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Chinatown, the club, hotels and the ‘black hole’

The harbour is now bounded on the Tulagi side with many buildings, starting with a hotel … then many government offices which some visitors from Australia described as b … little Kiosks. Then beyond the government station comes an ice factory, and engineering shops. Then comes the great reclamation which I was congratulated upon after starting to dry up that swamp upon which some hundreds of Chinamen now live. They have quite good buildings including about a dozen stores, some bakeries, a laundry and a restaurant where first class meals are reputed to be sold. Next comes an extensive set of buildings the property of W.R. Carpenter & Co. on Laycock’s old lease. They are in keen competition with B.Ps, still on Makembo [sic]. Further on are several blocks leased to Jack Newman and others, running right up to where the narrow passage separates Tulagi from the mainland.

— Ralph B. Hill, 1915

This chapter returns to the 1920s and its events and institutions. The first section discusses the role of hotels and the Tulagi Club in creating a settled urban community. The second section extends earlier discussion of the Chinese community and its importance to Tulagi. This is followed by an outline of the events around the 1927 killings on Malaita, which led to a massive and destructive government response. The chapter ends with the arrival of the first seaplanes, beginning a change to air transport, which

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1 PMB, Woodford Papers and Photographs, 151, Reel 2, Bundle 10, 2/26, Ralph B. Hill to C.M. Woodford, 22 January 1915.
eventually meant that Tulagi, regardless of the wartime damage, could not be the permanent capital of the BSIP. The planes were also a harbinger of the centrality of aircraft in the Pacific War.

Photographs and maps help us to judge the rapid development of Tulagi during the 1920s and 1930s. At the beginning of the 1920s, there were only about 30 Europeans—most of whom were members of the administration—plus growing numbers of Chinese. The Resident Commissioner, Government Secretary, Treasurer and Commissioner for Lands lived on one side of the bridge over The Cut, with the Judicial Commissioner, the Commandant of the Armed Constabulary and the Inspector of Labour on the other. The big changes on Tulagi seem to have come during the middle years of the 1920s. The commercial area grew rapidly and there was a telephone system connecting the government offices, as well as some businesses and private houses. Chinatown had many shops, jetties and houses, and Morris Hedstrom and then Carpenters also had their store, offices, staff houses and wharf there. Further around the coast, at Sasape, Johnny Chan Cheong (Chen Chang) operated a slipway and boatbuilding yard. Jack Ellis had his home and sailmaking shed nearby. The prison was situated at Point Tulagi at the entrance to the harbour on the south-eastern end of the island. A row of dilapidated concrete cells is all that remains today.

All the trappings of the British Empire were paraded when dignitaries visited. When high commissioner Sir Eyre Hutson arrived in 1927, Union Jacks, the BSIP flag and that of the Crown Colony of Gilbert and Ellice Islands were either flying or draped decoratively about. The European men were decked out in tropical whites and wore pith helmets (sola topes). Their wives wore light tropical dresses, observing the decorum of the day with hats and gloves. The armed constabulary paraded bare-chested in their tight-fitting sulus. Tulagi was a pretty British tropical town, picturesque and garden-like with its profusion of luxurious tropical plants. The hotels and the Tulagi Club were the centres of social life.

2 After the war, he was manager of the British Solomon Islands Trading Corporation in Honiara.
Hotels and the Tulagi Club

Tulagi Club
The Club was built delightfully beneath the palm trees tall.
There is a table in the billiard room and trophies on the wall.
There is a reading room and card room and bathrooms and a bar.
And all shines with electric light as brilliant as a star.
A lovely place is our Club, for when the day is through,
We can talk Tulagi scandal as only men can do.
And none can overhear us, the tale need not be true.
We are all good fellows in our Club, we laugh and chat and smoke
Over lots of tasty yarns and many a pungent joke.
We’ve a tennis court, a golf course, a swimming bath and lots
Of really jolly company to share a round of pots.
Yes! We’re all good fellows in the Club, but alas it may be told
That the beer tastes all the better and the stoutest heart’s more bold
When the latest scandal’s mentioned and the latest stories told.
We rush like rabbits to our Club for twice a day at least,
For a bit of spicy talk is like a noble feast.
It’s like turtle soup and roast beef and cream and caviar
For us to hear where Mrs ‘This’ and Mr ‘So-and-so’ are,
Oh! Yes, we’re noble fellows, but it sometimes seems to me
If we read some healthy books and drank a bit more tea,
A really truly decent place Tulagi Club might be.
Yes! After all our Club card room and our after dinner joke
Do not make up for the loss of friends and really decent folk.
But there’s but one trick to chat old Time, and that’s to follow youth,
And tell one better every time regardless of the truth.
For a long and lonely life we live when all is said,
So let us tell our scandal, then toddle off to bed.
The Club’s A1, but Oh! I wish I had a home instead.

— Kathleen Bignell

Before hotels were built, alcohol could be obtained wholesale and retail from different stores. While we do not know exact consumption figures for the Tulagi enclave, taking the 1926–27 BSIP Annual Report as a guide, that year the protectorate imported £8,554 worth of alcohol: £3,135 of the value in spirits, £1,135 in wine and £4,287 in beer. Most would have been consumed by the protectorate’s European and Chinese residents and visitors, and in today’s dollars, the value is close to A$664,700 or
This would have included clandestine sales to Solomon Islanders, but nothing approaching the huge total. The total foreign population of the BSIP was no more than 500, about 150 of whom lived in the Tulagi enclave. Some of the expatriates were teetotallers or were not big drinkers. One-third of Tulagi’s foreigners were Chinese—seldom big consumers of alcohol. The missionaries and expatriate women (there were no more than 100 in the BSIP) were probably not excessive drinkers or did not drink alcohol at all. A small number of Tulagi residents and visitors did a lot of drinking and the businesses provided the alcohol for the rest of the protectorate. If the steamer from Sydney was late, supplies ran low and on occasions were totally exhausted. When the steamer arrived, there was a gathering of schooners, cutters and launches at Tulagi, Makambo and Gavutu, with the BSIP residents intent on replenishing their supplies of alcohol and other commodities.

Plate 4.1 Tulagi in the 1930s, showing Elkington’s Hotel on the left on the top of the ridge
Source: NBAC, N115-513-4.

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5 BSIP AR 1926–27, 6; Golden 1993, 433.
Finding lodgings for visitors was always a problem. For all its delights, the club did not provide accommodation. Elkington’s Hotel, the first on Tulagi, was built in 1916 on the edge of the ridge on the harbour side. It was the earliest centre of social life on the island, providing excellent meals and rooms. Photographs show the hotel building raised on short concrete stumps and with wide verandahs. There were 10 guest rooms around a central dining room with a bar and parlour. If there were too many guests, they were allocated mattresses in an annex. The building was often insufferably hot as the site was sheltered from breezes. The proprietors, Thomas H.G. and May Elisabeth Ann Elkington, had installed carbide lights in the main parts of the hotel, enabling bright if dangerous illumination. Tom was born in Lincolnshire, England, in 1861 and arrived in Brisbane in late December 1886. A few months earlier, May Elisabeth Ann Bathe, born in Derby, England, in 1881, landed in Brisbane with her parents and a sister. The Bathes became tin miners in north Queensland and Tom and May married in Mt Romeo, near Cooktown, on 30 January 1907. Tom was also a miner in north Queensland. The couple moved to Samarai soon after they married and their son, Thomas junior, was born there on 17 November 1908. Their initial capital came from a large win at the races, which enabled them to have a prefabricated building sent to Samarai, where it became the core of their Cosmopolitan Hotel. In about

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1912, they moved to the BSIP and, by 1916, had applied for a land lease for a hotel. May decorated the hotel with her own paintings and artefacts from the islands and was the proud owner of one of the protectorate’s few pianos, a Brinsmead. When she was not playing to entertain patrons, the instrument was stored in an asbestos cabinet to keep out humidity.7 Wilfred Fowler describes a trip to the hotel:

I leaned against the bar with my foot on the rail and gazed round the place while I waited for Tom. Island trophies were displayed on the walls. Clubs, shields, spears and stone-head axes hung in profusion, and there were crescent-shaped body ornaments worked from gold-lipped shells, arm-rings made from clam shells and chief’s insignia in intricately fretted turtle shell. Tom took my order in silence. He wore a striped cotton shirt with a plain neckband. His face was shrivelled and lined and his hair and moustache were quite white. He had been more than forty years in New Guinea and South Pacific islands.8

Despite Tom Elkington’s taciturn demeanour, the hotel was the main early social centre. Sometimes people hired it out for private functions, such as in 1922, when Charles and Kathleen Bignell of Fulakora plantation on Isabel held a party for 40 guests—all of the leading Europeans from the Tulagi enclave and nearby plantations.9

The hotel had a monopoly during the 1910s and 1920s. In these early years, its patrons had a reputation for hard drinking and womanising (although few women were available), which made it off limits for more ‘respectable folk’. As Fowler recorded:

There were tales of fabulous spending at Elkington’s Hotel. Traders and recruiters off schooners used to come ashore in the twenties and buy up the entire stock of liquor. The copra slump had brought an end to spectacular extravagance but not too hard drinking.10

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7 Pop and Agnes Johnson also had a piano at Tulagi. In the 1900s, George O’Neil and his wife had a pianola at Gozoruru, Isabel, although the climate quickly took its toll on the rolls and the piano. The Edge-Partingtons had a piano at Auki on Malaita in the 1910s; they left the protectorate in 1915. Golden 1993, 314; BM, Thomas Edge-Partington Photographic Collection, Album 5, MMDscn1076. See also Boutilier 1984a, 189.
10 Fowler 1959, 157–58.
Fowler suggests that, in his later years, Tom Elkington ‘cultivated an air of rectitude’ and would not let his patrons ‘go beyond the limits he allowed in his hotel’.

