

THE GREAT WAR TIMES

ISSUE FIVE

DECEMBER 2016

FROM THE WHANGANUI
WWI CENTENARY PROGRAMME



BATTLE OF THE SOMME

The Battle of the Somme took place on the Western Front, beginning on 1 July 1916 and ending on 18 November the same year, with huge losses incurred by Allied and German forces.

The Western Front was a defensive line which began to take shape in 1914, running from the Swiss border and on to Belgium and Southern Germany. It would eventually be 700 kilometres in length. Famous battles fought along this line were Marne, Ypres, Verdun, the Somme, and later, Passchendaele. Some New Zealanders arrived at the Western Front in September 1916 as part of the British 4th Army. It was intended that this offensive would be a key break-through on the Western Front.

The main strategy of the Somme Campaign, devised by Commander-in-Chief Sir William Haigh, was an intense shelling of German lines to destroy German offensives. It was expected this would put the Germans to flight. Instead, the Germans retreated to prepared trenches, and when shelling ceased, came out of their trenches to man their machine guns. As the British went over the top at 7.30 am on 1 July, the German guns fired. By the end of the day 60,000 Allied men were wounded, dying or dead. This “first attack” lasted for several days.

Over two months, the Allied gains could be measured in metres, with both sides suffering huge losses. At this point people realized that the war would not be “over by Christmas”. The Dominions were requested to contribute more soldiers.

On 12 September 1916 the New Zealand Army entered the battle on the Western Front. Firstly, artillery went into action, joined by the New Zealand Infantry on 15 September 1916. At 6.20 am on that day they went over the top. About 6,000 men saw action, and of these, 1,200 were wounded or missing and 600 were dead. The Allies did, however, capture Fleurs, Courcellette and High Wood.

On 16 September the rain came. The downpour turned the battlefield into a mire, making it impossible for any advance. Soldiers spent days knee-deep in mud and without proper cover. The New Zealand Expeditionary Force did, however, go over the top again on 16, 25 and 27 September and on 1 October, with more loss of life and no gain in territory.



New Zealand on the Somme, 1916

“New Zealand on the Somme, 1916” - map, URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/somme-battles-1916-map>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 14-Sep-2016

Among the 2,000 New Zealanders who died on the Somme was Sergeant Donald Forrester Brown, who posthumously, was awarded the Victoria Cross, the only Victoria Cross to be received in 1916 by a member of the NZEF. An oak tree was planted for Sergeant Brown in Oamaru, where he had attended school and farmed.

For the last ten weeks of the Battle of the Somme, the Allied Forces lived in horrendous conditions of mud, rain, rat and lice infestation, unable to sleep or dry out. In a brief break in the weather, the Allies managed to take Morvel, Thiepval Ridge and Beaumont Hamlet, but since that fateful “first attack” on 1 July the Allied Line had only advanced 12 metres. The rain gave way to snow, and finally on 18 November, a halt was called to the battle. The Germans withdrew to the Hindenburg Line and the Battle of the Somme was over. The human cost for both sides was staggering. Technically the Allies won the Battle of the Somme, but it was a hollow victory.

It was on the Somme that the largest number of New Zealanders were killed or wounded during World War I. Over half of the New Zealand Somme dead have no known grave. The Unknown New Zealand Warrior, interred at the National War Memorial in Wellington, lost his life on the Western Front sometime between April 1916 and November 1918.

The Caterpillar Valley Cemetery, north-west of Amiens in France, has two graves of Whanganui soldiers plus 29 names of soldiers from Whanganui and the surrounding district on the New Zealand Memorial Wall.



For information on Whanganui casualties go to:
The Commonwealth War Graves Commission website at: www.cwgc.org
Auckland War Memorial Museum Online Cenotaph database at: www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph

Postcard titled La Grande Guerre, Albert (Somme), with a subheading in French “Ce qui reste d’un quartier de la Ville après sa destruction par les Allemands”. (This is what remains in a quarter of the town after its destruction by the Germans).

Whanganui Regional Museum Collection ref: 1802.3793

WAR AT CHRISTMAS



Christmas Card dating from World War I

Whanganui Regional Museum Collection Ref: 1802.4502

PRINCESS MARY'S GIFT



A presentation tin was issued by Princess Mary to over 426,000 members of the British, Colonial and Indian Armed Forces serving during Christmas 1914. The tins were filled with an array of goodies that included tobacco, confectionery, spices, pencils, a Christmas card and a picture of the princess. Princess Mary was the 17-year-old daughter of King George V and Queen Mary. She had organised the public appeal to raise funds to ensure that “every Sailor afloat and every Soldier at the front” received a Christmas present.



