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Introduction

On 7 August 2011, the mid-morning sun rising over the city of Honiara promised another hot but fine day. This was no ordinary day in the capital of Solomon Islands.¹ Over Commonwealth Street, in the heart of the city, loomed a strange, 4-metre-tall object covered by a silky grey fabric, with blooming tropical flowers around its base, which seemed to have appeared overnight. On one side of the object was a podium and two large white tents with chairs arranged facing the entrance to the street, a short but wide and busy thoroughfare leading from the main road through the city, past office buildings to the bustling wharf area. At the entrance, a pair of policemen in blue uniforms directed traffic and motioned invited dignitaries towards the tents; the curious people of Honiara, young and old, assembled along the street wondering what could be hidden under the grey shroud.

Echoing in the near distance as the last guests took their seats, a police siren announced the arrival of the governor general. The master of ceremonies spoke into a microphone, ‘Please rise for the arrival of the governor’, and everyone stood up as a police band played the national anthem. Despite the mid-morning tropical heat, the crowd beyond the VIP tents stood quietly in the sun as the official ceremony commenced. After a series of speeches and wreath laying, the speaker again summoned everyone to rise as the governor general, Frank Kabui, stood up to remove the grey fabric,

¹ Contrary to popular usage, the official name of the country is ‘Solomon Islands’, not ‘The Solomon Islands’.

and the long-awaited object was unveiled (Figure 1). The curiosity of the crowd spilled over as locals, expatriates and journalists all surged forward to get a glimpse.²



Figure 1: Unveiling of the Pride of Our Nation monument, 7 August 2011

Source: Photo by Anna Kwai.

² Anna Kwai, personal observation, 7 August 2011.

It was a new monument, built to recognise local contributions to the Allied Solomon Islands Campaign during World War II. Designed and sculpted by local artist Frank Haikiu, the monument consists of a concrete sculpture of three Solomon Islander scouts surrounding a European coastwatcher facing seaward on a 2-metre-high plinth. On the seaward side of the plinth, the famous words of wartime United States Navy Admiral William ‘Bull’ Halsey are inscribed: ‘The Coastwatchers saved Guadalcanal and Guadalcanal saved the Pacific’. On the opposite side are the lesser known words of the Australian coastwatcher John Keenan: ‘If it wasn’t for local help I don’t know what we could’ve done, we wouldn’t have lasted 10 minutes’.

This book will examine the involvement of indigenous islanders in the Solomon Islands Campaign of World War II. It will show that the dominant narratives of the participation of islanders in the war are often rendered as simplistic representations of local wartime ‘loyalty’ to the Allied forces, and especially to the Solomon Islands’ British colonial masters. But subjecting the efforts of islanders to a more detailed analysis reveals a more complex scenario — one that takes into account the varied nature of colonial influence on indigenous subjects and the effects the war had on postwar and contemporary Solomon Islands society. Understanding the complexities of islander wartime participation is important for balancing received representations of the indigenous war experience. As accounts of the war begin to find their way into the nation’s school curriculums, more indigenous perspectives are needed to enable a comprehensive understanding of the war and its impacts on the development of the nation.

Historical background

The Solomons group comprises over 900 islands, scattered over an area of approximately 28,000 square kilometres in the South Pacific, east of Papua New Guinea and north-east of Australia, roughly aligned into two parallel island chains running north-west to south-east (Figure 2). The country has a population of around 500,000 people: a predominantly Melanesian population occupies the larger islands, while the smaller islands of Rennell and Bellona in the south and Ontong Java and Sikaiana in the north-east are inhabited by Polynesians (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat n.d.). More than 80 different languages are spoken by the peoples of the Solomons, making it one of the Pacific’s most diverse countries in terms of language and ethnicity.

