

# White Man's War

By Dr Seamus Spark

An address to the Battle for Australia Association

At the Anzac Memorial, Hyde Park, Sydney, 15 February 2019



In 1967, Ken Inglis – that great Australian historian of Anzac and much else – moved to Port Moresby to become the Foundation Professor of History at the University of Papua and New Guinea (UPNG). Under his guidance, the History department at UPNG sought to encourage its New Guinean students to tell and record their own histories. Inglis and his colleagues started by asking the students about their families' memories of the Second World War. One conversation with a young man from the Sepik in northern New Guinea stuck in Inglis's mind. Here I quote Inglis:

I asked the student a corny, chalky question: 'What did your family say about the Japanese occupation?' He said: 'Towards the end it was terrible as there was no food and they were eating people, but for a long time it was okay. They were the only white men who would ever sit down on the floor of the house with us.' I had to prevent myself from saying, 'White men, what do you mean white men?' It was a very instructive moment for me to realise that Sepik people regarded all Japanese, Australians, British and Germans as varieties of white men.

5 December 1942. Buna, Papua. At an advanced American dressing station. Wounded being brought in on stretchers along a track through the Kunai grass. Photo: George Silk/Australian War Memorial.



In 1968, Inglis gave a paper at UPNG's Waigani Seminar entitled 'War, Race and Loyalty in New Guinea, 1939-1945'. He suggested that more time be devoted to studying New Guinean responses to the conflict. In the paper, Inglis showed how New Guineans, with their own hopes and interests, were victims of, and participants in, the Second World War. What did the war mean for New Guinea and New Guineans, Inglis wondered. His article pointed the way to a new history of the New Guinea campaign in which New Guineans were neither stereotypes nor bystanders on the periphery of the war.

Some historians have followed Inglis and examined New Guinean responses to the conflict. The late Hank Nelson continued to document New Guinean perspectives of the war long after he left Moresby, and several New Guinean scholars, among them John Waiko and the late August Kituai, have written valuable accounts. In recent years, Jonathan Ritchie of Deakin University, acting on a pledge Julia Gillard made to the people of Papua New Guinea when she was Australian prime minister, has worked tirelessly with Papua New Guinean and Australian colleagues to record New Guinean memories of the war.

Yet most Australian histories of the war relegate New Guineans to the edge of the story. We read little about the massive disruption and suffering visited on New Guinea from 1942-45. About 1.5 million foreigners descended on the country in those years, around one foreigner for every New Guinean.

That statistic is worth dwelling on. One person came into New Guinea for every one of its 1.5 million or so inhabitants. New Guineans served Australians, Americans and Japanese, sometimes willingly, sometimes not. In parts of the Sepik, Bougainville and New Britain, around one quarter of the local population died.

Some historians may claim that there is relatively little information on New Guinean responses to the war, and that's true, certainly when compared with what we know of Australian, American and Japanese experiences. When Ken Inglis and his UPNG colleagues set out to capture New Guinean memories of the war, they did so on tape rather than on the page. New Guineans speak, act and dance their history; writing is a more recent approach. The whereabouts of the oral history recordings made by UPNG staff is not known: either they are lost, or they are buried in an archive in Port Moresby, in which case they may as well be lost given nobody knows where to look. But this relative lack of information should not distract us from the bigger issue: we do not pay enough attention to the evidence that does exist.

Today I take my cue from Inglis's 1968 paper. I discuss New Guinean perspectives of the Second World War, and suggest we must make more of this evidence. Too often Australian histories of the war exclude New Guinean voices, and our histories are poorer for it. John Waiko, PNG's pre-eminent historian, has written that the people most affected by the war in New Guinea were New Guineans. It seems an obvious statement, but it is rarely heard. The idea that the war was about New Guineans is foreign to most Australians, as is the concept that New Guineans' involvement was deliberate as well as accidental.

25 December 1942. Buna, Papua. Private George Whittington being helped along a track by Raphael Oimbari towards a field hospital at Dobodura. Photo: George Silk/Australian War Memorial.



### **A more complex picture – New Guinean accounts of the war**

What do New Guinean perspectives tell us about the battles fought in 1942-43 in their country? Very often, they present a more complex picture of the war than is usual in Australian accounts. The 'fuzzy-wuzzy angels', indigenous labourers who served the Allied war effort, have been celebrated in Australian verse and literature. The term 'fuzzy-wuzzy angel' comes from an affectionate poem composed by an Australian soldier who fought along the Kokoda Trail. What histories of the war tend not to mention is that many, perhaps most, of the 'fuzzy-wuzzy angels' didn't serve willingly. In the area around Port Moresby, from where Australian authorities recruited carriers for the Kokoda Trail, male villagers hid to avoid being pressed into service.

