



# DESPATCHES

Newsletter of the Queen's Redoubt Trust

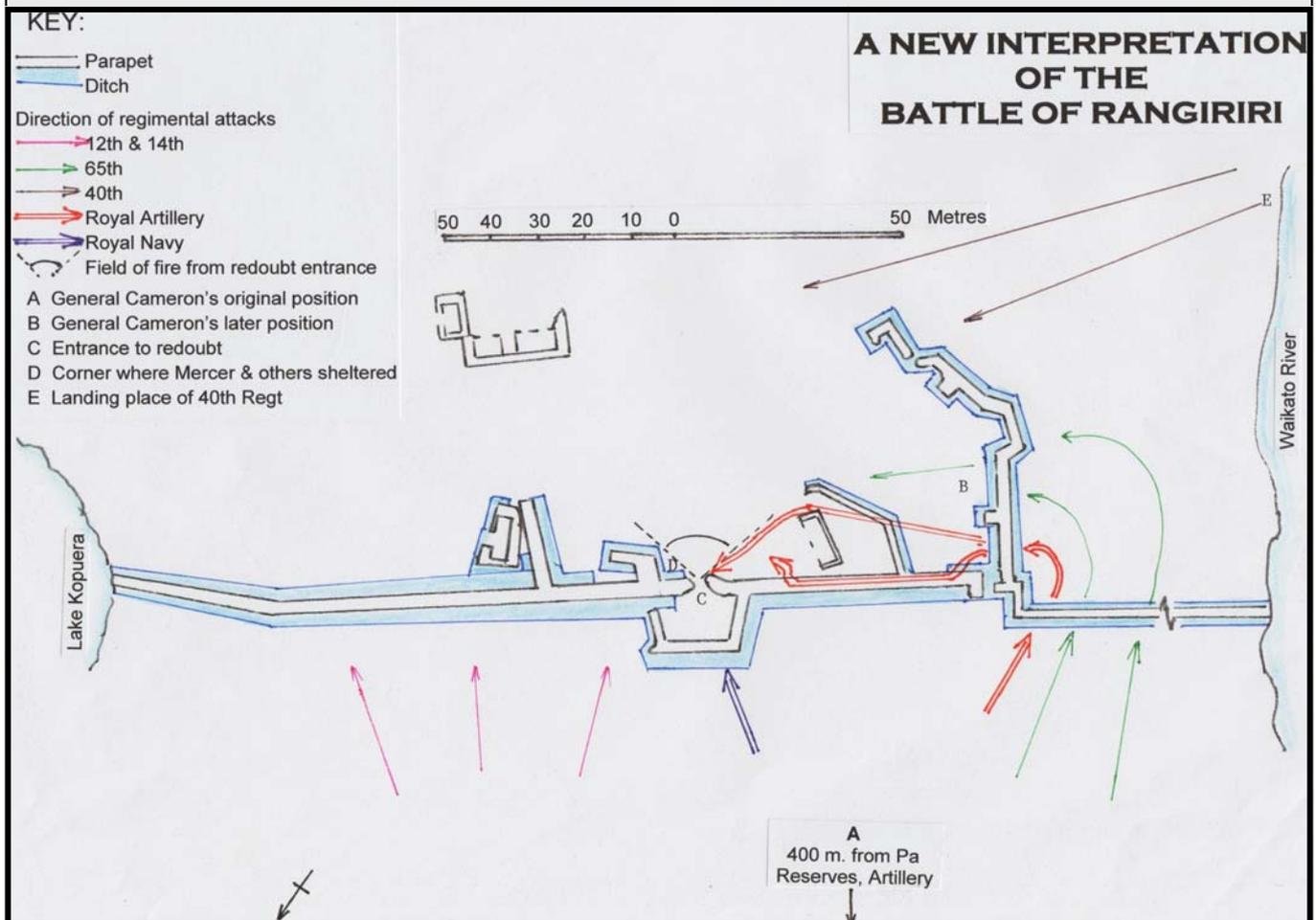
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## RANGIRIRI: FACTS, MYTHS and LEGENDS

