

Fact sheet 2: A warrior tradition

Nearly 16,000 Maori enlisted for service during the Second World War. Around 3600 of these served in the army's 28th (Māori) Battalion, which became one of the most celebrated and decorated units in the history of the New Zealand armed forces. The Māori Battalion lost 649 men killed, while a further 1712 were wounded and 237 taken prisoner. This casualty rate was almost 50% higher than the average for the New Zealand infantry battalions.

Māori who fought in the Second World War drew on a long warrior tradition that extended far back before European contact. In older times the training of the male child from infancy to manhood was aimed at the perfection of the warrior class. Warriors of great experience and repute would teach the next generation the fighting traditions of Tūmatauenga, the god of war. In the *whare maire* (school of weaponry) and on the *parawhakawai* (training ground) young Māori men learnt how to thrust and parry with *taiaha* – in much the same way young Māori soldiers of the 20th century learned to use the bayonet with great effectiveness.

To die in the pursuit of the war god Tūmatauenga was considered a sacred duty and a manly death. Many hapu and iwi drew on the histories and exploits of warrior ancestors for inspiration. In pleading the case for Māori to be allowed to fight in the First World War, the MP for Northern Māori, Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter Buck), appealed to this sense of history and tradition. When he arrived with the Native Contingent in Egypt in 1915, he said: 'our ancestors were a warlike people ... the members of this war party would be ashamed to face their people at the conclusion of the war if they were ... not given an opportunity of proving their mettle at the front'.

Māori continued to draw on this tradition in other conflicts since the end of the Second World War. Many Māori made service in the armed forces into a career; many continue to serve with distinction in the army, navy and air force. In 2007 Willie Apiata (Ngāpuhi and Te Whānau-ā-Apanui) was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery while serving in Afghanistan.