May died in 1927 and Tom in 1930, after which the hotel was managed by their son, Tom junior, and then Bill Fyfe and his wife, before it was sold to J.A. (‘Johno’) Johnstone and John Mather.

No attempt was made to replace the hotel after a fire destroyed it in 1934.

The next building on the site was a Catholic church. By the time it burnt down, Elkington’s Hotel had competitors in Chinatown: one Chinese hotel and Sterling’s Hotel, two licensed Chinese restaurants, which seem to have doubled as bars, the Tulagi Club and Mrs Boyle’s boarding house. BP had a hotel licence for its branch store on Tulagi. In 1936, acting resident commissioner Kidson wrote that ‘no hotel will be built at Tulagi for many years to come’. He did not know how right he was.

Bobby Sterling, owner of one of the two hotels in Chinatown, moved to the Solomons in 1915 at age 20 and worked as a trader, planter and recruiter. A short, wiry man, he is rumoured to have made enough money from gambling sessions to open his small hotel, which became a haunt for less reputable Europeans, including those no longer welcome at Elkington’s Hotel. Colloquially known as the ‘Blood House’ (because of the number of fights that occurred there), it was not much bigger than the surrounding Chinese stores. There was a kitchen and bar, a room containing three iron beds and a verandah at the front. Fowler also visited Sterling’s establishment:

A babel of noise rose from the fog of tobacco smoke which hung over the bar. The night was sultry and men stood drinking, hairy chested and bare to the waist, wiping away sweat with the trade towels they carried. The lamps, flickering as flying insects got caught in the flames, cast a poor light on the whiskey advertisements and prints of undressed girls displayed in a calamitous attempt to enliven the place.

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11 ibid.
13 NASI, BSIP, A/RC N.S.B. Kidson to HC WPHC, 22 August 1936.
14 Golden 1993, 179.
15 Fowler 1959, 207–09.
Fowler described some of the staff and patrons. Behind the bar was Charlie Koenig, a ‘tall, big-boned man with a hard humourless face’.16 Charley Shatz, a sailmaker, was ‘a small man wearing a sleeveless vest and white drill trousers’, with white stubble showing on his bony chin.17 Drunken Peter Cullen, in filthy clothes, stood ‘swaying, wild-eyed and ill-looking, mouthing with incoherent anxiety’.18 A small American, bearded and with tawny sun-bleached hair and a body tanned leathery brick red, wore only a pair of tight-fitting shorts. He was sailing his yacht single-handed around the world and had perfected the art of always getting someone else to pay for his drinks.19 Some of Sterling’s patrons, it is said, became such a nuisance that resident commissioner Ashley ordered them deported. After Bobby Sterling died from cancer in Sydney in 1931, the hotel continued to operate under his name, with new ownership, until the Japanese occupation. Sam Doo (Du) ran the other Chinatown hotel, known under his name, which also had a good Chinese restaurant. As with Elkington’s and Sterling’s establishments, Sam Doo’s Hotel carried his name long after he left Tulagi.

Mrs Boyle’s boarding house provided accommodation for those wanting a less alcoholic stay. Other visitors to Tulagi were fortunate enough to be invited into the homes of the government officers, the company managers or other staff. For instance, in the 1930s, anthropologist Ian Hogbin always stayed with Spearline and Jessie Wilson when he passed through Tulagi.20 Important visitors were usually invited to stay with the Resident Commissioner.

16 ibid., 207.
17 ibid.
18 ibid., 209.
19 ibid., 208.
Plate 4.3 The Tulagi Club, 1920s
Source: NBAC, N115-520-7.

Plate 4.4 The Tulagi Club, 1930s. Shutters and sides have been added to enclose the verandah
Source: UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs.
In 1925, resident commissioner Kane raised the need for a ‘Europeans only’ club, proposing that the government pay £1,000 towards building expenses. This was authorised a year later, with the Tulagi Club paying £25 rent each year to use the premises. Kane estimated that the club would be visited regularly by 65 members: 43 headquarters civil servants and their wives, 10 ‘country’ or outstation officials and perhaps a dozen or so commercial or plantation-based individuals and their wives. Once the club opened in 1927, management was taken over by BP, presumably using their existing Tulagi liquor licence. Casual guests were welcome and government officers could join automatically, but other residents in the islands had to be nominated and only after they had been in the protectorate for six months. The vetting process was strict and membership fees varied. Protectorate officers each paid £3/3/- a year and their wives paid £1/1/-, which included their children. Rates for residents from outside Tulagi varied according to how far away they lived. Although it had no accommodation, the Tulagi Club was the premier social centre. Its recreational facilities and the bar and reading room were the drawcards. The bar was small—just a servery hatch where a Chinese barman dispensed the drinks. Members then retreated to the verandahs to drink. Chits were signed and bills arrived monthly. It became a venerable institution and it was considered a high honour to be invited to play golf or tennis with the current Resident Commissioner, who was president of the club’s committee. The club held an annual sports competition between government and nongovernment employees. Competitions between ‘the government’ and ‘the rest’ were played out in a ‘Five Events Cup’, with rival 12-man teams competing in golf, cricket, tennis, billiards and swimming in the shark-proof enclosure. Dick Gaskell junior was a sportsman of repute and, in the 1930s, always headed ‘the rest’. The competition was intense and expatriates came from all over the Solomons to compete. It ended with a ‘Five Events Dinner’ at the club, which always commenced formally but degenerated into a ‘sixth event’—a beer swilling competition.

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22 Brown 2007, 11.
Plate 4.5 The Tulagi cricket ground, 1935
Source: Annika Korsgaard Collection.

Plate 4.6 The Tulagi cricket ground, 2 April 1939
Source: Martin Clemens Collection, courtesy of Alexandra Clemens.
In Kathleen Bignell’s poetic assessment at the start of this section, the club was a hotbed of gossip—and men, not women, were the ones doing the drinking and gossiping. Eustace Sandars described his first trip to the club in 1928 (he later became its secretary):

The Club … was full of people, almost all the government servants who lived on Tulagi were there with their wives, and being steamer time, many of the outside plantation people were in Tulagi and they all came along to have a chat and a drink. The Club was the centre of all social life in Tulagi and many very pleasant hours I spent there. In the evening we generally used to play snooker. Everybody on Tulagi seemed to own a dog. There were dogs of all sorts sizes and descriptions and they all came along to the Club with their masters. Most of them lay down in the cool under the club until about six o’clock and then they all started, most of them wanted to fight each other.23

Fowler also left us a description of life at the club, including an evening of dancing:

We walked in couples down the graded coral-metalled paths to the golf-course. We could hear the dance music as we walked across the course to the Club. Coconut-palm fronds fixed along the verandah, a crudely fashioned archway of foliage over the entrance and sprays of purple bougainvillea displayed in corners of the building and tied against the wall, all failed in their purpose. They were not decorative—they merely gave the Club a raffish and untidy appearance. Kelsey and Hardy left us as soon as we arrived, but the rest of the men danced in turn with the women on the Club verandah.

There were twice as many men as women at the dance and the women, warm and moist in the still close night, danced heroically time after time to the gramophone music. The sweating, animated crowd grew boisterous as the night advanced. The Club boys brought us drinks to the table outside, where we sat watching the incoming tide washing over the coral shark-barrier at the bathing-pool.24

Dick Horton, a district officer who arrived on Tulagi in August 1937, found the community friendly. He noted that ‘life was somewhat circumscribed by the local conditions and any new arrival was a heaven-

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23 PMB, Sandars, Papers on the Solomon Islands, 7.
24 Fowler 1959, 184–85.
sent gift for dissection and discussion’. Much of this took place on the golf course or at the Tulagi Club—the social centre in the evenings and weekends. Along with billiards and table tennis tables, there were reading and dining areas, with comfortable wide verandahs on which to relax. The King George V cricket ground and the tennis courts were next to the club and a nine-hole golf course had been laboriously constructed from nearby swamp land. Unusual hazards included the wireless towers, coconut crabs that stole golf balls and a ninth hole beside the sea, into which many balls disappeared. Sandars described the course as

something very strange to me being sand browns and not greens. It was kept in beautiful order and provided you kept straight there was no problem but, once off the line there were crab holes down which a ball went and that was the end of them until the crab had eaten them and spewed them up again being quite worthless both for him and for you.

