

INTRODUCTION

On 16 September 1975, the flag of Papua New Guinea (PNG) was raised officially for the first time in Port Moresby, marking the end of almost a hundred years of Australian rule. The honour of this task was given to Warrant Officer George Aibo of the fledgling Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF), who not only represented the military at the ceremony but was also himself a product of the profound changes that had occurred in the twenty-four years since Australia raised the small peacetime Pacific Islands Regiment (PIR). Aibo had been the third Papua New Guinean to join the regiment and, in the years following, saw the single battalion of the PIR expand to a force five times its size, becoming the brigade-sized PNG Command in 1965 and, in 1973, the PNGDF.

Aibo's career exemplified the changing role of Papua New Guinean units within the Australian Army and the transformation of Papua New Guinean soldiers from subordinate 'colonial' troops in the eyes of Australians to well-educated, equipped and trained men who were represented at all ranks and in all positions, albeit solely in PNG rather than throughout the Australian Army. He had served throughout the PIR's problematic infancy, when it was considered of only secondary importance by the Australian Army, and had helped halt riots by Papua New Guinean troops in 1957 and 1961. Later, he patrolled the border with Indonesia at the height of Confrontation, at a time when PNG Command was charged with guarding this vital Australian region. During the late 1960s, as a solid and experienced non-commissioned officer (NCO),

2 GUARDING THE PERIPHERY



Figure 0.1 The lowered Australian flag is removed, Independence Day, 16 September 1975. George Aibo is second from the left, at rear. (Dennis Williams and the *Post Courier*)

Aibo guided those new Papua New Guinean officers who would lead the PNGDF in an independent PNG.¹

The history of the PIR, PNG Command and the PNGDF is at once a history of Australia and of Papua New Guinea. It is a history of men like Aibo, and of his Australian counterparts, of colonialism and decolonisation, and of peacetime and the threat of war. From the re-raising of the PIR in 1951, the Australian Army in PNG was, to varying degrees, both an important pillar of Australia's defence as well as a significant part of PNG's progression to independence. More broadly, Australian policies and attitudes towards Papua New Guinean units and the soldiers within them are one example of a multitude of colonial armies around the world at the time and before, albeit with a particular, and unique, Australian flavour. The experiences of the Australian Army's Papua New

Guinean units are therefore a window on race relations in PNG, and on the relationship between militaries and decolonisation.

This book takes as its focus the operational, social and racial aspects of the Australian Army in PNG. The PIR, and the other units later raised to command and support it, was first and foremost raised to defend Australia by guarding PNG, which was then the northernmost periphery of Australia's territory. As a result the role the Australian Army was intended to play in the defence of PNG, and how successful it was in preparing for it, are key to this history. At the same time, the Army did not act in a vacuum in PNG. Indeed, in some ways the Australian Army had to be more attuned to the local context than it was in Australia. As a result, the book considers the interaction between the Australian Army and its Papua New Guinean context, in particular the development of the Territory and the often-tense relationship with the Australian colonial government as the place of the military in the future nation was debated. Finally, as is often noted, armies are collections of people. In PNG, the Australian Army found itself commanding units of astonishing diversity, in which hundreds of languages and cultures were represented. This book explores the Australian Army in PNG as a point of cultural interaction, between the Army and its colonial charges, between Australian and Papua New Guinean soldiers, and between their families, all during a period of profound change in race relations in Australia and PNG.

It is a cliché when writing Australian military history to refer to the degree to which a particular battle, campaign, war or person has been neglected by historians. Often, this speaks as much to the particular narrative an author or group hopes to create about an event as to the number of people with knowledge of it, given the cachet associated with an 'untold' story. Undoubtedly, some historical periods are neglected for a variety of reasons, such as their complexity, lack of a clear narrative, paucity of sources and a dearth of drama or excitement. In particular, 'peacetime' or 'routine' military activities attract little attention, while battles and campaigns are studied time and time again. No conventional war was fought in PNG after 1945, although one with Indonesia was feared during the 1960s, and Papua New Guineans did not directly participate in Australia's Cold War conflicts. Consequently, the campaigns of the Second World War and the narrative of military deterioration, civil conflict and criminal violence after independence have overshadowed the experience of the military in PNG between 1951 and 1975. Moreover, as PNG is now an independent nation, the contribution of Papua New

Guineans to Australia's defence is seen as part of that country's past, and has been largely excised from Australian history.

