

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

EPW-9
Return to Kokoda

P. O. Box 628,
Port Moresby,
Papua,
Territory of Papua
& New Guinea

November 15, 1967

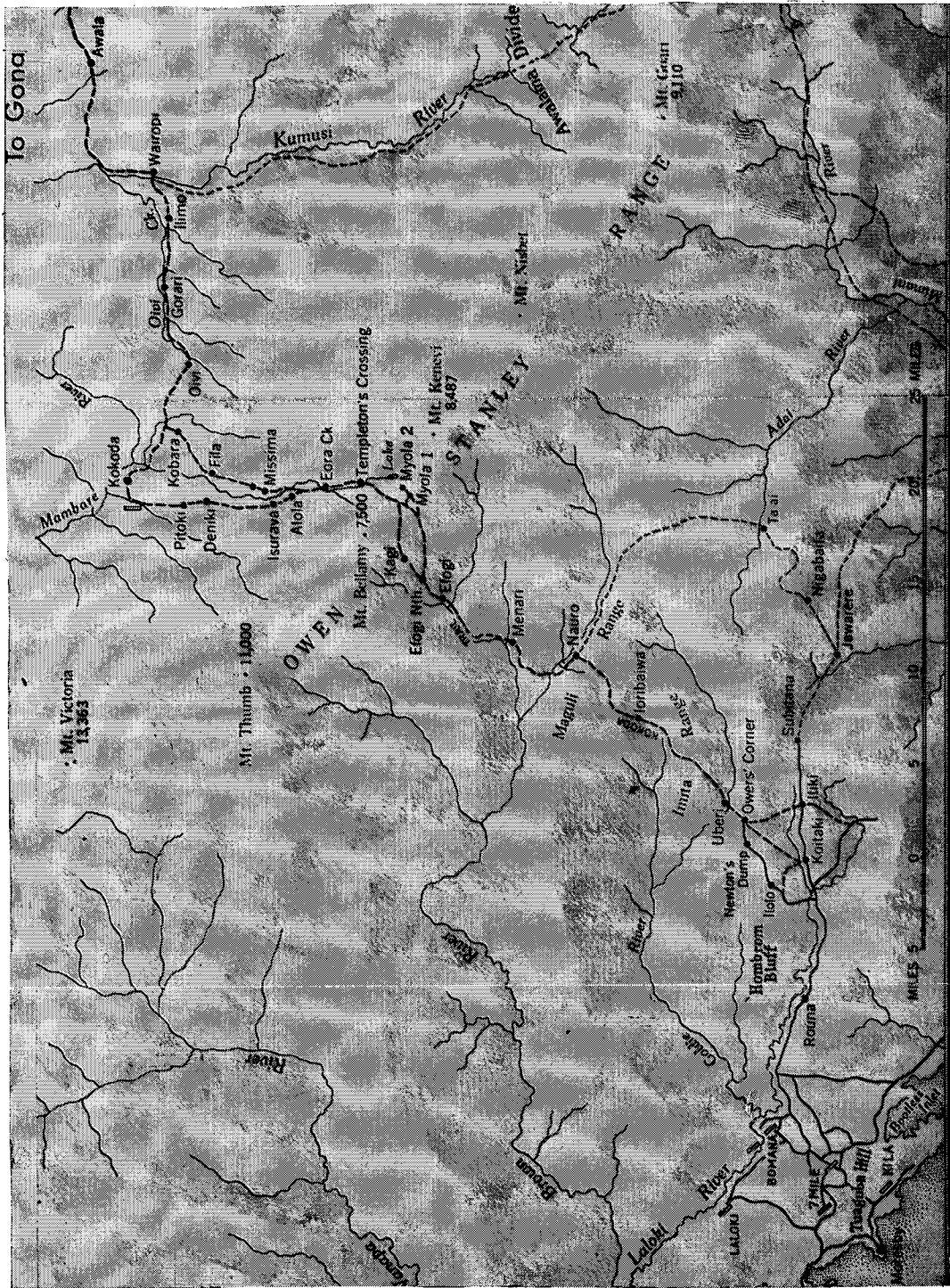
Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Executive Director,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 10017, New York,
United States of America

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The recapture of Kokoda in early November 1942 was only one of a few important turning-points in the battle for Papua and New Guinea during World War II. It was, however, probably the most important event in this theatre of the war on a psychological level, for it began the overland push that was eventually to drive the Japanese from most of the New Guinea mainland. By September 1942, the Australians had been driven back to within little more than thirty miles from Port Moresby. The recapture of Kokoda ensured at least the temporary security of the Papuan capital.

