

# 28th Māori Battalion

## Takrouna

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"No infantry had a more distinguished record, or saw more fighting, or alas, had such heavy casualties."

*Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, Commander of the 2 NZEF,  
commending the 28th Māori Battalion.*

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# Takrouna

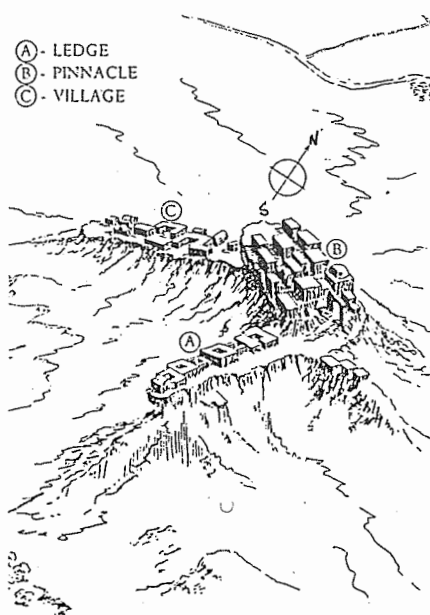
On the night of 19/20 April 1943 the action at Takrouna took place. This was to be one of the last major battles fought in North Africa by units of the 8th Army of which the 2NZEF formed part. The actual unit taking part in operations around and on Takrouna was the 5th Infantry Brigade 2NZEF composed of 21st, 23rd and 28th (Maori) battalions. The N.Z. Division formed part of 10 Corps commanded by Lt. Gen. Sir Brian Horrocks.

**T**HE limestone outcrop was known as Takrouna and the top of it about half a mile in length, was on three different levels and shaped roughly like a crescent. The ledge on the top of the rock face facing south, which the Maoris first gained, will be called the "ledge"; the part where Sgt Smith DCM 23 Battalion chased the Italian and lost him is the central and highest part will be called "the pinnacle"; buildings covered both ledge and pinnacle, and there was a small mosque built on the south-western corner of the pinnacle which was in the nature of a rock keep with four steep sides.

A flight of rough-hewn steps connected the two levels near the mosque; in addition a track started at the same place and worked along the bottom of the drop below the mosque on its western side to the third portion of the crescent. Other methods of arriving and departing this robber's nest were rope ladders from the mosque to the steps below and a tunnel from the floor of the mosque to the same steps.

We have accounted for three of the four steep sides of Takrouna. The fourth, connected by steps referred to, we will call the village because it was a stew of hovels on the western end of the crescent, separated from the pinnacle by a sheer rock wall and sprawling down the shoulder to another and larger group of buildings near the road, this being the actual village of Takrouna. So now we have four areas - the narrow ledge connected to the pinnacle by a set of steps and to the village by a longer set of steps on a lower level; the pinnacle, virtually inaccessible on all four sides; the 'village' with no apparent access to the pinnacle; and Takrouna village.

During the night attack the Brigade's casualties mounted: In the Maori Battalion alone the CO and all but one of the company commanders had either been killed or wounded. A message received during the night at 5 Brigade's HQ from the advanced dressing station reported that they had 11 wounded officers from



A aerial view of Takrouna

the Maori Battalion alone which confirmed that the Maoris had met stiff resistance to their advance.

It now became plain to the Brigade that the night's operations had not been successful. The 28th and 23rd battalions had made marginal advances before being halted by the enemy defence system and the 21st battalion has suffered so many casualties on the western side of Takrouna that it became obvious that the troops would be in a very vulnerable position once daylight broke from the commanding heights of Takrouna. So they were ordered to withdraw to their start line positions. Plans were being hastily made to use 21 Battalion which had been withdrawn from the western side of the rock to make an assault up the slopes of Takrouna. However there was no need, for around Sam, through the dust and confusion of battle they saw to their relief and delight,

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**This is a description of the ground over which the Brigade was to assault the enemy positions by the CO of the Maori Battalion Lt-Col C. Bennett.**