Scholarly work on the Australian Army in PNG is scarce, and is limited to a handful of narrative regimental histories and theses, many written in the 1970s and therefore invariably suffering from a lack of access to the archival record, as well as a focus on the process of independence rather than the broader history of the PIR and later forces.² General histories of the Australian Army after 1945 have conceptualised its Papua New Guinean units as an interesting but remote corner of the institution. For instance, Jeffrey Grey's *Australian Army*, the most valuable of a handful of studies of the history of the institution, describes service in PNG 'as one of the defining features of service in the army in the 1950s and 1960s'. However, his allocation of only a small number of pages to the bookends of the PIR's existence – its raising and Papua New Guinean independence – is representative of other studies of the Australian Army's organisation and its post-Vietnam history, which recognise Papua New Guinean units as unique but do not, or cannot, study them in their own right.³ In part, the absence of the Australian Army in PNG from this historical record is compounded by the broader academic neglect of the post-1945 period in Australia's military history, beyond studies of Korea, Malaya and Vietnam.⁴ Although, as is often the case in Australian military history, while there might be only a little written about the Army in PNG, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), which maintained a PNG Division of the RAN from 1949, and the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), which operated extensively in PNG during the Cold War, have received almost no historical attention.⁵

From the end of the nineteenth century, PNG was viewed by Australians both as a bulwark against attack and as a springboard to Asia, and as such figured significantly in Australia's defence planning and strategic thinking. However, only recently has PNG's place in Australia's strategic perceptions been examined. Historian Bruce Hunt argues that throughout most of the period of Australian administration of PNG, Australia 'made judgements about Papua New Guinea using external reference points as the focus of its assessments', namely Germany, Japan and Indonesia.⁶ In the period immediately before independence, however, these reference points 'all but disappeared'. While internal stability and unity became an increasing security concern, the decline of PNG's strategic significance was of profound importance not only to the Army in PNG but also to Australia's willingness to grant independence to Papua New Guineans.⁷ Others, such as T.B. Millar and Hank Nelson, have examined the role

played by PNG in Australia's conceptions of its defence.⁸ However, in each case, the implementation of strategy, and its implications for the units and the people within them, is absent from these discussions.

While the strategic and political context – as understood by Australians – dictated a great deal of the development of the force, this book moves beyond high-level decision-making, and is concerned primarily with the way government policies, civilian attitudes and the Army's own experiences combined to shape the development of a force of Papua New Guineans. Grey complains that the official historians of the First and Second World Wars do not 'devote much space to the essential building blocks of armies . . . doctrine, training, command, logistics, force structure'. As a result, in the official histories, 'Australian operations just "happen", with little real indication of the extraordinary preparations necessary'.⁹ While the study of a force that trained for combat but did not engage in it presents particular challenges for an historian, this book addresses those essential building blocks of armies to which Grey referred by examining how the Army in PNG 'happened', adding to this list the issues of race, civil–military relations, and soldiers' family and social life.

PAPUA NEW GUINEANS: AUSTRALIA'S OTHER SOLDIERS

Papua New Guineans composed the largest minority to have served in the Australian Army in the post-war period. By 1972, the 2800 Papua New Guinean troops constituted almost one in ten regular soldiers in the Australian Army.¹⁰ By way of contrast, an estimated five hundred Indigenous Australian soldiers served during the entire ten years of Australia's participation in the Vietnam War.¹¹ Yet, despite the fact that Papua New Guineans constituted the largest non-European group of soldiers in the Australian Army, their experience has been almost completely neglected by historians, even within the already 'overlooked and underrepresented' place of minorities in discussions of Australia's military past.¹² As interest grows in Indigenous Australians soldiers, sailors and airmen, an examination of Papua New Guineans in the context of their place as regular soldiers in Australian service reveals that the breadth of cultures within the Army extended far beyond mainland Australia, and substantially expands the understanding of race in the Australian Defence Forces and colonialism more generally.¹³

