

A Canvas City

The 3rd (Auckland) Mounted Rifles camp, Avondale Racecourse 1912

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In late April 1912, the Avondale Jockey Club held their usual autumn meeting. Despite heavy rain towards the end, it was declared successful, according to newspaper reports of the day. Then, just after the final day, it was announced on 30 April that a training camp was to be held at the racecourse; 383 men under canvas from the 3rd (Auckland) Mounted Rifles, at their very first annual camp since they were raised as a unit of Territorials under the 1909 Defence Act and its 1910 amendment. Semi-rural Avondale had never seen anything quite like this before – but this 1912 encampment on the district's largest open space was to be the beginning of a string of such camps for fighting men during World War I and II.

The 1909 Defence Act and 1910 amendment

In December 1909, in response to both domestic and Imperial concerns regarding the defensive capability of the British dominions and colonies, the New Zealand Government instituted the Defence Act:¹

"Subject to the provisions of this Act all male inhabitants of New Zealand who have resided therein for six months and are British subjects shall be liable to be trained as prescribed as follows :—

(a) From twelve years to fourteen years of age or to date of leaving school, whichever is the later, in the junior cadets; and

(b) From fourteen years of age or the date of leaving school, as the case may be, to eighteen years of age, in the senior cadets ; and

¹ *Evening Post*, 30 December 1909, p. 7

(c) From eighteen years of age to twenty-one years of age, in the general training section; and

(d) From twenty-one years to thirty years of age in the Reserve."

Provision is made for the constitution of a Territorial Force consisting of such a number of men as is provided for by Parliament. The force will not be liable to serve outside New Zealand, but if the force is at any time below the strength contemplated by the vote of Parliament it will be brought up to its full strength by draft from the general training section which consists of those men between eighteen and twenty-one years of age. The service of the general training section will consist of fourteen days in camp and twelve half-days a year, except in artillery and engineer branches, in which it will consist of fourteen days in camp and twenty half-days or their equivalent. Every person liable to come under the compulsory training scheme must register himself; failure to do so will entail the imposition of a fine and deprivation of electoral rights. Any employer who prevents an employee from doing his duty under the Act is liable to a fine not exceeding £10, but no employer is to be compelled to pay any employee for the time during which he is undergoing training. The selling of liquor in military canteens is prohibited. Power is given to the Government to maintain arms and ammunition factories in the Dominion, and to set apart Crown lands for permanent training grounds."

This measure was championed by the Prime Minister Sir Joseph Ward, who regarded a system of national defence against possible future foes as "a comparatively cheap form of insurance rather than to run the risk of incalculable loss."² It was introduced into the House on 3 December 1909 as "a bulky measure of 103 clauses" (condensed from 158 clauses in the 1908 version) which repealed all existing legislation regarding the nations

² Speech to New Zealand Club luncheon, *Evening Post*, 5 October 1909, p. 8

defence forces. The measure to initiate a programme of universal compulsory military training met with support from the press.

*“The fact is that we have all realised during the past eight or nine months as never before by how slender a thread and upon what haphazard arrangements our national supremacy hangs. The moral that Commandants and Inspector-Generals had been endeavouring in vain for the last ten years to impress upon us was suddenly driven home by uncomfortable speculations as to what might happen to New Zealand if the Old Country were to be worsted in the Dreadnought race, or even temporarily to be robbed of her supremacy at sea. For years we have been preaching to the Empire, and now we propose to do something far better by putting our own house in order, and so setting an example which will be worth a thousand sermons. As no measure is of greater importance for the country and the Empire, and none will do more credit to the Government or excite less opposition, we hope that the Premier will push the Defence Bill through before the land question or any other bone of contention has demoralised the House. Here is a statesmanlike scheme which is above the reach of partisanship and bickering, and it should be given a chance at once.”*³

Into 1910, and the implementation of the Defence Act was postponed until the passage of a new Bill incorporating suggestions made by Lord Kitchener early that year, including raising the age in the general training section from 21 years to 25 years.⁴ The Government dithered somewhat for most of 1910, however; a new Bill was introduced in July, and after considerable debate (mainly around raising the age of the territorial force), the amendment was passed by the end of the year.

