

1886.
NEW ZEALAND.

THE OAMARU ENCAMPMENT

(REPORT ON), BY SIR G. S. WHITMORE, COMMANDER OF THE FORCES.

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

The COMMANDER of the COLONIAL FORCES to the Hon. the MINISTER of DEFENCE.

SIR,—

Defence Office, Wellington, 1st May, 1886.

I have the honour to report, for your information, that the camp of exercise at Oamaru was successfully carried out between the 23rd and 26th ultimo; and that the Volunteers of all ranks and arms present amounted to 2,551 men and officers, with 120 Oamaru cadets.

It was your wish to make this concentration of Volunteers a test of the efficiency of the several district organizations in bringing reinforcements to the assistance of any unfortified spot on the coast threatened by hostile invasion, in order that, having seen how readily it could be accomplished, such places would be encouraged to make a vigorous resistance under such circumstances. Therefore the Public Works Department was moved to instruct the several Traffic Managers along the line to comply with the requisitions of the several District Commanding Officers, placing these latter in the positions which they must have occupied as regards the public railways in case of actual war. The successful manner in which the troops arrived at the appointed rendezvous was therefore carried out independently by these officers, without any interference on my part, and the discipline—which for a citizen force was remarkable, both in going and returning—is wholly due to their exertions. The sole order issued by me to all of them was to bring their forces to Oamaru Racecourse before 1 p.m. on Friday, the 23rd.

It is only just here to say that the Public Works Department most liberally and ably carried out all that was asked of them by the Volunteer commanding officers, notwithstanding the unusual strain upon it caused by the enormous influx of visitors going to see the camp manoeuvres, by the Christchurch races, and by the excursions usual during the Easter holidays. Mr. Crombie, of Oamaru, had immense trouble to accommodate so many passengers, but by great exertions enabled all the detachments of the force to get back to their homes in good time, though, at the very end, some of the Canterbury force had to return by trucks much less comfortable than the second-class carriages by which they had arrived, but which had been unavoidably withdrawn for the Christchurch races. These Volunteers, however, though uncomfortable during the night journey, after a hard day, made no complaint.

By Friday afternoon the whole force was at the camp. All the tents in the colony barely sufficed for Wanganui and Oamaru, but every one on hand was sent to one or the other. I was aware that the number sent to Oamaru was barely all that we required, but the Racecourse Committee placed part of their grand stand at our disposal after 5 p.m. on the 23rd, to accommodate the balance of the force. As soon as the last arrivals could occupy the buildings all were under good cover, but for an hour or more one or two hundred of them had to pile arms and wait, as, unfortunately, the races were not quite over. The inconvenience was, however, more apparent than real, for on the following morning, when the several corps settled down, two bell tents and a large one lent by the Caledonian Society were still unoccupied.

The contractor carried out his duties fairly well, and, though I did hear that the tea and coffee were, at Oamaru as at Wanganui, inferior, still the provisions as a whole were good, and no complaints were made.

Admiral Scott, R.N., arrived on the 22nd, and in conjunction with him the plans for the Saturday land and sea operations were completed. The Union Company generously lent two of their fleet, and the Harbour Board of Dunedin two of their launches, one of which escorted the torpedo boat from Port Chalmers, arriving in good time on Friday, steered by Captain Goldie, of the Port Chalmers Naval Volunteers—the petty officer (Grant) of the boat having been wrecked in the steamer “*Taiaroa*.” During the night of the 22nd the “*Hinemoa*” arrived with the Napier 6-lb. breech-loading guns, the Torpedo Corps, Petone Navals, and the ammunition. Lieutenant Lodder and three of the Torpedo Corps came two days sooner, with me, in the “*Wanaka*” steamer, bringing the explosives and torpedo appliances which it had been intended to send by the Government launch “*Ellen Ballance*.”

Everything being in readiness, the naval attack was carried out on Saturday, at an hour suited to the convenience of the crowds of visitors from north and south by rail and by steamer from Dunedin, which had been ascertained previously by Admiral Scott, R.N.

The operations were such as might well have been attempted by a predatory squadron in the idea that Oamaru was undefended or practically undefended. Four ships, with two guns apiece, opened fire on the town, and, the troops being concealed, a flotilla of boats attempted to land, assisted by a steam-launch towing a barge laden with troops. It had been intended to represent the successful countermining of the torpedo defence, and an explosion, supposed to have been caused by this means, had been intended to have occurred before the flotilla dashed into the harbour; but, unfortunately, one of the steamers, in going to sea shortly before, cut the wire, and rendered it impossible to fire that mine. The boats, therefore, after waiting some time for this signal, proceeded without it; and thereupon both brigades of infantry were directed to take up defensive positions from the breakwater end of the harbour to a mile beyond the mole.

