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Why Support the Allies?

The positive attitude of Solomon Islanders towards Allied forces during the Pacific War has attracted considerable speculation in the literature, with the overwhelming majority of commentators simply representing islanders as ‘loyal natives’.¹ In a section on the British Solomon Islands Protectorate in his book *Return to Paradise*, James Michener compared the different perspectives that American troops had of islanders in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Although Papua New Guineans were observed to be more industrious than their neighbours in the British Solomon Islands, one thing that American troops could not deny was the ‘loyalty’ of Solomon Islanders during the war. Michener (1951: 185) states:

on British islands not one white man was betrayed. Not one. The fidelity of Solomon Islanders was unbelievable. Hundreds of Americans live today because these brave savages fished them from the sea, led them through Jap lines and carried them in their canoes to safety.

This romanticised representation of wartime indigenous peoples is not unique to Solomon Islanders. In Papua New Guinea, the contributions of indigenous peoples as stretcher bearers, carriers, riflemen and soldiers has created the myth of the ‘fuzzy wuzzy angels’ in Australia (Hereniko 1999: 144). As historian Hank Nelson (2006: 136) noted, ‘the “boy” had become the fuzzy wuzzy angel’.² However, Nelson (1978), Emma

1 These authors address islander roles in the Allied war effort on Guadalcanal and elsewhere in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate: Clemens (1998), Feldt (1991), Lindsay (2010) and Lord (1977).

2 ‘Boy’ was a term used for Melanesian men of all ages during the colonial period.

Rogerson (2012) and others (e.g. Riseman 2010) have argued that these representations are far from the reality of islander experiences. Issues such as the method of recruiting islanders for labour used by the Australian and New Guinea Administrative Unit and the manner in which labourers were treated have proven otherwise. Nelson wrote:

ANGAU officers and police entered villages, 'lined' the people, gave a 'pep' talk, and convinced most men that they must endure hard work, danger and separation from home. When villagers showed signs of resistance, the police seized traditional valuables, began eating the household foods and threatened to rape the women and recruit young boys unless deserters gave themselves up and able-bodied men agreed to go away as labourers. (Nelson 1978: 182–3)

In the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, recruitment of islanders was generally voluntary yet of a complex nature. When oral histories and other documentation are investigated, a number of issues emerge that help to explain more fully the complexities of the motivation behind the cooperation of islanders with the Allied forces during the Solomon Islands Campaign. Among the factors considered in this chapter are obligation, fear, curiosity and adventure, the lure of rising wages as Allied demand for labour increased, the relationship to Britain as a colonising power and the differing experiences of encounters with 'friend' and 'foe' during the war. Exploring these various motivations, it becomes clear that Solomon Islanders' participation in the war was more complex than the common representation of simple loyalty to the Allied cause.

Obligation — cultural attitudes and tradition

In 1893, in the process of regulating the illegal labour recruitment or 'blackbirding' of islanders, Great Britain declared a protectorate over Solomon Islands. Although islanders had come into contact with European explorers, traders and missionaries as early as the 1500s, little was known by the outside world about their way of life, social structures and practices. Information that would aid in implementing administrative policies was lacking, and the administrators of the protectorate were strangers to the indigenous inhabitants of the islands (Belshaw 1950: 23, 38–9). A lack of cross-cultural understanding contributed to the British colonisers' view of islanders as 'savage', 'uncivilised' and in need of a transformative cultural, moral and technological education. For their

part, islanders were dazzled by their encounters with British ships, guns, tinned foods and other manufactured goods. Over time, such encounters resulted in islanders accommodating the colonisers' technologically superior culture. The supposedly superior 'Western' culture projected its dominant ideology, informing and sometimes dictating the everyday affairs of indigenous subjects. This was due to the method in which it was channelled into the society, and the perceptions of Solomon Islanders attributing prestige to the colonial authorities. Hence, to understand the extent to which Solomon Islanders felt a sense of obligation to assist Allied forces, it is appropriate to discuss the nature of prestige in the traditional leadership systems of Solomon Islands societies and how this influenced attitudes towards colonial administration.

There is a deeply held notion of respect for authority in the cultural make-up of Solomon Islanders and other Melanesians, which is a driving force in the nature of their sense of obligation to anyone with high status in traditional society. Take, for instance, the level of prestige a 'big man', chief or elder attains, the authority he possesses and the respect he commands. Big men express their authority by sponsoring ceremonial activities that attract the admiration of their kin and community, displaying their ability to appear as someone worthy of respect (Allen 1984: 23–4). However, the status of big man is not a political title. As Marshall Sahlins (1963: 290) famously pointed out, it is merely 'an acknowledged standing in interpersonal relations'. A big man's command is influential only within his community, and beyond that his reputation is known with diminishing influence over space and time. Although he does not use physical force to command respect, due to his standing within his society his admirers and followers often feel an obligation to submit to his commands. In his study of the Kapauku people of New Guinea, Leopold Pospisil (1958: 81) described this merit and relation-based Melanesian social structure, stating 'their obedience to the headman's decision is caused by motivations which reflect their particular relations to the leader'. The leader (big man or headman) 'must be prepared to demonstrate that he possesses the kinds of skills that command respect — magical powers, gardening prowess, mastery of oratorical style, perhaps bravery in war and feud' (Sahlins 1963: 291).³

3 It is also appropriate to mention here that those who obtained some form of Western education can be also classed as big men. The knowledge they acquired from formal education equipped them with skills that were foreign in a traditional society. See also Lindstrom (1984).

This social status of the big man becomes an important consideration when dealing with administration of indigenous affairs by the colonial authority (Kennedy 1946: 168–70). An eventual understanding by administrators of how local social structures functioned in the protectorate set a foundation for the war effort. When Japan occupied Solomon Islands, big men were immediately ushered into the war effort by district officers (who were also coastwatchers) as scouts, guides, carriers and labourers. The big men's immediate appearance alongside Allied forces indicated to the rest of the local population which side they ought to support.

