

# 28th Māori Battalion

## The Last of the Colonels

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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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# The Last of the Colonels

*Te pou, te pou,  
Te tokotoko i whenuku,  
Te tokotoko i wherangi.  
Tuku e toki e.  
Ka whai tamore ki runga,  
Ka whai tamore ki raro.  
Tena ko te pou, ko te pou  
Na Fu te winiwini  
Na Fu te wanawna  
Na Tu kai tou  
Na Tu ka whakaputaina  
Ki te whei ao, ki te ao marama  
Tikee Mauriora.*

He manawa i whitikia, he mauri ka wehe i te hono. Kokiri wairua ki te tihi o mauri. Nga hoa rangatira e takoto mai ra i nga marae maha o Tumatauenga, nga mate tarahare haere koutou haere, haere. Haere koutou ki tua o Reao, ki tua o Rehua ki te whakamaunga kekete, e kekete mai ai te kekete, e ara mai ai te ara.

Ki nga morohu, ki nga urupa, ki nga mata ora ki nga matawaka tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

Tenei ahau tetahi o nga pononga o t iwi, te tuku atu na i taku mihi kia a koutou ki nga kai whakahaere hoki o tenei hui. Ko te tumanako, kia hari, kia koa koutou, ara tatou katoa, tae noa ki te wa e wehewehe ai tatou, kati.

As a former comrade in arms, it was with pride and pleasure I accepted the invitation to contribute to the Reunion magazine.

There were all sorts of reasons why young men of our generation enlisted for active service. It my case not only was it a desire to serve my country, but an opportunity to fulfill my fathers' dying wish, that I should pay to the Ngapuhi people with my blood, what he regarded as a debt of honour. If I had to pay the supreme price, so be it.

To understand my fathers wish, he was the Member of Parliament for Northern Maori from 1913 to 1938. During the first World War he in conjunction with Sir Apirana Ngata, Sir Mani Pomare, and Sir James Carroll formed the Maori Recruiting Board and Regimental Committee. As spokesman for Ngapuhi he authorised them to go to war. Many did not come home. His own family were too young.

For these reasons then, on that historic and fateful day the 3rd of September 1939 when it was announced that New Zealand was at war with Germany, he, my father with great emotion being critically ill, said to me, son I want you to enlist tomorrow and carry out my wish. He did not live to see me enter Narrow Neck Camp early in 1940. Thus began the tortuous road to completing a mission.

I was joined two days later by a squad of well trained and efficient Maori NCOs. Some later became Officers others

remained NCOs, but all served with the Maori Battalion with distinction. Several now lie in foreign fields. After a period of training we were transferred to Papakura Camp to train reinforcements with on my sleeve the first step to a Field Marshall's baton.

In the beginning of May 1940, I along with other NCO's were marched out of Papakura to go to OCTU Trentham. I must have been an after thought, for the others were already paraded for inspection when I was told by the CO Colonel Wales, to hurry up and pack and join the others at the railway station. By this time I was a Corporal acting Sergeant.

Life and training at OCTU was strenuous. Like every other cadet I had a healthy respect for Captain McCulloch the "Screaming Skull". Indeed, I can still hear him screaming Mr Taihape for Mr Pine Taiapa. At the end of the Course, nine of our intake graduated 2nd Lieutenants; Pine Taiapa, Jim Matehaere, Don Stewart, Tony Barrett, Dick Ormsby, Jack Te Puni, Jim Henare, Hupa Hamiora and Aubrey Rota. The last two were killed in action at the desert.

Back to Papakura to team up with 2 Lieutenants Awatere and Awarau. All these Officers served in the Battalion with the distinction. Indeed two of them were destined to command the Battalion.

During final leave the elders of Ngapuhi gathered at my home Marae of Motatau to wish me Godspeed and to prepare me for battle. The ceremony of the "Tohi o Karakawhati" and the anointing a well known Ngapuhi ritual was performed by an octogenarian Hare Te Rangi a grandson of Kaiteke or Te Kemara the famous Ngapuhi tohunga, who always accompanied Hongi Hika and his armies.

