

# ARMY WANTOKS

# JOURNAL

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Journal of the Australian Teachers Who  
Served in the Army in TPNG 1966 - 1973

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## Editors' Note

Welcome to this edition of our journal. We are focussing on the PNG Training Depot at Goldie River (otherwise known as 'Goldie' to most people) in this Journal. Goldie formed an essential part of the Army organisation in PNG as it was the recruit training unit and also provided specialist training for clerks, drivers, signallers, medics and others. Because of this, the Education Centre and its Chalkie staff were an integral part of the establishment.

Goldie, however, suffers a little because it lacked, perhaps, the *gravitas* that was attached to 1 and 2 PIR and the other barracks in PNG Command. Perhaps the spectre of such less-than-attractive places as Singleton, Kapooka and Puckapunyal tarnished its image. AND, it was called a 'Depot' for goodness sake. I presume there is a reason for this appellation but it makes it sound like a railway goods shed!!

The Chalkies, however, who served there (Ian was one of them), remember their time there with considerable delight and it gave its own unique perspective on the PNG Chalkie experience. We are particularly pleased to

have John Teggelove's account of his time there in 1966/67. We hope you enjoy this very entertaining read.

Ian Ogston [ozoggies2@gmail.com](mailto:ozoggies2@gmail.com)

Greg Ivey [iveygi@gmail.com](mailto:iveygi@gmail.com)



Goldie Headquarters building, 2014 (Photo Greg Ivey)

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## MY NASHO STORY INCLUDING GOLDIE RIVER 1966-67

- by John Teggelove

My marble came out for the first National Service intake in July 1965 but the call-up was deferred, to enable me to complete my first teaching year, so I commenced recruit training at Puckapunyal in early February 1966. Memories of the culture shock and the discipline and fitness regimes there for ten weeks are still fairly vivid. Recruit training was followed by another ten weeks of

Ordnance Corps clerk training at Bonegilla, before being posted to the Ordnance Field Force Unit (2 Comp Ord) at Bandiana. After 2 months there, around mid-August, I received a directive to attend an interview at Southern Command Personnel Depot (SCPD) for the newly-created teaching positions in the Army in the Territory of Papua New Guinea (TPNG). Several days later, back at Comp Ord, I was notified of my success at interview and posting to TPNG as an Army Education Instructor, with rank of Sergeant. A pleasant aside was the overt 'pride' expressed by the Company's tough RSM that one of 'his men' should be selected for such a prestigious promotion. He certainly didn't have too many like-minded colleagues among the senior NCO's we encountered subsequently at the various Messes we stayed at!

Things moved quickly and, within 48 hours, I was back at SCPD in Melbourne and in the company of 6 other Teacher Nashos on the same journey. We were briefed, allocated rooms and then sent off to the Q-Store to collect our Sergeant stripes, prior to a rushed sewing session to be appropriately dressed for dinner in the Sergeants Mess. Our rapid promotion created considerable resentment amongst many Senior NCO's, which was immediately felt following our introduction in the Mess. However we all adjusted. The following day, we were given "stand-down" leave to get our affairs in order, prior to reporting back and waiting for departure.

A few days later, our party of 7, the first detail of Teacher Nashos for TPNG, departed Essendon Airport. Following an extended stopover at Brisbane airport due to mechanical problems, we arrived at Jackson Airport in Port Moresby at 6am. An overwhelming sensation, on walking onto the tarmac, was being engulfed by a blanket of heat and then a lather of sweat. An army driver and jeep awaited us for transfer to Army Headquarters at Murray Barracks and I vividly recall, en route, the multitude of locals sitting beside or strolling along the main road, so early in the morning and **seemingly** aimless. I think the description was "sindaun nating" and "wokabout nating".