Much has been written about this major battle of the Waikato invasion in November 1863, some of which has been inaccurate or contradictory. A good example of this is reports in the Daily Southern Cross and the N Z Herald, both of which were very pro colonist and full of platitudes. One major conundrum is the reason why General Cameron used a small party of

artillerymen, and later one from the Navy, to try and take the central redoubt of the defensive line. Issue 14 (December 2013) of this newsletter contained some initial findings and further research has shed more light on this and other puzzling aspects of the battle. In doing this I have now consulted 34 sources; 14 of which were written mainly by military personnel

at or soon after the event: 9 - mainly written later by military historians and 11 by historians, newspaper reporters and politicians with limited military experience. Sifting through these sources and applying some logical analysis to the results has given a clearer insight into the more puzzling activities and their earlier interpretations.



**RANGIRIRI: FACTS, MYTHS and LEGENDS (cont)****OUTLINE OF BATTLE: THE KNOWN FACTS**

On 20 November 1863 at 3.30 pm a British force, numbering 1488 officers and men, attacked the Maori defensive position at Rangiriri. This consisted of an entrenchment across a narrow ridge lying between the Waikato River and Lake Kopuera. General Cameron's forces initially attacked from the north side (Artillery, 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Regiments) and two hours later from the south side (40<sup>th</sup> Regt). Despite some holdups the British had taken all of the works except for the central redoubt and probably the south side of east trench to Lake Waikare by about 6 pm. The central redoubt, although small, was much stronger than Cameron had envisaged and its walls too high for the scaling ladders the troops had brought. The only realistic way in was via its entrance on the south side and several attempts to force this had all failed. The troops besieged the redoubt overnight and at 5.30 the following morning a white flag was waived from the parapet of the redoubt. Soon after this the defenders surrendered. The background to some of these activities is uncertain because various aspects are contradictory -some information given by various historians and other commentators being incorrect or muddled. So what actually happened? Here is a new interpretation.

**THE LENGTH OF THE MAORI ENTRENCHMENT**

Various lengths are given by different writers, ranging from Gamble's 470 metres to Cowan's 1200 metres. The issue is confused by there being two lakes. The smaller, Kopuera is nearest to Rangiriri and today has an area of approximately 50 hectares while Waikare, 1.5 kilometres to the east, is much larger at approximately 3400 ha. The land between the two is low lying and in 1863 was swampy. There was also confusion as Kopuera is sometimes referred to as a lagoon (New Zealander). There are indications that there had been heavy rain prior to the battle with high water levels in the Waikato and the surrounding country (Southern Monthly). These two sources, both contemporaneous with the action, drew attention to high water and the connection between the two bodies of water. It is suggested that the land between the two was flooded, with Kopuera appearing to be connected to Lake Waikare -as indeed it probably was in earlier centuries. This means that the entrenchment went from the Waikato River to the shore of Lake Kopuera, a distance of 470 metres; the distance measured by Gamble one of the military commanders present.

**STRENGTH OF THE CENTRAL REDOUBT, SCALING LADDERS AND POSITION OF ENTRANCE INTO REDOUBT**

In earlier reconnaissance trips up the river had caused General Cameron to underestimate the strength of the central redoubt (Pugsley) because it looked to be of similar height and appearance to the rest of the entrenchment. However it was not, and while the scaling ladders carried by the troops were adequate for the outer parts of the Maori line, they were too short for the redoubt. (Southern Monthly; Webb; Gibson). The entrance to the redoubt was also a problem. One commentator implied there was an entrance in the front (Pugsley), but most stated there was only one entrance (Belich, 1986; Cameron, in 65<sup>th</sup> digest; Pickard in Mercer, 1882; Pickard, Jnl; Lennard); which was at the rear with its base at breast height (Southern Monthly; New Zealander). Thus any attacks on the walls of the central redoubt, using ladders for access, were doomed to failure. The ladders only worked on the parapet near the Waikato where, as the wall was lower, the 65<sup>th</sup> were able to cross.

