

# AOTEAROA

Our Whakapapa,  
Our Stories



Conflict: 28th Māori  
Battalion



## **The 28th Māori Battalion WW2**

This resource provides a brief overview of the 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion, its origins, outstanding contributions to the campaigns of WW2 (1939-45), and its role in advancing Māori aspirations for self-determination.

The formation of the 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion was supported by the majority of Māoridom to demonstrate Māori mana, and to achieve equality with Pākehā at a time when racist attitudes were mainstream in New Zealand.

In this resource the 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion is viewed within a context of whakapapa – an origin that begins with Tūmataunga, the eponymous ancestor and deity of warriors, spans the devastating impacts of the musket wars and the subsequent alliances it spawned between Māori and the Crown in the New Zealand Wars, to the New Zealand (Māori) Pioneer Battalion of WW1, and the outstanding contribution of the 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion of WW2, and concludes with a current incarnation of Ngāti Tūmataunga – the New Zealand Army, officially recognised as an iwi (tribe) in 1995.

### **Tū-mata-uenga – Tū of the angry visage**

Tūmatauenga is an eponymous ancestor (the ancestor of all Māori), and deity of war and activity. In the story of the separation of Pāpātūānuku (Earth mother) and Ranginui (Sky father) so light may enter the world, Tūmatatauenga and his siblings fight each other over the means to achieve this separation. Conflict is woven into the cloak of humanity, an inescapable aspect of humanity.

Tūmatauenga is more than the slayer of men (Tū-whakaheke -tangata).

Tūmatauenga is a primal force to ensure balance and reciprocity. Security and stability is safeguarded by the ability and means to protect one's community and country.

Māori women have always played a key role in maintaining a balance in the domain of Tūmatauenga. A female peace, 'he rongo tamāhine', was considered a firm and durable peace, and was preferable to 'he rongo tamatāne', a male peace.

### **Supporting Link**

<https://teara.govt.nz/en/iri-traditional-maori-warfare/page-2>

### **The Musket Wars**

The end of the Napoleonic War, and the War of 1812, saw a glut of quality muskets for sale at cheap prices. Māori were able to arm themselves by trading with American whalers, and Sydney merchants.

The acquisition of muskets enabled various tribes to pursue utu with former foes. It changed tribal boundaries, upended the balance of power, and resulted in the loss of 20% of the Māori population.

### **Te Tiriti o Waitangi**



*1840 signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi /Treaty of Waitangi*

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Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Treaty of Waitangi were signed in 1840 by William Hobson on behalf of Queen Victoria and Britain, and by over 500 Māori chiefs.

There is an English language Treaty of Waitangi and a Māori language Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Article 2 of the Treaty of Waitangi promised Māori exclusive and undisturbed possession of their lands, rivers, and taonga. Within 50 years of its signing Māori had lost more than 50% of their lands.

*The Courts and the Waitangi Tribunal have located the core meaning of the Treaty in the exchange of law-making power for the protection of chiefly authority. At the time of the Treaty signing, Māori outnumbered Pākehā settlers by 40 to one, and the tribes represented a powerful military force. It seems unlikely Māori would have agreed to the unqualified transfer of their authority to the new arrivals. It is more probable they understood the Treaty guaranteed the continuation of tribal force and tribal affairs.*

### **Supporting Links**

[www.tpk.govt.nz/tpk-treaty-overview-2001](http://www.tpk.govt.nz/tpk-treaty-overview-2001)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDM-Ct21N4I>

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/treaty/the-treaty-in-brief>

### **Kūpapa – Māori who fought alongside the Crown in the New Zealand Wars**

During the New Zealand Wars (1840 – 1880,) the British and New Zealand government went to war against Māori for refusing to sell their land. Some iwi felt military alliances with the Crown were in their best interests to safeguard future generations in a volatile, rapidly changing world. For others it provided an opportunity to pursue utu and the return of land lost in the Musket Wars of the 1820s – 1830s.

The Māori allies (Kūpapa) chose to exercise their authority and rangatiratanga to form alliances with the Crown as equals. Understanding such motivations for these alliances must be considered within the context and terrible cost of the Musket Wars of the preceding decades. It underscores the military relationship that has existed between Māori and the Crown from that time.

### **Te Hokowhitu a Tū- New Zealand (Māori) Pioneer Battalion WW1**

The four Māori MPs of the day, particularly Tā Apirana Ngata, believed WW1 presented an opportunity to raise the profile of Māori. Initially the government was reluctant to allow native troops to participate in wars between Europeans.

