



Recruiting and conscription

by Tim Shoebridge

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Recruiting and conscription

Recruiting men for the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) was among the New Zealand government's most pressing priorities during the four difficult years of the First World War. Tens of thousands were needed every year to keep the NZEF up to strength, and finding them presented major logistical, bureaucratic, and tactical challenges to those responsible.

The war's earliest days saw a great surge of patriotic enthusiasm, and every space in the NZEF was keenly sought after by willing volunteers. As the war dragged on, however, it grew harder and harder to find enough men to keep the NZEF in business. The demand for reinforcements outpaced the number of available volunteers by late 1915, so the government followed the lead of most combatant countries in introducing a conscription system the following year. Though controversial both at the time and since, the system allowed the government to keep the NZEF at full strength up to the close of hostilities. Ultimately some [98,950](#) people – including 550 nurses – served in New Zealand units during the war years.

Volunteers

New Zealand was well-positioned to contribute to a British expeditionary force when war broke out in August 1914. Three years earlier it had created a Territorial Force which could provide the nucleus of an expeditionary force in the increasingly likely scenario of war breaking out in Europe. The declaration of war brought 14,000 volunteers, many serving territorials, swarming into Defence Department offices across the country to secure their place in the NZEF.

The first 8500-strong group of NZEF soldiers – known as the Main Body – left New Zealand in October 1914, and maintaining an orderly and reliable flow of reinforcements would henceforth be the government's first priority. The Main Body would need to be refreshed with two-monthly instalments of 3000 men to replace those who died or were removed from the forces by illness or injury. Each draft of reinforcements was numbered, with, for example, the 6th reinforcements sailing in August 1915 and the 28th reinforcements sailing in July

1917.¹ Each new draft commenced their training just as the previous draft prepared to embark for the front.²

The forces were organised on a regional basis, with the four military districts of Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and Otago expected to supply a quarter of each draft. Each regional office initially recorded the names of all those who volunteered, and called upon them when the next reinforcement draft was scheduled to enter camp to fulfil their part of the quota.³ This ad hoc programme was replaced by a more systematic and centralised process in February 1915, whereby men could offer their services by filling out an enlistment card at any post office. They then returned to work and awaited instructions about where and when they could formally enlist and be medically examined preparatory to heading to camp.⁴

Box: Which unit should I volunteer for?

Men were initially invited to volunteer for a particular arm of service (such as the infantry, artillery, or the engineers), which enabled them to serve in a unit where their civilian skills might be best utilised. By late 1915 this was creating a shortage of men for the infantry, so henceforth all men were required to enlist for ‘General Service’. They could state a preference but the decision would ultimately fall to the Camp Selection Officer at Trentham Camp.⁵

Age, height and weight requirements for the NZEF, 1914–18

Age

August–October 1914	20–35 years ⁶
October 1914–October 1915	20–40 years ⁷
October 1915–July 1917	20–45 years ⁸
July–September 1917	20–44 years ⁹

September 1917–November 1918	19–44 years (19-year-olds required permission of parents) ¹⁰
Height	
August 1914–October 1915	Over 5ft 4in (1.62m)
October 1915–November 1918	Over 5ft 2in (1.57m)
Weight	
August 1914–November 1918	Under 12 stone (76.2kg)

Falling short

The NZEF landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula in April 1915, and the eight-month campaign which followed took a major toll on the New Zealand forces. The military authorities created a string of new units – including a whole new infantry brigade – which expanded the size of the NZEF by 6577 men. These added numbers, combined with the ongoing challenge of replacing the many men who fell in battle, pushed up the number of volunteers required every month.¹¹

News of the Gallipoli landings – and the sinking of the civilian liner *Lusitania* by a German u-boat which quickly followed – inflamed public sentiment in New Zealand and brought a surge of volunteers to the doors of recruitment offices. Volunteering remained buoyant until the final months of 1915, when the government raised the reinforcement rate from 3000 to 5000 men every two months. The pool of willing volunteers was beginning to drop away, and district quotas began to fall seriously short for the first time.¹²

