

Story: Ngārimu, Te Moananui-a-Kiwa

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Ngārimu, Te Moananui-a-Kiwa

1919–1943

Ngāti Porou and Te Whānau-ā-Apanui; soldier

This biography, written by Whai Ngata, was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography in 2000. It was updated in January, 2002. It was translated into te reo Māori by the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography team.

Te Moananui-a-Kiwa Ngārimu was born into Te Aitanga-a-Mate of Ngāti Porou at Whareponga, on the East Coast, on 7 April 1919, the son of Hāmuera Meketū Ngārimu, and his wife Maraea. He had strong connections to Te Whānau-a-Rākaioira, Te Aowera and Ngāti Horowai. His mother was of Te Whānau-ā-Apanui and was connected to Te Whakatōhea. Through her, Moana's ancestry is traced to the Mātaatua canoe, and through an ancestor, Te Aomoengāriki, to Te Arawa. Moana was a nephew of the well-known Ngāti Porou woman of mana [Materoa Reedy](#). Maraeake, the family home where he was born, is a short distance from Kirikiritatangi, on the foreshore, where young warriors of the area were trained in the art of warfare.

Moana Ngārimu attended Whareponga Native School from 1924. When the family moved to Pōhatukura, 2½ miles from the small township of Ruatōria, he was enrolled at Hiruhārama Native School from 15 July 1929. He later spent 1933–34 at Te Aute College, where

he was outstanding at rugby. After leaving school he worked on the family farm and was a member of the Hikurangi Choir. He was developing his skills as a sheepfarmer, and was engaged to Hīria Walker, when the Second World War began in 1939. Māori MPs requested that the government allow Māori to volunteer for military service overseas. On 4 October the government announced the decision to establish the 28th New Zealand (Māori) Battalion, which was organised on a tribal basis. Ngārimu signed up for the army at Ruatōria on 11 February 1940.

On 1 May 1940 the main body of the Māori Battalion left the showgrounds in Palmerston North, where they had been training, and marched to the railway station and travelled to Wellington. At Aotea Quay they boarded the *Aquitania*, and the next day sailed for England, where Ngārimu was chosen for intelligence duties. He later became a second lieutenant and a platoon leader in the battalion's C Company.

The men of the Māori Battalion were embroiled in much of the heavy fighting in Greece, Crete and Libya. During the retreat from Tobruk (Tubruq) it took part in the breakout from encirclement at Minqâr Qaim. In February 1943, following the battle of El Alamein and the advance to Tripoli, eight C Company officers, including Ngārimu, wrote to Sir [Apirana Ngata](#) describing the battalion's casualties: two commanders had been wounded and some men had

describing the battalion's casualties: two commanders had been wounded and some men had been wounded two or three times. The fittest of the wounded were being used to reinforce the front lines. The officers suggested to Ngata that it was time their men were taken out to rest.

Shortly after they were involved in the action at Tebaga Gap in Tunisia. The battalion was on the right of the attack and its objective was a hill known as Point 209. It was found to be strongly held by Germans and heavy fire held down the battalion. C Company, under Colonel [Peta Awatere](#), was sent to attack the position. To do this he had to first order an attack on high ground in front of Point 209. The Ngāti Porou soldiers called it Hikurangi, after their mountain at home. Ngārimu was one of the platoon leaders given the job of attacking the hill, which was held in considerable strength by the enemy and defended with intense mortar and machine-gun fire from Point 209.

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 that he had dreamed of his great grandmother Hana Maraea. She was beckoning to him in the dream.

Ngārimu was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery, determination and outstanding leadership. It was presented to his parents by the governor general, Sir Cyril Newall, at a hui at Ruatōria on 6 October 1943 attended by government leaders, diplomatic representatives and 7,000 Māori. The occasion was recorded by the National Film Unit and the films shown to Māori Battalion soldiers in Italy. His grandmother, Makere Ngārimu, died the night his Victoria Cross was presented.

Ngārimu's Victoria Cross citation was published in English and Māori in a booklet by Sir Apirana Ngata entitled *The price of citizenship*. He is commemorated in the Ngārimu VC and 28th (Māori) Battalion Memorial Scholarship Fund, which was set up in 1945 to promote Māori education and the maintenance of Māori language and culture. Te Moananui-a-Kiwa Ngārimu is buried in the Sfax War Cemetery in Tunisia.

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