Tulagi’s men, particularly if single, spent a great amount of time at the club, and visitors usually ended up there being entertained with tall tales of crocodiles and sharks, big fish that got away, dangerous sea voyages, the problems of living with malaria and, of course, the ‘natives’. Women also included the club in their social circuit, usually in the afternoons for a swim, a game of tennis or to read the overseas newspapers. In 1933, Jessie Wilson described the small procession needed if she wished to descend from her house on the ridge to visit the club:

I think I’ve told you that we are on a hill about 400 feet [120 metres] above sea level, although we are nearly within stones throw of the beach & to get the pram down the Hill on to the flat road it has to be carried by two boys & another walks behind to carry Ann & then I come along with Michael by the hand. So you see it is quite a complicated business to get a game of tennis & golf. One boy then pushes Ann around about the club & another plays with Michael on the beach. The other one came back to cook the dinner & ‘Mother’ plays at something till 6 pm, & then begins to round up the family. Of course when ‘Father’ is at home he can stay on the hill & mind the family.

26 PMB, Sandars, Papers on the Solomon Islands, 7.
Plate 4.7 A tennis court, next to the Tulagi Club
Source: UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs.

Plate 4.8 The Tulagi golf course and the Tulagi Club
Source: UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs.
Chinatown: Flourishing despite prejudice, 1920s and 1930s

While the European residents may have seen the Tulagi Club or Elkington’s Hotel as the social centres of Tulagi, for Solomon Islander residents and visitors, Chinatown was central and welcoming. Chinese merchants learnt not to hurry Solomon Islanders deliberating over purchases. They went ‘eye shopping’ or made small purchases; they could lounge about, get something to eat and maybe purchase some forbidden alcohol. Chinatown consisted of a two-sided row of shops. The settlement abutted the coast and buildings on the outer side had several wharves, which enabled the Chinese trading schooners to tie up close by. Dr Hetherington was worried about the prevalence of malaria, and in 1927 focused his attention on Chinatown:

Chinatown will require special attention of its own for the control of malaria. Built practically in a swamp, the water in its drains flows slowly back and forth with the tide, the ground between drains is marshy and sodden. There are many depressions & crab-holes with water either fresh, brackish or frankly salt.29

29 WPHCA, No. 2010 of 1927, Dr H.B. Hetherington, Report of Malaria Control Measures, Tulagi, 7 March 1927, enclosed in RC to WPHC, 8 August 1927.
Typical of Chinatowns in the Pacific, the wooden shops fronted the street, with the homes at the rear. There were shady front verandahs with crisscrossed wooden batons, with the eves, walls and railings painted in blue, red or green. There was one difference from most other Chinatowns, in that quite substantial buildings were built on the wharves to cope with the swampy land, expanding the living and shopping areas. Solomon Islanders saw Chinatown as the social and economic core of Tulagi and they felt comfortable there, just as they did later in Gizo’s or Honiara’s Chinatowns. The Chinese also employed Solomon Islanders. The oldest shops in Gizo’s and Honiara’s Chinatowns today are quite similar in style to those once found on Tulagi.

One of Tulagi’s early restaurants was begun in 1925 by Alois Akun, representing a Rabaul company owned by the Chan (Chen) family. Alois (a contraction of Aloysius) Akun may have been a relative of one of the three Chan brothers who arrived in Rabaul in 1894, 1897 and 1902, respectively, originally from Taishan County, with the first two arriving via Singapore.30 His name matches that of the youngest Rabaul Chan brother, who had been given a good European education. In 1902, Rabaul’s Aloysius Chan became the first Christian Chinese in the town, and over the following decades, he established one of the largest wholesale businesses in east New Guinea. Tulagi’s Alois Akun also became prominent in business. He was allowed to open stores in Gizo and the Shortlands. The reason seems to have been an attempt by the government to provide some competition with BP, which was placing an exorbitant mark-up on its goods, both to Solomon Islanders and to local planters.31

31 Bennett 1987, 208; WPHCA, 2564/1926, Paper 3 of the Special Meeting of the Advisory Council, 30 June 1926.
Plate 4.10 Chinatown in the 1930s, with BP’s Makambo Island in the background
Source: UQFL, Wilson Papers and Photographs.

Plate 4.11 The main street of Chinatown, 1938
Source: NASI, BSIP Photographic Collection.
Quan Hong, who arrived at Tulagi as a carpenter in October 1924, was granted a licence to trade at Gizo in 1927, where he began a partnership with other Chinese from Tulagi. The Yip (Ye) family from Kaiping County were other early arrivals. In 1926, Yip Yuk brought out his two teenage nephews, Yip Sing (Ye Xing) and Yip Choy (Ye Cai), to work for him. Like Alois Akun, Leong Ben moved from Rabaul to Tulagi, where he became a boat builder and repairer. A mechanic, Chan Wing (Chen Rong), arrived in Tulagi in the 1930s to establish his own ship-repair business. Today, this family runs the Honiara Hotel, Wing’s supermarket and the Chan Wing shipping company, all based in Honiara.

Map 4.1 ‘No. 2’, the commercial area on Tulagi, circa 1934
Source: Cartography by Vincent Verheyen.

33 Willmott (2005, 12–13) provides details on the origins and approximate years of arrival of these settlers.
Chinatown (Map 4.1) was part of what became ‘No. 2’, the extensive commercial area on Tulagi. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the area spread to cover all the coastal land between the Hollis Brothers’ iceworks and Chan Cheong’s slipway at Sasape. Carpenters held the largest piece of land, of more than 5 hectares adjoining Chinatown. Next to them were R.C. Symes, the Malayta Company Limited (the commercial arm of the SSEM), the Australasian Conference Association Limited (the commercial arm of the Seventh-day Adventist Church) and Dick Laycock’s store, then Ellis’s sail repair business and Chan Cheong’s slipway business.

During the 1920s, Tulagi’s Chinatown grew to such an extent that it was surveyed and, in 1929, had a street plan imposed.34 In June that year, Mr Lin, the Chinese Consul-General to Australia, visited Tulagi and helped negotiate the long-term residence of 10 Chinese families. Tulagi’s Chinese community maintained its Rabaul and Guangdong links, and also developed strong connections with the Australian Chinese business community. Several Tulagi men were shareholders in a joint-stock company that produced the *Chinese Times*, a newspaper published in Melbourne between 1902 and 1922, which was later moved to Sydney as the media organ of the Guomindang (Kuomintang).35 While the Chinese experienced discrimination in the protectorate, their overseas links enabled them to be part of a much wider Chinese diaspora.

There are many good photographs of Chinatown, which show its extent and complexity. Using a late 1930s photograph and imposing on it the 1922 land leases detailed in Chapter 2 (Map 2.1) gives some idea of the possible sites in Chinatown.

34 BSIP AR 1929, 12; Knibbs 1929, 264.
35 The Tulagi shareholders were Long Kock (Guo Long), Joe Youm (Ren), Long Sun, Hoe (Hao) Chen, Leong Lum (Liang Lin) and Tomo Moo (Tumu Mu). The final name is not clear; it could also be Jono Mao (or Moo or Mu). Information from Mei-Fen Kuo, 19 November 2015. There is a photograph and story in the *Chinese Times* (Sydney), dated 25 June 1920. The sources are in the Archives of the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia (Sydney). The reference number is 523-01-297.
Plate 4.12 Chinatown in the 1930s, with identification of the leases added from Map 2.1 (1922)


Source: Annika Korsgaard Collection; cartography and numbering by Vincent Verheyen.

The BSIP’s Chinese community grew quickly—from 55 in 1920, to 90 in 1925, 164 in 1931 and 193 in 1933. Chinese numbers then dropped slightly, to 180 by 1941. The Crown Colony of Hong Kong Government did not issue passports and they were difficult to obtain in China, which is usually given as the reason the Solomons’ numbers declined, although, in comparison, the Rabaul Chinese community increased in size during the mid to late 1930s. The majority of Solomons Chinese lived on Tulagi. Chinatown was replete with trade stores and eating places. Saturdays became the regular market day on the nearby shore, where swarms of Gela canoes brought produce to sell. Chinatown was exotic, and Fowler had a good eye for detail:

We walked down the slope to the waterside path, past the offices and the wharf, and then on for a quarter of a mile to a cluster of flimsy wooden shacks with coral jetties leading off to deep water. This was where the Chinese lived—hard working traders in piece goods, cheap lamps, fish hooks, jews’ harps, beads, pipes and gaudy-labelled low-grade tinned food. Their schooners lay at the

36 Laracy 1974, 29; NASI, BSIP 14/6, RC C.M. Woodford to Resident Magistrate T.W. Edge-Partington, 24 December 1911, BSIP 14/60, District Officer W.R. Bell to Resident Commissioner, 12 June 1927.
38 Knibbs 1929, 274; Godfrey 1928, 6.
end of the jetties, discharging trochus shell and copra or loading with trade goods. High-pitched chatter, sibilant exclamations and the clatter of counters disclosed a session of fantan in one of the sheds we passed.  

