

# The Importance of the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion

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The 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion; World War Two; 1940 to 1945.

3,600 Maori Men, serving on the battle fields of Greece, Crete, North Africa, Italy.

1712 Wounded; 237 prisoners of war; and 649 killed.

However, those... are just statistics. It's the story that tells the true tale of the 28<sup>th</sup> Maori Battalion.

After calls for an all Maori unit to go into World War II in September 1939, from the then Governor General, Sir Apirana Ngata, and other Maori MPs, an agreement with the government was reached for the formation of the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The 3,600 Maori men who were to become part of this unit were from all walks of life. Some were 15 year old boys who were still in school, lying about their age; some were 50 years old with 5 children saying they were 21 and single. However, they also had many things in common. For many Maori in those days, travelling outside of New Zealand could only be a dream, but if you were to enrol into the army... you could go on the 'adventure of a lifetime and see the world!' Becoming part of the battalion meant they could do things they would never be able to do otherwise. Many Maori also had a spark left from their Maori ancestor warriors that was reignited at the mention of being part of war. Maori have always been known for being keen fighters, their traditions of combat passed down through generations and generations, and this battalion was the perfect opportunity for them to show off the skills they possessed. However, one of the biggest reasons the Maori men in the battalion enrolled was because they wanted to fight alongside their Pakeha brothers; they didn't want to be left behind. And, they weren't.

The Maori Battalion was to be put into some of the toughest and most gruesome battles of World War II. However, even then the Battalion still fought the strongest fights. Did you know that the 28<sup>th</sup> battalion is one of the most recognised infantry units in the world for its fearsome battles and defences that they took part in in World War II? But for some reason, very few New Zealanders know the incredible impact the battalion had on not just the battles they fought in, but also the impact they had on the people they were fighting for, and even the people they were fighting against. In the battles they fought in Greece, and Crete, the people there feel the strongest admiration and love for the Maori with the Greek saying, "We are indebted to them. Their presence was invaluable. They are our brothers." And the Cretians remarking that, "the Maori battalion was famous, and had many fearless fighters. They faced the Germans and those Germans lost." The Commander of the 2nd NZ division, the greatly respected Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, once said that, "No infantry battalion had a more distinguished record or saw more fighting, or alas had such heavy casualties as the Maori Battalion." However, if you still don't believe that the Maori battalion is as highly recognised as I've said, then maybe this will help you to understand. In World War II, German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, who was Hitler's favourite general, once said the

Maori battalion he fought against in North Africa was the greatest fighting force he ever encountered, and “Give me the Maori battalion and I will conquer the world.” Even with his racist views, Adolf Hitler himself admired the Maori and their combat techniques.

One of the reasons the Maori Battalion was such a strong force was in part due to their ancestors. From a young age, Maori men were trained in the art of war. Brought up to be fearsome warriors, even the British colonisers that arrived in New Zealand were impressed. So impressed actually that they adopted the military tactics they saw in the Maori and utilised them in many wars from the Crimean War in the 1850s, to the infamous Battle of the Somme in World War 1.

It is important that we all remember and recognise the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion, not just Maori descendants, but all New Zealanders, because these were men who fought for our nation and its freedom; not because they had to, but because they wanted to. To conclude, I believe that this verse from the Maori Battalion song epitomises the spirit, and bravery of the men in the battalion. A song that they sang through every battle and every hardship they encountered; a song that spurred these courageous Maori warriors on through the toughest of fights.

“Maori Battalion march to victory

Maori Battalion staunch and true

Maori Battalion march to glory

Take the honour of the people with you.

We will march, march, march to the enemy,

And we’ll fight right to the end.

For God! For King! And for Country!

Au-E! Ake, ake, Kia Kaha e!”

Shanice Wills