**CRITICISM OF CAMERON'S TACTICS, HIS LOCATION DURING THE BATTLE, HIS USE OF R.A. and R.N.**

There was some criticism of the tactics used by General Cameron, mainly by others after the event. Many colonial newspapers tended to criticize Cameron for his perceived slowness and timidity (Belich, 1990,) but, as will be explained, this was usually unjustified. Most writers considered Cameron to be a good military tactician (Belich, 1990, Southern Monthly). He was not "too stubborn to change his tactics" as implied by Holt but quite flexible and usually able to change his plans as necessity dictated. The use of Cameron's actions at Rangiriri to illustrate the "inflexibility of British tactics" was a bad choice. (Bond; Mercer, 1865)

Virtually no information can be found to explain where General Cameron was during the battle. Most writers perhaps assumed he would have been on the high point where guns of the Artillery guns and the reserves were located. This is probably correct for the opening phases but he possibly moved at least once. There is an indication of Cameron's movements in Pickard's Journal where he states "so away we went crossing over the parapet where the General had crossed and was waiting for us." From this statement we can deduce that the General and his staff had followed the 65<sup>th</sup> across the west trench and re-located his command position on the ridge south of the central redoubt.

The brother of Captain Henry Mercer R.A, Major Arthur Mercer (89<sup>th</sup> Regt), strongly criticised Cameron because of the latter's use of a small group of artillery men (and by implication the Royal Navy party) to try and take the central redoubt, a task which all previous attempts by the 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> regiments, had failed. (Mercer, 1865) But although these two attempts also failed they serve to illustrate Cameron's forward thinking and flexibility as a commander. Before the battle; "when halfway to Rangiriri, 30 of the gunners were supplied with Dean and Adams' revolvers (the use of which they were well acquainted from having been armed with revolvers while acting cavalry) and Capt Mercer was told that in case there was any serious difficulty met with in the projected storming of the Maori entrenchments at Rangiriri, his men would be called upon to assist in the assault." (Pickard, 1865). References to revolvers occurs in several secondary sources but the most pertinent is "the R.A. men, were the only fresh troops immediately to hand and were armed with revolvers which impeded men less than rifles when scrambling over obstacles" (Belich, 1986). Belich has thus identified the main reason why the R.A and R.N contingents were used. The redoubt was small, about 12 paces square (Pugsley), or 45 x 26 feet (Gamble), containing (as was later learnt) about 180 men. In addition the entrance was small, only allowing one or two men to enter at one time. These factors made men with revolvers the most effective group to force an entrance -there was no space for infantry armed with muskets and bayonets. This is actually confirmed by Arthur Mercer who, in one of his polemics about his brother Henry states, "... they were driven back simply because there was not room to fight." (Mercer, 1882)

**ACTIONS OF OTHER REGIMENTS; 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup>.**

The 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> were tasked with taking the centre and east end of the line of fortifications. Here they came under heavy fire from the central redoubt as well as the trenches running down to the lake. Quite early they lost several officers, including Colonel Austen of the 14<sup>th</sup>. By the end of the battle the 12<sup>th</sup> had lost 19% of their men killed or wounded. (1) These two regiments were effectively pinned down and spent the

## RANGIRIRI (Cont.)

remainder of the battle preventing the Maori from escaping to Lake Waikare. (14<sup>th</sup> Regt letter book)

The 40<sup>th</sup> Regiment were all landed from the boats in the Waikato River and were held up, by river currents and a possible squall, from landing for at least an hour after the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> attacked from the front. Once ashore they, with the 65<sup>th</sup>, took the south side of the entrenchment. The 40<sup>th</sup>, along with the 65<sup>th</sup>, were one of the larger units but their losses were relatively light. (Gamble; Cowan; Gibson; Pugsley; Lennard)

