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RURAL PATRIOTISM

While the sons of our local residents were in training in Egypt their letters were received fairly regularly, but now the scene has changed. Letters are irregular and are opened with fear and trembling. The Post Office every night and the Postman every day are sought after for news of the absent ones.

Ohinemuri Gazette, 24 May 1915

IN THE FINAL YEARS of the nineteenth century a wave of British imperialism washed over Africa. Throughout Great Britain and her colonies, dreamers, hard-nosed businessmen and those who believed in Britain's imperial destiny longed for the day when the Union Jack would fly on every fort and settlement flagstaff from Cairo to the Cape of Good Hope. In southern Africa Britain had done well. The Cape, Natal, and several tribal protectorates, were under imperial control. But the Queen's subjects throughout the empire were unhappy. Why? Because the Afrikaner republics, the South African Republic of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, were resisting the British lion's invitation to dinner, and sought to retain autonomy in local affairs. Worse still, from the British viewpoint, these two tiny republics, enriched by the sale of gold and diamonds, flirted with European powers who prompted them to act as if they were fully independent states.

And what had all this to do with Ohinemuri County? In the late 1890s a surge of patriotism and imperial sentiment swept the colony of New Zealand, and the county as part of that colony. The Queen's loyal subjects in Ohinemuri were angered by the Boers' refusal to see the merits of the British Empire, and were infuriated by Germany's military posturing and support for the Boers. To show their loyalty Ohinemuri's young men formed volunteer military companies to train for the defence of the empire. During 1897 three Ohinemuri companies of volunteer soldiers were added to the colony's defence force. On 16 June 1897 Number One Company, Ohinemuri Rifle Volunteers, was founded at Paeroa, the county seat; whilst on 26 July 1897, at Karangahake, Number Two Company was formed. Before the year's end, on 29 November, Number Three Company, based at Waihi, came into existence.¹

Company minute books indicate the club-like nature of these volunteer companies. It was counted a privilege to belong to the Volunteers. A would-be

recruit had to be nominated and faced the possibility that he might be 'blackballed' — by three black balls being lodged in the company's ballot box by any volunteer who believed that the candidate was not the 'right' sort. Once enrolled in the Ohinemuri Rifles the recruit was expected to provide his own uniform, by volunteer standards a fairly inexpensive one, of khaki with maroon facings.

The Ohinemuri Rifles were composed of fairly independent and highly democratic companies. Soldiers annually elected their NCOs and all officers below the rank of major. In the Ohinemuri Rifles it was possible for a soldier to be a captain one year and a private the next. Because most meetings were held in the local hotel the local pubkeeper, who usually shouted the assembled company, had a fair chance of being elected a lieutenant or an NCO. A fair example of this democratic spirit was displayed on 3 June 1898 when Captain F. D. Fergusson complained to his assembled Ohinemuri riflemen that non-attendance at parades was endemic, and that while he could fine absentees, he would prefer a vote of confidence from his men. 'A show of rifles' gave the company commander the indication that his men were behind him.²

While the regular officers and NCOs of the colonists' few hundred strong regular army were contemptuous of the Volunteers, Ohinemuri's young men took their military duties very seriously. Weekly parades were held, Saturday afternoon field manoeuvres and rifle practices were conducted, and dances and fundraising campaigns were organised to help pay for uniforms and equipment. In 1898 the Ohinemuri Rifle Volunteers were incorporated into a larger military unit — the Hauraki Regiment, with its headquarters in Paeroa. On 9 July 1898 the second battalion Auckland Rifle Volunteers, called also the Hauraki Regiment, was constituted, with Major Thomas Nepean Edward Kenny, the Ohinemuri county clerk, with a company commander's rank, as its first commanding officer. Major Kenny was not only an efficient county clerk, but was also an experienced army officer who had formerly served with the Black Watch (the 73rd Highlanders) and the 23rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers. The county clerk had seen active service in 1870, against Te Kooti, and for a time was enrolled as a sub-inspector in the Armed Constabulary. From 1898 to 1899 under Major Kenny's watchful eyes the Hauraki Regiment began the establishment of a tradition of efficient military training, well summed up in its later motto — 'Whakatangata Kia Kaha' — 'Quit yourself like men, be strong.'