Whanganui Regional Museum Collection ref: 2015.67.15

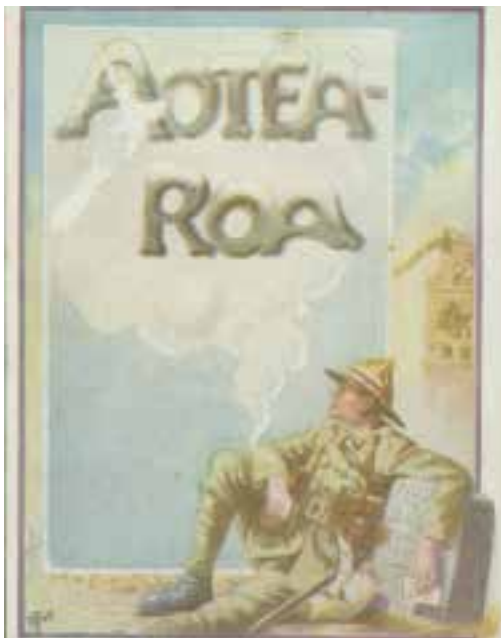
The tin is painted gold and has a hinged lid. Embossed in the centre of the lid is the profile of the head of Princess Mary surrounded by laurel leaves and with the letter “M” in relief on each side. Around the edge of the lid are the names of the countries in the Western Alliance with Belgium, Japan, Monte Negro and Serbia in a shield in each corner. France and Russia are embossed in a circle on the sides, set on a background of flags and with “IMPERIUM BRITANNICUM” (British Empire) at the top with a drawn sword and sheath on each side. “CHRISTMAS 1914” is also embossed in the metal with a naval gunboat on each side.

CHRISTMAS CARDS FROM THE FRONT

NEW ZEALAND ARMY



A combination Christmas card and a menu for Christmas dinner on Christmas Day 1917 was printed as a Christmas greeting for New Zealand soldiers in France to send home to their families. On the front is a colour illustration of a New Zealand soldier sitting on the ground resting on a milestone, which reads “France to New Zealand 13,000 miles”. In the central panel the smoke of his pipe has formed the word “AOTEAROA”



Whanganui Regional Museum Collection ref: 2015.67.15

combined with a map of New Zealand. Inside is printed "With Best Wishes for Christmas and the New Year from ..." and the date "Christmas, 1917" is augmented by "The New Zealand Command Depot".

On the left inside page is a printed "Menu-Xmas Day, 1917". A four course dinner is described briefly.

ROYAL NAVAL DIVISION

The 63rd RND was a British infantry division, formed at the outbreak of the war from Royal Navy and Royal Marine reservists and volunteers who were not needed for service at sea. They fought at Antwerp and at Gallipoli. In 1916, following heavy losses, the RND was transferred to the British Army as the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, re-using the number from a disbanded Territorial Force division. As an Army unit, it fought on the Western Front for the rest of the war.

This battered old Christmas card from The Royal Naval Division was produced while sailors fought on land during World War I. The cover shows the RND crest and the text, "With best wishes for a Happy and Victorious New Year /



Whanganui Regional Museum Collection ref: 1960.20

From ...". Inside the card are line sketches in blue print of sites associated with Gallipoli, a short history and the war record of the Royal Naval Division. The back cover has a cartoon of a British and a Turkish serviceman lobbing bombs at each other.



KIWI HOSPITAL AT WALTON-UPON-THAMES

The New Zealand War Contingent Association negotiated the use of a large gracious home named Mount Felix at Walton-on-Thames, in the south-west of London, to use as a hospital for New Zealand war wounded. It opened in early August 1915 and within days, men from the Gallipoli.



Christmas 1916 in the wards at Mt Felix Hospital, after the Battle of the Somme

Whanganui Regional Museum Collection Ref: 1802.3773.20 & 18

Campaign became its first patients. Other hospitals for New Zealand servicemen, run by and paid for by New Zealand, were needed and in August 1916 Brockenhurst, in the New Forest in Hampshire became No 1 General Hospital while Mount Felix became No 2 General Hospital.

Mount Felix grew swiftly, in response to the increased intensity of the war; wounded were placed in huts and

large tents. During the Battle of the Somme an old hotel, Oatlands Park, just down the road from Mt Felix, was also converted into a hospital and managed medical issues, tuberculosis and amputees.

