

Peripheral Crises: Ongoing Australian involvement with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force

Intro

Today I will be looking at the gaps in our understanding of Australia's military presence in Papua New Guinea, in the lead up to independence in 1975. This paper forms part of my broader research into the long Australian military involvement in PNG which focuses on Australian military assistance in the region – and its diplomatic, organisational and personal effects.

Although a significant amount of scholarly work has been produced on Australia's colonial rule in PNG, this work tends to be produced contemporarily, creating a body of literature where, in effect, PNG emerges into the public consciousness – and academic study – at every crisis, and then fades away to the periphery of history. Importantly, what **has** been written has focused on the outcomes of key events in shared Papua New Guinean and Australian history, while often neglecting the processes that contributed to these events.

Australia has been directly involved in Papua New Guinea for well over 120 years. In 1884, a protectorate was declared over Papua, and after the First World War Australia assumed control over German New Guinea in the north. The Second World War thrust PNG into the Australian consciousness, and has coloured popular understanding of the country since. Simplistic views of Papua New Guineans and a tendency to see the country as completely homogenous and only in the context of Australian involvement is represented clearly in the place occupied in Australia's war memory by George Silk's famous photo of a 'fuzzy wuzzy angel'. The Second World War represents perhaps the dominant 'crisis' in our understanding of Australian and PNG shared history.

After 1945, for many ‘old PNG hands’, it was business as usual – in the second picture behind me you can clearly see the colonial dynamic of the military in PNG in the immediate post-war period. By the mid-1960s however, momentum towards independence had started to gather, and there was a significant expansion of the Papua New Guinean army and public service. After independence in September 1975, Australia continued to be closely involved in PNG, yet scholarly work has continued to focus on a succession of crises in the country, the most notable being the Bougainville conflict and the Sandline Crisis.

The tendency to see PNG only in light of a few select events has resulted in a focus on the outcomes, rather than the process or context of Papua New Guinean and Australian history. In this way, the period between the late 1960s and the mid 1970s is seen in terms of Papua New Guinean independence, rather than through the continual process of change in Australian rule and Papua New Guinean agency. In terms of Australia’s military presence, this has meant that despite the long Australian military involvement in the country, the historical record tells us very little about the thousands of Australians who served there and the Papua New Guineans with whom they served.

The two examples I will examine today – one oral and the other archival – allow a deeper understanding of not only the crises that capture public attention, but importantly the processes leading up to these events, thereby adding complexity to the historical record. First, I will look at the experiences of National Service teachers in the Army in PNG between 1966 – 72, a period that saw intense change as PNG made its way toward independence. This example is based on interviews that I conducted in May this year. Second, I will examine the issue of village court jurisdiction over Australian servicemen that arose during the negotiation of agreements between Australia and PNG at the time of independence, drawing on files held by the National Archives of Australia.

Australian military in PNG

Before going on, I will outline briefly the Australian military presence in PNG.

The majority of Australians who served in PNG did so with the Pacific Islands Regiment or 'PIR'. Formed during the Second World War, the regiment was re-raised in 1951 and was initially comprised of Papua New Guineans, with Australian officers. In 1964 there was 185 Australians and around one thousand Papua New Guineans in the PIR. By 1969 there were 500 Australians and 2,000 Papua New Guineans.

With the increase in size of the army came debates over the role and the utility of the military in PNG, and these formed a significant part of the wider debates at the time on the preparations for independence. A number of commentators in the media and academia argued that PNG did not require a military at all. Observers such as Hank Nelson and Harry Bell held fears that a military would represent a 'new tribe' and – as one of the few organised bodies in a state without a long tradition of democracy – that the military would stage a coup, as had occurred in newly independent African nations during the 1960s.

A number of strikes and riots by PIR soldiers over pay, conditions and perceived injustices convinced many that the military was a threat to stability and that PNG soldiers had not yet grasped the western concept of civil-military relations.

At the same time, proposals to use the army to quell disturbances on the Gazelle Peninsular in 1970 brought home the very real possibility of the military having a role in PNG's internal security, and reinforced fears that the military would have too large a political role. Even after thirty-five years, these issues remain at the centre of discussions on PNG as a nation.

Amongst these debates, the Australian Army saw its role in PNG as two-fold. First, it was to guard against threats to the territory – and by extension Australia – and second, it aimed to

create a military force that could, on independence, effectively serve the new nation. To achieve the second goal, the army planned to build up a cadre of PNG officers – a process it called localisation – as well as to more generally improve the training, structure and education of Papua New Guineans in the ranks. The Royal Australian Army Education Corps formed an important part of this education effort, and by 1968 one in twelve of the Australian soldiers in PNG was an education corps instructor. Of these, most were national servicemen with teaching backgrounds.

