

28th Māori Battalion

The Māori Chaplains

Accession Number 1996.447: This is an excerpt of the recollections of members of the 28th Māori Battalion published in the 14th reunion magazine "The Maori Battalion Remembers" held by the National Army Museum Te Mata Toa and protected by copyright law



"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 MAORI CHAPLAINS

Throughout the war the Maori Battalion had its own Maori Chaplain, and for the last three years there was a second chaplain who worked with the Maori troops at Base. A special church service book in Maori was produced, with hymns and an order of service based on the "Book of Common Prayer", for owing to the unusual denomination ratio, the five Maori chaplains were all members of the Church of England. Padre Hawawira, who had first gone to the First World War at the age of sixteen, was the first chaplain, and he served in Greece, Crete, Libya and Syria before being invalided home. His place was taken by Padre W. Rangī, a man of great spiritual force, well-loved and respected. He was once described as having the face of a New Testament saint and the fire of an Old Testament prophet. He was not young for infantry work, having three sons serving with him in the battalion, but he made little of age and was giving splendid service up to the time when both his eardrums were burst by an exploding shell at Alamein.



Padres
Hanawera, Rangī, Wanoa.

Padre N.T. Wanoa served with the battalion from Alamein to Tunis, after spending the first three years of the war as a combatant, during which he rose to the rank of lieutenant after good service in Greece and Crete. He had been a vicar before the war and was commissioned as a chaplain in 1942.

Padre Wi Huata arrived in the Middle East in 1943 and served throughout the Italian campaign. He was a young man with many talents. Life, vitality, and enthusiasm flowed from him at all times, whether he was living in the front line or taking a choir on tour round the Base hospitals. Energetic in all things affecting the welfare of his men, he showed great courage and proved himself a worthy representative of his battalion. He was awarded the Military Cross for his fine work with the battalion, in Italy. His religious duties were performed with sincerity and love, and he presented over a hundred men for confirmation.

Padre Manu Bennett, another distinguished son of the Rt. Rev. F.A. Bennett, Bishop of Aotearoa, arrived in the Middle East in 1944 and also saw service with the battalion in Italy.

It was right that the Maoris should have chaplains of their own race for they had many characteristics which deserved real knowledge and sympathy. In battle they won respect for their fiery courage and their most light-hearted contempt of danger. They did not bother much about minor regulations and red tape, and many a time everyone, save Authority, smiled at some ingenious interpretation of military law. Like all New Zealand soldiers they grew restive in the monotonous routine of a Base camp, and sometimes this boredom led to trouble. But the crimes of a few

individuals could not tarnish the record of the battalion in action nor disguise the fact that as a race they have an interest in spiritual things which is often deeper and more natural than that of the pakeha.

Every morning before daylight in the front line prayers would be taken by the chaplain, but if he were absent an officer or private would always step forward to take his place. They took a real interest in their Church services and made them beautiful with their singing. Sometimes in big services at Base the Maoris would sing an anthem in their own language.

There was one occasion on a hot, sticky, dusty day, when some two thousand soldiers attended a service in a cinema in Maadi. The church parade seemed formal and uninspiring until the Maori contingent stood up and sang. Then the war and the dust and the heat were forgotten in a moment. Something of home and of beauty was brought very near, and the glorious unaccompanied harmony brought new life to the listeners, as refreshing as rain in the desert. Time and again a small group of Maoris separated from their battalion would attend a pakeha Church parade and sing hymns in Maori with the same wonderful effect, giving a fresh meaning to the words of Isaiah: 'The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose'. The Maori chaplains were always popular members of the Department where they willingly took their share of all extra duties, and in the battalion they were worthy members of a race famed for its martial tradition and respect for the deeper things in life.

PADRE WI HUATA:

25 years Young, Energetic & Empathetic.

He says: I was honoured to serve as Padre for the 28 N.Z. (Maori) Bn. I will never forget them and the days and months and years I was privileged to serve them while they served their people and their country. They were warriors with a long tradition of war, Field-Marshal Rommell said, "Give me the Maori Battalion and I will conquer the world" world".

One of my saddest experiences was in Wellington, January 23rd, 1946 when I saw the dispersal of our Battalion — A Coy — The Gum Diggers (Nga Kiri Kapia)
B Coy — The Penny Divers (Nga Ruku Kapa)
C Coy — The Cowboys (Nga Kau Poi)
D Coy — Ngati Walk-about,
H.Q. Coy — The Odds & Sods.