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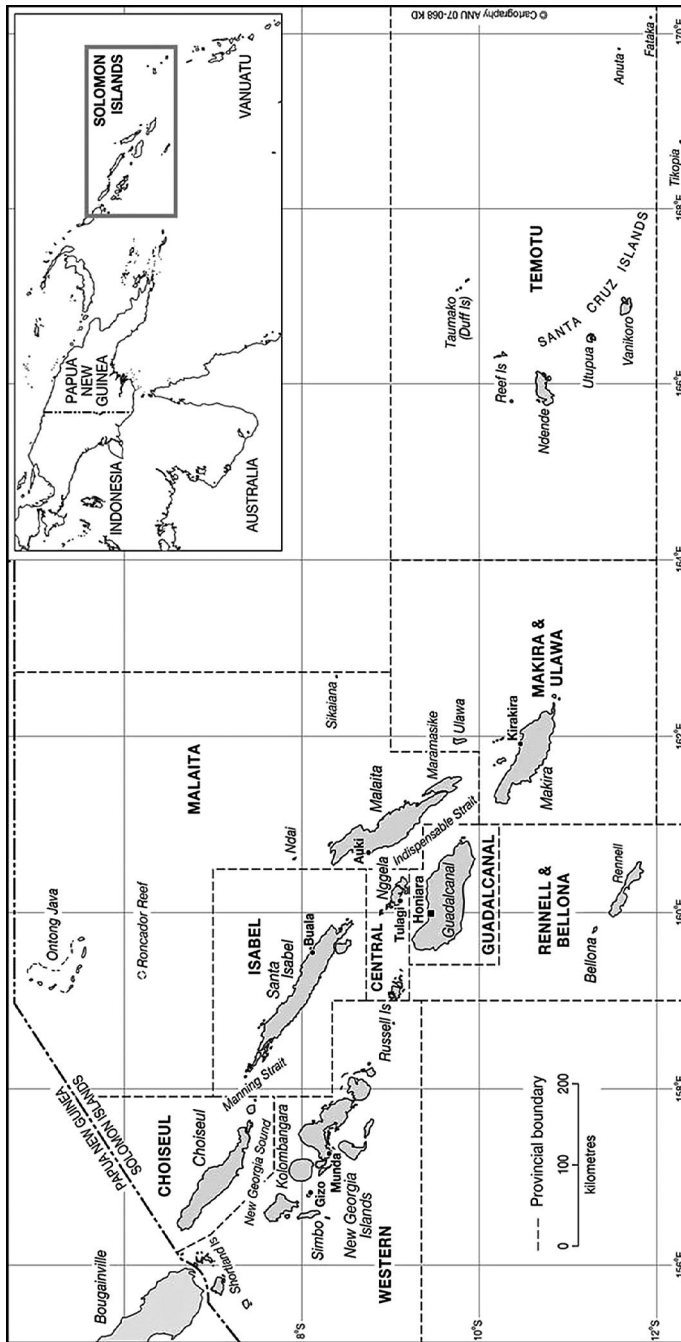


Figure 2: Map of Solomon Islands

Source: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

Indigenous peoples settled the large islands of the Solomons archipelago well before European exploration. Settlement on these remote islands occurred in the form of migration believed to be from Southeast Asia about 30,000 years ago (Matisoo-Smith et al. 1998). By the time the first European explorer, Álvaro de Mendaña y Neira, reached the Solomons in 1568, the large islands of the archipelago were well colonised by indigenous peoples. When Mendaña and his crew landed on the island he named Guadalcanal, he found alluvial gold. This led him to believe the island must have been where the biblical King Solomon's fabled mines were located; hence he named the group *Islas Salomon*, or 'Islands of Solomon'. Following a gap of around 200 years, a number of explorers, traders, whalers and missionaries visited the Solomons group. By the early 1800s, the local inhabitants were accustomed to the arrival of foreigners on their shores (Green 1976). By 1874, due to the growing need for labourers to work on large plantations in Queensland, Fiji and Samoa, islanders were forcibly recruited on a large scale in what became known as 'blackbirding'. This illegal recruitment continued to escalate throughout the Solomons and neighbouring islands, such as Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. The British declared a protectorate over the Solomons in 1893 to put an end to this illegal labour trade (Belshaw 1950). An administrative centre was established at Tulagi on Gela Island in the Nggela (Florida) Islands four years later, and the English naturalist and Pacific adventurer Charles Morris Woodford became the first resident commissioner of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Under the influence of the colonial administration, the indigenous inhabitants of the islands were exposed to Western education, Christianity, new technologies and a filtered glimpse of the world beyond their shores. The common practice of tribal warfare was suppressed throughout the islands; by the early 1940s, such tribal conflict was rare. For nearly half a century, the Solomon Island group was a fairly neglected outpost of the colonial empire, but things were about to change.