³ *Evening Post*, 7 December 1909, p. 6

⁴ *Evening Post*, 27 June 1910, p. 7

Establishment of the 3rd (Auckland) Mounted Rifles

Colonel Alexander John Godley (1867-1957) was appointed as commandant of the new territorial forces in 1911 for the next five years, and held the temporary rank of major-general. ⁵ In August, he presented his first report to the Government on the new scheme and the training requirements.

“It is hoped that the posting of all those registered will be completed by the beginning of September, and that it will be possible to commence training these men during that month ... The interests of employers and employed, the suitability of men for the various arms, and, as far as possible, the wishes of the men as regards the arms in which they wish to serve, will all be considered. The training will at first be most elementary and rudimentary, and no camps will be held till Christmas-time and after. The annual week's camp will be held by regiments and battalions, and, in the case of the mounted rifles, who are chiefly drawn from farming and dairying districts, the camps will not as a rule be held till near the end of the training season—namely, 31st May.” ⁶

On March 17 of that year, the 3rd (Auckland) Mounted Rifles were raised, ⁷ and the establishment of this new territorial unit was officially announced. ⁸ The unit also gained a royal stamp of approval: on 30 April 1912, the eve of their camp at Avondale, it was declared from Government House in Auckland that King George V had identified himself with the Territorial Army of New Zealand by assuming the position of Colonel-in-Chief of both the 3rd (Auckland) Mounted Rifles and the 1st (Canterbury) Regiment of Infantry. ⁹

⁵ Ray Grover, 'Godley, Alexander John 1867 - 1957'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22 June 2007, www.dnzb.govt.nz

⁶ Report to the Defence Forces, from *Evening Post*, 15 August 1911, p. 8

⁷ “NZ Mounted”, Digger History: an unofficial history of the Australian & New Zealand Armed Services, <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-nz/nz-mounted.htm>

⁸ *Evening Post*, 17 March 1911, p. 3

⁹ *Evening Post*, 30 April 1912, p. 8

At an address to the mounted regiment at Avondale in May 1912 (see below), Major-General Godley made reference to the fact that the 3rd (Auckland) Mounted Rifles had a long history. The concept of an organised mounted military corps goes back to the volunteer corps such as the Auckland Volunteer Cavalry Guards in the 1860s, and groups like the Prince Alfred Light Horse from the c.1870 to c.1886, a volunteer cavalry unit among a few which sprang up in the region at that time, and which paraded both at the Great Northern Hotel (the Old Stone Jug) at Western Springs, and in Avondale itself, possibly even on the paddocks which would, twenty years later, become the racecourse.¹⁰ The Waiuku Royal Cavalry Volunteer Corps existed in 1865, and built the Waiuku lock-up.¹¹ The first Auckland Mounted Rifles were organised to serve in South Africa during the Boer War, and were gazetted in November 1898. Members of the regiment served with the First Contingent, the Second Contingent, and with the Rough Riders.¹²

The camp

The horses to be used by the 3rd (Auckland) Mounted at Avondale were valued by the Defence Department, registered on lists, and fully examined by a veterinary surgeon so that, in case of an accident, the owner could receive due compensation for the worth of the animal. This was a provision, according to the *Auckland Star*, which had been advocated for a long while, “and the system will give great satisfaction to the men.”¹³ Men and horses arrived at Avondale from around Auckland, Matakana, Waiuku and Clevedon, converging on Avondale railway station in special trains.¹⁴

A dry part of the ground to the west of the grandstand was selected for setting up the bell tents, along with the horse lines, sheltered as much as possible from the winds off the Waitakeres. Water pipes were laid with taps throughout the camp ground for use by the men and for watering the horses. The camp’s schedule was said to have been basic, due to the number attending the camp: 6.15 to 6.45 in the morning was physical drill; 6.45 to

