6. John Strasburg (1856–1924): A plain sailor

John Strasburg’s is not a conspicuous name in the maritime history of the Pacific. Hitherto it has rated barely more than a footnote in the literature. Yet, he is still a significant figure. This is not on account of any magnitude of achievement, for any dramatic acts of villainy or, indeed, for establishing a notable claim on the attention of his contemporaries by any other means. Rather, it is mainly because—unusual among his kind—he generated sufficient written records to reveal his participation in the busy and burgeoning commercial life of the Pacific islands between the 1880s and World War I. With a career that ranged from Tonga to New Guinea, and that lasted for over 30 years, he thus emerges as an accessible—and clearly identifiable—representative of an important, but relatively reticent and historically under-studied, class of people. That is, the seafarers who maintained the shipping networks that sustained European interests and activities in the islands during the colonial heyday; and, conversely, who were drawing island peoples into ever closer contact with Europeans, and so into increasing dependence on the goods and services that they could provide. While the lives of missionaries, merchants, adventurers and administrators in the islands remained strongly linked to the worlds beyond the horizon whence they had come, those of their indigenous clients, the capsule of their traditional self-sufficiency cracked if not yet broken, were also tending in the same direction.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, traders of diverse kinds—whalers and other predators of natural resources being prominent among them—had located virtually every serviceable anchorage in the Pacific. Regular mercantile operations were developing rapidly. ‘Beach communities’ of displaced Europeans had formed at commonly frequented ports. By the 1880s, from Sydney to San Francisco, from Auckland to Honolulu, from Valparaiso to Guam, and at various places in between, the Pacific shipping news had become a vital item in the local newspapers and in harbourside gossip. Most of the people who operated the vessels involved in this maritime efflorescence have, though, slipped into irreversible obscurity. That John Strasburg stands out from the crowd and becomes available for an extended discussion, one which also throws a rare light on the enterprises in which he was involved, is fortuitous.

It is largely due to two instances of self assertion on his part. In the first case, he published two retrospective magazine articles about trading voyages to the

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Solomon Islands in the early 1880s. In the second, he entered into a dispute concerning his service during the Australian military occupation of German New Guinea in 1914. This affair not only produced a voluminous correspondence but culminated in a parliamentary committee of enquiry. From these records, supplemented by meagre fragments of information from other sources, essential biographical details may be extracted. A picture of the man himself also emerges: energetic and enterprising at first, but eventually frustrated, broke and disappointed. Sadly, his was—and is—a not uncommon life trajectory. Nor is it one reserved to mariners, although it is difficult to avoid the impression that it was disproportionately so. Their’s has traditionally been a precarious occupation, despite the success of some, such as Robert Towns, who prospered in the south-west Pacific sandalwood trade of the mid-nineteenth century.

John Strasburg (originally Axel Johan Leonard Stridsburg) was born at Soderkoping, near Stockholm, in Sweden, in 1856, but grew up in the north of England. He was the son of a builder, whose name he also gives as John, and his wife Elizabeth. Little more is known of his early years, but he seems to have set out on a seafaring life at a young age, having served an apprenticeship on a north of England collier. In 1871 he became a naturalised British citizen. That procedure was repeated in Sydney, Australia, on 28 October 1892. Possibly it was required because the original papers of citizenship had been lost and he needed such evidence to obtain the pilot’s certificate for Sydney and Newcastle, which was issued two weeks later.

Meanwhile, Strasburg had resurfaced in the historical record in Fiji in 1883. This time it was as mate of the 69-ton fore and aft schooner Sea Breeze, which had been engaged in recruiting Melanesian plantation labourers since March 1882. According to the local newspapers, the vessel made three such voyages in 1883, although Strasburg says that he sailed on only one of them. With a crew of 33, and with 87 time-expired labourers to be returned to their homes, the Sea Breeze left Suva for the Solomons on the first of these trips on 1 April, at the end of the three-month-long hurricane season. Its other departure dates that year, in which the fleet of 16 vessels brought a total of 2,221 labourers to Fiji, were 5 August and 24 November.

