

28th Māori Battalion

Initio-Finito


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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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28 (MAORI) BATTALION

INITIO — FINITO

(This article is produced by Colonel Frank Rennie CBE, MC. Frankie Rennie as a young New Zealand Regular Soldier of three years experience was one of the small group under then Major George Dittmer who, in November 1939, received and was responsible for training the initial group of Maoris, from which the nucleus of the Officers and NCO's of 28th (Maori) Battalion was founded.)

Frank Rennie as you will read, did not remain with the Maori Battalion; he was commissioned and subsequently served in the Pacific and in Italy. He completed 34 years service in the New Zealand Regular Army, including being responsible for the formation, training and command of the New Zealand Special Air Service (SAS) Squadron during operational service in Malaya. His final appointment before he retired in 1970, was Commander of the Fiji Military Forces.)

A very strong lobby headed by Sir Apirana Ngata had been successful in ensuring that a Maori Unit be formed following the precedent of the Maori Pioneer Battalion in the 1914-18 war, and within a month of the outbreak of war the government announced its decision to embody an infantry battalion from the Maori Race to serve with the Division which was to be raised.

It was soon announced that Major G. Dittmer, MBE, MC, NZSC, would command the battalion and that Major G.F. Bertrand, who had served in the Wellington Regt. in the first world war, was to be the second-in-command.

A group of 146 trainees reported to Army School at the end of November 1939, from which it was hoped to find the officers and NCO's for the battalion. Included in the draft were six officers of the Maori Pioneer Battalion. Few, if any, of the remainder had had previous Military service. The conditions under which they entered camp were that all officers except the Commanding Officer and second-in-command, were regarded as student officers and the balance as student NCO's with the prospect of approximately twenty being recommended for commissioning at the termination of the course.

I was appointed the Sergeant Major because Ace Wood who had been earmarked for the job, was required to have medical treatment. He however recovered to be appointed Regimental Sergeant Major when the battalion was formed early in 1940.

I had been brought up in Christchurch and consequently had had very little contact with Maoris, but if ever a chap had a crash course to remedy that, I did.

When the group first arrived in camp, my first task was to try and sort them out. I had been given a copy of the nominal roll, but I had no intention of trying to call it. I couldn't have done so anyhow. Two large, very well built figures arrived on the scene; Captain Rangī Royal MC and

Captain Harding Leaf, and things began to fall into place. Captain Leaf put his arm around my shoulders and introduced me to the other officers, using such expressions as "If you ever lose anything this so-and-so will have it". Captain Royal introduced me to the troops and said something in Maori which seemed to make some difference because they came to attention from then on. Sometime later I asked him what he had said, and with a bit of a grin he replied that he had explained that I was the RSM and although I looked pretty young, the bite of the RSM was always worse than his bark — and that I had a pretty good sort of bark. If they wanted to be considered as officers or NCO's in the battalion, I was the man they had to convince. Rangī went on to say that he hoped that his position was safe, but he wasn't sure. I never really knew exactly what he said of course, but Rangī Royal helped immeasurably during that very important phase.

The group had an immediate incentive to commence drilling, because there had been a request from Sir Apirana Ngata, that a guard of honour of one hundred strong be made available for the opening of the Maori Court, at the Centennial Exhibition in Wellington in less than three weeks after arrival. The request was approved by Army HQ's, but there were many there who were dubious as to the ability of the Maoris to supply a reasonable ceremonial guard in so short a time. To compound the problem it was necessary to keep abreast of the syllabus for the course, and the drill periods available for the preparation were limited.

Things immediately began to take shape. The Maoris drilled themselves in the hut before breakfast, at lunch time, no one wanted to be left out. A reasonable march was also involved in Wellington and in order to toughen them up a bit, I took them on a route-march which included a trek along the track over the hills above the rifle ranges. I gave them the usual break of ten minutes each hour, which was meant for rest, and the opportunity for officers to have a look at feet and the condition of the troops generally — not a bit of it, they practised rifle exercises. After the guard of honour, when I took them on some reasonably long route marches, during the breaks, Harding Leaf who had been an outstanding athlete in his day, organised tabloid athletic meetings, on a platoon basis, long jumps, hop step and jump — how far in three standing jumps.

One very calm Trentham November evening, I was invited to be present at a hut when for the first time the Maori Battalion song was introduced by Pvt. Anania Amohau, its composer, and sung superbly, right from the start. Whenever I hear it sung I remember that evening, the harmony and particularly the outstanding leading voices of two or three including Julian Waratini.

I was interested in hearing the background of the song. With the approach of 1940, the centennial of the Treaty of Waitangi, preparations had been made for New Zealand wide celebrations of the opening of Meeting Houses and unveiling of monuments. The Awara Services League, guided by Rangi Royal were well advanced in their preparations, including a tune which had been whistled by Anania Amohu and encouraged by Rangi. It was brought to camp and was put to words identifying it with the battalion. Lieutenant Pike, Bandmaster of the Trentham Camp Band, arranged the music for a military band, and the marching song of Maori Battalion swept the country.