"The key point in the enemy's defence line was the rock of Takrouna, a pinnacle rising to a height of over 600 feet and standing like a grim forbidding sentinel. On the summit of the pinnacle, and commanding an uninterrupted view to the South were the remains of an old fort, a formidable stone structure. Resting as it did on a massive foundation of solid rock twenty feet deep, this fortress surveyed the plains below with an air of almost impregnable seclusion. Nestling half way down the northern slope of the feature was the native village of Takrouna, uninhabited at the time. The southern slopes of the rock were precipitous and formidable but at its northern end it sloped away more gently and the narrow track that led from the village down to the Enfidavillee-Zagouan road below made that end the least resistant line of approach. The intervening country between our position and the rock, though fairly flat and undulating, was a natural death trap. Around the base of Takrouna, were numerous olive patches interspersed with impenetrable cactus so thick as to deny passage to a man's hands.

Each assaulting battalion was allotted three Crusader tanks for the purpose of smashing a way through these cactus hedges but all available machetes were also issued as part of their battle equipment for the assault. Nearly all these hedges had been heavily mined. The wheat fields dotted here and there across our front were an added impediment and were chiefly responsible for retarding the infantry's rate of advance during the actual attack. The planned close cooperation between our troops and the artillery was largely neutralized. The hilly country to each flank of Takrouna and to the rear provided great vantage points in the enemy's plan for the defence of the rock for there was not a single line of approach to the fort that was not covered by converged fire."

**ARMY NO: 65430****LANCE CORPORAL H. RUHA M.M**

In the attack on Takrouna on the night of April 19/20, L/Cpl Ruha. was a member of the party of nine men which attacked the fort crowning the village. During a counter-attack by the enemy, some broke into the lodgment gained by the party. L/Cpl Ruha immediately rallied the party around him and attacked fiercely. He was severely wounded but carried on until the situation was restored and the enemy destroyed. His complete disregard of danger was an inspiration to his comrades and of great assistance to his commander.

a stream of prisoners, coming down from the pinnacle on Takrouna. As this was to be the turning point of the battle we now have to follow the fortunes of 'B' Company from the Maori Battalion in their night attack, for it was from this company the initial assault on Takrouna that resulted in the prisoners seen by Brigade HQ mentioned above.

'B' Company's orders for the battle ahead were to advance through the olive groves and cactus before skirting the eastern side of Takrouna. Then together with 'C' Company push through to the Enfidaville-Zaghouan road. The two sections as mentioned were to detach themselves and create a diversion under the steepest side of the rock to allow this plan to be carried out. 'D' Company were to attack Takrouna over the more accessible ground to the rear.

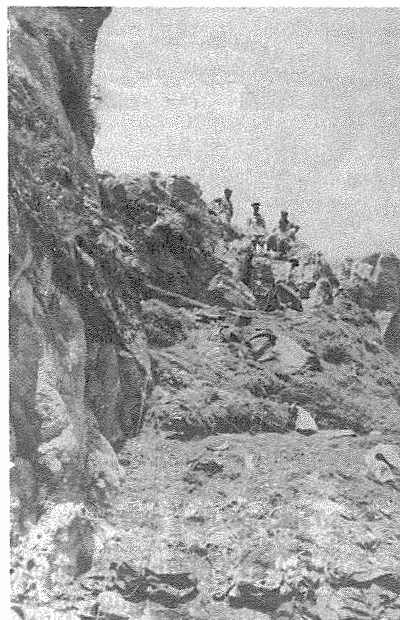
'B' Company started their journey through the olive groves at 11pm on the night of the 19th. The company soon ran into trouble from the many mines sown amongst the cactus and the deadly

**ARMY NO: 65184****PRIVATE H. GRANT M.M**

In the attack on Takrouna on the night of April 19/20. Pte Grant. was a member of the small party which stormed the front crowning the village. Throughout the action he showed outstanding courage and dash. On the morning of April 22 he led a small party along the western slope and captured approx. 50 prisoners from well dug in positions. During the whole two days' struggle he repeatedly guided reinforcements into the positions, constantly exposing himself without regard for danger, and became established in the hazardous position of official guide.

machine gun fire from the rocks on the lower slopes of Takrouna itself. They managed to advance a further 300 yards to the south eastern toe of the rock. By this time the casualties had mounted, the company commander had been wounded and one of the platoon commanders took command. Platoon Sgts replaced Platoon Officers as the casualties affected the command structure of the company and it was at this point that Sgts Rogers and Manahi left with their small band of men to create their diversion.