Press and public railed against the healthy young men who had yet to enlist, accusing them of cowardice and lack of patriotism. The folk-devil of the 'shirker' assumed a prominent role in the public discourse about recruitment.¹³ In October and November 1915 the government carried out 'National Registration', whereby the Government Statistician's office compiled a card index of all military-aged men across the country and whether or not they were willing to serve. The news that 34,000 men were unwilling to volunteer became a rallying cry for the introduction of conscription.¹⁴

National Registration had also revealed 110,000 men supposedly willing to volunteer, even though they had yet to respond to the public clamour for men. The government created a Recruiting Board in January 1916 to oversee the personal canvassing of all men of military age across the country in an effort to bring forward the last few volunteers. The board provided local recruiting committees with lists of all the eligible men in their area, so committee members could hammer on their doors and ask them to volunteer. The scheme failed to bring forward enough volunteers to fill the national quota.¹⁵

The idea of conscripting the necessary men had entered public debate during 1915, and a vociferous lobby urged 'equality of sacrifice' through conscripting men from across the whole of society. The armies of Germany, France, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia and many smaller nations had conscripted men from the outset of the war, with England the only major European combatant to rely solely on volunteers. It too introduced a conscription system in early 1916, followed by the United States and Canada in 1917.

New Zealand's National Registration programme provided a body of information which could be used as the foundation of a conscription system, and the government slowly moved towards the creation of one. It gradually passed laws restricting the movements and activities of military-aged men, who from November 1915 were banned from leaving the country without the government's permission. From February 1916 badges were to be worn by men who had been legitimately exempted from military service, to draw public attention to those who had not enlisted.¹⁶ The noose was tightening around the necks of those who had yet to volunteer.

Prime Minister W.F. Massey introduced a conscription bill into Parliament in May 1916, based broadly on the English conscription system. Passed on 1 August 1916, the Military

Service Act empowered the government to call up any man aged between 20 and 45 for military service at home or abroad subject to a medical examination and a limited appeals process.

Image page: Medical examinations

Image: Garrison Hall, Dunedin

Each recruit had to pass a basic medical examination before they could be accepted into the NZEF. Doctors or military medics inspected each man, ensuring they had good hearing and eyesight, a ‘well formed’ physique, a healthy heart and lungs, good teeth, that they weren’t afflicted by illness or fits, and that they were free of hernia, varicose veins or varicocele (testicular varicose veins), haemorrhoids, and skin disease. The inspecting physician assessed finally whether the man was in ‘good bodily and mental health’, and gave them a medical classification:

A	Fit for active service beyond the seas
B1	Fit for active service beyond the seas after operation in Camp or Public Hospital
B2	Fit for active service beyond the seas after recovery at home
C1	Likely to become fit for active service after special training
C2	Unfit for active service beyond the seas but for service of some nature in New Zealand
D	Wholly unfit for any service whatever

In the voluntary era recruits were inspected either by their local doctor or, increasingly, by an army doctor connected with their local Defence Department office. The first phase of their enlistment process involved being called into their local Drill Hall for inspection on a certain date, along with the other men of that reinforcement draft. By late 1915 recruiting offices had been opened in the four main centres, where a doctor was always available to inspect men at the time of their enlistment.¹⁷

By 1916 the Defence Department was growing concerned that pressure on army doctors was allowing men to evade service by feigning illness or injury. With the introduction of conscription late that year, the department created a network of Medical Boards to inspect the recruits consistently and methodically. The boards would travel the districts after each ballot, inspecting up to 60 men a day.¹⁸

Henceforth balloted men were called in to their local drill hall on a certain date, where they filled out their attestation form and made the oath of allegiance before moving to an adjoining room and stripping off their clothes. They moved into the medical examination room wearing only their jacket, carrying their inspection paper – which listed their military number but not their name. The board then inspected the man without knowledge of his identity. Director of Recruiting David Cossgrove noted that it was often an unpleasant job for the medical officers, ‘working on a hot summer’s day amid a crowd of undressed, over-heated recruits whose last bath had been taken days, at least, prior thereto!’¹⁹

