

REPORT

RELATIVE TO

PURSUIT OF ESCAPED CHATHAM ISLAND PRISONERS

AND

ENGAGEMENT WITH THEM ON THE RUAKI-TURE RIVER,

ON THE 8TH AUGUST, 1868.

BY LIEUT.-COLONEL WHITMORE.

PRESENTED TO BOTH HOUSES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY, BY COMMAND OF
HIS EXCELLENCY.

WELLINGTON.

—
1868.

REPORT

RELATIVE TO

THE PURSUIT OF THE ESCAPED CHATHAM ISLAND PRISONERS.

SIR,—

Camp on the Ruaki-Ture, 9th August, 1868.

As I have had very little opportunity of conducting correspondence regularly, I have no copy of my last despatch. But I resume my narrative of our operations from the 3rd August, on which day I reached Waihau, on the enemy's trail, and was joined at the camp on the lakes by Major Fraser and the main column, whom I had sent round by the established overland track.

I halted on the 4th; Major Fraser's men and Natives moved into my lines, and all the troops were supplied with provisions for four days, to the 8th. I had at this moment 280 mouths to feed, and with the uncertainty of my future movements I deemed it imperatively necessary to leave Captain Biggs to arrange and ensure our future supplies. I gave him full authority to do whatever he thought best, and to follow any line he liked, but directed him to be sure that ten days' supply was at Whangaroa before the 8th, and told him I would have some one with the means of bringing on these provisions to me directly they arrived.

On the 5th I marched to Pukewhine, on the Whangaroa, intending to leave my depôt there, under guard of the chief Paul Poro and thirty Natives. I crossed the Napier Natives, Napier Volunteers, and the Napier Division of the Armed Constabulary in a canoe I had brought up the previous day, and issued orders for the march of the whole column, without horses, next day at daylight. At 5 p.m. I received a despatch from Sub-Inspector Richardson at Wairoa, from which I gathered that Mr. Locke, a passenger by the "Waipara," which was detained at Wairoa by stress of weather, had informed him that the despatches on board for me contained an order countermanding further pursuit. I saw at once that I was not justified in taking orders through such a channel; and as I knew the enemy to be near, and as yet not materially reinforced, it appeared to be my duty to press on to overtake him if possible before he reached the Uriveras. I had reason to doubt the number (generally believed) of his force, for though he may have acquired some adherents besides, the largest ascertained reinforcement he has obtained is the Ngatikowhata Tribe, the inhabitants of the Lake Country, numbering not more than fifteen adult males. The information given me by the Government had made me aware that not more than seventy men landed at Whareongongo; and I believe now that in the affairs with Captains Westrup and Richardson the women must have taken some part in the engagement, or that from want of experience those officers erred in the estimates they made of the enemy's number of armed men. Scarcely had I decided to go forward with the pursuit when Captain Westrup told me that his men wished to go back. The bulk of the men were not sworn in, and as the Militia Act was not in force, I had no legal right to compel their service. I was not prepared for their indisposition to proceed, as I had been asked to issue them boots and other articles so late as that very morning, and they had drawn rations for the march. I had throughout considered that the population was not sufficiently represented in the field, but those actually with me, some thirty to thirty-five in all, were the best men in the place. I considered it not worth while disputing my power with them, nor advisable to enforce any authority in the matter, as the expected order by the "Waipara" might be as represented, and in that case compulsion would have been for no purpose. I therefore ordered the men back, declining to accept an offer made by Captain Westrup to act as a transport corps, inasmuch as the expense of such a mode of supply would have been disproportioned to the service. Scarcely had I done this when all the Turanga Natives also struck, and I discharged all except a few men, the personal escort of the chiefs Paul Poro and Hotene, who begged to accompany me. This diminution of my force by one-half made it necessary to change or modify my plans. The guard for my depôt having declined to stop, I had to take eight men of the Turanga Volunteers to hold the ground, and to shift the depôt to Whenuakura, the head of the gorge leading to Wairoa, and the point where my new line from Turanga joins the old road by the lakes from Wairoa. All this occupied some time, and it was noon before I could march with my reduced column—a delay to which may be directly ascribed the escape of the ex-prisoners from me two days after, for they were making, very slowly, their way through the forest towards the gorges of the Ruaki-Ture at the time, and at any place half a day nearer than where I overtook them I must have destroyed them if they declined to surrender. On the night of the 6th I was in sight of their fires, not five miles away as the crow flies; so I camped in a bush-gully out of sight, and allowed no fires till dark, nor after daybreak next morning. The trail was quite clear, and the horsemen had now joined the foot party, and they were not far ahead evidently, as we were making longer and quicker marches, and the fires we saw on the 1st and 2nd were clearly those of their camps. I may remark that stores of rotten maize and potatoes had been evidently placed on their line of march by some party acting in concert with them belonging to the country, and this was perhaps the Ngatikowhata Tribe, under Rakiroa, which had joined them, for the places of their encampment were in the most unlikely tops of steep ranges where the cold is too intense for cultivations. On the 7th I marched as soon as I could discern the trail, and continued till nearly sundown as fast as I could, recapturing one or two horses taken from the Turanga men, and I camped on a kainga called, I believe, Erepiti. Here I got some potatoes and a saddle, and found fires still burning. It had been