The enemy on the heights of Takrouna were well entrenched and consisted of an Italian battalion, later reinforced by two companies, and some Germans from 202nd Gruppe plus one German Anti/Tank Platoon. The Italians, whose fighting



A view of the rock face near the top of Takrouna.

ability had not been highly regarded by the 8th Army, were to resist the assault on Takrouna with such ferocity that it was a surprise to all who took part in the battle.

As dawn broke the small party from 'B' company, who had spent most of the night in a wadi at the bottom of Takrouna, began their assault. Sgt Rogers who was in charge of the 12 man strong party divided it into two and planned to lead one party himself up the south-east side of Takrouna whilst Sgt Manahi was to work his way up the south-west side where they hoped to meet at the top. Just before they began the attack they were joined by Sgt Smith from 23 battalion who had lost his unit during the night attack. Smith attached himself to Roger's party

**ARMY NO: 62700****LANCE SERGEANT TAHAE TRAINOR M.M**

During the attack on Takrouna by his Battalion on the night of 19/20 April L/Sgt Trainor's Platoon Commander became a casualty when the platoon was still 800 yards from its objective. L/Sgt Trainor assumed command and with the remainder of the platoon pushed through intense MG and Mortar fire and captured the objective, destroying MG posts and capturing 27 prisoners including two gun crews with 75 Mm guns. He consolidated and held the ground throughout the day 21 April 43. under very heavy Artillery and mortar fire until relieved in the evening by men from another unit. His conduct under fire was an inspiration to his men throughout the action.

and the assault began.

As they progressed up the hill they met with stiff resistance from well entrenched enemy positions which were well protected by barbed wire hung with warning devices. Enemy fire of all types was still heavy and a hail of mortar bombs sent the Maoris from rock to rock. Both parties were amongst the enemy with Bren Guns, Hand grenades and bayonets. Smith and Aranui gained some high ground above the trenches and were soon joined by some more men, this, in the confusion of the smoke and noise of battle, convinced the enemy in the lower trenches that they had been over-run, white flags soon appeared and over 60 prisoners were taken.

Meanwhile Smith and Aranui had gained a foothold on the ledge by pulling themselves up on telephone cables. They found that they could look down on a small courtyard where a German soldier was operating a wireless set. Aranui leapt down and captured the German, whereupon a German Officer appeared from a small building and surrendered. The Officer turned out to be an Artillery Officer who had been observing the whole of the New Zealand front from a small window in the building mentioned above. Both Germans were sent down to join the other prisoners. Sgts Rogers and Manahi had in the meanwhile gained the ledge and joined Smith and Aranui who were having a smoke with their prisoners. Smith caught sight of an Italian departing in some haste and gave chase only to lose him, he no doubt having the benefit of