Early in 1941 we embarked with the 5th Reinforcements on the Mauretania. Standing alone on the after deck, I saw the sun set and the land of my birth disappear over the horizon for the last time till my return in 1946. With a tear or two and a lump in the throat I turned to other pressing duties.



On arrival in Sydney there were the biggest boats in the World waiting for us. The Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mary, the Ille de France, the Aquitania and the Nieu Amsterdam. The next day, one by one they moved out of the harbour. What a sight, what a convoy. If Hitler knew or perhaps he did. Apart from one or two submarine scares the voyage was uneventful. The heat in the tropics was almost unbearable, the food excellent, supplemented by some crayfish obtained alive and put in the bathtub by Pine Taiapa.

This was the holding pen. Whenever we felt like eating a leg or two it was dispatched with due ceremony and the appropriate chant was recited to thank and appease Tangaroa or Neptune and then to the galley. One incident though should be related. Just before we reached Colombo, two of our Maori Soldiers played up. They were duly charged and pleaded guilty. Punishment for them was Shore leave withdrawn. Jim Matehaere and I went down to the mess deck to see our boys. In front of the other Maori Troops the two offenders challenged us to a fist fight. If they won they were to be allowed shore leave. If we won they would accept our punishment. Immediately there were cheers, and come on Officers don't be yellow. Imagine then our predicament. We held a council of war and decided to accept the challenge. We all stripped to the waist. To cut a long story short we emerged the victors. We suspected that from then on our mana and authority was respected. Unorthodox, I suppose so.

First glimpse of Egypt was very much as I expected. This then was the land of the Pharaohs with a welter of intricate and confusing factors. The Suez Canal, the key to the war for the Western Allies and the Axis powers.

After training at Maadi and attending courses, I was finally posted to 28 Maori Battalion achieving a long felt desire and goal. There I was standing with considerable awe before the CO Colonel Dittmer, whose reputation as a soldier a disciplinarian and a Commander was well known. His first comment was "you are carrying too much weight, I will see that you lose some of it. The second was, call yourself a soldier? You are not a soldier till you have smelt cordite in battle. In addition to the CO's comments, I realized that the majority of my platoon had been in action in Greece, Crete and the desert. I had to fight back a feeling of inferiority and a genuine desire to experience battle as soon as possible for my peace of mind. After a spell in the Levant on the Anti Lebanons with the Battalion and a stint at a Middle East Company Commanders' course we were back in the desert to experience my first smell of cordite in battle at Mersa Matruh and Minquar Qaim. Kaponga Box, El Myreia, Munassib, Ruweisat, for ever so it seemed on the run. Finally El Alamein. Dig in, move attack and patrols. Thus far no further. Every man will stand and fight to the last.

This was the order from the new Eighth Army's Commander General Montgomery.

From the time the Division arrived back at Mersa Matruh from Syria and during the retreat to El Alamein, there were orders, counter orders, marches and counter marches. As a platoon Commander I did not know what was happening and where we were going to. It was one disaster after another. The situation appeared hopeless.

The breakthrough at Mingar Qaim apart from punching the enemy's nose, proved to me one could go through a hail of fire unscathed, and also the opportunity to qualify as a soldier by smelling cordite in battle as Colonel Dittmer said.

On the 23rd October on the day of the battle of Alamein I shared with thousands of other soldiers the proud honour of standing on the crossroad of history. That night I was wounded so I thought to myself, well Dad your debt to Ngapuhi is well and truly paid with my blood. Another rather amusing thing happened. In the late afternoon Ben Porter arrived from Brigade to wish me well but expressed the fear that I might not survive the battle. I had no illusions that the battle was going to be easy, nevertheless I assured Ben my time was not yet. So he told me in the most pious way, that when he got home he would name his first born son after me. I promised him in case his lease on life was suddenly terminated, that I would name my son after him. In the event we both came home, only just though, and both named our sons after each other. The battle of Alamein proved to be the turning point and the beginning of the end of the war in North Africa.

