

MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN THE OPOTIKI DISTRICT IN 1870

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Just before they enter the Pacific Ocean, two rivers of considerable size, the Waioeka and the Otara, converge to form an estuarine inlet at Opotiki in the Eastern Bay of Plenty. The former rises in the central Urewera Country, in the Huiarau Ranges, traversing many miles of extremely broken and bush-clad hills before emerging on to the Opotiki flats. This short history deals with the military situation at Opotiki in 1870 and the major campaigns that took place in the Waioeka River area that year.

Few people travelling the Waioeka Gorge highway to and from Gisborne realise that this inhospitable-looking countryside was once the home of a considerable number of people. I have personally surveyed and recorded 15 pa sites in the Waioeka Gorge area and there are also numbers of kainga on the benches above the river as yet unrecorded.

The region was once under the mana of the great TE WHAKATANE chief Kahuki, but later it was to become the land of NGATI-IRA, a sub-tribe of WHAKATOHEA. The site of Maraetahi is in the central Waioeka. Known as one of the resting places of Te Kooti Rikirangi, it is on the western bank of the river, $\frac{1}{4}$ -mile upstream of Midway Camp, and is located on the property of Mr P.Innes-Smith, owner of the Oponae Station.

Te Kooti first moved into the Waioeka region after his defeat at Ngatapa, Gisborne district, in January 1869. He had suffered severe losses there, 135 of his men had been killed, of which number 120 were killed after they had been captured. He retreated to Te Wera in the upper Waioeka where he constructed a village of 30 totara bark-roofed whares. While in the area he recruited many of the TUHOE and WHAKATOHEA to his cause, at the same time converting many of them to the Ringatu Faith.

The NGATI-IRA people had retreated to the bush-clad Waioeka after the fighting in the Opotiki district of 1865, following the murder of the Rev.Volkner. Their chief, Hira-te-Popo, who was a strong supporter of the Maori King movement, had stopped his people from being involved in the killing of Volkner; he led them inland, refusing to make peace with the Government in 1866 when the other hapu's of the WHAKATOHEA decided to lay down their arms.

When Te Kooti left Te Wera in 1869 he told the NGATI-IRA and the TUHOE that after he had visited the King in the Waikato district he would return and make his final abode at Maraetahi. They were to build there a kainga and a whare karakia (praying house). So the people constructed 30 large well-built whares, and a well-carved house for Te Kooti's own use, but the main feature was the whare karakia, an imposing structure 80 ft long, 40 ft wide and 9 ft high at the eaves. The floor was covered by two large Kie Kie mats, plained crosswise, with scriptural names, six inches high worked in red wool down the centre of each. Around

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The village were extensive gardens that included five acres of Taro, besides maize and other vegetable crops.

Te Kooti retreated from the Taupo and Rotorua regions, arriving back in the Waioeka area in the early part of 1870. From here he raided Opape, a village about ten miles along the coast east of Opotiki, taking 170 prisoners, 30 guns and a considerable quantity of powder and ammunition, which he took to Wairata six miles up-stream from Maraetahi.

At the time of this Opape raid, two columns of Government forces were in the Opotiki area. One column, resting at Ohiwa, was under the command of Major Kemp (or Keepa), a Wanganui chief, an energetic leader who had proved his courage and military ability in a number of campaigns against the Hauhau in various parts of New Zealand. His force on this occasion consisted of Wanganui warriors under Topia Turoa, NGAI TAI of Torere under Mirimu Kingi, NGATI AWA and NGATI PUKEKO of Whakatane under Hohoia and Hori Kawakura. The other force was commanded by Major Ropata of NGATI POROU, his second-in-command being a pakeha officer, Captain T.E.Porter. Plate 3.

These latter two officers, with their NGATI POROU warriors, had been searching the Urewera Country for Te Kooti and also the TUHOE who at this time had taken up arms against the Government. The force had left Gisborne in February 1870 and, after weeks of battling through the river gorges and steep bush-covered ridges, heard that Major Kemp had made peace with Tamaikoha, of NGATI TAMA, a TUHOE chief who had been carrying on a relentless guerilla war with the Government for five years.

