

Volunteer company, formed in 1900, the Ohinemuri Rifles elected their own officers, beneath the rank of major. At annual meetings all ranks could nominate and vote in the election of a Captain, Lieutenants, Sergeants-Major and N.C.Os. In classical Athens and in the New Zealand Volunteers it was possible, and not thought unseemly, for a man to be a captain one year and a private the next. Because most annual meetings were held in local hotels, the local pub-keeper, who usually shouted the assembled company, was more often than not elected captain.

Notices of motion, amendments and majorities decided most questions of company policy. A good example is the occurrence of 3 June 1898 when the company's officer commanding Captain F. D. Fergusson, complained of non-attendance at parades and argued that while he could fine absentees he would prefer to have the company's backing. 'A show of rifles' gave the captain the support he needed.

Fergusson was an excellent example of the leadership elected by the companies of the new regiment. Having previously served in a British volunteer unit, the Sixth Lancashire Regiment, from 1874 to 1880, and then in the Christchurch Rifles, Fergusson brought to his company expertise and the traditions of well-established units.

Other foundation officers of the regiment were equally well-chosen. Captain Robert Reilly Ralph, of the Huntly Rifle Corps, was the son of the pakeha discoverer of coal in Huntly and a large shareholder in the Taupiri Coal Mine Company, and the owner of a 1000 acre farm. Just as in Britain local community leaders tended to become officers in the Volunteers, so it was in late-Victorian New Zealand. It was Captain Ralph who saw to it that the Huntly Rifles Volunteer Brass Band, while its members wore the uniform of the corps, acted as a public band, performing at all charitable functions and turning out its eighteen bandsmen on all community occasions. In Huntly, at the close of the 1890s, the Volunteer Captain acted as local squire.

The new regiment, with its headquarters at Paeroa, was gazetted on 12 September 1898, and its companies were given the following order of seniority:

- Te Aroha Rifle Volunteers
- 1 Company Ohinemuri Rifle Volunteers
- 2 Company Ohinemuri Rifle Volunteers
- Hauraki Rifle Volunteers
- 3 Company Ohinemuri Rifle Volunteers

Coromandel Rifle Volunteers

Onehunga Rifle Volunteers

The battalion was part of a Volunteer Force divided administratively between the Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury, and Dunedin military districts, comprising in all four mounted corps (252 all ranks), three Naval Corps (312 all ranks), one battery of field artillery (ninety-two men), one engineer squadron (sixty-three men), sixteen rifle companies (1000 all ranks), one cycle corps of twenty-seven men, one bearer company of 27 men and a garrison band of twenty-six.

With this strength the New Zealand Volunteers, subject to the orders of an Imperial Army Colonel who acted as chief-of-staff, were ready to fight the Boers. In October 1899, New Zealand troops began to depart for South Africa. Richard Seddon, the Premier, volunteered New Zealand troops, a fortnight before the war began, when he offered a contingent of mounted rifles to the British government. Those who could bring their own horses, and preferably a spare mount as well, were given preference amongst those volunteering. Over 200 troops from the Hauraki regiment volunteered between 1898 and 1902 and saw active service on the veldt.

Amongst the first contingent of 214 officers and men to leave New Zealand was the battalion's first Regimental Sergeant-Major (RSM) George Rowland Bradford, formerly a Colour-Sergeant in the Coldstream Guards. He was to be the first New Zealander to die in the South African campaign, and the first member of the Colonial Forces to give his life in this war.

Sergeant-Major Bradford died of wounds received at a skirmish at Jasfontein Farm by the Transvaal. The farm was owned by a Boer farmer who had shot an officer of the Inniskilling Dragoons. At daylight on 30 November 1899 a battery of the Royal Horse artillery opened fire on the farm, but when the New Zealanders advanced they found the farm unoccupied. When General French, the General-Officer-Commanding, occupied the farmhouse, enemy troops opened fire from a defended position some hundred yards to the left, and began a bombardment with a field piece. In the Imperial Army retreat before the Boer counter attack Bradford was mortally wounded, taken prisoner, and he died shortly after. A monument to the regiment's first sergeant-major, and first battle casualty, stands on Tuikairangi Hill, Paeroa, unveiled by Premier Seddon. It bears the simple inscription 'A Soldier and a man'.