

Pvte Puaka Whitau

New Zealand Maori Battalion

Died 10th October 1915

'Mrs Miria Kemare of Temuka [see picture right] has been advised that her nephew, Puaka Whitau, died in London from bronchitis on October 10. Puaka Whitau was about 20 years of age. The early years of his life were spent at the Maori Pah, Temuka, under the guardianship of the late Mr Harry Kahu. At the time he enlisted he was living at Tuahiwi, near Kaiapoi. He was related to the Uru family and was named after the great South Island fighting chief Puaka. His brother is at the Dardanelles, and according to a message just received is well'
(*'The Timaru Herald'*, 16th October 1915)¹



This was how the death of Private Puaka Whitau was reported in his native New Zealand. He died at the Pinewood Sanatorium in Berkshire and was buried in the churchyard of St Sebastian's Church, Wokingham. How he made the journey from Temuka to Berkshire is a fascinating story that draws us into the history of the Maori Contingent of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in the Great War.

According to one source, Puaka Whitau was born to Teone and Ratira Whitau from Temuka on 3rd April 1893². This would have made him 22 when he died, whereas his gravestone gives his age at death at 19. Maori volunteers were drawn from the age group 21-40, so the former is perhaps more likely, unless he was under age when he enlisted³. His parents may have died while he was still young, since he was raised at the Maori settlement in Temuka by Mr Harry Kahu. When he enlisted on 29th Sept. 1914 in Tuahiwi he was working as a labourer and his aunt, Miria Kemare, was listed as his next of

kin.⁴ He was assigned to A Company in the 1st Maori Contingent, alongside his brother Tuapaoa, who survived the war. His other brother, Arapata, joined the 2nd Maori Contingent and was killed in action at the Somme on 8th June 1916.⁵

Some Maoris opposed fighting for a crown that had dispossessed them of land in the previous century, but others were keen to serve. The policy of the British Empire was initially against native peoples fighting in a war among Europeans, but this changed as casualties mounted and reinforcements were badly needed.⁶ Along with his 500 comrades in the Maori Contingent, Puaka Whitau left New Zealand for Egypt aboard the SS *Warrimoo* on 14 February 1915 [see picture to right].⁷



¹ https://museum.timaru.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/32461/Temuka-Telegraph-Issue-43-Nov-2014.pdf

² <https://www.nzwargraves.org.nz/user-story-1449453386>

³ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-CowMaor-t1-body-d2.html>

⁴ <https://www.nzwargraves.org.nz/user-story-1449453386>

⁵ <https://vanrossenhistory.wikispaces.com/Maori+and+WW1>

⁶ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/maori-units-nzef>

⁷ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/page/maori-soldiers-sail-war>

Arriving at Suez, they travelled by train to Cairo, before being ordered to transfer to Malta, where they were to begin garrison duty at Ghain Tuffiah Camp near Valetta.⁸ After several weeks in Malta, they were delighted to be ordered to join the New Zealand Expeditionary Force at ANZAC Cove, arriving there at the beginning of July 1915. Although hoping to see action, they spent many weeks enlarging the large communication trench known as the 'Big Sap'⁹, leaving their mark by making Maori carvings on its walls (see picture)¹⁰. Conditions were insanitary and they were bothered by plagues of flies. It was not surprising that some fell ill¹¹, including Puaka, who was reported sick and returned to Malta on 14th August.¹²



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On 6-7 August the Maoris took part in the first attacks of the Battle of Sari Bair, gathering first for a service with their own chaplain. Later, after taking the hill, they broke into their famous haka and war cry 'Kamate'¹³ (the picture shows the Maori Pioneer Battalion haka in 1918).¹⁴ From 8-10 August they were part of the assault on the high point of Chenuk Bair, sustaining casualties of 17 dead and 89 wounded¹⁵. It is unclear whether Puaka saw any fighting, or whether he was already ill when the attacks took place.

The Maoris established a fearsome reputation as fighters at Gallipoli, but for Puaka the war was over when he was diagnosed with diarrhoea and chronic bronchitis and evacuated to England from Malta on board the HMS Oxfordshire on 29th August 1915. Admitted to Bethnal Green hospital on 5th September, he was further diagnosed with tuberculosis and transferred to the Pinewood Sanatorium, where he died on 10th October 1915.¹⁶



The badge of the Maori Contingent (right), includes two traditional Māori weapons, the taiaha and tewhatewha, crossed through a crown.¹⁷

Rev Canon Andrew Marsden
Vicar of St Sebastian's Church, Wokingham
23rd September 2017

⁸ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-CowMaor-t1-body-d2.html>

⁹ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-CowMaor-t1-body-d3.html>

¹⁰ <http://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2015/07/03/marks-on-the-landscape-researching-the-maori-carvings-at-gallipoli/>

¹¹ <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-CowMaor-t1-body-d3.html>

¹² <https://www.nzwargraves.org.nz/user-story-1449453386>

¹³ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-gallipoli-campaign/the-august-offensive>

¹⁴ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/maori-and-pacific-units>

¹⁵ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/maori-in-first-world-war/native-contingen>

¹⁶ <https://www.nzwargraves.org.nz/user-story-1449453386>

¹⁷ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/badges-of-maori-units>