



The Last Battle

By Fiona Sullivan

It's a field on the left on the way up to Pyes Pa on the corner of Joyce Rd. It looked pretty ordinary with a Historic Places Trust concrete block memorial in the corner but it was the site of an important battle of the Land Wars in the Bay of Plenty. After the English defeat at Pukehinahina - Gate Pa in April 1864, the British took charge of the land, demolished the remains of the Pa and built a redoubt there. A redoubt is an earthen fort with ditches and breastworks that can be hastily dug and then strengthened over time.

The commander of the British troops, General Cameron, had a strategy to aggressively patrol and establish a protective network of redoubts. In May 1864 British patrols destroyed the abandoned pa at Poterihwi, on the Wairoa River, and began construction of a new redoubt. That same month a pa at Te Puna was destroyed to build a redoubt there as well. The intention was to link the redoubts by dirt roads and to erect masts and halyards signalling systems which helped the government to hold and occupy land. But this plan was upset when a crisis in the Whanganui area required troops to be diverted there and so left the string of redoubts around Tauranga thinly occupied and vulnerable.

After the battle of Pukehinahina - Gate Pa the Māori defenders withdrew and on the night of 20th June 1864, began construction of a new pa at Te Ranga, a narrow neck of land with ravines on both sides; potentially a strong situation. The work had only just begun when a patrol, scouting from the military camp at Te Papa (present day downtown Tauranga) discovered them at the task.

When the troops arrived at Te Ranga on the morning of the 21st of June the Māori defenders had probably been digging for 12 to 15 hours. Their defences formed a semicircle of about 250 yards and consisted of 43 pits, six feet by four with traverses of three feet. The dirt had been thrown up behind the pits preparatory to constructing the parapets. Some posts had been dug into the ground and there were pre-cut rails lying in front of the trenches.

One of the lessons the British took from their defeat at Pukehinahina - Gate Pa was the importance of denying the Maori defenders the time to construct another substantial Pa.

A six pounder cannon was deployed onto a small knoll about 400 meters in front of the trenches from where it raked them with fire. Skirmishers spread out and closed up to less than 200 meters from the front of the trenches within range with their muskets but out of range for most of the Māori weapons. The skirmishers fired at the trenches while groups of the 43rd and 68th regiments moved to the flanks, out of the range of Māori muskets and took up positions where they also fired at the trenches and cut off the chances of escape. The defenders were able to do little more than try to keep their heads down.

Their leader Rāwiri Puhiraki was reported to have not been happy with the siting of the Pa and had planned to attack another redoubt at Judea. He was also expecting the arrival of 500 reinforcements led by Tāraia Ngākuti of Ngāti Tamaterā from the Hauraki. They didn't arrive in time and failed to engage the troops during the battle or on their trip back to camp Te Papa. They contented themselves with quietly retreating into the hills in preference to being killed or taken prisoners.



The battle was little more than a massacre. Out of ammunition and in a poorly defended position the Maori defenders were shot down and many were killed in the bayonet charge that followed.

'It was indeed strange to see many of the then survivors climb slowly out of the trenches and disdaining to run, walk away under fire that mowed them down some halting and firing as they retreated and others with their heads bent down stoically and proudly, busy receiving their inevitable fate.' Robley. British Army artist.

As soon as the victory at Te Ranga was assured, Greer returned to Te Papa and was back in camp by afternoon. The remaining troops stayed at Te Ranga until dusk collecting up the bodies of all who had been killed. The number included many chiefs and 107 bodies were laid out in three rows beside the trenches; another was found in the morning. Possibly some of those killed during the pursuit through the gullies and swamps were never found. The bodies were looted and many soldiers secured greenstone jewellery ornaments, weapons and other treasures as trophies. The wounded of both sides were taken back to camp at Te Papa for medical care including two Māori women. It was a miserable rainy day the next day when Archdeacon Alfred Brown read the funeral service and 108 warriors were buried in the trenches which they had dug the day before. The British had 13 dead including six officers and 39 were wounded. These dead joined the rows of their comrades killed at Pukehinahina - Gate Pa, in the Mission Cemetery in Tauranga. By then Archdeacon Brown had buried nearly 200 men, many of them Māori who he loved and respected as well as his countrymen.

In June this year volunteers and schoolchildren planted native trees in the newly constructed bund which runs along Pyes Pa road on the western side of the site and down the steep scarp on the other side. Taumata, Pyes Pa and Green Park Primary schools took part alongside students from Aquinas College and Tauranga Girls College. Volunteers from the Pyes Pa community were there and Sunrise Rotary and members of the Ngai Tamarawaho hapu who own the reserve and have made it available for public use. Many biscuits and lollies as well as litres of juice were donated by Pak 'n Save, Tauranga. They had 5000 trees to plant and the Pukehinahina Charitable Trust thanks all those who helped. Negotiations are underway with the Tauranga council to acquire the wetland portions of the site to build a viewing platform on the knoll in the centre.

The site is to be further developed with more planting, a car and bus parking area, information boards, a new memorial and walkways. Planting days are planned for later in the year and if you would like to participate please leave your contact details with the Pukehinahina Trust: pukehinahinatrust@gmail.com

To visit, please park at the Joyce Road gate entrance.



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