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the enemy's camp on the 5th, and was occupied till the morning of the 7th by their rear guard. I wished to have pressed on to the main camp of the night of the 6th; but the column was too tired, and as many of the men had eaten all their rations, I was glad to give them an opportunity of getting potatoes. On the 8th, the last day of the rations, and, unless supplied from the rear, of our food, till we could get back, I moved off with the force as per margin,* at 5.30 a.m., leaving everything behind, under a guard, except the arms and ammunition, and by 7 a.m. had reached the camp of the enemy on the night of the 6th, and could clearly see his fires close below me in the river. He had cut a broad track through the bush, and taken a large drove of horses through it. We now advanced cautiously for three miles, Mr. Canning, a gentleman who had volunteered to serve with me, leading, at his own earnest request, the advanced guard, and expecting to be engaged every moment with the enemy. However we saw no trace of him till we got to his fires, and heard now and again a shot, evidently at pigeons as we saw the feathers of the birds on the track. This camp was one affording great facilities to estimate the number of those who had occupied it, and Captain Herrick, who kindly undertook to make an approximation for me, considered that not less than 230 had slept there the preceding night. This convinced me that the Government information was substantially correct, and that I had before me the whole force, with the reinforcements I have reason to think they have obtained. Still, it was now noon; and though so near the object for which we had undergone so much hardship and toiled through so rugged and inhospitable a country, I decided to return, as my men had no more than time to get back to camp by dark. I gave the column half an hour's halt, hoping to find some potatoes, but as none were discovered I gave the order to return. At this moment I received from Captain Carr, of the Royal Artillery, a gentleman who also volunteered for this service with me, and who was acting as my staff-officer, a pencil note to the effect that the enemy was in sight two miles off. This news spread like wildfire among the men, and I was at once besought by all ranks to proceed, and they would release me from my promise to return by night. Hungry and faint as some had been, the news of the proximity of the enemy electrified all, and Natives and Europeans vied with one another in manifesting their eagerness to advance. I was nothing loth myself, and accordingly pushed on up the gorge of the Ruaki-Ture, among enormous boulder rocks and between sheer precipices, wading up to our middles the deep torrent whenever either bank became impracticable, and to do so being obliged to hold hands to prevent being carried down. At 3 p.m., on rounding a long reach of the river, we were fired upon from an island in the stream, and were immediately engaged with the enemy in front and on the right flank. A column of men 120 strong, in single file, reaches a considerable length in such a place, and it was impossible to close up or form line. I had therefore to press on as closely as I could, in the hope of getting to some spot where I could form under cover of the boulders. The enemy had however so carefully selected the field that no such spot could be found; and Mr. Canning and the advanced guard did not waste time in looking for one, but scrambled up the bushy bank and laid down to wait till their number was complete. I now perceived that the enemy had omitted to take possession of the opposite (proper right) bank of the river, and I ordered Captain Herrick, who was in rear with the Napier Volunteers, to cross the river and push on to take the enemy's force on the island in reverse. The river proving unfordable, Captain Herrick was obliged to descend it a considerable way before he could cross; and as I was anxious that he should move forward, I left the head of the column to ascertain the cause of the delay, for his movements could not be seen from the front. I had scarcely got 100 yards away when I saw that this gallant officer was carrying out my orders under the greatest difficulty, and that he was in full advance. At this moment, and before I could scramble back, I heard the enemy sound the advance, and the women calling out "Kohiri, kohiri." I hurried up to the front, where I found from Major Fraser that the advanced guard, which was not yet all collected, had been charged, and, though they made a gallant stand and killed many of the enemy with their carbines and revolvers at a very short distance, were eventually driven in upon the column. My two gallant friends, Captain Carr and Mr. Canning, who had both joined the advanced guard, and neither of whom had perhaps taken full advantage of the cover, were both killed by the enemy in this charge. Captain Herrick now came into action with the front part of his corps, and the enemy was driven from the island. But the day was passing, and the road to our blankets intricate, painful, and long. I could evidently not hope to turn them completely out of their position so as to take their camp before night; nevertheless the fire from Captain Herrick's side of the river had so galled the enemy that he was beating a retreat up the opposite bank, and had I known what the country was, and whether any ambuscade was laid there, it would have been still possible to have charged him with a prospect of inflicting a good deal of loss. I did not, however, like to run this risk, as I had several badly wounded men in front to carry back on the men's shoulders, and I therefore gave orders to have these withdrawn. The enemy had intended to draw me on to the island, and then cut off my retreat by their new horse-track, which ascends the bushy bank at the bend of the river where we first received their fire. The chief Hotene placed himself there with his few followers, and if they had attempted this manœuvrein force I should have added to his numbers; but the enemy was growing disheartened by his heavy losses, and though a few volleys were fired at us as I removed the wounded, and gradually withdrew my men, he never dared to reoccupy the island nor to advance towards us. I now gave orders to cease firing, leaving Captain Herrick and the Heretaunga Natives to cover the movement, and to take advantage of any attempt the enemy might make to follow us up. He showed himself at first, but was so hotly received that he again precipitately retreated. I now drew off my men and carried my wounded back, leaving my dead on the field, in the hope of finding provisions in my camp and being able to recover or bury the bodies next day. My force could hardly carry the wounded, and I did not feel justified in trying to take away the dead who had fallen so near the place where the enemy still held out when the action closed. The want of the Turanga Volunteers was much felt, as their force, had it been available, would have enabled me to take the enemy in reverse by the horse-track; even their rations for a day would have enabled me to resume the action at daybreak, had the enemy remained; but he broke camp directly, and retreated hurriedly to a great distance up the Ruaki-Ture