The Second World War has dominated the limited discussion of Papua New Guinean soldiers. Just as the physical legacy of the war can be seen

throughout PNG, in airstrips, overgrown fortifications and the layout of towns and roads, so the war also pervades Australia's perception of PNG. As Hank Nelson has noted, 'three and [a] half years of World War II may have been more important and more enduring than nearly one hundred years of administrative history', given the effects of the war on the landscape and the people.¹⁴ While PNG itself struggles to find a place for the war in its national memory, in Australia the war dominates perceptions of its former colony and closest northern neighbour.¹⁵ Views of 'native' troops varied both during the conflict and in the post-war literature, but although portrayed in the official histories as performing well, they have often been presented in racial terms.¹⁶

As Liz Reed and others have shown, since the Second World War popular memory in Australia has focused on the archetype of the 'native' carrier, popularly known as the 'fuzzy wuzzy angel', as exemplified in George Silk's famous photograph of a Papuan man leading a wounded Australian soldier near Buna on Christmas Day, 1942.¹⁷ Papua New Guineans are, through this image, accorded a place in Australia's perception of the war, yet it is a subordinate one. The common depiction of all carriers as willing and loyal participants simplifies their complex motivations and experiences, particularly given the widespread Australian practice of conscripting carriers and the fact that many Papua New Guineans laboured – willingly and unwillingly – for the Japanese.¹⁸ Moreover, the focus on carriers and labourers in historical study and commemoration of the war denies the less subordinate (although equally valuable) role played by thousands of Papua New Guineans as soldiers during the war and is perhaps one factor in the lack of recognition of Papua New Guinean soldiers after 1945.

Simplistic images of Papua New Guineans as loyal carriers and 'fuzzy wuzzy angels' have continued in recent scholarship. It is still possible to find scholars referring to Papua New Guineans during the Second World War as 'innocent and ignorant', while the term 'native' still abounds in description of both soldiers and carriers.¹⁹ At the same time, more scholarly work on the treatment of Papua New Guineans can depict Australians as universally callous and racist. Noah Riseman, for instance, argues that Australians were profligate with the lives of Papua New Guinean soldiers.²⁰ Papua New Guineans were undoubtedly treated as second-class soldiers, but the idea that Australian commanders wilfully threw away the lives of their soldiers is neither substantiated nor consistent with contemporary military practice. Ultimately, the description of Papua New Guineans as either innocent or cruelly exploited

