



# The New Zealand Māori Pioneer Battalion

“No matter how desperate the fighting may be... they are amongst the best bayonet fighters in the world, and they are perfect sentries. As trench fighters, you can't beat them.” These were the words of a Pākehā officer after seeing the Māori Contingent fight at Gallipoli in 1915.

Like other battalions, Māori soldiers were decimated by events at Gallipoli. There were 500 in the contingent when it arrived in Gallipoli and just 134 when it left.

The number of Māori soldiers who served in World War I is unknown. Around 2,227 Māori recruits served in what was to become the Pioneer (Māori) Battalion. But because New Zealand military records didn't record the ethnicity of any soldiers at the time, the number of Māori who served elsewhere in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force isn't known.

Following Gallipoli, the Māori contingent was organised into the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion which also included the Otago Mounted Rifles Regiment. Māori soldiers in other battalions were encouraged to transfer to the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion. Some did, but others chose to stay where they were.

The Pioneers were sent to the Western Front in April 1916 and carried out engineering work such as digging trenches, building roads, railways or preparing ground for communication wires. Unlike the Māori Contingent in Gallipoli, the Pioneers weren't a fighting unit. But that

didn't mean they were safe. They often worked under fire and the work was highly dangerous, but very essential. One of the most unpleasant tasks they had to perform was as members of a firing squad to execute a convicted deserter.

The Pioneers were alongside other New Zealanders on The Somme and then in Messines. Here's one account of their work on The Somme: “Sent ahead to prepare for the arrival of the rest of the New Zealanders, the Pioneers began work on an 8-km communications trench, ‘Turk Lane’, leading to the front line. Some members of the infantry described this trench as a masterpiece, but it came at a heavy price. Under constant and heavy artillery fire, the Pioneers toiled with pick and spade, completing their mission around midnight on 16 September.”

Around the middle of 1917, the Pioneer Battalion was reorganised. The Otago men were replaced with around 470 soldiers, mostly from Niue and the Cook Islands. The battalion became known as the New Zealand (Māori) Pioneer Battalion.

When the end of the war came, Māori soldiers were given a huge welcome home, with parties and parades all over the country. Like all other battalions, the victory came at a huge cost. The total number of dead from the Pioneers (including Niue and Cook Islanders) was 336. A further 734 were wounded.



**Pictured:**

Top: The Pioneer Battalion cheering Massey and Ward on their departure, Bois-de-Warnimont, France.

Inset: Pioneer Battalion soldiers in the cockpit of a downed Bristol fighter F2B during World War I.

**Sources:**

Photo credit (top): Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918. Ref: 1/2-013291-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [natlib.govt.nz/records/22332062](http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22332062)

Photo credit (inset): Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918. Ref: 1/2-013070-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [natlib.govt.nz/records/22852811](http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22852811)

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