

# 28th Māori Battalion

## Crete: Wounded and Evacuated

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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)



# Wounded and Evacuated

## Crete 1941

*Charlie Mules Medical Officer 28 Maori Battalion*

*It happened about 3am in the night attack on the Maleme Aeodrome  
— the counter-attack hopefully to regain the airfield.*

“Do you feel any pain?” my comrades asked. No. I felt no pain. There had been a sudden flash of light and then the feeling that a handful of grit or sand had been thrown directly at me. I said, “Aw, Hell,” and grabbed my nose and right side of my face — it felt a numb mass and I wondered if half my face had gone west.

My own medical orderly, Corporal Anderson and Private Daniels were quick to apply pad and bandages and I was led back over the bridge to a truck. A group of us wounded was taken to a large cave, probably a M.D.S. I must have bled quite a bit because my shirt and shorts were cut off and discarded and I lay on a stretcher covered only by a blanket, naked except for the “meal ticket” around my neck.

There were about sixty wounded in the cave awaiting the attention of the hard-pressed medical personnel. When my turn came about midday I was given an anaesthetic and my nose and right eyebrow sewn up by a “tommy” surgeon. I was not to know if my right eye was present or absent until a week or so later when I came out of Crete on an Australian destroyer.

That same evening a party of walking wounded took off under cover of darkness and I planned to go the following evening. I was lucky in finding my boots and another chap had a spare shirt and another produced some shorts so I was ready to go. In the cave we had not fared too badly for food and had been able to eat about twice in the day.

I joined the group of walking wounded, my nose and right eye covered but able to see sufficiently with my left eye so as not to be an impediment to the others. We walked two or three miles to a large walking-wounded collecting post on 42nd Street in Suda Bay. This was a large flat area under olive trees and many hundreds of wounded were gathered there. It was unfortunately sited between an ammunition dump on one side and a petrol dump on the other. Enemy planes would come over “spotting” each morning and then drop sticks of bombs over the area in the afternoon. It did little for our confidence to be caught out in the open in the line of a string of bombs coming down — one’s nose buried itself a little deeper into the turf.

I remember how chilly it was the first night. I had no blanket and there was snow on the mountains in Crete. I took refuge in a ditch in a pile of wood shavings but the cold winds chased around me and sleep did not come.

I was cheered the next day by the arrival of our 2 I.C.

Major George Bertrand. Was I pleased to see him! He had been sent back with an attack of dysentery but now, being recovered was on his way back to the Battalion. He told me of a hut which had been taken over by a New Zealander named Shorty Golding. I don’t know how Golding came to be separated from his unit but he did a damn good job looking after some of the many wounded. He would go and collect rations and bring them back to the hut and became a self-appointed medical orderly. His cry was, “What more can I do to help these chaps?” I remember two of the boys there, Fry from Nelson who had lost an arm at the shoulder, and Dan Devon from Christchurch shot through the shoulder.

On the afternoon of the second of the two days I spent at 42nd Street planes hit the petrol dump and clouds of black smoke billowed over the area. Word went around that the wounded would have to be evacuated that evening and all wounded including over 20 of the 28 Battalion were paraded outside a small ration hut at 2000hrs. I recall seeing big old Murphy among the number out of action with a compound fracture of his shoulder.

The job of listing their injuries and sorting them out fell to me but the organisation that followed left a lot to be desired. The hut door was not opened until about 2030hrs. Wounded then entered the hut one at a time while the sergeant covered over the light of a lantern. When inside, the light would be uncovered and the wounded man would be examined and if his injuries were considered serious enough other orderlies would write our **embarkation forms in triplicate!!!** How silly can you get — it seemed such a waste of valuable time and something that should have been done already.

I stood it for some time and then pushed forward and told the officer in charge that I was Lieutenant Mules, Medical Officer of the 28th (N.Z.) Maori Battalion, that many of our men had been badly hurt and I could supply a list of their names and their injuries. He then gave an instruction to his sergeant who yelled me out much to my amazement, **“Men of the N.Z. Maori Battalion will be seen first.”** To say I was staggered would be an understatement, but naturally I was pleased to get some prompt action. The boys moved up to the front of the line and I was told that I would be in charge of the truck to take us to our embarkation point. There was no time to be spent in arguing so I agreed and full of hope we approached the truck.



About thirty of us were to go but of course the number had swelled to about a hundred and further time was lost in trying to get some order. About midnight we witnessed the arrival of a large army workshop which resembled a horse float and which turned along our road, effectively blocking the exit of **any** vehicle. So that was the end of that.

Our party then walked, and reached Suda Bay in time to see the last landing craft returning to the naval ship. These had brought in the commandos who were to assist in fighting a rear guard action. One of them told me that the ships had to be out of port by 0300hrs or they would be sitting targets. I felt that if the wounded had been marched down to the Bay when the ships had come in, many wounded could have been evacuated.

