

28th Māori Battalion

Minquar Qaim

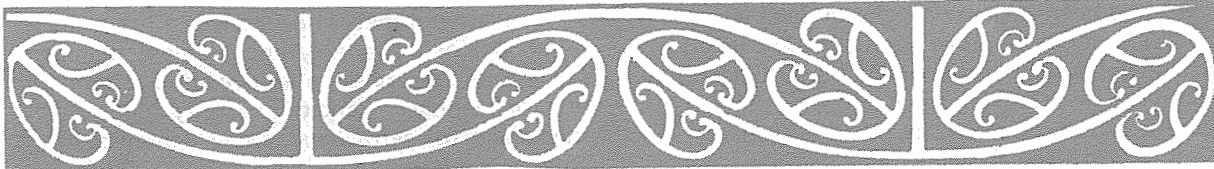
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"No infantry had a more distinguished record, or saw more fighting, or alas, had such heavy casualties."

*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)



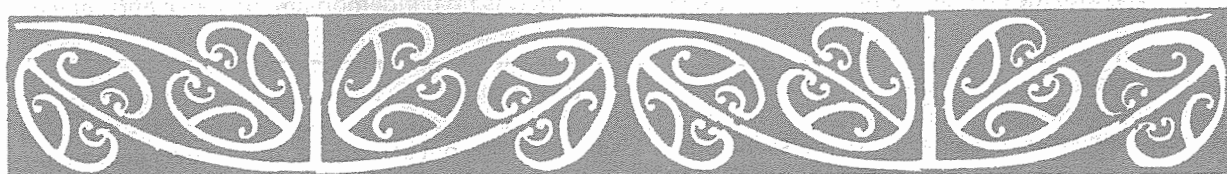
MINQUAR QAIM

Across a Khaki Land — The Breakthrough at MINQUAR QAIM



A desert battle defies description. It is a puff of smoke with khaki figures moving in apparent aimlessness across a khaki landscape. In my memory small episodes stand out marking the battle through its ebb and surge. Like the moment when we were standing around a ruck in the dusk, forlorn and cold, waiting for news of the battle —our own battle— over the BBC and hearing Paul Robeson singing “Deep River”.

— from “The Painted Years” by Peter McIntyre



We had been rushed down from Syria because the 8th Army at that time had been very severely mauled in Libya by Rommel and his Afrika Korps who were now making for Cairo and the Canal Zone as fast as their vehicles could take them. On June 25, 1942, the Battalion, along with other elements of the Division, moved south into the desert from Mersa Matruh, a distance of about 25 miles, to a low rocky feature — Bir Abu Batta just east of Minquar Qaim where we set about preparing defensive positions until nightfall. The next day we moved once again, this time to the Minquar Qaim feature itself where we once again prepared to either dig in or build sangars.

At this time we were part of the 4th Brigade. Sited for all round defence the Brigade was in quite a strong position supported as it was by our own artillery. The enemy was very close and any movement of vehicles during the night could just as easily have been friend or foe; so it was with a certain amount of caution that we listened to the sound of approaching vehicles in the still night air. Eventually I decided the only way to find out one way or the other was to go out and see if we could identify the vehicles. Any old soldier who has spent much time in the desert will tell you that the best way to approach anything at night is to try and silhouette the target; so Herbie Elkington Jim Koti and I made our way towards the sound and crouched down as we got close.

We were able to recognise our Dodge PU with a body standing up through the hatch in the roof and behind was a single column of our trucks. Immediately I called out and the column stopped. I went up to the truck to try and identify the figure silhouetted above the cab. We recognised each other immediately. It was Capt Jim Cornwall the QM of the anti-tank regiment with whom the battalion anti-tank men and I had spent a month while in Syria.

He told me that he had been wandering around in the dark since leaving Mersa Matruh looking for the Division as he had a convoy of 32 six-pounders which he had brought up from Cairo for delivery to his regiment. He knew there was a distinct danger of his falling into enemy hands but he had to make the effort to get to the Division so the six-pounders could be deployed for our defence.

Another thing arising out of this was the fact the infantry battalions were waiting for their allocation of two-pounders which could only happen if and when the Regiment got their new six-pounders. The outcome was, the next morning at an early hour we got the call to pick up our two-pounders and portees. We lost no time in doing this and deploying them on the battalion perimeter.

The day passed uneventfully for us although we knew the artillery and other elements of the Division were kept busy waging what was mainly a long-range battle with the enemy. Came the evening and a lull. The desert is a lovely place in early evening — so calm and peaceful and cool but we knew that was not to last long. Eventually I was called to an "O" Group Conference at Battalion. The CO had just returned from Brigade. It was a silent and

serious body of men who listened to the plans to break out of the enemy encirclement that very night. Our artillery did not have enough ammunition for a whole day and our security depended on their ability to keep at bay the ever-tightening net of enemy armour and other weapons; so it was decided we had to go that night.

