

28th Māori Battalion

The Trials of Separation

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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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• THE TRIALS AND CHALLENGES OF SEPARATION •

This account by Mrs Mabel Waititi of Motatau, relates some of the thoughts and feelings of a Maori wife left behind. So much of what she says is relevant for all such wives. All of us who were separated from our husbands will be able to identify with some part of Mabel's account and thank her for relating it so realistically.

Though we did not all work as physically hard as Mabel, most of us worked outside the home and 'kept the home fires burning', and tried to make a positive contribution to ease the settling in period of our husbands on their return.

Ida Lambert

Mabel Says:

I did not want my husband to go to the War, but I did not try to persuade him not to go for I knew that he would not hear of it, because all his colleagues and relations had enlisted and he said, it was his duty to go and serve overseas.

When I thought of the war I was fearful. Even when they left on the boat I thought they might hit a mine, or they might be torpedoed, or be attacked from the air, even before going into battle. Then I would have a son to rear on my own. I couldn't get it out of my mind that if my husband went into action he might not come out alive. This was because of what I had heard about World War I.

The war was relevant to me because England was involved so our men went out to help the cause, but to me behind it all power was the only motive and human life was the price to pay.

I feared that one day I would be left a widow or my husband would come home minus one eye or minus an arm or leg or maybe even without legs, but I suppose that is why I married him and love him till death do us part.

Life did change back home here, because he and my older brother left for the Army and my younger brother and I had to run our business; a school-bus-run and passenger service plus a cream run to Hikurangi and a goods service run. I had to drive the school bus and my brother drove the cream lorry to Hikurangi Dairy Co., plus all other extra jobs. But having to work while my husband was away made all the difference. It kept my mind occupied, but our son fretted for his father so that did not help things because he hardly ate.

We women tried to help each other when our husbands left. Perhaps if we were all living in on district we could have done more, but we were all scattered and only a small number lived close to one another, but we did assist one another when we met. Most of the men from around Ngatihine here were single men and many did not come home.

To help our men overseas I was always involved in what was going on, like fund-raising for the Maori Patriotic Committee, knitting balaclavas and mittens and wrapping and posting parcels for the men. Myself and Mrs Ada Stan Walker were responsible for purchasing, wrapping and posting of the parcels. We went to

the Bargain Stores in Whangarei; bought yards and yards of unbleached calico, cake tins, ink pencils for addressing parcels, corned beef tins, meat and vegetable tins, tins of toheroa soup and packets of shortbread biscuits, tins of dubbing and one Christmas cake for each soldier.

When we had purchased everything we were given a corner in the Bargain Store. The first lot of parcels we sent numbered twenty four. Each parcel was wrapped with the unbleached calico outside the cake tin and sewn up. We had previously sent individual parcels wrapped in paper, but we were advised to wrap them in calico as only a few items reached the soldiers. Our own Maori Patriotic Committee sent money to the Red Cross to send parcels for our Maori Prisoners of War.

Looking back in my diary of 1943 I find that each parcel and contents and postage cost only six shillings. It amazes me to compare this with the prices today.

When the second Maori Battalion were camped at Remuera, Ohaeawai we helped the men. Our mother opened her home for those who could not get home for weekend leave, so very often we got Army trucks bringing soldiers for leave from Saturday to Sunday. The names of some of the men were Winiata, Wineera, Parata from Ngati Raukawa, Apanui and Maaki, Waititi from Whangaparaoa, Titi Allison, Raukokore, Te Punga, George Wards, Jack Tangira and Lieutenant Reihana - some I have forgotten.

Every fortnight on a Sunday my other and one of our grand uncles cooked some 'kai', such as stuffed geese, ducks, chicken and Tuna pawhara, rewena bread and takakau. We delivered them to Remuera for the Sunday meal. Of course when there was a flood we would ring Headquarters at Remuera to send a truck to fetch the eels already caught. At one time they took back seven sacks of tuna. I mean the real big chaff sacks.

One day my mother got a special request from 2nd Maori Battalion, to deliver on the next Sunday four crates of beer. No beer was allowed to Maoris then outside the hotels, but having a good relationship with the publican we managed to get them. We loaded the beer under the kai and took off. On arrival we found that a trench had already been dug up so the crates went straight into them. Earth covered the crates, turf on top and no one knew the beer was there except the culprits.

We had fears for our own safety, especially with the Japanese being so close. One day my brother took ill and was taken to hospital and I had to drive the cream lorry to Hikurangi. We met an Army patrol who told me there had been a Japanese U Boat torpedo scare at the Bay of Islands and that about five hundred army vehicles were on their way up North. I felt sick and started vomiting. We arrived late at Hikurangi and a man's job awaited me at the end of the run. I was the first woman from Ngatihine to get a motor car, heavy traffic and motor omnibus license. I felt sick at times doing a man's job, but there were few men left behind and none had a drivers license.