Smart Chinese traders turned on their gramophones to attract customers to buy their enticing wares, as Stanley Knibbs described:

Clocks that grind out a tune every hour instead of striking, electric torches with enormous lenses suggestive of correspondingly large powers of illumination, accordions adorned with gaudy tinsel of every colour, loin-cloths of startling hue and design.

The traders also let off firecrackers and in the evenings lit their premises with colourful paraffin lamps. European residents shopped in Chinatown and, if comparisons with Rabaul’s Chinatown are valid, Chinese-style women’s matching pants suits and silk pyjamas were easily available and cheap, as were rattan and wooden furniture—all imported from Asia. Basic work clothes for men were also sold there.

Many of the Chinese were single men, but there was a core of married couples with a few children. Eugen Paravicini visited Tulagi in the late 1920s, staying with Carpenters’ manager on the far side of Chinatown. His description of Chinatown is not flattering as he failed to realise the control the administration placed on Chinese migration and allocation of space. They were only allowed to use the Chinatown site because it was an unwanted low-lying area:

At the beach of Tulagi, the Chinese erected dirty corrugated iron huts. One can see that the Chinese prefer confined settlements, even far from home while the dwellings of the Europeans are spread over a big area. The Chinese quarter looks sad: broken boxes, bits of jute sacks, broken glass and petroleum cans are all over the place, creating plenty of little puddles, an ideal breeding place for mosquito larvae. No wonder that Tulagi has a reputation for being the source for malaria. Out in the sea natives and Chinese live in stilted huts which are poorly mended with corrugated iron and therefore look quite neglected.

40 Knibbs 1929, 275, see also 339–40.  
42 BSIP AR 1927, 10, 1934, 13.  
43 Paravicini 1931, 43.
Chinese traders—deliberately discouraged by government policy from establishing permanent stores outside Tulagi—managed to trade from vessels around the coast, collecting copra and trochus shell. Photographs show seven jetties in Chinatown—an indication of the network of Chinese traders that existed and the centrality of the Chinese community to commerce.

Restrictions were eased during the late 1920s and 1930s, allowing Chinese to set up stores at Midoru on Isabel, at Gizo and the Shortlands in the north, Aola on Guadalcanal and on Malaita. Johnny Chan Cheong expanded his Tulagi and Gizo-based operations to Isabel. Yee Poy (Yi Bo) used his base in the Shortlands to trade locally for trochus shell and copra, extending his operations to include Choiseul. A partnership between Akun, Quan and Chow (Zhou) operated from Gizo. This was eventually replaced with Quan Chow (Guan Zhou) Company, trading throughout the Western and Central districts. In 1917, Leong Tong (Liang Dong), on behalf of Man Cheong and Company of Tulagi, applied for land for a trade store on Malaita, which was refused. The same Chinese company tried again in 1920, through Ay Choy (A Cai) representing Kwong Chong and Company, an associated company. They were refused again. Finally, in October 1927, Malaita’s district officer William Bell recommended that Chinese traders be allowed to establish trade stores at Su’u on the south-west coast and at `Ataa on the north-east coast, but not at Auki.\(^4^4\) In 1934, Quan Chow Company leased the former Mala Development Company chain of trade stores around Malaita, then owned by Messrs McLeod, Bolton and Company. These Chinese companies used Tulagi’s Chinatown stores and the big companies (Carpenters, BP and Levers) to obtain wholesale supplies. Kwong Chong Company’s success was only possible because of the economic downturn in the 1930s, which caused European-owned trading companies to withdraw from the outer districts.

\(^{44}\) NASI, BSIP 14/48, DO W.R. Bell to RC C.R.M. Workman, 22 March 1920, 14/14 Workman to Bell, 27 February 1920, 14/60, Bell to Workman, 12 June 1927, 14/25, Government Secretary to Bell, 5 October 1927.

Plate 4.13 Solomon Islands leaf houses and a substantial Chinese house built over the water in Chinatown
Source: NASI, BSIP Photographic Collection.

Plate 4.14 Solomon Islands leaf houses built over the water in Chinatown, and a Chinese trading vessel
Source: Clive Moore Collection.
The big British and Australian merchant firms continued to oppose the Chinese, wanting to limit the size of Chinatown and stop any development of Chinese stores in other parts of the protectorate. They were assisted in 1925 by an eight-man deputation (of planters, traders and Reverend John Goldie) to the High Commissioner, attempting once more to place controls on the Chinese. This time, the stress was on the ‘degeneracy of native morals’—mainly through gambling and the dangers from opium consumption—and the lower standard of produce collected by the Chinese. The Chinese were accused of overflowing Tulagi’s Chinatown and inculcating the protectorate with ‘Asiatic national ideals’. The petition complained that the Chinese were providing ‘rest houses’ (shelters for Solomon Islanders visiting Tulagi), which encouraged loitering and vagrancy. The petition alleged that the Chinese were breaching the curfew imposed on Solomon Islanders and Chinatown, and that the gambling they encouraged could lead to assaults on European women:

>[A] number of attempted assaults on European women resident at Tulagi have taken place during the last two or three years. We are of the opinion … that these are encouraged by the fact that natives are, by the facilities afforded, encouraged to leave their quarters for the purpose of gambling, and to remain away from them until a late hour. It is a very simple matter for natives to leave the gambling dens during the night and to make their way into European houses.45

One Chinese was accused of consuming £40 (about A$3,200 in today’s money) worth of opium a month, and others were said to live in local villages with their Solomon Islander wives. The petition topped it all off with the ludicrous accusation that the majority of the Chinese were members of the ‘Kuo Min Tang’, which the petitioners erroneously claimed was ‘essentially the Communist Party of the Chinese Republic’. Finally, the petition requested that the Chinese be limited to contract work as ‘mechanics, tradesmen, [and] domestic servants’.46 Their request was denied.

45 WPHCA, 1184/1925, Deputation to High Commissioner of Representatives of Residents, 29 September 1925, transcript, and Annexure C, read by H. Chaperlin.
46 ibid.
Plate 4.15 A branch of Jiang Jieshi’s (Chiang Kai-shek’s) Chinese Nationalist Party, the Guomindang (Kuomintang or KMT) operated on Tulagi from 1925. The building dates from about 1927

Source: Queensland Museum, EH15349 2.

The Resident Commissioner had total control over all entries without a passport. A 1922 regulation required all new arrivals to have at least £50 in cash, to ensure they did not become a burden on the government. Employers also had to post a bond to cover the repatriation costs of all workers brought into the protectorate and, in 1928, a new regulation levied a bond of not less than £20 on jobless immigrants. While there was no mention of the Chinese, the intent was obvious.\(^\text{47}\) Restrictions became harsher in 1929, and in 1930 Chinese traders were limited to the exact localities stated on their trading licences. Djenbien Young (Dianbin Yang), a Chinese consular officer from Sydney, arrived in Tulagi in March 1931. He registered diplomatic complaints about the discriminatory restrictions, much to the annoyance of resident commissioner Ashley. However, when Sir Murchison Fletcher became High Commissioner in 1930 (earlier in his career he had been posted to Hong Kong) and the Depression began to bite, circumstances changed. Fletcher believed that a Chinese presence could be an advantage. Most restraints on the Chinese were lifted in 1933, although they were still forbidden to obtain freehold land.\(^\text{48}\)

\(^{47}\) Willmott 2005, 17.
\(^{48}\) ibid., 16–17.
The smaller European companies did not want to face Chinese competition, but the major companies—although they raised the usual complaints about the corrupting influence of the Chinese on the local people through gambling, alcohol and other vices—could survive without being beholden to the Chinese middlemen. The big companies also made use of the itinerant Chinese trading vessels, buying village-sourced copra and trochus shell from them, and selling them wholesale goods. The latter was an attempt to lessen Chinese imports directly from Sydney, Rabaul and Hong Kong and thus bind them into local European commercial networks. In 1930, an article in the *Pacific Islands Monthly* accused the Chinese of falsifying the weights of ‘native’ copra by adding water to swell the dried coconut flesh and lamented that the Chinese had been allowed to prosper beyond their rightful place as labourers and domestic servants.

