

## HENRY TE REIWHATI VERCOE



Henry Te Reiwhati (Harry Ray) Vercoe was born at Maketu, Bay of Plenty, probably on 21 July 1884, the third child of Ngahuia Te Ahoaho and her husband, Henry Vercoe, a surveyor. Vercoe's mother had tribal connections to Ngati Pikiao and Ngati Tuara of Te Arawa. His early childhood was spent with his parents at Maketu and Paengaroa, where his grandmother, Katherine Vercoe (nee' McManus wife of Joseph Lawry Vercoe), had a great influence on him.

Vercoe received no formal education until he was sent to Waikato to become a farm cadet with his uncle, George Vercoe. He was taught for a year or more by a tutor, and also learnt the requirements of farm and stock management. Henry's love of horses became apparent, and his uncle's stable of racehorses and show jumpers was soon the centre of his life. He became an adept horseman and displayed his prowess playing polo. His all-round athleticism is shown by his selection for the 1905 All Blacks, although he was unable to tour; in 1914 he played for the Maori All Blacks. He was to play for the Pioneer (Maori) Battalion team in 1919.

Vercoe's love of horsemanship led him to join the Tauranga Mounted Rifle Volunteers. During the South African War he falsified his age and enlisted with the Seventh Contingent at Wellington on 3 April 1901.



TAURANGA MEMBERS OF THE 7TH CONTINGENT.  
Ray Vercoe. Frank Brown. Ellis Wrigley

His father gave him two of his best steeplechasers and they sailed with him **on 6 April**. In South Africa Vercoe distinguished himself by his courage. On one occasion his troop was sheltering in a fortification during an attack by the Boers and was forced to withdraw. One of their number was inadvertently left behind, and, against the judgement of his superiors, Vercoe returned under heavy fire to retrieve the wounded trooper; while double mounted, he jumped his horse out over the parapet. On another occasion, three New Zealanders, including Vercoe, rescued two dismounted troopers who were exposed to the fire of over a hundred rifles. Colonel F. S. Garratt, who witnessed the incident, recommended the three men for honourable mention in dispatches.

For his exploits Vercoe received the Imperial South African War Medal and the Queen's South Africa Medal. He returned to New Zealand in July 1902 and was discharged from the army on 26 August.

He resumed farming on the family lands at Paengaroa and Maketu, and on **23 May 1905**, at Ohinemutu, he married **Mary Aver Barnett**; they were to raise a family of at least five sons and two daughters; two other children apparently did not survive early childhood.

About 1930 Vercoe took a second, customary, wife, **Rangiteremoana Karaka**; they had no children.

Vercoe saw further military service during the First World War. **In October 1914** he enlisted as a private with the Maori Contingent. He was promoted to **Sergeant** in November and embarked in February 1915, landing at Suez on 26 March. **In June** Vercoe was promoted to **Sergeant Major**. Because of a reluctance to commit Maori soldiers to battle, his battalion was sent to Malta for garrison duty. It seemed to be regarded as a travelling show, put on display to

perform to visiting dignitaries but not good enough to fight. The men drilled and trained in mounting frustration as word of the Gallipoli landing reached them and the wounded arrived at the Malta hospitals.

Heavy losses within the ANZAC corps saw the Maori Contingent at last sent to reinforce the depleted New Zealand forces. **On 3 July 1915** they landed at what became known as Anzac Cove, and were attached to the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade. Vercoe was wounded in action on **8 August 1915** but remained on duty. In September he was hospitalised at Mudros (Moudros) with appendicitis, and on recovering was attached to the Wellington Battalion.



SGT MJR H R VERCOE  
Maori Contingent – Wounded

His distinguished and gallant services in the field earned him mention in dispatches – the first of four such citations – and promotion to **Second Lieutenant**.

#### London Gazette dated 23 July 1918

Captain Henry Ray Vercoe, Auckland Regt:—  
For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. When his company commander was wounded he took command and led the company successfully under very heavy machine-gun fire. Next day he carried a wounded man into safety under heavy fire, and the following day, when some of his men were buried by a minenwerfer he went to the spot and saved the lives of two by digging them out with his bare hands. This officer was a fine example of courage and determination.

After the Gallipoli campaign the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion (in which the Maori Contingent was now included) was sent to France in **April 1916**. Vercoe was again wounded in action, and earned several promotions, reaching captain in October 1917. He served as **Commander** of the 16th Company of the Auckland Infantry Regiment until July 1918, and on **23 July was made a DSO, (Distinguished Service Order)**

He was twice recommended for the Victoria Cross, but did not receive it. The Pioneer Battalion had been used primarily as a labour force to dig trenches and latrines, and to serve as horse attendants, groomsmen and batmen. Even so, it suffered a high rate of casualties, and the New Zealand Division's commander, Major-General Andrew Russell, had ordered that the battalion should receive the same quota of medals as infantry battalions. They in fact received fewer.