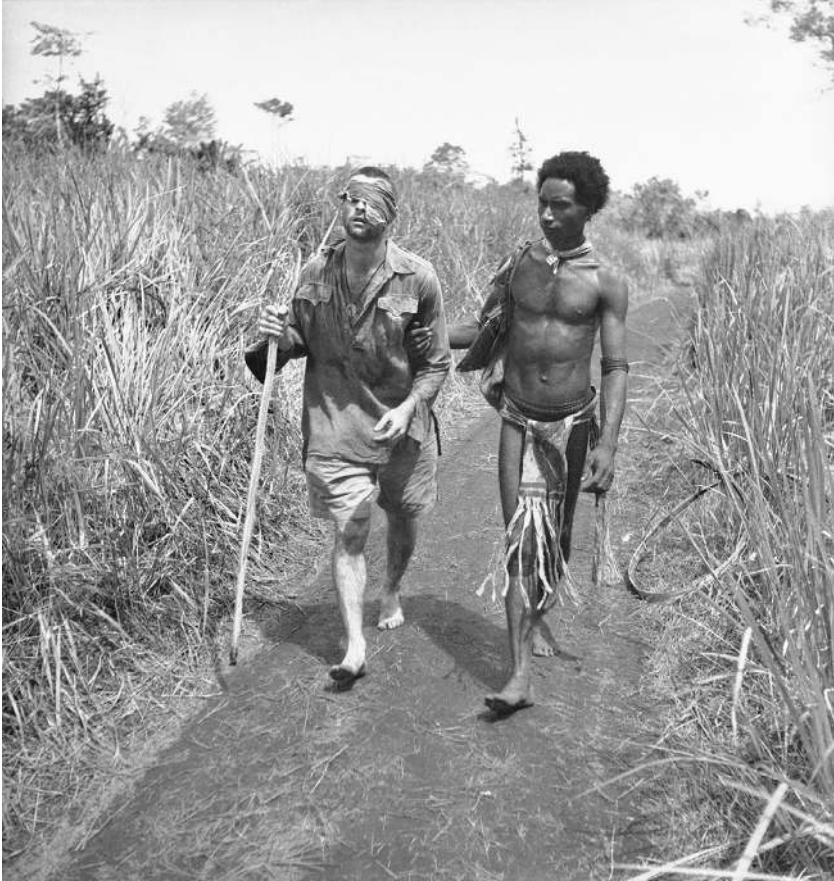


Figure 0.2 Raphael Oimbari leads Private George Whittington, Buna, 25 December 1942 (AWM014028)

serves to simplify the complex place of Papua New Guineans within the military.

Certainly, the Australian Army, particularly during the 1940s and 1950s, viewed Papua New Guineans as subordinate, adopting a paternalistic attitude to their training and leadership. However, during the post-war period on which this book focuses the place of Papua New Guineans shifts from subordinate to all but equal. Within this transformation there existed a variety of Australian Army attitudes, ranging from racist to more progressive than the civilian world. Importantly, Papua New Guinean soldiers themselves were not naïve colonial soldiers, instead engaging with

the Army in a range of ways, often proudly becoming part of an elite in PNG. Through these men – both Australian and Papua New Guinean – we have an unparalleled insight into the way in which the Australian Army adapted to shifts in race relations occurring around and within it. The omission of Papua New Guinean experiences from the history of race and Australia's defence is somewhat baffling.²¹ In the small Australian armed force of the 1950s, Papua New Guinean units would have loomed large in Australian soldiers' conception of race within their ranks. Without an examination of the Army in PNG, any discussion of race and Australia's defence during the Cold War period is inadequate.

'THAT ARMY AGAIN': THE MILITARY AND COLONIAL PNG

The development of the PIR into the PNGDF can be understood only in the context of Australian rule in PNG and the process of decolonisation from the second half of the 1960s. However, the literature on this subject suffers from a lack of scholarly and public interest in Australia and PNG's shared history.²² Academic study on PNG peaked immediately before and after independence as historians and political scientists examined the past and present in order to comment on the nascent country's future. As Stuart Doran points out, much of what has been written on Papua New Guinean independence has 'all too quickly moved to a narrative of what was or was not done' rather than examining the context of independence and the motivations of the various actors.²³ At the centre of critiques of Australian decolonisation are the interconnected questions of why Australia granted independence, and whether its approach took into account the needs and desires of Papua New Guineans. A common narrative is that Australia left too early, burdening PNG with national institutions ill-suited to its particular circumstances, of which the PNGDF is seen as a prime example.²⁴ Donald Denoon, in his analysis of the independence process, rightly argues that this narrow interpretation of decolonisation neglects the complex drivers of change in late 1960s PNG, denies the agency of Papua New Guineans, and assumes that 'continuing Australian rule would have resolved, rather than exacerbated, problems of governance'.²⁵