* Armed Constabulary, 52; Napier Volunteers, 24; Napier Natives, 42; total, all ranks, 118.
And Hotene and P. Poro, with two or three men.

Gorge. My provisions not having come up I was compelled to retire also, and on the evening of the 9th, when met by Mr. Gascoigne with a day's supply only, the Heretaunga Natives asked leave to go home. I could hardly refuse it, being unable to feed them further, and indeed must now retire another day to the rear to get rations: we have lived upon horseflesh for two days, and could continue to do so, but we have neither groceries nor flour.

During this indecisive action, the enemy fought very differently to any Natives I have yet seen engaged. He held a body of desperate men in reserve, to charge whenever he sounded the bugle. His fire was deliberate and never thrown away; every shot fell close to its mark if it did not reach it, and there was no wild volley discharge during the action. He began the fighting himself, and no opportunity was afforded me to summon him to surrender. He lost a great many men, we know; but as I did not hold the ground after the action, I could not search for them. I am, however, aware that when the advanced guard was charged, many were shot at a few feet distance before the men were driven in; and an old Native whom the ex-prisoners disarmed and took, but who escaped, corroborates the testimony of the men, given to me before he returned to us, on this point. At the island where we drove the enemy in, he lost probably more than we saw, for he ran from it in great haste, and hurried up the bank under a hot fire, losing men all the way; and I therefore feel sure he would not have run the gauntlet of all our fire if he had not been roughly handled first. All along my flank he was engaged with us, nearly the whole time of the action, at about twenty or thirty yards distance, and gradually driven up the ridge, so that he may have lost men there. But certainly we killed nine close to us, and as many more are positively stated to have been shot at the longer range firing at the island and retreat from it. The Napier Natives conclude, from his not taking courage to move on as we withdrew, that he was very much weakened by his losses. On our side, I have not words to express my admiration of the gallantry, coolness, and cheerfulness shown by the men and officers. Nothing can be more trying than an action in which the men are necessarily separated from their officers; and yet the Constabulary went forward cheerfully, behaved steadily, took up their wounded on their shoulders, and carried them back through the rocks as calmly as if no fire was going on, instead of their becoming targets for rifles at an easy range; and lastly, most difficult of all, they withdrew fighting slowly, steadily, and without the least show of hurry or wish to hurry back. Major Fraser, as on many previous occasions, showed his many soldierly qualities, and himself attended to the rear, placing each man of the rear guard so as to give his fire with effect in covering the movement. Sub-Inspector Tuke, personally known to the ex-prisoners from his connection with the guard at the Chatham Islands, was received with a storm of bullets, which riddled his clothes and wounded him in the arm. The Natives, who as a body behaved very well for Maoris, were charmed with the fighting of the Constabulary, and cannot understand how men can be so cool in action. This was due to the example of the officers and non-commissioned officers in the main, but also greatly to the character of the corps, from which the indifferent men have been carefully weeded out and discharged. The Napier Volunteers were fortunate in their officer, for Captain Herrick, who kindly took charge of them, is a very well known settler of Hawke's Bay, and evinced those soldierlike and manly qualities which he has long been known to possess. He comprehended at a glance what he had to do, and did it steadily and successfully, bringing on his untried men mainly by the force of his personal example. What, however, was the most pleasing feature in the affair, was the behaviour of the Natives of Napier, who had never before held any reputation for courage. One of them, the chief Paul Kaiwhatu, got into Captain Herrick's post before he could bring up the Volunteers, and, alone, kept up an audacious attack on the island. The Natives were calling out his name and trying to shoot him, but could not hit him. This chief, and the young chiefs Henare Tomona and Rionihi (nephew of Tareha, M.H.R.), behaved so well that I trust the Government will in some manner acknowledge their services. The chief Hotene, disappointed that his people had not come up, and Paul Poro of Turanga—sole representative of that district, except Assistant-Surgeon Brown—both endeavoured, with their few men, to be of use, and set an excellent example. I must not omit to mention Mr. Hamlin's services with the Natives, which have been once more rendered on this occasion with the zeal and ability so well and often displayed before in many ways, and on many trying occasions. Nor can I neglect to thank Major Fraser and his corps, and Captain Herrick and his men, for their great assistance to me throughout the operations. Mr. Assistant-Surgeon Brown, the sole medical officer with my force, was most attentive to the wounded; and though the carrying of these poor fellows kept him and the bearers for the whole night long, and till 2 p.m. next day, continually moving slowly towards my camp, I am sure that in no respect could wounded men have been more attentively and kindly treated.