On 7 December 1941, the Japanese Empire made its historic attack on the American fleet on Pearl Harbor, and on other American, British and Dutch possessions throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific. These attacks shook the protectorate as much as they did the United States and its Allies. On 22 January 1942, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate experienced the shock of modern war as a Japanese plane dropped the first bomb on Gavutu in the Nggela (Florida) Islands. Japanese forces occupied Rabaul in the neighbouring Australian territory of New Guinea the following day.

Japanese troops pressed forward into the protectorate on 3 May 1942, but they arrived in Tulagi to find a ghost town; the colonial administration had relocated to Auki on Malaita, and nearly all European civilians had been evacuated to Australia. Most Europeans who chose to remain were enlisted with the Royal Australian Navy's coastwatching network and went into hiding in the jungles of Guadalcanal and other islands. Assisted by islanders, they spied and reported on Japanese activities.

The Japanese were unopposed in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate for over three months, during which time they constructed an airfield on Guadalcanal (COI 1946: 17). The news of the airfield was not welcomed by United States military intelligence. Its completion would threaten United States supply and communication lines to its Allies in the Pacific, especially Australia. On 7 August 1942, 11,000 men of the United States First Marine Division landed on Guadalcanal and Tulagi; their objective was to capture the airfield. This landing marked the beginning of the Solomon Islands Campaign: a campaign that lasted for over a year and resulted in the deaths of 23,800 Japanese and 1,600 United States soldiers (Miller 1995: 350).³ In his 1995 book, *Pacific Turning Point*, historian Charles Koburger argues that the Solomons Campaign was, in fact, the turning point in the Pacific War and not the Battle of Midway as stated in most general histories of the Pacific War (Koburger 1995: 119). For Solomon Islanders, the campaign marked a new era in their history and continues to influence social, political and economic landscapes in the country today.

More than 50 years after World War II, the country underwent another major disruption: an outbreak of open conflict between the people of Guadalcanal and Malaita. Among other factors that triggered 'the tensions' were issues of ethnicity and postwar economic centralisation on Guadalcanal as a result of the war. Although the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) eventually ended the turmoil, the nation suffered drastically in terms of loss of national identity and pride.⁴ In 2009, as part of a national restoration process, the Solomon

3 These figures do not include those on both sides who lost their lives at sea.

4 RAMSI was a joint effort by Pacific island countries led by Australian and New Zealand military and police forces. It was the result of Australia's response to the Solomon Islands Government's call for help to end hostilities between members of the Malaita Eagle Force and the Ititabu Freedom Movement on Guadalcanal. RAMSI initiated its program in Solomon Islands in 2003, four years after the crisis began. RAMSI's efforts resulted in the successful restoration of peace throughout the country. In June 2013, RAMSI celebrated its 10th anniversary in Solomon Islands and announced its transition out of the country.

Scouts and Coastwatchers Trust Board was founded.⁵ The project involved the construction of a memorial honouring islander efforts in World War II, with the intent of promoting national identity and pride, but also serving as an educational tool to transmit knowledge of islander participation in the war to younger generations of Solomon Islanders. Coordinated by its founder, Bruce Saunders, an expatriate Australian businessman, the project resulted in the erection of the sculpture memorialising the scouts and coastwatchers described above, an honour roll and a plaque to the Royal Australian Navy. Taken together, these individual installations carry the title of the ‘Pride of Our Nation’ monument.⁶

In Australia, similar sentiments promoting a national identity and historical consciousness have become the subject of commemorative initiatives such as ‘Australia Remembers 1945–1995’, which involved the construction of monuments and nationwide commemorative events. Marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Australia Remembers hoped to achieve a ‘uniquely Australian’ understanding of the war and bolster national identity (Con Sciacca quoted in Liz Reed 1999: 159). Motivated partly by Australian efforts towards nation building through war commemoration, and seeing the need for rebuilding national identity in the aftermath of the upheavals in Solomon Islands, Saunders expressed in a press conference how he hoped the Pride of Our Nation monument would become the ‘Solomon Islands version of the Anzac legend and Remembrance Day in Australia and New Zealand’.⁷ Although the Pride of Our Nation monument has impressed both the national and international communities, only time will tell how well it will achieve the objective of promoting national pride and identity among the people of Solomon Islands.