For some of those men and women who found themselves in Allied service, willingly or otherwise, it was a rewarding experience. In the 1970s, Ian Maddocks, eminent Australian doctor and an old PNG hand, lived with his family in Pari, a village outside Port Moresby. The Pari men who had worked as carriers during the war enjoyed what Maddocks calls 'a shared confidence'. Their service was a source of pride and good memories. 'For some villagers', he writes, 'the war allowed a first experience of

comradeship with whites.’ Maddocks tells of warm friendships and mutual respect between these men. This story is familiar; we’ve heard many like it. He goes on:

Most other Pari villagers remembered the war as a time of privation. Japanese bombing of Port Moresby in early 1942 led army authorities to move the people of Pari to the site they call Vailala, 80 kilometres south-east. The people of Pari had to abandon their houses, gardens and church, taking with them only the church bell. Women, children and old men were deposited on the beach at Vailala, where they were left to build makeshift shelters and scrounge for bush foods. Locals there could offer them little help, for most of their active men also were away on the Kokoda Trail. As late as the 1990s, the people of Pari were composing songs that remembered hunger and deaths at Vailala.

This history is less familiar to Australians.

In June 2017, I spent a week in Salamaua with two Papua New Guinean colleagues. My trip, part of Jonathan Ritchie’s oral history project, was funded by the Australian government through the PNG-Australia partnership. The village of Salamaua, on the tip of an isthmus that juts into the Huon Gulf, was a site of great strategic significance both to the Allies and the Japanese in the fight for New Guinea. Japanese artillery is still in place in and around the village. Just off the beach is a Japanese landing barge, half submerged. Gun emplacements dot the hills around Salamaua. Relics of the war are everywhere. Because Salamaua was contested territory, some villagers found themselves serving the Japanese, others the Australians and the Americans. When the war ended, these divisions ruptured relationships in the village. Salamauans speak with clarity and candour of the problems, terror and death brought by the white man’s war.



Amogoye Mathias. Photo: Deakin University.

‘White man’s war’ isn’t my term: it was used by an old woman we interviewed on Salamaua, and I’ve read and heard the phrase elsewhere. The phrase lumps together the foreigners who brought their fight to New Guinea, with no distinction drawn between Australians, Americans and Japanese. The name of the old woman we interviewed was Amogoye Mathias. In her interview she spoke mostly of being scared, and of the ways she and other villagers hid from the war. Amogoye lived in the bush for two years.

Certainly, the Salamauans we interviewed spoke little of national differences, of battles and their outcomes, of who was right and who was wrong. In common with the people of Pari, they talk of the war as a tragedy that caused them unprecedented and unwelcome disruption. One Salamauan described to me the arrival of Japanese forces in the village. An officer demanded that the villagers supply his men with food. We have only enough for ourselves, they replied. New Guineans don’t take more than they need from land and sea. The Japanese officer listened to their answer, murdered the nearest villager, then repeated his demand, leaving them no choice but to share their daily catch and garden produce. Several of the Salamauans we spoke with mentioned the death of a young woman who died with child in womb, her stomach sliced open in a bomb explosion. Among otherwise disparate individual testimonies, that story was a common element.

Here, I think, is a difference between New Guineans and Australians. New Guineans remember the war as social history. The other day, I listened to a 2017 interview with a Milne Bay woman. She spoke of two mango trees. For the people of her village, the trees were a source of food and pleasure. For Australian soldiers, they were a scaffold from which to hang enemy dead. The trees didn’t survive the

war, yet they are spoken about seventy-five years later. Australians, meanwhile, look at the campaign through the lens of military history. There is, of course, a place for both approaches in writing the history of the war in New Guinea. Our knowledge of the campaign would be stronger and clearer if we were to combine the two more than we do.