The hardships of the retreat along the Kokoda Trail and the fight back from Imita Ridge are now legendary, and quite a large number of young Australians walk the trail each year to prove their physical fitness. Indeed, the shared hardships of the Papuan and New Guinean troops and the Australians bred a new spirit of interracial goodwill which marked a turning-point in the Territory's race relations. The harsh commercialism of pre-war New Guinea and the distant paternalism of the Papuan administration gradually gave way during the war to the benevolent paternalism of the immediate post-war period.

Although news of the war's progress was deliberately kept from the indigenous inhabitants of New Guinea until the Japanese attack on Rabaul was virtually under way, and very few Papuans indeed were able to read the Papuan Villager's patriotic exhortations in simple English, the indigenes' loyalty to their Australian masters was soon put to the test. In many areas, the local people simply recognised that the times had changed, and set about cooperating with their new masters, the Japanese. In those areas still under Australian control or where government influence was strong and favourably regarded, volunteers to the Allied cause were not wanting even for such hazardous tasks as spying behind enemy lines. Many members of the Papuan Infantry Battalion and the Royal Papuan Constabulary won medals for their courage, while the heroism and selfless toil of the impressed and probably uncomprehending indigenous carriers and stretcher-bearers gave rise to a certain amount of badly written, if sincerely felt, verse:



KOKODA TRAIL

Discovery

(Without any apology to Kipling)

Here's to you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy! In the fight against Japan
You have taught us all a lesson in the brotherhood of man;
Where the aching Owen Stanleys taunt and daunt us on the track,
We have seen the white soul shining out of faces ebon-black;
And as one we've worked and suffered, and as one we've lived
and died

By the rapids of Wairopi, in the swamps of Gona side.
So here's to you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, savage men of tender heart!
We, the fighters - we, the wounded - we've seen you play a part
That will ever be remembered when the warrior tales are told -
How you showed us in New Guinea something finer than its gold.

- H. P.

The "Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels" of the Owen Stanley Track

Many a mother in Australia, when the busy day is done,
Sends a prayer to the Almighty for the keeping of her son;
Asking that an Angel guide him, and to bring him safely back -
Now we see those prayers are answered, on the Owen Stanley track.

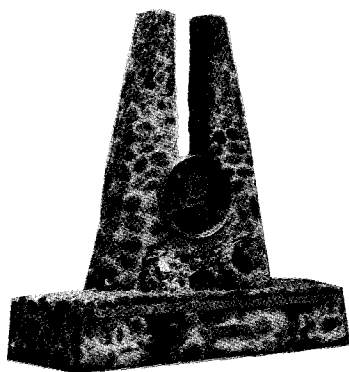
Tho' they haven't any haloes, only holes slashed through the ear,
And their faces marked with tattoes and with scratch pins in their
hair,
Bringing back the badly wounded, just as steady as a hearse,
Using leaves to keep the rain off, and as gentle as a nurse;
Slow and careful in bad places on the awful mountain track,
And the look upon their faces makes us think that Christ was black.

Not a move to hurt the carried, as they treat him like a saint,
 It's a picture worth recording, that an artist's yet to paint.
 Many a lad will see his mother, and the husbands, wee 'uns and
 wives,

Just because the Fuzzy Wuzzies carried them to save their lives
 From mortar or machine-gun fire or a chance surprise attack
 To safety and the care of doctors at the bottom of the track.

May the mothers in Australia, when they offer up a prayer,
 Mention these impromptu angels with the fuzzy wuzzy hair.

