The War in Papua – The Executions at Higaturu

By John Fowke

Some 67 years ago, the Japanese nation - the first Asian nation to industrialize and to build a modern mechanized military capability, believing in its own superiority and in its destiny to dominate, rule and gain access to all the raw-material resources it wanted - conceived of a vast, militaristic, neo-colonial operation which it named 'The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere'.

The aim was to invade and take over all of South East Asia, as well as the islands and Australian continent that lay to the south. The Japanese had already invaded and taken possession of the Korean Peninsula and had also conquered and possessed the Manchurian provinces of mainland China. They believed, as they advanced into SE Asia from these bases, that any threat from America, at the time neutral in the European conflict begun by Hitler's Nazi Germany, would be minimized if they attacked and sank the US Pacific Fleet, normally at anchor at its huge base at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii.

Thus 'The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere' campaign was launched in a dawn attack upon Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. It was a surprise attack, and it was devastating.

Eight weeks later, in January 1942, a Japanese invasion of what is now Papua New Guinea commenced and soon New Britain, New Ireland, Manus and parts of the mainland had been occupied. On 21 July, Anglican missionaries near the Government station of Buna were surprised to see very large ships approaching the coast. Thus began the invasion of what was then the Northern Division of the Territory of Papua, with the aim to press through to Port Moresby. From here air and sea attacks upon Australia would be launched with ease.

Australia's reaction was one of panic. As a loyal member of the British Empire, Australia had committed almost all its military resources to fight with the British and their allies in North Africa, Europe and the defence of Singapore. In Australia there remained, at best, a 'Dad's Army' of elderly and unfit men whose service in the First World War was considered experience enough to allow them to man the coastal defences.

The plan of action was for civilian populations of Queensland and the Northern Territory to withdraw to the south to a position below what planners called 'The Brisbane Line', drawn across the continent from east to west. From here a defensive land battle would be undertaken. Lands to the north, and the island territories governed by Australia were too big and too difficult to man and supply, let alone to defend.

This fallback position behind the Brisbane Line was the place the opposing forces would engage, if and when the Japanese approached northern Australia.

Unfortunately for the Japanese, but most fortunately for the rest of us - Papua New Guineans and Australians alike - the Americans, impelled by the unheralded and massive attack at Pearl Harbour, came into the war with a huge impact. The US Pacific Command was created, and in due deference to his experience and to the huge resources at his command, the American General Douglas MacArthur was given command of all of Australia's forces at home and in the Pacific. MacArthur immediately dismantled the 'Brisbane Line' preparations and requested the Prime Minister of Australia to assemble a military force for the defence of Port Moresby, correctly anticipating Japan's plans.

The force dispatched to defend Port Moresby was almost entirely composed of young and unwilling conscripts to the Australian Militia, which was, by law, prevented from operating outside Australia. Relying upon Papua's status as an Australian-protected Territory as his justification, the Prime Minister authorized the despatch of this force.

Older soldiers named these youths 'The Chocolate Soldiers', predicting that they would melt once they faced the heat and discomforts of service in Papua. Their officers were, for the most part, men who had been judged as too old or otherwise unfit for service in other theatres of war. On arrival at Port Moresby, the Chocolate Soldiers showed their resentment by disobeying orders and by systematically looting and vandalizing the stores, warehouses and private residences of the town. Even churches were despoiled, as recounted to this writer by the daughter of the then Anglican Rector of Port Moresby, Reverend Mathews.

Despite the complaints of the remaining white residents of Port Moresby, little was done by their largely ineffectual officers to restrain these youths in uniform. At the same time, civilian officers of the Papuan Administration were sent on patrol in all the coastal districts with instructions to conscript all healthy males within a certain age band for service with the Australian Army as carriers and labourers. This was done; and men from the West, from the Gulf, from all parts of Central and Milne Bay and Kokoda in the Northern Division (now Oro Province) were brought to Port Moresby. Here they faced a frightening, dangerous and low-paid existence for an unknown period.

In the beginning, naturally, there were many desertions. Then, with the landing of the Japanese invading force at Buna, matters began to change. An advance party of experienced men of Australia's Seventh Division, called back from service with the British forces, prepared for movement to Port Moresby soon after their arrival in Australia.

These men together with the young militiamen, a great many of whom were teenagers, and referred to contemptuously as 'Chockos', were deployed to the Sogeri Plateau and beyond to meet the Japanese advance. Marching with them as carriers and stretcher bearers were the Papuan conscripts who would become known as the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels'. These two groups had a lot in common, being for the most part young, bewildered, badly paid, and apprehensive of the immediate future. In the extreme adversity in which they found themselves these two groups of men formed a bond of a kind, which neither side had ever known or expected to be a part of.