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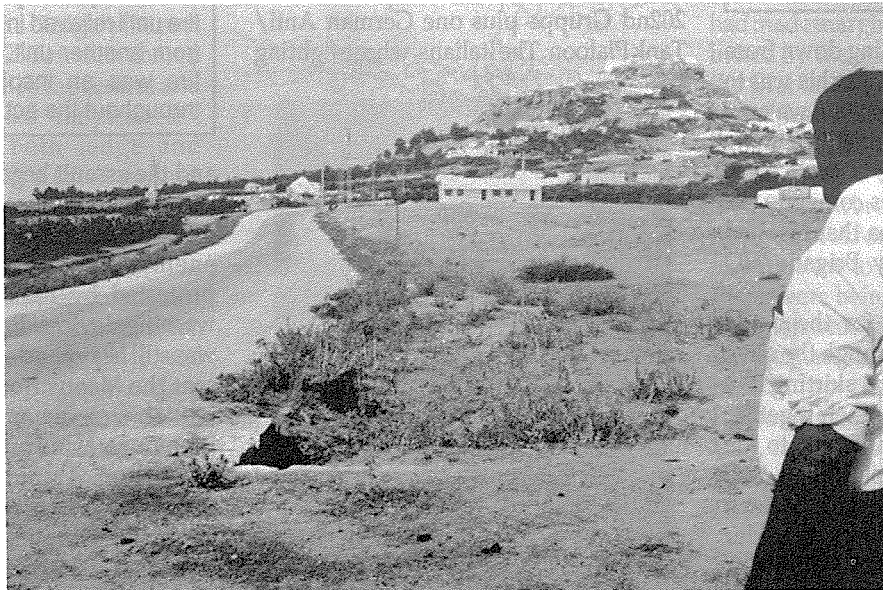
knowing the outlay of the position. The chase led Smith to the North side of the pinnacle where there was a sheer drop down into Takrouna village that should have been captured by then - but was not.

Rogers and Manahi decided that the best way to defend the pinnacle was to try and prevent any access from the village, which was at this time full of Italian troops unaware that the heights above them were occupied by the New Zealanders. A rock was placed over the mouth of the tunnel and Manahi covered the steps from the South-Eastern side of the pinnacle. Some men from 'B' and 'C' companys (28 Battalion) filtered up the hill and with a section of men from 'B' company (23 Battalion), who had strayed from their unit, were incorporated into the defence. The tiny garrison then waited for the enemy reaction that was not long in coming. The enemy soon realised that their occupation of the ledge and the pinnacle had been lost and they subjected these positions to intense fire of all types. Mortar and shell fire continued all day and clouded

Takrouna from the sight of all those below on the plain. And it is against this continual fire and the consequent casualties that were suffered that we must judge Manahi's conduct at Takrouna.

Sgt Rogers who had commanded the initial attack was killed by a shell and this left Manahi in command. As the casualties mounted it became obvious to Manahi that unless the position was reinforced they stood very little chance of resisting any further attacks, and, once again Takrouna would be in the enemies hands to harass and observe any movement made by 5 Infantry Brigade on the plains below. Hoping that the enemy would not attack in the meantime Manahi took a chance, and with no communications with 5 Brigade HQ decided to go down and collect some reinforcements. Sgt Manahi went down the slopes of Takrouna which was still under intense fire where he contacted Lt. Haig ('C' company 28 Battalion) and managed to get a section of

riflemen, some stretcher-bearers, ammunition and food and led them back up the shell torn slopes of Takrouna which by now was enveloped in smoke and a dust cloud so that those below had no idea who occupied the ledge or the pinnacle on the heights above them. On the way back Manahi was met by an Artillery officer who had come down from the slopes above and told him that the position was impossible to hold and that it was soon to be shelled prior to another attack. Manahi was advised to return to his unit. Manahi decided to carry on. This was a fortunate decision for at the foot of the hill he met another gunner officer,



Takrouna June 1977

Capt. Catchpole of 5 Medium Regiment, who had even later information on the proposed artillery concentration it had been cancelled. He was told that the positions on Takrouna were to be held at all costs and that reinforcements were on the way. Manahi continued up the hill, positioned the new men and awaited any further attacks by the enemy.

At 3.30pm Lt. Shaw with 15 platoon (21 Battalion) arrived on the ledge. Whilst Lt. Shaw, who was to take over command, was being shown around the position by Manahi and 15 platoon was still clambering onto the ledge a strong counter-attack began. Manahi raced to his position at the head of the track and saw twelve truckloads of enemy divided into two parties and attack the north-west corner of the ledge. The enemy made a determined effort to climb the track but Manahi and Cpl. Bell inflicted severe casualties and the attack was stopped in its tracks. The second party managed to

force its way onto the ledge where fierce close quarter fighting took place among the alleys and buildings. For a time it was touch and go but with the help of 15 platoon and a small party of Maoris, led by Captain Muirhead, who came down from the pinnacle above, the tide was turned and the enemy fled. By 7pm everything was quiet on Takrouna, Lt. Shaw was in command and Manahi led his small band down the hill to a well earned rest.

