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FROM THE WHANGANUI
WWI CENTENARY PROGRAMME



NEW ZEALAND TUNNELLERS AT WAR

Probably the least known group of “servicemen” serving in World War I was the tunnellers. They were stationed on the Somme between March 1916 and April 1919, but for a century, were given no recognition for the difficult and dangerous work they did. No war memorials bear their names. It was not till 2016 that a memorial was raised to these men, in Waihi where most of these men came from. The Arras Tunnel in Wellington is named in honour of them and is the official government recognition of their great contribution to WWI. This recognition, however, did not arrive until 2014.

In September 1915 the Imperial Government requested that the New Zealand Government raise 300 to 400 men to form an Engineering Tunnelling Company. The men who joined this company were largely miners from the Hauraki goldfields, quarrymen and labourers from Railways and Public Works plus some West Coast miners. Twelve men with a Whanganui connection joined the Tunnelling Company, four of whom were employed by the Harbour Board at the Kaiwhaiki quarry.

In October 1915 the would-be tunnellers assembled at Avondale Racecourse in Auckland to be instructed in military protocol: saluting, drilling, taking orders and military law. None of this went down well with these rough, tough men. Two months later the company arrived at Falmouth, England, for further instruction and on 9 March 1916 they finally arrived on the Western Front.

The initial task for the company was to countermine, which meant identifying enemy tunnelling, and destroying German tunnels before the Germans reached the British front line trenches. The success of the operation depended on the speed of digging. The tunnellers would dig a tunnel under the enemy lines and create a cave at the end of the tunnel. They would then pack the cave with 3,000 pounds of explosive, retreat and detonate. When such an explosion erupted,

everyone in the tunnels, plus people unconnected with the explosion, would be killed by carbon monoxide gas. Of course the Germans were undertaking a similar operation. While they were digging, the tunnellers would listen for the sound of the Germans digging. It became a race to see who could reach an enemy position, and pack and blow first. It was dangerous work, even for a war zone. If you did not blow first you had lost the race. Forty one tunnellers died and 151 were injured during counter-mining operations. Fortunately the New Zealand tunnellers dug at three times the rate of the Germans, and only once did they fail to win the race.

In their countermining role, the New Zealand tunnellers operated at the foot of Vimy Ridge, several kilometres out of Arras, but they were later transferred to Arras where they remained for two years. It was at Arras that they were joined by the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion, a battalion of Māori soldiers, and where their most spectacular achievement occurred.

In preparation for the Battle of Arras the Tunnelling Company moved from a counter-mining operation into an offensive operation. New Zealanders are credited with the quite serendipitous rediscovery of forgotten underground quarries outside Arras. This underground quarrying of stone to rebuild Arras in the 17th century had led to great caverns being formed underground after the stone had been excavated. The New Zealand tunnellers set about connecting and enlarging these caverns so that a place could be constructed for a secret amassing and housing of troops, ready for a final, huge-scale, victorious offensive on the German lines.



Map showing tunnels and caverns around Arras. The New Zealand section was named, north to south, as were the towns and cities at home, starting at Russell and reaching Bluff.

Ref: ww100.govt.nz

It is reported that in four months the New Zealanders made six miles of gallery (connecting tunnels) and levelled 15 acres of caves. To do this the Kiwis abandoned the Royal Engineers' method of small, timbered tunnel units and developed a New Zealand version based on their own mining experience. They made the galleries six feet high and three feet six inches wide, giving "room to swing a pick". British tunnels were unlined and supported at intervals by rough props, but New Zealanders timbered their galleries at right angles to the slope. The galleries were formed in much the same manner as a coal seam.

The completed underground system could house 20,000 to 25,000 men. The tunnels had running water, electric lights, kitchens, latrines, a tram system and a fully-equipped hospital with operating theatres and mortuaries. So extensive was this system that in order to find their way around, they gave names to the galleries. The "main highway" was Godley (most senior New Zealand commander on the Somme) Avenue, connecting Russell, Auckland, New Plymouth, Wellington, Nelson, Blenheim, Christchurch, Dunedin and Bluff.