Perceptions of the superiority of the white race, due to the skills and tools they brought, and the power of their medicine, appealed to islanders. It attracted their respect and enhanced a sense of obligation to subject themselves to these forms of supremacy. The esteem in which the islanders held the white coloniser did not indicate a breakdown of the prestige they attached to their traditional leaders, but it distorted the hierarchy by placing foreign authority figures above traditional leadership structures. The position of local leaders shaped how information was transmitted into society as well as how the colonial authorities executed initiatives. In other words, the British administration understood the functions of hierarchy in Solomon Islands society and manipulated them to the advantage of their cause. For instance, Eric Feldt described how coastwatchers Josselyn and Keenan on Vella Lavella organised a local scouting network and placed the chief of the island in command of the force:

Bamboo [the chief] continued to administer native affairs on the island, advised by Josselyn who, however, kept in the background so that no native, resentful of an adverse decision in a civil matter, should be tempted to betray him in revenge (Feldt 1991: 243).

On Guadalcanal, district officer Martin Clemens had a 'pep talk' with the Marau district headmen in which he instructed them to relocate inland as soon as Japanese forces landed in the area. Clemens feared any contact with Japanese troops would reveal coastwatchers' locations; persuading locals to evacuate coastal villages would minimise the likelihood of contact with enemy troops. As soon as this instruction was agreed upon by the Marau headmen, it was passed on to all other headmen on the island as to what was expected from them (Clemens 1998: 89). Elsewhere in the Solomons, the same channel for transmitting information to the local population was used by district officers, coastwatchers and missionaries. Effectively, the local societal structure was used to the advantage of the Allied cause.

Feelings of obligation as a result of good social relationships

The administration of colonial Solomon Islands involved the collaborative efforts of missionaries and colonial administrators. Each could not accomplish much without the other. Despite different approaches to local affairs taken by the government and missionaries, both endeavoured to achieve a common goal, which was to deliberately ‘transform’ and even to ‘revolutionise’ the lives of islanders (Belshaw 1950: 44–7). By 1940, five church denominations — Roman Catholic, Anglican, South Seas Evangelical, Seventh-day Adventist and Methodist — had established and gained momentum in Solomon Islands. In some coastal villages where islanders encountered more than one Christian denomination, proselytism was common and local customs in these areas diminished (Osifelo 1985).⁴ Hence, the transition to Christianity from ‘paganism’ witnessed a shift of prestige from pagan gods and spirits to the Christian god, but not a total elimination of the former. The functionality of local religion was altered by the introduced Christian notion of divine lineage: that all of humanity was created by God who, in this sense, is the common ancestor of all tribal groups. This did not lead to a total breakdown of the political boundaries of tribal sects, but Christian values became so widely accepted that they reduced tribal boundaries through a world view that unified all of humanity by asserting a common relationship with a single god. Therefore, the respect that was formerly demanded by traditional interlocutors to ancestral gods was now commanded by Christian elites. This contributed to islanders’ allegiance to Allied troops during the war (Osifelo 1985: 1–6).

In early 1942, when Japan began its daily raids on Tulagi, the British colonial government called for the immediate evacuation of the expatriate community in the protectorate. But not all expatriates evacuated, and among those who remained were many missionaries. Some denominations like the Seventh-day Adventists evacuated all its missionaries. But for the South Seas Evangelical Mission, all but five of its missionaries

4 In this personal biography, Osifelo repeatedly described his family’s movement from one church to another. His parents initially converted to Anglicanism, were then baptised into the South Seas Evangelical Church and his mother later converted to the Catholic Church. His father, on the other hand, stopped attending church after his second marriage (which was considered a sinful act of adultery in the South Seas Evangelical Church). Osifelo later reconverted to Anglicanism after his marriage to a pagan woman.

nominated to remain on Malaita. In the western Solomons, only three of the Methodist missionaries (including a female, Sister Merle Farland), remained at their posts.

However, almost all missionaries of the Catholic and Anglican churches refused the government's order for evacuation and remained in the protectorate to continue their religious duties. Although some missionaries maintained neutrality during the war, most were later absorbed into the coastwatching network and organised the local scouting network in their respective localities (Laracy 1988: 32).

This refusal to evacuate earned the missionaries admiration and gratitude from indigenous people. Their choice to remain in the islands was encouraged by denominational traditions. As Sister Merle Farland of the Methodist Mission wrote in her diary, the evacuation of missionaries was 'not consistent with Christian service' (Farland, February 1942: 36) and could be seen as abandonment. It could also inflict a moral defeat on the church and destroy the foundation that had been established in the protectorate over years. Farland was convinced that her choice to remain in the protectorate when Japan invaded would help maintain confidence in the mission. She described the reaction of islanders:

They seem very glad for us to stay, tho' they do not want us to be in danger. It hurt them greatly to feel that the white staffs were deserting them without even putting the case before them, or stopping to plan for things with them. Clarrie Leadley left a letter here [at Patutiva] for Paul Havea telling him they were 'going away so that they would not die' but for them [islanders] to 'be courageous and carry on the work' (Farland, February 1942: 37).

Farland also indicated in her diary that George Hili, a teacher and ex-hospital boy, pointed out to her that 'while there was a white person in charge of hospital work, the natives would keep their confidence in the medical boys as teachers, but without one, the work would suffer badly' (Farland, February 1942: 36). The point made by George Hili not only shows the admiration towards white missionaries but also reflects the prestige they obtained among the indigenous population and their status in the social structure of the local societies they had influenced.