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4 Dorothy Shineberg, They Came for Sandalwood: a study of the sandalwood trade in the south-west Pacific, 1830–1865, Melbourne, 1967.
5 Senate Report, pp. 3, 12; Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), 6 May 1919; Strasburg to Naval Secretary, 1 Mar. 1915, National Archives of Australia (NAA), A518, G822/1/3; Strasburg, death certificate.
6 Fiji Times, 18, 29 Mar., 10 May, 5 July, 9 Sept. 1882.
By his own account, contained in an imaginatively embellished memoir, Strasburg arrived in Fiji from Europe early in 1883, and quickly launched himself into the shipping industry servicing the burgeoning commerce of the south-west Pacific. The pace of development had picked up with the advent of the big German firm of Godeffroy, which had begun operations in Samoa in 1857 and, in the mid-1860s began purchasing land for plantations, and importing island labour to work them. At about the same time, other would-be estate holders were becoming interested in Fiji. By 1874 the number of foreign settlers there exceeded 2,000. Such were the problems of law and order attendant on this growth that the British Government—reluctantly—found itself impelled to take responsibility for governing the group. As had happened in New Zealand 30 years before, annexation stimulated further immigration. That, in turn, brought an expansion of planting and further demand for auxiliary services. In 1879, when European settler numbers had reached 2,671, people from India began to be introduced to Fiji. This was done in order to meet a surging demand for plantation labourers that could not be satisfied from generous but limited Pacific island sources. At the same time—in accordance with government policy—the Indians helped cushion the disruptive impact of settler activity on the traditional way of life of the native Fijians (taukei) by excusing them from plantation labour. In a further major response to the increasing scale and complexity of the European (kai vulagi) presence, in 1882 the capital of the colony was transferred from the confines of Levuka on the island of Ovalau to the more spacious and accessible location of Suva on the south coast of Viti Levu.

It was probably there that Strasburg landed in Fiji a year later. He promptly joined the *Sea Breeze*, captained by an experienced master, James Taylor, and set out to try his hand at recruiting. This was a precarious business. To the inherent, and frequently realised, perils of the sea was to be added the possibility of clashes with islanders when landing returned labourers or collecting new ones. Caution was always necessary, but, in the event, it was often insufficient. Strasburg spells this out in his *Sea Breeze* narrative, although with regard less to any experience of his own than to the massacre of the crew of the Fiji-based *Borealis* which had been attacked at Malaita in 1880.

Contrary to his statement that he embarked ‘in the beginning of 1883’, it is more likely that Strasburg sailed not on the first of the *Sea Breeze*’s three-month long voyages for that year, but on the second one. The itinerary he gives for

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9 Fiji Times, 9 Jan. 1884.
10 Strasburg, ‘Labor Recruiting’, p. 509. For the *Borealis*, see Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: a history of Solomon Islands labour migration, 1870–1914*, Melbourne, 1973, pp. 33, 57. Strasburg claims to have witnessed the reprisal that quickly followed the *Borealis* attack but the dates make that impossible. He also invents a story of a punitive raid by a naval vessel.
the vessel’s movements in the Solomons does not accord at all closely with that
given for the first voyage by Taylor. Thus, Strasburg offers Santa Ana, Malaita
(where in Uru harbour he mused on the Borealis attack), Mono (where he met the
flamboyant chief Mulekupa), Buka, and then back to Santa Ana for three weeks
for repairs before returning to Fiji. Taylor, in contrast, reports visiting Efate
in the New Hebrides before going to the Solomons, where he called at Nggela,
Guadalcanal, Isabel, New Georgia, Choiseul, Mono, Bougainville and Buka,
before returning—without incident—to Fiji.11 Besides, if Strasburg was on the
second voyage (the exact track of which cannot, unfortunately, be ascertained)
that would give credibility to his claim to have been in the Solomons when
the survivors of the labour ship Stanley were rescued from Indispensable Reef,
where they had been marooned for two months, by the trading schooner Venture.
The timing fits better, for that dramatic set of events occurred during July and
August.12 Alternatively, it is not inconceivable that Strasburg was on the third
voyage of the Sea Breeze rather than the second, and not ‘early’ but late in 1883
(and that he merely ‘borrowed’ the story he tells of that vessel’s being forestalled
in going to the rescue of the Stanley by learning of the Venture’s intervention,
in order to add colour to his own narrative). Favouring this hypothesis is the
fact that the master’s report of the third cruise gives a route not too unlike that
given by Strasburg: Santa Ana, Malaita, Buka, Malaita, Santa Ana.13 Why such
uncertainty about which voyage? Perhaps Strasburg’s memory was fading 35
years after the event? Even so, there is no reason to doubt that he did sail on a
recruiting voyage in the Sea Breeze, or to question his statement that afterwards
he never saw the ship or its captain again.