Vercoe spent a short period in the United Kingdom before being seconded to duty in New Zealand on **26 July 1918**. He received a civic welcome on his return, followed by a civic and tribal reception in Rotorua. Vercoe's task was to encourage the Waikato people to volunteer for military service. He was eventually successful, and a well-trained company was about to embark for Europe when the armistice was signed on **11 November**. He was posted to the Reserve of

Officers on **19 December 1918**. For his overseas service he was awarded the 1914–15 Star, the British War Medal, and the Victory Medal.

After his demobilisation Vercoe returned to farming and became closely involved with the development of tribal lands, the rehabilitation of returned Maori soldiers, and the establishment of education programmes for Maori children with the South Auckland Education Board. The introduction by Apirana Ngata, later native minister, of the Maori lands development scheme in the 1920s led to Vercoe's full-hearted involvement with the schemes at Horohoro and Rotoiti. He was to be joined by family members.

Settling Maori on their ancestral lands now became the keystone of Vercoe's life work. His own tribes, Ngati Pikiāo and Ngati Tuara, had hardly any experience of farming their own land. After a long and difficult battle, many thousands of acres of good sheep and cattle land were brought into production by Ngati Pikiāo corporations and individual settlers. Vercoe took particular pleasure in the fact that many of the settlers and some of the managers were returned soldiers.

Vercoe found that it was much easier to manage and run a block under one family group than a multiplicity of tribal owners, and established the incorporations on this basis. Some of these lands

were originally leased to Pakeha, but on the expiry of the leases were brought back under Maori management. As mortgages were repaid the land reverted to its owners' hands with some cash credits; all blocks were fully stocked. The work of land settlement was accelerated after the Second World War, when thousands of acres were settled by Maori ex-servicemen. Many became winners of the Ahuwhenua Trophy in cattle, sheep and dairy farming.

Vercoe attempted to enlist with the 28th New Zealand (Maori) Battalion during the Second World War, but because he had falsified his age in 1901 he was turned down as being too old. He was appointed **Captain** in the Rotorua Home Guard battalion on **1 August 1941**, promoted to **Temporary Major** in **May 1942**, and took command of the Matata Military Camp in February 1943. He relinquished this appointment in August and became involved in the Maori War Effort Organisation. He was posted to the retired list on **28 April 1946** and awarded the **New Zealand War Service Medal**.

After the war Vercoe became involved with Maori welfare and education. He was determined that what had happened to First World War veterans

would not be repeated. When Maori veterans returned home, training programmes were already in place in many trades. Vercoe was also involved with the provision of Maori housing. He became a member of the National Committee of Maori Education and was an adviser to the South Auckland Education Board. He was chairman of the Arawa District Trust Board for three years, chaired the Waiariki District Council of Tribal Executives and was also involved in setting up the New Zealand Maori Council. When Queen Elizabeth II visited Rotorua in 1953 he was in charge of arrangements for the tribal reception. For his services he was appointed an **OBE**. In 1960 he stood unsuccessfully as New Zealand National Party candidate for Eastern Maori.

After a lifetime of service to his people, Henry Te Reiwhati Vercoe died at Rotorua on 23 March 1962. He was survived by both wives, four sons and two daughters. He laid in state at Houmaitawhiti marae, Rotoiti, and received a full military funeral attended by thousands.

His children are: Doreen Ngahina, Henry Te Rupe (#34877 Killed in WWII), Neal Te Taute, Raharuke, Richard Te Atakarauria; William Te Ropiha and Irene Te Arani.

*This biography was written by Whakahuhi Vercoe and was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume 3, 1996*



**The final draft of the Auckland Section of the Seventh New Zealand Contingent.**  
**Front Row:** Vercoe, Morris, Choat, Wilson, Wrigley, Gracie.  
**Second Row:** Lt. Horne, Kendal, Phillips, Mold, Miller, Gabolisey, Flaval, Seccombe, Clark, Burns, Holden.  
**Third Row:** Thompson, McDonald, Heard, Upton, Masson, McFarlane, Hanlin, Williams.  
**Fourth Row:** Connell, Tibbetts, Brown, Bradley, Aroa, Weeks, Hemphill, Tatton, Schofield.  
**Back Row:** Caines, Patterson, Drumovich, Considine, Houchen, Rollinson, Mason, Mullins, Marshall.