



# DESPATCHES

The New Zealand Tunnelling Company  
Soldiers from the Hauraki Goldfields

*A Waihi Heritage Vision Project*

## Descendants of the New Zealand Tunnelling Company gather in Waihi

Descendants, researchers and a variety of interested participants gathered in Waihi on March 16 to meet each other and learn more about these soldiers from the Hauraki Goldfields.

The day started with a bus tour of the modern day gold mine, followed by an extended lunch. During this time attendees took the opportunity to view the many descendants' displays available or visit the Gold Story mining centre. Most importantly, they took the time to meet each other and share experiences.



One of the unexpected highlights of the day was finding out just how many descendants were related to each other in some way, knew the same people, or whose paths had crossed at some time. There was certainly lots to talk about. The afternoon session was opened by His Worship the Mayor of Hauraki District Mr John Tregidga. Newmont Waihi Gold Mines Rescue Team then explained how their modern equipment differed little from the original Proto design used in the First World War. Mines Rescue team member Troy Hargreaves is pictured below having a quick lunch before this session.



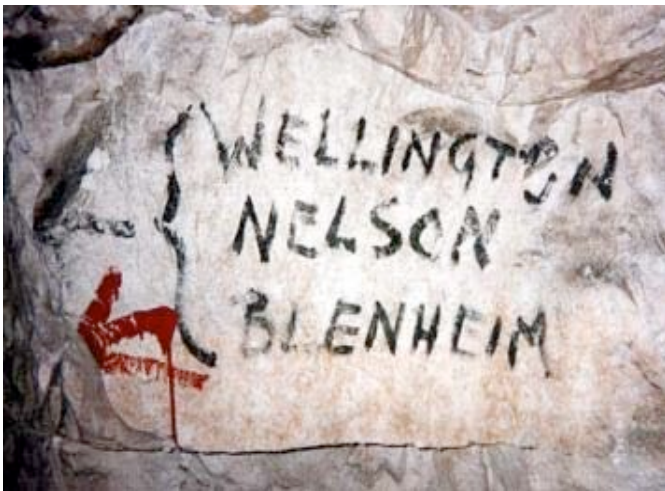
Dr Ian McGibbon from the Ministry of Culture and Heritage briefly outlined his work. Sue Baker Wilson provided a Powerpoint display which highlighted the story of Hauraki Goldfields enlistments in the Tunnelling Company. French PhD student Anthony Byledbal presented a Powerpoint display that showed modern day Arras and a range of images from the First World War Tunnelling Company operations. Anthony explained in some detail what the Company did, where they operated, and the work they were involved in. For many people, this was the first time they had seen these images. A short DVD was shown which featured two local stories. Waihi's Buzz Roycroft shared memories of his father 43082 Sapper James Lewis Roycroft while 102-year-old Zoe Brown spoke of her Uncle Bluey from Komata, 37704 Sapper John Frederick Wells. Both men enlisted in the 5<sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Coy Reinforcements. The afternoon session ended with a brief presentation by Vision Waihi Trust CEO Eddie Morrow who described the planned Gold Discovery Centre that is scheduled for completion in about three years.

Thanks to all the descendants who made the day so special. There were amazing stories of people outside the district who once alerted to the event, tracked down the venue and took the opportunity to be with us. Several people contacted us on the Monday and drove immediately to Waihi, from Auckland, Hamilton and other areas too.

We are aware of many who had to overcome personal health challenges to be with us. The same 'can do' character in the special men of the Tunnelling Coy is obviously alive and well today in our descendants.

Since Monday, further stories have come forward from those descendants keen to see their loved ones' stories recognised and remembered. One special story relates to 89 year old Rangī Ryan, who while travelling down from Auckland to attend a bowling club event in Tauranga, went to great lengths to find us and share his Tunnelling Coy father's story.

To others who have since written and rung following the descendants gathering, a special thank you. We appreciate that for many the gathering has provided an opportunity to reflect on deeply personal stories and memories. It is humbling to have been able to learn more of the men and their family story. To those who were unable to attend, thanks for sending your information and stories that continue to inspire.

