

A brave but humble hero

'Maori spirit and love of fun could not be quelled'

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CROSSING the Senio River, the Allies were now heading for Trieste but having to fight for every inch of ground.

"It was all open land, there were hardly any trees except for a few olive trees and vineyards. And the olive trees were all blown to bits. The boys used to run in behind these as if a little thing like that would protect you," he says, beginning to giggle like a man who can't wait for the punchline of a joke.

"I shot up to one of them once. Got to it, looked behind and all my mates were behind me. The whole section was behind me and this little tree," he rocks forward in his armchair, nearly in tears at the ludicrousness of the memory.

"So if anyone was going to get hit, it was me first."

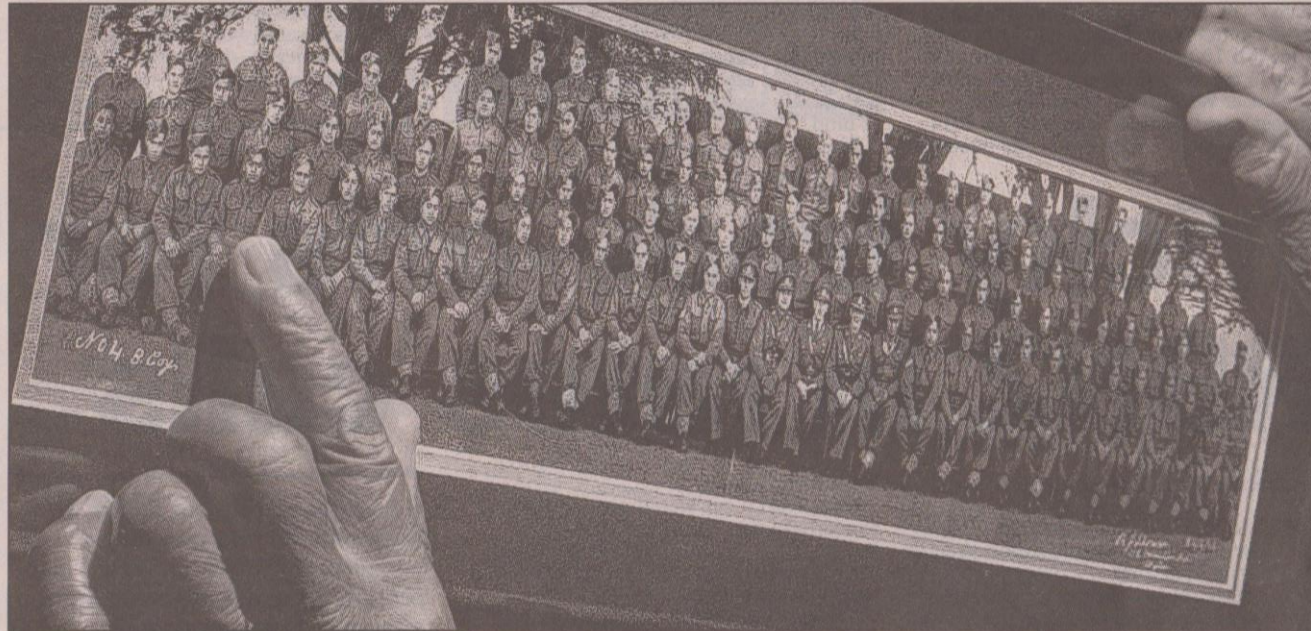
During the same engagement, D company was being held up in a fierce fight with a company of Germans. As they looked to advance across exposed ground the Maori created barricades with the corpses of fallen enemy to shelter from incoming fire.

"They grabbed the dead ones and stacked them up as protection. But one of these D company guys grabbed a 'dead' German and went to roll him on top of another one when the man suddenly stood up and took off. He was playing possum. He just ran off."

So, did Mr Patara kill any Germans?
"I'm not sure. You're just firing as you go forward a lot of the time. It's hard to tell."

What he is clearer about are the heightened feelings of being engaged in conflict.

"You feel uptight, you're on the lookout for snipers in the tall buildings like the church spires. All you hear is a whoosh of



LONE SURVIVOR: Te Puhi Patara, pointing out himself among B Company's 12th reinforcement, says he is the last person in this photo still alive. Bay of Plenty Times picture



church spires. All you hear is a whoosh of a bullet.

"We had to fight all the way to Trieste. The Germans didn't just retreat, you had to come along and kick them out, clear out the homes. When you were approaching houses, you didn't know (if Germans were there) until you were fired on. You were thinking about it all the time."

Even then, the Maori spirit and love of fun could not be quelled.

