

# TE HOKOWHITU-A-TU

## 28th (Maori) Battalion reunite at Kaitaia

Easter weekend saw the twelfth national reunion of the Maori Battalion, hosted this time by A Company at Kaitaia.

Over 400 veterans attended, their numbers swelled by other Maori members of the armed forces past and present, widows of members of the Battalion and, as special guests of honour, a contingent of Fijian veterans of the Second World War. There was also a large contingent from Ngati Kahungunu — the last reunion had been hosted by D Company at Wairoa.

The splendid new Far North Community Centre was the venue for the occasion. Despite its sophisticated amenities, however, there were a few problems. One was the roadworks going on outside, and another was the weather. Though the sun shone for much of the time, there had been heavy rain during the previous week and the A and P showground behind the centre soon became muddy. With all the pedestrian and vehicular traffic around it very quickly came to resemble conditions on the Somme during the First World War rather than those of the Western Desert during the Second. But guests settled into their tents cheerfully enough, and the delight of greeting old mates far outweighed any temporary practical discomforts.

It was an emotional time for most people: a lingering hong

between old soldiers who hadn't seen each other since the last reunion, or maybe even since demobilisation; sadness for those who had passed on, and for those who had not survived the war; the inevitable reminiscences and old stories (one rather cynical visitor commented that you could hardly move without tripping over dead Germans); and the relaxing delights of the "wet canteen", complete with sawdust floor, nikau walls and hay-bale seating.

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Not that the reunion was all about booze and nostalgia. From the official welcoming ceremonies on Good Friday, there was an element of serious — and often heated — discussion on the role of the Battalion Association today, particularly with regard to our youth. The Minister of Maori Affairs, Mr Ben Couch, laid a challenge at the feet of the Battalion in his speech:

Nothing can ever dim the memory of your achievements and of the sacrifices made by those of your friends who did not come back. It is a great and glorious story that deserves our gratitude and our respect. But that was thirty-five years ago . . . Are still showing that same courage, that same leadership, that same example today?

