

The Voyage of Colin's Cat

New Zealand

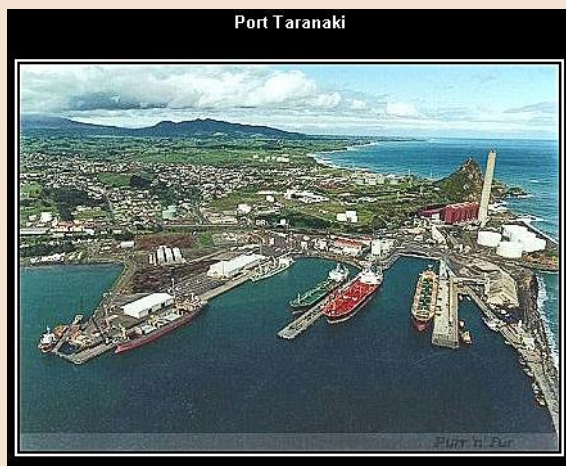
(2006)

(page checked January 2026)



In late 2001 a tortoiseshell-and-white cat made international news when she took an unplanned trip from New Zealand to South Korea on a methanol tanker — a journey of nearly 10,000 kilometres.

She had been adopted by Colin Butler — at the time manager of the Port Taranaki tanker terminal in New Plymouth, New Zealand — when she was abandoned there as a small kitten sometime around 1991 (*the exact date is unclear*), so tiny that Butler carried her round in his pocket for about a fortnight. According to one reference seen she was apparently christened Queenie. However, when Butler left and retired to Australia, she became known to the terminal staff as Colin's Cat — or simply **Colin's**.



She had quickly made herself at home in the watch house (*above right*) by the Newton King Tanker Terminal, soon becoming the 'port cat' and a favourite with people there. She saw off other animals, including dogs and feral cats, but was friendly to people and especially children. A very vocal young lady, she became renowned for her apparently insatiable appetite and for using every opportunity to persuade people to give her food. She soon worked out the shift system, such that staff going off duty would feed her before they left, and then she would approach the incoming workers to feed her again!

Accidental adventurer

In November 2001 it was her appetite that led her to go on board a tanker, when she 'spoke' to one of its crewmen, the second engineer Jeong Yun-Seok, and followed him. He thought she must be hungry and took her on board for some food. Afterwards both man and cat fell asleep in his cabin, and unfortunately when they woke up the ship had left port and was on its way to South Korea! Although she had sometimes boarded New Zealand ships to explore, this was the first time she had ventured aboard a foreign vessel. Colin's was said to be 'a bit seasick at first', but soon gained her sea-legs and settled down to the maritime routine. Ship's captain Chang Seong-mo sent photos of her back to the port by e-mail to reassure staff there that she was alive and well. He told Korean press later that during the voyage she ate 'salmon, beef and snacks' and slept on the second engineer's sofa.