Lt. Shaw (15 Platoon) realised that it was imperative that reinforcements be sent if he was to hold the position. A note was sent down, as there was at this time no signal communication with Brigade HQ, and to his relief at 9pm 14 Platoon ('C' company 21 Bn) under Lt. Hirst arrived. They had no sooner settled in then yet another attack was launched by the enemy. The pinnacle was re-captured by the enemy and the ledge nearly lost, however the New Zealanders managed to hang on and an uneasy stalemate developed. The enemy now held the pinnacle and showered a continual

fire on those below on the ledge.

Daylight on the 21st saw no improvement in the situation Lt. Shaw was wounded and Hirst took command, the situation was again becoming desperate. By this time there was telephone communication with Brigade HQ who decided to reinforce Takrouna again. 28 Battalion were asked to provide, and in particular that Sgt Manahi because of his local knowledge, be included in the party. Sgt Manahi selected men from 'B' and 'D' companys, loaded up with more ammunition, and again made his way up to the ledge on a path he was by now very familiar with. Hirst discussed tactics with Manahi who decided that perhaps the battalion mortars may be able to dislodge the enemy from the pinnacle. However the range was too great and the bombs fell short. Next a 2in Mortar held vertically was tried but to no avail for this time the range was too short. Another method was

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suggested by a forward observation officer of the artillery, this was to use the 25 pounders of the artillery to range in on the pinnacle. The gunners used over 50 shells to slowly creep the barrage up the hill and at last scored three direct hits on the pinnacle. As this was going on three assaulting parties had been assembled ready to take advantage of the shelling. Sgt Manahi led one party of Maoris on yet another attack up to the pinnacle. The enemy by this time had had enough and mysteriously disappeared, using a secret tunnel as yet undiscovered by the attackers. The pinnacle was again subjected to heavy mortar fire and more casualties suffered. The artillery again came to the rescue and over 300 rounds were fired before the enemy mortars were silenced.

Takarouna village now became the focus of attention and Hirst decided that some softening up was required. By now it was mid-afternoon and no doubt everyone felt that the battle had lasted long enough.

The buildings in the village gave excellent protection to the defenders from small-arms fire so it was decided to use one of the new 17 pounder anti-tank guns

**The official war history comments on Takrouna are worth quoting:**

Not for the first time nor the last in the long history of war, such victories as were achieved came from the efforts of junior commanders and from the initiative and determination of Platoons, sections, and individual men. It was the highest glory - a Soldier's Battle. Takrouna itself remains a supreme example of courage and determined action. The way in which a few men in daylight found their way to the top of an 'unstoppable' hill through a tangle of enemy posts, capturing prisoners many times their own in number, reads like an imaginative incident in a romantic novel. And this initial action was followed by a period of bravery and skill in minor tactics shown by parties from two battalions, although the main honour rests with the Maoris. General Horrocks has since said that it was the most gallant feat of arms he witnessed in the course of the war. In the Division as a whole the men who survived the struggle were regarded with something akin to awe. For two whole days and nights Takrouna had been hidden by smoke and dust of bloody battle, and strange stories of passages and secret entrances had circulated amongst the troops. Takrouna and the battle there had become legend.

to try and blast the buildings apart. This was very successful and to the delight of those on the pinnacle the enemy began to panic. Sgt Manahi seized the opportunity and with a small part of Maoris advanced and won the north-east slope. Using bayonet and grenades several gun pits were overrun and many prisoners taken. Seeing the effect of the 17 pounder shells on the village buildings Manahi and his party made for the village. Hirst meanwhile had come to the same conclusion as Manahi and also made for the village, driving the enemy from house

to house towards Manahi. Soon all the enemy resistance ceased and at last the battle of Takrouna was over. Sgt Manahi, as soon as darkness fell, supervised the collection of the dead from the pinnacle and the ledge. The dead were then wrapped in blankets and lowered down the slope by ropes.

