

A Heap of Metal? A Narrative of Medals Awarded to Soldiers in 'A' Company, 28 Battalion

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Abstract: This research project examines the meaning of the medals awarded to the soldiers in 'A' Company, 28 Battalion during World War II. It analyses the interface between this military history and the social location of the 28 Battalion, Māori identity and issues around citizenship. The data-gathering part of the study involves archival research of the appropriate literature held at the Auckland University Library and the appropriate artifacts at the Auckland War Memorial Museum. In addition, semi-structured interviews are used. It is expected that through the stories generated by the war medals, the notion of the Intergenerational family is likely to be highlighted and reinforced. Finally, the data and results should contribute to knowledge about the recent history and the cultural identity of Patuharakeke Hapū and the broader Māori community in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Keywords: 28 Battalion, citizenship, identity, Māori, medals, war.

Introduction

In 2006, the medals awarded to my father, Sergeant Tiakiriri Te Kepa Rata Kukupā (a.k.a. Robert Kepa), were repaired by Mr. Cocks of Remuera. He replaced the worn coloured ribbon attached to each medal, and he brought to my attention the fact that each medal represented a particular story. Therefore, in this research project, my aim is to study the meaning of the medals awarded to the soldiers in 'A' Company, 28 Battalion during World War II. 'A' Company soldiers were otherwise known as the 'Gumdiggers'. This study will also examine the interface between military history and the social location of the Māori Battalion, Māori identity and issues around citizenship. It is argued that this interface was the price of citizenship for Māori. That is, an asset in "the crucible of war" that is valued on "Māori terms in the coming peace" (Ngata, 1943, p.18). I interpret Ngata's argument to mean that warfare has always played a role in forming people's identity because the whole community is brought together in many ways that do not happen in peacetime. As a result national identity, citizenship, nationhood and pride are boosted and transformed. So, by initiating Māori leadership and control over Māori affairs in both military and industrial war efforts these factors would be critical in establishing Māori' roles in New Zealand life. Free will commitment in war may be seen by the government and nation as the price on Māori terms for winning on-going reciprocal citizenship; a fair share of the nation' resources; and equal opportunity to make policy and ways for Māori development.

A related but no less important purpose of this study is to provide the children and grandchildren of the soldiers, and the broader Māori community with information on the campaigns, service, and medals that their tipuna/ancestor was awarded. This information will become part of the annual Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) service. This ceremony commenced at Takahiwai marae in 2006 in memory of the 37 men who served their country in active service from 1939–1945. Moreover, the narrative is likely to be used as part of the ritual to celebrate the 70th 'birthday' of the War Memorial Hall at Takahiwai marae in 2007.

Further, this study is important because, through the stories generated by the war medals, the notion of *intergenerational family* is highlighted and reinforced. Finally, the data gathered will contribute to knowledge about the recent history and the cultural identity of Patuharakeke hapū. Thus, I acknowledge the partial nature of this research project; that is, it occurs at a certain place, at a certain time, under specific circumstances and that particular factors make this study distinctive; certainly not all of its findings may be generalisable (Davidson and Tolich, 2003, p.183).

Literature Review

The literature review examines accessible material salient to the topic in relation to the medals awarded to Sergeant Robert Kepa, and it sets the scene for the research study. This literature review also links prior research to this study by discussing texts that were consulted in relation to the 28 Battalion, Māori identity and citizenship.

The military is a well ordered, hierarchical organisation, and the military meaning of the medals that it awards are presented in the same methodical, precise manner on the New Zealand Defence Force Medals Site/Te Ope Kātua o Aotearoa (<http://medals.nzdf.mil.nz/> Accessed 15 January 2007). This website gives a brief description of a range of related practices such as, the mounting of medals, the priority for mounting medals and the wearing of medals by family members. In fact, these data answered all the technical questions I had in regards to Dad's medals. The book *British Battles & Medals* (1988) used a similar display page plan to describe the medals and although, the reverse view of the medals were not shown the general remarks were more detailed. For example, time spent as a prisoner of war counted towards one's eligibility for an award. Out of the two sources I preferred the website because its data were related to everyday contexts and interests rather than military regulations only.