After two more long trips, the second of which extended to the islands at the
eastern end of New Guinea, the Sea Breeze, bound for Sydney, sailed from
Levuka in ballast on 28 March 1885—and vanished. No sign of it was ever
found.14 Likewise in 1885, Strasburg, rather more fortunate than his erstwhile shipmates,
entered the colony of New South Wales, where he would eventually settle. On
this occasion he arrived on the Ly-ee-moon, probably from Melbourne. This
vessel, built for the China opium trade and used as a blockade runner during
the American civil war, had been employed by the Australian Steam Navigation
Company on the Melbourne–Sydney–Brisbane run since 1876. Occasionally, it

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12 Strasburg, ‘Labor Recruiting’, pp. 508–509; correspondence re R v McMurdo and Davies, Fiji Royal
Gazette, 1884, pp. 203–226; Suva Times, 10, 20 Sept. 1884; William Wawn, The South Sea Islanders and the
13 Suva Times, 27 Feb. 1884.
14 Suva Times, 26 Mar., 17 Sept., 8 Oct. 1884; Fiji Times, 7 Jan., 4 Feb., 1 April, 27 June, 27 July 1885.
also relieved the *Gungha* on the regular Sydney–Fiji run, but there is no record of it having done so in 1885. It was lost off the south coast of New South Wales on 30 May 1886.\(^\text{15}\)

Soon after reaching Sydney, Strasburg states that he signed on as mate aboard the 100-ton *Princess Louise*, under Captain Sam Craig, bound for a trading voyage to the Solomon Islands. In 1891 Craig, then mate of the *Sandfly*, was killed at Makira by a returned labourer in revenge for some of his fellows who had died in New Caledonia.\(^\text{16}\) According to an article Strasburg published in the *Lone Hand* in 1914, he sailed on the *Princess Louise* voyage in 1884. This would have meant a trip that lasted from 25 June 1884 to 7 January 1885.\(^\text{17}\) But, in addition to the contradictory statement that he did not reach New South Wales until 1885, internal evidence suggests otherwise. Strasburg mentions that during the voyage the *Princess Louise* rescued the crew of the German-crewed, Samoa-based labour ship *Haapai*, which had run aground near Fauro in the Bougainville Strait, and took them to Mioko, the Deutsche-Handels und Plantagen-Gessellschaft trading post at the Duke of York Islands—and that while there he met the piratical Niels Peter Sorensen. These claims, though, relate to events that occurred in 1885. Consequently, to have participated in any of them Strasburg must have been on the next voyage of the *Princess Louise*, which lasted from 21 March to 14 December 1885.\(^\text{18}\) Again, faulty recall presumably explains his factual error about the order of events.

In the Solomons the *Princess Louise* traded principally for coconuts and the oil derived therefrom, plus some bêche-de-mer and pearl shell, which it obtained in return for ‘trade goods’. These Strasburg describes as being

> about the most weird assortment of goods ever brought together in one ship—colored beads of every variety; porpoise teeth (which pass for currency among the island natives); Jews’ harps; prints of various gaudy patterns, but mostly of the variety known as ‘Turkey Red’; hoop iron; knives of all sorts; tomahawks and axes; “=‘Tower’ muskets (worth about 3s. 6d.), powder and shot; tobacco (of a particularly vile kind); clay pipes; calico; fish-hooks and lines; medicines; arm rings of porcelain; zinc mirrors; and, last of all, live dogs.

The last, he explains, were to be used for hunting wild pigs. But the method of collecting them ‘was more ingenious than creditable’:

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On the return voyage to Sydney all the spare corners of the ship were filled with coconuts, and when the trader moored in Wooloomooloo Bay, the usual place, hundreds of small boys came on board and inquired for coconuts. They were told that if they brought a dog on board they would get three coconuts. Where the boys got the dogs the traders never inquired, but they got them; and it was quite a common thing for a trading schooner to leave Sydney with 150 dogs barking farewells.

It made for a lucrative exchange, even allowing for literary exaggeration:

[For each dog] the natives paid ten cockatoos, those usually sold as South American birds, at any price up to £5 a-piece: but the traders had a set price of 10s each at the Sydney market. So a stolen live dog brought a trader £5 cash on his return to Australia. And £5 for three coconuts is profitable trade.

In words that should strike a sympathetic chord with anyone perplexed by the latter day widespread—and commonly illegal—trade in exotic and endangered species, he comments ‘the thing I never could understand was the unfailing demand for these green cockatoos’. 19

With that voyage completed, the record of Strasburg’s career becomes meagre for most of the next 20 years. It can be glimpsed only in fragments of information that resemble reported sightings of rare animals or of wanted criminals ‘on the run’. A consistent feature of them, though, is that he is now in full command of a trading vessel. He was issued with an ocean-going master’s ticket (OM 14) in Fiji on 13 August 1887 and in November he was reported there in charge of the 66-ton schooner John Hunt. 20 Formerly owned by the Methodist mission, this vessel, which had been employed—among much else—to make an annual three-month visit from Fiji to the Methodist mission in New Britain, was sold as a wreck in 1884. It was subsequently salvaged, and then operated by Henry Cave and Company of Levuka in the recruiting trade (in which they also controlled several other ships, including the Sea Breeze). In 1884 the company procured labourers at a cost of £17 2s 6d per head, exclusive of government charges and commission, which would be included in the price eventually paid for them by employers. 21 But Strasburg did not remain long in the company’s employ.