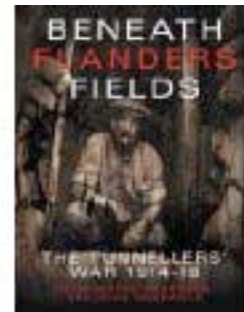


Thanks also to Sheryl Rasmussen of Auckland from the family of 40307 Sapper Walter George Dean MSM for providing accommodation so that Anthony can continue his research next week at Auckland Museum. Your assistance is much appreciated. Anthony leaves NZ on April 8. He hopes to catch up with more descendants before returning to France.

## **NZ Pioneer Battalion**

We are continuing to research men who worked alongside the tunnellers beneath Arras. Along with others, 16/434 Second Lt Richard Angel from Thames and 20616 Private Manu Tuki from Matata left their names on the cave walls. Later Private Tuki would die of wounds in Belgium on 7 June, 1917. He was aged 22 years.

## **Books you can find in your local library**



*Beneath Flanders Fields: The Tunnellers' War 1914-1918*, Peter Barton, Peter Doyle, Johan Vanderwalle.

This is a well-researched, detailed account, which includes the Ypres Salient and a secret struggle beneath no man's land involving engineering, technology and science as well as carefully calculated assassination, a silent, claustrophobic conflict. The NZ Tunnelling Coy does not feature strongly in this book, our company only worked for a short time north of Arras but it provides a great starting point to learn more of their work.

*The New Zealand Tunnelling Company 1915-1919* Edited by J.C. Neill Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd 1922.

The New Zealand Army official Tunnelling Company story. It provides a great account of the work of the NZ men.

*On the Fringe of Hell: New Zealanders and Military Discipline in the First World War* Christopher Pugsley Hodder & Stoughton 1991. 4/1563 Sapper Edward Robert Crawford was one of 28 New Zealand servicemen court-martialled during the First World War. Australian-born, NZ Sapper Crawford was sentenced to death in July 1917 for desertion, although he was not executed.

We would be interested in learning more about Sapper Crawford. His mother lived in Auckland and he enlisted from the coal mining district of Nightcaps in the South Island.

### **Other works on interest**

*A Soldiers Song* Campbell Smith; playwright, artist and poet formally from Waihi attended the Tunnelling Coy gathering. This play won the NZ Playwrights' Association Prize in 1986. It is related to incidents in World War One where five New Zealand soldiers were executed by British firing squads. *The Miners of Waihi* is Campbell's most recent play. It investigates the relationships between Waihi Tunnelling Coy men and their families, a Waihi conscientious objector, and the Waihi strike. You can contact Campbell by writing to him at 801 River Rd Hamilton.



### **Plans for the future**

Waihi Heritage Vision will continue to work to tell the story of the NZ Tunnelling Company, to liaise with descendants and to work towards the inclusion of the Tunnelling Company story in the Gold Discovery Centre soon to be constructed in Waihi's main street next to the Pumphouse.

### **The 'Tunnellers' Grace'**

For those who have requested it, below the prayer adopted as our official 'Tunnellers Grace'. Thanks to our 'Tunnelling Company Chaplain' Marj Tyson for researching this.

*Dear Lord*

*Protect our sailors while at sea  
Watch over them wherever they be  
Protect our soldiers while at war  
We pray for peace for evermore  
Let us remember the wars that passed  
Where lives were lost for peace to last  
Now while we eat and have our fun  
We spare a thought for those with none  
Lord, bless this food and grant that we  
May thankful for thy mercies be.  
Amen*

### **How you can help**

Find out more. See the NZ Tunnelling Company page at [www.waihi.org.nz](http://www.waihi.org.nz)

Spread the word. Encourage others to share their story.

Send us your photos of the descendants' gathering. Lay a wreath on ANZAC Day for the Tunnellers.

### **Thanks**

Newmont Mines Rescue Team, Anthony Byledbal, Waihi Arts Centre & Museum, Waihi Salvation Army, Sue Haxton, Marj Tyson, Pete Connor, Iain McHenry, Arras Tourism Office, Hauraki District Council, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, Waihi Community Marae, Te Rereatukahia Marae, Otawhiwhi Marae,

Extra special thanks to **Newmont Waihi Gold** who provided staff on the day and funding for the tour bus and lunch, as well as assisting with printing, photocopying and postage.