The 65<sup>th</sup> were tasked with attacking the west end of the Maori fortifications (Cowan). At some stage their attack seemed to falter (Belich, 1986) but this can be attributed to the fact that, "about 50 yards from the entrenchment the skirmishers were ordered to halt and cover the ladder party." (Gamble). One report suggests that the heavy Maori firing cowed the 65<sup>th</sup> and they took shelter, refusing to go on. (Belich, 1986). However the only reference to this is an account by W G Mair, written in 1894, and taken from the book on the Mair family by Andersen & Petersen. Mair was a member of the Colonial Defence Force, seconded to Cameron as an interpreter and after 31 years his memory may not have been perfect in relation to this episode. As another example the map he drew of the battle site, and published in Lennard, is not accurate as he has the 65<sup>th</sup> attacking the east side and not the west. Once they began to move forward again the 65<sup>th</sup>, using their ladders, quickly mounted and crossed the first parapet. (Cameron, in 65<sup>th</sup> digest; Gamble, Featon, Fox, Cowan) Then, wheeling to the left, they charged up the hill and crossed the line of trenches which ran south from the main line. (Cameron, in 65<sup>th</sup> digest; Gamble). At this point they came within sight of the central redoubt, the heavy fire from which caused them to stop and take cover. The 65<sup>th</sup> then made 3 separate, small scale attacks to try and penetrate the central redoubt through the entrance on the south side. One was led by Lt Lewis and two by Lt St Hill. These attacks were repulsed by heavy volleys from within the redoubt and several men were killed or wounded, falling in a small corner sheltered from Maori fire. (Belich, 1986; New Zealander)

**THE ROYAL ARTILLERY AND ROYAL NAVY ASSAULTS**

By this time, about 6.00 pm, Cameron was of the opinion that his troops had captured all of the Maori works except for the central redoubt and possibly the south side of the trench running from the redoubt down to Lake Kopuera. (Lennard; Cameron, NZ Gazette) He now appeared to have two choices; he could send in the specialist units (R.A and R.N) to try and bring about a speedy resolution, or he could lay siege to the redoubt and wait until morning. The disadvantage of the second choice was that Maori fighters were known to slip away to another pa site if the opportunity presented. They had done this at Meremere and Cameron did not want it to happen again. (Belich, 1986). So with this in mind he decided that, with 2 to 3 hours of daylight left, (2) he would attempt to force the redoubt by attacking with a specialist unit armed with 5 shot revolvers (Pickard, 1865; Mercer, 1882 ) and probably swords (Holt; Cowan; Featon; Belich 1986). According to Pickard (Jnl) "The General sent to tell Mercer to send his men who were armed with revolvers, to make a final rush on the place. We had 30 men (3) thus armed so away we went ..." The R.A unit would have moved from the gun emplacement, crossed over the western parapet and then turned left toward the redoubt. It seems that Pickard and a few men went along the top of the parapet while Mercer and the others ran along its south side. Pickard fired on the defenders from the top of the redoubt but, finding it impossible to enter that way, because there was a 20 foot drop, went down to the south side to find Mercer. (Pickard, Jnl; New Zealander) Meanwhile Mercer with the main party passed through the ancillary fortifica-

tions (see plan), which had been cleared by the 65<sup>th</sup>, before unexpectedly coming to the redoubt entrance from where they were subjected to heavy fire by the defenders. It was here that Captain Mercer, his servant, Gunner Culverwell and two other gunners were shot. (Pickard, 1865 & Jnl; Gamble; Harrop; Alexander; New Zealander) The entrance to the redoubt and its strategic design was described by the Southern Monthly who wrote that its strength enabled the defenders to "keep up a deadly fire without exposing themselves. So successful was this position that attackers were repulsed 4 times with heavy losses."

With Mercer's wounding and the R.A situation stalemated, Pickard withdrew the remaining R.A men and advising General Cameron of the situation, got help and water for the wounded and arranged for a screen to be erected to shield the wounded from Maori fire. (Alexander; Pickard, Jnl & in Mercer, 1882) Cameron now asked Commodore Wiseman, the senior naval officer, to send a party of sailors and marines to attempt entry of the redoubt from the front (4). (Gibson; Cameron in 65<sup>th</sup> Digest; Foljambe; Gamble). Somehow a few seamen managed to reach the top of the parapet, but they too were repulsed with the loss of Captain Mayne and Lts Hotham, Downes, Alexander and 5 other ranks wounded; with Midshipman Watkins and 5 other ranks killed. By now it was dark and General Cameron ceased all attacks although the R.E continued to try and mine the east wall of the redoubt. (Mair, plan in Lennard; Cowan)