The young Australians initially viewed the Papuans, with whom they could not converse, as strange and unpredictable savages, whilst the Papuans began to recognize that they had much in common with the young white men, a race they had been accustomed to view with a degree of awe and even fear; a race with which they had never imagined that they would share a cigarette, let alone a cup of tea or a hardman biscuit. This, however, was what happened.

From shaky beginnings both groups steadied and became resolved to carry the fight forward to the Japanese, buoyed by growing comradeship and admiration for each other, a regard forged in the raging crucible of extreme danger, death and discomfort. Ultimately, victory was achieved through this spirit of oneness and the bravery that grew with it. This is the true story of the Chockos and the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels and the campaign they fought together.

The Australian soldiers were paid six shillings a day, the equivalent today of roughly $4 a fortnight, with rations, shorts, shirts and boots.. The Angels were paid the equivalent of 65 cents a fortnight plus rations, a *rami* and a leather belt. All the men were provided with a waterproof cape, blankets and a mosquito nets. A stick of tobacco with newspaper cost roughly 5 toea [two cents] in today's money at the labourers' canteen in Port Moresby. A box of matches was 1 toea.

In recent years it has been stated that the PNG campaigns fought by the Allies and their Papuan and New Guinean fellow soldiers were something which had nothing to do with the people of this country. It has been intimated that the local people who were caught up in any way with the fighting were unfortunate pawns in a matter that had nothing to do with them.

This theory is incorrect, as we have seen. Papua New Guinea was an object of the Japanese desire for conquest, domination and exploitation just as much as Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma, and India. Such expressions of opinion constitute an insult to the thousands of Papuans and New Guineans who fought and died to make their native land safe from the occupation of a merciless

and brutal foe. This is to say nothing of the more than 9,000 Australian servicemen who lie buried in war cemeteries and in as yet undiscovered graves throughout Papua New Guinea. All, brown and white alike, fought and died so together we could remain free of the rule of the Japanese Empire.

In my youth, among many men who served in the war with distinction, I knew the Royal Papua and New Guinea Constabulary's [RPNGC] Sergeant Segera of Daru, Sergeant Sahanopa of Oro, ex-Sergeant- Major Katui MM, late of the Papuan Infantry Battalion [PIB], from the Goaribari tribe of the Gulf, and ex-Sergeant Major Samai of the Kairi tribe, upstream from Kikori, also a non-commissioned officer of the PIB. All served in the Kokoda-Popondetta-Buna-Gona-Sanananda campaigns, and all with distinction. All were either involved or well acquainted with the now newly controversial executions at Higaturu and elsewhere. All had many stories to tell, including those of the executions - and had a wide audience for these.

Of them all, Katui's picture stays clearly in my mind today, some fifty years later. Katui, even when approaching old age was a particularly impressive figure of a man, standing some six feet in height, broad-shouldered and big-boned without being heavy; a man with the unmistakable look of a warrior. Katui, who worked together with Tom Grahamslaw, of whom more later, was renowned for his practice, when encamped within known distance of a Japanese outpost, of going out at night clad only in the skimpy garment known as *sihi*, and equipped only with a large, sharp sheath-knife of the type in those days issued to village policemen.

Katui would quietly work his way close to the Japanese camp in the early hours of the morning. With patience and skill this big man would inch forward quietly, slowly, ever closer to the cold and sleepy Japanese sentry. Then suddenly and in silence, he would cover the man's mouth, slit his throat, cut his ears off and withdraw. Katui's grisly collection of dried Japanese ears became a legend throughout the Allied forces in the country, and in his own Kikori district he was regarded with awe and respect until the day of his passing.

These men, and many others like them, told their stories to a wide audience, both brown and white. It is true that the news of the hangings at Higaturu and elsewhere were not released by the Army to the news media during the war, being seen as a negative in a time when high morale amongst the civilian populace was very important.

The news services published a largely positive picture of the progress of the Kokoda-Gona-Buna campaign in the Australian media, emphasizing the positive part played by local enlisted servicemen, policemen, and the conscripted Angels. However, the fact that the executions and the crimes

that led to them were so widely known and talked about, ensured that they remained no secret. All the Allied service personnel who were present in Papua during the war years knew about these events. And most Australians who later lived and worked together with the men of the RPNGC and the PIB in Papua in the decades after the war also became familiar with this part of the war's history.

All the crimes committed by Papuans against their own people, foreign civilians and Allied servicemen at various locations, and the executions which followed, are the subject of a number of published works which have long been available to anyone with interest enough to seek them.

All this is quite contrary to the sensational allegations of cover-up made in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's recent feature, presented within its Foreign Correspondent program. The Port Moresby-based ABC reporter is a relative newcomer to PNG and, although he may have been misinformed, he has shown himself at best to be gullible. An apology for the insult and the misinformation generated is warranted.

