

28th Māori Battalion

A Ngāpuhi Narrative

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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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• A NGAPUHI NARRATIVE •

At Wellington I boarded the 'MAURETANIA', bound for Port Said, with H.M.S. Ajax and Leander looking out for the enemy. In the daytime the two destroyers would be manoeuvring till night then they would be back. I felt good and safe. In the Great Australian Bight it was really rough waves 40 to 50 feet high. The 'MAURETANIA' was just like a little dinghy getting thrown about. Tea up - steak and eggs on the table. I enjoyed my kai but some of the boys couldn't eat with sea sickness. James Henare was one of them. Anyway at last I reached Port Said and it was good to see land after a month on the sea. It sure got boring.

BLISSFULLY IGNORANT

We arrived in Cairo by train and looking out from the window I saw lots of girls singing out, "Give it milk, Kiwi." It was funny. I didn't know what they meant till I got to Maadi - there the old hands told me, and I laughed and laughed my guts out. Things were going pretty good but all of a sudden I took ill with Malaria and was rushed to Helwan Hospital by transport. But next morning I came O.K. and after about a week's rest I was back with the boys.

FROM THE SANDS OF EGYPT TO SNOW OF SYRIA AND BACK AGAIN

The next move was to Syria. Boy! it was snowing and very cold - no water till midday, but at night I had some rum issue to keep me warm. In Palestine I still remember the Sea of Galilee, the Seven Pillars, the olive trees and oranges and the Dead Sea. I went on leave to Beirut and Haifa for a week which was good, but next thing there was a sudden change of plan. Big Dan Beazley and Moses Daniels and I had to rush back to Mersa Matru. Tobruk had fallen to the Jerries. Bombs were flying all over the place. So this I thought was action at last.

ACTION AT LAST - SURROUNDED AND NEARLY IN THE BAG

The desert was covered with Jerries who kept coming full out. Next morning everybody stood their ground and Harawira got hit next to me. It was one of the greatest experiences I have had. The shell hit his tin hat and that saved his life. Boy! That was great. The fighting kept going all day, but finally we were surrounded. That night we had to break out at Minquar Quaim, I was number one Bren Gunner and Ike King was number two. We just kept running on and on. Poor Ehu Tiore went down, he got hit in the back. I still remember picking up a 15 year old Jerry - only a kid.

WE LEAVE KAPONGA BOX

In the morning round about 9 a.m. we made our last stand at Kaponga. We dug down and laid mines - it must have been midday. The desert skyline was thick with Panzer Division tanks. We let the Jerries keep coming and our 25 pounder artillery started, so we let them have it. It must have been a five to six week battle at Kaponga. On the Sunday at daylight we moved about ten miles to the West which was a weak point. So away we went 'A' Company 'B' 'C' & 'D'

BOMBED TO BLAZES

The next thing the German Stukas pounced on us. I tell you it was a massacre. Sid Kereopa who was in charge of the ammunition truck was blown up by bombs. It was a real disaster. He didn't know what had happened anyway. We

started to dig down again and the next thing a bomb landed about eight feet away, We lay flat on the sand, but the bomb did not blow up, instead it ricocheted away.

ON THE MOVE AGAIN

I and my mates Wi Nathan, Dick McManus, Moses Daniels, Harry Bowman and Ike King all hopped on our truck and away we went flat out. Just coming on evening Dick McManus and I pitched our pup tent. After we had about two hours rest the word came to pack up. I rolled my bed up and as I stood up there was Mac swearing away. There was a snake in his bed. He went for his 303 rifle and started shooting. He was really upset and frightened. We kept going all night till we came to Snake Ridge where we all started to dig down, and as everything was going according to plan, and we were settled, we started playing cards on top of our trenches. When the sun was almost setting, a Bren Carrier arrived with our tea of Bully Beef stew. All of a sudden the Jerries opened up with mortar fire and poor Moses Daniels copped it. He didn't feel anything and died. We buried him at Snake Ridge - Moses was a great Sergeant, he went through Crete and Greece. He was really what you'd call a fine soldier.

IN THE BAG

It was quiet for two days. Then we got word from Colonel Baker to attack that night. So in we went but Harry Bowman and I ended up with a 'C' Company platoon, but we went too far into Jerry lines.

We hid in the trenches hoping the Jerries wouldn't see us, but we were out of luck and so got taken Prisoners of War.

TIT - FOR - TAT

The Jerries are good soldiers, they liked Kiwis and they gave us plenty of rations. They were saying they didn't like our bombers. I laughed to see the Jerries running like hell - it was funny. Just like their Stukas did to us.

WE SET OUT FOR ITALY - EIGHTEEN MONTHS AHEAD OF THE BATTALION

I was transported back to Alamein, Mersa Matruh, Halfaya Pass, then I stopped at Derna. In the camp there were a good many Poms, Indians, Kiwis and South Africans. The Italians took over. Pol Pol was very sick with dysentery. There was a date tree laden with fruit but Niho Niho managed to climb up (he was strong and fit). I boiled some dates and it was beautiful to drink. Pol Pol had some too and after that he started to come O.K. Three days passed before we were transported to Tripoli where a boat was ready to pick us up to take us to Taranto in Italy. We sure got a clean up. It felt good too. At Greece we had a decent wash, hair cut and shave. After that away we went by train to Apua Fredo Camp. There were quite a lot of prisoners. Some had been there over two years. Everyone was excited when we arrived, but boy it was cold at night. Each of us was given Navy Rum to keep us warm. About 8 o'clock in the morning we went out to work in the garden and back we came at 5 o'clock in the evening. Come Sunday we all went to Mass. Afterwards we got a Red Cross parcel containing smokes, porridge, chocolates, socks, biscuits and the good old rabbit tin meat and coffee. Boy!, it was a great feast. The best I think I ever saw was Lew Johnson - he was a boxer. He was really starving. He got stuck into the food. He never cooked his porridge, but ate everything raw, and it was not surprising that he took very sick for days.

