

A brave but humble hero

He survived the horrors of World War II but Te Puhi Patara has never talked about it publicly — until now. In this interview, the member of the 28th Maori Battalion shares his story with **James Fuller**

TE PUHI Patara's eyes have seen horrors most of us can only imagine. Those same eyes regard me now as he casts his mind back 70 years to Italy and the ferocious front-line fighting between the Allies and Hitler's forces at the tail-end of World War II.

Brave but humble men are the most admirable of all and Mr Patara is one. Until now, he had never spoken publicly about his wartime exploits and I would not be sitting here with him but for his daughter, Hinemihi.

"I think he misses his mates a lot and doesn't really talk about the war much, except to those who were there," she had told me.

Nearly 3600 men served overseas with the 28th Maori Battalion between 1940 and 1945. Just 23 are still alive.

The poignancy of this statistic is heightened by the fact it was 24 until last Sunday, when Mr Patara's friend and comrade, Aubrey Balzer, passed away. Mr Balzer was originally from the Maketu area and still maintained a home there. A third Maori Battalion man and another of the remaining survivors, Arthur Midwood, also grew up around Maketu.

Mr Patara has the dignified air of an ex-soldier. The hair, combed neatly, is white but impressively full for a man closing in on the start of his 10th decade. His snowy-white moustache is trimmed perfectly.

Raised on a Pukehina dairy farm, he was one of 11 siblings born in an age when milking was done by hand and the family home was too remote to have power. "We didn't have much money but there was plenty of kai around, fish, eels, things like that. We didn't go hungry," says the 89-year-old.

He tells me one of his brothers, Kehukehu, nine years his senior and part of the Maori Battalion's fourth reinforcement, was the inspiration for his decision to enlist.

"He went to Greece, Crete, and fought in the desert (North Africa)."

By early 1944, the tide of the war had

James Fuller



referred to as "Two Eight" by its members, was made up of five battalions, four of which were formed along tribal lines. Mr Patara was part of B Company, featuring Maori from Rotorua, the Bay of Plenty and Thames-Coromandel.

He says the biggest battle his section was involved in was at Faenza in November/December 1944.

"Our reinforcement did most of our fighting there. We always attacked at night, the New Zealanders and the British. They always had search lights at the back of us, shining it up in the air, like moonlight, so you could see where you were going. Then they would shoot shells with red and green tracers and you followed them as you moved along, so you wouldn't end up in the wrong place. They fired them every few minutes to guide you."

The Germans were defeated at Faenza but heavy snow made more progress impossible. The weather closed in and it soon became clear the Maori Battalion would have to spend the winter camped near the Senio river.

"We couldn't go forward or anything because of the snow, we had to wait until the snows thawed," he says. "We were camping just this side of the Senio river, about a couple of miles back from the flood bank, which is where the Germans were. They had trenches on the other side, they had dug themselves in. They could see anyone from there and there was constant sniper fire and shelling."

Mr Patara and some of his comrades were holed up in a stone house.

"One of our chaps was up the top of this house, in a sort of watching area. I think he was just having a bit of fun, you know, seeing what he could see, looking around. But he forgot they could see him, eh? The next thing we knew, they started shelling."

One shell struck the top of the house.

"This joker got hit in the backside with shrapnel, right across his bum," says Mr Patara, laughing hard. "And he shot down the stairs, looking terrified, thinking oh crikey he was going to die. But it was only a flesh wound."

"It gave him a fright, though, and he never went back up there again."

In the spring of 1945, as the snow melted, the offensive renewed and the Americans and British bombarded the German positions on the banks of the Senio. The bombardment was so effective that after waiting three hours to go over the top, they found the enemy so "bomb happy" (shell-shocked) that they simply gave up.

However, the melting snow had brought some unexpected problems regarding prisoners.

"It was all mud. The tanks were getting stuck and we had to fight our way across it. We were all muddy and whiskered and grubby looking and a Maori looks terrible (fearsome) when he's like that."

"We had captured some prisoners."

When they brought these Germans around, our company commander sang out to my mate, Harry Walker, to take them back to the holding pen.

"Well, if you looked at him then he would've scared you," he says, smiling. "These young Germans were saying 'no, no, no'. They didn't want to go with him, they were afraid. They were shaking."

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."



BRAVERY: Members of the 28th Maori Battalion were renowned for their courage. Te Puhi Patara says he is proud to have served.
PHOTO/STEPHEN PARKER 120313SP7



RELAXING: Te Puhi Patara (left) enjoys a break in the fighting with Maori Battalion colleagues in Italy.
PHOTO/SUPPLIED 110313MB2



READY FOR ACTION: Te Puhi Patara, 20, during training at Wellington's Trentham Camp.
PHOTO/SUPPLIED 110313MB1

swung after Allied victories in North Africa and with the Italian capitulation on September 8, 1943. But the Germans were still stubbornly defending territory in Italy and the prospect of a lengthy campaign loomed. The Maori Battalion had arrived on Italian soil in October 1943 and the call had gone out for reinforcements.

"I heard all my mates' friends were joining up so I went with them and joined up in Tauranga. About a dozen of us went together, all from around the Te Puke and Tauranga area."

Having passed his medicals, the 20-year-old did not have to wait long before being whisked up to Auckland's Papakura military camp for a brief spell before finishing three months' basic training at Wellington's Trentham Camp. By early 1944, Private Patara, serial number 811621, was on the Highland Princess, heading for war.

Having landed in Egypt, more training followed at the Kiwi camp in Maadi, south of Cairo, before the troops boarded a ship for Taranto, Italy. From there, they were moved to Bari, before a 360-mile journey up the Italian east coast took them to Rimini and the front line.

The battle was raging around the German defensive structure known as the Gothic Line.

"That's where we were introduced to the war," says Mr Patara, as we sit talking in the living room of his white wood house near Rotorua.

It's a peaceful home and the silence is broken only by the sound of the occasional cars passing outside or the chime of a clock.

"We got there and the Germans were dropping shells, well that was a different story. The old heart starts beating and you immediately start thinking of back home."

Sleepy Pukehina must have seemed far away. The new recruits soon learned some valuable lessons.

"We had some Sherman tanks and we were following in behind them, well that's the worst thing to do because the Germans targeted the tanks and they were deadly with their 88 (mm) guns."

"Our tanks, their guns couldn't pierce the German armour (Tiger tanks) head on. When our tanks attacked the German tanks, they would go backwards firing, retreating but firing. That's when we would get all the shrapnel and what have you around us."

Some of Mr Patara's friends, who had travelled so far to fight, did not get the chance to do so again, perishing in the early exchanges.

The formidable Gothic Line was breached but the Germans were retreating with purpose; falling back to organised lines of defence prepared along prominent terrain features.

The 28th Maori Battalion, always

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 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, eh (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, you know."

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



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.
PHOTO/STEPHEN PARKER 120313SP3