¹⁰ L. Truttman, *Terminus 1: The Flour Millers*, 2008 (published online)

¹¹ Anne Barker, “Waiuku’s Historic Treasures”, *Heritage New Zealand*, August 2001

¹² *Cyclopedia of New Zealand*, Vol. II, 1902, p. 165

¹³ *Auckland Star*, 30 April 1912

¹⁴ *Auckland Star*, 1 May 1912

7.45 stables, followed after breakfast by drill without arms, saluting etc from 9.30 to 10.35 am. Musketry, care of arms and semaphore work was from 10.15 to 11.45, then stables from noon to 12.45. After lunch, there was mounted drill (including mounting and dismounting), stand to horses, saluting, fitting of saddlery etc. from 2.15 to 4 p.m. More stables from 4.15 to 5 p.m. ¹⁵

The men were divided into four squadrons. Captain J. Potter was in charge of “A” Squadron (Auckland and districts) with Lieutenants Holder, Lucas, W. E. Carter, and J. E. Carter, with 8 non-coms and 72 privates. “B” Squadron (Clevedon) was led by Major McKenzie, assisted by Captain Scholfield, Lieutenants Johns and Paton, with 14 non-coms and 80 privates. “C” Squadron (Waiuku) had Captain Herrold in charge, with Lieutenants Wilkinson and Aldred, and 9 non-coms and 60 privates, while “D” Squadron (Wellsford) was under Captain Jollie with Lieutenants Ashton and Lush, and 11 non-coms, 47 privates. They were joined in the camp by infantry casuals (infantry regiments that had joined the territorial forces after their own earlier Papatoetoe camp). Around 90 men were in those regiments. Then there were the staff instructors, four regimental sergeant-majors attached to each mounted squadron: Notley, Marr, Bell and Beer. Lieutenant Ellingham was in charge of the machine gun with 22 men under him, Captain Monk was medical officer attached to the camp, and two chaplains, W. E. Gillam and W. G. Monckton, were also in camp. The band comprised 25 players, “in attendance to liven the proceedings”, led by Lieutenant Whalley Stewart. ¹⁶ There were also members of the Garrison Ambulance and Field Engineers, to round off the variety. ¹⁷

As many comforts and necessities as could be provided were available for those attending the camp. A complete kitchen staff cooked all the meals for the men for, as the *Star* put it, “As most people are aware, mounted men do not cook, having quite enough to do to look after their horses.” ¹⁸ The YMCA assisted, but in finding there was a shortage of large marquee tents, they set up premises in a “large shed” (ironically for the morally-

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *NZ Herald, Auckland Star* 2 May 1912

¹⁷ *NZ Herald*, 3 May 1912

¹⁸ *Auckland Star*, 1 May 1912

orientated organisation, the shed was that which usually housed the totalisators). There they provided “reading and writing tables, piano and music, gramophone, two rifle ranges and many indoor games. A lantern is provided, and a choice selection of lantern views has been collected. The local association has provided post cards bearing the name of the 3rd Mounted Rifles. All arrangements will be under the control of one of the YMCA secretaries, who will work with a committee of men consisting of the delegates of each company.” There, daily papers were provided free by the *NZ Herald* and the *Auckland Star*, magazines from booksellers Upton & Co, Champtaloupe and Edmiston, T. Miller, Gordon & Gotch and the Sunday-school Union. Music was provided by Rev. Gillam and Eady & Co. Games came from the Girls Grammar School, Grevatt & Sons, Goodson’s London Arcade, E. Le Roy, J. W. Stewart, J. W. Wiseman, and H. G. Fountain. A phonograph from the English and Foreign Piano Company, lantern slides by Mr. Elkin with additional slides from Rev. Gillam and F. Harrop, the rifle range with rifles from Hazard & Sons, as well as the YMCA themselves.¹⁹ At the weekend, the YMCA staged a concert, with a number of their workers taking part. The men also had the use of a temporary post office set on the grounds, cleared four times a day.²⁰