In 1931, five European traders on Isabel protested to the Resident Commissioner about the introduction of Chinese trade stores on the island. Two years later, Harold C. Corry of Ivatu plantation on Guadalcanal, wrote to the WPHC High Commissioner complaining about extra trading licences recently granted to the Chinese. He claimed that they were inconstant in their purchases of copra and ivory nuts, were governed by the markets and that their real reason for being floating traders was to sell inferior Asian merchandise to labourers. The implication was that European traders did not react to markets or sell inferior goods—both unlikely. Once more there is a reference to these goods being cheaper than similar products sold by European traders or on plantations, which made the Chinese traders more competitive. Corry’s only solution, during the hardship years of the Depression, was

in self-defence to buy Chinese and Japanese goods from Hong Kong when I could have obtained goods of British origin though at an enhanced cost. The quality of the British goods gives better value for the money but the natives prefer to take the cheaper article.

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50 Chaperlin 1930.
51 WPHCA, 3223/33, H.C. Corry to HC, 8 September 1933.
Corry’s gripe was discussed in Suva and, interestingly, Anglican Bishop Walter Baddeley supported the Chinese, saying that they ‘gave the natives a squarer deal than the European trader’. One of the solutions was to encourage Solomon Islanders to become traders, cutting out the need for European or Chinese middlemen. However, even after a reduction in the licence fees for Solomon Islander traders, this did not work. The acting Resident Commissioner reported to Suva that, as of December 1932, there were only 12 store licences and 61 hawker licences issued to Solomon Islanders, the former in only two districts. The response supported the Chinese:

The average Solomon Island native had little aptitude for business and practically no sense of economic values and cannot face the competition of European and Asiatic traders. Further the physical nature of the islands renders trading for a native storekeeper’s position an unenviable and unprofitable one. In conclusion the Acting Resident Commissioner considered that native interests in the Protectorate would best be served by unrestricted Chinese trading for many years to come.

The Chinese were restricted again in 1936 when the government began to think once more about fostering indigenous entrepreneurs. By the mid-1930s, there were about 30 Chinese in business at Gizo and another 100 at Tulagi; a few more Chinese women had joined the Tulagi community. There are indications that there was also a mixed-race community on Tulagi, with part-Chinese and part–Solomon Islander children.

A branch of Jiang Jieshi’s (Chiang Kai-shek’s) Chinese Nationalist Party, the Guomindang (Kuomintang), operated a community hall with a room at the rear that provided accommodation for new arrivals and served as a home for any destitute Chinese. The Guomindang was active at Tulagi from about 1925—initially led by Quan Park. Tulagi’s Guomindang building seems to have been constructed in about 1927 and expanded in

52 WPHCA, 99/33, 2592/31, Precis, Trading by Natives in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate.
53 ibid.
54 Weetman 1937, 34. Bishop Steward denied this in June 1926, telling the Advisory Council that there were no Chinese mixed-race children in the protectorate. WPHCA, 2564/1926, Paper No. 3 of the Special Meeting of the Advisory Council, 30 June 1926.
the 1930s by adding two side wings. Europeans seldom understood the dual purpose of the Guomindang branch, which was political and social, acting as a community centre.

Chinese continued to work for the administration, usually as tradesmen, and there were a few Europeans who worked with or for the Chinese, based in Chinatown or assisting their business negotiations. C.E. Minns, who ‘floated’ around the protectorate from the 1920s, working on ships and managing plantations, spent his final years in poor health on Tulagi, where he was in and out of hospital. He held a lease on a piece of coastal land at Sasape, worked as a boot repairer in Chinatown and died in 1934. Arthur L. Threlfall was another ‘floater’, a rough ‘knockabout’ type from Sydney. He had managed a store at Marau Sound, Guadalcanal, where he had a reputation for mistreating the local people. Threlfall married Isobel (Bella), the part-Solomon Islander daughter of a local settler named Bill Dumphy. They moved to Tulagi in the 1930s. Threlfall had different jobs, including managing stevedores and working behind the bar in Sterling’s Hotel. Though fluent in Pijin, many of the Chinese wrote English poorly and relied on friendly Europeans to help them arrange business deals and negotiate with Western suppliers, often for a fee.

Although always marginalised, the Chinese were central to the retail trade in the protectorate. Europeans appreciated their trade skills, cursed their entrepreneurial flair and patronised their stores. Solomon Islanders availed themselves of the cheap goods in the Chinese trade stores and probably thought little of their Asian languages and customs, which were

56 I have two photographs of the building, one held by the Queensland Museum and one from the collection of Mei-Fen Kuo. The Kuomintang records in Sydney indicate that eight BSIP Chinese joined the party in Sydney in 1921. Their chairman was Ceng Chang-yan (曾昌言) and the secretary was Zhang Huan-ting (張煥廷). The Solomon Islands Kuomintang branch was officially launched in August 1923 by Yee Wah (余) as a sub-branch of the Rabaul Kuomintang, which was established in 1922. In 1931, Tulagi’s Kuomintang became a branch of the Australasian Kuomintang in Sydney. The next year, the Chinese names listed as executive members of the Tulagi Kuomintang were Feng Nan (馮南), Guan Fei-yan (關非炎), Johnny Chan Cheong (陳章), Augustine Quan Hong (關洪) and Zou Gui (鄭). By 1933, the anti-Chinese restrictions had affected the Kuomintang but Huang Long-cai (黃隆才—possibly this was James Wang [Wang Desheng] [的中文名字叫]) and He Chi-de (何池德) helped to maintain the association. The executive members of the Kuomintang in 1933 were Huang Long-cai (黃隆才), Situ Chuang-guo (司徒創國), Liang Yi-chi (梁意池), He Chi-de (何池德) and Chen Deng (陳登). I am indebted to Mei-Fen Kuo for this information on the Kuomintang in Tulagi. I have included her use of Chinese characters in the hope that it will aid future research into the Solomon Islands Chinese community. Kuo and Brett 2013.

57 Golden 1993, 114.

58 Bill Dumphy died in 1922. Planters’ Gazette, 6 May 1922, 9.

59 ibid., 156.
just as alien as those of the Europeans. The early decades of the Chinese presence began the ambivalent relationship that still exists today between Solomon Islanders and Asian businesses. White residents on Tulagi were outnumbered by the Chinese, although if we add in Gavutu, Makambo, Bungana and Tarana, the balance is more even. Commerce was always dominated by the big British and Australian companies. Nevertheless, some of the Chinese companies were also substantial and prosperous, and some residents were unhappy about the level of Chinese dominance.

The Kwaio massacre: Imprisonment, disease and death

Incidents that occurred elsewhere in the protectorate also involved Tulagi as the centre of authority. One such event was the murder of district officer William R. Bell, cadet officer Kenneth C. Lillies and 13 police at Gwee’abe in Sinalagu Harbour at 11 am on 4 October 1927 during a tax-collecting patrol in the Kwaio area of east Malaita. Bell and Lillies arrived on the small government boat Auki, meeting up with the armed constabulary, who came overland from Auki. The police knew that trouble was brewing but pugnacious Bell, although he was amply warned, decided he could bluff the Kwaio. It was not in his nature to show fear or retreat and there were three other ships nearby, which would have reassured him. There was personal animosity between Bell and some of the east Kwaio bigmen, partly because several of their kin had been arrested and hanged for murder. By demanding that they turn in their guns without compensation (a Malaita-wide policy), Bell had further humiliated them. At the time of the attack, F.A.H. Bonnard was close by on the motorised recruiting schooner Wheatsheaf, pastors G. Peacock and John D. Anderson from the Seventh-day Adventist Mission were in the harbour on the Advent Herald and a labour recruiting schooner, Ruana, was working nearby. What followed was the most notable violent event in the prewar BSIP—both the attack and the vicious official retribution. It was also the most dramatic and traumatic event associated with the Tulagi enclave before the Pacific War.

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61 Akin 2013, 46.
62 The incident is described best in Keesing and Corris 1980.
Plate 4.16 Malaita’s district officer William Bell, who was assassinated in 1927
Source: Clive Moore Collection.
Men led by Basiana, primarily from three kin groups from inland of Sinalagu, mounted the attack. Their motivations were mixed and largely related to the ban on guns, taxation and the steady creep of government intrusion. Sacrifices were made to fighting ancestors to assist in the attack and there was a great deal of planning and discussion.63 *Auki* was anchored close offshore. Tax collecting began on Monday and the attack occurred the next day. On Tuesday morning, the two missionaries and Bonnard came to talk to Bell about leasing land in the harbour. Peacock and Anderson returned to their ship to prepare medical injections to give to people who had assembled on board. Bonnard, aware of the impending trouble, shifted his schooner further away. Bell and Lillies were sitting at their tables while the police were positioned inside the tax house to try to diffuse the tense situation. Men lined up to pay their taxes in the clearing by the beach.

About 200 men from inland groups appeared, bringing down a few old guns to surrender, which explains the presence of some weapons. They were clearly angry, shouting out, which caused concern among the armed constabulary, but not from Bell. The constabulary’s 14 modern repeating rifles should have been more than a match for a few old single-shot rifles, and Bell and Lillies had revolvers. Basiana joined the line twice, the first

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63 ibid., 108–25.
time paying his taxes. On the next round, he caved in Bell’s skull with a rifle barrel consecrated to his ancestors that he had concealed in a bag. Lillies received a glancing blow from a machete, but was able to retreat into the tax house and began shooting with his revolver. He killed two men with one shot before he was killed by a shot through his chest.

