

## **1st New Zealand Mounted Rifles Contingent to the Boer War 1899 - 1901**

### **Background**

On 11 October 1899 the Boer South Africa Republic made up of the Transvaal and Orange Free State declared war on Great Britain. This declaration was the culmination of 63 years of animosity between the Boers and the British in Southern Africa. The First Boer War in 1881 had led to the British defeat at Majuba Hill and the British Jameson Raid in 1895 was also defeated by the Boers. Gold was discovered in Witwatersrand in 1886 which led to an influx of British "Uitlanders" into the Transvaal. The Boers would not give the Uitlanders citizenship which caused friction. The British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain and the Governor of Cape Colony, Sir Alfred Milner wanted war with Boers to secure the Witwatersrand gold fields and end Boer independence. The Boers had been armed with modern weapons with assistance from Germany. On 9 September 1899 the Transvaal and Orange Free State Governments demanded that the British withdraw British forces from their borders and stop reinforcements coming by sea from Great Britain. The British non-compliance resulted in the declaration of war with Great Britain by the Transvaal and Orange Free State.

On 28 September 1899 The Prime Minister, The Right Honourable R.J. Seddon moved a resolution in Parliament for New Zealand to offer a 200 strong mounted rifles contingent to the Imperial Government in London for active service in South Africa. This offer was accepted by the Imperial Government in London.

### **1st New Zealand Contingent New Zealand Mounted Rifles**

Each of the five New Zealand military districts was asked to provide 50 picked men from the mounted volunteer units in their district and to send them to Wellington as quickly as possible.

Men from the Permanent Artillery set up a camp for the contingent on Campbell Farm in Campbell Street in the Wellington suburb of Karori. The first contingent of men arrived at Campbell Farm on 6 October 1899 and the majority of the men were in camp by 11 October 1899. Major A.W. Robin<sup>1</sup> was appointed Commanding Officer of the 1st Contingent New Zealand Mounted Rifles. The contingent was broken into two companies with No 1 Company commanded by Captain R.H. Davies and No 2

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<sup>1</sup> Major A.W. Robin was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in South Africa. He became Chief of the General Staff 1906 to 1910 and General Officer Commanding New Zealand Forces in NZ during World War One. Major General Sir Alfred Robin, KCMG, CB, K StJ, VD retired in 1922 and died in Wellington aged 88 in 1935.

Company by Captain W.R.N. Madocks. The two companies were further broken down into three divisions of 30 men commanded by a lieutenant. The contingent had a strength of 11 Officers and 204 Other Ranks.



1st Contingent New Zealand Mounted Rifles Camp  
Campbell Farm Karori Wellington 1899

No 1 Company was made up of volunteers from Auckland, Waikato, Heretaunga, Hawera, Manawatu, Wairoa and Alexandra Mounted Rifles; Ohinemuri, Onehunga, Rangitikei and College Rifles; Wellington Guards and A and D Batteries Field Artillery.

No 2 Company was made up of volunteers from: Marlborough, Canterbury, Clutha, Southland, North Otago and Ellesmere Mounted Rifles; Hastings and Christchurch College Rifles; Canterbury Yeomanry Cavalry, Otago Hussars, Napier Guards and B and E Batteries Field Artillery.



Troopers of the Alexandra Mounted Rifles  
At Campbell Farm October 1899

The contingent spent the period 11 - 20 October being fitted out with uniforms, equipment and Martini Enfield single shot carbines and conducting basic training for the operations ahead of them in South Africa.

The SS Waiwera was chartered by the Government to take the 1st Contingent NZMR to South Africa. The contingent's 252 horses were embarked on 20 October 1899. On 21 October 1899 the 1st Contingent marched from Campbell's Farm down Tinakori Road, Sydney Street and Lambton Quay to Jervis Quay where a farewell address was given by the Mayor of Wellington, Mr J.R. Blair, The Governor General, Lord Ranfurly and the Premier, Mr Richard Seddon prior to the contingent embarking.

The 1st Contingent NZMR arrived in Cape Town on the 27th November 1899. On 28 November 1899 the contingent went by train to Naauwpoort, North Cape Colony to join Major General French's 1st Cavalry Brigade. Over the next 12 months the contingent was engaged in military operations against the Boers at Arundel, Jasfontein Farm,

Coleskop, Slingsfontein (New Zealand Hill), relief of Kimberley, Bloemfontein which resulted in the capture of Boer General de Wet's forces, Koornspruit and the advance on Pretoria with General Hutton's 3rd Mounted Infantry.

The 1st Contingent NZMR was awarded the following clasps to the Queens South Africa Medal: Cape Colony; Orange Free State; Transvaal; Relief of Kimberley; Paardeberg; Driefontein; Johannesburg: Diamond Hill; Wittebergen and South Africa 1901.

The 1st Contingent NZMR left South Africa in November and December 1900. The contingent was disbanded on 21 January 1901.

10 New Zealand Mounted Rifles contingents totalling 6,507 men served in South Africa. 60 men were killed in action, 11 died of wounds, 26 were killed in accidents and 133 died of disease for a total of 230 men killed.

In addition to these contingents New Zealand sent 20 teachers and 35 nurses to serve in South Africa. The teachers taught children in the Concentration Camps established by the British to separate families from Boer combatants. Only six of the 20 teachers returned to New Zealand with the remaining 14 staying in South Africa.

### **Significance of the Boer War to New Zealand**

Richard Stowers claims in his book, *Rough Riders at War*, that the Boer War experience provided that New Zealand had come of age in the eyes of Great Britain and the Empire. The colonial name tag was dropped and replaced with a "member of the Empire". New Zealand was determined to increase its role as a valuable member of the Empire. The greater awareness of New Zealand in Britain led to an increase of exports and set the scene for New Zealand's involvement in the First World War.

The military lessons of the Boer War led to major reforms within the British and New Zealand Armies. The old volunteer system was replaced with School Cadet Forces and the Territorial Force administered and trained by a Regular Force Staff Corps and Permanent Staff. This reorganisation put the New Zealand Army on a more professional footing to meet the challenges of war on an industrial scale in the First World War.

### **Bibliography**

Richard Stowers, *Rough Riders at War* 5th Edition 2008, Richard Stowers Publisher, Hamilton 2008

John Crawford and Ellen Ellis, *To Fight for the Empire: An Illustrated History of New Zealand and the South Africa War 1899 - 1902*, Reed Books, Auckland 1999.