

South African 'Boer' War (MCH, 2018e)

Page 4 – New Zealand's response

Preparing for war

New Zealand men responded in overwhelming numbers to Premier Richard Seddon's offer to send troops to South Africa in September 1899. However, service was confined to those who were already members of the tiny New Zealand permanent force or a part-time volunteer unit. District commanders were responsible for selecting men who met physical requirements such as height, age and the ability to ride and shoot. Because of the large number of volunteers the military physicians did not shy hesitate to reject men who did not meet the requirements. While the standards for marksmanship were not high, many applicants were let down by poor horsemanship.

Those who were accepted were dispatched to Wellington where a training camp had been established at Campbell's farm in Karori. With time short, they received minimal training. Their routine was also constantly interrupted by the arrival of new recruits.

With only three weeks before departure, the New Zealand military hastily gathered equipment and resources. Many volunteers offered their own horses, but a number of these failed to pass the veterinary examination. The government was forced to purchase horses and to accept mounts donated by the community. Where equipment was lacking, the military had to improvise or borrow from the volunteer corps.

By the time of its departure the contingent comprised 204 men in two companies. Those of No. 1 Company were predominantly from the North Island while most members of No. 2 Company were South Islanders. Accompanying the men were nine officers, a surgeon and a veterinary surgeon. The contingent was commanded by Major Alfred Robin.

Sailing to war

Seddon was eager for the New Zealand troops to be the first colonial contingent to reach southern Africa. Following the rush to secure resources, the contingent was ready to depart on 21 October 1899. In order to transport the troops and their horses, the Union Steam Ship Company had been forced to make modifications to the *Waiwera*.

Many of the troops attended farewell functions held in their honour and on the day of departure large crowds gathered in Wellington to see them off. The *Waiwera* stopped over at Albany, Western

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Australia, but left four days before the troopships carrying the Australian contingents departed. When the *Waiwera* reached Cape Town on 23 November, Seddon's hopes were realised.

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'New Zealand's response', URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/south-african-boer-war/new-zealands-response>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 6-Mar-2018