5 When the Board of Trustees was founded, it was given the name ‘Guadalcanal War Memorial Project’ under the Solomon Islands Government Charitable Act. In 2014, after much consideration, the board agreed to change the name of the organisation to ‘Solomon Scouts and Coastwatchers Trust’ to be more reflective of the history the organisation is promoting, which is a unifying Solomon Islands history of the war.

6 Although these individual installations were built and dedicated separately, they are now regarded as one monument.

7 Bruce Saunders, Solomon Scouts and Coastwatchers Trust press conference, 5 March 2010, Honiara. An audio of the press conference is in the author’s possession. It is also available at the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation library, Honiara.

Previous writings on the Solomon Islands Campaign

The history of World War II in Solomon Islands has been studied and documented in many aspects.⁸ The participation of islanders was administered by coastwatchers who were enlisted by the Royal Australian Navy's coastwatching network, and the islanders' stories were often mentioned in passing when the exploits of coastwatchers were recounted in published histories. One account that provides a detailed narration of the work of coastwatchers comes from the commander of the coastwatching network, Lieutenant Eric Feldt. In his book *The Coastwatchers* (1991), Feldt reveals how the coastwatchers operated from their outposts in enemy-occupied territory. As commander of the network, Feldt knew the significance of the work his men did behind enemy lines and argued that 'without them [the coastwatchers] the course of the war in the Pacific would have been drastically changed' (Feldt 1991: 1). Yet, to a coastwatcher who did the actual job of 'hide and seek' behind enemy lines, their fate depended on their knowledge of the tropical island environment and their relationship with the indigenous population. In his book *Fire over the Islands* (1970), Dick Horton provides a concise description of his coastwatching activities but also describes and acknowledges the efforts of his indigenous companions. In the final chapter, Horton interprets islanders' attitudes towards the Japanese and credits their efforts, stating 'without the Islanders neither the Coastwatchers nor the armed forces would have been able to achieve so much or so easily ... their contribution to the defeat of the Japanese invaders cannot be measured in material terms alone' (Horton 1970: 247). This sentiment appears repeatedly in several memoirs, diaries and histories published by coastwatchers after the

8 One of the earliest and most prominent records of the war was Richard Tregaskis's *Guadalcanal Diary*. Published in 1943 while the war was still raging, Tregaskis's diary provides an insight into the United States Marines' journey to the Solomons. A journalist by profession, Tregaskis began his war diary on 26 July 1942 on board a transport ship making its way to Guadalcanal. His diary gives an account of the beginning of combat and the privations endured by Allied troops on Guadalcanal until 26 September 1942, when Tregaskis left the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. A similar personal narrative is Robert Leckie's *Helmet for My Pillow*, first published in 1957. Like Tregaskis, Leckie provides an insight into the epic struggles faced by the United States Marines in the protectorate. These two accounts each resulted in the production of films: *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943 — one of the first feature films made about the Pacific War) and *The Thin Red Line* (1998), as well as the HBO miniseries *The Pacific* (2010). Beyond these, the battle for the Solomons has attracted historians and other writers who have extensively documented individual battles fought in the islands. Some of the general war histories (to name only a few) include those by Brian Altobello (2000), Charles Koburger (1995), Herbert Laing Merillat (2010) and John Prados (2013).

war. In his published diary, *Alone on Guadalcanal* (1998), district officer Martin Clemens presents his experiences as a coastwatcher on Guadalcanal during the Japanese occupation. His memoir gives us a glimpse of the life of a district officer and coastwatcher, but also allows us to see just how completely his fate was in the hands of his indigenous comrades.

Like those of Feldt, Horton and Clemens, Walter Lord's book *Lonely Vigil* (1977) also narrates the story of coastwatchers and their role during the campaign. Although Lord was not a participant, his work provides much detail of the operations of coastwatchers behind enemy lines. Despite focusing on the fate of coastwatchers, Lord also acknowledges islanders' part in the network. A series of coastwatchers' reports from the northern Solomons were compiled in A.B. Feuer's 1992 edited book, *Coastwatching in WWII: Operations against the Japanese on the Solomon Islands, 1941–43*, providing an insight into coastwatching operations on Buka and Bougainville islands in the Australian-mandated Territory of New Guinea. Although these islands are geographically part of the Solomons group, their inhabitants were administered by Australia. For the purpose of this book, I focus on indigenous inhabitants of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate.