Conscription

Between 1916 and 1918, 134,393 men were [called up](#) under the monthly ballot system. A further 2876 men were called up under the so-called ‘family shirker clause’, by which the Defence Department could call up the sons of families from which no-one had volunteered. It also called up 213 men under section 35 of the Act, by which men found not to have enrolled for conscription could be sent straight to camp without being balloted. This raised the net total of men called up under the conscription system to 138,034 men. More than half those balloted were rejected as medically unfit or exempt for other reasons, with an estimated 32,270 conscripted men actually being sent to camp.

The first monthly ballot was held on 16 November 1916, at the Defence Department’s office in Featherston Street, Wellington. It took 20 hours and 15 minutes to draw the 4024 cards. For each card, [Government Statistician Malcolm Fraser](#) spun two revolving drums containing numbered marbles and drew one from each. The first marble’s number pointed him to a numbered drawer filled with 500 registration cards, the second to a specific card. All those so selected now were legally in the army, and letters arrived a few days later to let them know.²⁰ Men could still [volunteer](#) for military service – 24,105 did so between September 1916 and

November 1918 – with the conscription ballot used to fill up shortfalls in each district’s quota.

Director of Recruiting David Cossgrove claimed in early 1919 that ‘the most conspicuous feature of the ballot was the practically whole-hearted acceptance by the people of the justness of the measure.’²¹ The majority of those conscripted accepted the government’s will and submitted to military service, though some either resisted or directly opposed it.

Each man had the right to appeal against his calling-up, with appeals heard by his district’s three-person Military Service Board usually composed of a magistrate chairman, a farmer, and a unionist. The would-be recruit could employ the services of a lawyer (about 40% did so), and the government likewise employed a lawyer. Hearings were held in public, allowing their proceedings to be published in the local press.²² There was no further right of appeal after the hearing, so the boards’ decisions were final. Historian David Littlewood estimates that around 32% of all conscripted men appealed on one ground or another.²³

The boards could consider exemptions for only a few, tightly-defined groups. The vast majority of appellants asked to be excused on the grounds that they performed essential work, or that their absence would inflict great personal hardship on themselves or their families.²⁴ Employers or unions usually applied for workers to be exempt from military service because they worked in essential industry, and from 1917 the government issued [guidelines](#) on which industries were considered essential and which were not.²⁵ From early 1917 the boards could also appoint trustees to manage soldiers’ businesses while they were away. The boards often struggled to make judgments in personal hardship cases, so the government moved to make financial provision for soldiers’ families in order to free breadwinners from household responsibilities.²⁶ No group was categorically exempted from military service, though appeals from members of the clergy and theological students were generally adjourned sine die (suspended indefinitely), which amounted to much the same thing.

Littlewood estimates that around 4.76% of all appeals were made by men who resisted military service on philosophical, ethical, or religious grounds (conscientious objectors).²⁷ The Military Service Act permitted the Military Service Boards to exempt men on religious grounds, but only if they were an accredited member of a recognised pacifist sect. Only 73 men were exempted on religious grounds, though others willingly joined non-combatant units

such as the Medical Corps or the Army Service Corps where they would not have to bear arms. Some conscripted men refused any form of military service, and 286 such men were court-martialled and sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Read our main feature on [conscientious objectors and dissent](#).

The government recognised that the key to making conscription work lay in [punishing those who tried to evade the system](#). Under the Military Service Act, balloted men who failed to present themselves for service could be imprisoned with hard labour for up to five years, and employers could be prosecuted for hiring them. The Defence Department created a Personal Service Branch in February 1917, which investigated all such cases and issued arrest warrants for absconders. By March 1919 it had investigated 10,737 men, of whom 1294 remained at large. Of those located, 2211 men had been found to be eligible for service, 580 had been arrested for breaches of the Military Service Act and 1133 warrants were outstanding. Ultimately, [2320 men were deprived of their civil rights for 10 years](#) for deliberately avoiding military service in the view of the authorities.