Not only have the Allied servicemen and the white and Papuan mission personnel who were tortured and murdered been insulted, but so have the majority of the population of today's Oro Province. Their forbears, like the famous Raphael Oimbari of Popondetta who lives to tell the tale, shouldered the burden and fought hard for their birthright, their freedom and their land. These people were also in many cases murdered, raped and kidnapped by the gangs of Papuan men who became the spies and facilitators of the Japanese, and who were hanged for their crimes.

Among the Australians who worked as government officers in pre-war Papua, and who later served in the Army's on-the-ground village liaison and logistics unit, ANGAU, was Thomas Grahamslaw. Grahamslaw later became Chief Collector of Customs in pre-independence PNG. He retired late in the sixties. In 1971, aged 70, he wrote a personal memoir detailing his experiences as an ANGAU officer in the Moresby-Milne Bay-Buna-Gona-Popondetta areas in 1942-43. The memoir was published in 1971 in the then-widely-read Australian magazine, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, and it has been quoted from and referred to many times since.

Tom Grahamslaw, aided by then Sergeant Katui, PIB, among others, was the officer who oversaw the execution of those who were hanged at Higaturu in 1943.

After the respective hearings and sentencing, Grahamslaw together with the late Claude Champion and with David Marsh, today still hale and hearty, a well-remembered District Commissioner of Central Province, appealed to the General Command for clemency for the condemned men. These three Australians whose whole lives and interest were bound up with Papua and its destiny, recommended that the capital penalty be reduced to one of life imprisonment. Their advice was considered but

rejected by the Commanding Officer in Port Moresby, Lieutenant General Edmund Herring, who ordered that the executions be carried out immediately, at Higaturu. Later in life, Herring became Chief Justice of Victoria.

Following the arrival at Higaturu of the Warrants for Execution, Grahamslaw arranged for and oversaw the grisly and sad events. Claude Champion oversaw the construction of the gallows. In his memoir Grahamslaw gives an exhaustive account of the events leading up to the arrests, convictions and the executions under prevailing laws of the Papuan offenders, as well as the executions.

Among the many books by individuals, as well as Army unit histories covering these happenings, along with the entire campaign, that written by acclaimed Australian journalist Timothy Hall '*New Guinea 1942-44'*, published by Methuen in 1981 stands out. This is not only because it tells the story of the Papuan campaigns very well but because it is well-researched and quotes its sources in a comprehensive bibliography. Here reference is made to many files accessed at the Australian Archives and the Australian War Memorial. These files are available for perusal by anyone with sufficient interest to do so, and they contain reports relevant to the subversive activities, conspiracies and murders carried out by a small minority of the native population of the relevant districts. A simple Google search provides references to this data.

In fact an extract from the collection of ANGAU diaries held at the Australian War Memorial, being a page from the reports of Captain JS Beharall, sometime colonial Magistrate, co-opted to serve in ANGAU, is in this writer's possession. This gives an intimate record of the exhumation of the bodies of murdered Anglican missionaries, of several American servicemen, of an Australian officer of the Papuan Infantry Batallion and of several local Papuans including the Anglican teacher Lucian, who, whilst able to run away, stuck with the white missionaries to try to dissuade their Papuan captors from handing them over to the Japanese.

The leader of the treasonous villagers was one Embogi, the first of the men to be hanged later at Higaturu. Lucien was murdered and his body thrown into Gambureta Creek, from which it was later removed, placed in a coffin and properly buried at Sangara by Beharall's group.

The well-known Australian academic, Hank Nelson, has written no less than three books in which these events are treated. One of Nelson's books was published by the ABC. Nelson remains easily contactable in Australia, being an erudite source of information on many matters of history in PNG, and he was contacted by the compilers of Foreign Correspondent. Nelson's contribution to the program was set aside, presumably because it stood in complete contradiction to the desired conspiracy theme.

More recently, Eric Johns, an Australian who worked in PNG for many years as a teacher has written a multi-volume textbook, a history of PNG for schoolchildren. This work is entitled '*PNG History Through Stories'* and was published some years ago. In Volume One, on page 64, the story of the executions begins. It is entitled 'Hangings at Higaturu' and it provides a thorough and balanced overview of these events, a sympathetic account that gives expression to the confusion which existed in many districts when the war first began. Here again, good exposure has been given to the story because this book was serialized in the Papua New Guinea *Post-Courier's* 'Weekend Extra' in 2004. Thus it reached a wide audience within PNG, although not, it appears, the informants upon whom the ABC relied.