Ohinemuri's townsmen and country lads, enrolled in the newly founded regiment, had only fifteen months of peacetime training before the war drums began to sound on South Africa's veldt. In 1899 Richard John Seddon, New Zealand's premier, called for volunteers for a New Zealand military presence in the British Imperial Army in South Africa. In the course of the Boer War (1899-1902) over 200 troops from the Hauraki Regiment saw active service on the veldt — nearly forty

were from Ohinemuri County. From Primrose Hill, above Paeroa and the Hauraki Plains, a simple stone monument looks down on the western fringe of Ohinemuri County. This monument was erected by Premier Seddon in memory of Sergeant-Major G. R. Bradford, from Ohinemuri County, the first imperial soldier to die in the Anglo-Boer War. Sergeant-Major Bradford, formerly of the Coldstream Guards, died from a wound received at a skirmish at Jasfontein farm in the Transvaal. The farm was owned by a Boer who had shot an officer of the



Sergeant-Major G. R. Bradford, Number One Company, Ohinemuri Rifle Volunteers, killed at Jasfontein, South Africa, 29 December, 1899.

Paeroa & District Historical Society



Soldiers from the Ohinemuri Rifle Volunteers leaving for the Anglo-Boer War.

Paeroa & District Historical Society

Inniskilling Dragoons. At daylight on 30 November 1899 a battery of the Royal Horse Artillery opened fire on the farm, but when the New Zealanders advanced they found that the farm had been evacuated by the enemy. The Boers counterattacked from a prepared position, to the left of the farmhouse, and bombarded the farmhouse with a field gun. In the British retreat that followed, Sergeant-Major Bradford was mortally wounded, taken prisoner, and died shortly after.

On 3 February 1900 the *Ohinemuri Gazette* published a letter from Trooper Claude Jewell, of Number One Company Ohinemuri Rifles, that told of the events that led to Bradford's death:

We have been in some extremely hot corners, but fortunately we have all come out fairly unhurt, except poor old Bradford who was shot down and left for dead when we retreated after storming the Boer position. He was within 300 yards from the kopje from which the Boers were firing, coming into our lines off patrol. There were scores of rifles at him and at us, and poor 'Brad' dropped. One man turned to pick him up, but his horse was shot, so he double-banked with another and came in. We went out with an ambulance to pick him up, but the Boers had wandered out

and taken him prisoner. Thus poor 'Brad' spent his Christmas in the Boer camp with a bullet in his hip.³

On receiving the news of Sergeant-Major Bradford's death as a prisoner-of-war Ohinemuri's settlers gathered together on Sunday 28 January 1900 for a memorial service. Three companies of the Hauraki Regiment paraded with a military band, and a memorial service held in the Criterion Theatre, Paeroa, was filled to capacity. In the course of the service the Hauraki regimental chaplain, the Rev W. H. Wilson, stressed the justice of Britain's cause in South Africa. He insisted that it was the plight of the Uitlanders (the new British settlers in the Boer republics who were denied citizenship by the Afrikaners) that had provoked the war. He argued that 'under such circumstances peace was an impossibility and it would be cowardice to shrink from war.' Padre Wilson was a fire-eater who after the service gave a belligerent patriotic address in the square in front of Paeroa's Bank of New Zealand, and inveigled £6.4.6d from the pockets of his listeners — for the patriotic fund.⁴

Sergeant-Major Bradford's death at the front strengthened Ohinemuri County support for Britain's cause in South Africa. An editorial in the *Ohinemuri Gazette* made plain that the Boers stood in the way of Britain's destiny:

