

Fact sheet 5: The formation of the 28th (Māori) Battalion

When the decision was made in October 1939 to form a Māori military unit one suggestion was to call it the 'Treaty of Waitangi' battalion. It was felt that this would draw the attention of both Māori and Pākehā to their respective obligations under the Treaty. Article Three of the Treaty spoke of the rights and obligations of British subjects, something Āpirana Ngata saw as 'the price of citizenship'. He believed that if Māori were to have a say in shaping the future of the nation after the war, they needed to participate fully during it. It was also a matter of pride. As Ngata asked, 'how can we ever hold up our heads, when the struggle is over, to the question, "Where were you when New Zealand was at war?"'

Officially called the New Zealand 28th (Māori) Battalion, the unit was part of the 2nd New Zealand Division, the fighting arm of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF). The NZ Division was made up of 15,000-20,000 men, divided into three infantry brigades (the 4th, 5th and 6th Brigades) plus artillery, engineers, signals, medical and service units. Each brigade initially had three infantry battalions (numbered from 18th to 26th). The 28th (Māori) Battalion was at times attached to each of the Division's three brigades. Each battalion was commanded by a lieutenant-colonel. The Māori Battalion usually contained 700-750 men, divided into five companies.

The Māori Battalion's four rifle companies were organised on a tribal basis:

- A Company was based on recruits from Northland and Auckland (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Whātua and other tribes)
- B Company consisted of men from Rotorua, Bay of Plenty, Taupō, and the Thames–Coromandel areas (mostly from the Arawa confederation and Tūhoe tribes)
- C Company was drawn from the Tairāwhiti/East Coast region (Ngāti Porou, Rongowhakaata and sub-tribes)
- D Company drew its men from a much wider area, covering the Waikato–Maniapoto confederation, the Taranaki, Wellington and Manawatū–Horowhenua tribes, Ngāti Kahungunu of Hawke's Bay–Wairarapa, the entire South Island, the Chathams and Stewart Island, as well as a small number of recruits from the Pacific Islands.

The Battalion's fifth company, Headquarters, drew its personnel from all over Māoridom.

While conscription for non-Māori was introduced at the end of May 1940, Māori enlistment remained voluntary throughout the war. In the end close to 16,000 Māori joined up. They volunteered for many reasons: some to escape poverty or the boredom of life in the backblocks, others to follow their mates or seek adventure. Most Māori recruits served in areas such as home defence, artillery, engineering and service corps. Some joined the air force and navy. But it is the 20% that fought with the famous Māori Battalion that are best

remembered. These men established a formidable reputation as one of New Zealand's finest fighting forces. This was highlighted by the actions of men such as Victoria Cross recipient Te Moananui-a-Kiwa Ngārimu, Haane Manahi and Charlie Shelford, among many others.