

THE SOMME

The Battle of the Somme began on 1 July 1916 and was the major British offensive in that year. The position in western Europe at that point was that the French army was heavily engaged in a bloody defence of Verdun and the opposing forces along the rest of the Western Front had been mired in the stalemate of trench warfare for 18 months. Named for the nearby river this assault was designed to decisively break the deadlock, relieve the French at Verdun and begin the advance to retake Holland, Belgium and the rest of France.

The first day saw almost 60,000 British casualties of which 20,000 were killed. The battle dragged on for another summer into a wet autumn over 141 days



A New Zealand trench mortar battery on the Somme. Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918.

until November. Over the course of the assault the French Army suffered an estimated 195,000 casualties, the combined British Forces suffered 420,000 casualties and the Germans around 650,000.

The New Zealand Division, fighting as part of the British forces had their first engagement on the Western Front at Flers in France in mid September. By early October, the Division had suffered some 7,000 casualties on the Somme of which 1,500 were killed.

On 15 September at Flers, a British secret invention was unleashed for the first time, alongside the New Zealand troops. The tank was developed to break the deadlock of trench warfare. 49 tracked and armoured tanks went into action in support of the attacking troops. Many broke down or got stuck, but the remainder struck terror into the German defenders and the attack was a success. The name was a secret codename, so the Germans might think that water tanks were being developed instead of a weapon. By the end of the war, tanks were in use by most nations and had improved greatly in reliability and usefulness.



Maori Pioneers await their evening meal on the Somme. Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918.



YPRES AND PASSCHENDALE

On 31 July 1917, a massive offensive was launched by the British Army around the Belgian city of Ypres, which had already seen much fighting. The British assaulted the German defences on the higher ground facing the city. The summer weather in August was atrocious and the ground soon became a sea of mud. British attacks at first failed but successes followed, including the New Zealander's capture of Gravenstafel Spur on 4 October 1917. 320 New Zealand lives were lost, including Originals All Black Captain, Dave Gallagher.

At 6.00am on 12 October 1917, the New Zealand Division attacked the ridge at Passchendaele in wet weather and with little preparation. In the appalling boggy ground the attack became a slaughter, with the exposed New Zealanders unable to advance through the mud against the German bunkers. A second attempt in the afternoon met with more failure.

By the end, the 2nd Brigade and 3rd (Rifle) Brigades had suffered 2,700 casualties with about 845 men dead or dying. 282 men of the Canterbury Regiment were killed and 618 wounded. Passchendaele represents New Zealand's worst loss of life in a single day.



New Zealand troops move down a corduroy road, Ypres Salient. Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918.



An advanced New Zealand headquarters known as the Capitol, Ypres Salient. Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918.



German prisoners bringing in the wounded, Spice Farm. Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918.



CANTERBURY IN 1917

The First World War continued throughout 1917 with significant battles for New Zealanders in Palestine and Flanders. In Canterbury, life was also marked by other significant political and civic events.

In February 1917, Christchurch Captain Robert Falcon Scott's statue was presented to the city as a memorial to the great explorer who set sail from Lyttelton in 1910 on the ill-fated Terra Nova expedition. At its unveiling, a member of the Scott Memorial Committee acknowledged the statue as "a visible sign which connected Christchurch with the deeds of endurance and sacrifice which has few parallels in history." The story of the sacrifice of Scott and his companions was used to inspire British patriotic feeling during the War.

Also in this year Christchurch elected its first female councillor, Ada Wells. Born in England in 1863 she arrived in New Zealand aged 10 and married in 1884. She worked closely with Kate Sheppard as the chief strategist in the Women's Christian Temperance Union's campaign to enable women to vote in parliamentary elections. During the First World War she belonged to the National Peace Council which helped conscientious objectors. She served as a Christchurch City Councillor until 1919 and died in 1933.

Towards the end of 1917 the famed German naval officer, Felix von Luckner was imprisoned on Ripapa Island near Lyttelton. Von Luckner had left Germany as Captain of the raider vessel

Seeadler in December 1916. Over the following eight months, von Luckner and his crew scuttled 14 ships and took more than 300 prisoners before running aground in French Polynesia. With five of his men, von Luckner sailed some 3,000km to Fiji. He was captured as a prisoner of war in late 1917 and brought to New Zealand. The Count was involved in numerous escape attempts prior to his repatriation to Germany in 1919.



Heathcote Valley, 1917.



Robert Falcon Scott memorial, Scott Reserve, corner of Worcester Boulevard and Oxford Terrace, Christchurch [ca. 1917]



PASIFIKA INVOLVEMENT IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

When Great Britain declared war on Germany a call was sent out to all parts of the British Empire to support their efforts to defeat their opposition. Thousands of miles away in the warm waters of the South Pacific, that call was answered by what must have surely been some of the smallest British Protectorate Nations. Though few in number, they were passionate in their support.

The Chiefs of Niue, a Pacific Island with a population of only 4,000 at the time, drafted a reply to King George V, it read:

"To King George V, all those in authority, and the brave men who fight; I am the island of Niue, a small child that stands up to help the kingdom of King George V."

