

War a far cry from Pukehina

28 Maori Battalion soldier misses his mates

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

TAURANGA — Te Puhī 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.

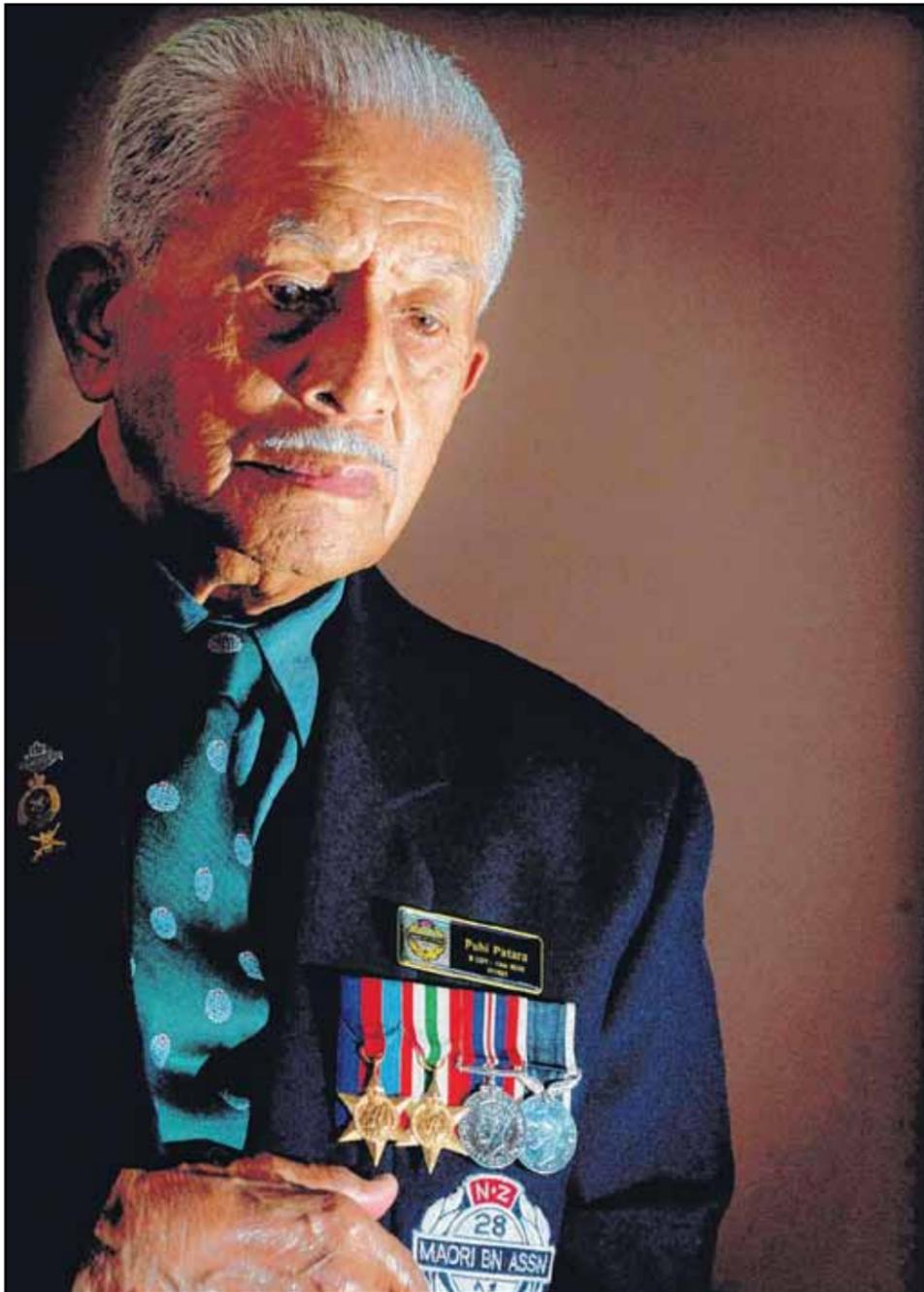
"He went to Greece, Crete, and fought in the desert (North Africa)."

By early 1944, the tide of the war had 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



BRavery: Members of the 28th Maori Battalion were renowned for their courage. Te Puhī Patara says he is proud to have served. Bay of Plenty Times picture

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.

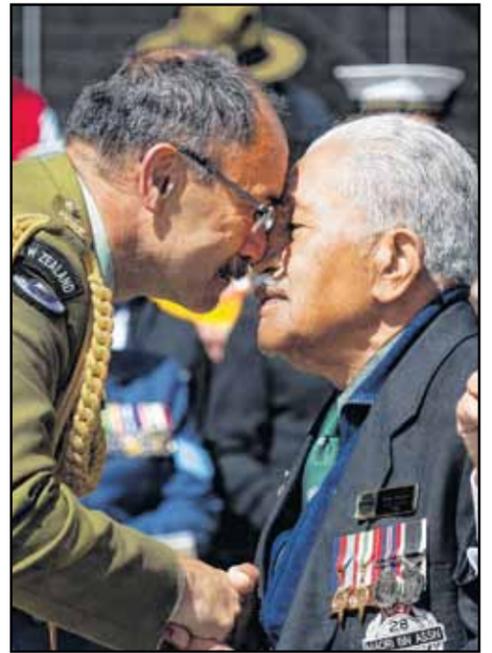
The formidable Gothic Line was breached but the Germans were retreating with purpose; falling back to organised lines of defence prepared along prominent terrain features.

The 28th Maori Battalion, always 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



BRavery: Governor-General Lt General Sir Jerry Mateparae gives a hongi to Te Puhī Patara, a surviving member of the Maori Battalion. — NZ Herald

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." — continued on next page

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