Ropata and Porter and their weary force arrived on the coast at Ohiwa on 20 March. They had spent the last two weeks without rations, living on what food they could find in the bush. At Ohiwa, Ropata met Kemp with part of his force comfortably camped and well rationed. Ropata was still feeling annoyed because of Kemp's peace treaty with the NGATI TAMA. He had been looking forward to meeting Tamaikoha on the field of battle, believing that his NGATI POROU would have defeated him, then he could have dictated terms to that TUHOE sub-tribe.

Ropata used strong and taunting language to the chiefs of the Wanganui because of Te Kooti's raid on Opape. While they were resting at Ohiwa. He said they were kaupapa (waverers) and although his own men were footsore and weary, they would march the next day to attack Te Kooti unaided.

Major Kemp, who had proved his courage, loyalty and ability in the fighting on the west coast of the North Island determined to get ahead of Ropata, and left next morning at 3 a.m. collecting the rest of his force at Opotiki and starting up the Otara River to take Te Kooti in the rear. Later in the morning, when he found that Kemp had departed, Ropata addressed his men, saying: "Your swags are light from want of food, as well as your stomachs, now also let your hearts and feet be light and take two steps to their one and not be robbed of what we have come so far to get" (meaning Te Kooti). Ropata was angry because Kemp had left with-

out arranging a plan of attack. On arrival in Opotiki he found too that the Wanganui force had cleaned the place out of rations and he was obliged to wait until the next day for supplies. On 23 March, the force marched straight up the Waioeka River for Maraetahi, taking some WHAKATOHEA with them for guides.

Kemp's force of approximately 300 men had taken the Tutae-toko branch of the Otara River. They crossed over the dividing range and then, following down the Omakura Stream towards the Waioeka, were in position and ready to attack the four villages at Wairata on the morning of 25 March. The first three were taken without even firing a shot by surrounding them and then rushing in to capture all the occupants. The fourth village was a different proposition, however, as most of the Opape prisoners were there and the attackers could not fire into the village for fear of hitting the WHAKATOHEA. Kereopa Kaiwhatu, who was responsible for the killing of Rev. Volkner in Opotiki in 1865, was in the village with his followers; they put up a determined fight before most of them escaped into the surrounding forest.

Ropata and his approximately 300-strong force that left Opotiki on the 23rd did an amazing march up the Waioeka River. That evening they reached Kai-rakau, finding that it had been abandoned a few days previously. A day's battling up-river put them close to Maraetahi, far too close to Te Kooti to light fires, and it had started to rain. It must have been a test of stamina for men who had left Poverty Bay over a month before, spending their time since then marching and fighting in the rugged bush country of the Urewera, often wet, cold, hungry and unable to light a fire for fear of giving their position away to their TUHOE quarry. And now, once again, they were battling their way up a river strewn with large boulders, the water at times up to their armpits. A wet night, and no fires to dry themselves or their clothes, nor to prepare a hot meal; up again before daylight and into the river to take the sentries guarding the Gorge by surprise at first light. They were certainly a tough breed of men who followed the war trails in those days!

The TUHOE and NGATI-IRA warriors of this part of the country were experts in the art of guerilla warfare. The lightning raid, the well laid ambush carried out by men who knew every inch of their rugged bush-clad hills made them a dangerous adversary who was not to be taken lightly.

Te Kooti had not built defences at Maraetahi, but he kept guards at the gorge $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile down stream. This gorge is now known as Hell's Gate, the old name being Te-Karoro-Atamatea. The track here was narrow and the sort of place where a few determined men could have held up a large attacking force. The young sentry was half asleep and so he did not see the advance of the NGATI POROU. A sudden rush and they were through, the guard of 20 men tried to put up a fight but were driven back. As soon as firing was heard, Te Kooti sent reinforcements but they were driven back also, by the advancing NGATI POROU.

When the attacking force got within range, they were fired on by the defenders from Maraetahi and the hill above. The NGATI POROU advanced up the river-bed taking advantage of boulders for cover. Striding amongst them quite oblivious of the bullets was Ropata, stick in hand, urging on his men and if necessary, poking them with this stick to get them to move forward. The defence was so weak and disorganized that the attackers did not think that it could have been Te Kooti himself but that it was the Ngati-Ira of WHAKATOHEA. In an hour and a half from the time they attacked the guards at the gorge, Maraetahi had fallen and the resting place of Te Kooti was in the hands of the NGATI POROU. When the Government troops were nearly to the village and most of the firing had stopped, a man got on to the top of a whare and called out "Ko Wanganui tenei!" and fired three shots at the attacking force. Eru Rangiwaha ran forward and at close range fired two shots which both missed their target. It can be imagined that the Government forces were very exasperated when they later found that this man was none other than Te Kooti himself. Te Kooti had 65 men and some women with him. These now scattered, pursued by NGATI POROU.