Some very badly injured and ill men were admitted to Mt Felix. Medical personnel tried hard to inject a spirit of cheerfulness and optimism and made sure that Christmas was celebrated and enjoyed by all, however badly off they were.

In 1921 the people of Walton-on-Thames erected a plaque to the Kiwis who had been patients. After the demolition of Mount Felix the plaque was installed in the Walton Town Hall in New Zealand Avenue. When the Town Hall was demolished the plaque was donated to the Elmbridge Museum in Surrey.

This tablet is erected AD 1921 by the inhabitants of Walton-upon-Thames to commemorate their 27,000 fellow subjects from the Dominion of New Zealand who wounded or disabled in the Great War 1915-1918 were cared for in the military hospitals at Mount Felix and Oatlands Park. Seventeen of these men lie buried in Walton cemetery. Their bodies are buried in peace but their name liveth for evermore.

QUEEN ALEXANDRA'S MOUNTED RIFLES

During the New Zealand Wars of the 19th century volunteer corps sprang up all over the new colony of New Zealand. The Alexandra Troop, based at Warrengate (Fordell), was accepted for service in 1864. The Troop was named in honour of Princess Alexandra of Denmark, who had married Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales the year before. Initially 30 strong, the Troop was deployed to patrol the district on the east side of the Whanganui River while the Wanganui Cavalry did the same on the west side, the town side. There was, at that time, no bridge across the river.

By 1879 Alexandra's troop had grown to 54 men and in 1886 to 69 when it became part of the 1st New Zealand Cavalry Regiment for the next four years. In 1895-6 the Mounted Corps of the four main provinces, Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Otago, were formed and organised into two Mounted Rifle Battalions by 1899. Number 1 Battalion was made up of volunteers from Wellington, West Taranaki, Wanganui and Manawatū, while Number 2 Battalion was manned with Eastern Hawke's Bay and Wairarāpa volunteers.

In 1911 the introduction in New Zealand of compulsory military service resulted in the volunteer corps losing their

separate identities and being merged into one regiment. The Wellington Mounted Rifles (WMR) comprising three squadrons, the 2nd Queen Alexandra's Own, the 9th Wellington East Coast and the 6th Manawatū was created, being a regiment of the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade (NZMRB).

A regimental badge and motto design was submitted by Miss Barbara Elmslie of Waverly and Miss Feaver of Opunake. Commissioned in 1911, it consisted of a punga tree encircled by a baggage strap with "QUEEN ALEXANDRA'S 2nd WWC Mtd RIFLES" in relief. The number 2 is on the left and right sides and a scroll below the tree reads "AKE AKE KIA KAHA" (for ever and ever be strong).

The WMR mobilized with the other regiments and sailed to Alexandria in Egypt in December 1914, as part of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF). QAMR comprised 158 men and 169 horses and was initially commanded by Major Jim Elmslie. Every fighting soldier had a horse; senior officers often had several. New Zealand was responsible for all the NZEF horses for the first years of the war. During the voyage, horses were mostly accommodated in the ship's hold in rows of stalls, usually



Queen Alexandra's 2nd Wellington West Coast Mounted Rifles badge

Whanganui Regional Museum Collection Ref: 1802.3881.5

facing inwards to the centre. Kiwi Trooper Ted Andrews wrote, "They trod backwards and forwards, in regular steps and were cursed constantly by the men whose bunks were immediately below the tramping hooves. The smell of hundreds of horses reached to every corner of the ship and seemed to taint the very food, but everyone soon got used to it."

The total weight carried by a troop horse was about 100 kilograms; 70kgs for the rider, 20kgs for the saddle and 10kgs for clothing, ammunition, rations and personal effects. The Mobile Veterinary Service (NZMVS) was the equine equivalent of the field ambulance with the capacity to treat 250 horses for minor ailments at any one time. Horse sick parades were held every morning. It was in the best interest of all WMR men to keep their horses fit and

well to avoid losing it and possibly receiving an inferior replacement.

The NZEF and Australian Light Force had been diverted to Egypt when Turkey declared war on 31 October 1914, and took part in the invasion of Gallipoli. The NZMRB, including QAMR, landed without their mounts, which stayed behind in Egypt. The Mounted Rifles maintained and built their reputation as hard fighters. Major Elmslie was recommended for a posthumous Victoria Cross. The NZMRB was effectively destroyed on Gallipoli.