The *Star* reported on the second day:

“This morning work was begun in earnest, and then men were put through squad drill without arms, saluting etc. and later on received instructions in musketry, the care of arms, semaphore work, etc. There is ample ground in the middle of the course for manoeuvres, where the regiment is being exercised. Nearly all the troops come from country districts, and are a well set-up, intelligent body of men, who are taking very kindly to the drill. At present they do not look so spick and span on parade as might be wished, nearly half of them being in civilian clothes. It looks odd to see

¹⁹ *NZ Herald*, 2 May 1912

²⁰ *NZ Herald*, 6 May 1912

*men drilling in bowler hats, but the uniforms are in camp, and will be served out in a day or so.”*²¹

That evening, after the horses had been safely picketed for the night, wrapped in rugs to protect them from the cold and the wet, the bugle sounded for mess. “Great attention has been paid to the commissariat department. The officers’ messroom is in a fine building, and at the mess to-night the toast of “Our Honorary Colonel-in-Chief His Majesty the King” was drunk with musical honours.” This was followed by a lecture to the officers by Lieutenant-Colonel Parkes on sanitation, which was followed the next night by one from Judge Advocate-General J. R. Reed on military law.²²

The *Herald* sent in one of their reporters to “rough it” with the men in “Avondale’s Canvas City”:

“A bag of bran for a pillow, sweet-smelling hay as a mattress, a waterproof sheet and two military overcoats as bedclothes -- and a Herald reporter settled down for his first night in camp at Avondale on Wednesday. The "last post" had long since sounded, but from different parts of the camp came sounds of revelry. In the horse lines, just outside the tent, all was quiet, save for the "champ, champ" of the horses at their feed, and an occasional sharp rebuke from the guard to a refractory horse. And so to sleep.

”At a seemingly unearthly hour in the morning the bugle sounding the reveille awoke the camp. The morning was cold and raw, and it was difficult to leave the warm tent, but coffee, brought by a friendly orderly, made the task easier.

”Outside the men were hard at work grooming their horses, and all was

²¹ *Auckland Star*, 2 May 1912

²² *NZ Herald*, 3 May 1912

bustle and confusion. Horses groomed and fed and accoutrements cleaned, the various squadrons lined up to be fitted for uniforms, and many a laugh was heard as a particularly small man got lost in a particularly large uniform. The regiment clothed, breakfast was the next thing, after which the regiment went through a course of mounted drill prior to being inspected by General Godley in the afternoon...

“After mess the regiment paraded, and, drawn up in line formation, presented arms and gave the general salute.

“General Godley then inspected each squadron; and displayed keen interest in them, asking the squadron commanders from what district their respective units were drawn. The regiment then retired in line. The order, “Line of squadron advance,” was given, and the regiment divided into squadrons, and advanced to the saluting base. Extremely difficult evolutions were gone through, which to the onlooker looked as if they would end in confusion, but so well did the squadron leaders perform their duties that, despite the fact that many of the movements were executed at a smart trot, the evolutions ended in perfect order; and the regiment, after advancing in squadron column formation and column of squadrons, lined up en masse for General Godley to address them.

“General Godley expressed great pleasure at having had the opportunity of inspecting them, and of seeing such a fine regiment in the Auckland province. The regiment was an old one, counting its history as a volunteer corps, and from what he had seen that day he was certain it would uphold its traditions.”²³

Visitors day came on Sunday May 5th, with 2000 people attending. “A large crowd arrived by train in the afternoon. The band played on the lawn, and the soldiers had an

²³ NZ Herald, 4 May 1912

enthusiastic reception from their friends, who were keenly inspecting all there was to see. In addition to the usual train, the Railway Department put on a special, the accommodation being taxed severely.”²⁴