Tunnellers bunking down underground
Ref: ww100.govt.nz

Thousands of soldiers were billeted in this underground camp for eight days prior to the start of the Arras offensive. At 5.30 am on 9 April 1917, exits were dynamited to allow the troops to storm the German trenches. The Germans were taken totally by surprise and were pushed back 11 kilometres. The weather, however, closed in and became very wet. The offensive got bogged down in the mud, and after the casualty rate reached 4,000 per day, the offensive was called off. Officially the Allies won the Battle of the Somme, but it came at a bitterly high human cost.

The New Zealand Tunnelling Company also achieved one further engineering feat before leaving Arras. Over the Canal du Nord they constructed the Havringcourt Bridge, complete with footways and handrails, within eight days. These were men with no bridge-building training, let-alone experience. It is truly amazing that such entrepreneurial men were left unrecognised for almost a century.

RESTORATION OF MĀORI WAR MEMORIAL IN PĀKAITORE, WHANGANUI

For over 12 years the Pākaitore Historic Reserve Board has worked to restore the World War I Māori Monument at Pākaitore/Moutoa Gardens. With great relief and pride, restoration of the monument's statue, obelisk and steps was completed in December 2015. The monument was built as a local Māori initiative in 1925 to commemorate Māori participation in World War I.

A large vertical crack in the 10 metre monument structure was first noted in 2003. This indicated structural instability and sparked investigation on options for repair. Fear for the safety of the statue and the public was such that in 2013 the statue was removed to storage and the obelisk shored up and fenced off.

In 2013 a \$432,000 grant from the New Zealand Lottery Grants Board started the restoration project.

Engineering investigations and much deliberation determined that the best option for repair was an unusual one; to completely dismantle and rebuild the obelisk, core out the plinth and install new foundations and reinforcing.

Opus International Consultants, Goldfield Stone, Conservation Advisor Detlef Klein of Manawatū Museum Services, along with Heritage New Zealand and the Pākaitore Historic Reserve Board, agreed to this procedure.



Marco Buerger, stonemason and conservator (at left) and Aaron Te Rangiao, stonemason, employees of Goldfield Stone Ltd, working on the statue of Herewini.

Photographer: Detlef Klein,
Manawatū Museum Services Ltd

In October 2014 Goldfield Stone, specialist stonemasons from Christchurch, commenced work. First they individually marked and laser-located each of the over 600 large stones that made up the obelisk. They then completely dismantled it down to the plinth. The plinth was cored out and trenches dug below to take four five-metre-long steel foundation beams. The stonemasons

then painstakingly re-built the monument stone by stone, matching each to its exact original position. Concrete and new reinforcing fill the core.

The restored statue of local soldier Herewini Whakarua was lifted by crane to the top of the monument on 2 June 2015.

Set in Stone, a full length film by Whanganui filmmaker Kevin Double, is due for release soon. This film documents the project and the monument's significance to Whanganui.

With thanks to the author, Rosemary Tennant.

ETTIE ROUT, AN UNFORGETTABLE HEROINE

Ettie Annie Rout was born in Tasmania and the family moved to Christchurch in around 1896. Ettie excelled in shorthand and typing classes and in 1902 she became one of the first government-appointed shorthand writers working in the Supreme Court. This work gave her a rare insight, particularly for a woman, into a wide range of social issues.

In July 1915, during the Gallipoli campaign of World War I, she set up the New Zealand Volunteer Sisterhood and invited women between the ages of 30 and 50 to go to Egypt to care for New Zealand soldiers. Many were sponsored by local patriotic committees, and in spite of government opposition, she sent the first batch of 12 volunteers to Cairo that October. The women worked in the New Zealand YMCA canteen in the Esbekia (Azbakiya) gardens and in hospitals; one ran a cookery school. Three women in the Whanganui area joined the NZVA and they worked in military hospitals in Egypt or with the YMCA in London.

