

Fact Sheet 1: New Zealand and the Second World War

The Second World War was the world's most destructive conflict. It took the lives of up to 50 million people. The 12,000 New Zealanders who died during the war might not seem like a large number by comparison, but at the time our population was under 2 million. On a per capita basis, this country's losses were the highest in the Commonwealth – approximately one out of every 150 New Zealanders died on war service.

Most New Zealanders accepted that our security depended on the survival of Britain and the outcome of the war in Europe. As a result, the majority of the 140,000 New Zealanders who served overseas were involved in the Mediterranean region, in Greece, Crete, North Africa and Italy. New Zealand forces also fought against the Japanese in the Pacific and took part in the post-war occupation of Japan. In each case, New Zealanders served as part of a larger Allied force, alongside British, Australian, American or other troops. Approximately 104,000 served in 2NZEF (the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force). The rest served in New Zealand or British naval and air forces. Back home, a further 100,000 New Zealanders enlisted in the Home Guard. In all, 67% of men aged between 18 and 45 served in the armed forces.

The mobilisation of New Zealanders for the war effort did not just involve military personnel. New Zealand devoted a very high proportion of its resources to the war effort and in particular to ensuring that Britain was fed. This extended to the rationing of many products here to ensure that as much as possible was sent to Britain. People not serving in the armed forces were also directed into jobs considered necessary to support the war effort. Many women gained opportunities to join the workforce, as did Māori who migrated into the cities to fill positions vacated by men overseas fighting.

The Second World War contributed to New Zealanders' developing sense of identity. The contribution of our soldiers in a number of key campaigns had increased our confidence about our role in the world. For instance, the exploits of the 28th (Māori) Battalion became a source of great pride to many New Zealanders.

Its contribution to the Second World War also encouraged New Zealand to express its opinions on the world stage and to seek ways to avoid a repetition of such a conflict. This country was one of 51 nations to sign the United Nations Charter in San Francisco on 26 June 1945. Those gathered declared: 'We, the peoples of the United Nations, are determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.'