The war affected our lives on the Marae, because when word was received that a soldier had been killed everyone from the area around went to that particular soldier's Marae to grieve for the loved one. Even when a soldier was wounded everyone gathered around to give support to that family.

Our school, Motatau, raised the most money to buy the mobile canteen 'Te Rau Aroha', which was sent overseas to the Battalion under Charles Bennett (Charlie Y.M). After the war 'Te Rau Aroha' was brought back to Motatau plus all the bullet holes so we could see what the Children from the Native Schools bought.

We women worked hard. My diary tells me that on 23/3/43 I went to Hikurangi Dairy Co., brought back goods and petrol drums for the supplies. Got to Motatau 2.30pm, unloaded goods and empty cream cans, went to the Station, picked up ten sacks of chaff and one sack of oats. Took load to Okaroro Base Farm, unloaded them by the huts, came back picked up a Hay sweep for Mr Kay and delivered, came home left truck, picked up bus and went to pick up shoppers from the railway station at 7pm and then take them to their homes. By then I was dog tired. Next morning I was on the truck again.

It was the happiest moment of our lives when we heard that the war was over, and that the Battalion would be coming home. They arrived in January 1946. I was preparing to go to Kaikohe, 'A' Company tangi and reception when I got a cablegram from George, saying that Apirana instructed him to go via Ngati Porou, so I went with our son through to Te Kaha then on to Whangaparaoa. When they arrived there were 30 of them including 4 Waititi's, Pine Tiapa and Peta Awatere. They went to every individual Marae from the coast right through to Opotiki.

It was really sad seeing the families crying for their dead, no bodies, only photos to cry over and knowing of course that the bodies would never be brought back but lay elsewhere - i nga whenua o Taiuiwi.

When we received word our cousin had been killed in action one felt sad and lonely for he had been like a brother, so we could imagine the feelings of the wives, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters.

The war changed me as a person, particularly my view towards war. I just hope and pray that a Third World War will not happen, and we who have sons do not have to send them away to fight. I also had bitter feelings especially, about the burden that fell on the women with the young men away.

Of course we have nothing but praise for the part the Battalion played. They set their goal and they achieved it and that was victory. Some of these gallant men got decorations, but I am sad to say that I felt unhappy when only one of the Maori Battalion was given a V.C. and only to a dead hero. To me, if all the praise from people all over the world was correct the Maori Battalion should have been awarded more than one V.C.

I attended that V.C. Celebration at Ruatoria in 1943. Apirana sent me a free travel warrant to take our son Tukaki to see the celebration, as his father was away at war.

The older generation of our area grieved badly for the loss of precious lives who can not be replaced and they clung to them year after year after year. When Jim brought back 28 (Maori) Battalion we all thought that was a great honour for Maori and Ngatihine.

We had talked, George and I, about our marriage before he left. he said to me "I am sorry to have to leave you and our son for the sake of the war. I regret I have nothing to leave you with, only our son and my carving tools. If for some misfortune I do not return I want our son to be given the carving tools when he grows up, and when of age you are to send him to the Maori Arts and Crafts Institute in Rotorua to where I qualified in 1938. The other is, I know what happened during the First World War, when soldiers came back some of their wives were living with others, so if that happens to you, I will not bear any grudge against you because I left you in the first place, but I will want my son back".

He did come back and taught his son how to carve and helped him to carve 'Tumatauenga' at Otiria, Te Whare at the Kaikohe Intermediate School and the Jubilee Archway at the Whangaparaoa School.

When George came back from the War he did not know our son, but our son knew him from his photo. George had changed. Within a year we had a second son and he had no time for the older one which saddened me. I had to wait until he really settled down before I could ask him why he was like that. In the end I said to him, "I want things straightened out as our two sons need the same love and care and attention from both of us". He did admit he cared more for the younger one because he helped to rear that one, but it did help him when I spoke to him because he did not realise it was happening. After that he loved the two of them.

The legacy of the Maori Battalion can be found perhaps in the Battalion song:

We will fight right to the end
For God for King and for Country
Ake Ake Kia Kaha e.

The whole country and Commonwealth knows of the splendid contribution towards victory. The battles in the Middle East, in Greece and Crete, in Tobruk the battle of El Alamein, Tripoli, the Italian campaign and Cassino where a good many of their comrades fell are only some of the places where they fought to the bitter end. They earned distinction for their fighting qualities.

No Reira ra e koutou e nga morehu a Tumatauenga ake, ake kia kaha, ma Ihowa a koutou e tiaki e manaaki kia roa atu ai o koutou ra ki runga i te mata o tenei whenua.

Arohanui, M. Waititi
Wife of 68247, Waititi, Hori Kerei
W.O. II 28 (Maori) Battalion