

August 12th 1941

Dear Colonel Dittmer

I am very much obliged to you for your letter, which came to hand last week. I have taken the liberty of circulating it among our people, and I found on arriving here, that a copy had appeared in the Morning Post. I am sure that our people at home here will feel as I do, that no greater honour could have been done the officers and men of the battalion than this appreciation by their Commanding Officer.

In the Maori manner we, the relatives and tribes of the men under your command, have appropriated to ourselves the glory of your achievements and the immense satisfaction and relief in knowing, that they have looked the worst dangers face to face without flinching. I never doubted the bravery of your Maori lads, knowing the stock they were descended from, but I did have some misgivings about their ability to face the shock of the terrible weapons so ruthlessly used by the enemy. Could they stand up to these, where so many of the soldiers of European nations had turned away in terror? The cabled reports dispelled one's anxiety on that score, and you can realise the deep satisfaction throughout the Maori world as the news came from many sources of the prowess of the raw lads from Maoriland. Many an elder, who had decried the degeneration of the race, has had to revise his valuation. It was the chorus of praise from Imperial, Australian, New Zealand and even American sources, which gave us comfort even as we read the casualty lists and grieved over sons killed or knocked about or missing.

It was very difficult for relatives, Pakeha or Maori, or in other words for New Zealand to realise what the hectic speed of the operations implied in the matter of official news of the fortunes of their boys. In numerous cases the official bulletin that a man was reported missing was preceded or immediately followed by a cable from the man himself, reporting his safety. It was not known here until many days or weeks later, that the private cable (undated and not showing place of origin) was sent from Crete and referred to a safe evacuation from Greece, but that the official message related to events in Crete. Thus we had on a Sunday a report from the Minister of Defence announcing Arnold Reedy as missing, while the next morning came a cable from Reedy, "Safe but lost everything". Well into June his mother and relatives believed that Arnold was safe with you in Egypt. Subsequent enquiries by H.Q. unfortunately left no doubt that he had not returned with the rest.

We are very glad to have your testimony of the quality of the officers, who have had their baptism of fire. We extend to them our heartfelt congratulations, while sympathising with them and yourself on the loss of their fellow officers and comrades. All that was said while you were still with us, the flower of Maori youth, the future leaders of the race, was emphasised as we followed you to England, watched the intensive training there and the impatient waiting by the English Channel. Then came the long spell in the New Year when you passed out of our hearing to emerge at your original destination on the eve of the great adventure. Whether in Greece or in Crete we wondered whether our confidence in your qualities of leadership would be justified, for so much depended on those in the generations ahead. So the testimony of your Commanding Officer brings to us a deep satisfaction and pride.

Lady Ngata and I have paid our respect to the relatives of George Te Kuru and Horton Stewart. In the former Hawkes Bay has lost its most promising young leader, whose example in this war has inspired a greater response from his own people of Porangahau than from any other part of the East Coast south of Gisborne. My first wife and I brought up Horton's father and saw him through Te Aute College. I mention these two lads

specially because I knew them and their people better than in the case of the other officers reported killed in action. We grieve with you for them and for the sacrifice of such promising lives. It is pitifully tragic that the insane ambition of one man should have had such repercussions in this far-off land and among a people that does not fully grasp the issues involved in the present world conflict.

And Harding Leaf- until your letter came we had from letters received from officers and men, and statements made by men invalided home, satisfied ourselves that he lost his life in Crete. We in the south here were about to visit his wife and people at Hokianga, having heard that a tangi was in progress there for this outstanding figure in our Maori world. This in spite of the official report, that he is 'missing'. Your letter raises a faint hope, that he might, like Watty McKay, who was reported so badly wounded as to have had little chance of surviving his wounds, turn up as a prisoner of war. I knew the sacrifice this man made in order to lead his people of Hokianga to enlist. And having succeeded in that object he felt he would be letting them down if he did not go overseas with them. If it is any satisfaction to his tribesmen, his fellow officers and friends in the battalion, they should know that Harding has drained the man power of Hokianga dry or almost so, and that he continues to inspire other sections of Ngāpuhi and associated tribes of the North. If the worst has happened then Harding met his fate in the way his warlike ancestors deemed the most honourable, leading his own tribesmen into battle.

In their memory and that of the fellow officers, Pakeha and Maori, and of the men who fell with them we in the cities and villages of their native land stand in sorrow at the many marae which will not see them again. During the many weeks as the casualty lists dribbled through it was poor comfort to the bereaved relatives that the Pakeha world admired and applauded the conduct and achievements of the battalion. Your casualties were so distributed over the length and breadth of the Maori territory, that sorrowing communities could not see the honour and glory through their tears. The Pakeha's praise could not quite assuage their grief. It needed the messages from those who survived, the first hand accounts of men who have returned and now your sober testimony to convince them, that their lads have attained to something praiseworthy. I should say here that nothing pleases us more than the absence of 'skite' in the letters received from members of the battalion. The same may be said of the accounts we have had from men invalided home. Officer and men have looked into a world, where they have seen visions to sober them.

I feel greatly honoured that you have written to me as you have. I thank you for your notes about my two sons, and for the knowledge that they earned the esteem of their commanding officer and fellow officers. Kere this you will have heard that Henry and the others are prisoners of war in Germany. This good news was accompanied by a cable from the High Commissioner that they were getting on very well. Henry, George Bennett, Jimmy Williams, Hokianga, Herewini, Tenga Rangi were mentioned in one list, then came Watty McKay's name. The names of a few of the privates have also appeared and you may be sure that anxious wives, mothers and other relatives are anxiously waiting for advice from the Minister of Defence. Jimmy Williams' father was most anxious to get to the Middle East to look for his son. Poor old chap, living at Lake Ohia he innocently believed the world would be safe for his search. My own people suggested I might be more usefully employed as an observer with the battalion to send home intimate accounts of their beloved ones!