According to Papuni (2004; Soutar 2000; Porter 1996) the 28 Battalion was an important part of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF). The Battalion was involved in some of the heaviest fighting in Greece, Crete, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Italy. Consequently, the death toll, the number of wounded and the number of prisoners of war was high due to the Battalion's regular selection for dangerous yet vital assignments. Joseph Cody (1956) wrote the official history of *28 (Māori) Battalion*, and he gathered his data by giving questionnaires to senior and junior officers. He also obtained soldiers' diaries; the accounts of the Battalion's historian in Italy; and he counterchecked his information with the War History Branch. His book includes maps, photographs, biographical footnotes and an honour roll so it is a substantial study. In the preface, I admired Cody's honesty in his disclaimer about the limitation of his study. That is, his difficulty in overcoming his bias particularly "when there was a difference in racial outlook" (1956, p.vii).

On the other hand, Wira Gardiner's book *The Story of the Māori Battalion* (1992, p.8) questions how Māori soldiers coped with the stresses of war, and he begins with explanations of a Māori perspective to war practices. For instance, by using utu/vengeance as a means of restoring a warrior's soul, self-esteem and social standing; with chiefs leading by example not command; and soldiers motivated by their tribal affiliations to maintain whānau/family mana/prestige. Further, his analysis of Māori military heritage highlights the skills that led to the famous bayonet charges; commoners achieving mana through success in war; and the use of tapu to strictly control the everyday behaviours of Māori soldiers. By contextualising 28 Battalion war practices his analysis demystifies such activities as taking war booty and the treatment of prisoners.

In *An Intimate History of Killing. Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* Joanna Burke (1999, p.38) in her chapter entitled *The Pleasures of War* details “grotesque behaviour”. She argues trophy-hunting is basically trying “to assert one’s essential ‘self’ in the act of killing”. This practice was ubiquitous throughout the World Wars and the Vietnam War and its amount only varied according to the nationality of the enemy, opportunity, and “national narratives traditions”. For example, Americans emphasised “scalping their enemies like the Indians”. She further argues (1999, p.182) that the killing of prisoners has “always been an important part of military expediency.” It is a practice that is driven by revenge for the death of comrades; jealousy that prisoners would be better off in prisoner of war camps; the fear that prisoners would overpower the guards; and the fear of greed that prisoners would consume too much of the limited food and water. At other times it was believed that a wounded prisoner would be better put out of their misery and sometimes the guards were simply too lazy or impatient to lead the prisoners to safety. This discussion contextualises some of the 28 Battalion war practices noting that they often echo “normal” military practice but were given Māori explanations and rationales by the participants.

The notion of and the book titled *The Price of Citizenship* was spearheaded by Sir Āpirana Ngata (1943; Orange 2000; Walker 2001). The 28 Battalion was made up of volunteers so Māori men and women met their military and industrial war efforts/obligations through their own free will. The practice of duty and patriotism without compulsion has always been the highest obligation of citizenship since the Greeks and Romans (Listowel, 1944, p.5). Hence, by sacrificing their blood and by mobilising an efficient home force freely it was felt that the Crown was reciprocally bound to grant Māori their promised equality as British subjects and partners to the Treaty of Waitangi.

Throughout the literature reoccurring critical themes can be identified in relation to the medals awarded to soldiers of 28 Battalion. The themes are: the military meaning of the medals; the interpretation/value of 28 Battalion; Māori identity/perspective represented in its war practices; and the interpretation/meaning to Māori of the price of citizenship. However, a gap exists in the state of knowledge for research regarding the stories generated by the war medals that highlights and reinforces the notion of the Intergenerational family.

Research Methodology

This project primarily involved in-depth archival research of the appropriate literature, and I gathered the relevant books and thesis from The Auckland University Library and Auckland Public libraries. Additional books of interest were recalled and collected from reading these first resources and their bibliographies. The University’s Special Collection had many DVDs depicting different aspects of military life pertaining to 28 Battalion. The most useful DVD, *28 Rua Tekau Mā Waru* (Māori television: Wed 5 Jul 2006, 20:00-23:30) discussed the latest reunion hosted by ‘A’ Company at Omapere in April 2006. This 26th reunion was a celebration of the soldiers’ brave and courageous lives, and a renewed thrust to continue the Battalion’s separate, military identity. Overall, its goal was to maintain the focus on the soldiers, their wives and widows.