It was a great body of men, proud and vigorous, second to none in a venture that taxed their total being — physical, emotional and Spiritual.

An Unusual Celebration of Holy Communion.

After the Battalion moved back to Castelfrentano from Orsogna, where there had been no fewer than 233 casualties, 50 of them fatal, we had a Holy Communion Service which was attended by 788 men. The communicants sat under the olive trees while they waited their turn, and a team of runners distributed the bread and wine — I repeatedly said the words, with the giving of the Bread: Ma Te Tinana o to tatou Ariki, o Ihu Karaiti, i tukua nei mou, e whakaroa tou tinana me tou, wairua kia ora tonu. Tangohia tenei kainga, hei whakamahara ki a te Karaiti i mate mou, kainga whakaponotia ia i roto i tou ngakau, i runga i te whakawhetai,

and with the giving of the Cup:

Ma nga Toto o to tatou Ariki, o Ihu Karaiti, i whakahekea mou, e whakaora tou tinana me tou wairua kia ora tonu. Inumia tenei, hei whakamahara, ki nga toto o te Karaiti i whakahekea mou, mo te whakawhetai ano.

Earlier I had persuaded Boy Tomoana to part with his considerable store of vino. He remarked afterwards that he was pleased to participate in the Holy Communion and in the holy drink.

Two of my chief helpers at this service were Joe Poata and Corporal Rawhiti. When some of the communicants realised that Rawhiti who was the sanitary Corporal was also a server, they murmured, but Rawhiti was equal to the occasion with the retort, "Very clean, very hygiene."

These two same Gum Diggers were also my fastest grave diggers at several burials. When I asked Joe Poata how he came to be such a fast digger, he said, "The first hole is always for your own protection." And when I said, "How about the Padre?" — "Please yourself", was his comment, so we all became fast grave diggers.

During my time as Padre for 28 Bn, I suppose I did the same sort of things that all Padres do in the 2NZEF. The same sort of things that Kahi Harawira, Tunoa Wanoa and Whare Rangi did before me. But there are some things that I think a lot of people don't know about and it is these things I want to tell about.

I believe that the 28 NZ (Maori) Battalion was so good at fighting because they had a strong spiritual side to their lives

— a simple belief in their ability to fight and a real belief in the Hereafter. There were many times when men who were dying said to me, "Padre, homai te inoi tuku," or "E Wi pray for me," or "E Wi, pray for my mother."

When a young soldier is afraid or when he knows he is dying, he calls for his mother. The priorities of aroha to a young Maori soldier seem to be:

- (1) Love for his mother.
- (2) Love for his father.
- (3) Love for his wife.
- (4) Love for his children.

Services: Formal & Informal.

Under the heading of Formal Services I include the massed Church Parades at Base, when we combined with other units and where the great crowd itself provided an atmosphere of excitement and shared the fellowship, which was strongest when the hymn singing had been set alight by our own powerful choir. With a good leader the ordinary soldier was happy to follow — hymn singing included.

When we were out of the line, but spread out in company areas it was my custom to hold services separately for each company — a day each. This meant that the whole week was covered A to H.Q. with Saturday for Battalion H.Q. and Sunday for a combined Service, usually Holy Communion at a central area — two of the most popular hymns were: Piko nei Te Matenga and Aue Ihu Tirohia.

The pattern of services when the troops were committed was not very different, but the details were — time and personnel available depended very much on 'the exigencies and the service' as the phrase goes. Half-demolished buildings, especially the cellars, convenient holes, sunken roads and stone walls were all places for corporate prayer and fellowship.

There are two other aspects of this section of my reminiscences that I must mention. The first of these is how important it was to our men that there be some form of religious observance. If the Padre wasn't available there would usually be an officer or some other leader to conduct prayers in Maori.

My second mention is my remembrance of Holy Communion services a few hours before and a few days after an action. These services were exciting and stimulating and very very sad. We came together as a family knowing full well that some of would die or that some of us had died.

He Inoi Tuku mo te Tangata
e tata pu ana te mata

Before battle I always tried to get myself in a place where as each company went forward they would pass me. I would say He Ino Tuku — always in Maori — a Commendatory Prayer. 'Almighty God with whom do live the spirits of just men made perfect after they are delivered from their earthly prisons: We humbly commend the souls of these Thy servants of the 28th NZ (Maori) Battalion into Thy hands, as into the hands of a faithful Creator and most merciful Saviour that they may in the end be brought to Life Everlasting through the Merits of Jesus Christ Thine Only Son Our Lord — Amen. After this I usually found my way to the RAP to see what I could do to help the Doc and his staff.

