

Te Rau Aroha:
A gift from the tamariki of the Native Schools to
the 28th Māori Battalion



*E tipu e rea mo ngā rā o tō ao
Ko tō ringa ki ngā rākau ā te pākehā Hei ara mō tō tinana
Ko tō ngākau ki ngā tāonga a ō tīpuna Māori
Hei tikitiki mō tō māhuna
Ko tō wairua ki tō Atua, Nānā nei ngā mea katoa*

Thrive in the days destined for you,
your hand to the tools of the pākehā to provide physical sustenance.
Your heart to the treasures of your ancestors to adorn your head,
your soul to God to whom all things belong.
(Apirana Ngata 1949)

Aotearoa NZ Histories Curriculum: Know

Whakapapa me te whanaungatanga : how the past shapes who we are today – our familial links and bonds, our networks and connections, our sense of obligation, and the stories woven into our collective and diverse identities.

Introduction

The story of Te Rau Aroha is much more than that of the mobile canteen truck made in New Zealand, sent in WWII to our soldiers overseas. It is part of the story of the 28th Māori Battalion, the story of former students and teachers at Native Schools volunteering to fight for New Zealand. As the whānau from the same communities had done years earlier for the pioneer battalion in WWI, the next generation volunteered to be members of the Māori Battalion in WW2.

The whānau and tamariki of these men, students in the same schools they had studied at, demonstrated a great desire to support the soldiers. They did this by raising the funds for a mobile canteen truck, (far exceeding the required amount to pay for the truck and its special cargo), to be sent to the battlefield.

Apirana Ngata, highly regarded as the first Māori student in the country to achieve a university degree, was present when the truck was handed from the Minister of Education to the Governor General, in Wellington in August 1941. Crucially, Ngata was pivotal in encouraging Māori recruitment in both world wars. He believed that fighting for King and country would give a voice for Māori as fully recognised citizens of a post war New Zealand.



Apirana Ngata interprets Māori to the Governor General at the handover of Te Rau Aroha in 1941.

Native schools

The New Zealand Wars had caused great turmoil in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 1860s, so the government sought ways to improve relations between Māori and Pākehā. There is a strong European tradition of using schools as a site to create support for the Crown. There had been mission schools, including those funded by the government, for many years but Māori and Pākehā wanted more schools for Māori students. As a result, the government formalised a new system for educating Māori, through the Native Schools Act, in 1867.

The original 1867 Act stated that Māori would be required to request the school themselves, supply the land and contribute to the resources for it; but once each school was established the Māori community, that created the school, would have no control over what would be taught in the school. Te Reo Māori was originally allowed to be spoken for the first classes held, but the Māori language was actively discouraged in the years that followed. The long-term purpose of these schools changed - from a policy of encouraging students to stay in school and obtain higher qualifications, to one where Māori students were encouraged to follow only trade and agricultural career paths.

Māori originally believed native schools could create opportunities to share the scientific knowledge of Pākehā and that learning English, as a second language, would also create better relations. Some schools did become a link between Māori communities and the Pākehā world. However when the students achieved a good standard of English language often the school would be closed, and the students would then go to a public schools. This meant Māori lost a community and the sharing of knowledge was replaced by a path of assimilation with Pākehā culture.

Many, including government school inspectors, believed that Te Reo Māori and Tikanga Māori were a barrier to Māori being assimilated and that adopting a Pākehā world view was the way forward. In 1947 Native Schools became known as Māori schools, and were taken over by regional education boards in 1969. At this time government reports believed, as outlined in the 1961 Hunn report, that a "school is the nursery of integration, and the cause of race relations would therefore be best served by 'absorbing as many Māori children as possible into board schools'."

Fundraising

In 1941 the Ministry of Education worked with the Native Schools to inspire the students to raise funds for a mobile canteen truck and its contents specifically for the 28th Māori Battalion. The truck became Te Rau Aroha and the contents became gifts from home to the men of the Battalion. The methods the students engaged to raise these funds were diverse. More than one hundred schools contributing to the fund; all of them demonstrating a genuine interest in sending aroha from their school to their men fighting in a war on the other side of the world.

"The target was 850 pounds, (about \$1700 at the time). In just six months the target was reached as schools grew vegetables for sale and ran concerts and stalls; children also dug into their moneyboxes. The final total raised was 1000 pounds

(about \$2000 at the time) – a lot of money in those days.” (National Army Museum Te Mata Toa)

There are many references to the tamariki giving pennies to the cause. Many raised much more, with North Auckland students raising an average of “five shillings per head”. In the war time economy (1939-45), a working class family might earn five pounds a week.

Examples of how the children raised money;

Urewera school: Penny concerts were put on by the boys and the girls and raised money to “show the men we have not forgotten them”

Pukepoto school: Held a calf club parade, a festival, bottle drive and the sale of goods made at the school.

Nuhaka school: Put down a Hangi and raised twenty pounds.