A more general account of the campaign is Stanley Jersey's *Hell's Islands: The Untold Story of Guadalcanal* (2008). Jersey's work provides a balanced analysis of both American and Japanese developments in the protectorate. Chronological in its structure, *Hell's Islands* begins with the story of the few Australians of the Royal Australian Air Force in the protectorate and moves through to the evacuation of Europeans from the protectorate, the United States Marine Corps' landing on Guadalcanal and subsequent events of the campaign. Like other accounts from a military perspective, Jersey's work mentions islanders only in passing and as secondary to coastwatching efforts. Similar accounts that pay attention to islanders, if only in passing, include James Michener's *Return to Paradise* (1951). In a chapter of 14 pages titled 'Guadalcanal', Michener briefly described the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, but focused more on the island of Guadalcanal and the difficulties of the environment as experienced by Allied troops. Michener, however, compared the indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea to islanders of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and stated that the 'fidelity of Solomon Islanders is unbelievable' (Michener 1951: 185). Such comments have contributed to a somewhat simplistic image of the responses of islanders to the challenges of the war.

The story of the coastwatchers is indeed one of courage, never ceasing to attract an audience despite the passing of time. Patrick Lindsay retold the story of the coastwatchers in his popular history *The Coast Watchers: The Men Behind Enemy Lines Who Saved the Pacific* (2010). Lindsay's work emphasises the importance of the contributions of these few men to the Allied war effort in the Solomons and to ultimate victory in the Pacific.⁹ Mike Butcher presents a comprehensive biography of Donald Kennedy and provides an in-depth view into Kennedy's personal life and relationships with indigenous people during his time as district officer in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and elsewhere in the Pacific (Butcher 2012).¹⁰ In his 2013 book, *Watriama and Co: Further Pacific Islands Portraits*, Hugh Laracy discusses the life and journey of Donald Kennedy in various colonies of the Pacific including the British Solomon Islands. He details Kennedy's style of leadership as protectorate district officer and coastwatcher prior to and during the war, and argues that in spite of Kennedy's flaws, he was extraordinarily talented and his contributions to colonial administration have gone largely unnoticed. Laracy's chapter serves as testimony to Kennedy's intelligence and 'remarkable talents' as a colonial officer (Laracy 2013: 211–28). In a chapter that follows, Laracy discusses the fate of native medical practitioner George Bogese, who was regarded as a 'traitor' to the coastwatching network and the Allied efforts in Solomon Islands. Laracy's analysis is important because it gives an understanding of the complex relationship between educated islanders and members of the colonial administration (ibid.: 229–42). In another chapter, Laracy discusses the work of another colonial officer, Hector MacQuarrie, who published *Vouza and the Solomon Islands* (1945). Laracy stated: 'despite the title ... the book has little to say about the Solomons. Rather it is an episodic memoir about MacQuarrie's brief sojourn in a remote part of the group as a colonial administration officer' (Laracy 2013: 243–56). Although MacQuarrie's work does not contribute directly to our knowledge of war, his account of Vouza is important in understanding the nature of relationships between islanders and colonial administrators.

9 Peter McQuarrie (1994) wrote of the Micronesian coastwatching network.

10 Donald Kennedy was a New Zealander. He served as district officer in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate prior to World War II, and during the war became a key player in coastwatching efforts in the Solomons. A further discussion of Kennedy takes place in Chapter 3 in this book.

While these accounts narrate the story of the coastwatchers or their personal lives in detail, they do not provide adequate insight into islander participation, nor do they set out any extensive analysis of local experiences during the war. This is the gap I hope to help fill. While these earlier narratives relay the coastwatchers' story from a European, or 'outside', perspective, this book will examine the narratives of islanders who played a part in the war.

