

28th Maori Battalion Reunion



Mr Haare Reneti

Tawhirimatea, the God of the Elements, demonstrated his unquestionable force in Whakatane on Good Friday, the day which was the opening of the 13th Reunion of the 28th Maori Battalion.

Amidst pouring rain and gale-force winds, the men of the 28 Battalion, 'J' Force, 'K' Force, Maori Servicemen from Malaya and Vietnam, and one lone soldier from the World War One Campaign, gathered to reminisce times past, to rekindle friendships and to remember friends no longer with them, and those buried in foreign battle-grounds.

In addition to these men were wives, families, widows, and mothers and fathers of 'Battalion Boys'. A special welcome was also extended to members of the Fijian contingent who came to New Zealand especially for this Reunion.

People had journeyed from all over the country — busloads from Northland, Auckland, Wellington and the East Coast, to mention but a few; and many cars with families and groups of ex-servicemen pooling in together to get to Whakatane the best way possible. The manuhiri who travelled the furthest were from Te Wai Pounamu.

One man, who lives in Invercargill, began his journey on the Monday before Easter, making his way north to meet up with others coming to Whakatane, crossing Cook Strait with his group of friends and arriving at the Reunion Headquarters on Friday morning. A long, long way to travel; but distance cannot be measured in miles alone at times like this.

On Thursday evening before the Reunion officially commenced, the atmosphere at the Whakatane War Memorial Centre was one of eager anticipation. The organising groups were there, busy all through the night, and a small group of old soldiers sat together talking about who they hoped would come and what they would all do. We

sat and chatted with these dozen or so men as they were engaged in the all important task of testing the liquid refreshments to make sure no-one sustained damage to the stomach during the weekend.

In talking with them, the statement which sticks in my mind and perhaps sums up the hopeful expectations of the old mates was: "You just wait and see, girl. The bullsh.. will get bigger and bigger as the weekend goes on." Outside the wind and rain was not easing up, but inside the only wet was on the inside of the stomach, and the gentle wind was the laughter and joking of old friends getting together and telling the 'hard case' tales of those days gone by which brought them all so close together.

Activity began

On Friday morning the frenzied activity began. Arrivals from early morning, registrations and placements for accommodation. Although there were only perhaps 300 registrations prior to the Reunion, the organising committee was well-prepared for the influx of much greater numbers.

Travel weary after a long journey, the first port of call for most was the wet canteen — and why ever not, for that is the place where one meets up with old coppers, catches up on news (as well as tells a few yarns), and has the opportunity to raise a glass to the health of friends.

By early afternoon there was no sign of a weather change. So unrelenting was the rain and the driving cold wind, that the official welcome had to be shifted from the magnificent Wairaka Marae on the shores at Whakatane to the stately War Memorial Building in the centre of Whakatane. This was to

be the centre of all activities for the Reunion and it provided a more than adequate and hospitable atmosphere. No matter about the change in plans — so smooth was the organisation that, to the visitor and to the on-looker, the change in venue was like a deft flick of the wrist.

Even inside the warmth of the lounge at the War Memorial, one was aware of the downpour outside, and as one of the speakers welcoming visitors to the Reunion, the Mayor of Whakatane, said "... it is fitting that this Reunion should begin with a tear in the sky and a tear in our eyes". Not sentimentalist talk — sincere and meaningful thoughts to those gathered together.

Most wet

After the official welcome, the journey for most was a short one — to the enormous marquee which had been erected on the lawn at the back of the Hall to house the wet canteen during the weekend. The atmosphere was most convivial, with beautiful kaponga lashed to the tent poles and grass underfoot, giving a tropical feeling to the place.

Inside, the warmth of the people contrasted greatly to the cold of the wind outside. A sea of smiling faces and happy groups greeted you on escaping from the elements outside. But calamity struck during the late afternoon when the force of the howling wind was just too much for the strength of the ropes and poles holding up the marquee, and the whole thing collapsed, with ropes flying in the wind, poles crashing to the ground — and the hilarious visage of patrons struggling out into the fresh air from beneath a mountain of wet canvas reverently protecting the jug or glass in hand!

Well, when the house falls down, you don't cry about it, you get to and put things back together again. And so the re-erection of the marquee began. "All hands on deck!", like in the old sailing ship days, when men hauling with all their might on the ropes. This was real tug-of-war on a massive scale — but alas the wind won in the end. Not easily deterred by such mishaps, the organising committee (with ample assistance from many helpers) quickly and quietly transferred the essential contents from the now completely grounded wet canteen into the Memorial Hall.

Hence Friday evening's entertainment was not disturbed, and there ensued a cheerful and jovial dance and social evening in the warmth inside.

More sturdy

Although the continuance of the same weather conditions could have deterred some visitors on waking on Saturday morning, I am sure that many