On Tuesday 7th May, the 3rd (Auckland) Mounted Rifles made a route march to Auckland City and back, via New North Road, Kingsland, Eden Terrace, Symonds Street, past Government House to the foot of Custom Street, then up Queen Street, headed by the band, and returning to camp along Karangahape and Great North Roads. The *Herald* described the day:²⁵

“No better illustration of the merits of the new defence scheme than that afforded by the march could be expected. Although most of the men are recruits who have been pushed into the ranks by the compulsory clauses of the Defence Act and had not made acquaintance with military arms and drill until the past few months, they have acquired a degree of efficiency which is astonishing to those who know the long period of training which the regular forces of the British army have to undergo before they are passed as satisfactory. A few short parades and four or five days’ training in camp have transformed raw youths into men who take a pleasure in holding themselves erect in their saddles and who are keen to prove themselves really men ...

“A large crowd lined Queen-street as the regiment, which had 365 men on parade, marched up in column of fours. From mounted men evenness of rank, such as is seen in infantry corps, is not expected, but those who looked for faults in this respect were agreeably disappointed. The fours were dressed with admirable precision, and the steadiness and the fine physique of the men drew forth high praise from the innumerable interested onlookers ... The horses also received well-deserved praise.

²⁴ *NZ Herald*, 6 May 1912

²⁵ *NZ Herald*, 8 May 1912

They were not showy, nor were they without some incongruities, but their hardiness and usefulness for mounted riflemen were apparent. It is essential that the horses of such troops shall be active and suitable for rugged country, and not so heavy as the chargers of regular cavalry, and those of the 3rd Regiment are excellently adapted for their purpose for which they are required ...

“On arrival at the Town Hall the regiment was drawn up in squadron formation facing the building, and the officers dismounted and were received by His Worship the Mayor in the supper room.”

There, the Mayor addressed them, complimenting the regiment, and also stating that war was inevitable, given the world situation; “... it was the duty of the nation to get ready.” He spoke in absolute support of the Defence Act and its enforcement.

The formality of Tuesday was eased somewhat by Wednesday’s Sports Day. Wrestling bouts on horse-back, tug-of-war on horseback, whistling competition (won by Trooper Rogers, who whistled “Starlight”), races, sack races, and the “Victoria Cross competition”, which required a rider to jump hurdles, race to a given spot, pick up a dummy, and deliver it back to the finish line.²⁶

That night at the final dinner for the officers, officers from other regiments were invited, along with a few civilians, including John Bollard, MHR, President of the Avondale Jockey Club. After the meal, and the traditional toast to the King, another was made to the health of the Jockey Club, and its president. Bollard duly replied, “and expressed his pleasure at the conduct of the camp, which, he felt sure, would have a good effect. It was his opinion that the territorial scheme would revolutionise society in New Zealand. He felt pleased, as president of the Jockey Club, at being able to place the course at the disposal of the regiment, and gave the regiment a hearty invitation on behalf of the club

²⁶ NZ Herald, 9 May 1912

to the use of the grounds at any time. The club would scorn to make a charge for the use of the grounds, as it was recognised that the territorials were our first line of defence.”

The last major activity of the camp was an open-air concert held on the grandstand to a crowd nearly 2000 on the lawns.²⁷

This first camp for the 3rd (Auckland) Mounted Rifles was universally declared a success, and regarded by many as symbolic justification for both the Defence Act and the concept of compulsory military training. Non-commissioned officers from the 3rd Auckland, 4th Waikato and 11th North Auckland were to become part of the second Auckland Mounted Rifles during World War I; author Sergeant C. G. Nicol in 1921 seemed to think that this was the only common point between the fully fledged wartime regiment and the territorial regiments which had preceded it.²⁸ I can't see how the men themselves would not have been part of the force which was to serve in Egypt, the Sinai and Palestine during the war. Some who were in the Middle East may have been among those rising at dawn to the sound of the bugle on those May mornings back in 1912, in a quiet village settlement on the outskirts of Auckland called Avondale.

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ C. G. Nicol, *The Story of Two Campaigns*, 1921, pp. 1-2