The later days of recruiting

The Defence Department divided the eligible men, known as ‘reservists’, into several ‘divisions’, each of which would be exhausted before the next was called up. Balloting began with the First Division, single men without wives or children, in November 1916, and moved onto Second Division men who were married but childless, in October 1917.²⁸

The rules were amended and tightened in mid-1917 as the government faced the imminent exhaustion of the supply of unmarried men. It finally abolished the district quota system in September 1917, henceforth using the conscription ballot to fill national rather than local shortfalls. All Second Division ballots would draw recruits from across the country.

Thereafter young men were allowed to volunteer at 19 with their parents’ permission; otherwise they would be called up automatically within a month of turning 20. Other men would only be allowed to volunteer if their group of reservists was currently being balloted. Men from earlier groups who presented themselves later were expected to proceed directly to camp under threat of arrest.²⁹

By late 1917 the supply of single men without dependants was all but exhausted, with the exception of the approximately 500 young men who turned 20 each month. The Defence Department toiled to expand its catchment of eligible single men, to hold off conscripting men with dependants for as long as possible. It created a 'Home Service' branch consisting of men physically incapable of overseas service, but who might be placed into essential work at home to allow other men to be sent abroad.³⁰ It also operated dental clinics at camps to reduce the number of men rejected with bad teeth, and funded minor operations in order to pass men who fell just short of medical fitness. In November 1917 it converted Tauherenikau training camp into a 'C1 Camp', where men who narrowly failed their medical examinations might be brought up to an acceptable state of fitness and reclassified as 'fit'. Despite these various efforts, married men with one child began to be called up in April 1918 and men with two children in June.³¹

Shortfalls in Māori units in France saw conscription extended to Māori in late 1917 and the first 'Maori ballot' conducted in May 1918. The government limited the ballot to the Waikato district, which to date had produced few recruits. Minister of Defence James Allen was motivated by a belief that all sections of the community should be forced to play their part, but Waikato Māori resisted enlistment because of historical grievances going back to the land confiscation of the 1860s. When only a few of the 552 conscripted Māori presented themselves for military service, a raid on Te Paina marae in Mercer saw 14 men arrested and imprisoned. The war ended before any of the Waikato conscripts could be sent overseas. Read our [main article on Māori conscription](#).

The disbandment of the 4th Infantry Brigade in France in early 1918 and the resulting drop in reinforcement numbers eased the pressure in New Zealand slightly, and the number of men balloted dropped each month after June 1918. The final ballot was conducted on 12 August 1918, with the all remaining men in the earlier ballot divisions called up on 9 September and 10 October.³²

By the time of the Armistice in November 1918, New Zealand had supplied 98,950 recruits to the British war effort (in addition to 9924 in camp at the close of hostilities and those who served in other Imperial units). Of these, around [72% were volunteers and 28% conscripts](#). Around [9% of New Zealand's total population](#) were recruited for service in the NZEF.

Non-Maori ballots under Military Service Act, 1916–18

Ballot No.	Ballot dates	Number called up				
		First Division called up	Second Division called up			Total
			Class A	Class B	Class C	
1	16–18 November 1916	4024				4024
2	11–12 December 1916	2886				2886
3	8 January 1917	3514				3514
4	5–6 February 1917	6581				6581
5	5–6 March 1917	4311				4311
6	10–11 April 1917	4573				4573
7	1–2 May 1917	8066				8066
8	29–30 May 1917	8001				8001
9	26 June 1917	7588				7588
10	21–23 August 1917	14050				14050
11	Remainder of division, 24 September 1917	8320				8320
12	26 October 1917	1410	4627			6037
13	26 November 1917	698	4828			5526
14	Remainder of division, 18 December 1917	822	3494			4316
15	Remainder of division, 14 February 1918	978	255			1233
16	Remainder of division, 19 March 1918	486	78			564
17	13–17 April 1918	514	35	9769		10318
18	Remainder of division, 12 May 1918	509	33	7559		8101
19	10–11 June 1918	490	38	57	9816	10401
20	16 July 1918	574	32	36	4936	5578
21	12 August 1918	434	23	30	4912	5399
22	Remainder of division, 9 September 1918	507	13	12	3874	4406
23	Remainder of division, 10 October 1918	540	14	8	38	600
		79876	13470	17471	23576	134393