Chalkies

Well over 300 National Servicemen served in Papua New Guinea between 1966 and 1972. Those who served as teachers were called ‘Chalkies’ – a term of affection similar to ‘sparky’ or ‘chippy’ – and had completed their teaching degrees and a year of teaching prior to being selected to go to Papua New Guinea.

They were sent to PNG for a year, on average, and were an integral part of the military in the territory, such that they were present at every base and outstation and accompanied the Pacific Islands Regiment on patrol. Almost every Papua New Guinean soldier between 1966 and 1972 would have at some point been taught by a National Service teacher. Consequently, these men had a unique insight into the processes by which military policy was implemented, and an examination of their service allows us to understand the complexities of the Australian Army in PNG.

Selection

The selection of which National Servicemen the Army saw as fit to serve in PNG, for instance, allows us to paint a more accurate picture of the nature of the military role in the territory, and to analyse how the army approached this role – through the men it chose.

Chalkies were selected during their initial National Service training. To get into the Education Corps, however, was reasonably hard – Chalkie Norm Hunter remembers that of the 120 teachers in his National Service intake, only 30 went to PNG. Aspiring teachers fronted a panel of high-ranking officers and, crucially, the questions posed to each soldier centred on their experiences working with indigenous Australians.

For example, Phil Adam, called up in 1969, remembers that the panel

‘did talk at different times about how we felt about working with indigenous people. I think they were looking both for attitude and I think also for some experience.’

Similarly, Greg Farr, called up in January 1970, remembers:

‘I think the fact that I could tell them I’d taught some aboriginal children stood me in good stead because I spoke positively about it.’

Almost all of those Chalkies interviewed had taught or interacted with indigenous people during their short teaching careers. The emphasis on such experiences demonstrates a desire on the part of the Army to choose those men who not only had an ability to teach cross-culturally, but also those for whom issues of race would not enter the classroom.

Interestingly, Greg Farr also notes that teachers were often selected on the basis of their sporting prowess, as the playing field represented another level on which to relate to Papua New Guineans. Moreover, the high proportion of primary school teachers among those National Servicemen chosen to teach in PNG is indicative of the army’s view that different skills were needed to teach in the territory.

Given the often fierce historical debates over the character of Australia’s colonial rule in PNG, the careful selection of who would serve in the territory, and indeed the decision to send large numbers of educators, reveals a more enlightened military policy that is often

associated with the Australian army in the 1960s. Moreover, it shows a policy concerned with how best to teach in a culture quite different to that of Australia, indicating a relatively high level of understanding of the challenges of operating in PNG among policy-makers in the army.

Teaching experience (Civics)

The teaching experiences of the Chalkies also allows us to add complexity to current scholarship on the nature of the military role in PNG prior to independence. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the discipline of Papua New Guinean soldiers in scholarship on the military in PNG, yet the scope of these studies very rarely extends beyond an examination of the key discipline issues, such as riots by soldiers in 1957 and 1961.

The Chalkies were at the forefront of Army efforts to address these fears of ill-discipline and instability, as it was they, along with other Australian officers, who were charged with ensuring that Papua New Guinean soldiers understood and internalised western concepts of civil-military relations. The experiences of Chalkies in this respect show the Army efforts as extensively carried out, but varying in impact.

The Army aimed to promote stability through both classes taught as part of the standard curriculum – in a subject called civics – as well as more general lectures. Greg Ivey, pictured here in his classroom, gave a lecture about the United Nations and Australia's responsibility in PNG to a company of 2nd Battalion Pacific Islands Regiment, and remembers that 'there was not much opportunity for interaction with the lecturer' and that

‘It was a very formal thing. The company marched in, the company sat down, the company listened, the company stood up, [and] marched out’

In contrast, as it was taught in the classroom, the civics curriculum was more hands on and centred on the key concepts of democracy and the functions of government. Interestingly, Greg Farr posits that one of the most important aspects of the civics classes was the opportunity it gave PNG soldiers not just to learn about western concepts, but also about their own country. Thus, visits to the PNG House of Assembly in Port Moresby were matched with visits to the museum. While efforts by the army and the administration to ensure the loyalty of the military through education was a much-discussed facet of the Australian Army's role in PNG, no attempt has been made to document what was actually taught.

The experiences of National Service teachers in PNG serves to deepen to our understanding of Australia's military role in the country. They allow us to further analyse and understand the character of Australia's colonial rule; a subject that has been much debated, but about which very little in-depth scholarship has been produced.

The last Chalkies left in 1972 with the end of conscription, and were not replaced in the same numbers. But Australian troops stayed on – there were around 600 Australian servicemen and women in PNG at independence in 1975. As a result, it was vital that their presence in the new nation be formalised.

Village courts

This brings me to my second example: the issue of village court jurisdiction over Australian servicemen in an independent PNG. In this case, an examination of the process of negotiation on this matter – rather than simply an assessment of the outcomes – allows for a deeper understanding of the motivations, attitudes and agency in the Australian – Papua New Guinea relationship at a crucial time in its development.