5 NZ INF Brigade 2 NZ Division Corps
 NZCHD att 28 NZ (MAORI) BN
 Schedule No. _____ Unit _____
 (To be left blank)
 Army No. and Rank 817470 Rev CF Cl 4
 Name WI TO TAU HUATA
 (Christian names must be stated)

Received	Passed
Brigade 18 Apr 45	18 Apr 45
Division _____	_____
Corps _____	_____
Army _____	_____

Action for which commended (Date and place of action must be stated)	Recommended by	Honour or Reward	(To be left blank)
Rev HUATA became Padre 28 NZ (MAORI) BN in Sep 43 and since then he has done continuously outstanding work in the course of the bn's war effort. During action at ORSOONA on 23/24 Dec 43, his first experience under shellfire, he helped to recover the bodies of soldiers from among mine-fields and carried wounded with the stretcher-bearers. Thereafter, he made daily visits to the PDLs holding prayers with and for troops often under shellfire and enemy machine-gun fire. Ever since that battle and in every battle in which the bn has since been engaged, the Padre has continuously and religiously done such deeds to a point of routine. After every battle he is always to be seen recovering bodies of soldiers and attending to their proper burials. His happy disposition both in and out of the line and his spiritual leadership are so inspiring that the morale of the troops is maintained at a high standard, and high morale founded on spiritual worship contributes very largely to the fighting spirit and efficiency of the bn	AWATERE Lt-Col 28 NZ (MAORI) BN 18 Apr 45	MERIT DEC MC	
	L. BONINANT, Brig. Comd 5 NZ Inf Bde. 18 Apr 45.		

(Sgd) B. C. FREYBERG
LT-GEN.
Comd. 2 NZEF.

Padre Huata's Citation for the M.C.

Concerts:

We had a number of concert groups, large and small and for all occasions. Many of these concerts were held among ourselves, and other groups were formed to visit the wounded in hospital. Some of the personalities I remember best were, Pango Munro playing the piano, Lou Paul singing the 'Lords Prayer', Sonny Waru singing 'Kingi Tawhio & Bull Reedy Raumoko', George Asher was our music critic and Jackie Baker the piano accordionist.

The harmony and volume that a group of our Battalion boys could produce was wonderful. Their singing brings back many fond memories.

I recall an incident from one particular concert. We had a fellow Edwards from Tuhoe — B Coy. Could he sing!! I dropped him from the programme and when he asked me why, I told him that his songs were too dirty.

There was the time we were giving a concert in front of an audience of men and women. Edwards pleaded with me to let him sing. He promised it would be O.K, and I let him. During the singing he placed the American and French flags around his Kumu. I was troubled about what might come next so I told he to get off stage, but he wouldn't. He was properly worked up, so we arranged a Commando Act — a real one was carried out by my brother Oussie. When the commandoes booted off the singer the crowd thought it was good acting and when Edward called out, 'Padre, Padre!!, have mercy on a cheerful ass,' the crowd roared.

Football:

Whenever and wherever we could, we played football. Company matches tended to be tribal affairs and they produced some pretty good games and so did the times we played other battalions and units. We had some pretty good players and we had some hard-case ones. Our best Maori soldier was our worst footballer. He was dynamite in the front row, but Ray Thompson and Rei Rautahi knew how to fix him. And there was the time he tackled Harry Lambert. Harry was surprised because he and Peta were playing on the side same. Peta had a vocabulary for all occasions, but I'm not going to record his football English — it might spoil my article and I am a parson. Peta always wanted his side to win. He even tried to get Johnnie Smith to transfer out of 21 Battalion.

All in all, we had hundreds of tough footballers in our ranks. It was hard to knock a Maori out because he feared nobody. They used to say, 'Better to get hurt here than by a real bullet'.

Footnote to Football — Canon Huata Cannon-ball.

Padre himself was a pretty tough footballer. He learnt to play in his home district of Wairoa where Rugby is rugged.

(I was born there too, but never played football there). In the early days of inter-unit football in Italy Wi Huata and I were on opposing sides, Tutu Wirepa was '2nd Five' and I