At Murray Barracks we were welcomed by Brigadier Hunter (Commanding Officer of the Army in TPNG) and Major Dachs (OIC, Education Corps), who briefed us on the focus for our new positions: to assist the Australian Army in the development of an effective indigenous military force in and for the Territory of Papua New Guinea, with military discipline and education as key training components for all soldiers. Having significant numbers of qualified

teachers - and for that matter, other professionals and skilled tradesmen in the National Service program - was opportunistic for the Australian Army in this task. The longer term goal for this focus was Papua New Guinea's journey to Independence, which eventuated on 16 September 1975, after almost 70 years under Australian administration.

Over the next few days we were fitted out with juniper green uniforms (more sewing) and other relevant army clothing and equipment. Further induction included tours of Moresby and surrounds, incorporating also army bases at Taurama Barracks and Goldie River, where I was to be posted for the next 14 months. A reality check on that first visit to Goldie River was, after my teacher-style interaction with a young army recruit and pointing to a passage of text, the Education Corps OIC there suggested that I count the fingers on my hand, as the young recruit involved was from the Kukukuku tribe from the Gulf District with a history of cannibalism. Eventually, twenty-six Teacher Nashos all arrived in TPNG within a fortnight, to be progressively dispersed to army bases at Murray Barracks (Army Headquarters), Taurama Barracks (1st Pacific Islands Regiment) , Moem Barracks at Wewak (2nd Pacific Islands Regiment) and Goldie River (Recruit Training Depot).

Goldie River Recruit Training Depot was located some 20km outside Port Moresby, accessed by a mostly very dusty and always badly pot-holed dirt road. The Camp comprised a collection of native grass huts, set around a hilltop and located in a very picturesque setting, surrounded by lush rainforest-style vegetation and with the Goldie River flowing alongside. Keith Bryant and I were the first two Teacher Nashos posted to Goldie River and when we arrived there our sleeping hut was still being built, so we sat around watching some very deft weaving but very clumsy hammer and nail work. We were later joined by Leo Howman, Dave Powell, Gordon Moore and Ian Bowrey and our contingent almost doubled the non-indigenous population of the Camp. The Education Officers there were Capt. Mal Ashton (OIC), Capt. Sandford and later Lt. Gould.



Entrance to the old Goldie River camp. Note the entrance quote. (Photo: Terry Lee)

Recruit Training programs at Goldie River were of 22 weeks duration, with recruits coming from all over the Territory. They were truly representative of the wide diversity of languages, cultures and religions manifested throughout Papua New Guinea. It was Recruit Training Depot policy to separate recruits from the various villages and tribes (“Wantoks”, because they spoke the same language) and spread them through the training units. There was supposedly a 17 years minimum age for recruits although awareness of birthdates was often vague. Some recruits spoke only ‘Tok Ples’ (tribal language) although most could converse in ‘Tok Pisin’ (Pidgin English), the most widespread and common language of the Territory. The majority had attended a few years of elementary schooling and developed basic or better English literacy, as well as numeracy, skills.

Education classes ran for 18 of the 22 weeks of the Recruit Training program, with English as the language of instruction. Recruits attended, in their platoon sections, for several classes a week, focusing on Literacy and Numeracy skills development. Night classes were held for Social Studies (including history and

geography of the Territory, Civics and Citizenship) lessons. How can one forget the class chants of the mantra “Democracy is Government OF the people, FOR the people and BY the people”! Training and Admin staff, from Private to Warrant Officer ranks, were also compelled to attend Education classes several times weekly.

The Education Program was based on the Army Certificate of Education, with three basic levels of accreditation. Level 1 recognised the ability to successfully engage in conversational English and was acknowledged with a brass, pin-on, letter E badge. Level 2 was attained by achieving Grade 3 (Australian equivalent) standard in English, Mathematics and Social Studies, acknowledged with the letter E badge set within an open laurel wreath. Level 3 was acknowledged with the letter E inside a full laurel wreath and crown, for attaining a Grade 6 standard in the same 3 subjects. The pride with which the badges were worn by soldiers on week-end and recreational leave was outstanding. Achievers beyond Level 3 were educationally extended in groups or individually. Tutoring and supervision was also provided for some training staff engaged in formal Years 10 and 11 subjects by correspondence.