This example supports Hank Nelson's assertion that Australia saw itself as very much the dominant partner in the relationship at this point. But the files also demonstrate a degree of Papua New Guinean agency, as Papua New Guinean negotiators had an active role in the processes that shaped the relationship between the two countries at the time of independence.

In preparation for independence, the Australian Government and the PNG Government-to-be worked together to formulate a set of arrangements that would govern the continued presence of Australian troops in Papua New Guinea. The most important of these was the Status of Forces Agreement – which covered issues such as entry rights and taxation while in a host nation.

Negotiations were ongoing in the year before independence, however in August 1975 – one month before independence – Papua New Guinean officials advised their Australian counterparts that under these agreements Australian servicemen would be subject to the jurisdiction of Village Courts while in PNG.

These courts were set up to implement customary law, and were often an informal affair – the photo behind me shows a modern sitting of such a court.

A Department of Foreign Affairs Memo on 3 September 1975 informing the minister on developments in negotiations, summed up Australian concerns that native custom, different in each district, might be applied to Australian soldiers without legal representation or right of appeal to a higher court.

The Australian military strongly opposed the idea that village courts would have jurisdiction over Australian servicemen. Australian Minister for Defence Bill Morrison cabled his PNG counterpart Albert Kiki on the 10th of September – six days before independence – expressing dismay at this decision, and replying that if it were not possible for Australians to be

exempted from the jurisdiction of village courts, then Australian soldiers and their families would have to be removed from those areas where these courts operated.

The following day, the Australian Administrator in PNG Tom Critchley, advised Foreign Affairs that Morrison's suggestion had antagonised PNG ministers and hardened their opposition to Australia's wishes. Critchley went on to suggest that the cabinet decision 'was an emotional one' and that

'PNG ministers will recognise sooner or later that they have acted irrationally and against PNG's best interests'.

This somewhat patronising language is tempered by Critchley's suggestion that a compromise may be possible if an appeal process was implemented for the village courts, allowing Australian personnel to have their case heard at a higher – and more formal – court. Tellingly, a Foreign Affairs Memo on the 12th of September – four days before independence – admitted that

'the events of the last few days have shown that the tactics which we have adopted have tended to stiffen the opposition to compromise in the PNG cabinet'

Unlike Critchley's cable, this admission demonstrates first an awareness of Papua New Guinean feelings on the matter, but more importantly, it demonstrates a willingness to see the PNG government-to-be as a viable and independent entity, that has to be *negotiated* with, rather than instructed or managed.

The same day, Kiki wrote to Morrison *acknowledging* the Papua New Guinean need for Australian military assistance, and his wish for it to continue. He went on to point out that village courts had been in operation for some time prior to these negotiations, and Australians had not been troubled by them. Kiki's cable shows a Papua New Guinea aware of its reliance

on Australia, but confident enough to argue its case to the dominant partner in the relationship.

These documents reveal an Australia somewhat paternal in its attitudes, yet willing to hold back and allow the PNG government a degree of latitude. Equally, the willingness of Australia to do this, as well as the confidence of PNG in negotiating, allow us to assess the character of the relationship at a crucial time in shared Papua New Guinean and Australian history. Examples such as this are especially important, given the tendency of historians to use independence as a convenient end or start point, thereby neglecting the continuous nature of the relationship during this period. The negotiation of village court jurisdiction represents a period of change that straddles independence, rather than one that led to, or was sparked by it.

It wasn't until a day *after* independence, on the 17th of September, that the matter was settled, in a fashion, by discussions between Kiki and Morrison. Australian soldiers would be subject to the village courts, but would have recourse to higher courts in certain circumstances. It was this compromise that decided the wording of the 1977 Status of Forces Agreement, which continues to govern Australians servicemen in Papua New Guinea.

Conclusion

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade historian Stuart Doran, in an article examining the character of Australian colonial rule in PNG between 1966 and 1969, acknowledges Hank Nelson's assertion that

‘...in unequal relationships, it is not surprising that the dominant partner should choose when it comes, stays and goes. By the same token’ Doran writes, ‘the method of Australia’s governance in PNG... shows Australia determined not only the fact, but the terms of its presence.’

The examples of the Chalkies and the negotiations over the village courts allow us to assess these terms, and ask deeper questions of Australian policy, attitudes and intention in PNG – not just on the level of policy-making, but at the negotiating table, and in the military classroom.

Such examples add complexity to our understanding of the relationship between the two countries. Through an examination of examples such as these, we can gain a deeper understanding of the long and complex history of the Australian and Papua New Guinea relationship, avoid focusing on a succession of crises, and reorientate this shared history from the periphery to the centre of Australian historical scholarship.