

# Long road for nuclear veterans

By SHELLEY TOPP

Mururoa Nuclear Veterans Group members, who were aboard two frigates sent to Mururoa Atoll by the New Zealand Government in July 1973, visited Rangiora last Friday.

The frigates *HMNZS Otago* and *HMNZS Canterbury* were part of a multi-national protest against French atmospheric nuclear testing in French Polynesia.

Earlier that year the New Zealand and Australian governments took the French Government to the International Court of Justice to force France to end nuclear testing in the region. The court ruled against France but it refused to accept the court's ruling.

The Mururoa Nuclear Veterans Group visited Rangiora as part of a nationwide tour to talk to members about their entitlements under the Veterans Support Act 2014.

A review of the act has been tabled in Parliament by the Minister for Veterans Ron Mark.

Although the 1973 protest was widely considered a success by politicians it is now clouded by the ill-health of veterans and their families, the veterans say.

"Only 300 of the 500 of us who went on the mission are still alive," says Gavin Smith, from Marton, who was aboard the *Canterbury*. "Of those 300 the



**Time to reflect . . .** Mururoa Nuclear Veterans Group representative Gavin Smith, of Marton, left, with Returned and Services Association national office project officer Richard Terrill, Rangiora RSA president Ian Thompson, and Veterans Affairs New Zealand senior case manager Dave Foley, at the Rangiora RSA's clubrooms.

PHOTO: SHELLEY TOPP

majority have had abnormal cancers," he says. "Their children and grandchildren have also had problems. The crews on board the frigates were assured by the Government at the time that they were not being put in harm's way and that if they did become ill after the protest they would be looked after," Gavin says.

"We were in a sealed environment during the nuclear explosion," he says.

But a few minutes later they were out on deck observing the aftermath and, two days later, sailed through the radiation cloud. Equipment on board

showed high nuclear radiation levels.

The Government "has a duty to support the veterans who have on-going health issues attributable to our service in their deployment to Mururoa", the veterans say.

They hope the planned parliamentary review of the act will bring about the support they seek.

In 1996, after 30 years and 193 nuclear tests in French Polynesia, France ended nuclear testing in the region.

In February 2016 the former President of France, Francois Hollande, acknowledged

during a visit to French Polynesia, that "the nuclear tests carried out between 1966 and 1996 had an environmental impact which had health-related consequences, and that victims had a 'legitimate right to compensation'."

Last month the French Overseas Minister Annick Girardin announced that a parliamentary commission was working on compensation demands.

The Mururoa Nuclear Veterans were hosted by the Rangiora Returned and Services Association during their Rangiora visit.