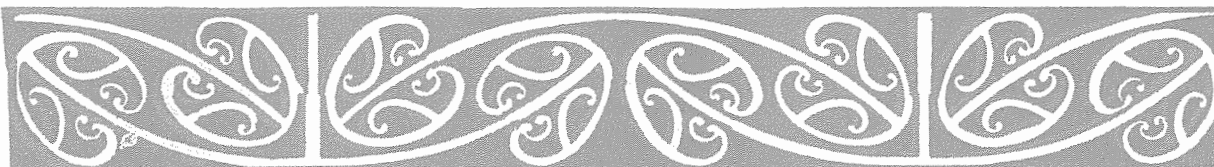
The infantry companies had their orders and moved off to prepare their men for the break-out. Orders were also given for the battalion vehicles. They were to be formed up nose to tail and five yards between columns facing east. On either side of the close columns the anti-tank portees were to be spaced to give anti-tank protection and outside them the Bren carriers in a similar role. So with me being in charge of the anti-tank platoon and Jim Tuhiwai OC carriers we left the conference accompanied by our batmen. I asked Jim to come back to my PU as I had a surprise. At my PU Jim Koti and I lifted my bed-roll out of the back and placed it on the ground. I suppose Jim and his batman must have wondered what was going on. We undid the straps of the bed-roll and there safely tucked away and protected from breakage were eight bottles of Canadian beer. As he gazed on the beautiful sight I said to Jim Tuhiwai — "Well if the Germans get us tonight, I'm going to make sure they don't get our beer". So the four of us proceeded to finish them off. The beer was far from cold but it was "wet". It was quite an effort, but enjoyable. After we emptied the eight bottles Jim Tuhiwai left saying he would wait until the portees were deployed on the flanks of the vehicle columns before putting his carriers into place. There was a brief handshake and that was the last I was to see of the man who had become my closest friend for 2½ years — all the time we had been in the army. Some time later when a Court of Inquiry was convened to gather evidence about missing personnel, we learned that Jim, after he got his carriers into position, told the crew that he was off to join C Company in the attack, grabbed a rifle and bayonet and disappeared into the night heading for his old company.

It was only after the Alamein breakthrough when we were passing the area that a DonR came across a German cemetery and saw a cross marking a grave with Jim's name on it. At least the Germans were decent enough to see he was buried properly.

To return to the events of the night breakout. After we were formed it was just a case of waiting for the success signal from the infantry that they had breached the enemy lines. As they made contact with the enemy there was a certain amount of firing rather intermittent, spasmodic. We could tell the fighting was going on in isolated pockets of resistance.

Eventually the success signal went up and we were away to pick up the rifle companies waiting. There was no pandemonium, no panic and yet we did not waste any time either. The orders were for the infantry to get on to any vehicle.

It was for the individual soldier to find his own way on to any truck, portee, carrier in fact anything at all heading out of the area. I have never ceased to



be amazed at the overall orderliness of that withdrawal; over the whole area was a blanket of thick dust churned up by hundreds of vehicles; of course there were no lights. This densely packed moving body of transport descended on groups of men waiting. Trucks would stop, pick up a few, move on and pick up a few, until there was no more room and then East throughout the night. If a vehicle should stop because of mechanical failure or some other cause and it could not get moving immediately, it was to be abandoned and the men on board were to climb onto the next available vehicle. It was not long before we had left the scene of the breakout and we made our way steadily East pleased to put as much mileage as we could between us and the enemy; not that we were afraid of him; we were buying time. Time to reorganise, to reform and have another crack at him. My own PU had broken down and was abandoned. Jim Koti and the driver got themselves onto another vehicle and eventually caught up with us.

There had been no accidents, no vehicles cannoning into one another and no-one on his feet had been left behind — a truly remarkable achievement which showed up once more the discipline and remarkable fighting spirit of the Battalion that it had earned such widespread respect.

It was good to see another day dawn; where we were able to see, look for and find our vehicles, our mates. Together we made our way to Alamein and Kaponga Box area to regroup and prepare for the next round.

Minquar Qaim was a definite success in that it bought the 8th Army valuable time; gave Rommel's forward elements such a drubbing that it caused them to hesitate, to lick their wounds and slowed down their advance. Until they finally stopped at Alamein, they didn't know how, when or where we would strike them and that could be harrasing to any foe.

Rangi Logan



Looking North-East from Minquar Qaim.