

The Battle of Hillsborough

By Barrie Woods

This started out as an article about how Butts Valley came to be named, but along the way I discovered a rich history of military activity in our area. In fact, I learned that back in 1865, on December 20th, a battle between 400 soldiers took place in Avoca Valley. On that day men clambered across the slopes, volleys of rifle shots rang out across the valley and the air was filled with the acrid tang of powder. Who would believe it!

We'll get to Butts Valley soon, but first I need to tell you about what happened at Avoca Valley. Known as the 'Battle of Hillsborough' the confrontation was widely reported in the newspapers of the day and reminisced about by the participants for many years to come.

The 'battle' was actually part of the 'Christmas Encampment', an exercise for volunteer soldiers from the local districts. It was held on the property of George Holmes, the proprietor of Holmes & Co, the company which held the contract for building the Lyttelton Railway Tunnel. He owned most of the land around Avoca Valley at the time.

Around 350 volunteer soldiers took part in the 'Christmas Encampment' which began on December 18th. This was the second such event, another having been held the previous Easter and was reported as the 'Easter Encampment'. The Easter Encampment was very much a social affair and was paid for by the volunteers themselves, whereas the later Christmas Encampment was funded by the provincial government and became a regular occurrence for a number of years.

The was camp set up in the lower reaches of Avoca Valley, towards the west. On the east side was Mr George Duncan's farm (now Mary Duncan reserve). The area had been sown in meadow and was most suitable for the erection of tents. A large mess tent capable of

accommodating up to 400 men was erected, along with a number of other buildings for officers' accommodation, sanitation, equipment storage, stables and a powder magazine. The exercises mostly took place the upper part of the valley with rifle targets being erected on the steep flanks to the west.

At the time this was a major event in the town and many of the locals turned up to watch the war games. In fact, a public holiday was declared. On the Friday afternoon there was a parade through Christchurch to the railway station, and the various companies were



The 1865 Volunteer Encampment

transported by train to the Hillsborough Station. This station was a platform especially erected for the occasion and was located at what is now Chapmans Road.

Heathcote sent the No 8 Rifle Volunteer Company to the encampment. George Holmes was the captain of the No. 8s and many of the men were tunnel workers. Their guns had not yet arrived, so instead they used metal fence standards as mock weapons.

The exercises began at daybreak on the Saturday morning with an energetic drill followed by various rifle

shooting competitions throughout the day, for which monetary prizes were awarded. The Heathcote Regatta was also held on this day and a number of the men left the camp for the day to take part in activities organised at the river.

Sometime after lights out on the Saturday night the alarm bugle was suddenly sounded. The camp was under attack. Rockets were fired lighting up the night sky and every man was roused from bed to defend the

arriving soon after 10am. There was some doubt as to whether this would eventuate as an important part of the gun (the vent-piece) had been lost and prevented firing, but fortunately a replacement was found in time.

The Armstrong gun was the showpiece of the Lyttelton Battery. It was the largest of its type in the district and received much attention at practice shootings. Earlier in the year, on May 24, the battery fired a Royal Salute



The Lyttelton Volunteer Artillery Battery with their Armstrong 12-pounder

camp. Rifle fire was exchanged with the enemy (blanks of course) and eventually the attackers were sent packing down the road towards Christchurch. It turned out the attackers were from Engineer Company and had withdrawn from camp under cover of darkness to carry out a well-planned night attack.

Sunday, as was the custom at the time, was observed as a day of rest. There was a church parade in the morning and the Anglican Bishop (Bishop Harper) came out from town to solemnise at Divine Service, then after lunch a Congregationalist minister (Rev. J W Habens) took another service. It seems the weather was hot and there were several cases of fainting in the ranks. On top of that, the water supply was not good, and several cases of diarrhoea were reported. During the rest of Sunday, the troops were entertained by their various bands, military music being an important part of the tradition.

On Monday a mock battle was planned. The Lyttelton Volunteer Artillery Battery hauled their 8 cwt (400 Kg) Armstrong 12-pounder (a 3-inch rifled breech-loading field gun) all the way from Lyttelton, via Evans Pass,

to mark Queen Victoria's birthday. Then the gun was returned to the safety of the Drill Shed, but about 9pm that evening, Lyttelton was rocked by a loud report. The drill instructor and another member of the battery, who had been celebrating, had taken the gun out of its shed and fired a shell which hit the barque Catherine, lying at anchor. The shell damaged the vessel's bulwarks, passed through the cabin and narrowly missed the captain. Court appearances and dismissal from the service followed promptly.

There was great fanfare as the gun arrived at the Hillsborough camp, complete with a tumbril for the ammunition and a team of horses. The Battery were dressed in an elegant uniform consisting of a blue Garibaldi jacket with a scarlet collar and silver braid, blue trousers with a scarlet stripe, white buckskin gloves, Wellington boots and a pillbox hat. They must have looked impressive.

After its arrival and appropriate ceremony, the gun was taken high up onto the western side of the valley where the Engineers Company were charged with building a protection for it.

The Engineers and No. 3 Company joined with the Lyttelton Artillery to defend the gun, and the rest of the men were to form an attack. Soon after 1:00 the troops were given their orders and combat was commenced by the Engineers who sent out two companies of skirmishers to open fire upon the Cavalry, who were then ordered to charge. Battle was under way!

In all there were almost 400 men taking part on the Sunday, so you can imagine the 'battle' was quite spectacular. Guns were fired, fence stakes pointed, prisoners taken, and bugles blown, along with much cheering and jeering. The grass on the slopes was slippery and many a man took a tumble. All the time the artillery kept the Armstrong firing, keeping a volley of a round every 14 to 20 seconds, putting on a great show for the spectators who had turned out to watch. Eventually however the gun was 'taken', and the battle won.