For missionaries like Father Emery de Klerk, a Catholic priest stationed at Tangarare on Guadalcanal, the refusal to evacuate also had a personal dimension. Father de Klerk was from Holland and had lost all contact with

his family after Nazi Germany's advance into western Europe. Since Japan was a member of the Axis powers,⁵ de Klerk saw an opportunity to avenge the injustice inflicted on his family by the dictatorship of Hitler. He became one of the missionaries who actively participated in the coastwatching network. On 3 January 1943, Father de Klerk was given an American commission by United States Army General Alexander Patch, for which he resigned his British commission. Harold Cooper wrote that 'de Klerk had a little Navy of his own, consisting of the ten-ton schooner "Kokorana" loaned to him by the government for the duration of his service with the armed forces' (Cooper 1945). Again, the courage of those missionaries who remained in Solomon Islands during the war, despite their personal motivations, certainly aroused the admiration of indigenous peoples. Hugh Laracy (1988: 32) rightly pointed out it 'helped ensure a high level of indigenous support for the Allied cause'. And, indeed, it built goodwill towards Allied troops throughout Solomon Islands.

It is not surprising that islanders admired the dedication of those missionaries who remained behind as leaders. Although locals did not want the missionaries to risk their lives, there was a mutual sense of fighting for a common cause to liberate Solomon Islanders from the Japanese Empire. In an interview conducted by Peter Crowe (1987), Bill Bennett, a local veteran of the British Solomon Islands Defence Force, described missionaries' tasks during the campaign somewhat romantically as 'bible in the right hand and bush knife in the left'. The courage of those missionaries who remained during the war considerably strengthened the sense of spiritual faith and loyalty of indigenous people among the confusion of hostilities.

The use of propaganda

Prior to the Japanese occupation of Solomon Islands, district officers travelled from island to island giving instructions on what was expected of the local population if Japan invaded. Along with these instructions, there was also the dissemination of propaganda on Japanese troops, regarding Japanese behaviour, morality and their intention to conquer indigenous lands. The use of land as a subject of propaganda was itself enough to

5 The Axis powers were founded in principle by Germany, Italy and Japan in the mid-1930s. These countries became the major opponents of the Allies during World War II.

influence the attitude of local elders. Land is a culturally fundamental issue that often leads to conflict within and between different cultural groups in Solomon Islands, and there is a strong sense of identification with it. Land is an important asset and the prospect of a stranger taking it away by force is culturally unacceptable. So the inclusion of land issues in Allied propaganda was likely to have a great impact on indigenous people's perspectives. In early 1942, Dick Horton, district officer and predecessor to Martin Clemens at Aola on Guadalcanal, toured his district and met with the elders of each village he visited, giving them instructions and spreading propaganda on Japanese troops. In his book *Fire Over the Islands*, Horton lays out the message that was delivered to the indigenous population:

They [the Japanese] have bad men leading them; evil men who want more power and land. They have conquered many places to the north and killed and shamefully treated men and women. If they come here, none of us will be safe. We will fight them together but we must fight them in the way I will tell you. First, you must keep away from them and watch them — no one must talk to them. You must make new villages and gardens in the hills which are hidden and the tracks to them must be difficult to find. If the Japanese comes to your old village they must find nothing. You must bring me news of what they do and where they are. I will be somewhere in the Island and the work of Government will go on. I know you are faithful and loyal and, until we bring in our friends [the Americans] to help us, this is the best way we can help each other defeat the enemy (Horton 1970: 10–11).

It did not take long for such messages to reach every household, and the fear of what possible horrors the Japanese might inflict mounted even before there was any local contact with Japanese troops. Fear continued to escalate as the islanders watched planters and missionaries desert their homes and flee to Tulagi for evacuation. By early March 1942, Clemens noted in his diary that a crowd of headmen from all over Guadalcanal assembled around his desk at the district office in Aola in apprehension, eager to know what was going on. Clemens wrote:

What could I say to them? I had taken over the district only three days earlier. The headmen had heard that my predecessor, Dick Horton, had gone; now the only other European on the station had orders to go. Terrified of what the Japanese might do to them and their families, they wanted to know that I would not desert them. And there we were, undefended, with the Japs flying over us to bomb the RAAF advance post on Tanambogo Island, nineteen miles away. What to do? I puffed on my

pipe and scratched my chin ... 'if you stick with me, someone someday will come and save us, and everything will be all right' ... Feeble though it was, that pledge was the basis for the tremendous show put up by the people of Guadalcanal during the dark days that followed (Clemens 1998: 31).

In Western District, district officer Donald Kennedy spread the same message and instructions as Horton and Clemens on Guadalcanal. Kennedy noted he visited villages and explained to headmen and elders the sorts of behaviour expected of islanders in the event of enemy invasion. Islanders were instructed to avoid the enemy and briefed on how to report information in the event of war. Nathan Oluvai recalled that even before the war 'we knew the Japanese were the enemy' (WPA 1988: 1). Kennedy reported soon after the war that 'the natives entered readily into all the plans and offered their services, their food supplies and their canoes without demur' (COI 1946: 13).

Infliction of penalties

Although islanders accepted the message spread by the district officers, they did not do so out of unquestioning loyalty to the administration. The instructions given to indigenous peoples dictated expected behaviours and norms of conduct and behaving otherwise could lead to penalties for the responsible individuals. In most instances, and as seen later during the campaign, islanders feared the consequences of disobeying orders from 'white masters' far more than the risks of combat. As in the Australian colonial territories of Papua and New Guinea, the inhabitants of Solomon Islands were subjected to the standard white colonial perceptions influenced by racial attitudes and feelings of dominance over 'primitive' populations (Silata 1988: 63–9).

