



02 MEI 1940

On this day, 79 years ago, after three months of training, the Māori Battalion's main body of 681 men sailed from Wellington with the 2nd Echelon of 2NZEF aboard the famous luxury liner Aquitania. (See photo on left.)

Many Māori had been quick to answer the call to arms when war broke out in September 1939. In October, in response to calls from Sir Āpirana Ngata and the other Māori MPs for an all-Māori unit, the government agreed to the formation of the 28th (Māori) Battalion.

Unlike the Māori Pioneer Battalion that served on the Western Front in the First World War, which was mainly engaged in trench-digging and support tasks, the 28th Māori Battalion was to be a frontline infantry unit. Composed of volunteers, it would be additional to the nine New Zealand infantry battalions already being formed for 2NZEF.

The Battalion was organised along tribal lines, but to the disappointment of many Māori, Pākehā regular army officers were initially appointed to key positions. Its first commander was Major George Dittmer. Selected officers and NCOs began training at Trentham in November, and the Battalion first assembled at Palmerston North on 26 January 1940.

After being joined by other troop ships in Australian ports, the battalion's convoy sailed for Egypt, where New Zealand's 1st Echelon had already established its base. But on 15 May, four days after leaving Fremantle, the ships were diverted to South Africa - intelligence reports suggested that Italy was about to declare war on the Allies and potentially blockade the Red Sea. Further commentary on the Battalion's story can be read on <https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/story-of-the-28th/call-to-arms>