As part of my approach to the research I visited the Auckland War Memorial Museum. I took Dad’s medals, ribbon bar, and pay books with me and I met with Chantal Clarke (Māori Liaison Librarian) and Rose Young (Curator Historian). We were able to discuss these artifacts at both a professional and personal level. Our sharing of information was very open and reciprocal because the museum is in the process of setting up an exhibition about ‘A’ Company in 2008, and ‘A’ Company is my interest. As a consequence of my readings about doing social science research I

found it relevant that Jane Kelsey (2003, p.340) acknowledges the fact that when using secondary sources “it is often more a case of *whom* you know rather than what you know”. The volunteers assisting at the War Memorial were intrigued with Dad’s artifacts, and we spent an informative afternoon matching his medals with their displays and clearing up misconceptions I had about his service. For example, his departure date in his pay book revealed that the three brothers had actually left on the same ship. This information brings into question the age of some volunteers, the number of men enlisted from the same family as well as their lack of formal training. Greg Newbold (2003, p.318) points out that when doing good historical research “one of the hardest tasks is finding out what evidence exists beyond that in the public domain”.

Since there are so few 28 Battalion men living today I never considered doing interviews in the short time span of the internship. But, I have since learnt the importance of talking about your research topic to whoever will listen to you and the importance of taking opportunities. My first participant (now identified as Tahi) became available to be interviewed as a bonus of a good network system and an intergenerational respect between families. The snowballing effect from this interview was amazing and to me it reinforced the need for a researcher to stay open and to change tact quickly when necessary. As Neuman (2006, p.158) stresses “[Q]ualitative researchers remain open to the unexpected, are willing to change the direction or focus of a research project, and may abandon their original research project, and may abandon their original research question in the middle of a project”. My second participant (now identified as Rua) was the recipient of his father’s medals. In fact, I needed to know what the significance of his father’s medals were to him and why he thinks his father passed them to him and not to his other children. Rua was a very busy man and it took awhile to make contact with him. Therefore, for his convenience we decided to conduct a telephone rather than a face to face interview. He has asked for a copy of the research paper to be sent to him.

New opportunities can bring new obstacles for example, ethics approval. After contacting my supervisor she informed me that due to time constraints I would not be able to get The University of Auckland ethics approval. Instead, she suggested that I should negotiate doing the interview *for* the family. The tape would be their resource and remain with them although, they could allow me to have access to it if they deemed this appropriate. These suggestions were discussed with and accepted by Tahi’s family. His eldest daughter even volunteered to accompany me during the interview as her father is in his eighties and lives in a rest home. He is hard of hearing in one ear and he has never met me. Thus, by using the experience and expertise of other researchers/supervisors a solution could be formulated to benefit both parties and not compromise anyone’s values.

A Kaupapa Māori methodology has allowed me to build a richer, reflective, qualitative relationship that is mindful of the researcher/researched power relations. With the control shifted back to the family and the data now their product they benefit with a present and future family history while our on-going reciprocal relationship allows me to complete my pilot study.

Results and discussion

War Medals

Sergeant Robert Kepa was awarded a set of World War II medals and a ribbon bar. His war medals consist of three imprinted stars and three imprinted discs. On the *New Zealand Defence Force Medals Site* (Accessed 15 January 2007) I discovered that the 1939-1945 Star, the Defence Medal and the New Zealand War Medal were awarded for meeting the required service. The Africa Star (8th Army bar attached) and Italy Star commemorated specific military campaigns. The British War Medal, 1939-1945 honoured a military event of distinguished individual service

such as, being mentioned in dispatches (Oak leaf emblem). Dad's medals were 'court mounted'. That is, they were slightly overlapped to take up less space than they were stretched firmly over a mounting board so that they were protected from damage caused by contact. The bar brooch attachment was placed at the back towards the top. When mounting medals there is a correct priority order which is set out in the New Zealand Order of Wear. This means that medals descend with priority from the right end (nearest the lapel) to the left end of the medal bar. As well, the multicoloured, medal ribbon is a significant accompaniment and exclusive part of the medal, or campaign it represents. Dad's ribbon bar has his highest-ranking medal ribbon exhibited on the top row closest to the lapel and his least-ranking medal ribbon on the bottom row furthest from the lapel. As all of Dad's ribbons cannot be mounted on one row, the second row is centred above the first. Finally, direct descendants of deceased New Zealand services personnel wear their relative's medals on the right breast either on ANZAC Day, Remembrance Day or when their relative's service or unit is being commemorated.