The Battle of Takrouna has been called 'A Soldier's Battle'. It is interesting to note that the Battle at Inkerman in the Crimean War was also called 'A Soldiers Battle' and twenty Victoria Crosses were awarded for this battle.

## Hero of Takrouna MANAHI

SINCE the end of World War II there have been many pleas for the award of the Victoria Cross to L/Sgt Manahi. These pleas have been persistent. As recently as at the Opening of 28 NZ (Maori) Battalion Exhibition at the Army Museum, Waiouru the late Sir James Henare pleaded the cause - to no avail.

As commanding Officer of the Battalion in the battle until seriously wounded in action, Sir Charles Bennett has said that he has always felt a continuing sense of moral obligation to attempt to correct what was generally regarded as a grave injustice. This was the feeling not only of Manahi's own comrades but of members of 5th Brigade who took part in the Takrouna Battle.

The intensity of this feeling can be gauged from the fact that for the rest of his life, Manahi was regarded with the highest respect amounting almost to awe, just as though he was indeed the holder of the Victoria Cross. His life came tragically to

an end in March 1986 in a motor accident. He was a quiet, self-effacing man, conscious, it appeared to those who knew him well, of the special niche he had carved for himself by his incomparable deeds at Takrouna.

A career soldier E.M. Dix (British & NZ Army) has assembled substantial and telling evidence upon which it could be claimed that there is a case to be answered in the non-award of the V.C.

*Dix maintains that there should be*

1. The reinstatement of the original recommendation for the V.C
2. The cancellation of the D.C.M.
3. V.C to be awarded in place of the D.C.M.

*The case rests mainly on the following -*

- a. It was intended that the V.C be awarded to Manahi
- b. The recommendations went through the levels of command; Maori Battalion, 5th NZ Brigade (Brigadier Kippenberger)

NZ Division and 10 corps  
(Lieut-Gen Sir Brian Horrocks)

The next level 8th Army (General Montgomery) appears to be the one at which the recommendation was lost sight of. (It was recorded in Kippenbergers "Infantry Brigadier that the recommendation passed the Corps Commander with ardent endorsement").

Sir Dennis Blundell, Brigade Major of 3 NZ Brigade at Takrouna, for our Reunion Magazine 1984 had this to say, "I wrote the citation for V.C for Sgt. Manahi and like the rest of the DIVISION was disgusted when he was awarded an Immediate D.C.M. I feel sure that here was an example that even in the realm of bravery, politics played a part and that the award to 2nd Lieutenant Ngarimu only some three weeks previously influenced the final decision. This for me was confirmed when later at the Gazira Sporting Club, Cairo, our Military Secretary, Brigadier Rudd asked me to tell the story to a Senior  
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# HERO OF TAKROUNA

# Manahi

British General. The General's comment was that, "We did make a mistake".

General Horrocks in his book "A Full Life" said this of Manahi.

"I have mentioned this fight in some detail because in my opinion it was the most gallant feat of arms I witnessed in the course of the War and I was bitterly disappointed when Sgt. Manahi, whom we had recommended for a V.C, only received a D.C.M.

It was interesting to note that in 1941 two V.C's went to one battalion in a short period. Sergeant Hinton of 20 Battalion won the V.C in Greece and Captain Upham in Crete.

When Manahi was asked if he had any warrior ancestors he replied that he didn't have a clue. Mr Kepa Ehau who was something of an expert on Rotorua Family histories provided an answer.



THE Victoria Cross awarded for gallantry is the highest order of its kind and is worn before all other decorations. It consists of a Maltese Cross in bronze, 1 1/2 inches across with the Crown surmounted by a Lion in the centre and beneath it the simple inscription For Valour.

Because of the prestigious nature of this award sworn statements by others who witnessed the action are necessary to support the recommendation.

Here are two such statements by: Pte H. Grant & Lieut I.M. Hirst.