The march from Alamein through Libya, Tripolitania, ending in the mountain's of Tunisia some 2000 miles in 6 months was described, by Mr Winston Churchill as 'unparalleled in all history'. I rejoined the Battalion in Tripoli in time to supervise the unloading of ships in the harbour.

For me the battle of Medenine and the last one at Djebebina were significant. Medenine gave me a close up view and the thrill of the enemy being well and truly thrashed and crushed. Djebebina in my view should never have taken place. It was already known that the enemy was about to give in. Yet my Company and D. Company were ordered to attack two high features.

Although we took our objective, my Company had four killed and some wounded unnecessarily so in my view. The enemy surrendered four days later. It was part of the strategy to keep up the pressure. This battle reminded me of that profound military principle:

'The best strategic plan is useless if it cannot be executed tactically'.

On May 13, 1943 General Alexander sent this telegram to Sir Winston Churchill.

Sir,

"It is my duty to report that the Tunisian campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African Shore."

And so the war is over for the time being with little cheering only a sense of relief and exhaustion. An anti climax perhaps. No more flies, sand, sand storms, salty water, sangers, mirages, heat and movement forward and backward. The ten or so months in the desert is a period of my life I don't want to live over again.

Back to Maadi in Egypt for a well earned rest and leave. After training and absorbing new reinforcements the order to march on foot to Burgel Arab came. During the march which was by night, some of my men marched in their underpants, others in their birthday suits. All arrived in good shape.

Speculation was rife as to where we were going to. Italy seemed to be the destination. This was confirmed the day after we left Alexandria. After a very pleasant and enjoyable voyage across the Mediterranean or 'Mia Mare' as Mussolini would have it, we arrived and disembarked at Taranto.

Before forgetting Egypt altogether I must tell the story of when I was leaving the Middle East Company and Battalion Commanders Course, the Brigadier Commandant called me in. He asked me if I would like to join the Indian Army. Without thinking I filled in the application form. When I reported back to Battalion in Syria the CO Colonel Dyer





**Maori WAACS wave a welcome as the ship berths at Wellington.**

congratulated me on my good report from METS but then the tone of his voice changed. He wished to know why I wanted to join the Indian Army: in his hand was my application. I had forgotten it had to get his approval. Was I a Maori or Indian. He tore up the form and I returned to my Company a much wiser man.

For most of us this was our first time on European soil. For the originals this was the second time. This was not the first time an army had invaded the land of the Romans. What a contrast to the desert of recent and unpleasant memory. The climate, the woods, hills, mountains, rivers, olive trees, vineyards, cultivations villages, towns and cities. A good indication of the kind of terrain we were going to become familiar with in the months or may be years ahead.

The three attacks on Orsogna and the one on the Railway Station Cassino were some of the most difficult actions I took part in. They also proved for me the last time I would be commanding A Coy. When the Battalion moved from Cassino to Isernia, I was sent by Col. Young across to Egypt to inspect our Base at Maadi and for a rest. After two weeks I flew back to Bari to rejoin the Battalion just before Florence. Col Young was away on sick leave and Major Awatere was in temporary command of the Battalion. I acted as 2i/c until the CO rejoined the Battalin at Iesi. I was then appointed to command Headquarters Company.

We moved to the front and the Battle for Rimii where two of our Senior Company Commandes were killed: Majors Te Punga and Mitchell. Although withdrawing all the time, the enemy was making us fight for every inch of ground. After San Angelo we were again withdrawn and returned to Iesi. From there we moved back into the hills to a lovely place called Camerino an ancient University town. Here we had a good rest. On November 18, Colonel Young announced he was marching out on furlough and command

of the Battalion would pass to Co. Awatere and I would become 2i/c. Both Peter Awatere and myself shook hands and vowed to stay with the Battalion while life lasted.