Near the end of the mole one 64lb. converted rifled gun—sent to Oamaru for training the naval artillery, together with a 24lb. iron muzzle-loading gun, had had platforms fitted by Major Sumpter, and I availed myself of the presence of two companies of engineers, under Captains Webster and Beale, to throw up a parapet affording cover both to the guns and two companies of infantry forming their guard. This work was both efficiently and rapidly carried out on Saturday morning by the engineers, who worked with great spirit. The guns were worked by the New Zealand Artillery, L Battery, which as yet has no field guns.

The infantry having taken up the positions selected for the several corps, with much judgment, by their brigade and battalion commanding officers, the boats found themselves opposed to a triple line of fire from troops, many of whom could not be seen, while the field guns, under Major Hammersley, ten in number, distributed along the front, with the two guns of position at the battery (christened Fort Sumpter) nearly at the centre, replied to the fire of the fleet.

The boats were supposed to have been surprised to find themselves in the presence of so large a force, and to have hesitated to land, when suddenly the torpedo boat "Taiaroa" rushed out upon the launch from concealment and fired her torpedo close to it. The launch and barge thereupon surrendered, and the boats made off rapidly to the fleet, which picked them up and stood out to sea.

The troops, however, had not returned to Oamaru nor the guns left their positions when the Admiral's flagship "Hinemoa" once more appeared, bearing down upon the harbour entrance, followed by the whole fleet, with the apparent intention of forcing an entrance. Directly the flagship reached the spot where the line of submarine mines was supposed to be placed, Mr. Lodder fired two small mines containing together 220lb. of gun-cotton. Captain Fairchild had brought with him a large unserviceable surf-boat, which, with much ingenuity, he had rigged with masts and spars to represent a ship, preserving flotation by means of the barrels brought down by Mr. Lodder to form a raft. The explosion was a magnificent spectacle, the whole of the raft, boat, &c., being blown to atoms, and a large column of water thrown up 250ft. in the air.

This was supposed to have destroyed the enemy's chief vessel, and ended the contest, the ships coming into harbour and landing the Naval Volunteers who had, to the number of seven corps, been on board of them. The Oamaru Navals had remained to take possession of the launch when damaged by the torpedo boat, and to add to the defence of Oamaru.

The day was beautiful, the crowd assembled enormous, and no single hitch occurred in any part of the proceedings, so carefully had Admiral Scott carried out his own programme, assisted by Commander Horne, R.N., and the officers of the Naval Volunteer corps. The men entered into the spirit of the operations thoroughly, but it had been resolved to prevent any collision through excitement, and the Admiral's precautions were thoroughly successful in preventing any attempt to land. It was satisfactory to learn from him and from other officers of experience on board the fleet that the disposal of the men ashore by their several commanding officers had appeared, from the enemy's side, to be excellent, rendering any landing impossible, few of the front line of defenders being perceivable from the boats, though close to the water's edge.

Among those who attended the Admiral on this occasion was Major Ropata, N.Z.C., whose kind treatment by all on board, and generally by all the Volunteers and civilians at Oamaru, he acknowledges in the most grateful terms. Lieut.-General Fulton also kindly came to Oamaru to lend the countenance his position confers upon him to the first similar attempt in the South Island. At 3.30 p.m. the troops (except the navals) formed column of route and marched back to camp.

I had been able to make but little use of the cavalry or mounted infantry, and had not much opportunity of moving the artillery during these manœuvres, but that little was done very intelligently by Major Hammersley and Major Slater's forces. This latter circumstance, added to the desirability of practising the infantry in more extended manœuvres, compelled me to decline Admiral Scott's invitation to attempt a new naval attack for the 26th. Many considerations weighed with me in this, and, among others, my wish to afford the recently-created battalion and brigades an opportunity of showing their efficiency and competence to act independently.

The Railway Department most considerably took the Naval Volunteers out to the racecourse by train, which, as the men had had a somewhat hard pull in their boats, was highly appreciated.

Next day being Easter Sunday no general manœuvres were attempted, but a full-dress Church service for Episcopalians was held by Canon Stanford and the Rev. Mr. Freeland, who had been appointed to this duty by his Lordship the Primate. I think the turn-out was very creditable, the men being well dressed, and forming up with precision. An appeal to them for a collection for the sufferers by the "Taiaroa" disaster was liberally responded to.

On Monday, the 26th, the troops were got under arms as early as possible compatibly with their procuring breakfast. The cavalry, who had a separate camp three miles off, where they had stabling for their horses, were ordered to meet the troops at a previously-appointed spot on the high

ground to the westward of the camp. The artillery were sent by a *détour* between the cavalry and infantry routes, and the infantry marched by a very steep road near the camp. To enable an earlier start on this day Captain Webster and the two Engineer corps (Christchurch and Dunedin) worked all night to construct a bridge to the rear of the camp, which was not completed till 3 a.m. It was an excellent piece of field-engineering, and cheerfully done by both corps. The Engineers performed yet another piece of special work, having, early on the previous morning, erected a military telephone to the camp. I desire specially to draw your attention to the manner in which these scientific corps—which have had as yet but little opportunity—proved their efficiency in the field.