The police seriously wounded about half a dozen Kwaio and several others received superficial wounds. For a group armed mainly with old weapons coming up against repeating rifles and revolvers, the Kwaio inflicted considerable damage. The tax house was demolished during the fracas. The armed constabulary who were killed were mainly from north Malaita. Bonnard heard the noise of the attack and moved his ship closer to shore to pick up any survivors.64 One of Bell’s police swam to the Wheatsheaf but died soon after. Four police, all badly wounded, swam to the Auki. Bonnard sent his engineer in a dingy to start the Auki’s engine, bringing the government craft to the Wheatsheaf. In a state of shock, Bonnard then sailed both ships across to the Advent Herald, which was anchored at the mouth of the harbour. They all attempted to treat the wounded. Then the boson from the Auki and eight Christian Kwaio went ashore to collect the bodies of Bell, Lillies and the police. Bonnard used the Auki to tow the Wheatsheaf to the SSEM base on nearby Ngongosila Island, where the surviving police were given medical assistance and Bell and Lillies and the dead police were buried.65 The crew of Ruana also helped with the burials. Bonnard then sailed for Tulagi with the wounded police on board. Eighteen hours later, Auki and Wheatsheaf arrived at Tulagi, where Bonnard broke the news of the killings to the residents. Tulagi, Makambo and Gavutu were in turmoil. Talk of retaliation began immediately. The news reached the world via Radio Tulagi and was widely reported in the Australian newspapers. BP also sent wireless messages to Australia to reassure people who had relatives in the Solomons that the report of a ‘native uprising’ was exaggerated.66

When news of the attack reached Tulagi, resident commissioner Kane was touring the Eastern District, which left government secretary Norman Kidson in command. There was no evidence that the attack was more than an isolated incident, and indeed Bell could have faced a similar attack anytime during his years on Malaita, given his belligerent style.

64  ibid., 83–147.
65  ibid., 148–49.
of administration. Tulagi’s residents nevertheless convinced themselves that the incident could be the beginning of a wider Malaitan uprising and demanded severe and sudden retribution. Kidson was weak and acquiesced. He was a ‘pen-pusher’, with little feeling for the subtleties of life in the protectorate. Believing the rumour that the incident was part of an uprising, Kidson sent off a string of cablegrams. He managed to alarm the High Commissioner in Suva, who contacted the Colonial Office to request the admiralty to send assistance.

Kane returned to Tulagi on 10 October, by which time plans were irreversible. An Australian warship was on its way. He supported Kidson’s actions, realising that the mood at Tulagi favoured mounting a local retaliatory expedition supported by a naval force. The news of the attack spread quickly among protectorate expatriates, many of whom made their way to the town with offers of assistance. The harbour was soon full of small ketches, schooners and motorboats, their owners spoiling for a fight with the Malaitans. The Europeans believed that, with the assistance of the armed constabulary, bolstered by former members called back into service, they were more than a match for the Kwaio. Chinatown and the big commercial houses did a good trade, buoyed by the sudden influx of residents. BP and Levers pledged to provide coal and supplies to the retaliatory force that was gathering.

Meetings were held to choose the participants for the counterattack. Dozens volunteered and 28 were chosen. The special constables—ostensibly recruited to assist the naval personnel—were also imbued with a spirit of pure vengeance. Bell was well known: he had spent several years based on Tulagi before moving to Auki in 1915. Although the general feeling on Tulagi favoured retribution, even the most gung-ho must have begun to have doubts when they heard of the carnage that resulted in Kwaio and later when Kwaio prisoners began to die during their incarceration. The initial attack and the subsequent retaliation and massacre (mostly of innocents), then the unfortunate Kwaio deaths while in captivity and the executions and imprisonments were the main topics of conversation on Tulagi during late 1927 and early 1928.

The two main civilian players were Edward Geoffrey (Geoff) Clift and Charles V. Widdy. Clift, a 42-year-old planter, took charge. He had been in the Solomons since 1908 and had military experience from World

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A member of the BSIP Advisory Council, Clift was held in high regard and Kidson willingly chartered him one of the main government vessels, *Hygenia*, to collect a volunteer force of planters and traders to go to Tulagi. Clift, from an Australian pastoral family based at Breeza Plain inland from Tamworth, NSW, was a tough bushman; although endearingly he had a speech impediment that turned initial ‘fs’ in words into ‘ts’. Widdy began his Solomons career as an overseer at Levers’ West Bay plantation in 1923. Three years later, he became Levers’ plantation inspector for the Western Solomons, and in 1927 he was manager at Banika plantation, Russell Islands (Cape Marsh). Next, he became Levers’ manager at Gavutu. Widdy was notorious among Solomon Islanders for his violent approach to dealing with labourers.

When Roger Keesing and Peter Corris published *Lightning Meets the West Wind* in 1980 (the only extensive account of these events), few details were known about the special constables. Like me, those authors failed to locate the original list of names in the BSIP records. Keesing and Corris concluded that the majority were plantation owners, managers and staff, some were ex-military men, and by and large they were not young men. With the assistance of Keesing and Corris’s book, Graeme Golden’s *The Early European Settlers of the Solomon Islands*, supplemented by Judith Bennett’s *Wealth of the Solomons*, Margaret Clarence’s *Yield Not to the Wind* and a newspaper article in the Sydney *Sun* newspaper, it is possible to flesh out the origins of some of the punitive expedition’s participants. Kessing and Corris were largely correct, although they underestimated the connections to the Tulagi enclave. Once the *Hygenia* was chartered, Clift set off to Guadalcanal and the Western Solomons to recruit members for the expedition. Syd (‘Pansy’) Elder was the master and chief engineer of the *Hygenia*. Elder had arrived in the Solomons as a young man in 1919, after serving in World War I. By 1927, he would have been aged in his 30s. He drank heavily and his local crew often had to run the ship until he sobered up. Despite his early involvement, his name is not among those of the 28 special constables recorded by Charles and Kathleen Bignell. F.A.H. Bonnard may have joined the group, if he is the ‘J. Banard’ in the *Sun*’s list. He was traumatised by the attack at Sinalagu and his trip back

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68 ibid., 163.
69 Struben 1963, 15.
70 ibid., 427; Keesing and Corris 1980, 150.
71 *Sun* [Sydney], 10 November 1927, 14.
to Tulagi with the maimed, bleeding police. Bonnard had to recount his story many times on his first night on Tulagi and seems likely to have participated in the retribution.73

There are several men who have been identified as among the special constables whose names do not appear among the 27 in the Sun’s list. Johno Johnstone was one of these. His name first appears in about 1920 as an employee on the Malayta Company’s plantation at Aola, Guadalcanal, and later at Talina in the Russell Islands, in 1923. In the early 1930s, he and John Mather purchased Elkington’s Hotel. Later in the same decade, he became a gold prospector at Gold Ridge on Guadalcanal. In 1941, he worked for Hollis Brothers on Tulagi, the owners of the icemaking plant and cold store, which was a branch of the New South Wales Fresh Food and Ice Company.74 In his Tulagi days, he ran a butchery in tandem with the iceworks—a useful combination. After the Pacific War, he did the same thing in Honiara. In 1927, he would have been aged in his 20s or 30s and presumably had local knowledge useful for the expedition.75

Fred Campbell is also said to have participated in the attack. Campbell had been a NSW police officer, reaching the rank of inspector before he moved to the Solomons as commandant of the armed constabulary in 1912, followed by work as a district officer and then planter on Makira. A member of the BSIP Advisory Council, he would have been a useful participant; however, his name is not on the Bignells’ or the Sun’s lists.76 There is also doubt about John Edward (Bill) Adams, whom Golden lists as a special constable. He was probably a relative of the Clifts and, as he arrived in the Solomons in about 1919, there is the possibility that he also had a military background. An engineer, he was in partnership with A.W. Stirling in a small engineering business on Tulagi. In the 1930s, he became a Tulagi-based labour recruiter.77 There is a photograph of him with John McElhone (Jack) Clift and Johno Johnstone, supposedly taken of them on Malaita as special constables,78 yet he is not included in the

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73 Golden 1993, 100.
75 After the Pacific War, he moved to Honiara and, in the 1950s, was manager of the Honiara butchery for Ken Hay, on the site of the present-day Mendana Hotel. Moore (2013: entry for Kenneth Houston Dalrymple-Hay). The family surname is Dalrymple-Hay, although he seems to have called himself Ken Hay.
76 Information from Christopher Chevalier, October 2016.
77 Golden 1993, 114.
78 ibid., 115.
Bignells’ or the Sun’s lists. Nor is Bobby Sterling on the Sun list. He is supposed to have done well out of being a member of the expedition, making a good profit from gambling while on Malaita.79 Perhaps these men were on Malaita, but not officially as special constables.

