

1845 p63

The veteran officer Henry Despard had now arrived to command all the British troops in New Zealand. Keen to cash in on Hōne Heke's setback at Te Ahuahu, he assembled the largest British force yet seen in the colony and moved to attack Te Ruki Kawiti's new pā at Ōhaeawai.

Despard had 615 men and five cannon available for an assault on little more than 100 fighters. The pā was bombarded for a week from 24 June 1845. Despard hoped to both break down the defences and demoralise the defenders.

On 1 July Kawiti launched a 'dangerous and provocative' raid against one of the artillery batteries. Despard interpreted this as an act of desperation and decided the time was right to launch an assault. Nene disagreed but was ignored. When the assault party – 250 of Despard's best men – was within 20 m of the pā it was met with a withering fire. In a matter of minutes, 40 British troops lay dead and another 70 were wounded.

Ōhaeawai, the prototype of the 'modern pa', was a major advance in the Māori response to new weaponry. Firing and communication trenches protected the occupants while allowing rapid movement within the pā. Anti-artillery bunkers (rua) had been dug into the ground and covered with logs, stones and matted flax. Each could house 15–20 men in relative safety.

An outer fence (pekerangi) concealed the pā's real strength. While it appeared flimsy, the pekerangi's flax matting easily absorbed musket shot and concealed the more substantial inner fence made of heavy logs. It also slowed down the assault party. The function of the pekerangi has been compared with that of barbed wire in 20th-century battles.

Despard considered withdrawing until he heard from his Māori allies that Kawiti planned to abandon the pā. Sensing an opportunity to salvage something from the situation, he ordered shelling to recommence on 10 July. When Kawiti withdrew next day, Despard argued that the prospect of another British assault had been too much for the defenders. The British occupied an empty pā and proclaimed victory. Few saw the outcome as anything other than a victory for Kawiti.

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Ōhaeawai

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