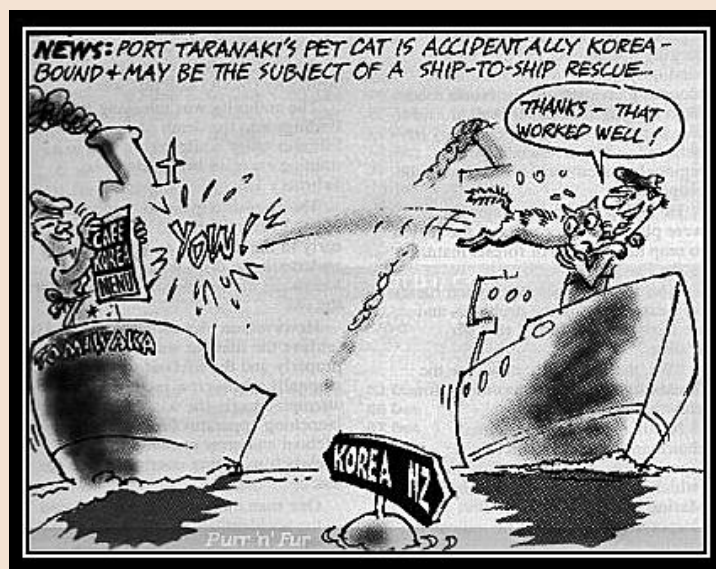


Colin's on the bridge of the South Korean tanker *Tomiwaka*



Rescue plans

Meanwhile, back at Port Taranaki, when it became known where she was, various schemes were hatched for recovering the traveller. At first it was thought she could stay aboard until the tanker returned; but then it was discovered the fairly old tanker *Tomiwaka* was in fact on her final voyage and due to be scrapped at the end of it. The next plan was to effect a ship-to-ship transfer of the wandering feline on the high seas, so she could be put on a tanker bound for New Zealand. However, that was deemed unsafe, not just for Colin's but because of the risk of collision or explosion involved in bringing together two such very large ships at sea. So Colin's remained on board for the duration of the voyage — some 18 days, after delays due to bad weather.

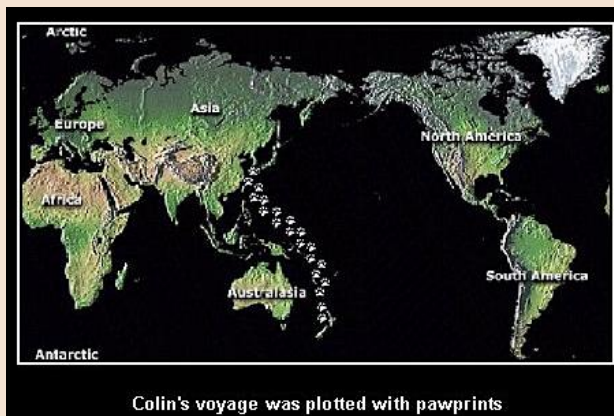


Terminal superintendent Gordon Macpherson decided he would fly to Korea to meet the ship and collect the cat to bring her back home; it was he who had taken over responsibility for her when her original owner had left the terminal. With much international interest in her exploits, with friendly assistance from Korean Airlines, and following an approach from the port authorities, the makers in NZ of Whiskas cat food agreed to sponsor her return trip with Gordon. (Apparently other pet-food companies had shown interest, no doubt with an eye to the publicity, but Whiskas made the best offer.)

Hello Korea ... and farewell

Gordon therefore flew to Yeosu, the tanker's destination port, and stayed in a hotel to await the ship's arrival. Korean quarantine authorities cooperated by allowing Colin's to be met straight off the ship and then be transported in a sealed carrier to Seoul airport for her return flight, without going into quarantine. A staff member from the authorities supervised the transfer with Gordon. Four Korean camera crews recorded the happy reunion with him.

When he collected her, 'She purred a lot and seemed pleased to see me,' he said, 'although she was a bit confused by all the people.' He added, 'I'll have to give her a talking-to and tell her not to speak to strange men in future.' Mr Yun-Seok was said to have 'spoiled her rotten', and he was very sad to say goodbye to her — before finally taking his leave, he said to Macpherson 'Mr Gordon, please take care of Colin's.'

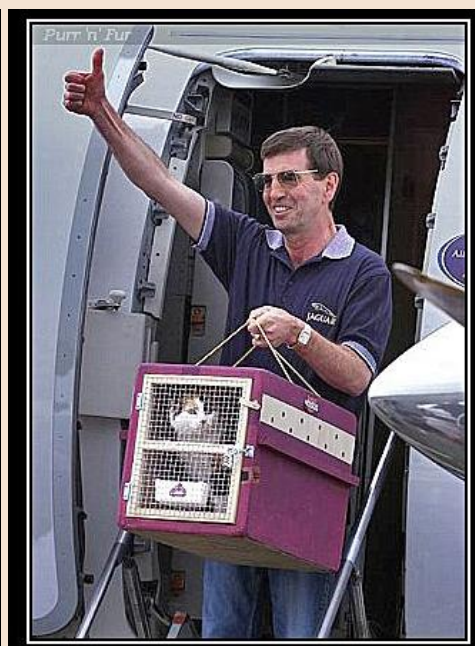


Meanwhile, in one of the routinely published shipping lists for Port Taranaki, among the normal notices of vessels arriving and departing, with tonnages and cargoes, a distinctly unusual entry appeared under 'Expected Arrivals':

COLIN'S, .00006 grt, port cat back from South Korea after goodwill visit, December 6 (NKTT).

