

68/10/16

TAITUHA, H.P.

REPORT ON OPERATIONS OF D COMPANY  
28 NZ (MAORI) BATTALION AT MOUNT  
OLYMPUS - 14-17 APRIL 1941.

Account of the Fighting at Mount Olympus by Cpl Harry P Taituha. Taken from THE GUERRILLA, the magazine of the Rotorua Services Convalescent Hospital, of March 1944.

(Note: Cpl Taituha was in command of No 1 Sec, D Company 28 Maori Battalion. It was this platoon and more particularly the section which bore the brunt of the German attack.)

Almost immediately the scout returned. The enemy was down below us he reported crawling up in hundreds. I sent a runner back, recalled my sentries and closed the wires. We prepared for action.

The ridge dropped sheer down the Pass. A road clung to the cliffs working round the Pass. Rocks, bare and naked, loomed above the tree tops. A canyon, hidden by trees and echoing to the roar of a swollen creek, snaked through the ranges. We were fifteen hundred feet up. My boots squeezed slush and mud. The leaves dripped from a recent three day's rain. The heights of Olympus stood to our right shrouded in fog.

My Bren view, covered our front by enfilade. The "Tommy Gun" was on our left. Outside the barb wires grew a thick undergrowth. The grenade throwers faced it. Two riflemen protected the Bren with frontal fire. My reserves covered the Bren from the right. Our weapon pits were camouflaged but when the attack began I climbed out of mine and stood behind the limb of a fallen tree. From this point I commanded a view of our whole front and flanks.

#### THE ATTACK

The enemy attacked. The day had gone dull. Overhanging trees had thrown a faint twilight over the battle scene but visibility was good. The enemy began by sneaking up the road on our right. Already snap shooting had begun. The enemy walked right into the muzzle of a Bren trained on the road from our reserve section behind. The Bren simply mowed them down. What escaped of the enemy scuttled back. A sudden calm but the air was charged for we knew that at any moment death stalked the ranges of Greece. Then it broke. The enemy had changed their tactics and came straight at us head on. We let them have it - guns, rifles, grenades and all. Waves came up but went hurtling back. Our fire was deadly and the men though wet to the skin were fit and in fighting condition.

A mob of Germans crawled round the left and up through the undergrowth. They aimed to cut our wires. The grenade throwers spotted them. The undergrowth blew up. Germans, tangled in uprooted growth, flew squeling in all directions. Meantime, our guns were pumping lead as fast as we could load them. Empty rounds jumped and clashed in mid-air. Outside the wires the heap of German dead mounted higher and higher. Still they came.

The Germans were brave but our boys were braver. The Germans held the advantage. They had scores of machine guns to our solitary one. They outnumbered us by forty to one. My section was a small eleven. They comprised men of the crack German Alpine Troops who had already had experiences in mountain fighting. We were ordinary Maori pig-hunters from New Zealand and this was our first taste of battle. But it was wonderful. I saw tongues of flame spit from our trenches. I saw Germans come up shooting through the wire and fall crashing backwards into the thicket. I could have shouted for joy but there was no time. The barrel of my rifle had gone hot. Empty clips lay scattered on the ground. Bullets zipped and zipped through the air. The enemy became silhouettes and began to blur in the pall of gun smoke. The noise was terrible. Shots, mortar bombs, explosive and Tommy-guns roared to the cries of kicking Germans. The din, reinforced by that of the creek below resounded through the canyons, up the Pass, and over the snow-covered mountains.

For hours the fight went on. For hours the enemy lines went crashing backwards at the wires. But the enemy came on - in waves. It seemed as though the whole forest had turned into Germans. Some had climbed up trees, in among the branches, and had begun raining bullets on us from there. Superiority in weapons, ammunition and men soon told. We could not hold out. Already they had located the Bren. They forced the gunners down by directing a continuous hail of bullets at the gun. They had it all over us. Our hands scorched by sizzling barrels, we stuck it out until the enemy in sheer number simply trampled the wires down and broke through.

WITHDRAWAL.