Bougainville Island, 31 December 1944. Unnamed Bougainvilleans assisting Private L.H. Wray back to a regimental aid post. Photo: Australian War Memorial

### **Dead Europeans 'returning in disguise'**

Testimony from across New Guinea shows that many New Guineans simply wanted the war and the foreigners on their lands to go away. This is a recurrent theme, and jars with the common perception that New Guineans fought side-by-side with Allied forces to restore Australian rule

in New Guinea. For Gunan, a Bougainvillean man who lived through the war, the conflict was another foreign invasion. He and other Bougainvilleans

saw no sense in many different kinds of 'white' people. The Germans were white, yet different to the people from Sydney. People referred to white foreigners as 'people from Sydney'. Rumour had spread that the Japanese were actually the spirits of the dead Germans of World War I, returning in disguise in another attempt to invade the people's land. They were thought of as a very hostile tribe from over the waters from some distant place somewhere.

Some New Guineans were inclined to a more positive view of the Japanese, thinking that they had come to liberate them from Australian colonialism.

The war gave Emboge of Northern province (now Oro province) the opportunity to express his beliefs about the presence of outsiders in New Guinea. He did this by murdering foreigners. Emboge's story of nascent nationalism generally is ignored in histories of the war in New Guinea. Emboge was summarily hanged by Australian authorities in 1943. The distinction between the murders he committed, and the killing practised by Australians, Americans and Japanese, was lost on some New Guineans. While Emboge's reaction was extreme, his thinking wasn't. As Inglis noted in his 1968 paper, some New Guineans believed the war was God's way of punishing foreigners for dishonest acts in New Guinea.

In his paper, Inglis was alert to the possibility that New Guinean testimony might recast what we know of the war. He wondered what New Guinean men who had served as carriers 'might say about their relationships with the soldiers', including Japanese. Is there a Japanese equivalent of the phrase 'fuzzy-wuzzy angels'? It's a question to ponder. Nearly two in three of the approximately 300,000 Japanese who served in New Guinea were killed, making PNG, in percentage terms, Japan's most lethal Second World War battleground. The campaign remains hugely significant in Japan. Many Japanese veterans have written memoirs of the war in New Guinea, and for them, as for Australians, PNG is a place of pilgrimage. It has been for a long time. Japanese war pilgrims were visiting New Guinea a generation before Australians began to flock to Kokoda.

I grew up in PNG. From the late 1960s, my parents lived on Boram Point in Wewak, on the north coast of New Guinea. Wewak was at the heart of Japan's New Guinea campaign. My mother recalls seeing

Japanese visitors on Boram Point, year after year. They were former soldiers, in New Guinea to remember. They lit candles and held ceremonies by small stone cairns. Sometimes they brought their families. A Japanese scholar based in Melbourne is doing important work about the relationships forged between New Guineans and Japanese soldiers. His particular area of interest is Bougainville, where he has identified New Guinean-Japanese friendships that continue to this day. How were these friendships formed? While we await his findings from Bougainville, there is evidence available from elsewhere in New Guinea to suggest answers.

Aitape, New Guinea 24 October 1943. This photograph was found on the body of a dead Japanese soldier. It shows the execution of Sergeant Leonard G. Siffleet. Photo: Australian War Memorial

In some villages, especially in the north where the Imperial Japanese Army had its New Guinea base and Japanese occupation wasn't threatened by Allied gains until late in the war, there was higher regard for Japanese rule than there had been for pre-war Australian authority. The Arapesh people of the Torricelli Mountains were pleased to receive Japanese advice on improving the productivity of their gardens and reducing inter-village conflict. The inhabitants of a Sepik village cried when they learnt the Japanese were losing the war and had to withdraw. Michael Somare, the first prime minister of independent PNG, began his formal education at a Japanese school established in the Sepik during the war.



These examples emphasise the complexity and diversity of New Guinean reactions to the war. New Guinean support for Allied forces, including the Australians, was not universal. Among the New Guineans who fought and laboured loyally were men without enthusiasm for the army they served or its cause. Dutiful service is not the same thing as affection. We know that many Australians who fought the war treated New Guineans with courtesy and respect; we know also that many didn't. The same could be said of American soldiers, and Japanese.

Too many of the words written about the war in New Guinea describe a binary world in which good battled evil, the Allies, aided by compliant New Guineans, against the Japanese. This narrow perspective fosters problems. Historians of the New Guinea campaign tend to write of New Guineans as homogenous, overlooking that their involvement with the war varied greatly by location. The experiences of men who carried for Australian forces on the Kokoda Trail tell us nothing about the experiences of New Guineans who lived through the war in Wewak or Lae or Madang or Rabaul or Kavieng. Along the Kokoda Trail, the war came and went relatively quickly. In New Ireland, Japanese occupation continued until the time of Japan's surrender in 1945. Kokoda, then and now, doesn't stand as an example for New Guinea.