Although coastwatchers depended entirely upon the indigenous population to carry out their duties during the war, there was little leniency in dealing with native affairs, especially in the infliction of penalties for minor offences. Forms of penalties included corporal punishment, loss of wages and hard labour. Different district officers employed their own strategies in handling offences of various natures. Martin Clemens indicated in his diary that offenders brought to him by chiefs were used as labourers and turned out to be resourceful during his coastwatching stint (Clemens 1998: 114). Despite the fact that these penalties were of a correctional

nature and useful from the perspective of colonial officers, to islanders they became a force for coercing them to perform to the expectations of colonial 'masters'. Local scout Bill Bennett, second-in-command to district officer Kennedy, boldly stated in an interview conducted by journalist Peter Crowe that 'there is a system that you gotta bow down to the master and do as the master say ... we're told what to do and even before the war come we're told what to do' (Crowe 1987). Scout Alfred Bisili told Crowe 'the war is nothing to do with Solomon Islanders; we're forced by the British officers to do scouting', re-emphasising Bennett's statement (ibid.). A similar statement was also made by scout Nathan Oluvai of Western Province, who recorded:

We were all afraid of the Coastwatcher who was like the government man, and the headman. Their orders were the law and if you didn't obey, they put you over a drum and gave you 12 or so whips ... you know that time, the word of the government was the last word. We were afraid, not like now when plenty of people are clever [educated] (WPA 1988: 1).

Caleb Alu, another veteran of the war, recalled his service under coastwatcher Josselyn: 'Josselyn was a rough man ... everybody was afraid of him. Only small things and he would whip you' (ibid.: 7). Alfred Bisili also described corporal punishment as used by Kennedy on scouts who were slow in dispatching reports to the coastwatching station at Seghe. All information gathered by scouts on Japanese troops needed to reach the responsible coastwatcher within 24 hours. Delays in reporting were not tolerated by Kennedy, who usually investigated the causes of interruption. Bisili (1988: 80) stated 'those guilty of the delay received very severe beatings with *loia* [lawyer] cane. For many who experienced these beatings they will still be fresh in their minds'.

District Officer Donald Kennedy, a New Zealander, was a well-known coastwatcher in the Solomons. His colonial service began in Fiji where he was appointed to teach at the Suva Grammar School in 1921. A year later, Kennedy became the headmaster at the Banaban School in Gilbert and Ellice Islands,⁶ also establishing a school at Vaitupu for Ellice Islanders. Despite his success, he was transferred to Tarawa as acting headmaster due to accusations of violence, womanising, alcoholism and a stormy relationship with his superiors. In 1932, he returned to Ellice Islands as acting administrative officer and later lands commissioner. But his difficult

6 Formerly Kiribati and Tuvalu, respectively.

attitude again got in the way and he was removed after complaints from colonial colleagues and a petition from islanders. He was then posted to the British Solomon Islands where he worked as a district officer and became actively involved in Allied war efforts in the protectorate (Laracy 2013: 211–14).

His notorious reputation and violent behaviour became both a blessing and a curse to islanders who served under his authority in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. His methods of punishment included lashes ordered by him and often carried out by other scouts. His violence towards indigenous people inevitably shaped social relationships. Although Bill Bennett compliments Kennedy's heavy-handedness as appropriate to his leadership responsibilities during the war, no other scouts who served in his force expressed this view. Most documented recollections repeatedly express the harshness of Kennedy's disciplinary actions. Kitchener Ada, who served as a scout under Kennedy, recalled:

Kennedy whipped me. We used to have stations to watch. One night I was assigned to No. 3 station. An airplane came, but I had a sore on the leg and so I just lay down on a log and slept. So they never had any report from me that night, because I was asleep (laughs). So I went to court. Kennedy asked what I would have done if the enemy had come — I said, we're here to fight, so I would have fought. But he said I broke the military order, so he said I could choose three whips or one-pound fine. So I thought hard about that. One pound was about a month's pay, but three whips was for only a second or two, not every day. So I said, 'Master, I think I'll take the whip' (laughs). Pinenunu, a Gela man, did the whipping. He was Kennedy's cook. I was cross after that and didn't want to work. There was plenty of us got whipped. It wasn't always big things that got you in trouble. People would report others for small things. I wondered, couldn't they just forget these things? And many times it was our chiefs who were reporting us for small things we did. Later we thought, we could have just shot them. And maybe in old times, we could just have eaten them (WPA 1988: 30).

While Ada's punishment might have been reasonable for his offence, Kennedy's disciplinary actions induced a sense of 'loyalty' in the local population based on the fear of being lashed or having a month's worth of wages denied. Scout Jim Bennett, the brother of Bill Bennett, described Kennedy as a 'fright-inspiring man' who gave orders and expected the response 'yes sir or no sir' (WPA 1988: 106). In his oral recollection, Daniel Gua also mentioned the brutality of Kennedy's disciplinary actions:

‘even though we were far away from him [Kennedy], we felt he was the boss because anybody could report you and you’d get into trouble’ (WPA 1988: 94). Beyond compelling ‘loyalty’, this strict standard of discipline created a platform advantageously exploited by indigenous people to avenge themselves against each other on the slightest issue of personal conflict or discontent within society. It left an impact on social relationships among individuals, as expressed by Ada and Gua’s recollections.⁷

Mike Butcher, who has thoroughly researched the life of Donald Kennedy in the Pacific, acknowledged that Kennedy had personal shortcomings that affected his relationships with islanders (Butcher 2012: 53–76, 131–84). Among islanders who worked for him or lived under his authority, Kennedy was a character who commanded respect and did not tolerate mistakes. The fear of his authority and dislike of his conduct was a common theme in postwar reminiscences among local veterans.