I drew my men back. First to go were the reserves and the Bren gun crew. A German slunk up behind a stump and drew a bead on to the retiring gunners. I plugged him fair between the eyes. Next to go were the grenade men. A conceited German slung his rifle and went after them shouting. He paid the price. I saw him topple down the hill. The tommy-gunner and his mate had an easy exit. They dropped into the gully and made back. My game riflemen I could not get out. Fire had become point blank. The enemy located my position and subjected it to a withering fire. My small limb of a tree cracked and broke off into splintering pieces but - God bless that wood - the core of it held. Bullets shot into it and went ricochetting up the trees. Germans were all over our trenches. My riflemen were nowhere in sight. Yelling was out of the question. I could hardly hear the 'plop' of my own rifle. The Germans shouted, yelled, fired. Their guns, freed from empty targets, turned on my position.

I sweated and steamed. My ears burned with scorching bullets. At length I saw the two riflemen come out. The Germans were all round them. I saw a big hulk swing the butt of his rifle but that was all he did. He got one fair in the chest. Two more went west before the Germans realised what was happening in their midst. But the two riflemen had dived among the logs and gone. All my men safe.

In the lives of people there occur episodes remembered in days later. Be they tragedies, romances or merely jokes, these episodes, when the mind is at ease and the mood retrospective, stand out clearly. In my case I find mine a joke. My men gone, there left but one thing - myself to retire. I got rooted to the spot. I was scared but those blurring figures falling before my rifle fascinated me. I pumped more lead. I saw more figures go down. An unholy cackle came out of my throat. I pumped again and then again .....

My bandolier ran out. I dived for the loose ammunition in my pocket. It was slow loading. But every bullet told. No one but a blind man could miss. Fire was point-blank. What with the heavy breathing, the crackle of broken twigs and the hail of bullets in the air, the place became hot. My face burned. Sweat poured down me and into my eyes. Wide, unguarded chests appeared. I shot straight into the chests.

Even a madman must get tired. But what hastened my end was that my clips were empty. I had to fall back on my loose rounds, a slow job indeed. Added to this, the woodwork of my rifle had been shot away. I was firing from a damaged rifle. A sub-machine gun got round me. I was then like a prize bull in a ring. Germans were already round me. ~~xxxxxxx~~ I could hear them breath, cough and shout. I was shot from the side and went down.

When I came to, it was dark. I was covered in blood. My right jaw hung down my face a bleeding mess. Next to me I found one of my reserve men whom I thought had got away. He died in my arms murmuring "Mama". A week later struggling through the mountains alone I came upon some of our troops. I learnt from them my two riflemen never got out.

As I write this I think of those three men. The two riflemen who fought on until all was hopeless. The lone reserve man who had the first chance to retreat and did not take it. May their mothers know their sons died fighting.

7 Aug 48

Dear Charlie,

Thank you for yours of 3rd inst., it is nice to know that you still remember me after these many years. I also have followed your fighting career with great interest. We are all proud of your achievements and of the quiet Intelligence Section private who became a brave soldier-- your own Monty Wikiriwhi.

Answering your questions in the order they appear, I have to state that:

1. I was in charge of No.1 Section, 16 Platoon, D. Company. Platoon Cmdr: Lieut. Gordon Ormand. Platoon Sergeant: Sergt. Waitiri Loydd. The other Section Cmdrs. were: Cpl. George Harrison, No.3 Section., Cpl. Jack Hemi, No. 2 Section. Our platoon straddled the ridge. My section occupied the most forward position, probably the most forward of the entire line. Mr. Gilroy's platoon occupied the ridge on the left and slightly behind us. B Company covered our right.
2. I know of the preparation in respect of my section only. It was almost foolproof, wiring, apron fence, concertina fence, coils and coils of wire which my whole section and I lugged from Hq. Coy. area down the road below us. This was after Hq. Coy had moved back up the hill. The only draw back was our field of fire. It was somewhat limited due to the bushes, stumps, undergrowth. We dared not make a proper job of clearing the field of fire because the cleared patch would reveal our position to the enemy spotting plane overhead. I had my fighting pits dug in positions commanding the most effect field of fire. The Bren pit was on the right. Immediately behind it was the ammunition dump and my temporary quarters. I could contact my line from the dump at any time but in battle, the dump was no place for a commander. It was too far to the right; and too level with the ground which made a clear view of the battle area-- right and left flanks-- impossible. I selected the most commanding spot, left my pit and made for it. My protection was the limb of a fallen trunk. I controlled the battle from this position. I had a clear view of my right and left flanks as well as the front. My job was to provide covering fire for the protection of my men and, even if I do say it myself, my rifle did a wonderful job. It literally bowled 'em over; I couldn't miss. (I attach article: "The Doomed Outpost". It tells the story.)
3. Yes, my Bren gunner, Pte. Karetu actually fired the first shot and I well remember the near panic caused among the other sections for they refused to believe Karetu saw a German. They reckon he was imagining things and Karetu and I came in for a hot time. Well, the fight broke out in earnest almost immediately after this. I cannot say what time. It was raining and the battle was waged in half twilight due to the overhanging branches and the fog on the mountains which was beginning to come down.
4. We knew the enemy was down below us. A "D" Company scout told us this as he hurried on back up the hill to Major Dyer. My own scout confirmed the fact soon enough for he came running back, and so we closed the wires. The enemy came up and then tried to by-pass us by creeping round the road on our right. They ran right into the muzzle of the Section 3 Bren which was "nested" behind us on the road corner. The Bren shot them to pieces. The enemy retired; and we waited.

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I don't just know how it started but before we knew what had happened, the silent forest had gone beserk with the sound of mortars, rifles, grenades and every death spitting weapon imaginable. (From here, I will let the article "Doomed Outpost" above continue the story.) The enemy overran us. They had more weapons, more men, more cunning in bush warfare. They had everything above all, they had nearly twenty Tommy guns to our solitary one and believe it or not, the enemy fire though erratic and ineffective, did one thing; and it was this thing which enabled them to get up to the wires. The enemy fire was a continuous hail which forced us to take cover. Not only that. That

P.S. I would like the enclosed copy of "The Doomed Outpost" returned please. It is the only one I have. Regards

hail did something else. It created a man-made fog of bluish powder colour and as the battle went on, the figures became blurs darting in the gunsmoke. Visibility deteriorated and it was like shooting at ghosts.

I do not know ~~what~~ whether any other platoon of D Company was attacked directly; nor do I know anything about B Company. Not one man came to our rescue except Cpl. Harrison's Reserve Section in the initial stages of the battle. About half way through the fight the firing from this section which was directly behind me, ceased; and I never heard a shot from it again.

5. As stated, the enemy tried to by-pass us on the right. Then it gave that up. It retired, and having regrouped, it came up at us in a head-on frontal attack. They struck our position immediately in front and of course we went to market on the shooting. The range was point blank we could not possibly miss. Joe Hiroti was our Tommy gun man. He was on the left with Bob Hohaia. In the next pit ~~was~~ Boycie Te Mana and Ropiha, the grenade men. They were lobbing grenades over the fence and I could hear ear-splitting squeals as enemy soldiers shot skyhigh in the tangled junk. Those fighting pits are no damned good. That was how the enemy beat us. We got immobilised in the pits. There was no manouverability (Don't know if I've spelt this word correctly.) We should have fought the enemy back on a fluid front.

The enemy is an expert bush and mountain fighter. It took advantage of every cover offering-- trees, logs, clumps, hollows. Some clambered up the trees and began shooting down on us. We should have done the same but no. Our orders were to dig pits and fight from there. Well, we did and once our positions were known to the enemy, it was the finish. The hail of bullets was like an iron lid clamped down on our heads and kept us under.

The enemy pelted us with grenades. The grenades were flying over the fence in a continuous stream. No bayonets were used, it was out of the question due to trees and undergrowth. The enemy got to the wires due to its effective employment of ~~small arms~~ <sup>small arms</sup> fire to shield its men; due to the superiority in number, arms-- particularly machine guns-- , experience in mountain fighting. The enemy outnumbered us by at least 40 to one. Our Bren, once located, never got a chance. Flying turf and chips from enemy bullets almost ~~covered the gunners~~ buried the gunners under.