**OVERNIGHT AND MORNING; PARLEY OR SURRENDER**

All involved in the conflict spent a miserable night. Pickard summed up the situation when he wrote, "No one knows whether the result of this will be peace or a continuance of this horrible war. I need not tell you that the time I spent in that fatal corner with dead and dying round me suffocating in my lap and no signs of assistance coming was the most fearful time I ever spent. It may have been half an hour or two hours that I was there. I had never seen men shot down before in such a cold blooded way & poor Murphy whom I knew intimately, was lying almost under me, quite dead as he had fallen. Then the shrieks & howls & yells of the niggers (5) with the groans of our own men were something awful. Momentarily we expected a rush from the Maoris at us through the entrance when the consequences would have been fearful." (Pickard, Jnl) By about 10 pm Capt Brooks (RE) and his men had, under cover of the screen he and Lt Pickard had earlier erected, dug a trench to the wounded lying in the sheltered corner and removed them to the 'Pioneer' where their wounds were treated. (Foljambe; New Zealander) Pickard describes his and Surgeon Temple's next action (6); "It was nearly midnight when Temple and I went back to the guns and crawled under a tarpaulin where we got some bread and beef & a rare bottle of Porter before we went to sleep."

At dawn a white flag was raised from the parapet of the redoubt. White flags are used to indicate a desire for parley or surrender. There seems little doubt that the defenders initially wanted to parley (Belich, 1986) but the British interpreted the flag as one of surrender and, with a mine in the wall of the redoubt ready to be exploded they argued for surrender. (Belich, 1986; Gibson) The process was described by the Southern Monthly as follows:- "At dawn a chief, holding a white flag above the parapet demanded a conference but the General's interpreter was instructed to require an unconditional surrender. During this process some of the troops, who had managed to creep into the position under cover of dark in order to re-commence the fight, made themselves noticeable to the defenders. Becoming aware of this the Maoris submitted to the 65<sup>th</sup> Regt, with whom they considered themselves safe" (Southern Monthly).

## Friends of Queen's Redoubt

Early in 2013 the Trust resolved to formally set up a group to be known as the "Friends of Queen's Redoubt". A membership database is being set up and anyone with an interest in the work of the Trust is invited to join.

Current membership fees are \$20 for individuals and \$30 for families. We are currently reviewing membership grades for organizations and when these are known it will be announced in the newsletter. At present it is suggested that any organizations that wish to join, register at the same rate (\$30) as Family members.

Please post a completed application form with a cheque for the appropriate amount to:

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### MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM

**Given Name:**

**Surname:**

**Address:**

**Telephone:**

**Email address:**

**Membership Category:**

**Individual** \$20  **Family** \$30  **Organization** \$30

RANGIRIRI (Cont)

### AFTERMATH

Although perhaps not realized at the time, the battle at Rangiriri was one of the most important of the Land Wars, opening the door into the rich lands of the Waikato. But it also left a bitter taste in the mouths of some commentators who believed that the colonists were furious at the British failure at Rangiriri. (Belich, 1986). In some ways they were correct because Maori defenders, numbering about half of the attacking British had, by the superior design of their fortifications and their undoubted bravery and tenacity, inflicted very heavy losses on the attackers. (Gibson) That the British would have won the battle seems very likely; that they won by a seeming subterfuge –interpreting a parley flag for one of surrender- is perhaps less honourable. A draw might seem to be the best interpretation of the result!

### Footnotes:

1. Only the R.A and the R.N had more men killed than the 12th
2. On 20 Nov. 1863 the sun set at 7.15 and it was dark by 7.40pm.
3. 30 men with 5 shot revolvers gave them a distinct advantage over the Maori defenders who would have a slow reload after each shot was fired.
4. It is possible that, because the RA attacked from the rear and the RN from the front, Cameron intended these attacks to complement each other.
5. This derogatory term while not used today, was commonly used in the 1860's to refer to non white people. Even Pickard, could use the term in day to day conversation.
6. Temple and Pickard were both awarded the Victoria Cross for their actions, under fire, in rescuing Captain Mercer and the other wounded men.

*Ian Barton* 12 December 2014

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### The new Information & Visitor Centre at Queen's Redoubt

Consents for the new building came through in August and it is now complete except for some painting and finishing which the Trustees are currently working on. If anyone receiving this newsletter has time available to help with painting etc please contact Ian Barton. Space has not permitted photographs and a fuller description in this newsletter but there will be in the next.

The Trust expects to formally open the Visitor Centre about March next year and, when the date is set, invitations to attend will be extended to all those on our mailing list.