When Ettie Rout arrived in Egypt in February 1916, she became aware of the soldiers' high rate of venereal disease, which was one of the main reasons Australian and New Zealand troops abroad were hospitalised. The Army's response to this problem was to encourage soldiers to abstain from sex, but Ettie saw this as a medical not a moral problem and proposed that preventive measures be available to them. She recommended the issue of prophylactic kits and the establishment of inspected brothels and tried to persuade the New Zealand Medical Corps officers to this view, with no success. In June 1917 she went to London and worked with the foremost doctors in this new field and eventually produced her own prophylactic kit, containing calomel ointment, condoms

and Condy's crystals (potassium permanganate). She sold the kits at the New Zealand Medical Soldiers Club which she set up near the New Zealand Convalescent Hospital. By the end of 1917, the NZEF adopted her kit for free and compulsory distribution to soldiers going on leave.

After working in the Middle East Ettie continued her campaign in England and France. In Paris she would meet the troop trains and hand them kits and cards advising them of the safe brothel she had set up with the help of French venereologist, Dr Jean Tissot, who dubbed her "a real guardian angel of the ANZACs".

The story of Ettie Rout shows up much about the hypocritical attitudes of her day. Although her work was of



Ettie Rout's passport photograph in 1918
Alexander Turnbull Library Collection ref: PAColl-4832

great benefit to New Zealand, and part of it officially adopted, she was ignored and news of her was suppressed in her own country. Ettie received no credit for her role in the kit's development and adoption, and for the duration of the war, the cabinet banned mentioning her in New Zealand newspapers under the War

Regulations. Mention of her brought a possible £100 fine after one of her letters, recommending kits and hygienic brothels had been published in the New Zealand Times. Others, particularly women's groups, accused her of trying to make "vice" safe.

Despite being decorated by the French for her war work, which included the establishment of a hygienic brothel for New Zealand troops in Paris in 1918, her activities were deliberately concealed in her own country. In 1920 the New Zealand RSA collected £100 for her as a tribute for her valuable war work, but this was not publicly known. As late as 1936, her obituaries avoided any mention of her wartime service. Her friend H G Wells regarded her as an "unforgettable heroine". In 1922 she wrote to him, "It's a mixed blessing to be born too soon".

Ettie Hornibrook (nee Rout) died in Rarotonga on 17 September 1936. In her obituary the press association called her "one of the best known of New Zealand women" but did not say what she was best known for, implying that it was for her typing speed!

GERMAN-SPEAKERS FACED SUSPICION IN WORLD WAR I

As mentioned in issue four of *The Great War Times*, Whanganui people did not escape the strong undercurrent of suspicion directed at German speakers during World War I. Concerns by some people that Swiss-German migrants and their children could have pro-German sympathies meant that even well-established families came under scrutiny. An example was the Meuli family, whose roots were in Switzerland. The family patriarch, Nicholas Meuli, arrived in Whanganui in 1877 and became a prominent builder and Harbour Board member; he also ran for mayor. By 1914 a number of his relatives had followed him from Switzerland and had settled in Whanganui and Taranaki.



Company Sergeant Major Lorenz (Bob) Meuli, killed in action in 1918.

Photo from David Scoullar collection

world of him.”

Nicholas Meuli’s son, Company Sergeant Major Lorenz (Bob) Meuli, also received accolades after he was killed by shell fire on the Western Front in 1918. In his memory Nicholas Meuli gave Lorenzdale Park in Gonville to the town. Fred Meuli, younger brother of Lorenz, served at Gallipoli and later in France.

Speaking German proved a bonus for Patea blacksmith Otto Meuli, who was a Farrier Sergeant with the Wellington Mounted Rifles in the Middle East. He

Members of the Meuli whanau did go to fight overseas, despite a whispering campaign by some people that they would not be good soldiers. After Lieutenant Wilfred (Chick) Meuli of Manaia was killed in action in France in 1916, tributes showed how wrong they were. Private Reg Lynskey wrote that Chick had been a “great officer and was one of the bravest and his men thought the

received a mention in dispatches for “gallant and distinguished services” after he persuaded some German soldiers to surrender by talking to them in their native language. The certificate recognising this action was signed by British War Secretary Winston Churchill.