6. Just before the fight I reported to Lieut. Ormand at Pl.Hq. about twenty yards behind our position. I said "What shall we do, Sir. Shall we carry on?" Lieut. Ormand nodded his head and said "Yes, carry on, corporal." I waved him a cheery goodbye and went on down the hill to my men and our position. As far as I know Lieut. Ormand was there close behind us. I thought he saw everything that went on. I did not expect him to show up in my area for I was in charge there. The appearance of another commander, especially at that late hour, would only interfere with plans and understanding between my men and I. We never received a single order to retire. We would have done so with the greatest of pleasure if we did. I had been expecting a runner all the time but he never turned up. We fought on on a definite instruction personally delivered me by Sergt. Waitiri Loyd. He said: "If you are attacked, there will be a Bn. bayonet charge." I relayed the message personally to all my men; and we fought on with this in view. I figured that the success of the Bn. charge depended on us holding out at all cost; and that was exactly what we did. I began to withdraw my men when I saw the enemy had broken through and Germans were all round us. I knew the promised charge would never come; and it was every man for himself. I started the withdrawal of my men then. I covered their retreat; the first pair to break back being ~~Karetu and Tumataroa---the gun crew,~~ the reserves, Larkins and Ropata. Then the gun crew, Karetu and Tumataroa. Then the grenade throwers, Boycie te Mana and Ropiha. The Tommy gun man, Hiroti, with his companion, Bob Hohaia, had an easy exit. They slipped into the gully on the left and made their way back. My most difficult men to get back were Kaimoana and Poutu. The full force of the enemy break through came from their front. These two men eventually came out but Joe Hiroti told me a week later they never got away. They were shot. The method I employed for protecting the retreat of my men is explained in the article "Doomed Outpost" enclosed above.

NO bayonet charge of 1st Battalion  
Ref. 1st Battalion's Campaign & Outpost  
Nov 1944

7 No men were left in the pits after the fight. Hiroti attached himself to one of Mr. Gilroy's section. This section lost contact with its platoon and when the British army retreated, the section got left behind. I met Hiroti about a week later on the ridge above Bn. Hq. area. In the party beside Hiroti, were Cpl. Wipiti, Carroll, McGregor, Takarangi and one or two others whose names I have forgotten. I spent a day and a half with them. Then I told them, since they were fit, to go on their own and fight their way out. I was too far gone and I told them so. Hiroti nearly cried when they bade me goodbye. It was Hiroti who told me that Kaimoana and Poutu were killed and that he buried them in one of the pits. Hiroti went back over the battle area after I had met up with him and the other men. I lost three men altogether: Poutu, Kaimoana and Ropata. All killed in action. I reckon this last man, Ropata, should be decorated. He was the first man I gave the opportunity to retreat and save his life. He refused and began firing back at the enemy. I didn't know this until after the fight when I regained consciousness. He was lying there behind a log close to me. And he died with the word 'mother' on his lips. He died in my arms.

