak point and considerable testing was undertaken to ensure its reliability, including testing several to destruction with the Wellington brigade staff.

That problem solved, the units were fitted with a 500gpm (38l/s) Colmoco centrifugal



pump (the first few had Rootes group pumps) and mass production commenced. A total of over 3500 units were produced during the hostilities and saw service in the Pacific theatre as well as a number that were shipped to the European theatre. New Zealand Forces and local bodies, which at that stage included fire boards, received over 1800 while 1600 were supplied to allied forces abroad.

One of the catalysts for the urgency of the project was the entry of the Japanese into the global conflict. Consequently it was proposed by the government that all coastal towns would receive a trailer pump complete with suction hose and all ancillary fittings as a protection from fire.

Ford Historian Roger Gardner, in his anniversary book *Ford Ahead*, talks of a further development of the Ford V8/Colmoco pump combination being adopted en masse by the US troops following the establishment of their training bases in Auckland and Wellington in 1941-2.

High Command had recognised seized on these developments identifying that a petrol powered fire pumping system on their K and Q class liberty ships operating in the higher ambient temperatures experienced in the equatorial battle zones in the Pacific – especially munitions cargoes presented a risk they had not anticipated while the ships were in convoy service in the North Atlantic.

Combining diesel motors with fire pumps, CMC engineers soon

demonstrated that they could quickly have the pump/motor combination installed here while the liberty ships were en route to the Solomon Islands, Tarawa and the New Hebrides.

In some of these cases, two, or sometimes three, two-stage Sulzer fire pumps and hose and other equipment were installed inside a 48 hour turnaround time, often sooner. Thus in August 1942, the Munitions Department and the Allied Eastern Supply Group were suitably impressed and an order for a further 600 fire pump trailers were ordered and supplied.

As to their reliability, the author, like a number of firefighters trained in the early 1970s, used them regularly in recruit and other pump training. Many went to our rural fire services and remote fire parties throughout the country, while many more found themselves serving new owners such as local authorities and other contracting companies well into the 1990s.



Controls for the Colmoco pump are easily accessible and understandable, including dials showing engine as well as pump performance. Two small taps were fitted on the inlet side of the pump casting to provide control for the cooling system. Up to four lengths of 6" (150mm) hard suction hose were carried as well as a metal suction strainer. The vertical bars (two at the rear and one at the front) were let down to the ground and provided stability while the pump was in operation. Wise pump operators usually found a wheel chock was a good idea as well. The trailer lamp also did dual duty serving as a panel lamp when working at night.



EFS firefighters training with a trailer pump at Auckland's ferry wharf, 1942. Postlewaight collection.

