

TE HOKOWHITU-A-TŪ

The Māori Pioneer Battalion

by Monty Soutar



*It's often said that New Zealand "grew up" during the First World War. At the time, our country was part of the **British Empire**, which meant Britain still decided our foreign policy. Most Pākehā weren't bothered by this. Many still thought of Britain as home. But by 1918, this attitude was changing. People were proud of what their small nation had done in the war. They were especially proud of their brave soldiers – soldiers who were beginning to use a new name for themselves: **Kiwis**. It was a name that was to become part of our country's new identity.*

But what about the 2500 Māori soldiers who fought during the First World War? How did the war change things for them? And why did they fight in the first place?



"E te iwi, whītiki! Whiti! Whiti e!"

When war was declared on 4 August 1914, Pākehā were eager to help. The government decided to send eight thousand men to fight, but within four days, thousands more had volunteered. This main group of soldiers was called the **New Zealand Expeditionary Force**.

Although many Māori wanted to join up, at first, only a few did. This quickly changed when the government said it would include a special group of soldiers called the Māori Contingent. A war cry went out: "E te iwi, whītiki! Whiti! Whiti e!" ("O people, prepare yourselves for battle! Spring up! Spring up!") In those days, most Māori lived in rural villages near their marae. So the four Māori members of parliament helped to spread this war cry. They travelled the country, encouraging Māori to "do their bit".

While soldiers were meant to be at least twenty years old, boys as young as fifteen enlisted for the Māori Contingent. Few Māori had birth certificates, which made it easy for boys to lie about their ages, especially those who were keen for adventure, just like many young Pākehā. In no time at all, places like the East Coast and Rotorua had given more than enough men. Māui Pōmare, the MP for Western Māori, praised the loyalty that Māori were showing. "The British cause is their cause," he said. "The British king is their king." Āpirana Ngata, the MP for Eastern Māori, was also pleased. He hoped Māori would become more equal with Pākehā if they fought beside them.

Rebels?

Not all Māori felt the same way about the war. Some iwi, in places like Taranaki and Waikato, had a very different attitude. Fifty years earlier, the government had attacked their tipuna. The government called them "rebels" and took most of their land.

These iwi were still deeply unhappy about what had happened. A whole generation had grown up seeing their land being used by other people. This loss also meant Māori had no way to grow their own food. Why would men from these places want to risk their lives for a government that had caused poverty and suffering?



The soldiers of Te Hokowhitu-a-Tū on board their troopship just before leaving, February 1915

Haere e tama ma

The Māori Contingent became known as Te Hokowhitu-a-Tū. In February 1915, after training in Auckland, the soldiers were farewelled. “Haere e tama ma,” their whānau said. “Haere me te whakaaro ki te pupuri i te rongou toa a o tatou tipuna. Kia wehi ki te Atua. Whakahonoretia te kingi.” (“Farewell, young men. Go and uphold the name of our warrior ancestors. Fear God. And honour the king.”) The group of five hundred sailed for Egypt. From there, they were sent to Malta, where they guarded the island for a few weeks.



Māori soldiers at Zeitoun Camp in Egypt

Then, in July 1915, the men were sent to Gallipoli. The British high command was uncomfortable with the idea of native people fighting alongside Europeans. So at first, the Māori soldiers were kept busy digging trenches and building supply depots. But these men had joined the army to fight – and because of heavy **casualties**, they finally got their chance.

On the night of 6 August, the Māori soldiers were ordered to attack the Turkish trenches along the foothills of Chunuk Bair. Before they left, their chaplain said a prayer. “Remember you have the mana, the honour, and the good name of the Māori people in your keeping this night.” That evening, the haka “Ka mate, ka mate” could be heard around the hills as the Māori Contingent captured enemy trenches, one by one.

Conscription and Māori

Most people thought the war would be a “quick victory”. But this wasn’t the case. Governments around the world, on both sides, soon faced the problem of finding enough men. In 1916, New Zealand began using military **conscription**.

At first, conscription was only for Pākehā. In June 1917, it was extended to Māori – but only those living in the Waikato, where very few Māori men had volunteered because most didn’t support the Crown. However, the policy failed. By 1918, over a hundred Waikato Māori had been sent to prison for refusing military training, and there were warrants out for the arrest of a hundred more. In the end, only a handful of Waikato Māori ever made it into uniform.



THE SPIRIT OF HIS FATHERS.

This cartoon was published in a New Zealand newspaper in 1915 to encourage Māori to sign up. In the background, it shows the Māori God of War, Tūmatauenga.



