

Von Tempsky- soldier and more...

The early colonial period in New Zealand history was one full of powerful characters on both side of the conflict. But for the title of most flamboyant, there can only be a few contenders. One of them must surely be Captain Gustavus Ferdinand von Tempsky.

He had from the very beginning a tragic a mysterious air about him, a combination of the Renaissance man, and the brave soldier.

Born in Prussia on 4 April 1864 into a military family of Polish descent, his father was a senior officer in the army. He quickly followed the family path, went to Berlin's military school, and then received his commission in the 3rd Fusiliers of Prussia when he was 16. He spent four years within the army, but soon the barracks and the routine got to him and in search of adventure, he set off for the Mosquito Coast of Africa.

The German government wanted to set up a colony in Central America, so when von Tempsky went off, it was with a letter for the British Consulate in his pocket. With him went 92 other young men eager for adventure. Britain was at this time competing with the United States for territories in the area. Von Tempsky and his "Prussian Company" helped the British win the eastern route. It was the first time the young soldier had seen active service; it must have excited him. But it was not without it dangers, so many of his company got terrible diseases and died, that they could not even bury their dead. While the remains of his company scuttled back to Germany, von Tempsky stayed behind. The British asked him to train a force of Mosquito Indians, from whom he learnt much about jungle fighting- a skill that would later bring him much fame.

But when the United States took over the area he lost that means of support. By now he had fallen in love with the daughter of the British resident Emelia, and determining to make enough money to wed her, he left for the Californian goldmines.

He took his time, travelling with a friend north, through Central America, a distance of 3,000 miles. This later became Mitla his written account of the journey, together with watercolors depicting what he saw. For von Tempsky was also a talented painter, as well as musician, writer and of course soldier. Having made his money in the goldfields, he returned home to Emelia and married her as he had promised. He worked for a time for her father in a timber mill, but when he died, von Tempsky took his young family, now expanded by two young children, to the goldfields of Australia.

But there seemed to be little luck for him there, even missing out on an adventure with Burke into the interior of Australia. The formation of mining companies was just beginning, and the free lancer von Tempsky didn't want to be part of that. He uprooted his family once more, this time to New Zealand. He tried his luck at the goldfields there, but it was even harder work than Australia.

Von Tempsky supplemented his income with writing for the Southern Cross, once again displaying his versatility. But trouble was brewing, as he observed.

"With all the success that has attended England's efforts to colonise the world, it has done so generally by crushing either the spirit or the very existence of native races; yet the Anglo Saxon is not cruel, he is even kindly and his intentions are not destructive- What breaks then the fortunes of the races that go down the stream with him together? It is his character, his hard, cold individuality... With all his just intentions, he continually shocks his partner to the very core... he will go the journey together with him but he is as cold at the end of it as at the beginning.."

But von Tempsky could not walk away from a fight or an adventure, and he offered his services to General Cameron. The Government had come around to the advantages of bush fighting, and it was decided to raise a group called the Forest Rangers. Originally von Tempsky went along as a reporter, but that didn't last long. He soon joined up.

Rising quickly through the ranks he was soon commanding men of his own; men who, like himself, were not born in New Zealand, but instead came from all areas of the globe. And he cared for those under his care, issuing them with Bowie knives at his own expense, and making sure they had greatcoats to keep out the worst of the rain.

And always he was observing the Maori, admiring their methods of fighting, but at the same time admitting that he did not fully understand them. He was not one to think they were simple savages.

Von Tempsky received accolades for his bravery, and the rank of major. After fighting in the West Coast he was crippled by rheumatism and having to be carried out, but when he could not find his Forest Rangers, he



joined up with the Opptiki campaign. Only then, did he find out that his men had decided not to join this fight because of low pay. He won them round, but then found another problem. He would have had to be under the command of an officer of lower rank than his. Obviously a certain amount of pride would not allow him to do that. But the Defence Minister at the time ordered him to proceed to Napier. Von Tempksy countered by resigning.

The Rangers, deprived of their commander refused to board the boat to Napier, and he in turn refused to order them to. Both Rangers and their commander were held under close arrest. When put to trial von Tempksy argued that Napier was outside the area his men had volunteered for. But even after his trial he was still held. But he was, if not the most compliant soldier, one of the bravest, and the colony needed bravery. He was released.

But then in 1866 the Forest Rangers were disbanded. Von Tempksy went back to Auckland to be with his family, where he painted, potted in the garden, and wrote poetry. But he was, like many other soldiers, bored with peace. So in 1868 when the Armed Constabulary was formed, von Tempksy jumped at the chance to command a division.

There was trouble brewing, with a Maori leader Titokawaru, promoting a version of the Hauhau faith, which included ritual cannibalism. When he attacked a garrison near Hawera, Lieutenant Colonel McDonnell led his forces, including von Tempksy's Armed Constabulary, against Titokawaru's pa. Von Tempksy asked permission to attack the fortifications, but was told instead to form a rearguard. He strode among his men, bending down, and asking one why he wasn't taking cover. That soldier in turn asked him the very same thing. One of the company was shot, and when von Tempksy went to his aid, he too was shot, directly in the forehead. He left behind his family, and the grieving Emelia.

But perhaps as a soldier, it was the way he might have wanted to go. He had written in his letter just a few weeks before his death.

"An honorable death on the battlefield is a gift of God compared with a slower death."

And as for his body, it was cremated along with his fallen comrades, by those he had called enemy, and their chant was as fitting an epitaph as any

"Farewell spirits of the brave! The pride and power of heroes!"

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