

The STORY OF 2/Lt Hohepa JACOB

The ebook follows the stories of WWI-era first XV rugby players and a female coach and the exhibition picks up on some of these stories, including a few with a Manawatu and Horowhenua focus

Hohepa Jacob is one of those. He was from a small settlement called Poroutawhao, between Levin and Foxton, and known to most as Harry and by his grandchildren as Grandad Jake. To New Zealand rugby connoisseurs he has gone down in history as one of our greatest Maori players, a highly efficient wing forward, captaining the New Zealand Maori and playing for the All Blacks.

That was pre-war and on the day the New Zealand government declared its support for Britain, which had declared war on Germany, Jacob was playing a Ranfurly Shield challenge against Hawera. It was the last rep game he was to play because on October 20, 1914, Hohepa 'Harry' Jacob enlisted. It's something his granddaughter, Rachel Selby, can't quite understand, why her Grandad Jake was so quick to sign up.

"We interpret history through our own lens. He signed up so early which is ridiculous really, but I guess they thought they were going to go off on a big adventure, be home by Christmas, sort of thing. He signed up and off he damn well went."

Jacob had been an only child and after the sudden death of his father he helped on the family farm. He had excelled at rugby right from junior level, playing for Koputaroa and Horowhenua. He later worked in the flax industry, a labour intensive, physical job which no doubt added to his strength on the rugby field.

He was 20 when he became a private, although Selby says the family have always wondered whether that was his real age. It is a known fact that many young men lied about their birth dates to enlist. He didn't remain a private for long and was promoted to sergeant, his army career really starting when he boarded the HMNZT Warrimoo for Egypt the following February. From there it became apparent that the rugby field was a good training ground indeed; Jacob fought on the battlefields at Gallipoli with the Maori contingent, in France, in Somme with the NZ Pioneer Battalion as a 'digger' and he fought upon the Chunuk Bair field of death and Messines. He was at them all and lived to tell the tale, which is quite astounding.

"He went on and won a Military Cross. I guess some people were quite in awe of him; a lot of people that knew him remembered him with deep affection and with a great deal of respect. People were very respectful of him for a number of reasons, only one of them being rugby."

In 1917 Jacob was put forward for training as an officer at Trinity College in Cambridge, UK. It is something which amuses his granddaughter. "Someone said to me once, well, you do come from a long line of academics, your grandfather went to Cambridge," Selby laughs, "he was a farmer really, you couldn't have called him an academic. When he went overseas I think he'd only had four years of school. But he wrote poetry, that's one of the extraordinary things and his first language was Maori of course. It must have been quite an amazing experience to be away all that time overseas."

While in Cambridge the rugby field found Jacob once again and he played for the pioneers in France and England. It's something that Akers points out as being quite an extraordinary thing about rugby at the time that the game melted down the walls of class and in some ways race.

"There was a big difference between the New Zealand rugby game and the English rugby game. Of course football originated from English public schools. I suppose in those days, back in the 19th century there was no time for the working class to play, they were all working six days a week, the seventh day was for church. But there was no class distinction in New Zealand, anybody could play the game and once the Maori took an interest and started playing and that was only a decade out from the New Zealand wars, it was a place for a common interest - Maori, Pakeha, the settlers were all mingling socially on the sidelines."

Rugby had a similar affect for the troops.

"It kept up morale within units and it kept them fit and combated boredom. The Maori players were held in high regard at Gallipoli. The Turks were used to seeing Indian players who were little and the big Maori players scared the shit out of them."