One story that has created significant discussion in the public sphere is the confession of Bill Bennett, who was second-in-command to Kennedy during the war. Bennett claimed to have shot Kennedy in the leg during a confrontation with a Japanese whaleboat on Marovo lagoon, Western Solomons (Crowe 1987). The incident, known as the ‘Battle of Marovo’, was long known to have left Kennedy with an injured leg (COI 1946: 49–53; Horton 1970: 209–211; Lord 1977: 206–8). Bennett said he intentionally shot Kennedy in revenge for an incident that resulted in Kennedy ordering one of his boys to lash Bennett with *loia* [lawyer] cane while he was forced to lie across a 44-gallon fuel drum. Bennett described how he was ordered by Kennedy to find him a local woman to satisfy his sexual desires. Bennett set out looking, but returned empty handed. This made Kennedy furious so he ordered that Bennett be punished for his failure (Crowe 1987). Butcher proposed that Bennett’s shooting might not have been intentional but triggered by anxiety and fear during the confrontation with the enemy, and that Bennett, who was under the influence of alcohol at the time of Crowe’s interview, might have made up the story for a specifically ‘truth seeking audience’ (Butcher 2012: 64). But Bennett’s confession and the oral testimonies of other scouts who served under Kennedy during the war is intriguing. Taken together, these

7 Bennett also expressed similar sentiments of discontent concerning Kennedy’s punishments when interviewed by Peter Crowe (1987). See also Bennett (1988).

accounts depict the extent to which coercion and the threat of punishment contributed to the control maintained by the colonial authorities over the indigenous population.⁸

For islanders like native medical practitioner George Bogese, infliction of penalties by colonial authorities bore even harsher consequences than physical punishment. A native of Isabel Island, Bogese was the first Solomon Islander to be sent by the colonial administration to pursue medical studies in Fiji. Unlike other islanders' heroic stories of the war, Bogese came to be regarded as a 'traitor' to the coastwatching network. Like other scouts, Bogese did not have a functional relationship with Donald Kennedy. Assigning Bogese to Savo Island before the war, Kennedy instructed the headman on Savo to kill Bogese if he misbehaved and warned Bogese to 'be very careful, or you will be shot, or whipped, the same as the others' (Laracy 2013: 236).⁹ On 4 May 1942, during the initial landing of Japanese troops on Tulagi, the Japanese destroyer *Kitsutsuki* was sunk and the next day two survivors were found ashore on Savo. Bogese offered medical treatment to the Japanese sailors. However, he was not the only one who assisted in their care: coastwatcher Leif Shroeder and missionary Desmond Scanlon both offered food and clothing to the sailors. Four days later, a Japanese barge landed at Savo, guided by a Savo native who identified Bogese. The Japanese threatened Bogese and forced him to accompany them to Tulagi where he assisted in the translation of Japanese notices into local vernaculars. As Bogese later attested, he 'was frightened to disobey' the Japanese (Laracy 2013: 231). From this point on, Bogese had an enemy on both sides: Kennedy and the colonial administration on one hand and the Japanese on the other.

Bogese had not seen his family since his posting to Savo, so when ordered to Rabaul to meet with the Japanese chief medical officer, Bogese asked if he could visit his family. Escorted by 50 Japanese soldiers, Bogese travelled to Isabel to bring his family to Tulagi. On the return journey, the Japanese encountered and sank Kennedy's vessel the *Wai-ai* at Mahaga in Isabel. Bogese remained under the jurisdiction of the Japanese until he was 'captured' by the Allies in early August 1942. At the persuasion of the British administration, he was interned in Australia with his family until October 1945 (Bogese n.d.). Upon his return to the protectorate, Bogese

8 The story of Bill Bennett shooting Donald Kennedy, and Butcher's interpretation, are also discussed in White (2015: 216) and Laracy (2013).

9 See also Laracy (1991: 59–75).

was tried on five counts of collaboration with the Japanese. Four charges were dismissed but he was convicted of the fifth, which stated that he 'did voluntarily join himself with the enemy Japanese between 1 May and 8 August 1942' (Laracy 2013: 238; see also Bennett 1988: 144–5). Bogese was sentenced to four years' imprisonment and was released in 1949.

Bogese's story exemplifies the extent of penalties an islander could incur for any form of interaction with Japanese troops perceived by British colonial officers as collaboration. Bogese's conviction was a judgement by the colonial administration against his character and lack of 'loyalty', with a biased consideration of the threats levelled at him by the Japanese to ensure he cooperated with their orders. It can be argued that the severity of Bogese's punishment was a demonstration by the colonial administration aimed at reasserting its prewar authority and control over the local population.

Curiosity and adventure

World War II was extraordinarily memorable for Solomon Islanders, in both the scale and the manner in which it was fought. War was not a new concept for Solomon Islands cultures, but it was previously fought on a far smaller scale between tribal groups. Such skirmishes were usually a form of revenge or demonstration of power between groups within or between islands. The way wars were fought was always of an unsettling nature among the tribal parties concerned and limited in setting. World War II, on the other hand, operated on a global scale that was beyond the understanding of islanders. The equipment used, the materials shipped in and the armed forces themselves were massive on both the Allied and Japanese sides. The nature of the fighting and why it came to their islands was not understood by islanders, and was questioned repeatedly. Indeed, islanders were in a state of confusion over the war, and so relied heavily on information and instructions from their head men, missionaries and district officers. The massive scale of the war and subsequent events also sparked curiosity and provided opportunities for adventure among young men. And although young islanders of this generation generally preferred the Allied forces over the Japanese, it was also partly the nature of their encounters with both sides that motivated them to choose one over the other.