By 9 o'clock—the difficulties of the road, which were considerable, having been overcome by Major Hammersley and his guns; and Captain Creagh, with two detached guns, sent with Major Sumpter's force to represent the enemy—the infantry were marched into the Ardgowan Estate, kindly lent to us by J. McPherson, Esq.; and the cavalry pushed forward to repulse a hostile cavalry force which was supposed to have shown itself in the valley beyond the termination of an opposite ridge. This latter, had been assigned to Major Sumpter, with all the Oamaru force and cadets, as the position he was to take up with an advanced part of an imaginary hostile force. In disposing his men this officer showed much tactical aptitude, and deserves the more credit, as, beyond having had the objects explained to him, all the details were entirely designed by himself.

The cavalry having pushed on, I gave the signal to Major Sumpter, and he opened fire. Major Hammersley now brought his eight guns into action, concentrating their fire on the enemy's small artillery force, which he was supposed to have succeeded in a short time in silencing. Meanwhile, the Otago Brigade moved on, with orders to attack Major Sumpter's force by the new regulated system of skirmishing attack, as improved by Major Gordon's four-deep formation. Though only one battalion had practised this as yet, and the second battalion was therefore necessarily used as a simple support, still the movement was highly creditable to the men. Probably, if the ground had been less rough, it would have been better to have advanced the whole way in skirmishing order, as I had, indeed, directed; but, as rain was beginning to fall, it was decided to march down in column to the watercourse at the bottom of the valley, and begin the attack from there. The Canterbury Brigade, under Lieut.-Colonel Lean, was on this day reinforced by the Naval Volunteers Battalion—seven corps strong—under Captain Goldie, and moved forward in support of Otago. Meanwhile, the guns covered the infantry movement with a tremendous fire, and the cavalry, having discovered the Oamaru right, had left behind and dismounted the Mounted Infantry Corps, which skirmished forward very brilliantly. Major Slater now pushed on, and was supposed to have repulsed and driven off the enemy's cavalry; when, wheeling to his right, he succeeded in cutting off Major Sumpter's force from its supports. The Otago Brigade, seeing that the enemy's guns were silenced, and Major Sumpter withdrawn from the ridge, detached parties to right and left to capture the guns, while the main body charged over the ridge upon the Oamaru force, which, outnumbered, and attacked both in front and rear, laid down its arms.

The division was now supposed to have found out that the enemy in front was advancing in superior force, and thereupon made preparations to retire fighting. The Canterbury Brigade relieved the Otago and Oamaru men, and, covered by a hot artillery fire of ten guns (Captain Creagh having rejoined the artillery), began a retreat in skirmishing order by alternate battalions. Although this movement had never been practised before, the battalion officers soon picked it up, and a very pretty sight was afforded by the regular skirmishing of the several battalions. Had weather permitted, a further set of manoeuvres had been intended; but I was anxious to get the men home before they were wet through, and before the ground became worse for the artillery. This latter corps had had a great deal of difficulty in transporting their guns, and it was due to the care and resource of Major Hammersley and his artillery that the guns were withdrawn without considerable delay and many accidents. As it was, only one man was hurt, through a wheel coming off; and I am glad to say that when I left Oamaru he was much better, and able to return shortly to Dunedin. The gun-wheel was not injured.

The day cleared as we descended the hill, and after dinner the men turned out in review order, and marched past in the presence, I am informed, of twenty thousand spectators.

On the whole, the appearance and marching of the men were most creditable. The older corps were very good, and many of the new companies were as good as the best English Volunteers, which is saying much; and the way in which the several organizations of brigades and battalions, chiefly created this year, were maintained was remarkable. After reviewing the whole force, I addressed a few words to the men, and had the opportunity of conveying to them the thanks of the Government, telegraphed to me by the Hon. the Premier. The Volunteers were then dismissed, and some were soon afterwards on their way by rail back to their homes.

Throughout the whole time there was but one and that a comparatively trivial complaint of any of the Volunteers by the people of Oamaru. If discipline in the ordinary sense was not as strict in all respects as in Her Majesty's service, on the other hand all that is essential in discipline—order, obedience, and willingness to make the best of everything—were conspicuous. There was no talking or unsteadiness in the ranks. Most of the officers and men had never seen so large a force together, and in the few days they were together had hardly time to master many little details of camp life which a week's campaigning would have made matters of course. But that all wished to learn their duty on such points, and did their best to acquire a knowledge of them, was quite evident from the fact that each day showed a remarkable improvement on the preceding one. I heard of no one case of breach of discipline either coming to or returning from the camp. Nor did Rear-Admiral Scott's experience of his Naval Volunteers, when away from my own supervision, prove different to my own.

