

# TASMANIA'S FIRST WAR

by

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Although these men are Victorian, the picture does show the uniform of the Australians during the New Zealand Wars.

It may be judged that the first concerted involvement in a war conflict for Tasmania was the Second Boer War of 1899-1902 when we were still an independent colony. It is true that Tasmanians as individuals fought in conflicts overseas and our first casualty (as far as I know) was during the Zulu War in Africa of 1879. However, Tasmanians were recruited and did fight in the New Zealand Wars of the 1860s.

Over all 2,400 Australians were recruited from Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania in 1863-64 to be part of the New Zealand Militia, the forerunner of the New Zealand's regular army. Seventeen Australians lost their lives and twenty died of illness and accidents, but I am not sure whether any of these were Tasmanians. It would be more than interesting to find out. The figure of 37 casualties could be an underestimate.

The Australians were recruited to fight against the Maoris. In 1860 hostilities between the Maoris and the British and colonial forces began in the Taranaki Province of New Zealand (NZ). The event was carried in the news services of the day throughout the Australian colonies, particularly those close to NZ.

Dissention of the Maoris can be traced back to 1840 when the Maoris ceded their authority to Queen Victoria. It was quickly realised by many that this was not such a good deal and that European dominance would impact greatly on their culture, indeed their entire way of life. The later Maori Wars of the 1860s should not be confused with this period of discord and in Hobart; you will find the only memorial in Australia dedicated to the 99<sup>th</sup> Foot who left Hobart to fight in New Zealand of this earlier time. The memorial was erected in 1850.



The 99<sup>th</sup> Foot Memorial, Anglesea Barracks, Hobart.

The Maoris found that they could not directly sell land to each other or to the settlers, but the Colonial administration had the sole authority over their purchases and sales. The intention was not to have the Maori exploited by settlers. A great deal of traditional Maori land was being sold much to the latter's chagrin. This all came to a head under the NZ Governorship of Thomas Gore-Browne who subsequently became Governor of Tasmania. The confrontation between settlers, the NZ government and the rebellious Maoris who feared for the existence not only of their culture, but their race began in 1860 and continued for the next twelve years with a number of small wars.

The Maori chiefs in Taranaki (which was on the north island) wanted to destroy all Europeans and the fighting which followed were described by veterans of the Crimean War worse at times than what they had previously experienced. By the end of July in 1860 about 1000 men were fighting the Maoris and it became obvious to Captain N. Norman RN commander of the vessel "Victoria" who was in charge of the small number of recruits from the miniature Victorian Navy, that more military personnel was required.

The situation was getting out of control with a large number of white 'refugees' being transported by the sloop and steamer "Victoria" and other British vessels to safer places in NZ such as Nelson or Auckland. In return, the "Victoria" found itself transporting troops from Plymouth to strengthen forces in Auckland. By now the Maoris had established a Maori King to unify their rebellion while the British military commander, Major-General Sir Thomas Pratt, considered he had sufficient forces and equipment to confront the enemy. The war continued into 1861-62 and 63. The Maoris realised, however, the war was favouring the whites, nonetheless they viewed it all as a threat to their survival and even though they were confronted by the British armed might they fought on.

By the end of 1863 the authorities planned to take the war into the heart of the Waikato tribes with the hope that if these tribes were defeated the Taranaki Maoris would make peace. By this time the population of NZ was not large enough to support the military in numbers, which included 500 cavalrymen. Conscription for men from 16 years to 40 was introduced, producing labour shortages.



NZ Governor Gore Browne, under whose watch the troubles commenced. He in 1861 became Governor of Tasmania.

Governor Gore Browne (who was now Governor in Tasmania) had been replaced by Governor Sir George Grey who planned along with senior officials to recruit from the Australian colonies to help defeat the Maoris. The recruits all voluntary of course, would receive two shillings and sixpence a day for a private and the promise of fifty acres of land or above private 400 acres of land. The offer of free passage was made for any man's wife and children to join them in NZ. No mention of pensions was made. The Australians would be required not only to fight as soldiers, but to build towns, establish military stockades, erect their own homes and schools and established a community.

Newspapers in Australia, such as the Sydney Morning Herald supported the scheme and one must admit it was quite attractive. It was called the Military Settlement Scheme. It added to

the confidence of the Imperial and NZ forces which was under the command of General Duncan Cameron. There was no doubt there would be ultimate victory over the Maoris.