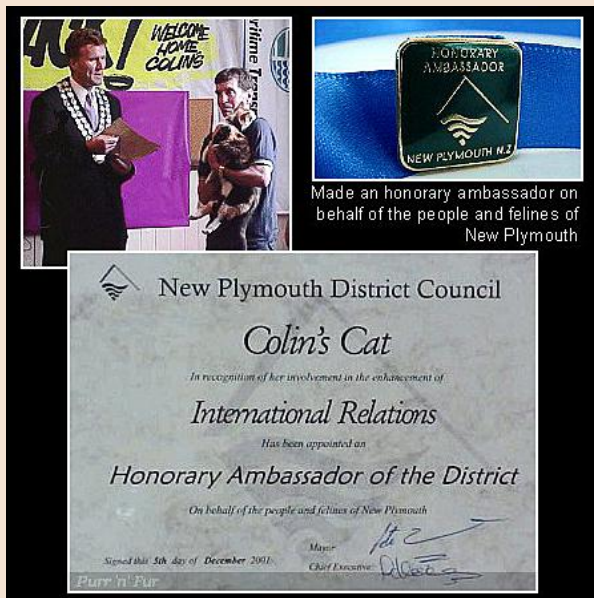
Colin's carrier was allowed to be placed next to Gordon on the KAL return flight; and on 5 December the cat and her owner returned triumphantly to New Plymouth. Mayor Peter Tennent announced that she would be awarded a certificate and medallion (*next page below*) as an honorary ambassador of the district on behalf of the people and felines of New Plymouth, 'in recognition of her involvement in the enhancement of international relations' and for the publicity she had generated for the city and for the port of Taranaki.

Port Taranaki	
ARRIVED	
CRYSTAL PRIVILEGE, 7743 grt, from Lyttelton to load meat, 1.40pm yesterday (Phoenix).	
NELE MAERSK, 27,733 grt, from Nelson to load containers, 7.30pm yesterday (Phoenix).	
SAILED	
BOW SEA, 17,561 grt, for Taiwan, 10.20am yesterday (Hookers).	
HELEN, 2277 grt, for Manukau, 6.30pm yesterday (Cape).	
IN PORT	
CRYSTAL PRIVILEGE, 7743 grt (Phoenix).	
NELE MAERSK, 27,733 grt (Phoenix).	
EXPECTED ARRIVALS	
AMOY, 25,800 grt, from Brisbane to load naptha, today (Phoenix).	
RERE MOANA, 20,597 grt, from Singapore to load methanol, today (Hookers).	
NEXO MAERSK, 27,733 grt, from Brisbane to load containers, tomorrow (Phoenix).	
PACIFIC ONYX, 25,060 grt, from Geelong to load crude oil, tomorrow (Phoenix).	
PACIFIC GAS, 2602 grt, from Nukualofa to load LPG, Monday (Cape).	
PROJECTED DEPARTURES	
CRYSTAL PRIVILEGE, 7743 grt, for Napier, today (Phoenix).	
NELE MAERSK, 27,733 grt, for Malaysia, today (Phoenix).	

