

# 28th Māori Battalion

## The Way of the Māori Soldier

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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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[28th Māori Battalion \(28maoribattalion.org.nz\)](http://28maoribattalion.org.nz)

# 'MA TE REINGA'

## The Way of the Maori Soldier.

*The way of the Maori Soldier is a record of the deeds and sacrifices of Maori Soldiers, by Major H.G. Dyer who graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1918, where he was a senior cadet and won the Sword of Honour, and who, with 'D' Company of the Maori Battalion, which he commanded from its formation, and later as Battalion Commander, served in England, Greece, Crete, and round Gazala in Libya. The following extracts tell of some of the soldiers he admired and loved:*

"Harding was a powerful man and a happy one. The Ngapuhis of the North were the wild men of the Battalion and Harding was one of them. He lived and loved at Hokianga in the old stamping ground of Hongi Hika and Judge Maning, and in his own way he followed the path they trod. . . Harding was a cavalier, a rollicking blade, who did not have to seek adventure — he created it. Wherever he moved he provoked mischief and fun and at times desperate adventure. It was then we first appreciated the qualities of Nathan, Harding's famous henchman who now has a Greek wife and about whom fabulous stories could be told.

We left Greece on Anzac Day from a beach near Marathon. My thoughts were bitter. The Germans were broadcasting "Run, rabbit run". Along came Harding as cheerful as ever: splashing through the water shepherding men who are always a bit nervous at such times, onto the landing barges. It was all war to him, and war, like everything else is just what you make it.

I did not see my friend during the first day of fighting in Crete. I cannot remember seeing him at all. He was killed during the night advance on Meleme. His Company Commander, Jack Bell, was killed a few hours later. I will try to describe the circumstances. It was an action very common in our military history — a muddle in which many good men were killed and a few brave survivors won glory.

The Maoris had fought hard all day and had suffered casualties, we had had no sleep and little to eat. We started to form up at eleven o'clock to be ready by midnight. 'D' Company was nearest the road. Harding with some of 'A' Company and some of 'C' Company was on our left flank further south. The starting hour was either 12.30 or 1 a.m., I forget which. Then we waited. There was some odd firing along the creek bed but otherwise all was quiet. The 20th Battalion did not arrive. Australian transport which they were to use was late, we waited. After some time there was heavy fighting ahead of us; then quietness again. After some time Jim Tuhiwai of 'C' Company came to me and said that at the starting time Harding had moved off with his troops as ordered, taking Jim's platoon with him. After some distance they came under heavy fire. Many men were hit; the rest scattered; he thought Harding was killed but was not sure. I waited, cursing; knowing that I should have made sure that Harding had heard of the delay.

At last the 20th arrived. We formed up and started our night advance of the three miles at, I think, a quarter to four — about an hour before daylight. We did advance with hard going and hard fighting. The tanks did well. One looked after the front of each Battalion and opened heavy fire with tracers on the flashes of German guns that opposed us. We lost men. Two of my best, Karetu and Apitu were killed by one brave German officer who was bayoneted. As day broke we reached the outskirts of Maleme village. The advance was held up.

But what of Harding? Was he killed, was he captured, was he in the hills? We never heard, not in Crete; but we became convinced that he was dead. Already rumour was at work. The legendary leader was still abroad, leading a charge here, staying a retreat there; a burly, jolly figure always in the middle of the fight.

To me Harding was a soldier. To his race, fighting was the task of a man.

There was Corporal Kopu, who never achieved fame but who played his part like a man. The Corporal was not supposed to be a fighting man, but he could not help it. He was in charge of our company stretcher bearers in Crete. They were a brave little group who never failed to do their duty, but this corporal could combine two jobs in one, as I shall relate. In the excitement of the aerial landing, he pulled off his stretcher-armlet, seized his rifle, fired at whatever parachutist he could see. There in some bamboos he discovered our cook hiding in terror. The cook, by the way, had only just come to us. Kopu told him to shoot.

Cook; "I can't I've never fired a rifle in my life".

Kopu; "You bloody well shoot".

The cook leans against the creek bank, aims at a parachutist crouching by his parachute about forty yards away, fires and misses.

Kopu; "You hit him this time. Hold that rifle firm and mind your trigger".

The cook fires and hits. A broad grin spreads over his face. Cook; "I'm alright now". And away they go up the creek looking for Germans.

That night the corporal stayed back by himself to care for the wounded when we set out for Maleme. It was not a pleasant task as small parties of Germans were moving down the creek bed all night, and at times he waged war single-handed against them.

To those who know the uncertainties and tensions of such warfare, that was no mean achievement.

Europeans may at times in the past have thought of the Maori as brilliant in attack and in victory but prone to accept defeat easily. Corporal Kopu and many hundreds of his race in Crete, dispelled that illusion from my mind forever.

However, this story is not about such men. It is about less gifted men, about men who had been forgotten when the better gifts of life were apportioned out, about Murph and Wattie D. and Iwihora Bill and Iwihora Harold and Old Horse.

These men had something in common, they could get into trouble, and they could fight.

In Crete, German parachutists fell in the vicinity of our Brigade Field Punishment Centre. Now I'm not saying that Wattie D was in there, but after the fight, and it was a good one. Wattie had a German machine gun on his shoulder and a number of belts of ammunition wrapped around his

person. Days later as we retreated over the main mountain ridge towards Sparkia this stout soldier was still using his Spandau effectively.

Murch was an older man, bullet-headed and burly. When I saw him I said to myself "There is a section leader", and Murph was given a stripe.

He kept it for one difficult week. When a section leader refuses to get up in the morning and orders his section to bring him breakfast, when he refuses to come on parade until it suits him, and then walks out of barracks for his quiet amusement when it suits him, it is difficult, however great his "Mana" to keep him as a Lance Corporal. With a brigadier it might be different. In England Murph was given another chance, with worse results. English Inns are very hospitable, and the gathering place for convivial souls.