"Maori boys, when they're fighting, they're still doing silly things to make each other laugh. You know, you might be down in the dumps but they would do something silly at the time to make you laugh."

Even under fire?

"Yes," says Mr Patara, a broad grin spreading across his face.

It's clear he prefers these humorous reflections and you can hardly blame him. Even when verifying the legendary ferocity with which the Maori fought, he qualifies it with humour.

"You have to, fight hard. But you took it for granted. I read a lot about our battalion in the papers and I think to myself, 'Gee, I didn't know they were that great.'"

As the advance continued, the soldiers found time for other distractions, including the local women.

"Ah, yep, plenty," says Mr Patara cheekily.

"Everybody did. But some of them got too serious though, eh? It was just a bit of fun for me, but some of my mates, they got their women to follow them wherever we went. You know, they were that much in love, I suppose," he says, raising his eyes and giggling infectiously.

"As we were advancing, they were there too, the girlfriends."

Other diversions included adding variety to their diet.

"A lot of (Italian) people had fowl, and we used to go out and hunt them. It made a change from bully beef, that's all we had was bully beef. So we used to go and pinch fowl, pigs, anything.

"One time there, our jeep, which brought the food, couldn't get through. So the Maori boys were looking for kai and cooking it up. Well our Pakeha friends (in the other New Zealand divisions) were looking for their kai too and so the boys started feeding them."

He says a strong camaraderie existed between all New Zealanders, not just the Maori. That was to the fore as the Allies



READY FOR ACTION: Te Puhī Patara (above), 20, during training at Wellington's Trentham Camp. **RIGHT, RELAXING:** Te Puhī Patara (left) enjoys a break in the fighting with Maori Battalion colleagues in Italy.

swept to victory.

The final month of the war turned into a pursuit as the Germans were forced to face the inevitable.

Their surrender was announced on May 2, 1945.

The conclusion of hostilities in Europe meant the end of the war for most Maori, although 270 volunteers, J-Force, were sent to bolster New Zealand's post-war occupation force in Japan.

Mr Patara, who spent 12 months on the front line, was not among them and returned home with the rest of the battalion, sailing out of Taranto on the Dominion Monarch on Boxing Day, 1945.

The returning heroes were greeted at Wellington's Lambton Quay but the formal celebrations were not what they were looking forward to most.

"They had the speeches and all that but all we were waiting for was to get to the pub. First time I ever got beer out of the pub in Wellington. When we went over to war the Maori weren't allowed to buy beer.

"So when all the formal greetings had finished, that's where we headed. We were just coming out of the pub afterwards, when we saw a cop. Well, I had a couple of bottles in my jacket, so when we saw him I got a fright, I thought he was going to put us in jail.

"All he said was, 'Have a good time boys'."

In common with many returning servicemen, Mr Patara said he found it hard to adjust.

What he missed most were those bonds formed in battle.

"We got back and we were all separated. You had spent all that time together. In the army, you're always together, you do

things together. I really missed that.

"When we got back, there was only one or two of us around the same area. I missed my mates."

The Maori Battalion was disbanded on its return.

Mr Patara, then 21, says he spent about three more months in the army before returning to his family's Pukehina farm.

Much of his working life was spent in farming or working for the Government's Lands and Survey Department, breaking in farmland in the Maketu region.

"Clearing scrub, chopping manuka by hand to bring in the land for farming. We had no machinery then. You had to dig drains by hand. Hard yakka," he concludes.

He married Te Tiriti O Waitangi Patara, on October 21, 1948, at Matata Church.

The couple had 11 children (four died in infancy), 16 grandchildren, 12 great grandchildren and two great great grandchildren.

After nearly 64 years of marriage, Mr Patara's wife died on July 11 last year.

A palpable sense of that loss remains in the couple's home.

Only one association has endured longer in Mr Patara's lengthy life — being part of "Two Eight" Maori Battalion.

It is one he admits to pride in but which the events of recent months mean is inevitably drawing to a close.

On December 1, a service at the national war memorial marked the formal closure of the 28th Maori Battalion Association.

On Wednesday, the battalion's ceremonial mere (weaponry club made from greenstone) was presented to the National Army Museum, Waiouru.

Seven veterans attended the ceremony

in which they entrusted the museum to act as themere's custodian. It is likely to be the old soldiers' last such formal gathering.

Mr Patara is not in frail health but many of his former comrades are and, as his living room clock chimes again, he sums up the situation frankly.

"The numbers are dwindling and a lot can't get about. There's only a dozen or so of us who can now."

Age has simply caught up.