When the time came Captain Rangi Royal commanded the Guard of Honour and it was an outstanding performance. In order to get the correct timing of the rifle exercises, I placed myself behind the Guard, quietly saying "two three" between each movement. They moved like clockwork.

In addition to the Ceremonial guard, a haka party led by Anania Amohau performed at the welcome.

Although it was a tough assignment to produce a Guard of Honour in such a short time, the circumstances and the performance, did a lot to settle the mixed-tribal group into a corporate entity, and it could well have been the commencement of the great esprit de corps which remained with the battalion during its existence.

The highlight of the course was mutual instruction, when regardless of rank, they all had a go. They practised commands in the huts, demonstrating and mimicking. George came over to me one day whilst I was taking the group for movement, and said quietly, "Look at the swing of their left arms." I did, they were all bending them slightly. He said, "that's known as 'the Rennie bend'." Need I say more? I still have the same trouble with that bend — in my golf swing!

The development of confidence of the potential officers was quite extraordinary — Charlie Bennett (now Sir Charles Bennett, KBE, DSO), his two brothers and Henry and Bill Ngata, and so many others. We had no problem in finding twenty officer candidates. The group produced at least three Commanding Officers of the Maori Battalion as well as many Company and Platoon Commanders.

Half way through their training, there was a long weekend leave to allow all to get home. It wasn't very sensible of us to have issued two battle dresses to each of them before they departed.

I had a real problem when they returned, because when I called the roll I had on parade 170 instead of 146 — all in battledress — all looking like soldiers. When I checked names and there was an overlap, I was told there was confusion over Maori and Pakeha names. I was getting nowhere and the officers didn't seem to be around. I had the answer: there were only 146 beds (less the officers) so I chased them off and told them to be on their beds. I went over and found 24 lying under the beds.

It was clear what had happened when the trainees arrived home. Elder brothers, older cousins, wanted to be in, they drilled each other, dressed each other and turned up in Trentham. I have never been convinced that the

original 146 completed the training. In fact I was told subsequently that at least two were "ring ins". How many more I don't know. I have a feeling it was closer to 10.

Having this experience with the Maoris provided a new dimension in soldiering for me. Their boundless and infectious enthusiasm and their tremendous pride in their reputation as warriors was something I had to see to believe. I saw it again and again. Many times I was personally grateful for it.

Whilst the nucleus of the battalion was being prepared, recruiting — always on a voluntary basis — was taking place throughout the country and the numbers required were quickly obtained.

The battalion was assembled at the Palmerston North showgrounds late January, with the Army School trainees arriving a couple of days before. The 28th (Maori) Battalion was in being.

In selecting Ace Wood as the RSM, a very good choice was made. He had come to Trentham initially to attend a selection course for Duntroon as the ex-head boy of Nelson College and when he missed, for some extraordinary reason, joined 10 wing as a regular soldier. Ace was very good in all sport excelling at rugby and boxing. He was a natural leader and a good disciplinarian. An excellent instructor.

Ace proved a great RSM for the Maori Battalion. After being awarded the DCM, Ace was commissioned and soon became Captain Adjutant of the Battalion. He was badly wounded in July 1942 in the same action in which the then Co, Lt. Col Tiwi Love, was mortally wounded. Sadly Ace died a few years ago.

Some five and a half years later, after the period of occupation of Trieste at the end of the Italian Campaign in August 1945, the Division was withdrawn to Lake Trasimene in the Province of Umbria in Central Italy to await the decision on New Zealand's contribution to the Pacific Assault Force.

Whilst there, the 23rd Battalion of which I was adjutant, maintained very close contact with 28th Maori Battalion and with Lt. Col. Henare (now Sir James) who had replaced Lt. Col. Awatere as its Commanding Officer. The undoubted highlight was a farewell to Pita Awatere, this included a hangi of prepared pork in such quantity that although there may have been a suspicion we could have been "accessories after the fact", nobody countenanced the thought of raising the question.

Many men in many Units of the 2NZEF can tell many stories about Pita Awatere, this is one of mine: I was standing on the road one day just after I had arrived in Italy when Lt. Col. Pita Awatere, DSC, MC, who had been a private soldier in Trentham, now Commanding Officer, was about to drive past me. He saw me, stopped, got out and said something like "what do you know — Frank Rennie!" I will always remember you, I was a dumb b - - - - during training and during Lewis gun stoppages. You kept on saying, "The immediate action if the gun stops is feel, rotate the magazine, think of my initials FR — FRANK, RENNIE — feel rotate" — I will always remember."

In October I received instructions that the battalion weapons were to be handed into a British Ordnance Mobile Depot and that a collection point would be established in the brigade area.