Permission was granted by the Army Council in Britain to raise a Māori contingent.

The 1st Māori Contingent (500 Māori soldiers) took part with the rest of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force involved in the Gallipoli campaign. They were the first Māori unit to leave New Zealand for active service overseas.

Not all Māori supported the recruitment of their young men to fight. Memories of unjust land confiscations, and its consequences of widespread material hardships

were lived realities for the majority of Māori. At the war's end, Māori politicians could take some satisfaction that they had been instrumental in the formation of a Māori battalion, despite it performing largely second class labouring duties, due to the prevailing racist attitudes about Māori capabilities.

## **The 28th Māori Battalion - WW2**

### **Price of citizenship**

By the beginning of WW2 Māori were yet to secure recognition and equality with Pākehā. Māori willingness to undertake military service was linked to their broader aspirations for autonomy with Tā Apirana Ngata again taking a leading role. Māori politicians put pressure on the Labour Government to raise a full Māori unit for overseas service. This became known as the 'price of citizenship'. Māori elders were concerned that the small Māori population would be unable to sustain the loss of men sent to war. Nevertheless, Māori were largely supportive of the war effort. Their preferences to serve together as a Māori battalion were motivated by their desire to retain a measure of control over their service, and to ensure their war contribution would be clearly recognised in order to advance the goal of achieving 'citizenship', and equality with Pākehā. The 28<sup>th</sup> Māori battalion suffered the highest casualty rate of all New Zealand battalions – a 70% casualty rate which was 50% higher than that of Pākehā. It was also the most decorated of the New Zealand battalions.

Lt General Freyberg, Commander of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, commending the 28th Māori Battalion said, "No infantry had a more distinguished record, or saw more fighting, or alas, had such heavy casualties."

### **Supporting Links**

<https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/story-of-the-28th>

<https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/school-resources>

### **Companies and Campaigns**

The 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion was part of the 2nd New Zealand Division, the fighting arm of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force during WW2. Like other infantry battalions, the 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion was divided into five companies: four rifle companies of 125 men each, and a headquarters (HQ) company of 200 men. The battalion's four companies were organised along iwi lines, while the HQ company drew its members from all over Māoridom. Company A, the Gumdiggers, was recruited from Northland to Auckland; Company B, the Penny Divers, from Rotorua, the Bay of Plenty, and Thames – Coromandel; Company C, the Cowboys, from the East Coast from Gisborne to the East Cape; and Company D, Ngāti Walkabout, from Waikato, Hastings, Wellington, and the South Island.

Campaigns were fought with courage and valour in Greece, Crete, North Africa, and Italy. The 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion's service against the Nazis in North Africa earned them a distinguished reputation. It is said that Nazi General Rommel remarked, "Give me the Māori Battalion and I will conquer the world."

## Supporting Links

<https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkWzbMzW3B8>

## Impacts on returning 28th Māori Battalion soldiers

Prior to the return home from the battlefields of WW2 a pilgrimage was made to the grave sites of fallen comrades. The 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion suffered greatest loss of life of all the New Zealand forces that fought in WW2. The death of so many brothers, cousins, and friends had a profound impact on the returning soldiers. Post traumatic stress disorder was not fully recognised or understood at this time. Many men suffered from stress with their families bearing the brunt of it.

The 1945 Māori Social and Economic Advancement Act did not generate the necessary policy support to advance the economic and cultural aspirations of returning Māori soldiers due to resistance from Pākehā public officials.

## Supporting Links

[Wai 1899-1945.pdf](#)

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/425359/maori-battalion-war-medals-to-be-claimed-after-75-years>

## Legacy

In 1995 the New Zealand Army was conferred iwi status as Ngāti Tūmatauenga by respected Māori elders including surviving members of the 28th Māori Battalion, the Māori Queen, Te Atairangikaahu, and the iwi surrounding Waikouru Army Camp.

Dr Hohaia, in her paper, *In Search of a Decolonised Military: Māori Cultural Learning Experiences in the NZDF*, writes, “the New Zealand’s Defence Force’s journey towards biculturalism has made significant progress towards the goal of a decolonised military where Māori knowledge and practices are as credible and valuable as their Western equivalents.”

## Appendices

### Te Rau Aroha



Te Rau Aroha  
National Army Museum Collection

Te Rau Aroha was much more than a mobile canteen providing supplies to the men of the 28th Māori Battalion. It was purchased in New Zealand from donations from Māori children in native schools. To the men of the 28th Māori Battalion Te Rau Aroha was a reminder of their loved ones at home. It provided a cultural space to gather around to share the trials and tribulations of war in a uniquely Māori way.