The Handover

In August 1941, the five mobile canteen trucks that had been built in Petone from community funds, were presented to Sir Cyril Newall, the Governor General, in his role as chair of the NZ Patriotic Fund Board. During the ceremony, it was Te Rau Aroha that received special attention from the Governor General. At the handover, the Governor General of New Zealand spoke of the support from the students at Māori schools referencing the “Spontaneous desire on their own part to show appreciation of their Battalion”.

He asked Apirana Ngata to translate the message, written on the truck, for the men of the of the Māori Battalion.

He tohu aroha na nga tamariki o nga Kura Māori o Niu Tireni ki te Ope Whawhai o te Iwi Māori e tau mai ra i te Pae o te Pakanga i te Mura o te Ahi.

Presented to the Māori Battalion as a token of love from the children of the native schools of New Zealand.

Of the children’s work and donations, the Governor General said, “There is nothing like a children’s gift to touch the heart. These gifts catered for the inner comforts of the men”.

Te Rau Aroha goes to war.

The five canteen trucks were delivered to North Africa in the Second World and were handed over to the Y.M.C.A. The man who drove Te Rau Aroha to the men of the 28th Māori Battalion was Sergeant Manning. He said being given the keys for the Battalion truck was a special opportunity and he drove Te Rau Aroha at the front of the convoy with pride. It took three days to get there, at times having to skirt around the enemy.

As often as possible the canteen had good supplies of chocolate, tobacco, toiletries, and books along with tinned fruit and kaimoana. It was the unique flavours of Aotearoa that Te Rau Aroha would come to host at Christmas time in Italy 1943.

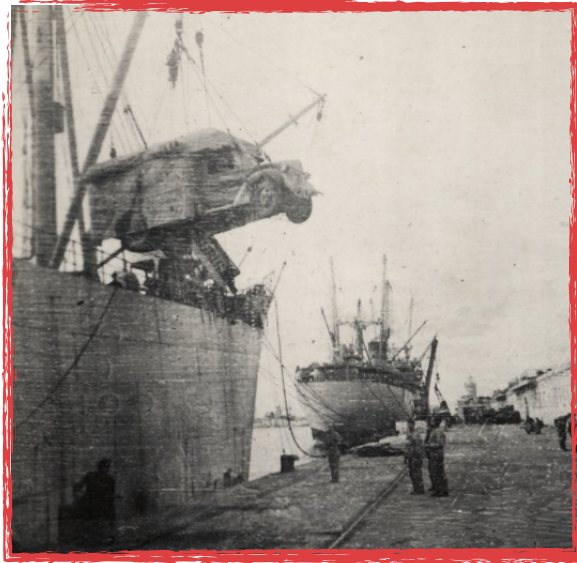
“As promised Sir Apirana Ngata had achieved the impossible. In the very Christmas week 1943, out of the blue so to speak, two trucks arrived and unloaded rusty battered old cream cans still showing Ngāti Porou, whānau ā Apanui and Tūhoe dairy factory supply numbers, and the familiar brass plate of the makers Alex Harvey & Sons. There were delicacies well covered in pork fat; tuna, paka tahu, mutton bird, karengo, kahawai, pipi; and so on and on. Te Rau Aroha became the assembly and dispatch point to get these gifts up to the front line and for Christmas dinner at B Ech”. (Norm Perry: 1984, The Battalion Remembers booklet)

Te Rau Aroha was then not only driven from camp to camp to comfort men between battles, but on numerous occasions, became part of the battle. Scarred with holes made by artillery rounds, the canteen not only had beloved food supplies cut to shreds, but was nearly lost completely, crew and all. On one occasion a British officer couldn't believe his eyes when observing a battle in North Africa. The sight of a mobile canteen mid-flight, racing into the combat zone with the troops was unbelievable. The scars of these encounters were seen as a badge of honour by the members of the Battalion. On the occasion that headquarters had the holes repaired, the men protested loudly. A German machine gun provided a fresh set of scars at the next battle so the men were full of pride once again.

The answer to why a YMCA vehicle was so close to combat areas was that the men of the battalion would not let the truck leave their side. They treated Te Rau Aroha as a treasured member of the group, taking the canteen into battle, fearing for the welfare of the truck, and taking pride in the battle scars suffered by it.



By the time the war ended in 1945, Te Rau Aroha had served in Africa, Italy and Palestine, surviving at the front of two major campaigns. The mobile canteen had reached the hearts of all who encountered the war-torn veteran. When the men of the battalion were told the canteens would not return home, they protested to the point of saying “if Te Rau Aroha is not put on the ship, we will not sail”.



The Return:

The driver of the canteen throughout the war was Charles Bennett and it was Charlie YM, as he became known, who drove Te Rau Aroha, after the war, to all the schools that had contributed. An itinerary was mapped out in 1946 and an epic journey was carried out from the West Coast of the North Island to the Bay of Plenty, through the lake district and to every Native School in the far north. The name of each school visited by Te Rau Aroha was proudly painted on the side of the truck.