The debate over the loyalty or otherwise of some Swiss residents was aired in the media after a reference in the House of Representatives in June 1916 to alleged ill-behaviour of certain Swiss residents in Taranaki, who were said to have engaged in offensive pro-German demonstrations.

Nicholas Meuli responded, “The Swiss in that part of the country were born into companionship with Germany, and their sympathies were naturally with the Germans, just as the Swiss near the French border were sympathetic with the French, and those in close touch with Italy are in sympathy with the Italians.

This, however, did not excuse or condone their offence, and if they had been guilty of the conduct alleged against them, they should certainly be interned. Such conduct was offensive not only to the British-born members of the community, but also to the loyal Swiss who had accepted the privileges and responsibilities of naturalisations, and whose sympathies were wholly and irrevocably with Great Britain and her Allies.”

An interesting consequence of the anti-German feeling was that local butchers, who before the war advertised German sausage products, renamed these as Belgian sausage, and the British Royal family name changed in 1917 from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor.

The Meuli family is remembered in Whanganui through Meuli Street and Swiss Avenue.

David Scoullar is a descendant of the Meuli family.

QUEEN ALEXANDRA’S MOUNTED RIFLES PART 2 THE SINAI CAMPAIGN

Queen Alexandra’s Mounted Rifles (QAMR) was a regiment of the Wellington Mounted Rifles Brigade (WMR) which was in the ANZAC Division of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF). QAMR fought alongside comrades in a number of crucial battles in the Sinai from 1916 to 1918.

They patrolled endlessly in searing heat, amongst clouds of flies, moving through sand in pursuit of their enemy, but also in the endless search for water for the horses. It was dangerous work because the Turks moved so silently through the desert that the slightest noise by the Mounted could give their position away.

The desert railway ran to Romani. In July 1917 aerial reconnaissance spotted Turkish camps containing many men and camels 20 to 30 miles away. Later it was discovered that this force comprised 15,000 Turkish infantry supported by German machine gunners and Austrian Artillery. Heavy guns were dragged across the desert by men and camels with a view to capturing the water-bearing Romani area. When this was complete they planned to use their artillery to attack shipping on the Suez Canal.



The Turkish Mauser was made in Germany for the Turkish Army and used during World War I at Gallipoli and in Palestine. It became a very familiar weapon to the men of QAMR.

Whanganui Regional Museum Collection ref: TF.110

Over the next three weeks the 2nd Light Horse Brigade, which included WMR, encountered parties of Turks and took prisoners. Fierce fighting on 4 August delivered over 1,200 prisoners. The ANZACs counter-attacked, and on 5 August WMR and the 7th Australian Light Horse charged, with fixed bayonets, the main Turkish position on Wellington Ridge. Despite being on the receiving end of heavy rifle and machine gun fire, they stormed the area, and many Turks surrendered. One Second Squadron patrol captured 93 prisoners, 80 camels and an ammunition dump.

After a couple of days rest they were on the move again. The Mounteds took part in another attack on Turkish positions at Bir el Abd. Ted Andrews, in his book *Kiwi Trooper*, writes, "The second squadron (QAMR) played a leading part, and Sergeant Patterson displayed great courage in rescuing wounded under heavy fire."

By 12 August the Battle for Romani was over. The Turks retreated towards El Arish. General Chauvel's casualties at Bir el Abd were heavy, with 73 men killed, including 30 Kiwis, and 243 wounded, 77 of them Kiwis. The wounded had a long and painful journey before they received any treatment. They were assessed in the field, then transported by camel or packhorse to a Regimental Aid Post or to a Mounted Brigade Field Ambulance, then evacuated to a Military Hospital.

After Romani there was a pause in activity as the railway & water pipeline was extended towards El Arish.