The torture and murder of a number of Australian, English and Papuan Anglican missionaries by Japanese aided, and in some cases physically assisted, by Papuan collaborators in and around Buna, Gona and Popondetta is commemorated in the well-known Martyrs Memorial High School, not far from Popondetta. In annual services in Anglican churches both in PNG and in Australia, the murders of the missionaries and their helpers is commemorated. As well, the deaths by summary execution, often preceded by torture, of Allied and Papuan servicemen and policemen captured by local villagers and handed over to the Japanese, are also commemorated both in monuments and in the histories of the campaign.

The summary and ghastly executions by the sword of the young Australian mission workers, Mavis Parkinson and May Hayman, were the consequence of prior abuse by their captors. A cover up. Even rank-and-file Japanese soldiers had some knowledge of the rules of war and the consequences that might follow where rape and torture of civilians were discovered. The events were observed by a loyal Papuan villager who remained hidden for some time near the shed in which the two women were held captive, and who subsequently gave evidence at an inquiry into their fate.

Several other Anglican missionaries as well as a larger number of Allied servicemen suffered similar fates, having, like Parkinson and Hayman, been beguiled and then put in the hands of Japanese by Papuan men pretending to be supportive or acting as decoys. One of the main groups of treasonous village men was that led by Embogi, who, as a Japanese-appointed 'Captain', armed a number of his cohorts with rifles. This group was responsible for the capture and handing over of several Allied servicemen, and Embogi was physically involved in the subsequent killing of one of these.

Embogi's group was also responsible for armed raids upon villages in the Managalase area, where houses were burned, women raped, and a number of people tied up and taken away.

Whilst a number of ordinary villagers supported the Japanese tacitly or actively when ordered to do so, understandably in the circumstances, those who were executed were pre-war village officials and leaders who, tempted by offers of payment and the use of rifles, became facilitators and spies of the Japanese. These men, so-called 'Captains' enjoyed considerable power over their fellows in the villages, and exercised it to their own advantage in many ways. Their actions, widely resented, ultimately led to their conviction upon a range of charges supported by numbers of witnesses from the villages, men who had learned to despise and to hate them.

With the retreat of the Japanese, Embogi was placed in some minor supervisory capacity with the Army labour-line at Soputa. Initially Embogi ingratiated himself with Grahamslaw who found him likeable and helpful until, inevitably, the truth of his treasonous and murderous deeds came out.

The executions took place before a large assembly of villagers, who, summoned by Grahamslaw, began to assemble the day before the event. At the appointed time, Grahamslaw addressed the crowd, speaking in the Motu lingua franca he knew, also using the services of a local interpreter who repeated what was said in the local language.

As Grahamslaw recalled, it was a grim experience. Each man was given the chance to speak, and each did so. Grahamslaw recalled that Embogi's speech had a profound effect on all present. He had a sonorous voice and was obviously a gifted orator. He stated that he had done wrong, and that he was fully conscious of this. He said that he was an uneducated man, and had not known better. He stated that the punishment he was about to receive was just, and urged his people to heed the Government and to obey its laws.

Grahamslaw wrote as follows; "I lay awake most of that night listening to the drums beating and the wailing of the mourners in the village adjacent to Higaturu, and I relived the events of the day. I had seen death in various forms during the preceding 12 months, but nothing affected me as deeply as the hangings of Embogi and his fellow murderers."

None of the people concerned in the hangings of Papuan and Japanese war criminals escaped unscathed. Tom Grahamslaw's memoirs show that he carried an ongoing sense of sadness at the recollection of these events and the killings and betrayals by trusted men that preceded them. The Port Moresby-born Claude Champion, scion of a family famous in the annals of Papuan administration and exploration, and present with Grahamslaw at Higaturu, recalled later in life that the executions were distressing in the extreme; impossible to forget.

As a young man in the then Territory in the fifties I knew the late Bill Gordon, again a scion of an old Port Moresby-based Australian family, for whom the modern-day suburb Gordon's Estate is named. Bill was the hangman in all but a few of the Northern Division executions, although not in case of the first five executions at Higaturu. An officer of the Royal Papuan Constabulary sent from Port Moresby for the purpose officiated here. Bill Gordon, an alcoholic whose later life was governed by his addiction, once said in his cups "I don't care about the Japs. I hung lots of them, too. But those natives, bad bastards and all that they were, I still see 'em. Still see 'em."

It was not simply that Australian laws or prevailing martial law as it existed in Papua [civil government was extinguished by decree in Papua on 14 February 1942] had been broken. Traditional Papuan custom and relationships, and relationships established over many decades with the Anglican Church, had also been ridden over roughshod by those who had conspired with and acted with the invading Japanese.

The situation was a very complex one within a complex and costly period in the history both of Papua and of Australia. All those who were there on the ground and continued to fulfill their duty to the end handled it in a way that deserves the greatest of approbation from us all. To them and to the Americans we all owe our present-day freedom and our participatory democracy.