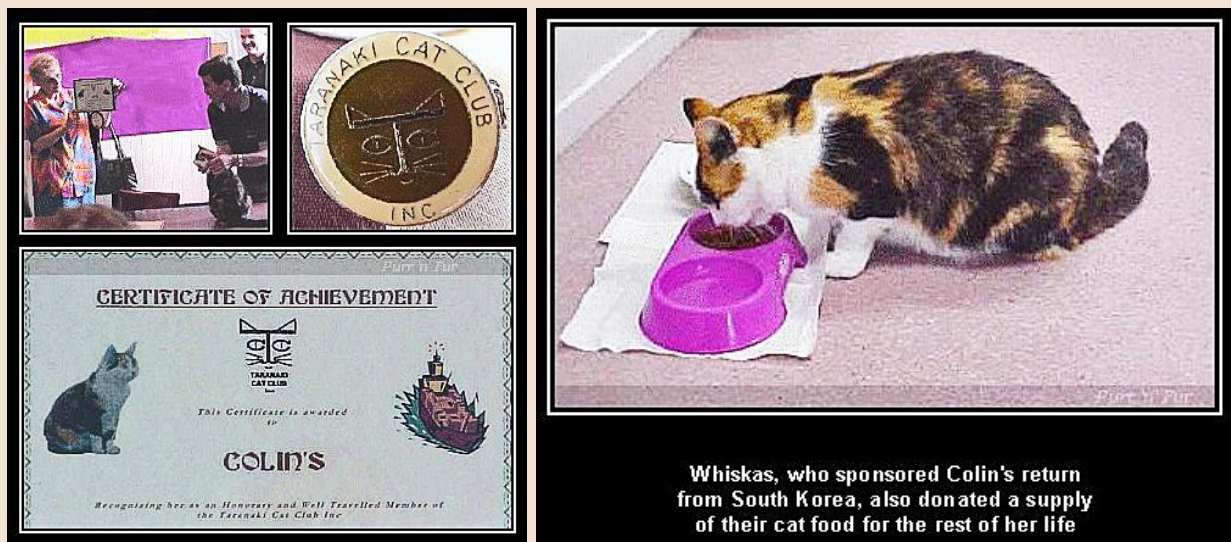


Media reception

New Zealand quarantine authorities had issued a special permit for her return, and so a white limousine, several TV cameras and a host of still cameras were at the airport to greet Gordon and his charge. When they eventually arrived back at the port and Colin's could be let out of her carrier, more than 50 staff turned out to cheer and welcome her, together with the mayor and also representatives of the Taranaki Cat Club, who made her an honorary member.