There is more certainty about C.E. Minns and Anton Olsen, who was mentioned earlier in the chapter. Anton Daniel Olsen was born in Norway in 1885, making him 42 years old in 1927. He left home at 15 and was a seaman on the four-masted wooden sailing ship Susquehanna, which was wrecked off New Caledonia in 1905. The surviving crew drifted to the Solomons in lifeboats. Olsen’s boat was rescued by trader Oscar Svensen and Olsen and two others on board decided to stay in the Solomons. Olsen became master of Levers’ trading vessel Lindsay, working in the outer islands, mainly around Ontong Java, Sikaiana and Santa Cruz. Lindsay was wrecked in 1907, after which Olsen took command of another Levers’ vessel, Jessie. He married an Australian woman and leased land at Tenamba on Guadalcanal to begin a coconut plantation. A cyclone wrecked his plantation in 1916, after which he took up gold prospecting on Guadalcanal in partnership with Geoff Clift, while also working as an occasional labour recruiter.80

L.J. Hanscombe was another participant. He was well known to the Bignells as he was best man at their wedding in 1914, and we know he was their neighbour between 1928 and 1936 when he was manager of Hivo plantation on Isabel.81 The Bignells’ list also contains the names R. Cambridge, A. Dickes, R. Gaskell, R. Harper, C. King and F. King, J. Svensen, W.F. Wilmott and G. White. Rolfe Cambridge managed Aruligo plantation on Guadalcanal between 1930 and 1932, which was owned by Jack Clift and then sold to the Malayta Company in 1931.82 R. Harper (not on the Sun’s list) is presumably Richard (Dick) Harper, who arrived in the Solomons in 1922 after serving in World War I. Until the Pacific War, he had a lease on Mandoliana plantation, on a small island of that name off Gela Pile. He also worked as a trader and labour recruiter.83 Richard Luke Jack (Dick) Gaskell, son of Richard and Edith Gaskell, was born in 1915 on Tete Island in Sandfly Passage in the Gela Group. His father was a boatbuilder, planter, trader and labour recruiter.

79 ibid., 179.
80 ibid., 141.
81 ibid., 312, 331.
82 ibid., 122, 167.
83 ibid., 66, 101–02, 184.
who first came to the BSIP in 1906 to build Makambo wharf for BP. G. White is probably Charles Havelock Gordon White, who was involved in the yaws and hookworm eradication campaigns of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Between 1923 and 1936, W.F. (Bill) Wilmot held the lease on the small Malavare plantation on New Georgia. He would have known Jack Clift on nearby Seghe plantation. Jack Svensen was a son of Theodor Svensen, a leading early trader and planter, and a business partner of his better-known brother, Oscar. In 1918, Jack was manager of Lavoro plantation on Guadalcanal; in the 1920s, he negotiated a lease over isolated Kokomuruki Island on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal. He was married to Edith Elliot, the first nurse at Tulagi Hospital. C. King may be Charles King, a subinspector of police who worked for the administration on Malaita for two years after the Bell massacre, although it is odd that such a person would be a special constable. Alan W. Dickes had been a clerk in the Lands and Surveys Department and then became the Tulagi postmaster.

The Sun lists Monty Masterman as a special constable. He was the Inspector of Labour and features largely in this book. It would have been entirely in character for him to have participated. A name that appears to be B. Filiers in the Sun’s list is presumably F.B. Filose, clerk to the Resident Commissioner in 1925, acting District Officer for Aola (1925–26) and for Kirakira, Eastern Solomons (1927–28), and District Officer for Malaita (1928–29), Santa Cruz (1929–31) and Isabel (1932–33). Another name has recently come to light, Ian Troup, who appears on the Sun’s list as J. Troup. He was born in Aboyne, Scotland, in 1894 and joined the Gordon Highlanders 52nd Highland Regiment in 1914, fought on the Somme, was twice decorated (with MC and DC medals for bravery) and promoted to corporal. After the war, he returned to Scotland and worked in his father’s butcher’s shop in Aboyne, before taking up a similar job in Hong Kong. He left for Australia in 1923 and worked as a stockman in New South Wales before moving to the Solomons, where he also worked with cattle, presumably on one of the bigger coconut plantations where cattle

84 ibid., 88–89.
85 Bennett 1987, 277. See Chapter 7, this volume.
86 Golden 1993, 196.
87 ibid., 153–54.
88 Bennett 1987, 276, 357; Information from David Akin, 23 December 2016; NASI, BSIP 14/61, Malaita Annual Report 1929, DO J.C. Barley to Government Secretary, 17 January 1930.
90 Bennett 1987, 399, 401, 402, 403, 404.
were used to keep the undergrowth down. He suffered trauma from the events on Malaita and returned to Australia in December 1927 after his time as a special constable. His military training and possible plantation connections with the Clifts would have made him useful.  

I have been unable to locate any information about other special constables listed by the Bignells or the Sun and, as some of the newspaper names cannot be deciphered, we may never know.  

And while we can try to understand something of those who participated, we will never know who else considered participating but could not or who refused outright to have anything to do with the foolish venture. There are two illustrative examples. Charles Bignell did not volunteer, although he would have if his wife had not been sick. One of the most eligible who refused was Ernie Palmer, born in South Africa in 1904, who spent his young years in England and accompanied his father and brother Philip to the Solomons in 1919. Their father, Philip Sydney Palmer, developed a plantation on San Jorge Island, just off the Isabel coast, but was so harsh and bad tempered that the boys ran away. Geoff Clift took them into his care and Ernie became an island trader and labour recruiter—one of the best. In 1927, he was 23 years old, had a strong Clift connection and would have been very suitable, but he scorned the expedition.

Apart from Clift and Widdy, the special constables were not leading figures in the protectorate. The Clift family and Levers’ connections were strong and one suspects that the special constables were men whom the Clifts and Widdy knew well. While they were competent bushmen and seamen, none of them had much idea of how difficult the Malaitan terrain could be. The special constables were sworn in, issued with .303 rifles

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91 I am indebted to Lyn Innes for this information on her father, December 2018.
94 BSIP Blue Books 1925–26, 63.
95 Golden 1993, 103.
and underwent training on Tulagi. Some had prior military experience and most would have been able to use and maintain guns competently enough. They were paid £1 per day with an extra 5 shillings a day ration allowance. Kane armed his ship, the 300-ton Ranadi, with a Lewis automatic light machine gun, added a detachment of 25 members of the armed constabulary and then sent the ship off to Aola, Guadalcanal, to pick up district officer C.E.J. Wilson, who had a reputation for toughness. Ranadi then patrolled the east coast of Malaita. Wilson reported that the people were in a state of anxiety, expecting some sort of retribution.\textsuperscript{96}

Kidson’s request to Suva was passed to the British Admiralty and on to the Australian Naval Board in Melbourne, then forwarded to the Minister for Defence. The advice back to the admiralty was that Australia could immediately ready HMAS Adelaide, a 5,650-ton Town-class light cruiser constructed at the end of World War I, powered by coal and oil. Under the charge of Captain G.H. Harrison, the ship left Sydney on the evening of 10 October, carrying extra ammunition, tents, ground sheets, large numbers of Mills bombs (grenades) and food supplies.

Calling in the navy was anachronistic, which made the Australian Government uncomfortable, although its small fleet of ships was at the beck and call of Britain and the ‘uprising’ was on Australia’s doorstep. The general feeling in Australia was that Solomon Islanders needed to be shown who was boss. The final decision rested with Stanley Bruce, who had been Prime Minister since February 1923. He had served in World War I and belonged to the liberal-conservative National Party.\textsuperscript{97} Bruce assured the parliament that Adelaide would remain under Australian control. William Bell’s brother, Lieutenant-Colonel George John Bell, was a member of the House of Representatives—something that Bruce pointed out. The Australian newspapers were roundly supportive, with one noting that Adelaide’s captain had experience with ‘native outbreaks’ and would ‘put the Fuzzy Wuzzy in his place’.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{96} Keesing and Corris 1980, 154–55.  
\textsuperscript{97} Radi 1979.  
\textsuperscript{98} ibid., 154.
Plate 4.18 HMAS *Adelaide* and HMAS *Sydney* in Tulagi Harbour
HMAS *Sydney* was not part of the 1927 Malaita expedition.
Source: BM, Sir Ronald Garvey Photographic Collection.