After the evacuation from Gallipoli in December 1915, the QAMR troopers were reunited with their horses at Zeitoun Camp near Cairo. When the New Zealand and Australian Infantry were sent from Egypt to the Western Front in early 1916 the Mounted Rifles were not required. They were re-formed into one new ANZAC Mounted Division, commanded by Australian General Harry Chauvel. They protected the railway and pipelines and scouted across the Sinai Peninsula.

The WMR had left home with bicycles, pack horses and wagons and horse-drawn ambulances, but only the pack animals could operate in the desert. Supplies were moved by rail or more exotically, by camel convoys managed by the Egyptian Camel Transport Corps (CTC). Some Kiwis and Australians were cameleers with this Corps.

When not on patrol the troopers lived in camps at the Romani or Etmaler Wells. A typical day in camp began with reveille at 5.30 am, and Sick Parade at 6.00 am. Horses were fed and watered four times daily, the men spending up to three hours a day grooming and attending to them. The health of the horses was a constant anxiety. With no grass in the desert, fodder had to be brought from the Suez Canal. The heat, the flies and the shortage of water were daily problems. Routine tasks included guarding water troughs and outposts, supply dumps, escorting camel convoys or digging wells.

Terry Kinloch, in his book *Devils on Horseback*, writes “The Turks withdrew many of their forward posts and gave up trying to intercept the ANZAC patrols. They sent aircraft to spot the horses being led or rested, and targeted these instead. To counteract this, air sentries, armed with a whistle, were posted on hillsides surrounding the camp.” Kinloch quotes Clifton Bellis, “On hearing a whistle blast every man sprang to his horse, leaps on and gallops straight out into the desert in a thundering scatter of six hundred horses.”

Part II of this article will be printed in the next issue of the *Great War Times*.

BOOK REVIEW

CHINESE ANZACS IN WORLD WAR I

A second edition of *Chinese Anzacs: Australians of Chinese descent in the defence forces 1885-1919* by Alastair Kennedy includes a new section about New Zealand-born men of Chinese descent who enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force of World War I. These men served alongside their Australian compatriots on Gallipoli, in Egypt and the Desert Campaign and on the Western Front.

About 30 of the 55 NZ Chinese who enlisted are acknowledged in the text but a list of all names is included in an index at the end of the book. The two main official sources are the databases of Archives New Zealand (Archway) and the Auckland War Memorial Museum (Cenotaph). Other information was sourced through branches of the New Zealand Chinese Association.



Photo: RNZ / Lynda Chanwai-Earle

The RSA National Senior Vice President commented at the book launch earlier in 2016 how special it was for these men to have enlisted, given the general anti-Chinese feeling of New Zealanders at the time.

The author, referring to this new work on New Zealand Chinese in the NZEF, stated, “This chapter is designed to be an introduction to a larger and more important history – the part played by New Zealand-born Chinese in the social and military history of New Zealand in the 20th century. As with those who served in the Australian Infantry Force, it would be interesting to tell the story of their lives between the two World Wars, and, in particular, how their short period of military service affected their later lives, especially in relation to the social tensions between the Chinese, part-Chinese and the white European communities.”

This is a book worth reading and adds significantly to the scholarship of contemporary World War I publications. Copies are available at the Whanganui District Library.

WHAT'S ON

WORLD WAR I EXHIBITIONS

NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, WAIOURU

Somme/Silk Rd photographs by David Wooding
until 6 February 2017

ANZAC photographs by Laurence Aberhart
until 17 January 2017

Food, Glorious Food: an army marches on its stomach
17 December 2016 until March 2018

Harnessed: New Zealand War Horses

The Patriotic Call to Yarn is Answered in Roimata
Pounamu-Tears on Greenstone Memorial space

TE PAPA

Gallipoli - The scale of our war to April 2019

The Anzac print portfolio to 26 February 2017

NATIONAL WAR MUSEUM, WELLINGTON

The Great War Exhibition by filmmaker Peter Jackson

There is an entry fee for this exhibition

WANGANUI WAR MEMORIAL CENTRE

We Will Remember Them - ANZACs of World War I
10am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday or by appointment



*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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GREAT
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Published by Whanganui Regional Heritage Trust for the Whanganui WWI Centenary Programme. The Whanganui WWI Centenary Programme is grateful for funding from Lottery World War One Commemorations, Environment & Heritage Committee and the Powerco Whanganui Trust.

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