Not for a moment would we say anything against the grand cause for which the empire is fighting. It is a just and righteous one which will sooner or later, though mayhap at great sacrifice, be a factor in a long lasting peace and prosperity for South Africa. It is the turning of the first sod that should make our empire dominant with an eventual dominance from Capetown to Cairo. It is the sweetening and the civilising of the earth's last savage continent. At great sacrifice.⁵

Letters from Ohinemuri's lads at the front were regularly published in the local newspaper and the editor made plain the country's 'pride and satisfaction' with the exploits of 'our boys at the front'.⁶ The *Ohinemuri Gazette* saw no virtue in the Boer cause, or in the Afrikaners as people. 'Brutality, selfishness and ignorance' were the hallmarks of Britain's South African enemy.⁷ At the war's end, the *Gazette's* editor advised that the Transvaal and Orange Free State should be given over to British soldier-settlers, to farm and garrison. Given this blind patriotism, it is hardly surprising that when news reached Ohinemuri that the town of Mafeking, besieged by the Boers, had been relieved, school and fire bells were rung, whistles were blown, and kerosene tins beaten, throughout the county. Britain's victory in South Africa was Ohinemuri's victory and hotel keepers had as much as they could do in the cellar to make a sufficient supply of whisky for their customers upstairs.

In Ohinemuri County, during the course of the Anglo-Boer War, there was no room for honest debate about the justice or injustice of a great empire imposing its

will by force on two small farming republics. Only blind patriotism could have produced the *Ohinemuri Gazette* editorial of January 1900 entitled, 'If John Bull Owned the Earth' — an editorial that insisted:

Take any nation you please, even our cousins, the people of the United States, and they could not logically deny the advantages that would accrue to them from being under our wise and strong administration.⁸

When one local resident, of Irish extraction, wrote pseudonymously to the *Ohinemuri Gazette*, concerned over a rumour that all pro-Boers of alien extraction were to be evicted from New Zealand, he was advised by the editor, that 'he had better pray for the speedy domination of Britain over the Transvaal and Orange Free State'.⁹

Why did Ohinemuri County's population support Britain's campaign in South Africa so vehemently? Antipodean isolation led settlers to affirm strenuously their oneness with the distant land from whence many of them had come and nearly all their parents had been born. Besides, belief in the benefits, purity, and unique civilising impact of Britain's rule were taught in the schoolroom and the pulpit as a fundamental belief next to belief in the Trinity. Added to this was the presence of county troops at the front and the county's desire to support the lads who had left the drudgery of county life for the danger of a faraway war.

The war ended in 1902 and most of the troops came home to mine and farm. Those who did not are remembered on small obelisks erected in the towns and villages of the county, in memory of those who fell in South Africa. Ohinemuri retained its volunteer corps until 1910, when the new Defence Act of 1909 came into effect and volunteerism was abolished throughout New Zealand at the birth of a new conscript territorial army. The Paeroa drill hall, designed and built under the direction of the surveyor William Tetley in 1902, still continued to serve the companies of the enduring Sixth Hauraki Regiment — a regiment that since 1907 proudly displayed its first battle honours, conferred by King Edward VII, with 'South Africa 1900-1902' proudly inscribed upon its banner.¹⁰

One of the young territorial officers who from time to time paraded with the Ohinemuri companies of the Hauraki Regiment, before World War I, made a name for himself quickly within the county. The *Ohinemuri Gazette* of 31 January 1912 reported to readers that:

A young man named Bernard Freyberg, who is 22 years of age, put up a rather remarkable performance on Sunday last when he swam down the Waihou River from Te Aroha to Paeroa.¹¹

Bernard Cyril Freyberg had been gazetted a second lieutenant in the Hauraki Regiment less than two weeks before his epic thirty-five mile swim. A dentist at Morrinsville, Freyberg was the epitome of physical fitness and stayed for ten hours in the water. During his ordeal he was fed at intervals with a mixture of eggs and