- an Australian Soldier in Papua



The Carriers' Memorial
 at Kokoda

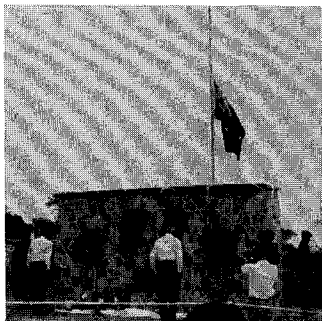
The Kokoda Trail, then, remains important in the memories of Australia's exservicemen together with a very real affection for the "fuzzy wuzzy angels". Many of the Papuan and New Guinean veterans, in turn, look upon the war as a period when men were treated on their merits as individuals. Although the troops were issued with various manuals on "how to handle natives", the exigencies of the time, and the natural easiness of those soldiers - the majority - who had not yet absorbed the attitudes of colonial society, cut across the old caste barriers, and paved the way for popular Australian acceptance of the need to develop the Territory in the indigenes' interest. Thus, many Papuan and New

Guinean exservicemen and carriers are very proud of their war medals and wear them on important social occasions, such as a visit of the Administrator to their area, while it is not uncommon for Australians to stop Papuans and New Guineans in the streets of Sydney to offer them a small gift, or to invite them home to relive their wartime experiences over a meal. I have even seen Highlanders who did not see their first European until after the war invited home to swap sentimental yarns.

Much of the Australians' sentimentality about the war, of course, remains quite incomprehensible to those Papuans and New Guineans who were compulsorily recruited for wartime service, while the many Motuan songs that tell of the privations and hunger of the time when they were evacuated from Port Moresby to make room for the troops are very far from being fond remembrances of a pleasant or even glorious time. Nonetheless, it was scarcely surprising that the Territory's Returned Servicemen's League decided to invite some Kokoda veterans from Australia to help commemorate the 25th anniversary of the recapture of Kokoda.

The Territory's R. S. L., which organised the "Return to Kokoda" celebrations, is scarcely as sentimental about its indigenous co-fighters as its Australian counterpart. Indeed, it does not allow them to join its clubs, though, as its leaders are always quick to explain, this is scarcely their fault. The R. S. L., even in Australia, is open only to men and women who fought overseas in Australia's defence, and so Papuans and New Guineans, who fought on their own land, are automatically excluded from membership. Although any European, exserviceman or not, who subscribes to the aims and objectives of the R. S. L. can join its social clubs, it appears that it has been impossible to date to find any Papuans and New Guineans who can be said to be true believers in the R. S. L's stern eyes.

With the passage of time, however, the Territory's R. S. L. has gradually changed. This year, the Anzac Day march was led by two Papuan heroes who were afterwards asked around to the club for a drink. Quite a number of indigenous veterans had their fares paid for them by the R. S. L. so that they could take part in the Port Moresby celebrations early in November, and even return to Kokoda with the Australian pilgrims.

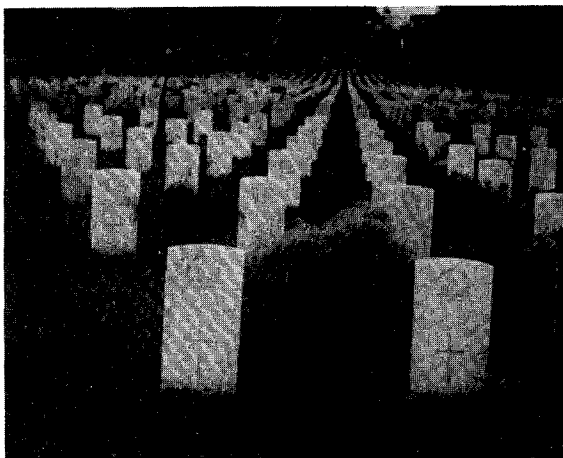


The 2 centre plaques are reproduced on the last page of this "Newsletter"

The celebrations began with the unveiling of a memorial in Port Moresby to the indigenous soldiers, policemen and carriers who had fought in the Second World War. Many of the Papuan and New Guinean veterans arrived more than half an hour before the ceremony began, as only 2 of them were awarded reserved seats among the official party. None of the numerous R. S. L. officials, pilgrims from Australia, or other assorted European dignitaries were without reserved seats, but then they were also, by and large, more suitably dressed for such an important occasion. The atmosphere, however, was jovial enough as some of the officers of the present Pacific Islands Regiment made a point of sitting among their ^{police} indigenous charges, while one senior European ^{officer} was kind enough to drive 2 of his heavily bemedalled fellow-officers to the ceremony - in the back of his truck.

