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British Logistics
in the New Zealand Wars,
1845-66

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the
requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
History

at Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand

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2004

Abstract

While military historians freely acknowledge the importance of logistics – the function of sustaining armed forces in war and peace – the study of military history has tended to focus on other components of the military art, such as strategy, tactics or command. The historiography of the New Zealand Wars reflects this phenomenon. As a result, the impact of logistics on the Wars remains largely unexplored and misunderstood.

The British superiority in numbers, materiel and technology has been one of the most consistent and enduring themes in the historiography of the New Zealand Wars. Although more recent, revisionist histories have also highlighted the impact of Maori military prowess as a factor, interpretations of the course and outcome of the Wars are still dominated by accounts which stress the numerical and technological superiority of the British Army as critical. There are several problems with this approach. At its most basic, it ignores the historical reality that small, poorly-equipped forces have occasionally defeated larger and better equipped opponents. More importantly, it fails to take into account wider British strategy in New Zealand, and events that took place off the battlefield, such as the provision of the logistical services that did much to shape the outcome. The result is a lack of balance that prohibits true assessment of the respective capabilities and performance of the two sides.

While it is acknowledged that the British had superior numbers and technology for most of the Wars, this thesis will show that the outcome of the New Zealand Wars was due more to the quality of British logistics and logistics doctrine, and the application of logistics within a coherent strategy, than to any quantitative advantage. This will be achieved by tracing the development and application of British logistics in New Zealand between 1845 and 1866.

It will be seen that the outcome of the New Zealand Wars was determined by the implementation, by the British, of a strategy that applied their greatest strength (their army's ability to fight sustained campaigns) against the critical Maori weaknesses (logistics, and an inability to fight prolonged wars). It will also be seen that the cornerstone of British strategy was strong, effective logistics.

For Alan Taylor (1928-2003),
who died while this thesis was being written.

Acknowledgements

When I began working on this thesis, I saw myself as embarking on a journey that would end with its (hopefully successful) completion. I now realise that that journey has no end, and that the completion of the thesis merely marks a point – albeit a personally satisfying one – on its path.

There are a number of people to whom I owe personal and professional thanks. First, I am indebted to my two supervisors, Dr Danny Keenan and Professor David Thomson, for their wisdom, advice, and infinite patience throughout the gestation of the thesis. As befits a study of logistics, they always delivered appropriate rations of praise and constructive criticism in a timely manner, helped ensure that my conclusions were soundly supported, and generally did all they could to ensure that the thesis reached the ‘front line’ in the best shape possible.

I acknowledge my employer, the New Zealand Army, for materially and morally supporting my study. I am extremely fortunate to belong to an organisation that so freely supports the academic aspirations of its members, and pay tribute to the series of visionary leaders who have fostered an environment where enquiry and learning are valued. My immediate superiors during the period of my study – Lieutenant Colonels Glyn Harper, Colin Richardson, Jerry Ramsden and Mac Grace – reflected this approach, and were all generous with their encouragement, provision of study time and use of resources. I must also mention those members of the Royal New Zealand Army Logistics Regiment who, at various times, provided technical advice and assistance and helped me gain an insight to the mind of the military logistician.

My wife, Pamela, and children and stepchildren (Patricia, Clifford, Amber-Lee and Shayna) are long-used to having me point to otherwise nondescript farmland or street corners as having been the site of significant historical events. As such, they have supported my study with the same good-natured attitudes they have always shown: encouragement, boundless patience, and – on occasion – some bemusement. I thank them.

Finally, I acknowledge my parents, Maureen and Alan, for having fostered and encouraged the joy in learning which really marked the start of my journey. Regrettably, my father died at Easter 2003, and so did not see the thesis being completed, as I know he would have wished. Accordingly I dedicate it to him, with my eternal gratitude.

Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Glossary of terms used	vi
Contents	v
References	vii

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Logistics in Warfare	14
Chapter 2: The Imperial Dimension	30
Chapter 3: The Colonial Dimension	51
Chapter 4: The Wars of the 1840s	77
Chapter 5: The First Taranaki War: 1860-61	109
Chapter 6: The Waikato War: 1863-64	129
Chapter 7: The Second and Third Taranaki Wars: 1863-66	163
Chapter 8: Conclusion	191
Bibliography	197

Maps:	Between pages...
The North Island	12 & 13
The Bay of Islands: 1845-46	77 & 78
Wellington and the Hutt: 1846	96 & 97
North Taranaki: 1860-64	109 & 110
South Auckland: 1863-64	129 & 130
South Waikato and the Waipa Basin: 1863-64	145 & 146
South Taranaki and Wanganui: 1865-66	178 & 179

Glossary of terms used

<i>Campaign</i>	A sequence of military operations designed to achieve a strategic objective within a given time and theatre of operations.
<i>Concept of operations</i>	The line of action chosen by a commander to achieve his mission.
<i>Counter-logistics</i>	Actions taken by one side to undermine the logistical capacity of its opponent, or to deny its opponent access to supplies and other resources.
<i>Critical vulnerability</i>	A characteristic or key element of a force that if destroyed or neutralised will significantly undermine the fighting capability of the force. A critical vulnerability is not necessarily a weakness, but any source of power that is capable of being attacked or neutralised.
<i>Distribution</i>	The process of planning, organising and controlling the cost-effective flow of material and services from supplier to customer.
<i>Doctrine</i>	Fundamental principles by which military forces, or elements thereof, guide their actions. It is authoritative, but requires judgement in application.
<i>Gabion</i>	A cylindrical wicker basket, which is filled with earth or stones for use in field engineering works.
<i>General hospital system</i>	A medical system, developed in New Zealand during the early 1860s, whereby casualties were evacuated through a series of medical facilities to a general hospital, receiving more advanced treatment at each stage.
<i>Lines of communication</i>	Routes established or designated for the movement of materiel and personnel required to deploy and sustain a combat force. They include routes by sea, land, inland waterways and air, or any combination thereof.
<i>Logistics</i>	See Chapter 1, pp.1-3.
<i>Materiel</i>	All items necessary to equip, maintain, operate and support military activities.
<i>Operation</i>	An action, or series of tactical actions (battles, engagements, or strikes) conducted by combat forces, coordinated in time and place, to accomplish operational objectives, and sometimes strategic objectives in an operational area.
<i>Operational level of war</i>	The level at which campaigns and major operations are conducted and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theatres or areas of operations. It links the tactical employment of forces to the achievement of strategic objectives.

<i>Tactics</i>	The employment of units in combat. It includes the ordered arrangement and manoeuvre of units in relation to each other, the terrain, and the enemy to translate potential combat power into victorious battles and engagements.
<i>Tactical level of war</i>	The level at which units are employed in battles or engagements, often as part of a campaign, to ensure operational success.
<i>Sap rollers</i>	Large bundles of sticks or cane used to provide cover for the diggers at the head of a sap.
<i>Sapping</i>	The construction of entrenchments and/or covered approach routes to an opponent's defensive positions, with the objective of undermining the defensive integrity of those positions.
<i>Strategy</i>	The art and science of developing and employing armed forces and other instruments of national power in a synchronized fashion to secure national or multinational objectives.
<i>Strategic level of war</i>	The level at which a nation determines national security objectives and guidance, and develops and uses national resources to accomplish them.
<i>Theatre</i>	The geographical area in which operations and/or campaigning are undertaken.

References

<i>AJHR</i>	Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives.
AMIL	Auckland Museum & Institute Library.
CO	Colonial Office file.
<i>NZDQ</i>	<i>New Zealand Defence Quarterly.</i>
<i>NZPD</i>	New Zealand Parliamentary Debates.
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales.
TAM	Te Awamutu District Museum.
TM	Taranaki Museum.
WTU	Alexander Turnbull Library.
WO	War Office file.