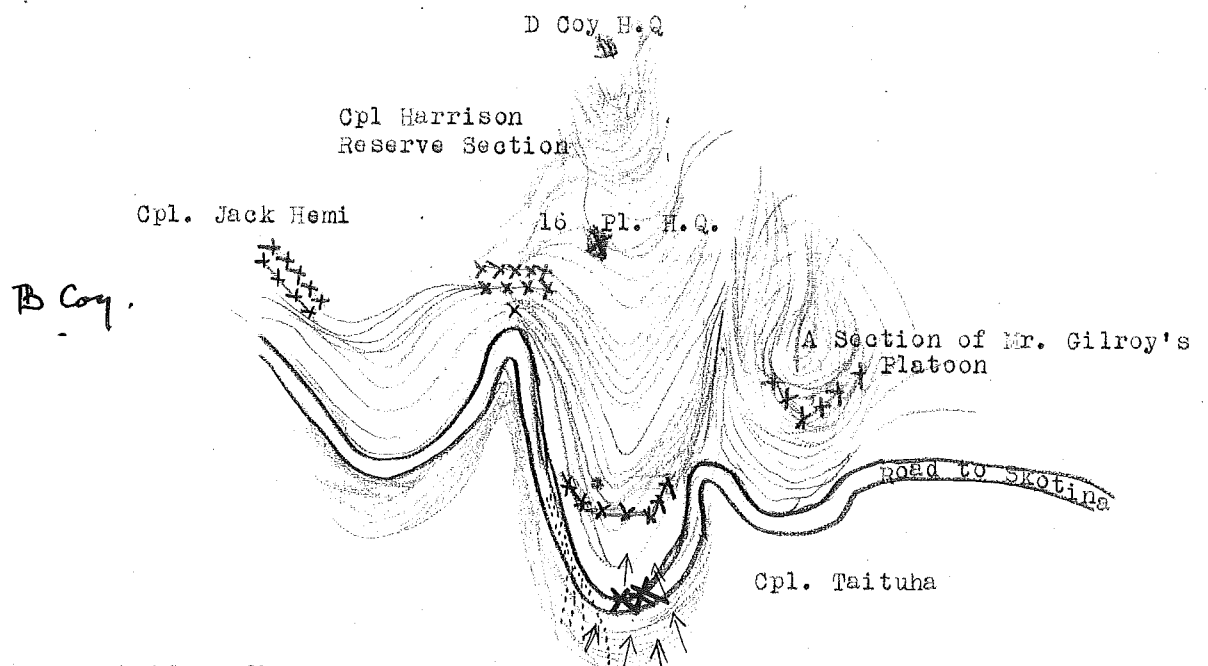
I was not captured in the ordinary sense of the word. A damned Greek double-crossed me. He said he would take me to a Greek doctor in Katarina. He took me to his home it was about midnight. The next morning he told me to wait and he would get the cart to take me. He returned and said, "No cart." He told me to go up the road and a doctor would be there. When I got out, the road was full of Germans. I could hardly walk then. A little boy took me to the road, the Greek would not come near me. The Germans placed ~~me~~ in a truck and I became a part of the long convoy that was chasing the British back to Athens. There were no others with me. Only myself.

8 I saw the Bn. positions after the British had evacuated. The positions were littered with blankets, gears, punctured tins. There were broken Brens and a well-polished theodolite stood leaning against a tree. The Greeks had the time of their lives on the spoils. Donkeys laden with blankets and biscuit tins staggered weirdly along the winding mountain tracks. The Germans refused to believe that less than fifty thousand British troops opposed them in Greece. The Germans numbered 250,000.

9. The Germans treated me all right. I attribute this to the state of my condition. They half carried me on to the truck and a man in the front seat gave up his place for me and climbed in the back. A stretcher bearer tore his own handkerchief up and tied it round my jaws to keep them in place. I do not know what happened to men of the other sections nor do I know anything about the B Company men at Skotina.