"Three cheers were then given for the Queen, and three for Major White, and the Companies were marched to their quarters, where three more cheers were given for the officers commanding companies."

The event was however not without incident or injury. The next day the Lyttelton Times reported:

"We regret to state that several casualties happened during the review. The men were so impetuous that nothing would restrain their ardour. The skirmishers were driven in by the Cavalry as if it were a duty to ride over them; the skirmishers in return poured in blank cartridge, as if they were defending their lives with musket balls; the charges were made with the bayonet, as if the enemy were really to be mown down out of the way; and prisoners were captured by main force, and even resisted capture, as if it were not in orders that they were to be defeated. With all this, a pretty list of casualties was soon run up. We can state the worst of them."



An Enfield rifle similar to those used by the NZ Volunteers. Enfield Pattern 1856 Rifle Musket (2-Band), circa 1860, Enfield, by Royal Small Arms Factory. Gift of Walter L Buller, date unknown. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Te Papa

A number of the casualties resulted from wads from blank cartridges being shot at short range and there were several twisted ankles along with various cuts and bruises. Some of the injuries were more serious.

"Private Lloyd, of the Engineers, received a very bad cut across the lips, which laid one open, and knocked out some of his teeth. This is a serious wound, on account both of the actual damage done, and of the disfigurement."

Private Mackenzie, of No. 2 Company, sustained a very peculiar accident. His lower lip was cut across just above the chin, with a wound about two inches long and three quarters of an inch deep. From this was extracted a bent piece of sheet brass or copper, about the same size as the cut."

The Lyttelton Times summed up the injury toll thus:

"It was a singular circumstance that not a single man among those hurt seemed to care the least about his injury, but professed a perfect willingness to do it all over again. Drs. Nedwill, Fisher and Frankish, who are, or have been, attached to the Volunteer 1 Corps, were on the ground, and gave their attendance assiduously to the different cases. We have rather dwelt upon these accidents, because they form a feature in a field day which the Volunteers will do well to omit for the future. They will be wise to moderate their ardour in pursuit and defence."

I'm not so sure that Private Lloyd or Private Mackenzie would have agreed, but maybe they were in no fit state to give their opinion. I can't imagine such a toll being tolerated at an exercise these days, but times were very different then. It appears however, that there was a fair measure of enthusiasm amongst the men that had not been anticipated, and consequently things got a little out of control.

Several other encampments were held at the Hillsborough site in subsequent years, until George

Holmes sold his land. None, however featured a battle of the likes of 1865, the over-exuberance of the day was not to be repeated. In the time between the camps the targets were used for rifle practice and competitions, and the land was used

for grazing. Mr Duncan, the neighbouring farmer, had issues with his stock being shot on occasion and this may well have limited the use of the property outside of the encampments.

In 1871 the Canterbury Rifle Association leased a portion of land in Horotane Valley from Major Hornbrook. The lease continued under a new owner, Mr R N Morten, after Major Hornbrook went bankrupt and was forced to sell. The Rifle Association set up their butts and targets in time for their annual Easter meeting in 1871.

The shooting area was at the bottom half of the valley, on the east flank. This portion of the valley therefore became known as 'The Butts' due to the location of the shooting butts, and in later years has become known as 'Butts Valley', though in effect it is really a portion of the larger Horotane Valley rather than a valley in its own right. A better name might have been 'Butts Spur'. So that is how the name 'Butts Valley' originated – there was no 'Mr Butts' for it to be named after, and no association with bottoms whatsoever.

The Rifle Association was credited with contriving a special target known as "The Coming Man". It consisted of a caricature of a man which could be moved by means of pulleys and ropes. Apparently, the target could be rotated into view at which time marksman needed to aim and shoot as many rounds as possible before it disappeared again. Competitors would pay one shilling for a one-minute turn and those who managed six points or more would take a share in a prize pool at the end of the day.

When the Avoca Valley site was no longer available for the volunteer encampments, they moved to Horotane Valley for a few years. These events utilised a much larger part of the valley. For longer ranges (900 yards) the marksmen would shoot from Harrison's farm across Port Hills Road, and red flags would be flown to stop any traffic. The 1890 encampment attracted a total of 464 men, so these were big affairs for the time.

The Butts Valley rifle range was used up until 1898 when the land was acquired by the crown to build the Pawaho Village, which was to be a housing development for Lyttelton workers (as it was close to the railway line). The last volunteer camp was probably in 1894. After that the Volunteer Movement petered

out and in 1909 was replaced by the territorials. The Heathcote No. 8 Company was officially disbanded in 1910 although the Canterbury Rifle Association continued on as a social sporting association and moved its base to a range at Redcliffs. There is still a Canterbury Rifle Association in existence to this day.

As you can imagine, with so many rounds being fired on a regular basis, there were a large number of spent bullets and casings to be found in both the Avoca and Horotane valleys. In the early years no doubt many young boys enjoyed fossicking for them and quite possibly there are still some to be found today.

If you are interested in finding out more, check out the chapters about Horotane and Avoca valleys in Gordon Ogilvie's book "The Port Hills of Christchurch". Although out of print, the local City Council Libraries have several copies available to borrow.

Sources for this article:

Papers Past

Christchurch City Libraries

Te Ara—The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand

The Port Hills of Christchurch, Gordon Ogilvie

Te Papa Tongarewa—Museum of New Zealand