



# War Blacks: The extraordinary story of New Zealand's WWI All Blacks

*Matt Elliott*

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*War Blacks* is the extraordinary story of New Zealand's national sport and The Great War, and the effect each had on the other. Published to coincide with the 125th anniversary of the founding of the NZ Rugby Football Union.

Rugby and war have played major roles in the forging of a national New Zealand identity. This is the story of where both met, on the hot sands of Egypt and the muddy fields of Britain and France during World War I. *War Blacks* presents for the first time the stories of more than 90 men who had been, were, or would be All Blacks and their 1914-18 wartime service, wearing the double silver fern of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force or the badges of other nations.

While first-class and senior rugby in New Zealand came to a halt as the war progressed – "fit to play, fit to fight" – the game played an important role in the recreation and morale of our troops. The mighty rivalry between the All Blacks and the Springboks can be traced to this period. When the "Invincibles" were touring the Northern Hemisphere in 1924-25, the ex-soldiers in the team made a point of visiting the battlefields they had fought on only a few years earlier, as well as the graves of their fallen comrades.

Arguably the most famous of the New Zealand player-soldiers was Dave Gallaher, captain of the "Originals" All Blacks in 1905, who lost his life in 1917 at Passchendaele. He was one of 13 All Blacks killed in action during WWI. Others were wounded and left suffering the effects of active service for the rest of their lives. But amongst those who played after the war was Maurice Brownlie, one of the greatest forwards the game has seen.

War Blacks is the moving - and at times humorous - story of our national sport and The Great War, and the effect each had on the other.

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