Key:

First Division: single men without dependants

Class A, Second Division: married men without children

Class B, Second Division: married men with one child

Class C, Second Division: married men with two children

Note:

Anticipating that many men would be rejected on medical or other grounds, the department called up three or four men for each vacancy in the reinforcement draft.³³ On six occasions the government called up all the remaining men in a reservists' group without holding a ballot, when that group was on the brink of being exhausted.

Sources

Return showing the number of reservists compulsorily called up under the Military Service Act 1916, IA1 1652 29/125; Calling up notices for ballot 23, New Zealand Gazette, 1918, pp.3513-20

Attached documents

[Report on conscription, 1916–18](#) (pdf, 38mbs)

[*War, 1914–1918. New Zealand Expeditionary Force: its provision and maintenance,*](#)
Wellington, 1919

Notes

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- ⁴ Graham, 'The voluntary system: recruiting 1914-16', pp.38-43
- ⁵ Cossgrove, 'Recruiting 1916-1918', p.2; *Consolidated recruiting circulars* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1918), p.11
- ⁶ Graham, 'The voluntary system: recruiting 1914-16', p.146
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- ¹⁰ Recruiting circular 37, 19 September 1917, AD1 1013 56/88, Archives New Zealand
- ¹¹ *Provision and maintenance*, pp.3-7, 13
- ¹² Paul Baker, *King and country call: New Zealanders, conscription and the Great War* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1988), pp.32-41; Graham, 'The voluntary system: recruiting 1914-16', pp.73-85
- ¹³ Baker, *King and country call*, pp.46-52; Graham, 'The voluntary system: recruiting 1914-16', pp.69-71
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- ¹⁸ Cossgrove, 'Recruiting 1916-1918', pp.33-8
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- ²⁰ Bargas and Shoebidge, *New Zealand's First World War heritage*, pp.25-6
- ²¹ Cossgrove, 'Recruiting 1916-1918', p.24
- ²² Baker, *King and Country Call*, pp.115-17; Military Service Act – Regulations as to Appeals to Military Service Boards, 10 October 1916, *New Zealand Gazette*, 1916, pp.3207-11
- ²³ David Littlewood, 'The tool and instrument of the military? The operations of the Military Service Tribunals in the East Central Division of the West Riding of Yorkshire and those of the Military Service Boards in New Zealand, 1916-1918', p.202
- ²⁴ Littlewood, 'The tool and instrument of the military?', p.261
- ²⁵ Baker, *King and Country Call*, pp.117-19
- ²⁶ Baker, *King and Country Call*, pp.117-19; Littlewood, 'The tool and instrument of the military?', p.213; Soldiers' Property Regulations 1917, *New Zealand Gazette*, 1917, pp.1211-13
- ²⁷ Littlewood, 'The tool and instrument of the military?', p.220
- ²⁸ Malcolm Fraser, 'War Work of the Census and Statistics Office', typescript, 14 November 1919, p.12 and attached table, IA1 1652 29/125, Archives New Zealand
- ²⁹ Recruiting circular 22, 20 June 1917, AD1 1013 56/88, Archives New Zealand; *Consolidated recruiting circulars* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1918), pp.27-8; Cossgrove, 'Recruiting 1916-1918', pp.52-3
- ³⁰ Regulations under the Military Service Act 1916, 18 June 1917, *New Zealand Gazette*, 1917, pp.2445-6
- ³¹ Fraser, 'War Work of the Census and Statistics Office', p.12 and attached table, IA1 1652 29/125, Archives New Zealand
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