Two years later, in 1889, when he next appears, it is as master of the 588-ton barque Coulnakyle out of Newcastle, New South Wales, carrying coal and general cargo for the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. ‘After discharging which’,

reports the Fiji Times, ‘she proceeds to Tonga and the Eastward Islands [that is, Wallis and Samoa], where she takes a full cargo of copra for Europe’. Then, in 1897, he is mentioned in a news report from Tonga. ‘We have yet one more buyer in our copra market. Captain Strasburg, late of the Meg Merrilies, now acting in that capacity for Lever Bros., Ltd., of Sunlight Soap fame’. Once commanded by the lightly scrupled Finlay McLiver on behalf of Charles Hennings and Co of Fiji, the Meg Merrilies had long been a stalwart of the labour trade, since at least 1882, but about 1895 it was transferred to the then flourishing Tongan copra trade. Strasburg’s association with the Coulmakyle—if not that with the Meg Merrilies, for Levers did not open their Sydney factory until 1900—suggests that by the late 1880s, he had made Australia his home, even if he did not spend a lot of time there. In June 1893, when he married Mary Dolling at St John’s Church of England at Darlinghurst in Sydney, he gave his address as Darlinghurst. The couple had two children: a daughter, Florence Mary, born in August 1894 and a son, John Leonard, born in August 1897. The latter’s birth certificate notes that his father was ‘away in Samoa’ at the time. There, two months later, Strasburg encountered the by now notorious Sorensen for a second time.

With that, Strasburg again largely disappears from historical view for several years, except for numerous tantalising will-o’-the-wisp sightings of him. He was again in Samoa in 1899; after which he reportedly worked for the Australasian New Hebrides Company; and then served as master of the government yacht Lahloo in the British Solomon Islands. But research has yielded no details on these matters.

When Strasburg next appears at all clearly, the principle focus of his maritime orientation has shifted markedly from that of his earlier years. It is no longer eastwards to Fiji but northwards to German New Guinea. There, early in 1904, he became master of the schooner Monantha, recruiting labour for Octave Mouton of Kinigunan plantation near Rabaul. It was a position he held for 18 months, until the Monantha was wrecked off Buka and his employment terminated. The mishap, though, did not deter him from practising his trade (in 1909 he was master of La Carbine, when it was used by the government for a punitive expedition to the Admiralty group), or from risking his own capital in business ventures in what he believed to be ‘the most valuable [islands] in the Pacific’. One writer has identified him as a founder ‘of the New Britain Corporation, established in Sydney in 1907’, but by his own account Strasburg’s investing centred more certainly on the island of Bougainville. Geographically the most
northerly of the Solomon group, Bougainville (with Buka) had been frequented by labour traders since the 1880s but was late in attracting more intensive forms of commerce. The first European settlers, Catholic missionaries, arrived only in 1901. Then, planting interests, British ones prominent among them, began acquiring land there along the fertile north-east coast in 1912.28

In March of that year Strasburg bought into such a syndicate and, the following month, together with his partners (C.G. Piggott, H. Howard, A.E. Kendall, and C.G. Banko) he left Sydney as commander of the auxiliary brigantine *Federal*, the company’s vessel, to begin the new venture. They travelled via Rabaul, Kavieng and Buka before, on 25 May, apparently on Strasburg’s recommendation, coming to Numanuma, north of the small administrative centre at Kieta, founded in 1905. (The trading ship *Ripple* had been attacked and its captain, Alexander Ferguson, and three of his complement were killed at Numanuma in August 1880, thereby attracting a severe reprisal raid by the chief Gorai from the Shortland Islands). After Piggott and his fellow passengers had been ashore to look at the land in which they were interested, Strasburg took the *Federal* to Aropa, south of Kieta, where a Dane named Peter Hansen was clearing land. There he picked up 38 labourers for return to Hernsheim’s station at Rabaul. Turning for the north, he stopped again at Numanuma. Piggott, Banco and Howard then left the vessel and began work. With the aid of 56 local labourers, they too set about clearing land while two Chinese carpenters erected a prefabricated house for them. These tasks were under way when, on 1 June, August Döllinger, the district officer, arrived in the steam launch *Buka* from Kieta to inspect and approve the project. The following day, with the boundaries marked, he supervised the formal purchase of 300 hectares of land from the indigenous owners for 250 marks, plus one mark for each of the 137 mature coconut trees growing on it.