Starting in the late 1980s, a series of publications began to fill this gap in the literature through oral histories of local wartime experiences. The Western Province Assembly recorded and transcribed 32 oral stories of wartime participants with the aim of preserving recollections of those who served in Western Province (WPA 1988). A similar initiative resulted in the compilation of a special issue of *O'O: A Journal of Solomon Islands Studies* (Laracy and White 1988). This was the result of a week-long conference in Honiara in mid-1987 aimed at assessing regional experiences of World War II and their social, cultural and historical importance. In 1988, the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education and the University of the South Pacific published *The Big Death: Solomon Islanders Remember World War II* (White et al. 1988). This book was a transcription of wartime memories of local experiences and provided a space in which oral recollections of local veterans could be understood by the current generations of Solomon Islanders. These publications have been successful in their attempts to record and preserve personal and local stories. My aim in this book is to contribute further to these local histories and present my own perspective, as a Solomon Islander woman, examining local involvement in World War II. My perspective in this book stems from my encounter with the few local surviving veterans while working as a researcher and executive officer for the Solomon Scouts and Coastwatchers Trust. The recollections of some of these veterans were transcribed in earlier works mentioned above. However, none of these earlier materials provides a thorough evaluation of the nature of islander contributions to the war effort.

Local experiences in and contributions to the Solomons Campaign have been narrated mainly by outsiders, and local efforts have continued to be represented in simplistic terms of 'loyalty' (White 1995). As local oral recollections have begun to be documented and published, they have confirmed that the lives of the European coastwatchers often rested in the hands of the so-called uncivilised natives whom they governed. There indeed existed a great sense of loyalty towards the coastwatchers and those

Allied soldiers whose lives were saved by islanders. While inscribing this essential loyalty onto war monuments becomes relevant to modern-day nation-building, it is also important that the complexities of islander attitudes towards the war and the forces arrayed on both sides be better understood. This is to provide for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of islander involvement, and the changes that the war wrought on local perspectives, the social environment of those it affected and the perceptions of the world beyond the islands.

The resources consulted for this book are predominantly from Allied perspectives and islanders' oral recollections. Due to barriers of language, access and time, Japanese sources are not consulted and their perceptions of islanders during the occupation of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate are not discussed. Other resources that may be relevant to the topic of this book that are held in archives, libraries and museums outside Canberra and Solomon Islands have not been consulted. Moreover, when looking at the war from a Solomon Islander perspective, the literature available on the topic bears an almost entirely male perspective. While mentioning local women in passing, the discussions in this book inevitably reflect the lack of accounts of indigenous women's perspectives and their experiences during the war.

In the next chapter, I discuss the contributions of islanders to the Allied war effort on Guadalcanal. I argue that the nature and significance of islanders' roles in the Allied campaign tend to become blurred when narrated from an outside perspective. Solomon Islanders' involvement in the war was a significant contribution to the defence of the islands. Despite the presence of the Japanese military throughout the islands, the indigenous population remained predominantly supportive of the Allies until the end of the war.

Chapter 3 explores the complex factors that motivated islander participation and their sense of loyalty to the Allies. I argue that local involvement in the war was influenced by indigenous culture, the colonial government and observations of military developments in local contexts. This results in a depiction of local perspectives that reaches beyond the simple notion of loyalty that has been portrayed in outside narratives of the war. Understanding these complexities will help us comprehend how the war influenced the attitudes of islanders.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the extensive impacts of the war on island societies, politics and economy. I show that some of these impacts were experienced as immediate benefits for the development of the British protectorate, yet proved to be problematic in the long term.

My study concludes by discussing the recognition of local wartime contributions through the erection of the Pride of Our Nation monument dedicated on 7 August 2011, the anniversary of the Allied landing on Guadalcanal. I argue that the monument is more politically relevant than its historical legacy first indicates. While sociopolitical problems faced in contemporary Solomon Islands are not entirely consequences of the war, I suggest that issues of ethnic disparity among the indigenous population were exacerbated by lopsided postwar reconstruction on Guadalcanal by the colonial administration. Realising these ethnic differences and addressing them in a collective manner through the construction of monuments in modern-day Solomon Islands can help to reimagine a wartime past that provides a common thread sewing together the history of an ethnically diverse nation. Hence, a closer understanding of the nature of local efforts will enable a more thorough sense of appreciation of islanders' actions during the war.

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