

THE PICK OF MAORI MANHOOD

(By 23/762)

ONCE a year the pick of the Manawatu District's farming produce, from prize-winning stock to vegetables and fancy butter, is displayed in the sheds and stalls and green spaces of Palmerston North's spacious showgrounds, for all the world to see and admire. On Saturday afternoons, during the winter, football teams played their matches in the show-ring.

But the war has altered all that. Now the pick of Maori manhood is camped there, training to become a complete and efficient military unit. In a few weeks these sons of New Zealand, gathered from all parts of the Dominion, have made such progress that their officers speak with enthusiasm and delight of their achievements and future.

Last week I spent two afternoons with the Maori battalion. It was my first visit since 1915 when my own battalion, hurriedly removed from Trentham, took refuge in the show buildings until a camp at Rangiotu was prepared for us. We had a week there, sleeping on the hard, hard floor, with only a ground-sheet and a blanket to ease the aches. Now long lines of beds give the main show building the appearance of a dormitory—each bed a model of precise arrangement, with neatly folded blankets, uniforms and military equipment laid on it, and giving the appearance of a mass production effort. Everything is spotless and a tribute to the efficiency of military régime. Floors are disinfected, windows and doors allow the breeze to circulate, but dividing walls break any draughts.

Lieut.-Colonel G. Dittmer, officer commanding the battalion, has every justification for pride in the appearance and conduct of his men. Since the Maoris went into camp at Palmerston North great progress has been made in building up and training the unit, and the utmost friendliness prevails. A sense of fun is in evidence. I watched a group of men waiting to go on duty. They were giving each other orders, in English and Maori; they practised turns and amused each other by imitating the goose-step; each saluted the other and played tricks which drew great gusts of laughter from those standing nearby.

Football Champions

There should be no difficulty in getting together a first-class football team, for the material is there, including several prominent Rugby and League champions to give additional strength and prestige. A healthy rivalry is evident between companies, and as each company is composed of men from separate districts, the honour of those districts is at stake. Thus a fine spirit of camaraderie is being built up to aid the reputation of the battalion.

Each Wednesday afternoon is devoted to sports. Later on, when the organisation is complete, inter-company competitions will be held and probably football matches will be staged to foster the rivalry.

As with other units of the Division, the Maoris are being trained as a full fighting battalion. Officers and men wearing decorations from the last war are proof of their desire to serve again. Machine gunners, a Bren gun unit, signallers, transport—all are in training as essential parts of a complete military unit ready to take its place on the field.

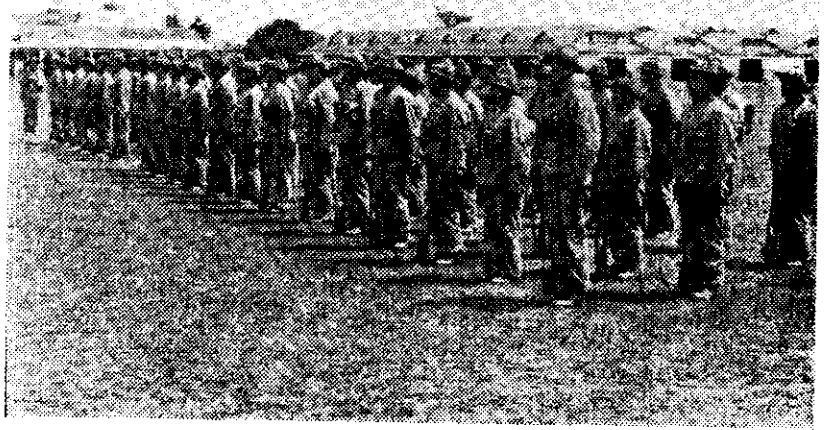
And the camp itself is as complete in equipment as any other in New Zealand. One company at a time spends a period in tents, changing with others who are housed in the main building so that they will become accustomed to field conditions. Three men sleep in each tent, on beds, with ample accommodation for personal equipment provided by cupboards made from butterboxes. There is no crowding or sleeping on the ground as in the last war. If the weather is wet and unseasonable, training operations are not hindered. The grandstand and the show buildings provide comfortable quarters where the work can go on without interruption.

Grand Hotel

The men have their canteen, to which some wag has given the title "Grand Hotel." There is a cinema on the premises, with pictures once a week; concert parties provided by Palmerston North talent give a weekly concert, and concerts among the men themselves are held every other night. In the evenings the women of Palmerston North arrive at the Y.M.C.A. to serve tea and coffee to the men. Every facility has been provided for recreation, including a plentiful supply of sports equipment. Radio sets provided by the Maoris are in evidence.

An ablution shed has been built close beside the main building, as well as shower baths. Physical jerks, not the kind we knew in the last war, follow the day's work, after which there is a rush for the showers before the evening meal. I watched the platoons marching out for this obviously enjoyable interlude, everyone clad in shorts and singlets (and often only shorts) to allow as much freedom as possible for exercises which are mostly fun and games. It was a fine sight; some of those men were perfect physical specimens.

One of the small showground buildings has been turned into a hospital, happily free except for one or two patients who were suffering from colds. The health of the camp is excellent.



MEMBERS of the Maori Battalion in training at the showgrounds, Palmerston North

There is a dental clinic, for every man's teeth must be in perfect order before they leave New Zealand. Officers and men have been inoculated and X-rayed, and blood tests have been taken.

Music as They March

Now the more advanced stages of training have been reached and route marches are hardening up the men. "These marches are a joy," one of the officers told me. "It's grand to hear the men whistling and singing as they swing along the roads." Apparently the residents of Palmerston North think so too, for crowds gather when the troops go by. The Maoris are popular with

the townspeople. From time to time they assist with concerts given in the town to raise funds for the regiment.

This popularity is rather embarrassing to the senior officers who receive requests for Maori concert parties from all over the countryside, including towns as far distant as Hastings. Naturally such tours would interfere with training operations and the requests have to be refused.

There is no lack of volunteers for the Maori Battalion. Judging by its present appearance the future is assured, and there is little doubt that new laurels will be gained by these fine warriors of a new age when they go overseas.

WASHING DONE HERE

EVERY provision is made for the soldier of to-day to become his own laundryman. Hot water, concrete tubs, electric irons, special drying sheds and ironing boards are at his disposal. Saturday afternoon is washing day and he plies himself industriously among the soapsuds.

On areas near the laundries clothes lines are being erected so that all washing can be dried in the open air when the weather is fine.

The wash-houses are spacious and airy. All down one side is a row of concrete tubs, with hot and cold water laid on to each one. On the opposite wall is a row of ironing benches, with plugs to each of them to take an electric iron. There are 21 such irons in use at Trentham. In the new hutments provision is being made for the installation of ironing boards and of points to take electric irons. These boards will fold up against the wall when not in use by trouser pressers. Irons and ironing boards will become part of the equipment of every

hut before the military camps are really complete in every small detail.

By an ingenious system, hot air is circulated round high drying sheds. Mechanism operating a fan at each end of the room circulates the air among the wet clothes. Hundreds of coat-hangers are part of the equipment of each shed. The wet clothes are put on the hangers and, with the aid of a long hooked pole, attached to the lines, high overhead, running across from wall to wall. And there, in all the colours of the rainbow, hang suits of pyjamas, shirts, singlets, socks, and other odds and ends of a soldier's wardrobe.

These drying rooms are also for use during wet weather, when uniforms, boots and overcoats can be dried out in the shortest possible time. Fatigue men are on duty to attend to the furnaces, for which there is no lack of fuel. In order to avoid waste in the army the surplus pieces of timber which carpenters leave behind them when huts are being built are used for the furnaces.