Trading on behalf of the company and bringing supplies for Numanuma, Strasburg made two more trips in the *Federal* to Rabaul over the next couple of months before being despatched to Sydney to sell the vessel. The company, it seems, was foundering, both financially and because of personal divisions. Besides, Piggott, the managing director, deemed the *Federal* to be too big for the company’s needs. Unfortunately for Strasburg, this also meant that his services as master were no longer required. After an arduous 30-day passage from Kieta, one made more difficult by a mutinous engineer who allegedly tried to wreck the ship for the sake of the insurance money, he was shorebound. At least, that is, until the outbreak of World War I meant that his familiarity with the waters of German New Guinea came once again to be valued by an

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employer. In this instance it would be the Australian navy although, as with the Numanuma venture, Strasburg would again find that his expertise earned him scant reward.²⁹

Responding to Germany’s invasion of Belgium, Britain—and with it the Empire—declared war on the aggressor on 4 August 1914. In Australia, where the prime minister, Joseph Cook, declared that ‘our duty [to stand alongside Britain] is quite clear’, his patriotic sentiments were fervently endorsed by the public at large. Recruiting for an Australian ‘Expeditionary Force’ began on 11 August and by 20 August over 10,000 men had enlisted in Sydney alone.³⁰ Nor was Strasburg slow to answer the call. Friends, including a Major Lark whom he had met at the Sydney Club, who knew of his ‘experience in the South Seas … for 35 years’ advised him ‘to offer to help the Navy by piloting in the islands’. Accordingly, on 12 August he presented himself at the Navy Office at Garden Island. There he was welcomed by a Lieutenant-Commander H.P. Cayley who, three days later, on the advice of the Naval Board in Melbourne, informed him that he was commissioned as Acting Lieutenant R.N.R. and was to proceed on board HMAS Berrima, a chartered P&O liner, where he would serve as pilot and navigator.³¹

Carrying troops for the occupation of German New Guinea and escorted by Australian, British and French warships, the Berrima left Sydney on 19 August. It travelled via Moreton Bay and Port Moresby, and reached Rabaul at 7 am on Friday 11 September. There the troops were quickly landed, but, despite being of overwhelming strength, they soon encountered considerable resistance from an enemy force of three dozen Europeans and 210 native policemen, who were not averse to night-fighting. It was not until Saturday at 1 am that, with four Australians dead and several wounded, the radio station at the administrative centre of Herbertshohe (later Kokopo) was captured. Later that day, preparing for the ritual completion of the exercise, Strasburg went ashore at Rabaul with Major Francis Heritage to obtain a flag pole (they commandeered a mast from the Nord Deutsche Heritage to obtain a flag pole (they commandeered a mast from the Nord Deutsche shipping line office) and to find a suitable spot on which to erect it in preparation for the formal reading of a statement proclaiming the Australian military occupation of ‘the whole Island of New Britain and its dependencies’.

That event, performed by the commanding officer, Colonel William Holmes, took place the following afternoon outside the administration offices, in what became known as Proclamation Square.³² It was followed by the reading of a

²⁹ Strasburg, ‘Log of the Federal’ and other papers, Mitchell Library, MS A1475.
second proclamation in pidgin English (tok pisin) which was directed to a native audience. This document had been drafted by Strasburg but was delivered from the verandah of the chief of police’s quarters by a Warrant-Officer Wilkinson. Predictably, as the occasion required, the listeners were promised better treatment than what they had received under the previous regime. Conversely, but no less predictably, they were addressed as a labour force. Fittingly, given the severity that was to become a mark of the Australian administration, a clear hint of punishment for any insubordination was also contained in the address.

Supposing you work good with this new feller Master, he look out good along with you. He look out you get plenty good feller kaikai [food]. He no fighting black feller boy along nothing. You look him new feller flag; you savvy him, belong British, English. He more better than other feller. Supposing you been making paper [signing a labour contract] before this new feller Master come, you finish time belongina him first. Finish time belongina him, you make him new feller paper long man belong new feller master. He look out good along with you. He give you more money and more good feller kaikai. Supposing you no look out good along him, he cross [get angry] too much. British, English, new feller Master he like black man too much. He like you all the same you picanin [children] along him.