So our old soldier became a mortar man. He recruited his mate Tom Hawea as his assistant. Their methods were slow, methodical and unorthodox. They scorned to take cover. We though sadly of their early decease.

But of all the old soldiers I think that I liked "Old Horse" best. He hardly ever said a word, but what he did say was surprisingly to the point. He had two mates. They were two brothers Iwihora Bill and Iwihora Harold. We were never sure which was the surname, but that is what they answered to, in full.

They seemed to understand one another, and stuck close together, both in action and in the orderly room.

The spontaneous charge by the Maoris in the last evening in Maleme was the finest action that I saw. I believe that for sheer inherent courage it was unsurpassed in the Middle East.

A few European soldiers collected in our area, which was a small flat spur sloping to the right, almost completely covered with gnarled olive trees. I said to one, a fair sergeant of the

Battalion.

"What are you doing here, Sergeant?"

"The Maoris can fight," he said. "I'm staying here".

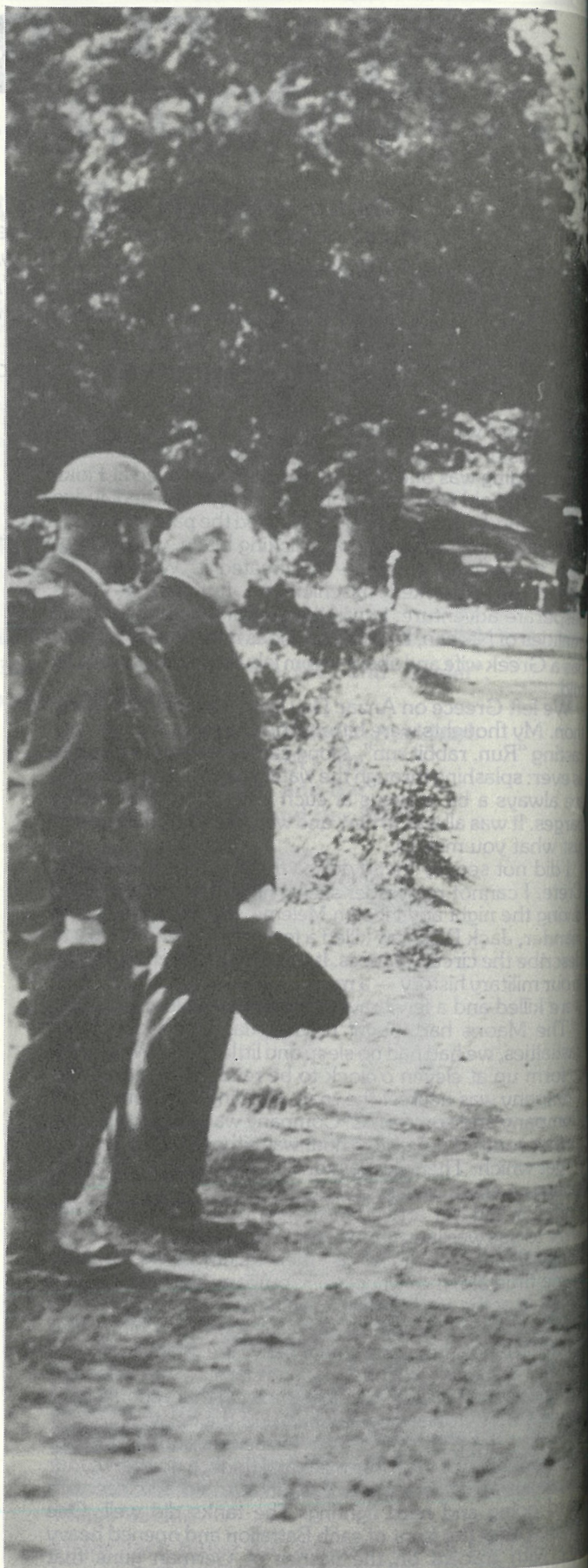
As evening approached, the Germans who had been steadily reinforced all day by troop carrying planes, began to press us. I suppose they thought that we would turn and run. In front, just below the edge of a spur, at about a hundred yards distance they erected a banner such as you would see in a street procession — a broad strip of red cloth held up by a pole at each end. In the centre was a white circle with a large black swastika.

Then, opening a concentrated fire, they came at us from the front and right.

As a man the Maoris rose where they lay, a scattered bank of dark figures under the trees. With knees bent, and leaning to the right they slowly advanced firing at the hip. They did not haka, for this was not rehearsal. Instead there rose from their throats a deep shout "Ah! Ah! Ah!" as they advance firing. Then the cartridges in their magazines being exhausted, they broke into a run with bayonets levelled, and their shouts rising as they went. The ground shook with the heavy tramp of man, the air whistling and cracked with bullets. Men went down but still they charged. The pride of the Germany army turned and fled.

I stood on the edge of the ravine and smiled as I looked at the abandoned machine guns and mortars which had worried us all day, and then turned to walk back. In front of me lay two figures, a dark man on his side, and fair man sprawled out, both grey in the shadow of death. Old Horse and the Sergeant, equal in sacrifice and equal in death.

As I walked back with the "Major" to rest for the night I thought that there are some things that are greater than individual human life. Among them is sacrifice. In it all men are equal, of whatever colour and whatever rank. Old Horse was gone; a simple Maori man, but in the supreme moment loyal and true, laying his all on the altar of manhood, his gift to Maoritanga. I thought, "A man could never find finer troops. I will soldier them to the end".



D Coy 28 NZ Maori Bn. March past Mr Winston C



in England 1940. Major Dyer leading the Company.