

Ever ready, ever steady

Devonport's Volunteer Fire Brigade has a long history. John Thornton hears about celebrations and honouring fallen comrades

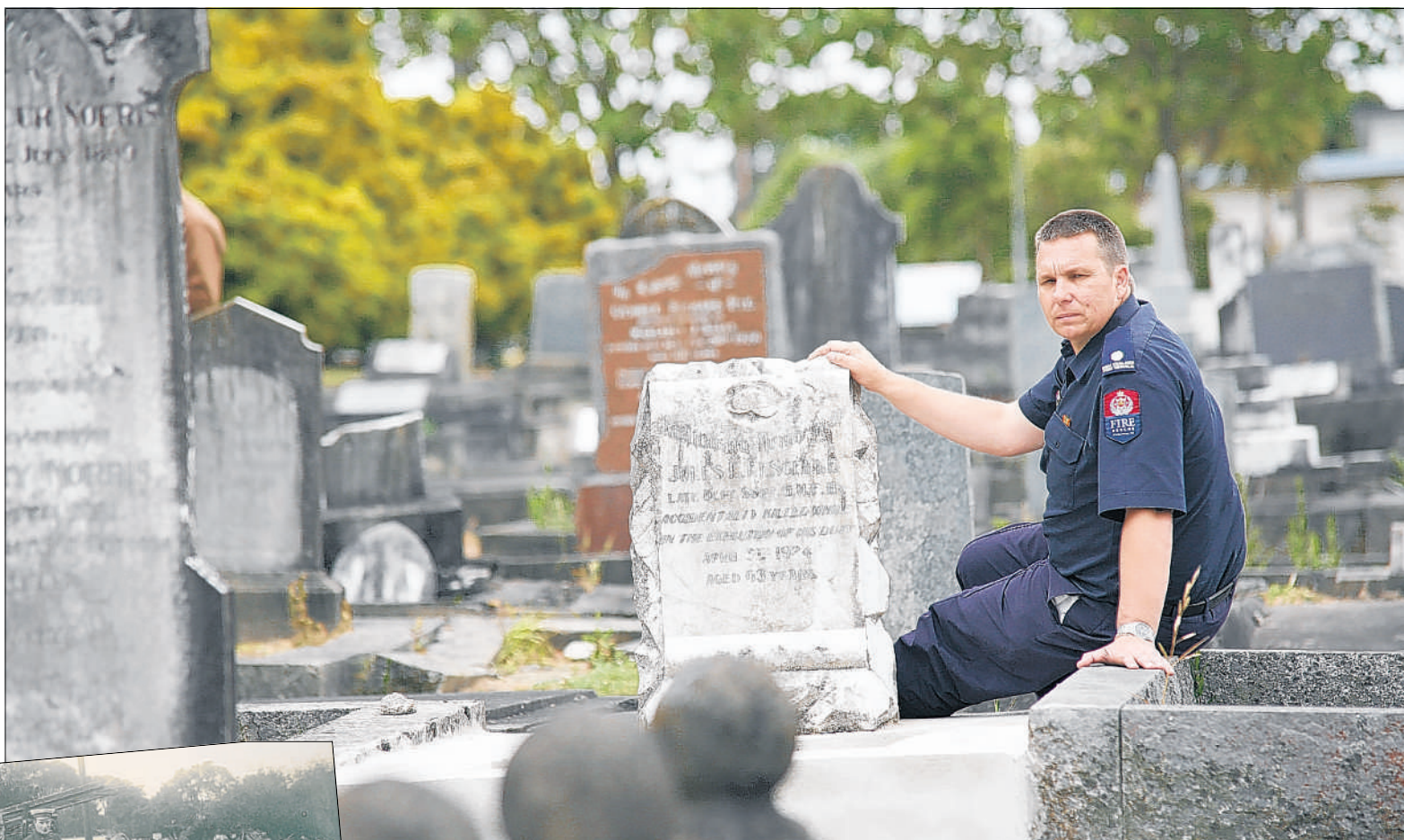
AT FIRST glance, Bayswater Cemetery evokes the tranquillity expected of the average graveyard, its hillside setting offering views across Ngataranga Bay to Auckland's city centre. Trees ring the site, blocking sea-driven winds and keeping the air peaceful and calm.

Yet cracks are forming. Some gravestones have eroded to disrepair, their engravings barely decipherable. Lime presides over stone.

Two of these graves, however, are being restored by the Devonport Volunteer Fire Brigade in time for the service's 125th anniversary on December 5. These stones mark the resting place of two brigade members who were killed in the line of duty — Richard Ridings (died 1913) and Jules Le Scelle (died 1924).

Devonport volunteer firefighter Andrew Keith hit on the idea while researching the brigade's history.

"It was a unanimous decision taken by the brigade," he says. "When I tracked both the graves down, and the graves were looking pretty rough,



Andrew Keith says restoration of the two graves has met unanimous approval in the brigade; inset, the 1921 brigade with Jules Le Scelle in the front row, second from right

GARRY BRANDON



you know, overgrown and cracked, I thought it would be a good idea for the 125th anniversary."

The graves will be restored by Ric Craghe — a former Devonport firefighter — who will scrub the dirt and lime from each tombstone and fit new plaques.

The lives of the two deceased are worthy of local folklore. Le Scelle, a Frenchman, joined the brigade in 1905 and was made lieutenant by 1913. He

was killed responding to a malicious false alarm when he was thrown from the fire engine as it skidded and crashed into a pole on the way to the non-existent fire. Ridings, a volunteer from 1899, died from a sudden stroke as the brigade battled a particularly hellish fire engulfing Clarence St. He was 53.

Devonport Fire Brigade has funded the project entirely, organising fundraisers such as fire-hose car-washes and digging into an extremely small portion of their grant.

As fitting as it is, renovation of the graves is overdue. As Mr Keith says: "I thought after 97 years no-one else was going to do it."

Mr Keith has spent six months researching the brigade's history in preparation for a forthcoming book on its first 125 years. The working title, *Ever Ready, Ever Steady*, was an early motto of the brigade.

"I think it's going to cost us more than we'll make out of it," he concedes. "It's going to be a fairly limited run. I'm doing it so that, in another 125 years' time, when they're doing the 250th, they won't have to do so much."

Mr Keith has been a member of the brigade for 15 years and has built up a deep knowledge of it.

The book will be published next

HANDS TO THE PUMP

The 125th Anniversary of the Devonport Volunteer Fire Brigade starts with an open day at the fire station on Saturday, December 4, between 9am and 2pm.

Modern and vintage fire engines will be displayed with Devonport's first fire engine, the Model T Ford, the star of the show.

Summit Barracks will host a formal evening party, that will include medal presentations as well, on Saturday.

The weekend's festivities will end with the brigade taking part in the Devonport Santa parade on Sunday, December 5, exhibiting old and new appliances in the parade and on static display beside Windsor Reserve.

year, well after the anniversary celebrations, "so we can include the activities of the 125th".

The activities take place on the weekend of December 4-5 and include

an open day at the Devonport Fire Station, a formal function commemorating brigade members and a strong brigade presence at Devonport's Santa Parade.

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