AN UNUSUALLY FORGIVING CAMP - COMMANDANT

We had a cook house and store inside our camp and in the afternoons we went down to meet the ration cart and horse. We took onions, potatoes, olive oil, and the potato skins we ate for about a month. Harry Bowman was our interpreter for he was quick to pick up the Italian language. One night about 10 o'clock all the Italian guards woke us up. Niho Niho had broken into the store. This was bad and we wondered what would happen to him.

The next day the General Commander said, "Don't worry. He must have been hungry." We were amazed when he dropped Niho Niho's case.

ROADMAKERS

Three hundred of us were transferred to Pescara to work on the road. We got double rations and every day they gave us about four lira. Jim Raylor our News Editor made up a song which went - 'Maybe, Dopo Domani We'll Be Free.' Mind you the sky was black with the Air Force, carrying on a really big raid about 2 miles away from our camp. It was over a big Railway Station. All the guards took off.

A KIND OF FREEDOM

After one year of prison camp we managed to open the gates. Sergeant Major took a lot of food parcels, so away we went to South Italy. I hiked for five miles till I came across a little city called CARAMANIKO. The Italian women were quite friendly. They offered us grapes, bread and cheese. Most of them were school teachers from Rome. They took us and hid us in a hay barn at night-time, but in day-time we had to go to the woods and hills and hide there. There were Germans, Gestapo and S.S. on the look out for us. A lot of prisoners were coming through, - Americans, Poms, South Africans, Indians and Aussies. By now the German patrols were out after us. At night I came to the hay barn to sleep. By morning, looking out there was a school not far, about fifty yards. Maria came to bring breakfast. She even brought civilian clothes and took my army clothes away and hid them. Late evening Ben Rata, Wiki, Jerry and Harry Bowman arrived. This was the first time I had seen them for a while. Then Ben Rata started talking about going back to get some parcels at Pescara Camp, I said to Ben "You might get caught". By morning he was gone, but on the following day he was back on a mule. He sure had a load of food parcels. "Gee! You're lucky allright, Ben. Boy! He was game. He was a runner for the Battalion.

A TEARFUL PARTING

The girls brought us more food, and as we were just about to eat, another girl came running warning us that the Germans had arrived at Caramaniko. We all took off to the hills. By night we were back again to our hay barn. During the night Maria and her mates came in with another Kiwi, he was very sick with Malaria. Maria was a Catholic. Her parents had a small farm milking a few cows. She brought macadamia nuts, she was really a great friend looking after us. Before I left Maria she gave me the Lord's Cross and said to me "This will guide you all the way" - and goodbye and a kiss. She was sad, and crying. I left my mandolin for her for memory.

THE WAY BACK

But at last we got word from our Sergeant Major to go back to our units. Ben Rata and Harry Bowman made the first move, Wiki and Pol next, at hour intervals, then Jerry and me. We passed Ben and Harry boiling their tea but we just kept on going on and on. We had to climb Pelena the mountain, boy it was hard work to get to the top, but it was the safest way from the Germans. We could see a little town. There was a church and a long ridge beyond the Larino River. We met more women and they too were quite friendly. We had kai and plenty of macaroni. I slept in the church, then a lot of Poms came and stayed with us to bunk down. There were about a dozen. There was no sign of Ben and Harry or Wiki and Pol.

A NEAR THING

When morning came we swam across the river - so far so good, but now we had to cross the road to the woods. Suddenly there were German trucks very near. Of course everything went wrong. Everybody took off as fast as they could. I started down the hill with bullets just missing me. I thought this was it. I hid under a rock ledge. By now it was getting dark and that saved my life. Half an hour later all the Germans departed. There was no sign of my mate Jerry.

I CONTINUE MY JOURNEY

I made it up a mountain. From there I could see a light. It must have been a three mile climb to the house. The French were good to me. I bunked down. There was plenty of kai for me in the morning. There was a beautiful view as I looked down. There was someone coming, but when I looked closer I could see it wasn't my mate Jerry. It was a Pom. All his mates were taken. However Jerry who had now arrived, Trooper Marten and I kept going till we got to a Railway Station. Early in the morning we were off again and about 10 o'clock that morning we achieved our goal.

HEROES FOR A WHILE

The Americans we came across thought we were great - our clothes were all torn. They gave us plenty of smokes and tucker and beer. We sure has a great experience. I must have covered four hundred miles walking to get through.

After two days with the Americans we were taken by transport to our Battalion. Trooper Marten had to go back to his own troops. It was sad for us to part. He wanted to stay with me, - so long trooper!

BACK WITH MY BONES

I pushed aside the door and there was Big Steve Urlich. He just couldn't believe it, nor could Captain James Henare. Later we had to go to BARI for a check up. We rested for quite a few weeks. There was Mac Walsh from 'C' Company. It was great to see him and to know that he had succeeded too.

62707 POMARE URLICH