To conclude, the audience of about 500, which had been marched from Proclamation Square to the space outside the police headquarters for the second reading, was enjoined to ‘give three feller cheers belongina new feller Master’. This they duly did. They were deemed, thereby, so Strasburg later commented, articulating the ingenuous detachment of the invaders, to have shown ‘that we were welcome visitors’.33

Composing this speech was not the last of Strasburg’s contributions to the occupation of German New Guinea, an event that proceeded without further Australian losses on land but which was marred by the mysterious disappearance of submarine AE1 with all hands south of Rabaul on 15 September.34 For the next four months he was busily engaged in facilitating and extending the process. At first this was mainly by recruiting labour. Then, after 4 October, when the Berrima left for Sydney and he was transferred to the staff of the military administrator, it was by commandeering and commanding numerous smaller vessels formerly operated by Germans. He was an assiduous factotum.
On 17 September he recruited 84 Chinese labourers to coal the *Berrima* and, when they went strike after two days for more pay and easier conditions, he supplemented them with 135 indigenous labourers, who were willing to accept far less generous terms. In his diary for 22 September Strasburg noted ‘We finished coaling the *Berrima* at 6 am—970 tons. The coal bill: Chinese labour £87-10s; native labour £23-7s-6d. The natives did the most of the coaling and all the night work, and the Chinese day work only’.\(^\text{35}\)

Once the main objectives of the expedition were secured (and these extended to the towns of Lae and Madang as well as to Rabaul), the new administration’s writ had also to be made to run through the scattered islands of the Bismarck archipelago. To this end, on 7 October Strasburg took the *Lorengau* to the Duke of York Islands. Ten days later he took the government yacht *Nusa* to Kavieng in New Ireland where a party of troops led by Major Heritage rescued the British consul, F.R. Jolley, who was being held prisoner by diehard German settlers. In the course of that voyage Strasburg’s navigation also led to the capture of three other German craft—the 490-ton steamer *Siar*, and the auxiliary schooners *Matupi* and *Senta*—which had been hidden in a small uncharted cove on Gardner Island called Tekarake. On 24 October he was despatched in the *Madang* to capture the *Samoa*, hidden in Kalili Bay on New Ireland. And, on 26 October, he returned to New Ireland in the steamer *Meklong*. It carried troops to establish a garrison at Kavieng, and then landed a shore party at Namatanai to apprehend some Germans who had sought to assuage their damaged pride by flogging an Australian Methodist missionary named W.H. Cox. The same week the *Meklong* captured the cutter *Hilalon* in open sea.

In their geographical extent, the shipping services for New Britain and New Ireland that occupied Strasburg’s attention during October and November seem also to have accorded with a calculated lack of official urgency to complete the occupation once the bulk of the task had been accomplished. Thus, the German regime on Bougainville was not replaced until December, bringing closure without relief to the expectant officials there. Two ships that had put out from Bougainville shortly before the occupation bound for Rabaul were early apprehended by Australian vessels (the *Sumatra* on 11 September and the *Madang* on 13 September); and, in late November, in a gesture of resigned defiance, the district commissioner had scuttled his two-year old, 60-ton steam launch, *Buka*. But the German flag still flew at Kieta. Indeed, it was not lowered until 90 days after the Australians had reached Rabaul. The countdown to that formal sign of defeat began on 7 December when the *Meklong*, a 438-ton former Norddeutscher Lloyd vessel, sailed from Rabaul. Captained by Strasburg and

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\(^{35}\) Printed versions of Strasburg’s diary for the period 12 Aug. – 12 Dec. 1914 are contained in *Senate Report*, pp. 9–12, and NAA, A518, G822/1/3; the manuscript in the Mitchell Library only covers the period 19 Aug. – 7 Nov. 1914.
carrying 230 troops commanded by Lt. Col. W.R. Watson, it reached Kieta two
days later, after a brief stop at the village of Rorovana to enquire about German
strength on the island. The transfer of power was swift and undramatic. A
shore party changed the flags; Dollinger with his staff of four, together with
their families, and several other Germans, were taken aboard; and a 54-strong
party of soldiers was left behind. By 6 pm, after a stay of barely five hours at
Kieta, the Meklong was again at sea. Before quitting Bougainville, it stopped
briefly at Tinputz and at Soroken and so became, said Strasburg, the largest
ship to have hitherto passed through the then unsurveyed Buka Passage. The
Meklong regained Rabaul on 12 December. The commander of the expedition
was generous in his praise: ‘The services of Lieut. Strasburg, the master of the
Meklong were invaluable, and his navigation of the difficult waters of these
islands relieved me of all anxiety as to the safety of our ship.’

With that, though, Strasburg’s service to the military administration came
virtually to an end, not because he could no longer be useful but because—it
seems—of the resentment towards him of a more senior naval officer, Commander
R.L. Lambton, the harbour master at Rabaul. It was through Lambton’s influence,
Strasburg alleges, that he was not asked to pilot the transport Eastern which ran
on a reef at Kavieng in January 1915 and cost £4,000 to repair. The advice of the
Japanese merchant Isokihi Komine was preferred, even though Strasburg had
twice entered that port in darkness and without any external navigation aids.
Again, whereas under the first administrator, Col. William Holmes, Strasburg
had hopes of being appointed government pilot for the whole of the ex-German
New Guinea territory, he believed that when Holmes was replaced by Col.
Pethebridge it was Lambton who induced the new administrator to terminate
his employment, as occurred on 18 January.