As news of Japan's occupation of Tulagi spread through the protectorate, a powerful sense of curiosity and thirst for adventure emerged among young men all over the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. These impulses fed the influx of younger men signing on for scouting and labour during the war. At the end of the Solomon Islands Campaign, more than 800 men were enlisted in the British Solomon Islands Defence Force and records indicate a labour strength of over 3,700 recruits by July 1944 (Solomon Islands National Archives 1945). Scout Alfred Alasasa Bisili recalled the landing of Japanese troops at Munda in November 1942:

It was very late in the afternoon, about 5 pm or so. We saw five Japanese battleships anchored outside Munda Bar. At about seven in the evening the soldiers came ashore. The five battleships then left. Where to, no one knew. But most probably to the Shortlands or to Rabaul in Papua New Guinea. The following day being very curious about the landing of the Japs, I, Solomon Hitu, and Nebot Kiada decided to go and investigate (Bisili 1988: 80–1).

Bisili's account of his and his friends' encounter with Japanese troops reveals the level of curiosity and the urge 'to go and investigate' prevalent among young islanders, despite the possible dangers. Similar sentiments led Biuku Gasa to join the scouting network. In his recollection, he stated: 'I was interested to become a scout from the time I first saw the planes come around Munda. I wanted to see the war and how people fought' (Gasa and Kumana 1988: 85).

In his book *Island Administration in the South West Pacific*, Cyril Belshaw, acting district officer in Gela in 1944–45 (who for a time produced a typewritten newspaper in the local vernacular), recorded some experiences of indigenous people of the area during the war. In an appendix to his book, he included translated narrations titled 'Native attitudes during the war'. Belshaw indicated that the texts were compiled and translated into English by his local clerk. In the transcribed narrations, an anonymous man of the Gela detachment of the Solomon Islands Labour Corps, working on Guadalcanal, described his curiosity in a more detailed way, including what he saw, his amazement at the machinery used by the military and the different groups of people he encountered. He described the air force, the ground forces, the marines and even medics in great detail as he understood them:

While I was at my home I heard the news all about Guadalcanal its all over my island for the people and everything. I was hoping to get there and see what its all about whether its true or not. Now I'm come and saw what's all about and its true all the news I heard. These I saw on the 16.1.44 and I was surprise to see them: (i) plenty of people, (ii) the ships on the sea, (iii) the airplanes, (iv) the launches, (v) the ships it goes in sea and in land, (vi) all sorts of launches, (vii) all sorts of different languages, (viii) all sorts of men, white and brown and black. Every tribes are in here (1) Americans, (2) Solomon Islander — these are plenty in here, (3) New Zealanders, (4) Australians, (5) Hawaiians, (6) Fijians, (7) Englanders. Although call them all Englanders because words gathered them together. These are all kinds of work they entered in (1) marines, (2) army, (3) navy, (4) air force, (5) labour, (6) doctor. Their business: the marines are to fight on land and occupies every parts of our islands. The navy are they fighting on board just exactly the same as the marines. Airmen are fighting in the air by the planes. The army are to take over the place and use it for war. The doctor to take care for the wounded and sick patients. Where they camp? I could not tell lies but I don't know where and where they all stayed in here at Guadalcanal. There are make me so surprise, for the looking at all sorts of things. I did not heard any news from my fathers and grandfathers could tell me the things like these before and this is my first time I saw it. These makes me so surprise (1) the airplanes (2) ships (3) motor cars (4) bombs (5) truck car (6) the ships it goes on sea as in land (7) all kinds of food (8) plenty of people (9) all kinds of play (10) the garden are so larger the length are 150 acre also the width (11) there all the American works (12) they win the fight (13) their great love of our Allied for they gave up their lives and they died for us (Belshaw 1950: 143–4).

These expressions of an islander demonstrate the extent to which the war shaped islanders' understanding of modern warfare and technology. It also suggests two major issues for understanding local involvement in the war. First, it depicts the extent to which curiosity drove able-bodied men from their villages to places where they could get a glimpse of military activities, or simply to ascertain that what they had heard, perhaps from other members of their communities, were not just rumours. Second, islanders were amazed and overwhelmed by what they saw. The machines, categories of military forces, groups of people, their nationalities and the specific tasks performed by each group were sources of apparent fascination to islanders who had never seen anything like this before or even heard talk of such things from their elders.

The material and military superiority of the American forces impressed islanders at every level, and would have provided substantial rationale for indigenous allegiance to Allied forces during the war if there had been no other reason for such loyalty. John Kari from Rendova in Western Province was one of the educated elite of his society. When recounting his wartime experiences, Kari compared the military strength of American and Japanese troops and made statements similar to those of the anonymous islander from Gela quoted above, opining that the Japanese were not a force to reckon with and that the Americans had superior artillery and possessed military equipment that the Japanese lacked (Kari and Langabaea 1988: 98–9).¹⁰ Likewise, Sergeant Andrew Langabaea began his narrative memories of the war by commenting on the military superiority of the United States as he observed it. He recalled the amazement of islanders when Americans landed on Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942: ‘you could have walked on ships from Marau to Tulagi the morning they came to start the landings. Barges, warships, cruisers, battleships ... we just saw for the first time the way white men fight’ (ibid.: 99).¹¹ Although Langabaea’s statement is factually exaggerated, it again indicates the overwhelming impact the war had on islanders’ understandings. George Maelalo, who had frontline experience with the Americans to as far as Bougainville, noted that the United States Marines were well trained for battle, but also that Japanese troops were not a force to underestimate — they were very skilful in jungle fighting and ‘when you look at the two kinds of soldiers side-by-side there was a definite difference between them in the way they looked and fought. The Japanese were small but you can tell they were well trained’ (Maelalo 1988: 189).

Communications

In the British Solomon Islands, there were over 80 native languages spoken by indigenous peoples. This did not make communication simple for any foreigner, especially Japanese soldiers who did not speak Pidgin or English (Wurm and Hattori 1981–83). Pidgin was the evolving lingua franca used by the British administration and expatriate community in

10 See also oral recollection of Daniel Rereqeto in WPA (1988: 18). Daniel was not formally enlisted in the scouting network but described his amazement at America’s military and material strength. His description noted Americans as ‘powerful’ in their infrastructure construction at Barakoma and Lambulambu.