The ceremony began with a very B. B. C. voice requesting us all to stand and sing Rudyard Kipling's Recessional. Although we did sing the fifth verse with its reference to the "heathen heart that puts her trust / In reeking tube and iron shard," the organisers had the good grace to omit 2 verses of the hymn, including the verse that refers to the boastings of the gentile and the "lesser breeds without the Law". Indeed, the timing of the ceremony coincided **rather** well with the modifications to the hymns that taste had enjoined, for the monument was unveiled almost exactly at sunset. There was perhaps a touch of unconscious irony in Sir Edmund Herring's tribute to "the men of this country who did so much to preserve this country and Australia from invasion, and to preserve our liberties here."

The service that accompanied the unveiling of the memorial was followed by a special dinner at the R. S. L. club in honour of the occasion, to which some indigenous exservicemen were invited.



The Saturday morning dawn service at the Bomana war cemetery was a more solemn affair. Its atmosphere was perhaps most aptly summed up in the words of one "digger", who was searching the headstones for his mates' names : "You wouldn't wish it for quids would you, not for heaps."

Kokoda itself is a small subdistrict headquarters set on a hill in the centre of a rich and verdant valley. Our arrival there in 4 DC3s and several smaller 'planes certainly disrupted the serenity of outstation life, and represented, in the words of one local official, "a great day for Kokoda".

Signs of the battles fought in the area are still to be seen around the station in the form of bullet-holes in the trees that flanked the parade-ground. They were supplemented on this occasion by the sentimentalities of the diggers' beer-loosened tongues.

Soon the real Kokoda veterans were back to using their old nicknames, and promising to return again next year, or to invite their indigenous friends home, if ever they should happen to visit Australia. Friends from one part of Papua met their comrades of 25 years ago, and exchanged fond memories in Motu, while others looked on with an air of bemused detachment. A few Australians swapped yarns with a detachment of Pacific Islands Regiment regulars who had been made to walk the trail in honour of a victory that had taken place before many of them were even born, or gazed admiringly at a display of Japanese and Australian arms that had been brought to Kokoda for the occasion.

One of the most prominent trophies on display was a Japanese soldier's helmet with parts of its wearer's skull still firmly stuck to it which the P. I. R. patrol had found in a mass grave just off the trail.

The march-past reflected the social divisions of an era that has fortunately passed. To the accompaniment of a band of bagpipe-playing P. I. R. regulars, the



As the sign said, they came from Port Moresby
"The Hard Way!"



...and not a Highlander among them

and had to be removed later on for correction.

former Australian forces marched on to the parade-ground, followed by the old Papuan Infantry Battalion with its European officers, and a small detachment of carriers. The senior ranks of the wartime army and the post-war R. S. L. sat in a small stand, as the perspiring pilgrims stood in the sun to hear the formal speeches, and to watch the unveiling of 2 plaques commemorating their pilgrimage. One of the plaques unfortunately contained 2 spelling errors

The atmosphere at lunch soon regained its former jollity, especially when the lunch packs containing a chicken salad arrived sentimentally labelled "K" Rations, with a menu that read : powdered egg, dehydrated mutton, M and V, gold fish and watery jelly. They were eagerly sought as souvenirs to show off at the R. S. L. clubs back home in Australia.

Soon after lunch, the cars came and we drove back to the small airfield, where another keg awaited us while the men assembled for their flight back to Port Moresby, Popondetta or Lae. Airfields in the mountains are seldom open for more than a few hours a day in the Territory; few wanted, though some people came prepared, to spend the night there.

One could not help wondering, once we had landed back in Port Moresby and had gone our respective ways back home, to the village, or to the R. S. L. club, just how the sentimental forgetfulness, or perhaps genuinely fond memories, of the older generation are viewed by their more detached and ambitious children.

Yours sincerely,

Edward Wolfers.





Received in New York November 27, 1967.