Nor was that the only misfortune to blight Strasburg’s naval career. On 4 January
1915 he had written to the Naval Board in Melbourne ‘intimating that I had
not received any official notification of my commission having been gazetted’.
He also enclosed a bill for £285 for outstanding pilotage fees in respect of the
captured vessels. The reply, which he received on 22 February, a week after
returning to Sydney, was singularly disconcerting. Despite the undertakings
of August 1914, he was told that he had not—and could not have—been given
a commission because of his alien birth. Therefore, notwithstanding official
recognition of his subsequent meritorious service (and, indeed, the award of

36 Strasburg, ‘Diary’ and related papers, NAA, A518, G822/1/3; Lt. Col. W. Russell-Watson, ‘Military
Occupation of Bougainville, German New Guinea’, Government Gazette, British Administration –
German New Guinea, no. 5 (15 Dec.), p. 4; Holmes to Minister of Defence, 15 Dec. 1914, Australian War Memorial, series
33, control 39.
37 Strasburg to Senator Needham, 4 Aug. 1915, and to W.M. Hughes (Prime Minister), 12 Sept. 1919,
NAA, A518, G822/1/3. For Komine, see C.D. Rowley, The Australians in German New Guinea, 1914–1921,
Melbourne, 1958, pp. 84–85.
medals to mark his participation) he had not actually been a member of the Naval and Military Expeditionary Force to German New Guinea, with which he had been prominently associated. To make matters worse, concerning the pilotage bill, the Naval Board was willing to pay only £125 of the total amount charged. In an attempt to persuade it otherwise by approaching officials and politicians directly, Strasburg took himself to Melbourne for two months (March to May 1915), but to no avail. The authorities were unmoved by his insistent and well-documented entreaties.  

A year later, with his fortunes declining but with his spirit of enterprise (if not his good judgement) still intact, Strasburg again comes into view, but briefly, and from another angle. On 13 May 1916 he left Sydney aboard the SS Van oon Stratten for the six-day voyage to Port Moresby, apparently intending to set up in business on his own account as a trader. Accordingly, on arrival he bought the small auxiliary-engined schooner Niue and, on 8 June, with a crew of three, set out for Faisi in the Shortland Islands, south of Bougainville. The vendor of the Niue, a Captain Dean, had told him that ‘the vessel was tight, the copper good and she had not been on shore anywhere’. Too late, the crew told him she had, in fact, been on the reef three times. Evidence was soon to hand. The Niue reached Faisi on 3 July, leaking so badly that the crew refused to go further in it and insisted on being sent home on the regular Burns Philp steamer Matunga from Sydney bound for Port Moresby. Strasburg thereupon engaged another crew and headed for Roviana in the central Solomons. There, at Lambetti, on 19 July he was forced to abandon the Niue. Two days later he joined the Matunga on its return voyage to the south.  

That ignominious episode, though, was not to be the last of its kind in what was proving to be a dismal end to Strasburg’s career. In February 1918 he returned once more to New Guinea, at the invitation of Jean Baptiste Octave Mouton. He was to be master of the motor schooner Takubar that Mouton used to recruit labour for his fine plantation at Kinigunan near Rabaul, but the one voyage he made in it was unsuccessful. On 14 April after an absence of 49 days, during which period it anchored at no less than 22 places along the south coast of New Britain and Rooke Island, the Takubar returned to Kinigunan with only seven recruits. Strasburg attributed this poor result to the rough treatment meted out to villagers by two other recruiting expeditions that had recently preceded him along that route. One of these had been conducted by two women, Ettie Kaumann and Lulu Hoepfels, part-Samoan relatives of the redoubtable pioneer planter ‘Queen’ Emma Coe. While not unsympathetic to the complaint that

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38 Correspondence enclosed in Strasburg to [Needham?], 5 June 1915, and Strasburg to Needham, 4 Aug. 1915, NAA, A518, G822/1/3.
Watriama and Co: Further Pacific Islands Portraits

Strasburg duly registered, the administration was unable to offer any remedy. Mouton, on the other hand, was moved by the meagre catch to reassess the case for maintaining his own recruiting vessel at a cost of £1,500 per year, and decided not to continue. Accordingly, Strasburg was given a month’s notice and a contract for supplying labour to Kinigunan was let to the Hamburgische Suedsee-Aktiengesellschaft, managed by a German named Mirow.40

With that, Strasburg went ashore for the last time. He was 62 years old, unemployed, disappointed and hard-up. He was battered; but he was not yet beaten. Over the next two years he wrote numerous letters, berating the Australian government on two counts. One was for allowing recruiting abuses, especially, he alleged, by Germans; German civilians having been allowed to stay when officials were deported.41 Given his Takubar fiasco, such irregularities could, he claimed damage the commercial economy of New Guinea by alienating potential labourers. Interestingly, in the light of his own difficulties, and in contrast to his views of a few years before, economic considerations were now alloyed with a measure of sympathy for the island peoples. In 1914 he had publicly expressed the view, not uncommon among those whose interest in the islands did not extend beyond making a living from them, that the natives were more a bane than a blessing.