Joanna Bourke (1999, p.132) discusses the claim that only one third of the men at the end of World War II actually collected their medals. She examines Leslie Wilkins (1949, p.3, 14, 17-19) data from *The Social Survey. Prediction of the Demand for Campaign Stars and Medals* which showed 560 of the soldiers interviewed did not collect their medals. Most of these men (41 per cent) said that they could not be bothered, 20 per cent thought that the medals were a waste of money and for 17 per cent said the medals had no value. In contrast, 1149 of the men interviewed did collect their medals. Their reasons were simple such as, they were "entitled to them" or "as a souvenir" and only 16 per cent said they "would like to have them". Bourke believes part of this lack of interest in medals was due to civilian values being applied to a combat situation. For instance, many servicemen equated the hero as being the most successful killer therefore, recognition by medals was not necessarily a good thing. In fact, since World War I, medals have been awarded more for military than humane intentions. My father also seldom talked about his war service although, he recalled his Battalion companions as comrades-in-arms. He did not join the Returned Servicemen Association and as a family we did not attend many ANZAC Day commemorations until late in his life. He was however, fortunate at 85 to be able to attend 'A' Company's formal welcome home at Waitangi Marae in 2000. This research project has helped me to attach some military knowledge and context to his war service through his medals. Hence, part of a future direction of interest to me would be to research the circumstances that led to his being mentioned in dispatches 1939-1945.

Interview one

On 13 December 2006, the interview with Tahi took place at his rest home. He was still finishing his lunch when his daughter and I arrived because a sing along session nearby with the other elderly residents kept distracting him. He had a very good singing voice and he was very much the showman. He also remembered the words of the songs perfectly. Since we needed somewhere quiet to talk we withdrew to the small, sunny lounge at the end of the wing where his bedroom was located. After a few minutes organising where I should sit in relation to the ear that he hears best with, his daughter reminded him that we were here to talk about the Māori Battalion, and he answered my first question about why he volunteered without any hesitation, "Because I wanted to see the world. I get paid to see the world. If I have to pay myself I won't dream about it. I get all paid. It was big pay. We travelled quite a few places."

Yet, when we talked about his medals he was quite nonchalant and disinterested with the topic "Don't worry about medals I wanted to go to all the outings. ...medals are just medals as far as you are concerned. Part of the contract." To him Māori identity was described as "In the Battalion they mix. One of the Battalion whatever they do. It was good."

It was difficult to work out how he used the terms Kiwis and New Zealanders. I was never too sure when he was referring to Māoris only or both Pākehā and Māori:

The New Zealanders stick together. Don't care when you go into battle. You use your own commonsense. When we go to the frontline. What we could get. After the attack. Raid the dead. Their personal gear. The Kiwis were looters. The Poms they were strict.

Tahi did not recall the term the price of citizenship or any of the discussion pertaining to citizenship. However, I may have confused him with my prompts about equality because he showed great respect for Ngata, and he remember the Battalion being called on to do difficult tasks which he emphasised staunchly they completed,

I just don't remember that. Sir Āpirana Ngata eh. He's a great man. Ngāti Porou. One of the best and they came to the Māori Battalion to ask for any what you call it and Māori Battalion used to do the job.

On reflection, I should have visited Tahi with his daughter before this session then I would have had a better idea of the man rather than a second-hand image influenced by others' impressions. I would have been aware of some of his mannerisms, as well as having a place organised to quietly talk without distractions. That is, if such a place exists in an elderly care facility. Many of the residents wandered about on their own or came into the area where we were talking with visiting friends and family. At different times our interview area became quite congested! But, without his daughter's knowledge of her father and the layout of the rest home the interview would not have gone as smoothly as it did. The next day, I was keen to interview Tahi again because I wanted to try and take his answers to a deeper level. For example, when I mentioned the names of Sir Āpirana Ngata, Harding Leaf and Awatere he responded differently with his answers, as he showed a great deal of admiration for them all. Therefore, I believed his answers would reflect his loyalty and esteem for these men rather than a superficial, stereotypical account of a Māori soldier's life during WW II. On the other hand, maybe war is one glorious adventure for some soldiers so I must be careful with my assumptions and report his meaning to events not mine. By the afternoon however, I realised I had lost my focus on the medals, and that I should be interviewing his son who has his medals now.