The Anzac Mounted Division was then joined by a Yeomanry Division and the Imperial Camel Brigade, mainly Australians and New Zealanders. The Desert Column was commanded by a British Cavalry Officer Lieutenant General Sir Phillip Chetwode. Three strategic locations were taken in quick succession. The Turkish Army abandoned El Arish and entrenched at Magdaba. The Mounteds made long silent night patrols, early morning reconnaissance and envelopment of enemy positions. The attack, when it came, was supported with artillery and

machine gun fire.

There was relief when Magdaba was taken, as there were plenty of wells. After the day's fighting and then watering and feeding both horses and men, the Mounteds were required to return to El Arish.

The Battle for Rafa, about 25 miles north east of El Arish, came next. Following a day's fierce fighting from both sides, the NZ Mounteds made a final bayonet charge under enemy fire, and captured a key part of the Turkish fortifications. This action turned the tide of battle for the EEF. In the ANZAC Mounted Division that day, however, 42 men were killed in action and 242 were wounded.

So ended the Sinai Campaign. Because of their superior mobility, the ANZAC Mounted Division had borne the brunt of the fighting. This changed when the EEF moved into Palestine where the terrain was more suitable for infantry forces.

The third part of this article will focus on the Palestine Campaign and will be published in the next issue.

SWANKERS' CLUB



Swankers' Club badge

Whanganui Regional Museum Collection ref: 2005.67

The Wanganui Swankers' Club was formed during World War I to raise funds for patriotic purposes, in particular to support the Red Cross and Red Cross Nurses; hence, the red cross is part of the Swankers' Club badge.

Swankers, as members

were called, had a light-hearted approach to a serious purpose. A swanker is a dashing, smartly-dressed or stylish man. Swankers wore a distinctive, stylish garb of top hat and tails, usually teamed with formal striped trousers and spats.

After the war, they were very active during the influenza epidemic of 1918-19. Members continued to raise money to establish and maintain the Wanganui-Waitotara Patriotic Society and support a range of charities. Like the Savage Clubs, Swankers held concerts, Mardi Gras and gala days, and were very successful. In June 1925, for example, the Swankers' Club assisted the annual YMCA street appeal, raising £121 2s 6d, which was equally divided between the Swankers' Club and the YMCA. The Swankers closed down in 1929.

NOTICEBOARD

ANZAC DAY PARADES & SERVICES

WHANGANUI

Wanganui RSA organises the ANZAC Day Dawn Parade and Service, held on the forecourt of the War Memorial Centre on Queens Park.

The Parade assembles outside the Davis Library at 5.15am, ready to march off at 5.25am under the command of the Parade Marshal. A short march along Cameron Terrace and Watt Street to the War Memorial Centre is led by the Mayor of Whanganui and the Wanganui RSA President. The Parade moves onto the War Memorial Centre forecourt and forms up behind the seating that is available for the elderly and less mobile. The Parade is then handed over to the Chaplain to conduct the Dawn Service. At the completion of the service, attendees are invited by the Rum and Coffee Committee to partake of refreshments in the War Memorial Centre. All are welcome.

MAXWELL

A service will be held at the Maxwell War Memorial at 9.30am, organised by local residents and the Whanganui District Council. The Mayor and President of the Wanganui RSA will attend and lay wreaths.

PĀKAITORE

The Whanganui Māori Community, led by 28 Maori Battalion, will hold a service at 11.00am at Pākaitore. The Mayor and Wanganui RSA President will attend and lay wreaths.

WORLD WAR I EXHIBITIONS

NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, WAIOURU

Food Glorious Food: An Army Marches on its Stomach to November 2017

Going Underground: Tunnellers of WWI
30 April to September 2017

TE PAPA

Gallipoli - The scale of our war to April 2019

NATIONAL WAR MUSEUM, WELLINGTON

The Great War Exhibition by filmmaker Peter Jackson
There is an entry fee for this exhibition



For information on all national activities commemorating the centennial of World War I, visit the official website www.ww100.govt.nz.

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