11 See also oral recollection of Robert Bula in WPA (1988: 95–104).

the protectorate. However, it was used and understood by only a small fraction of the population, mainly those who worked on plantations and in the public service. Others who obtained some formal Western education, either overseas in Fiji or at local schools run by missionaries, were able to speak and understand English. Even though Pidgin and English were used by a minority of the native population, this still placed Allied troops in an advantageous position over Japanese troops during the war.

The difficulty encountered by islanders in communicating with Japanese troops inhibited understanding between the two parties. Sign language was used, but its effectiveness was minimal. Scout Alfred Bisili confirmed that communication with Japanese soldiers was indeed challenging. When recalling his first encounter with Japanese soldiers, he stated, ‘we couldn’t understand what they were saying to us ... we used hand sign language before we managed to get what they wanted’ (Bisili 1988: 81). George Maelalo also highlighted the barrier of language, saying ‘if he [Japanese] were an Englishman I could talk to him ... but, my word, I could not speak Japanese’ (Maelalo 1988: 188).

The hurdle of language was not disregarded by Japanese military officials when they occupied the Solomons. In an attempt to disseminate a declaration of their occupation of Solomon Islands, native medical practitioner George Bogese was coerced by the Japanese to translate into local languages two notices issued by the commander of the imperial navy (as mentioned earlier in the chapter under ‘Infliction of penalties’). However, little was accomplished in the attempt to communicate to islanders behaviour expected by Japanese troops, and attempts at spreading any form of propaganda against Allied nations failed.

Employment and increases in wages

The Solomons Campaign saw an increase in wages for indigenous services provided to Allied troops and, as a result, demand for jobs also increased among the local population. Before the war, indigenous labour was required mainly for plantation work. Islanders were recruited for a period of one to three years for wages of one pound per month. During the global economic depression of the 1930s, the price for copra dropped drastically,¹² resulting in the halving of wages to 10 shillings per month.

12 Copra is the dried kernel from a coconut, used for its oil. It was the main export commodity of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate before the war.

As war proceeded in the protectorate, the demand for labour in military service became urgent and resulted in a rise in wages to attract labourers. Local wages rebounded from 10 shillings back to one pound per month, and in some cases labourers were able to earn up to 14 pounds in a month (Figure 15) (Belshaw 1950: 69). The effects of the increase in local wages will be discussed in detail in the next chapter; however, there was an immediate influx of labourers from all over the islands seeking paid employment from Allied forces.



Figure 15: Workers line up to receive weekly wages of five shillings (80 cents) from Australian Major J.V. Mather, Guadalcanal, 28 January 1943. Note the military cameraman at work

Source: United States Marine Corps (photo 52765), United States National Archives.

The Japanese, on the other hand, attempted to recruit islanders for labour without paid wages. In two documents distributed to villages by Japanese officials, there is no indication of any form of wages for local labour, but rather sets of orders pertaining to the confiscation of all properties in the protectorate, as well as the expected moral conduct and assurance of security to those who abided by the laws of Japan (including missionaries

and Europeans).¹³ Whatever the Japanese Empire aimed to achieve in the Solomons, it did not use wages as a means to achieve it, relying instead on force or the threat of force by Japanese soldiers.

Britain — ‘our government’

The colonial history of Great Britain in Solomon Islands was another motivating factor for islanders’ allegiance to the Allied nations during the campaign. First, there was a sense of political affiliation among the local population towards Britain as their government. Second, there were comparisons made by islanders on military strength and different categories and attitudes of peoples they encountered during the war. Japan was constrained by circumstances that seemed less favourable to the local population.

British Solomon Islands Protectorate was an ethnically diverse group of islands. When Britain declared a protectorate in 1893, a government administration was established that became a unifying medium for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the island group. This is not to say that traditional affiliations of individual ethnic groups ceased to exist, but several decades of colonialism encouraged a mentality of identification with Britain as the local government during the war. Shortly after the Japanese advancement into Solomon Islands in early 1942, islanders began to perceive that their islands were being occupied by Japanese armies because of the colonial government’s alliance with the United States. The Japanese were viewed as an enemy attacking the government, not simply a political opponent with whom they might affiliate. Although the nature of the war was barely understood by the indigenous population, the notion of protecting its government from strange enemies became a motive for participation. There emerged a unified, but not altogether voluntary, sense of patriotism among islanders. As Andrew Langabaea, a sergeant of the Solomon Islands Defence Force who served with Martin Clemens during the war expressed it, ‘you might think I was a volunteer to do all this fighting business, but at that time, they [district officers] said there weren’t enough men so I must stay. So I did’ (Kari and Langabaea 1988: 102). Loyd Gina, who later became a politician in the Solomon Islands

13 The Catholic Archdiocese of Honiara, reference box ‘War’, cited in Lacey and White (1988: 145–6).

Government, explained that the nature of Solomon Islands' involvement in the war was determined by its status as a British territory. As a result of their colonial status, he noted that islanders were obliged to offer their allegiance to Allied forces during the war (Crowe 1987).

The islanders' understanding of the outside world was limited, and Japan was not known as a country or even heard of prior to the war. Even if the word 'Japan' did ring a bell in people's minds, it was only through knowledge of individual Japanese who had been in the protectorate before the war (Clemens 1998: 31). The United States, too, was probably never heard of by the majority of the indigenous population. Oral recollections reveal how little knowledge islanders had of the world beyond their shores. George Maelalo recalled that while he and a few others had seen American sailors before the war, most people had no knowledge of America or how to distinguish an American from other Europeans (Maelalo 1988: 180). However, the alliance of the United States with Britain created a foundation for islander acceptance of American servicemen as friends in indigenous communities during the war.