### **Hearing the whole story – listening to New Guineans' perspectives**

Why don't we make more of New Guinean experiences of the war? There might be a temptation to think that New Guinean evidence is dismissed because most of it is delivered as oral history, but I doubt this is the case. All but the most regressive historians now accept the great insights that spoken evidence offers, especially in a country like PNG. A historian of PNG who chooses to ignore the spoken word won't discover much of substance about the country and its people. Rather, I suspect that many Australian historians have little interest in New Guinean memories of the war, or in memories of the

war that depart from received wisdom. Of course there were close relationships between Australians and New Guineans. Of course there many New Guineans who served the Allies with skill, bravery and loyalty. I am not here to dispute that. But nor is it the whole story, as New Guinean histories reveal. From New Guineans we can learn much about the war, but we must be willing to listen, even when the words are painful.

New Guineans are sources of information on Australian war crimes. I will provide two pieces of evidence as examples, but not to moralise. I want to emphasise that. We know that all combatants in the New Guinea campaign committed war crimes. Moreover, my statement isn't a bold one, for we have evidence from the men themselves. Australian soldiers who served in New Guinea have written memoirs in which they describe, with remarkable clarity and candour, their involvement in acts of atrocity. So, I cite the following examples not to shock, but to illustrate the revealing and confronting nature of some New Guinean testimony. The first example comes from the town of Madang, on the Bismarck Sea. For the last seventy-five years, its people have told of an Australian war crime: Japanese soldiers were herded on to a barge that was taken offshore and deliberately destroyed, men and all. As far as I'm aware, this incident is mentioned in no written records, though it's common knowledge among older people in Madang. The second example comes from the Huon Peninsula. On Kundumeru beach in late 1943, villagers from Wandokai witnessed a group of Australian soldiers blindfold and then behead their Japanese captives. The bodies were doused in kerosene and set alight, ensuring no physical trace of the atrocity. W. P. B. Silata, a New Guinean historian, told of that incident in a 1988 publication. Australians are certainly not the only subjects of such testimony. Other New Guinean accounts describe Japanese and American war crimes, and even atrocities committed by New Guineans themselves. New Guinean testimony spares no-one.



c. 1943. Native stretcher-bearers carry a wounded soldier down a muddy jungle track as they evacuate him from the front. Photo: Australian War Memorial.

Ken Inglis recognised that New Guinean history matters, not only because of what it tells us about Australians and other foreigners but, even more importantly, about New Guineans. Following Inglis, we must consider New Guinean testimony on its merits, which means putting aside what we know of the war, or think we know of it, or want to know of it, and looking afresh. The potential rewards are rich. New Guinean testimony gathered by historians in recent years has added greatly to our store of knowledge, often in unexpected, uplifting ways. Stories of hope, courage and resilience are as much a part of New Guinean testimony as they are of Australian histories. However, much more needs to be done. Efforts to collect New Guinean testimony have stalled for lack of funding, and soon time will run out. New Guineans die younger than Australians, and few of those who lived through the war remain alive. Their children and grandchildren tell stories of when the war came to New Guinea, but will the generations to come? When I was in Salamaua, some of the older men told me, with lament, that the younger villagers don't know much about the history of their community. An associated challenge is to ensure that New Guinean testimony reaches Australians. The wonderful project led by Jonathan Ritchie has lodged its findings with the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery, and the interviews can also be heard online through the project website. How many Australians will read and watch and listen to the results? Not

enough, I suspect. It becomes all the more important that historians should use this evidence in writing about the war in New Guinea.

Ken Inglis with students at UPNG in 1974. Photo: Inglis family.



I started with a Ken Inglis anecdote, and I'll finish with one. In the 1960s, when he was teaching at UPNG, Inglis heard a story about a man from Madang. During the war, this man would look outside each morning, gauge the state of the battle, then put on an Australian or a Japanese hat depending on what he saw. Such stories, Inglis said, shocked Australians in the 1960s. They still do, probably even more so these days. Forty and fifty years ago, when New Guinea was a central concern of Canberra politics, Australians knew more about New Guinea than they do now.

New Guinean testimony can enrich our understanding of the war. On occasion, these stories will make for difficult, disturbing listening, but the prospect of unpleasant discoveries should not be a deterrent. History serves us best when we tell all the story, no matter how messy or inconvenient. To ignore New Guinean perspectives of the war is also to ignore aspects of Australian history.

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