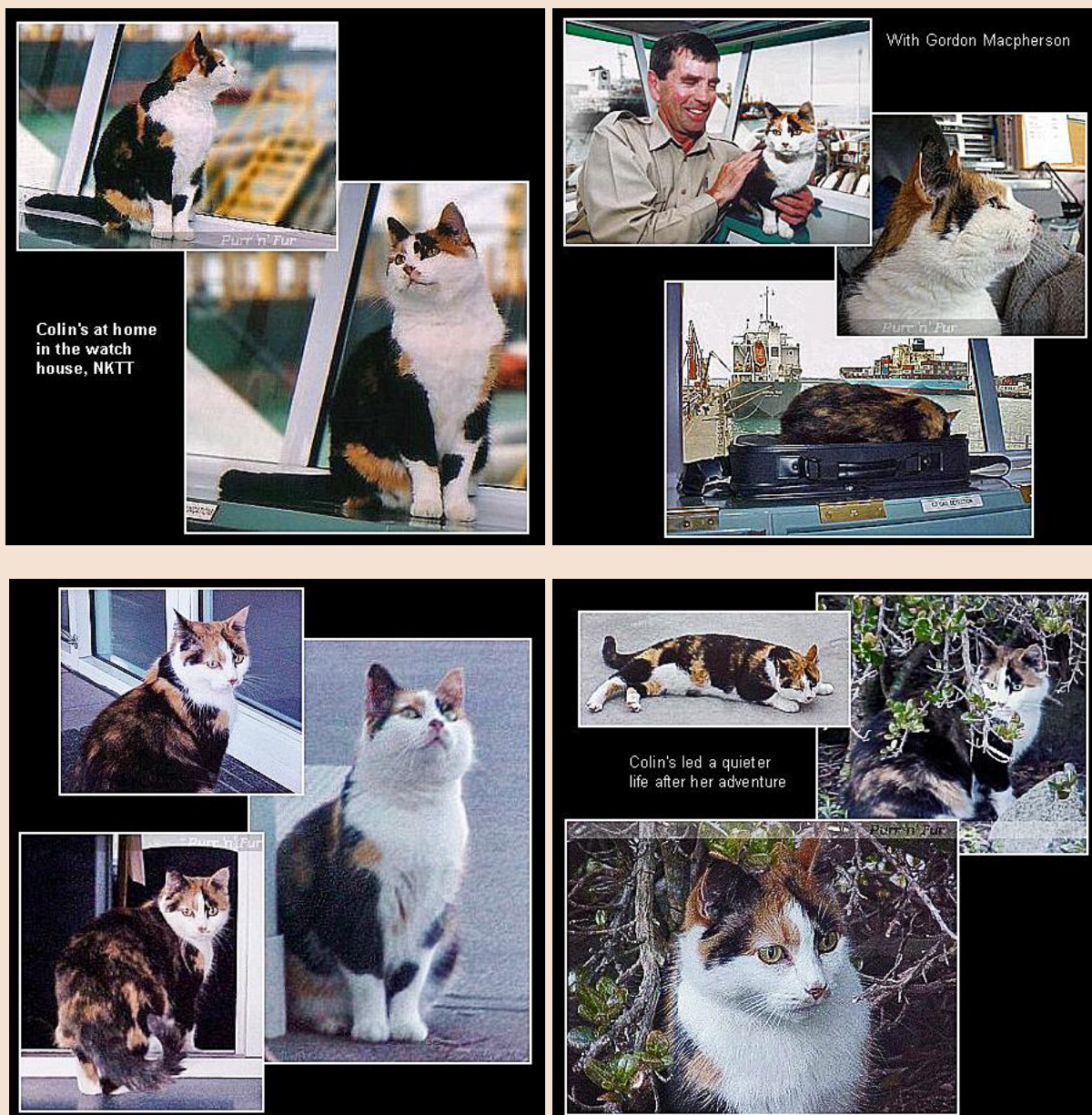
Colin's wasn't that keen on all the fuss and ran away into a corner at one point during the presentations, but finally she was taken away from all the people and allowed to pursue her normal routine — although with the gift of a lifetime supply of Whiskas cat food donated by the makers. Staff at the watch house were delighted to welcome back their friend who had 'kept us company for many a long night'.



For a period of time into 2002 the Port Taranaki website (then under the Westgate banner) carried the legend 'Home of Colin's Cat' on its front page, acknowledged the Whiskas sponsorship and provided a link to email Colin's. (A [screenshot](#) is no longer available.)

A quieter life

Early in 2005 Port Taranaki [posted a web page \(archived copy\)](#) with an update on Colin's just over three years after her globe-trotting adventure. [The page was updated to note Colin's passing in May 2007 — see below — but the account of her trip is still there —Ed.] It said she was about 12 years old and seemed 'older and wiser', not straying far from home. 'She occasionally wanders down the wharf with me,' said Gordon, 'but she doesn't go on board vessels any more. She's never been as adventurous since her epic voyage, but she still hunts and stalks seagulls sometimes.' And she had received a visit from her original owner at the port, Colin Butler.

