

## **New Zealand's military links with the Pacific**

Aotearoa New Zealand's connections to Te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean) stretch back thousands of years, beginning with the remarkable voyaging achievements of the Polynesian people, ancestors of these islands' Māori tangata whenua. Later, especially from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, European explorers, traders and whalers established new Pacific maritime networks, and from 1840 New Zealand became an important economic centre of Britain's Pacific empire.

In 1914 and again in 1941 rivalries between European and Asian empires brought conflict to the Pacific. New Zealand's opening act of the First World War was the unopposed capture of the German colony of Samoa in August 1914 (soon after, Australia seized the German territories of New Guinea and Nauru). New Zealand occupied Samoa throughout the war, and governed it afterwards under a League of Nations mandate.

The main Pacific manpower contribution to New Zealand's war effort came from two territories it had annexed in 1901 – the Cook Islands and Niue. Both offered men for the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) as soon as news of the war reached the Pacific. A group of 45 Cook Islanders and 150 Niuean men joined the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion (combat engineers) in Egypt before moving to the Western Front with the NZEF in April 1916. Their health suffered in the cold northern European climate, and by late May more than 80 per cent of the Niueans had been hospitalised. They were withdrawn from the Western Front and sent to England, then returned to New Zealand. The Cook Islanders remained in Europe until early 1918, when they were redeployed to the Middle East, where a second contingent of 120 Cook Island recruits had already been sent. At least 48 Cook Island and Niuean men died as a result of war service, almost all due to illness.

Volunteers from other Pacific territories also served with New Zealand forces, including some Samoans, Tongans and Norfolk Islanders. When the British colony of Fiji offered an ethnically mixed contingent in 1918 London referred the matter to the New Zealand authorities, who agreed to take the men. The Fijians arrived in Auckland for training in August 1918, but the war ended before they could be sent overseas.

Kiribati and Tuvalu were then part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, also under British control. When 25 members of the Gilbert Native Police volunteered, London referred this offer to Wellington. These men arrived in Auckland in July 1918, but like the Fijians they did not embark for overseas service before the war's end.

Volunteers from New Caledonia and French Polynesia served on the Western Front with the French Army.

During the Second World War much of the western and central Pacific was the scene of bloody fighting between Japanese and Allied forces. While New Zealand's war effort was again primarily focused on Europe and the Middle East, tens of thousands of service personnel served and fought in the Pacific.

The main focus of New Zealand's Pacific war effort was the Solomon Islands, where all three services saw considerable action. Royal New Zealand Navy ships served alongside American forces, and from late 1942 Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) fighter and bomber squadrons flew from Guadalcanal. The following year Guadalcanal was a staging point for men of the New Zealand army's 3rd Division, who occupied Vella Lavella and Mono Island.

In 1944 the 3rd Division attacked the Japanese-occupied island of Nissan, which is now part of Papua New Guinea. New Zealand airmen contributed to the attacks on Japanese forces on Rabaul and the island of Bougainville. New Zealand civilian merchant seafarers also served in the Pacific, and a handful of New Zealand merchant ships were sunk by German and Japanese raiders and submarines.

At the start of the war New Zealand had a network of over 50 coastwatching stations spread between Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Fiji, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, the Phoenix Islands, Tokelau and Fanning Island. These were manned by a mixture of New Zealand soldiers and civilians, and indigenous coastwatchers. In 1942, 17 captured New Zealand coastwatchers were executed by the Japanese at Tarawa.

During the war New Zealand troops and RNZAF units were stationed in Fiji, Western Samoa and Tonga, where they received valuable support from the local populations. Fijian troops (joined by a small number of Tongans) served alongside New Zealanders in the Solomon Islands. A number of Samoans, Tongans and Cook Islanders enlisted in the New Zealand armed forces, especially the 28th Māori Battalion.

From 1942 to 1944 New Zealanders were stationed in New Caledonia, home to the US South Pacific Command, within which New Zealand forces operated. New Zealand also supported Tahiti when it rallied to the Free French cause in 1940, sending the cruiser HMS *Achilles*.

After the Second World War New Zealand continued to maintain close military links with a number of Pacific territories. Between 1951 and 1956, 40 New Zealand officers served with a Fijian battalion that was deployed during the Malayan Emergency. From 1953 to 1977 New Zealand provided administrative and training support and commanding officers to the Tonga Defence Force.

Later, in 1997-98, a New Zealand-led peacekeeping force was sent to Bougainville. In recent decades, too, New Zealanders of Pacific descent have made up an increasingly important part of the New Zealand Defence Force.