Adventure is a common trope in soldiers' stories, and Joanna Burke (1999, p.14-15) conveys many of the ambiguities that can make warfare "attractive, even pleasurable." For example, soldiers acquire immense power in the relationship of life and death. Particularly, when combat "resembles the most exciting game in existence" and soldiers are pushed to their physical and emotional limits achieving intense fulfillment when they survive. War can also be a spiritual and sexual "turn on" while the notion of comradeship suggests a "bittersweet absorption of the self with in the group" which appeals to basic human desire. On the other hand, Wira Gardiner (1992, p.29) asserts enlisting for Māori was a tradition of maintaining the mana/status of the whānau, hapū, and iwi connections. Thus, their comradeship/mateship reflects the Māori ethos of whakawhanaungatanga, kinship, collectivity which reinforces true blood relations. Lieutenant General Freyberg fostered a sense of identity through mateship throughout 2NZEF. Although, comradeship in most armies extends only within a regiment, section or platoon and very seldom is applied to connecting and operating a large, significant unit. Ben Porter (1996, p.39) contends many Māori, like Pākehā, saw war service as a means to travel as well as being pressured by their peers to enlist or to join up with recruited family members and friends. According to Sir Geoffrey Cox (1996, p.214) "the Kiwis of 1941 approached war not only as an adventure, but as a job to be done". Therefore, part of country's maturing was the process of feeling truly equal to your enemies and allies.

Interview Two

Journal entry: I spoke to Rua today and it was great to hear his positive feedback about his father's medals. His attitude contrasts well with his father's negativity towards his medals. But it also highlights why and from where their feelings/meanings were coming.

Rua was "fascinated about what his father had done" when he looked at his medals. He was "proud of what he did" and he believed his father "had made a sacrifice." He told his father "he would look after his medals for him" and as "he didn't have much from his Dad the medals would be something personal by which to remember him." He also thought he had "benefited from his father's war experiences" because his father had an ear for learning new languages which he spoke at home. Consequently, Rua had learnt "to speak German and Japanese." There is a "big age difference" between the children of both families and Rua was the only child who "showed any interest" in their Dad's medals. In fact, he bought them up from "under the house" and at "Intermediate Woodwork classes he made a box for them." Rua had heard/read the rhetoric about citizenship and he believed his Dad "did what he did to be part of New Zealand and to have citizenship by defending Britain." However, he felt the "English were standoffish because they used the Gerkhas and Māori as cannon fodder as they believed them to be inferior." He also felt "Haane Manahi's decoration had been downgraded from a Victoria Cross." Finally, he was keen to explain that "his partner had had his father's medals mounted along with his photograph and historical details to give to Rua as a present". Needless to say he considered "this gift a taonga/heirloom to be passed on through the different generations of his family."

Rua's interview offered an interesting insight into the notion of an Intergenerational family. That is, the father sees his war experience as an adventure which reflects the mainstream, individualistic, competitive discourse of the day. His son meanwhile, sees his father's actions as reflected through his medals as brave, courageous, strong, he is a good citizen. Rua is applying social, collective values and the connection is bridged through whakapapa (familial relationships). As Russell Bishop verifies (1996, p.215) whakawhanaungatanga (network of interactive links) is "... your engagement, your connectedness, and therefore unspoken but implicit connectedness to other people". Consequently, Tahi's medals will continue to link future familial connections.

I found a telephone interview more difficult because I could not see Rua and it was hard to gauge the pauses and when to prompt without butting in. Not being able to read his body language was also frustrating. I could hear his voice rise but I needed other signs to interpret why. This method however, was quick and convenient. In fact, my interviewing technique needs to be more simple and relaxed. Prompts such as, 'how' or 'tell me more' would cut down on my verbal input. Keeping a running record during this study has been the most helpful activity I have undertaken so far. Whereas writing up as soon as possible after each event to ensure accurate note-taking is a necessity I must practice more conscientiously. I also read for too long and too wide and I did not realise my notes for the literature review would require so much sorting, rewriting and discarding. Hence, I need and have found a better timetable to follow (Manalo 2004, p.72).

Conclusion

This study divided into two distinct parts. Part one included archival research of military history and Māori identity/citizenship as related to the war medals. Part two developed through data collected from the interviews which highlighted the Intergenerational family. In short, their meanings given to the war medals. Part two was an unexpected yet significant outcome. Therefore, a future direction would be to expand and intensify this pilot study. That is, to research other stories generated by the war medals of 'A' Company soldiers and to see how they interpret

the notion of the Intergenerational family. Also of interest to me would be to include some research on the circumstances that led to Sergeant Robert Kepa being mentioned in dispatches 1939-1945.

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