Units had run down in numbers by drafts returning to New Zealand and with the decision that 9 Brigade units were to be the basis of the New Zealand Force to be included in the Japanese Occupation Force, we all realised that it was only a matter of time before battalions were disbanded. Even so whilst any unit remained armed it was military, the finite act of emasculation of a fighting unit was to withdraw its weapons.

It was depressing not only because our teeth were going to be drawn, but looking at the G10/98 (scale of weapons for an infantry battalion) and having some idea of our holdings, the cry was "Where have all the weapons gone?"

Battalions had been in existence for five years during which weapons were also subject to casualties and replacement. In addition some weapons were never popular. For example, the SMLE (Short magazine Lee Enfield) rifle. It had been replaced with condonement in many instances by enemy automatic weapons, and sometimes the American Garrand automatic rifle. If I remember right, we were required to produce 300 SMLE rifles.

A very unpopular weapon was the manpack lifebuoy flamethrower, so named because the fuel carrier encircled the body. It was not too effective; it was difficult to carry with other weapons and, of course, anybody seen carrying one became a prime target. I doubt whether they had ever been used. We were required to hand back 12 of them as they had been issued on the scale of one per rifle platoon.

We were in the middle of doing our check of weapons when I received an SOS from Adjutant Monty Searancke of the Maori Battalion. Did we have any spare British weapons? There were some monumental gaps in their holdings! On the other hand they were very well placed indeed with German automatic weapons, mainly schmiessers!

We agreed to have a thorough search and then compare figures. It was quite extraordinary where rifles were found — at the back of truck seats, under the seats, in tool boxes, ammunition boxes, even found two in a document box in our command truck. We were still 25 rifles short and four lifebuoy flamethrowers. We had 3 Bren Guns over (along with a variety of enemy automatic weapons). Thankfully the numbers of Vickers guns, mortars and 6 pounder anti-tank guns were OK!

The Maoris were over 100 rifles short and could only find 6 lifebuoys. Of all things they had a 17 pounder anti-tank gun which they had acquired — somehow or other.

Monty and I had a co-ordinating conference and we arranged to hand over weapons at the same time to the British Ordnance Collecting Point under the command of a BOWO (British Ordnance Warrant Officer) in the form of marquees on a green close to both battalions.

Our Regimental Quarter Master Sergeant Majors handled the exercise. It was a good day during which the co-operation between the 23rd Battalion and the 28th Battalion was never better.

The drill was that the weapons were handed over in bulk and numbers of, and fortunately not on, weapons were checked on a table, and then placed in categories inside the marquees. During a little bit of hospitality before the handing in started, it was agreed that we would both make soldiers available to fetch and carry the weapons including stacking them in the marquees.

I would like to draw a veil over the precise details of the handing in procedure except to say that there was a "handing in" party which became a "handing out" party

under the back flap of the marquees — but the two RQM's were able to produce signatures for the required number of rifles and lifebuoy flamethrowers.

We realised that other Battalions handed in weapons after us and Monty and I hoped that they had the odd surplus to help the BOWO to finally get signatures to match weapons!

I never asked Monty Searancke what the reaction was when they produced the 17 pounder anti-tank gun which had been reported missing from a gun park by a British Anti-Tank Regiment some 18 months before, although I did hear a story of it being recaptured from the German Paras!

Being involved with the arrangements for handing in of weapons of the Maori Battalion reminded me that the wheel had turned a full circle. I had been present when the first party under Captain Rangi Royal on which the battalion was formed, marched into Trentham in October 1939, exactly six years, all but one month, before. A lot happened in that period. Some served in the battalion. Casualties totaled 2,489 including 32 Officers and 552 other ranks killed.

General Freyberg recorded that "no infantry battalion had a more distinguished record, or saw more fighting, or, alas, had such heavy casualties than the Maori Battalion".

The Battalion stood to in England during the threat of invasion and arrived in the Middle East to take part in the disastrous campaigns in Greece and Crete. They later fought in the 1941 Libyan Campaign and in the battles in 1942 in the defence of Egypt. As the tide turned that took part in the victorious Western Desert and Italian Campaigns.

In these Campaigns the 28th (Maori) Battalion took a great, often decisive part. It was undoubtedly the most impressive offensive fighting unit in the Division.

When, after his abortive attempt to reach the Nile, Rommel was asked "what would have got him to Cairo", he replied, 'a thousand New Zealand bayonets'. In making this statement Rommel was paying a great tribute to New Zealand Infantrymen in general and 28th (Maori) Battalion in particular. German records make it clear that the Maoris use of the bayonet did so much to establish the offensive reputation of the New Zealand Division.

With hindsight and pressure applied at the outset by Sir Apirana Ngata to form a Maori Unit as an embodied Infantry Battalion of the Division, instead of a Pioneer Battalion was completely vindicated. It was ironic that both the Maori and the Fijians were employed in pioneer units during the 1914-18 war. They were not engaged in operations. Both confirmed during the 1939-45 war that they possessed the character, fighting spirit and determination which set an example to all, including established Regiments of the Line.

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