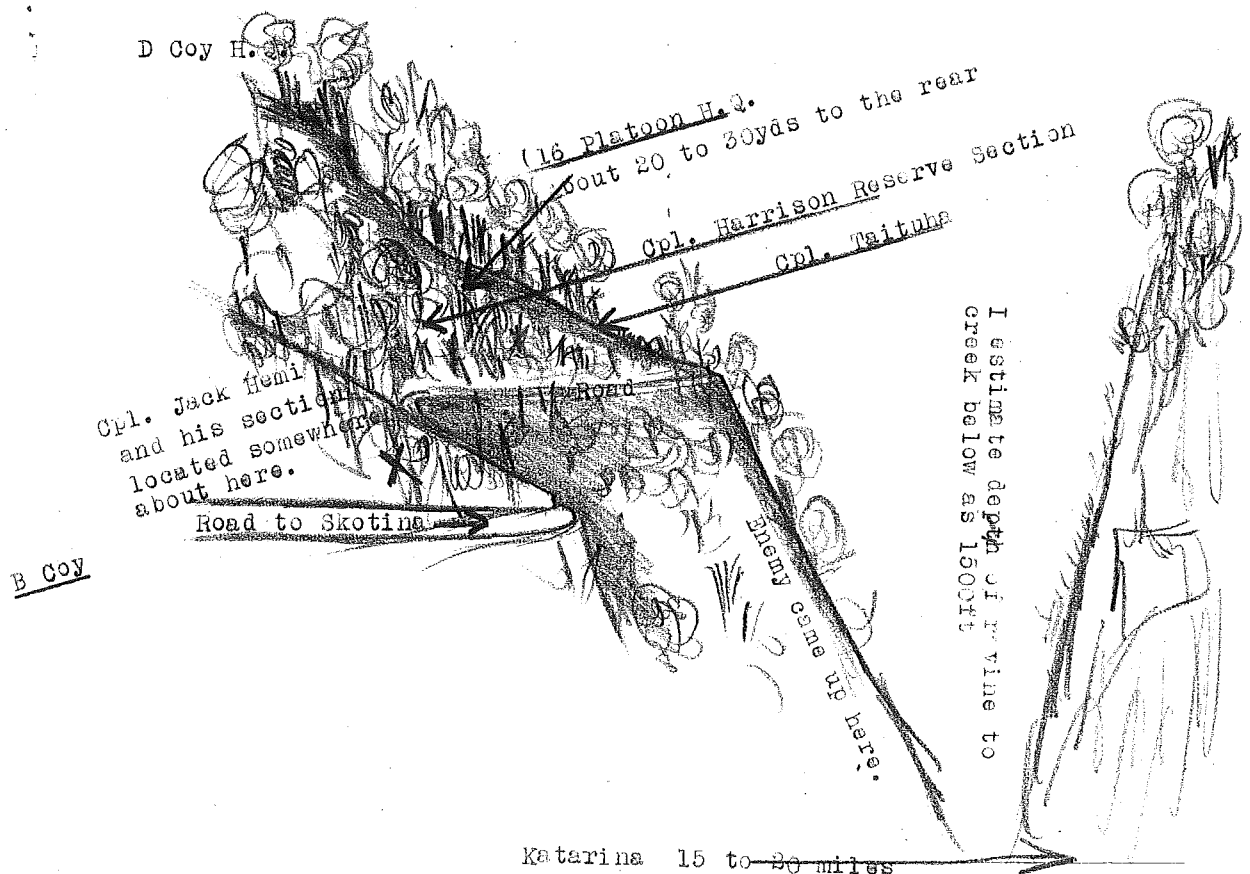
10. You asked for an estimate ~~inf~~ of casualties inflicted on the enemy. I can speak only for myself. Half way through the fight, to the end, after the enemy had broken through-- I never missed a man. My bandolier held ~~fifty~~ twentyfive rounds. I had about 300 loose rounds in my greatcoat pockets. I was still firing when my bandolier ran out and I had resorted to the slow process of loading without clips from the loose rounds in my pocket. In all, I must have brought down about 25 to 30. Each of my men, during the first phase of the battle and up to the time they retired, must have accounted for say 10 each on an average.

You may think the figure extravagant but I must point out the fight was point-blank range and what's more, as far as the Germans were concerned, I have never seen such a mob of unimaginative idiots. We simply mowed them down but they would persist in coming up the same way with monotonous regularity; and so I just kept on bang-banging away until my rifle got shot to pieces in my hand. (P.S. Reference article "Doomed Outpost" for commentary.) I saw dead bodies, mostly legs protruding out of the clumps, but I was too concerned with saving my own life, to count the number we had bagged. But I know the enemy stretcher bearers were close behind their men for during the fight I saw down the distant a figure dart among the trees. He wore a band on his arm, I do not know whether it was a red cross band, ~~something~~ but something told me that the man was helping the wounded out.



Each of my flanks touches the road. My front to the road marked XX would be about 10 to 15yds. The enemy, in the first attack, tried to by-pass us by creeping along the road on our right (Direction marked red dots) but enemy ran right into line of fire from Cpl. Harrison's Bren which was nested at spot marked X (red). Enemy retired, regrouped, and then, changing his tactics, came on up straight at us in a frontal attack. (Direction of frontal attack marked by red arrows.)

The terrain of the area which our Platoon held was steep and rocky and covered by thick forest. The only clear patch was a strip, 20 yds wide, commanded by my section. But the patch was ~~littered~~ littered with stumps, logs, second growths and uneven ground.





## **Reference**

Archives New Zealand = Te Rua Mahara a te Kāwanatanga

WAI11 180 DA 68/10/16

2NZE – 28 NZ (Maori) Battalion, Report on operations of D Company at Mt Olympus,  
14-17 April 1941, H Taituha.