Comparisons of attitudes

Limited knowledge of the outside world did not limit the ability of islanders to compare the attitudes of the Japanese and Americans they encountered during the war. The arrival of Japanese and American troops in 1942 meant the introduction of additional sets of cultures into the diversity that already existed in the protectorate. Because the United States was an ally of Britain and had a similar language and culture, it was easily acceptable to local societies. Japanese troops were blinkered by a strong sense of cultural imperialism and failed to take into account the norms and customs that governed the occupied societies. As a result, societal norms and local customs were trampled upon by Japanese troops. The Imperial Army occupied churches as barracks and removed any ornaments of value to send back to Japan. Whatever their needs were, they felt that they could be obtained from villagers at gunpoint, and all able-bodied males were forced to labour for no wages with the threat of extermination of entire villages upon refusal to work for the Japanese Empire (COI 1946: 20).

In recalling experiences of the war on different occasions, local veterans never ceased to comment on the attitude of Japanese troops towards their property, churches and customs. One scout recalled: 'You know, before we

scouts were even set up in Vonavona, the Japanese went inside the lagoon. They went into the church at Madou and ate, and shit in there too' (Kari and Langabaea 1988: 98). Leslie Miki, a scout of Geoffrey Kuper, recalled a Japanese fighter plane that made an emergency landing at a village in Kia, Isabel Island. Miki recalled that the plane was out of fuel and the pilots stayed at the village until another plane was sent to their rescue. While the pilots were in the village, Miki described that 'they used the church at Kia like it was their house for sleeping. They just "borrowed" any pineapples or oranges in the Kia area and brought them back to eat. They didn't see the church as a house for worship' (Zaku et al. 1988: 156). But the Americans were different: they respected indigenous property and mainly shared the same Christian faith. Andrew Langabaea recalled 'the Americans, no matter how rough things would become, would always go to church' (Kari and Langabaea 1988: 103). There was an expectation among local peoples that foreigners (Japanese troops and Allied troops) be aware of religious sites, in this case churches, and their importance to society. Such perceptions informed islanders' comparative perspectives and help to explain their support of the Allied forces.

Cyril Belshaw's recorded experiences of Gela people during the war repeatedly echoed local resentment towards Japanese behaviour as they encountered it. Another anonymous islander relates:

This is about the Japanese. They went to all the villages and they stole the following foods: bananas, pineapples, pigs, fowls, etc. they did these when they stayed at Tulagi, Makambo, Gavutu, Tanambogo and Halavo. Then they killed and died before they finished spoil and stolen all our things in the whole Gela. Those are the unkindly tribes in the world for they treat us so badly. When the Americans attacked them ... some escaped to Gela's jungle and they stayed there and start to get hungry and some of them died in cause of hunger, and some went to the beach and get raw coconuts and crabs clams and some other shells and they went to the bush and stole yams, pannas in our gardens to eat with shell (Belshaw 1950: 142).

Sao, a scout from Isabel, developed a different perspective from his encounters with Japanese soldiers. His interaction with the Japanese occurred when he and his fellow scout rescued and returned Japanese soldiers to their military base at Suavana on Isabel Island. Enlightened by this close encounter, Sao said:

the Japanese were good people too. They didn't make all sorts of trouble. They were just young men. Some weren't even shaving yet, just really young men. If those things happened with some Americans we might have died. Sometimes we just paddled very near them, actually went and scouted right in front of their eyes. When we or Mostyn went they would say, 'You all don't come near here. If the Americans come and bomb you might get hit.' That's what they told us. But if it had been like that with the Americans, it would have been all over. They would have shot us. Because if they saw us nearby like that, they would shoot. But not the Japanese. They just gave instructions, 'you all don't ever come near, otherwise when the American planes come and bomb they might miss the guns and get you'. That's just how it was (Zaku et al. 1988: 166–7).

Despite this positive opinion of the Japanese soldiers, Sao indicated his allegiance to the Allies as a scout. His alternative perception of Japanese soldiers is an example of a more humanitarian viewpoint, and was not unique. Other oral testimonies have also shed light on this aspect of islander–military relations, which will be discussed in the next chapter.¹⁴

Conclusion

I have shown in this chapter the different motivations that influenced the involvement of islanders in the war and local attitudes towards both Allied and Japanese troops. There were feelings of obligation that can be understood by examining the structure of the society and the colonial experience. The local societal hierarchy had been integrated into the British administration of indigenous affairs, and traditional leaders were either appointed or empowered by the administration. Feelings of obligation were also evoked by the principles of Christianity and the good relationships that were established between missionaries and islanders. Beyond this, propaganda spread by district officers throughout the islands also played a part in moulding islander attitudes towards Japanese troops. Also, penalties and punishment were imposed on islanders by coastwatchers, compelling cooperation with the Allies.

Beyond these 'push' factors, there was a strong sense of curiosity and lust for adventure among young male islanders, drawn by fascination with large-scale military developments and equipment, which became

14 See also oral recollections of Danial Gua (pp. 87–94) and John and Joyce Wheatley Kevisi (pp. 67–70) in WPA (1988).

a 'pull' factor towards involvement in the war. Meanwhile, the Allies' demand for local labour and the rise in local wages saw a large number of islanders enlist in the campaign. Another factor was the difficulty of communication with Japanese troops. Islanders found communicating with Japanese soldiers challenging, and this challenge became an advantage to Allied troops. Finally, since islanders had become familiar with British administration, invasion by a foreign power triggered a sense of patriotism and identification with the Allies. Islanders not only had the ability to compare attitudes and categorise different groups of peoples during the war, they could also assess the comparative strength of men and arms and the progress of the war. This ability enabled them to wisely choose to remain on the Allied side.

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