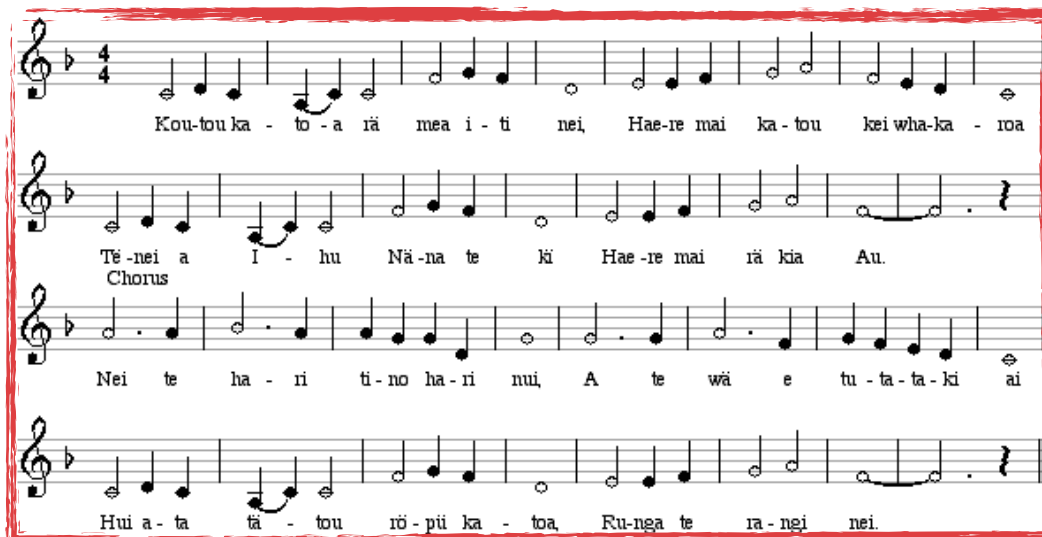
Over one hundred schools were visited, and a heartfelt reception was given to Te Rau Aroha at every school. This was matched by the genuine passion from Mr Bennett, and veterans, from each community, in explaining the exploits of the battalion's canteen and the gratitude for the mahi that made it all possible.

These events included:

Pukepoto school: On arrival Te Rau Aroha was challenged in the "traditional way" with haka, waiata-ā-ringa and poi. This was followed by a speech by Māori Battalion veteran Pvt. John Cameron.

Pamapurua school: At the welcoming ceremony the Kaumatua were wearing korowai and the tamariki had tā moko for a day of presenting kapa haka with taiaha. The waiata Kotou katoa was performed and Charlie Bennett gave a lantern lecture (slide show) of the story of Te Rau Aroha at war.

Whatuwhiwhi school: On seeing the marks of war on the truck it was said that the "scars prove a story is still alive, the spirit is still active". Mr Hawera spoke of his work with urban Māori and encouraged the parents present, to endeavour to take advantage of higher education standards for their tamariki.



At the end of the tour Charlie Bennet gave the kaitiaki, of Te Rau Aroha to the people of the Whakarewarewa Marae. His speech included “had you not bought this truck in the first place, it would never have performed its errands of mercy and been the comfort it was.... it was your present to your men overseas, it is only right its final resting place be here among you.

Conclusion

While the five mobile canteens that were funded by the communities of NZ represented a national desire to support the troops, it was Te Rau Aroha that struck a chord. The truck has become a living taonga for the country, not only with the 28th Māori Battalion, but to all who know the story,

The spirit the men showed in going to war, and fighting well, was matched by the determination of their tamariki and whānau in funding and supplying a mobile canteen unique to their fighting unit. The devotion of the men of the Battalion to Te Rau Aroha, literally in the pitch of battle, was matched by the gratitude they felt for the children who funded the mobile canteen.

The driver Charlie Bennett had a personal interest in both the welfare of Māori at home and in the battles of the far-off wars. He showed dedication by reaching every school that had contributed and giving the same passionate retelling of the exploits of Te Rau Aroha at each school.

Apirana Ngata is a key figure in this story, not only because he contributed to military recruitment of Māori, over two wars, but because he was a motivator and role model for Māori education. He gave energy to these causes so Māori could have an equal voice in a Pākehā world. His contact with Te Rau Aroha has added to the spirit of the truck today. The voice in society that Ngata sought for Māori by encouraging education and forming a Māori fighting force in a global war, was given momentum. The long-term future of achieving equal opportunity for Māori, had received a boost.

The Government policies of assimilation and integration, stretching back to the NZ Wars, sought to stamp out the Māori language and relegate tikanga Māori to the history books. It was the native schools who stood beside their men going to war, funding more than just a resource, but also a message of hope, a message written in Māori on Te Rau Aroha. This message returned and was welcomed home, with heart felt kapa haka and waiata.

It invoked living connections with tipuna - and sent a message into the future.

References

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