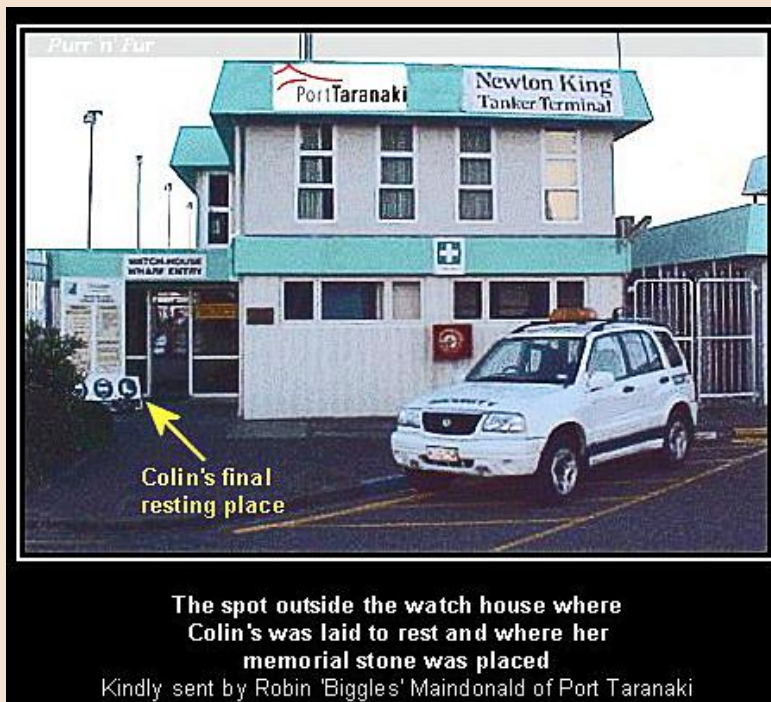


Colin's passing

Colin's died on 15 May 2007 of ill health and old age; she was 16. She's commemorated with a lovely plaque, and is buried close to the entrance to the watch house where she spent so much time. We're very grateful to Robin ('Biggles') Maindonald, Communications and Security Officer at Port Taranaki, for taking the trouble to inform us and for sending the photos below. He reported that she would be very much missed, as she was a special character, always there at shift changeover for many years (when she wasn't on the high seas, that is!), and one of the team. He also had this anecdote:

'She would sit up on the window ledge outside the watch-house reception window and try to get our attention (to let her in). We would pretend she wasn't there, or we hadn't seen her — but hanging on the side of the window frame is a clipboard with information on which product is being loaded onto a vessel moored at the tanker terminal. Colin's used to get her paw under it and give it a flick, so it made a knocking sound; one had to play the game and tease her by not opening the window to let her in. On one occasion there happened to be an ashtray on the ledge. After several attempts to get my attention with the clipboard, I went up to the window, still teasing Colin's by not letting her in. She looked at the ashtray and touched it lightly with her paw, indicating what she would do next if I didn't comply. I called her bluff, and ended up having to clean up the foyer area from a mess of ash and cigarette butts all over the place! She got me that time, we didn't play that game much again — Colin's had won!'