Plate 4.19 The government ships *Ranadi* and *Hygenia* at Tulagi wharf, late 1920s
Source: BM, Sir Ronald Garvey Photographic Collection.
Initially, HMAS _Adelaide_ steamed at 20 knots, slowed to 16 knots on 12 October and arrived at Tulagi on 14 October. An officer and 17 sailors were sent ashore to bolster local law enforcement. The ship then proceeded to Malaita. Australia also dispatched the 9,700-ton naval collier HMAS _Biloela_ as the supply ship, commanded by P.B. Hugo. _Biloela_’s full speed was 11 knots. The ship left Sydney three days after HMAS _Adelaide_ and did not arrive at Malaita until seven days after the cruiser. As the cruiser made its way down the coast, the Kwaio Malaitans heard the deep vibrations from its engines long before the warship’s 140-metre bulk loomed into sight around Cape Aracides (Darongongora) on the border between the Fataleka and Kwara`ae language areas. HMAS _Adelaide_ anchored off the Kwaio shore while the land operation was carried out. A platoon of sailors was landed on 17 October.99 Resident commissioner Kane was on board, although after the first night he transferred to _Ranadi_ and left for Auki, where 3,500 Malaitans had visited the station, with hundreds volunteering to avenge the deaths.100 _Ranadi_ returned to Sinalagu carrying the special constables, plus Kane, Wilson and Captain E.N. Turner, the Commandant of the Armed Constabulary.101

The special constables came equipped with too much luggage, their own staff and an ample supply of rum and whisky—hence their description as the ‘whisky army’. They seemed to believe they had a right to attack all Kwaio, without any proof of their involvement in the original deaths. Perhaps Kane, Turner or Wilson had quietly told them that there would be no repercussions if they exterminated innocent Kwaio. Widdy later said they had been told they could ‘shoot any native on sight’.102

An initial camp was established near the beach, with an advance camp (Base B Camp) several hours’ march inland at about 1,000 metres above sea level and, finally, Base A Camp at Gounaile, Basiana’s village high in the mountains.103 There were about 50 naval ratings and 50 permanent and temporary members of the armed constabulary, 28 special constables and 211 north Malaitan carriers (some of whom were ex-police) at Base B Camp.104 The expedition had three Lewis machine guns, plenty of

100 Akin 2013, 47.
102 Akin 2013, 382, n. 27.
103 These names were provided by H.R. Wilmot, the leading telegraphist on HMAS _Biloela_. Information from his son Jeff Wilmott, Tallarook, Victoria, November 2010.
104 Akin 2013, 47.
ammunition and a wireless transmitter. Although the Europeans were ineffectual in the rugged mountainous terrain, the north Malaitan police and volunteers were efficient and ruthless, avenging the deaths of their own people among Bell’s police. They ranged far and wide, returning at night to Base B Camp. Women and girls were gang-raped, many were shot, children and old people were murdered and prisoners executed and mutilated. Gardens were sprayed with defoliants donated by Levers, pigs were killed and houses were destroyed. The retaliatory force roamed north to Uru Harbour, south into the ‘Oloburi area and into west Kwaio—far from where the attack occurred. Keesing and Corris estimated that around 60 people were shot and others—some children—died from exposure while hiding from the attackers. The Kwaio estimate of the number of deaths is far higher. Ancestral shrines and sacred men’s houses were desecrated, which the Kwaio believe caused their angry ancestors to kill more descendants later, through illness and mishap. A woman gang-raped by the police was taken to Tulagi, and after she became pregnant hanged herself in shame.105

Plate 4.20 Labourers being fed during the expedition to Kwaio, Malaita
Source: Jeff Willmot Collection.

105 ibid., 48; Keesing and Corris 1980, 166–68.
HMAS *Adelaide* began its return journey to Australia on 23 November. Captain Harrison did not turn his ship’s guns on the Kwaio and, once he realised there was no general uprising, he began to doubt the usefulness of the cruiser’s presence. This was the last time the British used a naval ship to attack Pacific Islanders. The naval presence was similar in style to the nineteenth-century expeditions that had regularly bombarded Malaita and other islands, indiscriminately destroying villages, although in this case *Adelaide* served only as the means of transport. The big difference was the high death rate inflicted by the police, the north Malaitan volunteers and the special constables. The special constables were not needed, they were disruptive and caused trouble. Although they were official representatives of the protectorate government, they were there to wreak vengeance, operating beyond the edge of legality.

One hundred and ninety-eight Kwaio men were taken to Tulagi prison. An astonishing 173 were hospitalised for dysentery during their time on Tulagi and 30 men died (28 in 1928 and two in 1929). Rather unconvincingly, the government tried to explain that some of the deaths were from old age and senility. While a few of the prisoners were elderly, that raises questions of why such vulnerable men were in prison, initially not charged with any offence, and what role they could have played in the
attack. Perfunctory trials eventually proceeded. Basiana and four others had turned themselves in to stop further killing of innocents. They were among the 11 charged with murder, six of whom (including Basiana) were executed. Seventy-one were tried for offences less than murder, of whom 51 were acquitted. Six were imprisoned for life, eight for 20 years, two for 12 years and one for three years. Their wives and families either fled further inland or took shelter in the SSEM villages along the coast or at the Seventh-day Adventist Mission base at Uru. There was little food left in their gardens and few materials available to rebuild houses.106

Reports of the indiscriminate killings soon leaked out. Kane had even recommended that, as a final punishment, all of the Kwaio should be rounded up and moved to Isabel, with the hope that intermixing with the Isabel people would genetically soften their aggression. Wilson and Kane tried to defend themselves and, in the end, the Tulagi administration closed ranks around the perpetrators.107 The upshot was an official investigation by Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Harry Moorhouse, the retired Lieutenant-Governor of Nigeria (1921–25). He concluded that ‘practically the whole of the adult males of the Sinarango tribe had been rounded up and lodged in gaol in Tulagi’.108 The deaths while in detention were defended in his report. There had been outbreaks of dysentery among the police who had taken part in the attack. Moorhouse concluded that the exposure to the disease had occurred on Malaita and was transferred to Tulagi. He also assured the British Government that as soon as the outbreak was evident, emergency procedures were introduced to try to isolate the disease and stop its spread. He said the old men who died ‘suffered from increasing feebleness and finally died from failure of the circulation’. The report exonerated the administration and denied accusations of callous neglect or that the term ‘The Black Hole of Tulagi’ (used in an Australian newspaper article) was at all appropriate.109 Moorhouse’s report questioned whether the implementation of taxation during the early 1920s was responsible for the Kwaio attack. He felt that Bell had taken a reasonable, gradual approach and that local circumstances were also involved.

106 Moorhouse 1929, 14; Keesing and Corris 1980, 184–86.
108 Moorhouse 1929, 10.
109 ibid., 18.
The Kwaio massacre and its aftermath were the largest and most severe random punishment ever meted out by British authorities in the Pacific. It was central to activities on Tulagi over several months in 1927 and 1928, and Kwaio people have never forgotten or forgiven the excesses.\textsuperscript{110} The strength of the reprisal also signalled to all Malaitans and Solomon Islanders more generally that, if they had not already realised, the British administration was too strong to resist by direct means.

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Such extreme dramas were rare. However, other events began to shape the fate of Tulagi. Aviation was the crucial transport change that eventually made Tulagi obsolete. The first aircraft to visit the protectorate, a De Havilland DH50A seaplane belonging to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), flown by Group-Captain Williams, arrived at Tulagi on 31 October 1926. The seaplane was on an aerial survey of Papua and New Guinea, Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa. Arriving from the north, it landed first at Shortland Islands, visited Gizo and a few weeks later landed at Tulagi. At each stop, the local

\textsuperscript{110} Akin 1999.
people were astonished. At Tulagi, the crew decided to obtain some new engine parts before travelling south and these were shipped in on the *Mataram*. Locals inspected the plane thoroughly while it was beached at Makambo. The crew shelved plans to fly further south due to poor weather and flew back north on 23 November.\textsuperscript{111}

The next plane to arrive was an old seaplane with an Anzani engine, imported to Tulagi by ship in the 1930s by Monty Masterman, the Inspector of Labour. After much tinkering, it flew for the first and last time, or rather skated along the water, before settling nearby at Bungana Island forever. Masterman could not swim and hacked off one of the floats to buoy himself until a Chinese trading vessel rescued him.\textsuperscript{112} We can be fairly certain that when he tried to join the Aeronautical Inspection Directorate of the British Air Ministry and the Auxiliary Air Force in 1936, he failed to mention this inglorious aerial escapade.\textsuperscript{113} Masterman and his flying machine must have caused a great deal of mirth.

The next two chapters concentrate on the 1930s and examine the type of colonial society that developed on Tulagi in its final years as the capital. Public servants developed an efficient administration and interacted, not always harmoniously. Eccentricity, alcoholism and petty hatreds abounded. Fears of racial and sexual relations with the ‘natives’ surfaced, similar to those present in New Guinea, the New Hebrides and Fiji at the time.

\textsuperscript{111} Knibbs 1929, 269–70; BSIP 1926–27, 3; *Solomons News Drum*, 1 October 1976. A set of stamps was issued in 1976 to celebrate the first flight.
\textsuperscript{112} Sandars 1971; Russell 2003, 56.
\textsuperscript{113} NASI, BSIP 1/P1/M58/22/1, S.G. Masterman to Secretary of State, 8 December 1936.
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