

Preface

World War II is a significant period in the colonial history of Solomon Islands. As I will discuss throughout this book, it shaped the political and physical foundation of the country. The histories of battles fought in the Solomons theatre of war are among some of the well-documented histories in the world. However, most of these histories consist of dominant narratives of non-indigenous origin. Within these outsider narratives, Solomon Islanders, although clearly exercising choice and agency while playing an active part in the campaign, are often simply regarded as loyal and pliant subjects of the British protectorate administration. This perception, among other factors, pushes aside any islander-centred analysis of the war in Solomon Islands.

My interest in the history of Solomon Islanders' involvement in the war stems from my childhood curiosity at seeing unexploded ordnance and other war relics along the Guadalcanal coastal plains. My father worked for the former Solomon Islands Plantation Limited, and I grew up on one of the company stations. Every weekend, my parents would take us fishing at the beach and on the way we would stop at a coconut plantation and collect dry coconuts. Piled under one of the coconut trees were old artillery shells about 30 centimetres long. The first time my little brother and I found the explosives there were 12 in total, but every time we stopped for coconuts we would count the bombs and each time the number decreased. People (mostly young men) would take one and place it in dry brush and set it on fire, out of curiosity and as a form of entertainment.

During my primary and high school years, we studied the histories of major wars and political events in other parts of the world, ranging from World War I and World War II, the Suez crisis and the Middle East crisis of 1973, to the Vietnam War, Korean War and the Cuban missile crisis. No history lesson involved the study of Solomon Islands history in World War II. When I started university, the only knowledge

I had of World War II in the Solomons were the bombs and other relics I saw during my childhood. Added to this lack of knowledge was my embarrassment ensuing from a conversation with an American exchange student I met at the University of the South Pacific in Suva who impressed me with her knowledge of the Solomons Campaign, information I was ignorant about. This drove me to learn more about the war. In the process of job hunting after university, I met Sir Bruce Saunders at a Rotary club meeting in Honiara. Sir Bruce spoke about his passion for doing something about the history of the coastwatchers and the importance of their work during the war. I'd never heard of the coastwatchers, but I listened with great interest and expressed my wish to become part of the effort. A few weeks later, I started working with Sir Bruce and others to develop the Solomon Scouts and Coastwatchers Trust. Part of my job was to educate myself on the history of the scouts and coastwatchers. It is from this engagement that I came to realise both the significance of local efforts during the war and the absence of local narratives in published histories. I feel it is my responsibility to tell these stories as a Solomon Islander would. I am not able to include all the heroic local stories, but I hope this book will inspire other Solomon Islanders to document more historical narratives coming down from older generations.

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