For a great deal of this, I must observe, the credit is due to the camp general staff—Captain Hume, who acted as Adjutant-General very generously at my invitation, and by permission of the

Minister of Justice; Captain Anderson, who acted as Assistant Quartermaster-General; and Major Goring, who acted as Provost-Marshal, having not only worked all day and most of the night, but having shown the most marked tact in dealing with the Volunteers, and consideration for all their wants and inquiries—even when these were apparently trivial and arose from inexperience; Commander Horne, R.N., who proved most useful as a staff officer to the Naval Volunteers—a duty he very kindly undertook at some sacrifice of his convenience; and Captain Coleman with the cavalry, who rendered great service outside of his staff duties, which were also admirably carried out. I must not omit to mention Dr. McIntyre, who acted as senior medical officer, and whose arrangements were excellent; nor Canon Stanford, who acted as camp Episcopalian Chaplain, and who held several voluntary services. Petty-officer Grant, of the Torpedo Corps, having been prevented by the “*Taiaroa*” disaster from joining his detachment at Port Chalmers—though he subsequently met it at Oamaru—his place was taken by Captain Goldie, who, escorted by the Harbour Board launch, brought the torpedo boat up from Port Chalmers, and at the naval demonstration took her outside and showed her powers of rapid turning and going astern and high speed during a half-hour’s run among the boats and ships. This was not part of the supposed defence operations, but simply to show the manner in which she could do her work if well handled, which she was. Major Sumpter did much service in rendering Captain Anderson’s task lighter, and in obtaining all possible local assistance.

Personally, I desire to mention the great obligation I feel under to Colonel the Hon. de R. Brett, M.L.C., who acted as Chief of the Staff; and to Major Porter, who acted as my Aide-de-camp.

The thanks of the Government are especially due to the Brigadiers Lean and Staveland and their Brigade-Majors, Newall and Gordon, on whom so much of the work devolved; and to Lieut.-Colonel Bailey, Majors Wales, Tosswill, Andrews, and Captain Commandant Goldie, commanding the several battalions; to Major Hammersley, commanding the artillery, and Major Slater, commanding the cavalry, and their officers; as well as to the various medical officers, whose attention was most conspicuous, and who had provided complete sets of ambulance requirements.

I have not received any detailed report from Colonel Stapp of the Wanganui camp operations. But he informs me that thirteen hundred men of the Napier, Woodville, Wellington, Wairarapa, Marlborough, and Nelson Volunteers, in addition to the West Coast corps, assembled at the Wanganui camp, and acquitted themselves creditably. He draws attention to the fact that, owing to the generosity of Captain Abbott in lending his land and paddocks to the force, and to his liberal assistance, it became possible to render the camp, as it was, a great success. Colonel Stapp speaks highly of the officers who held the chief positions on this occasion—Lieut.-Colonels Pitt and Butts, Majors Baillie, Noake, Crowe, Garner, and Watt, Captains McCredie and Abbott; as also of Major Webb, Brigade-major; Lieutenant Jones, Assistant Quartermaster-general; Surgeon Major Tripe, P.M.O.; the officers of his staff; and of Captain Loveday and the signalling-party of the Wellington Guards.

I cannot close my report without mentioning the generous way in which the Auckland Volunteers, on this occasion, forbore to press for a camp this year, which they had intended to hold at Easter. Early in the summer I told them, through their commanding officer, that the tentage in the colony was insufficient to supply cover at three places, and that I would feel obliged if they would therefore dispense with a camp this year, in order that there might be tents enough at Oamaru and Wanganui. Their having immediately agreed to do so, while making it a pleasure to be associated with a force in which such consideration is shown by one part to another, gives them, however, in my mind, a fair claim to be considered next year in the camp arrangements.

I anticipate that in future the behaviour off duty in the camps will be less noisy, as the high spirits of the young Volunteers on this occasion made them give a wholly false idea of their discipline in camp. Those who judged it by the hilarity of the men drew wrong conclusions of their sobriety. At Oamaru there was but one case of drunkenness reported, out of 2,550 men, and that not a bad case. There never was the smallest difficulty in closing the canteen experienced by the Provost-Marshal or orderly officers: and at Wanganui, though I have heard of a complaint against the canteen-keeper for supplying other than Volunteers, it has only been necessary to dismiss one Volunteer for drunkenness on duty. I observe that a larger honorary staff is necessary for a hurried Volunteer camp than is required by regular troops, as the paucity of the staff at Oamaru caused too much work to devolve upon the gentlemen who kindly accepted the position.

I have, &c.,

G. S. WHITMORE,
Commander of the Forces.

The Hon. the Minister of Defence.

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