Meanwhile, Kemp and his Wanganui's were moving down the Waioeka River after taking the kainga at Wairata. A number of Te Kooti's men in escaping from Ropata's force ran straight into the hands of Kemp. It was not until the evening when a woman came into Ropata's camp to surrender that the troops realized that Te Kooti was one that escaped from Maraetahi. None of the attacking force were killed and only two wounded were taken in the pa. One hundred and twenty NGATI POROU set off in pursuit of those who fled from the pa.

The next day, the 26th, Kemp arrived with his force, bringing a number of prisoners and the Opape WHAKATOHEA who had been held at Wairata. Four days were spent in the Maraetahi area searching for Te Kooti and his men. In the whole of this operation, 35 men and a number of women and children were captured. About 20 of Te Kooti's followers were killed. Most of these were killed after they surrendered. They were taken down to the river bank and there executed.

Captain (later Col.) Porter with 50 men set out at 5 o'clock on the morning of 30 March to travel back to Opotiki. Only seven of them made it to Opotiki that night, the rest straggled in over the next couple of days. The main body of the Government forces came out on the 31st after burning all buildings and destroying crops.

Ropata ascertained from the prisoners that a quantity of powder and bullets was hidden in the hills behind Opotiki. This he had brought in by the simple means of sending out a prisoner who knew where it was hidden. The escort was told to take a shovel either to get the powder or to use it to bury the body of the prisoner!

As winter had set in, the Government forces under Ropata and Kemp were withdrawn to their homes, leaving the defence of the

Opotiki district to Lieut.Col.J.H.H.St.John and what local Maori volunteers he could get. On 4 May, he received information from a deserter that Te Kooti had joined Hira-te-Popo at Te Tahora in the Waioeka area. St.John collected a force of NGATI PUKEKO, NGATI AWA, NGAI TAI and WHAKATOHEA. About this time, the NGATI-IRA sent in their children and some women from the bush.

St.John's force took the Tutaeotoko track to the upper reaches of the Waioeka River, The weather broke while they were on the march and on reaching the Waioeka they found the river running high. Half the force under St.John crossed the river but as the rain continued they moved down river to Maraetahi, Wiremu Kingi with the other half taking the opposite bank. The weather continued wet and after spending six days trying to find a ford and many attempts to bridge the river by felling large trees across it,only to be swept away by the torrent, Taniora of Motu tried his plan. Tripods were constructed and placed in the river weighted down with large boulders. Working up to their armpits in the torrent the men finally got a bridge across.The force then moved back to Opotiki taking three days to find their way back through the bush.

Lieut.Col.St John was full of praise for the Maoris he had with him and said they were quite keen to continue the search for Te Kooti. The fact that they had run out of provisions did not matter as they "would march and fight on Tawa and Hinau berries".

Towards the end of June, Hira-te-Popo and his people, the NGATI-IRA came into Opotiki to submit to the Government. Mr W.G. Mair, in a letter to Mr Clark, civil commissioner, wrote thus:

The submission of this well known chief is an event of very great importance and will I have no doubt, produce a very marked effect upon the Urewera. Although never taking a very active part in their operations, he has nevertheless been viewed by the King party as one of their greatest supporters in these parts and his defection from their ranks, coupled with the destruction of their rendezvous in the Waioeka will prove a severe blow to their cause. At the same time his accession to our party will be a great gain as he is a man of considerable ability and of good character. He has kept aloof from us hitherto, because the other chiefs of Whakatohea made their peace with the Government without any reference to him - who had not shared in their offence (the killing of Rev.Volkner 1865) and his pride prevented him following in their tracks. Even now he expresses his wishes to have as little to do with them as possible.

There were a few other expedition forces sent out from Opotiki, but this was the end of fighting in the Opotiki district and both Maori and pakeha were able to get back to the pursuits of peace and to develop this pleasant, prosperous corner of New Zealand that 100 years later we enjoy. A lot of the Maori people still practice the Ringatu religion as laid down by their prophet and hero, Te Kooti Rikirangi.

- Concluded overleaf.

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