However, there was nothing else to do but keep on walking away from Suda Bay, our route finally taking us across the hills to Sfarkin on the south coast. My memory is a bit vague as to where we got to. I would walk along helping someone with an injured leg, while he could be my "eyes". I remember the name Nikora. There we held up in caves and met some Australians including a doctor from Perth whose parents I had met there on the way over.

Our route took us into the hills and we expected to go to Hellevas. However, walking up towards a road junction I was told there was a "tommy major" there who knew where to go. I approached him and began introducing myself when he yelled, "Charlie, we wondered where the devil you had got to. We heard you had been wounded. Hey and John, look who's here!" The "tommy major" was Colonel Blyw Bull and John was my old 5 Field Ambulance C.O. Lieut-Colonel John Twigg. It was good to see them. It was about 1-2am. They insisted I join a truck and next thing we were on the rocky slopes above Sfakia. We went to earth during next day and came out that evening.

I came out with Tiwha Bennett, our Transport Officer and Peter Burns of Auckland. If it had not been for Tiwha I think it extremely likely we should still be in Crete. By now our ranks had swelled to many hundreds and the atmosphere was pretty tense. In the dark we stumbled over the rocks and rough tracks down to the beach. Half-way down there was a water-hole, but it was pretty difficult to get any water. Next thing we were on the beach and I was shoved into a boat.

There were four waiting destroyers and we three came out on H.M.A.N.S. Napier. It was close to 3am when we left and I crept into a corner and thankfully went to sleep. At breakfast time next morning enemy planes came over and our destroyer rolled in a zig-zag course and opened up with all the anti-aircraft guns — there was the devil of a noise and I remember the paint falling off the ceiling on to the breakfast table. Our boat was not hit, but the second destroyer was either hit or near miss. I reported to the ship's doctor who told me my right eye was still present.

We landed in Alexandria and went to 65th General Hospital but after spending a day there were given the option of remaining there or going to our N.Z. hospital at Helwan. I chose the latter and was admitted to a room with one other occupant, Jeffries, Mr Peter Fraser's secretary. Apparently our Prime Minister and he had been in a car with a Gippo driver — the car crashed, Peter Fraser in the centre was unhurt but Jeffries was unconscious for several days and was just 'coming to'. Next morning another patient was admitted and he snored all night. I found it was Brigadier Hargest — our 5th Brigade Commander.

Things were getting too high powered for me, what with Peter Fraser coming in to see Jeffries, and Lt-General Freyberg coming in to see Brig. Hargest so I asked if I could be transferred to another room of 'lesser lights'. I landed in a room with five others and I was next to Major Thomasson of 23 Battalion. I found I was giddy, inclined to stumble, not see to well, and worried by bright sunshine.

I returned to N.Z. on the hospital ship Maunganui. On the way home surgeon Keith Bridge removed a corrugated piece of metal from behind my right knee, and another piece from below my left buttock. I did not realise anything was there until they stiffened up while we made our way down the rough slopes of Sfakia — too many other things to cope with.

Another friend on board the Maunganui was Bill Ngata. Bill was a great chap — he had both arms in plaster and we took turns in feeding him.

Similar trials and tribulations were experienced by so many of 28 Maori Battalion during the hair-raising days — shared memories brought to light again by this reunion.

## Charlie Mules

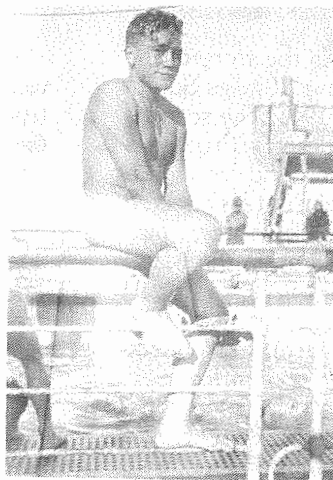
### 2 NZEF 1940 NZ to England



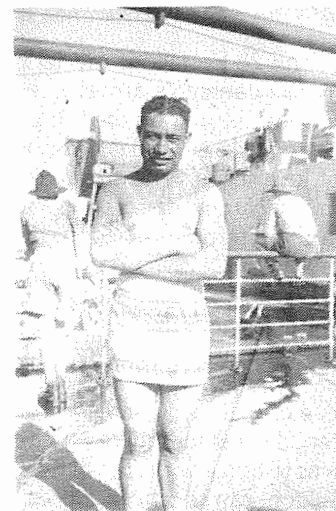
**"Aquitania" at Gourock (Scot)  
16 June 1940 Disembarking.**



**"Queen Mary" at Freemantle  
10 May 1940**



**Reg Mangu, my trusty  
henchman and batman  
from Ruatoria.**



**Medical Orderly  
Corp Anderson**