Willie with Wake Clarke and Tu Manahi and 13 men came home in the Maunganui. His leg wound healed nicely on board, but he looked a wreck with two arms in plaster and a face terribly pinched. He made for Hastings the day after landing, and has made very good progress. He is now able to feed himself and to write. The right arm is healing up a bit out of shape, but with use it might do quite well. He is very keen to resume soldiering.

and I hope he will be fit enough to take a hand in training some of the reinforcements. Bishop Bennett and I thoroughly enjoyed his account of the doings of the battalion. He writes that he will be strong enough to visit the East Coast via Wairoa and Gisborne next week, where the people are looking forward to a first hand account from a participator in the fighting.

Waka has been round from Gisborne to the Bay of Plenty, at the invitation of the tribes there. I met him in Auckland and visited the camp at Papakura with him. He was to have undergone an operation last Wednesday. If successful he may be useful as a recruiting officer or for our Home Guard. Tu Manahi has done the rounds of the villages in the Hot Lakes District and given very interesting accounts of the sea journeyings of the battalion and the training in England. On all hands I find evidence of the deep interest stirred by the visits of these officers.

Wellington, Aug. 14th: This evening comes official advice that Arnold Reedy is among the prisoners of war. His mother has worried herself into hospital over him, but the good news will cheer her back to health.

The suspense has been very trying to the women folk. Poor Herewini's mother committed suicide only a short while before news came of her son's safety.

H.Q. has given me the figures of the casualties, which bear out the experience in other theatres that reckoned in killed this war is much less destructive of the lives of soldier than the last. But it seems more deadly in another respect, by loss of effectives as prisoners. The return does not show the loss from sickness leading to men being sent home, although we have the number of those who died of sickness. We had expected for the Maori a much heavier rate of sickness, especially in the environment and climate of Egypt, but the Minister is very pleased with the good health of the Maori unit.

We are managing to keep pace with the demands for reinforcements, and as far as can be foreseen we are assured of men into next year. As far as a layman can judge the quality is not noticeably deteriorating, and that seems to be the opinion of the instructional staff. Recruiting, which languished somewhat in the late autumn and early part of the winter, took a spurt when news came of the battalion's showing. Casualties, which affected every tribe and district, introduced the additional motive of 'vengeance', a most powerful one in the old days. You will find in subsequent drafts brothers and close relatives of men reported killed, or wounded or missing, all eager to do their bit to make good the loss of man power.

Compulsion is out of the question, although tribes which are being drained of their young men ask for this in their resentment that neighbouring tribes do not realise their responsibilities. The historical experience of many tribes in the last 100 years result in the uneven response, which your Maori officers fully understand. We hope however that measures now being taken will spread the sacrifice more equitably. Your records overseas will tell you better than I can where your reinforcements are coming from, and I can assure that their communities will do their utmost to see that your strength is kept up.

I read your paragraph about the 'hau' or feast after you had settled down after Grete with a pang. Apart from relatives' parcels and parcels sent through the Patriotic Board we have tried to get to you the kind of 'kai' that your boys would appreciate at your foregatherings. A large consignment of butter was despatched to England before we knew that you were within a few weeks of coming to the Middle East. Other special foods intended for Xmas were held up for shipping. We sent preserved kumara, pork and beef, some dried paua with or about the same time as the reinforcements, which should have reached you before this.



We do our best to patch together from the boy's letters what their private requirements are. There would be a wider response in regard to these, and also your common fund and the more important matter of recruiting if concerted appeals could be broadcast from your end over the air, or by cable or letter. In regard to recruiting I have suggested to the authorities, that it would be a good thing if selected officers and men in the force could send s.o.s. messages by radio. There was a brief one by Werobia when you landed in England last year. That had a very real appeal and the people still remember it and wonder why more of that sort of thing is not done. I am sure that broadcast appeal by carefully selected men from the districts, which up to now have not responded as they might, will be very helpful to us here. They should be in Maori by masters in their respective dialects who need not be officers. A special effort in this direction from members of the battalion would be well worth while.

As to the battalion fund the only additional contribution to that from the East Coast was from King Koroki, which I hope has reached you. I am expecting a contribution from the Whanganui district and also North Auckland. I am glad to hear that you still have a balance.

I have left to this concluding paragraph comments of a personal nature, which are based on letters from the front and statements from men who have come back to us. These speak in emphatic terms of your splendid and unremitting efforts to bring the battalion to the highest point of efficiency and to instil the high discipline, which has been so well commended by members of other units of the N.Z.E.F. and the Australians, and which has enabled you to go through the recent strenuous trials and to come out of them with unimpaired discipline. I understand that officers and men did not always approve the severities of the training, but now acknowledge that but for it the losses might have been worse without achieving the distinction now attaching to the force.

Lady Ngata thanks you for your kind wishes. If Paddy White is still with you as despatch rider his grandmother sends him her 'aroha' and that of his many relatives. They are glad to hear from Willie that he is well.

We wish you, and the officers and men under your command and those of the reinforcements now in the Middle East success, good health and under the protection of God a safe return to your home land.

Yours very sincerely