Inhabited by a white race [the islands] might be a real terrestrial paradise. But the brown savage is a brand across the beauty, and while he remains the white man will never be more than a trader and an exploiter there. Had the South Sea Isles been uninhabited, a wonderful chapter of history might have commenced. They would probably have been flooded with white farmers, and become a great nation or confederation of small nations, beside which the Isles of Greece would have faded into ordinary and commonplace.

By 1919 this rhetoric of fanciful aspiration had given way to sentiments that, regardless of the frustrated self-interest that begot them, were still philanthropic. Strasburg became apologetic about his proclamation.

I am sorry to say that none of the promises in that address made to the natives has been carried out and that the natives of these Islands instead of being protected under our rule have been very cruelly treated, kidnapped, taken by force. Men and women [have been] compelled to work against their will for the German planters; flogged and kicked, some to death, because they were starving and could not do sufficient work for the German plantation overseers.

Strasburg’s other grievance concerned the discounting of his war service. This, he also wrote in September 1919, had cost him dearly:

I tried very hard for a settlement, went again to Melbourne for another 60 days, my case was brought before parliament, again turned down.
I became bankrupt, penniless, lost my good home. Worst of all, lost a good and true wife.⁴²

There is no evidence to suggest that his situation had improved when, three years later, he was at length awarded a token measure of relief. In August 1922, after exhaustive deliberation, a committee of the Australian Senate recommended that he be awarded a gratuity in terms of the *War Gratuity Acts* 1920. Even then it was not a unanimous decision and might not have been arrived at without the aid of some benignly inventive legal logic from the Solicitor-General, Sir Robert Garran. In the absence of any statutory definition of the ‘Naval and Military Expeditionary Force’ to New Guinea, argued Garran, Strasburg might be deemed to be ‘a member of the Forces, even though he was not a member of the Military or Naval Forces’. How one could belong to the whole but to neither of the constituent parts, he did not explain. Senator T.W. Glasgow was, therefore, moved to dissent from the majority view of Strasburg’s claim, but did concede that he was ‘morally entitled to receive an amount equal to the War Gratuity’. That is, £133-4s.⁴³ Not that he would have much time to enjoy his vindication. John Strasburg died at Rookwood Asylum, Sydney, on 21 July 1924, survived by his estranged wife and two children. Cause of death was given as senility. He was aged 68.⁴⁴

Writing of the pioneer trader Peter Dillon, who in 1826 solved the mystery of the disappearance of the La Perouse expedition that had vanished in 1788 whilst looking for the Solomon Islands, J.W. Davidson commented that Dillon, whom he admired, ‘was not a “great man” in the conventional sense’. Notwithstanding ‘the one brief flush of glory’ after a fortuitous find at Vanikoro, ‘his life as a whole was a failure, not only in conventional terms but as it must have seemed to himself’. Dillon had been an adventurous, enterprising captain, ranging the Pacific from Tahiti to Sydney in search of cargoes and charters when he came across wreckage from the expedition. But the bubble reputation so earned did not bring prosperity to him. Dillon spent much of the rest of his life in relative poverty. With anxious assiduity, he tried to improve his situation by petitioning government agencies, private capitalists and missionary organisations interested in the South Seas to employ his services, but to no avail.⁴⁵ His was career and a

⁴² Strasburg to Hughes (Prime Minister), 12 Sept. 1919, NAA, A518, G822/1/3.
⁴⁴ Death certificate.
⁴⁵ J.W. Davidson, *Peter Dillon of Vanikoro: Chevalier of the South Seas*, Melbourne, 1975, p. 308
fate, which, in its essential outlines, would later be paralleled by that of John Strasburg. The practical sailor had a moment of notability (in Strasburg’s case it was because of the proclamation of 1914 that historians have acknowledged his existence) but that was followed by a terminal decline of fortune and of official appreciation. On the other hand, the names of Dillon and Strasburg have at least survived and the salient facts of their lives have been retrievable. The names of most of their ilk, deckhands on the barque of commerce, remain ‘writ in water’.