Niue, Cook Islands, Fiji, Rotuma, Tonga, Tokelau, Tahiti, Hawai'i and as far East as Kiribati or Gilbert Islands are all recorded as having men that served during the Great War. The first of those to enlist were Pacific Island born men that lived overseas, most of these men served under the closest neighbouring Colonial Nations – Australia & New Zealand, but some served in armies in places as far as South Africa, France, Canada and the United States. There were around 1700 Pacific Islanders directly involved in the war effort (including medical personnel), and those that were unable to serve overseas formed groups to raise funds and donated goods, money, labour and services. In Samoa they even formed a Circus Troupe to raise funds, complete with high wire walker and "a series of acrobatic feats."

Some of the wealthier island inhabitants such as the Hon. Henry Marks, the Managing Director of an Import and Export Trader Company of Fiji, offered to pay £10,000 for the training and transportation to and from England or France of a Fijian Native Labour detachment. Pacific soldiers served in the battle fields of Gallipoli, Somme, Palestine, Messines, and many more.

Although the Great War waged on in Europe, shortly after the declaration of war, France, Australia & New Zealand were ordered to secure the German Territories of the Pacific – Samoa & New Guinea Islands. On the 29th August 1914, the New Zealand Samoa Advance Force aided by a fleet of French and Australian ships, Fijian Legion of Frontiersmen and Samoan-Fijian guides hoisted the British Flag at the Apia Courthouse without firing a shot. From that day forth, Western Samoa was subject to British Military Occupation, administered by New Zealand. Eastern Samoa remained an American territory and is still known as American Samoa today. German officials and citizens that were in Samoa at the time were arrested and sent to New Zealand as prisoners of war, their lands were confiscated and sold. These POWs were held on Somes & Motuihe Islands, some of them were later involved in Count Von Luckner's escape. Despite the undeniable presence of German sympathisers in Samoa, there was only one Samoan who fought in the German Army.

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Beattie, William Barbour, 1902-1991. No 4 Platoon (Niue) 3rd Maori Reinforcements. Gordon, P J: Photographs of Niue.



NGĀI TAHU

The years immediately prior to the War were a period of heightened activity for Ngāi Tahu in terms of Te Kerēme the Ngāi Tahu Claim. Ngāi Tahu leaders were focused on pressuring the government to investigate their people's landless plight.

The Crown's failure to keep its 19th century promises regarding the retention of land and mahinga kai (food gathering sites) in Ngāi Tahu ownership, was a major grievance for the tribe. Iwi pressure on the government led to the establishment of a Commission of Enquiry in 1914 but the outbreak of war interrupted further official consideration of the Ngāi Tahu Claim.

About 30 Ngāi Tahu men from Canterbury were part of the First Māori Contingent and its successors, but many more Ngāi Tahu from the region were enlisted in the British Army or the Australian Imperial Force. When the First Māori Contingent was formed, Māori already stationed with other New Zealand units were encouraged to join, however few elected to change units.

Ngāi Tahu in Canterbury were strong supporters of the war effort. Aside from supporting numerous carnivals, sports days and stalls, Ngāi Tahu communities regularly held fundraising concerts featuring displays of haka and poi. In 1915 Miria Pomare (wife of MP Māui Pomare) and Lady Liverpool (wife of the Governor) launched Lady Liverpool's and Mrs Pomare's Māori Soldiers' Fund. The primary objective of this organisation was to provide comforts for soldiers of the Māori Contingent. Māori food such as dried pipi, toheroa and preserved titi, knitted garments and letters were sent overseas. Members organised receptions for returned servicemen, and visited wounded soldiers in hospital. Branches of the Māori Soldier's Fund were located throughout New Zealand, including at Tuahiwi in North Canterbury.

Throughout the war strong bonds were forged between the soldiers of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and the Māori Battalion. But equality in the trenches did not equate to equality in the New Zealand society to which the soldiers returned. Māori veterans found themselves ineligible for farm settlement schemes which allocated land to returning Pākehā soldiers, as they were assumed to have tribal land already available to them.



Pioneer Battalion Flag.
Photo: 1984.1628 National Army Museum, NZ



Group portrait of two Privates of the New Zealand Maori Pioneer Battalion, one is Private Richard Abraham, Reg No 16/1397, of the 5th Maori Contingent.

Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 31-A2

During the war years, Ngāi Tahu complaints to the Crown about their omission from land allocations had led the government to legislate to allow these claims to be investigated. Many Ngāi Tahu subsequently proved their eligibility for land allocations. However, with the war over, the government found that 'every available and suitable block of Crown land is required at the present time for soldier settlement.'

While the war effort had brought Māori and Pākehā together to fight for a joint cause, victory ultimately inspired an even stronger belief in New Zealand society of the virtues of being British, and of British colonial policy which was not sympathetic to Māori. Despite this adverse political and social climate, during the 1920s Ngāi Tahu became increasingly active in pursuit of Te Kerēme (the Ngāi Tahu Claim).