I cannot forbear to say a few words of tribute to the memory of my two brave friends Captain Carr and Mr. Canning, who from purely public-spirited motives accompanied me on this expedition, who yielded me in all the hardships (and they have been considerable) we have undergone together, a zealous, intelligent, and always unselfish assistance, whose loss is what throws a gloom over what otherwise were operations, under rare difficulties, which it would have been pleasant to remember, and whose brilliant courage animated our men to a point at which, with the opportunity, they would have done anything at their call. It is, I fear, not too much to say, that in the Province which will regard this expedition with special interest, because almost all the force came from its population, the loss of these two brave, honorable, and respected settlers will be learned with universal sorrow, and looked upon as a public calamity. I feel sure the Government will sympathize with the public of Hawke's Bay in this matter, and equally with me deplore the untimely end of two such settlers as the Colony ill can spare.

I shall in a separate despatch report the steps I have taken in furtherance of your instructions; and I am glad to find by the despatches which reached me during the action of the 8th that I exactly have followed your wishes, and pressed the pursuit with the same object as you mention, viz., to intercept the enemy from joining the Uriwera.* This was my desire and why I pressed the operations, regardless of weather, climate, comfort, or food to the last moment I could, after Major Fraser joined me with his men.

* N.B.—The Uriwera territory begins some seven or eight miles further than I went, so I have not even crossed their land.

My estimate of the enemy's force is that he had above 100, perhaps 120 or 130, armed fighting men before the action, and I believe him to have had at least twenty or thirty casualties, and probably more. The wounded and dead will be about equal, for those killed on each side were mostly killed at a few feet distance, and I feel confidence in reporting the above numbers, as I am sure they do not exaggerate the fact. Our Natives look upon the other side as having lost much more heavily than we think.

I am led to believe that the ex-prisoners are in full march upon Runanga, the country of Nikora, and the late Rangihiroa ; but they will certainly stop first at a place called Aikereru, and will meet the Uriwera at Maungapowhatu.

The Hon the Defence Minister,
Wellington.

I have, &c.,
G. S. WHITMORE,
Lieutenant-Colonel.

NOMINAL RETURN of KILLED and WOUNDED in the action with the Insurgent Natives on the Ruakiture River, on the 8th August, 1868.

KILLED—5.				Rank and Name.
Corps.				
Staff	...	...	...	Captain O. Carr, R.A.
Armed Constabulary	...	...	...	Constable P. Condon.
"	"	...	...	Constable W. Coates.
Napier Volunteers	...	...	...	Lieutenant D. Canning.
Napier Native Volunteers	...	...	...	Private Rihara.
WOUNDED—5.				
Armed Constabulary	...	...	...	Sub-Inspector A. Tuke, arm, severely.
"	"	...	...	Constable J. Bratley, leg, severely.
"	"	...	...	Constable P. Byrne, through body, dangerous.
"	"	...	...	Constable J. Lewis, leg, severely.
Napier Volunteers	...	...	...	Private G. McKay, shoulder, severe.
				WM. BROWN, Assistant-Surgeon, P.B.M.R.V.