The battle of the Senio was the beginning of the end. My opportunity to command the Battalion in action came between the Sillaro and the River Idice. Colonel Awatere was ordered back to B. Echelon for a rest. I was elated, at the same time I realized I was being tried out as it were. In spite of strong opposition we crossed the River and pushed onto the great and wide River Po. I commanded the Battalion again on the outflanking attack on Mestre, opposite Venice and on to the River Isonzo. Then the enemy surrendered in Italy. We just flopped down and went to sleep. We were ordered to move to just before Opicina. The situation with Titos forces and ours was very delicate. In the end the Jugoslavs moved out of Trieste. Signal received from the General for Co. Awatere and me to proceed to Division headquarters, he wanted to see us. On arrival we were treated to some refreshments and a cup of tea. Then suddenly he said to the CO Peter, I have bad news for you. You are going home tomorrow morning, a staff car will arrive to pick you up up at 0800 hrs. He then turned to me, Jim, as from midnight tonight, you will assume command of the Maori Battalion with the rank of Lieut. Colonel. It is difficult to describe my feelings at that time, other than to say I felt humble and naturally elated. The next morning I was invited by the General to have lunch with him. He warned me that I had to command the Battalion in the attack on Japan. He expressed his regret that he could not let me go on furlough in spite of my long service of four years with the Battalion. V.E. day came and then we moved back to Lake Trasimene near Florence.

Out of the blue came the news, two bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war with Japan



Officers and men of the Battalion arching off the wharf at Wellington.

was over. The news was received by the biggest and perhaps the most dangerous fireworks display I have seen.

Reflecting on what you and I have been through in those long years of trials and tribulations I was reminded by what Napoleon said to his troops: 'The first quality of a soldier is fortitude in enduring fatigue and hardship: bravery but the second. Poverty, hardship, misery, are the schools of a good soldier'. We can rightfully claim we are graduates of that school.

I was advised by the Brigadier that the Battalion with base personnel were to come home as one complete unit, if and when ships were available. In order to maintain discipline while we waited, I commenced a programme of route marching and training to keep idle hands and bodies occupied. Keeping the battalion as a unit and out of trouble was a herculean task, especially when the war was over. Five months of waiting elapsed before we embarked on Boxing Day 1945. I was ordered to hand the canteen Rau Aroha in, I refused. I told Division it was part of the Battalion and it was coming home with us. I embarked with the canteen on board the Dominion Monarch in the morning before the battalion. When the canteen was lowered into the hold the hatches could not be closed, it was six inches too high. I was asked by the Ships' Staff Captain to have a look. I told him it was easy to resolve the problem by letting the tyres down. No further difficulty.

When I reported to the ships Captain he informed me that Dominion Monarch was a dry ship — well. As I watched my troops embark I knew that in nearly every kit bag was some wine or liquor. We had gone through the Suez Canal and going down the Red Sea on New Years Eve. The Ship's Staff Captain came to my cabin to get me to accompany him, down to the troop decks. What a mess. Empty bottles and soldiers strewn all over the decks. I thought to myself, so what. It seemed to me to be stupid having a dry ship for troops going home from War. The next morning I had to report to the Ships Captain. He was very upset. He cabled Army Headquarters about the matter.

We sailed into Wellington harbour, full of honours and happy to be home again, and for me after five years of active service with 28 Battalion.

The last parade was held on Pipitea Wharf and the last

march to the reception and welcome home. For the Battalion was no more and passed into history with a proud record second to none.

Let me conclude by quoting General Lord Freyberg V.C. 'No infantry battalion had a more distinguished record, or saw more fighting, or alas, had such heavy casualties. In all the many campaigns, this battalion took a great part, often a decisive part in the fighting.'

Let me also pay my tribute and respect to all those gallant Pakeha of all ranks who served in the battalion and helped to create such a proud record. The voluntary service of the Maori in all the conflicts our Country has participated in, gave a new dimension and glorious tradition, written indelibly into the pages of passionless history; of the people the late Sir Peter Buck described as 'Vikings of the Sunrise'.

To those of our comrades who lie in foreign soil I quote Pericles.

'They gave their bodies to the commonwealth and received, each for his own memory, praise that will never die, and with it the grandest sepulchre of all, not that in which their mortal bones are laid, but a home in the minds of men, where their glory remains fresh'. 'Kia mau. Kia mau ki te kawau maro, mo te atakura o Tumatauenga'.

Kia Ora mai ano koutou katoa

— Jim Henare

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