Recruitment of Australians began in Melbourne 25<sup>th</sup> August 1863 expanding recruitment depots at Ballarat, Geelong and Castlemaine. By 31<sup>st</sup> August 200 men had gathered at Spencer Street Station Melbourne, who Francis Bell, Minister for Native Affairs NZ described as "*a fine body of men*". Their commander would be Colonel George Dean Pitt (Pitt's militia) and were shipped off to NZ

Recruitment in NSW was also taking place and in the third week of August 1863, eighty men had been accepted with Col Pitt arranging transport to NZ on the vessel "Kate". Military horses also were acquired besides a large number of saddles and other material as required by mounted troopers. Enthusiasm for recruitment grew. Yet there were complaints from the Australians after they arrived in NZ regarding food and accommodation. Although there was no direct recruitment in Brisbane some men did travel to Sydney and sailed to NZ on the "Charlotte Andrews". Along with the soldiers, vets and equipment went several war correspondents.

For Tasmania, the NZ had already been in contact requesting 500 Enfield rifles which were stored in Hobart. These were for use by the local Tasmanian Volunteer units. Tasmania's defence was still under the defence of the British (until 1870) so it was decided to send the rifles which included revolvers, to NZ.

This co-incided with recruitment from Tasmania and by November 1500 men from the three colonies (NSW, Victoria and Tasmania) had been shipped to the war front, including artillery from Victoria a whole battery of six guns.

Tasmania had been requested to make their applications in September 1863. There was an opinion that the New Zealanders were taking the best of "Australian" manhood. Tasmanian Voluntary personnel were not permitted to enlist, but some did however. Arrangements for departure on the barque "Derwent Hunter" for the 7<sup>th</sup> October were made with twenty arriving from Launceston. The night before, 83 were paraded with The Mercury newspaper stating that a number were affected by liquor. Lieutenant Ashton was given temporary commission with a Dr Keen accompanying the troops to NZ.



The barque Derwent Hunter

The Mercury (7<sup>th</sup> Oct 1863) reported, *“The ages of the men range from 18 to 39 years, the average being about 30. Of the 63 men passed in to Hobart, only 9 are married “* Later, *“on passing the Custom House (Hotel) they were joined by a small detachment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Rifles under Captain Solly who took the lead and formed a guard alongside the vessel during the embarkation.”*

Thousands watching the departing troops gave three cheers with the vessel lying off Sandy Bay Point until the following day. While moored authorities came on to the “Derwent Hunter” and arrested two recruits who were taken off board while another two men were discharged as not suitable. Finally it raised its anchor and sailed for Auckland.

Recruitment was gradually to lose support with some resentment growing that it was NZ who was to gain from it all, encouraging immigrants under the guise of Military Settlers. Indeed The Mercury’s editor opposed any further recruitment. Nonetheless, recruitment did continue at depots in Hobart, New Norfolk and Glenorchy.

By 19<sup>th</sup> December 1863, 158 Tasmanian volunteers had sailed from our shores with The Mercury stating *“this would be the last we would hear of the movement in Tasmania”*. Tasmanians had lost the support for the war across the Tasman.

Newspapers did continue to report on the wars, but little was mentioned of any colonial deaths. Those men who did leave our shores did so I would suggest seeking adventure while no doubt some thought they could better themselves with the offer of land grants.

The NZ Government just before the last Tasmanians left made a decision to cease further recruitment from the Australian colonies.

Private Edward Sykes, of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Waikato Regiment, son of a Hobart Publican wrote to his father, *"We are drilled three times a day. People from all over Auckland say we are the best in the country. There are upwards of 2000 volunteers here."* He continued, *"Captain Rickards is very anxious to get us on our drill as quickly as possible, he wants to take us to the front and to be in the heart of it, that we can show what we can do."*

Conditions for Tasmanians in the Waikato Regiment were often harsh. For one thing the weather was frustrating particularly the incessant summer rains soaking them to the skin. The bugs and the food tested their patience. The men lived fifteen to a tent, sleeping like sardines. They spent their time gambling and in reference to the coffee, *"the less said the better"*. Australians like their beer and one major complaint was the lack of. As time went on, their uniforms became tattered.

- Tasmania had sent 79 volunteers on the 8<sup>th</sup> October under Lieutenants Rickards, Percival and Aston.
- Then 50 on the 20<sup>th</sup> October under Lieutenant Arthur Knopwood Gregson.
- 29 on the 18<sup>th</sup> December with the Mr Miller the Enrolling officer.

Over all casualties for the wars from whatever causes was for the British and colonists 745 and for the Maoris 2,154.

The New Zealand Medal was issued, instituted in 1869.



Most Tasmanians served with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Waikato Regiment, but not all. Doug Wyatt in his book, *"A Lion in the Colony"* (Third Edition) has a list of all those Tasmanians who served in the regiment mentioned.

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