Brave warriors

Seventeen Māori died on the slopes of Chunuk Bair. Eighty-nine more were wounded. After this battle, Māori soldiers became known as brave fighters. One Pākehā officer wrote that “no matter how desperate the fighting may be ... they are amongst the best bayonet fighters in the world, and they are perfect sentries. As trench fighters, you can’t beat them.” But like other troops at Gallipoli, the number of dead, wounded, and sick Māori soldiers grew. Te Hokowhitu-a-Tū was slowly reduced to a shadow. By the time the contingent finally left in December, only 134 of the original group of five hundred were left.

Pioneer battalion

After Gallipoli, soldiers from Te Hokowhitu-a-Tū joined with soldiers from the Otago Mounted Rifles Regiment. The two groups became the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion. The orders were that men in this battalion weren’t to fight as **infantry**. Too many Māori had already been killed at Gallipoli.

Along with the rest of the Expeditionary Force, the men arrived in France in April 1916. They began to dig trenches and build roads behind the front line. But it was still dangerous work, often done under fire. A few months later, the Pioneer Battalion became involved in the Battle of the Somme and much later, Messines. Many more Māori soldiers were killed on the **Western Front**.

Around the middle of 1917, the Pioneer Battalion was reorganised. The Otago men were replaced with around 470 soldiers, mostly from Niue and the Cook Islands. The battalion became known as the New Zealand (Māori) Pioneer Battalion.



Soldiers in the Māori Pioneer Battalion taking a break in the trenches, France, July 1918



One soldier’s story

The Māori Pioneer Battalion suffered many casualties. Each soldier was an individual with his own story. Hēnare Mōkena Kōhere (Ngāti Porou) was one of these men. He served in France as an officer with the battalion and was badly wounded during a night raid in the Battle of the Somme. He died two days later on 16 September 1916. Hēnare left behind three young children. He was thirty-six years old.



The Māori Pioneer Battalion on the Western Front, building a road just after the Battle of Messines

War’s end

The day the war ended, **Armistice Day**, the Māori Pioneer Battalion had been heading towards Germany. Suddenly, high command changed its orders. “Native troops” wouldn’t be allowed to **occupy** Germany. Instead, the soldiers would be sent back to New Zealand. The men were angry to be treated this way – but also pleased that they were going home.

The Māori Pioneer Battalion was the only one to return to New Zealand as a complete group. The Māori soldiers were given a huge welcome, with parties and parades all over the country. The men knew they had “done their bit” – and done it well.



Placing soil from the battlefields of Belgium in the Whanganui Māori War Memorial on Anzac Day, 1925

Afterwards

During the war, 366 Māori soldiers were killed and more than seven hundred were wounded. (These numbers include Māori who served in other parts of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force.) Those who did make it home were changed. They had seen friends killed and injured. They had learnt about hardship and stress and how much a person can endure. Most of all, they had earned respect that would last for a lifetime.

The returning soldiers had also seen the world. They were able to help their whānau understand the opportunities that lay beyond their villages. Many became strong supporters of their local schools, and this focus on education was positive for the community. Many soldiers were now well-connected. They had made strong friendships on the battlefield, and some of these were with Pākehā. This helped to form a better understanding between the two races.

Still, these changes weren't as deep as they might have been. Āpirana Ngata and the other Māori politicians had hoped for equality. But after the war, most Māori and Pākehā continued to see one another as "different". There was more goodwill and social contact, but a gulf remained. Māori stayed poorer, had worse health, and had the lowest-paying jobs. Many were still without their land – and it was to stay that way for a long time. Mostly, the hopes of Māori hadn't been realised. It would take many decades, including another world war, for any real change to begin.

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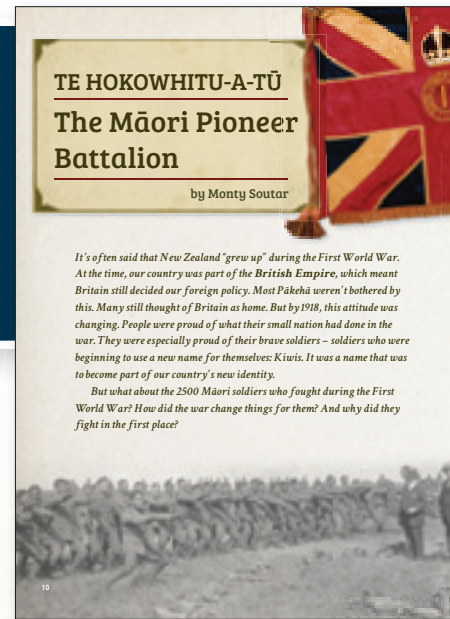
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