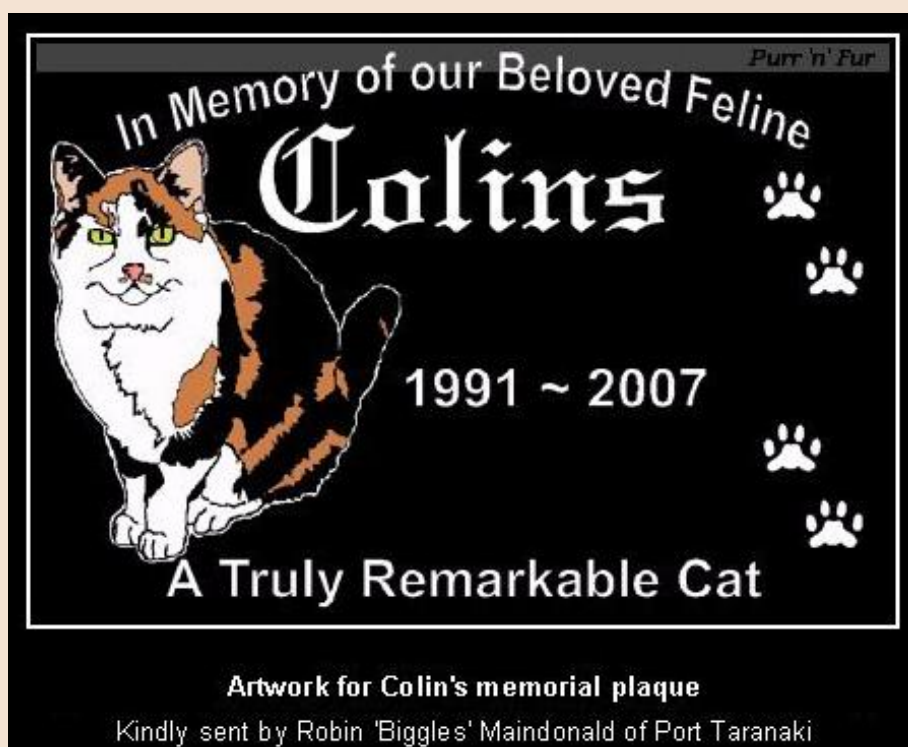
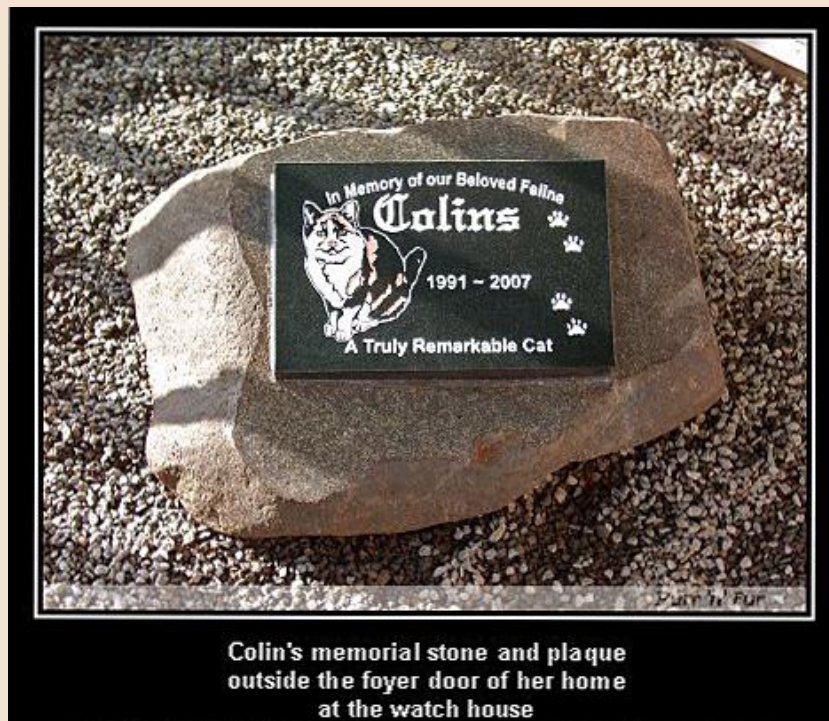
The [Port Taranaki page \(archived copy\)](#) mentioned above noted the passing of Colin's and included some heartfelt tributes. In addition she had a mention from the port's Chief Executive in his report on page 2 of the [Portal magazine \(archived copy\)](#) and her career was reprised and further warm tributes made on pages 10 and 11.



This account was written from the text and photos on the page for Colin's that in 2013 was still at the Port Taranaki website as linked above, used with the kind permission of the Business Development Manager, Jon Hacon, to whom many thanks; from the pages (now no longer online) for Colin's which were maintained by Robin 'Biggles' Maingdonald of the security team at Westgate/Port Taranaki as mentioned above — our warm thanks to him; and from newspaper reports of the time.

Links *(checked September 2024)*

- ❖ *New Zealand Herald*, 27 Nov 2001: [Rescue alert for stowaway cat.](#) *(pay wall)*
- ❖ *Scoop*, 30 Nov 2001: [Whiskas In Bid To Bring Stowaway Cat Home.](#)
- ❖ *New Zealand Herald*, 1 Dec 2001: [Rescued kitten has ruled the port ever since.](#) *(pay wall)*
- ❖ *Scoop*, 3 Dec 2001: [Cat Rescue Mission Reaches Korea.](#)
- ❖ *BBC*, 4 Dec 2001: [Purr-fect ending for stowaway cat.](#)
- ❖ *Scoop*, 4 Dec 2001: [Colin's On Her Way Back From Korea..](#)
- ❖ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 Dec 2001: [Colin's the cat reunited with pal.](#) *(pay wall)*
- ❖ *Scoop*, 5 Dec 2001: [Celebration Time - Colin's Returns Home.](#)
- ❖ *New Zealand Herald*, 6 Dec 2001: [Cat flap as seafaring Colin's flies home.](#) *(pay wall)*





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