There is little doubt that Australia acted in its own interests when determining the shape and timing of independence. However, as Doran and Denoon suggest, there is a distinct difference between self-interested leadership and deliberate neglect. Nelson most clearly argues that self-interest

was always at the centre of Australia's decolonisation, but reminds us that given Australia's position as the dominant partner in the process, this should not be surprising. Concern over increasing tribal violence, protests in Bougainville and tensions along the Indonesian border were important but largely unarticulated reasons for the Australian withdrawal. Given these factors, Nelson speculates that 'in the event of violence the Australians would immediately become part of the problem' and that were Australia to remain, it would find itself in an unenviable situation: forced to act, but pilloried for doing so.²⁶ Australia's position on the international stage, as well as its own self-perception, also drove its withdrawal from the dwindling list of colonial powers.²⁷

Despite the importance of the Army as an expensive and powerful force in PNG, the military figures little in discussions of Papua New Guinean decolonisation. Whether the PNGDF was suited to an independent PNG, the degree to which independence influenced the Army's policies and the way in which the Army engaged in nation-building all remain largely unexamined. To some extent, the experiences of several scholars in PNG during the independence period shaped their writing on these issues. Ian Downs, author of the most comprehensive study of the Australian Administration to date, addresses the Australian military only in the context of independence, overlooking the Army's presence in PNG in the two decades preceding 1975.²⁸ For him, and the Administration at the time (in which he served), the PIR and PNG Command were simply part of a separate government department, out of the Administration's control and therefore not part of the history of the Australian presence in PNG until the transfer of powers at independence. During the period of Australian rule this separation was sometimes reinforced by interdepartmental antagonisms and jealousies, stemming in part from the Administration's resentment at the Army's role in the Territory.

Adding to the tensions between the Army and Administration was a civilian fear of the military's potential to cause instability, through mutiny or an overthrow of the government. The example of African coups played a large part in fuelling this concern, and from the beginning of the 'wave of decolonisation' during the 1960s, Africa loomed large, if somewhat vaguely, in discussions and planning for PNG. Coups in the Congo, Nigeria and elsewhere suggested powerfully that the militaries of newly decolonised nations had the opportunity, organisation and inclination to impose their will on the shaky structures of a fledgling state.²⁹ As a result, and despite the vast differences between Africa and PNG in culture and history, the threat of a coup shadowed the military

in the prelude to independence. Similarly, after 1975 the possibility of the PNGDF mounting or supporting a coup and its general deterioration in discipline and capability dominated scholarly discussion of the force.³⁰ Given that PNG's independence occurred more than a decade later than that of many other colonised nations, the development of the PIR into the PNGDF occurred against the backdrop of the troubled experiences of these new states, and in particular a multitude of military-led coups. Nevertheless, as several scholars have pointed out, there are limitations to the comparison of PNG with Africa, not least the nature of Australian colonialism, which was tightly controlled from the metropole, and the unique culture and diversity of Papua New Guineans.³¹

The possibility of a coup also shaped the construction of the PNGDF before independence. The Australian Army engaged in these debates, largely but not entirely within government channels, and devoted considerable resources to addressing concerns about instability in the ranks. However, recent studies have failed to interrogate why the coup narrative had such force, particularly around independence. In this way, Marcus Mietzner and Nicholas Farrelly ask why no coup occurred despite a 'number of observers' predicting in the 1970s that PNG would likely become dominated by the military.³² Privileging such predictions, this view neglects the widespread civilian fear of 'arming the natives' during Australian rule, the poor relationship between PNG Command and the Administration and the broader context of anti-Vietnam War feeling at the time of independence. Ultimately, much of the scholarship on the Army's place within Australian rule in PNG and the country's independence relies too heavily on contemporary studies, which either neglect the military or reflect the tensions of the time.

THE AFRICAN EXAMPLE

Although a comparison between the Australian Army in PNG and other colonial armies is beyond the scope of this book, the wealth of literature on the subject helps illuminate the PNG case. In particular the work of scholars on such issues as 'martial race' theory, loyalty of indigenous people to the colonial power, exploitation of military minorities and cross-cultural relationships by scholars of colonial militaries informs my study. As Timothy Stapleton points out, although colonial soldiers have often been presented as 'naïve fools mesmerized by Europeans or optimistic mercenaries', the complex nature of indigenous soldiers' engagement with the colonial state has been acknowledged by a number of historians.³³