### Supporting Links

<https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/memory/te-rau-aroha>

## **Heroes of the 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion**

### **Te Moananui a Kiwa Ngarimu**

2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant

14 Platoon Leader

C Company Ngā Kaupoi

Ngāti Porou

Te-Whānau-ā-Rākaioa

Te Aowera

Ngāti Horowai

Te Whānau-ā-Apanui

Te Whakatōhea

Ruatoria

Sheep farmer

**VC Recipient (Posthumously)**

#### **Award Action:**

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Bennett, the commander of the battalion, wrote of Ngārimu: 'Displaying courage and leadership of the highest order, he was himself first on the hill crest, personally annihilating at least two enemy machine gun posts'. Two other witnesses attested to his bravery in leading the charge up the hill. Although wounded in the shoulder and one leg, he insisted on staying with his men. Hikurangi was attacked many times during the night but Ngārimu led the defence, driving the attackers back by shooting some with his machine-gun and throwing stones in hand-to-hand combat when weapons were disabled and grenades had run out, and the position was held.'

On the morning of 27 March 1943 the enemy again counter-attacked and Moana Ngārimu was killed. 'He was killed on his feet defiantly facing the enemy with his tommy-gun at his hip. As he fell, he came to rest almost on the top of those of the enemy who had fallen, the number of whom testified to his outstanding courage'. The Germans on Point 209 surrendered later that day. A few weeks before he was killed he had written to his parents saying that he had dreamed of his great grandmother, Hana Maraea. She was beckoning to him in the dream. His Victoria Cross was accepted by his father on behalf of the entire 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion.

When it was suggested his body be exhumed his father refused, knowing Ngarimu would not want to leave his men behind just as he would not leave them on Hikurangi on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1943.

#### **Supporting Links**

[https://teara.govt.nz/en/video/35631/presentation-of-the-victoria-cross-awarded-to-te-moananui-a-kiwa-ngarimu?fbclid=IwAR2rVD1ZjqDloXFo80X5KFh4rHnomGAcihL5aBLthiHbOmO3T97u6\\_MLco](https://teara.govt.nz/en/video/35631/presentation-of-the-victoria-cross-awarded-to-te-moananui-a-kiwa-ngarimu?fbclid=IwAR2rVD1ZjqDloXFo80X5KFh4rHnomGAcihL5aBLthiHbOmO3T97u6_MLco)  
[o](#)

## **Charles Shelford (Charlie)**

Private

C Company Ngā Kaupoi

18 Platoon

Ngāti Porou

Te Arawa

Te Whakatōhea

Ngā Puhi

Te Whānau-a-Apanui

Ngāti Ruanui

Ngāti Tūpaea

Ngāti Tānewai

Te Kaha (BOP)

Labourer

**DCM**

## **Award Action**

Charlie was recommended by D Company commander, Lieutenant Rangi Logan, and Platoon Commander 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Jim Matahaere

“During the battalion’s night attack on Gazala, Libya, on 14 December 1941, Shelford showed outstanding heroism and courage. After the first entrenchments had been taken his section carried on for 300 yards to a ridge, where they discovered they were isolated and were being fired on from the right rear and the left flank. Shelford volunteered to cover the 300 yards to the Italian position and ‘clean it out’. Despite the intensity of enemy fire from anti-tank guns, machine-guns and small-arms, he covered the distance walking and running and firing his Spandau machine-gun from the hip. With about 20 yards to go he was blasted in the legs by a rain of grenades. Wounded and dazed, he attempted to bring his machine-gun into action, but it had been hit and the butt smashed. In spite of intense pain, he threw a hand grenade into the enemy trench. The surrender of the Italian commanding officer triggered the end of enemy resistance in that area, and altogether Shelford captured four officers and 36 other ranks”.

Shelford was seen frequenting the front line of the battle even when his company was not involved in actions. He had set up a lucrative business dealing souvenir equipment in Egypt. His private armory was legendary.

## **Supporting Link**

<https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/photo/charlie-shelford-1>

<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5s14/shelford-charles>

<https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/school-resources>

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Crosby, R.D. (2015) Kūpapa. Penguin Random House New Zealand Ltd

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Gardiner, W. Ake Ake Kia Kaha E! Forever Brave. (2019). David Bateman Ltd.