65184 Pte GRANT. Kingi of 28 NZ (MAORI) BN on oath states:-

On the night 19/20 Apr 43, I was a member of the Section led by L/Sjt MANAHI. During the advance upon TAKROUNA our platoon sustained heavy casualties and at first light there were only some ten of us left. We were then pinned to the ground by mortar fire and heavy MG fire coming from the slopes of the feature and the pinnacle.

I was one of a party of four led by L/Sjt MANAHI up the slopes. We were trying to reach the pinnacle. On the way up we were fired on by enemy from posts below and on the pinnacle. L/Sjt MANAHI was always in front of us and personally attacked and captured MG posts. To get on to the pinnacle itself we had to climb up almost sheer rock face and hand over hand. After brief fighting, there, the enemy surrendered and we took approximately 60 prisoners. We were there joined by the remainder of the platoon.

After capturing the pinnacle we came under heavy mortar and shell fire and also fire from MGs sited in and about TAKROUNA below us. Towards the end of the morning our party holding the pinnacle had been reduced to three. L/Sjt MANAHI returned to the Coy and brought back supplies and a few reinforcements. In going down and up the hill he was under fire the whole time.

In the afternoon further reinforcements arrived, this time from 21 NZ Bn. The enemy counter-attacked and some of them gained a foot-hold on the feature. L/Sjt MANAHI led an attack against them. There was fierce hand-to-hand fighting but eventually the enemy withdrew.

All the remainder of that day we were subjected to steady fire. After dark I returned to my Unit with L/Sjt MANAHI.

Of the original party from my platoon who attacked the pinnacle on 20 Apr 43 L/Sjt MANAHI and myself are the only ones not casualties.

(Sgd) Pte H GRANT.

Sworn before me in the field this 3rd day of May 1943.

(Sgd) Kingi A KEIHA  
Lt Col.  
Comd 28 NZ (Maori) Bn.

2978 Lieut Ian Henry HIRST of 21 NZ Bn on oath states:-

On night 20/21 Apr 43 I was one of a party of two Maoris who had been holding the pinnacle feature above TAKROUNA village. I was NOT there at the actual relief and the Maoris had returned to their Unit when I arrived. The pinnacle was a flat ledge of rock barely a quarter of an acre in size and covered by native houses with small winding alley-ways in between. About one hundred feet directly below was the village of TAKROUNA. While I was on the feature, the village and the western slopes were strongly held by the enemy.

At about 2200 hrs enemy troops fired on us from some of the houses on the pinnacle. It was later found that they had gained a foothold by using a secret and covered approach. Fierce fighting ensued and the position was desperate. Reinforcements were asked for and at about 0800 hrs 21 Apr, L/Sjt MANAHI in charge of fifteen Maoris arrived. I discussed a plan of attack with him. This included bringing our own Artillery to bear on the feature. After a concentration during which we took cover, L/Sjt MANAHI personally led four men in an attack on some of the houses. They came under the heaviest mortar fire we experienced there and also considerable MG fire but the attack was a complete success. The enemy withdrew by the same means as they had used earlier to gain a footing and the entire pinnacle feature was once again in our hands. Following this we were heavily shelled and mortared and fired on by MGs from in and about TAKROUNA.

Later in the afternoon of 21 Apr L/Sjt MANAHI and one or two of his men, on their own initiative, moved out from cover on the pinnacle and I saw them stalking enemy section posts on the North-Western slopes of the TAKROUNA feature. They stalked post after post capturing them in turn. When I saw the number of enemy surrendering I realised they were cracking and took a party down to the village which was captured. But for the action of L/Sjt MANAHI and his men, the capture of the whole feature would have been delayed considerably. During these operations L/Sjt MANAHI and his men were continually under shell and small arms fire.

The number of enemy who finally surrendered exceeded three hundred, including eighteen officers. Two 25 - Pns, several mortars and seventy-two MGs were captured.

(Sgd) I.H. HIRST, Lt.

Sworn in the field this 3rd day of May 1943 before me.

(Sgd) Kingi A KEIHA.  
Lt Col.  
Comd 28 NZ (Maori) Bn.