It was an ongoing challenge for Army Education Instructors to keep soldiers in their classes focused and attentive. Even the strategy of standing up the “nodding off” students often proved futile as many soon started “rocking” as they then fell asleep on their feet! Also, Instructors were regularly caught out by the propensity for the Pidgin-speaking soldiers to give ‘yes’ responses to negative questions, for example, the response to “Haven’t you got a pencil?” was “Yes Sergeant!” (I haven’t), or when asked “Weren’t you listening?” the reply was “Yes Sergeant!” (I wasn’t). In my time at Goldie, I was seconded to teach for a week at Taurama Barracks.

Apart from our specific teaching responsibilities, we were also required to carry out other regular and ad-hoc duties. One was to act as Duty Sergeant one day/night every few weeks, with responsibility for Camp security, mounting of the Guard and related duties. It also entailed supervision of recruits allocated “extra-duties” as discipline for (mostly minor) infringements of Army Regulations and Camp Standing Orders. There seemed to be an unwritten

practice that all recruits would, sometime during their training, be 'charged' for some infringement or other, in order to experience "extra duties".

In the last few weeks of their training, the recruits in their platoons spent a fortnight camping out in the bush, engaged in military and practical jungle-training exercises. I had the dubious honour of commanding a platoon of available Camp Admin Staff (Dad's Army) to be their 'enemy' with the task of harassing them, engaging them in skirmishes and generally frustrating their operations. These exercises were held in mountainous terrain in the foothills of the Owen Stanley Ranges. It was interesting to observe how soldiers from the various areas of TPNG were "built" for their tribal terrain: Highlanders were stocky with massive legs/calves and they 'raced' up the hills, whilst those from coastal Provinces, like Milne Bay, New Ireland and New Britain were taller and leaner and found the hill-climbing as challenging as we Europeans did! One time we came across the scary sight of a huge python, well over 6 metres long that had a huge lump down its throat, having seemingly just recently swallowed a whole *magani* (wallaby). One last thought about the bush exercises: thank goodness for blank bullets!

Around mid-1967, Goldie River Depot was relocated to new "modern" facilities on a level site several hundred metres back along the road to Moresby. The new, double storey buildings were constructed with concrete floors, iron roofs and steel and wire mesh walls: a stark contrast to the traditional native hut accommodation to which the soldiers had been accustomed, probably from birth. In addition to its Recruit Training function, the new Camp also became a base and training facility for Service Corps and Engineers Corps Units. The Hon. Malcolm Fraser M.P., then Australian Minister for the Army, officially opened the new Goldie River Army Depot during a special parade. Keith Bryant and I were his designated "attendants" and stood guard beside the official stage during the ceremony!

A couple of weeks after relocation, pandemonium broke out in the middle of the night when a faulty alarm system triggered off the warning siren and the automatic fire-sprinklers through all the buildings. Bodies and bedding bolted for the bush in all directions. Three hours passed and troops were still being rounded up. Amazingly, despite the separation in accommodation of soldiers



from different villages and tribes, most were in “Wantok” groups when they returned to Camp after the big scare.

Our time at Goldie coincided with a National Census year. Leo Howman and I were given the task of collecting data from all families in the local Married Quarters. This proved to be a very challenging but insightful task with most of the Army wives very shy, reluctant to communicate and vague about the information required.

Many after-work hours mid-week were spent in the Sergeants Mess, usually having a few stubbies of South Pacific Lager before and/or after dinner and often over games of darts. Meals were generally appetizing enough, even the custard with dessert every night: be it “cold cusTARD” or “chilled cusTARD” or “warm cusTARD” or “hot cusTARD”, as described by Andrew our waiter. Army regulations compelled us to wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants in the evenings for protection against mosquito bites, also to take a Paludrine tablet with breakfast every morning to suppress malaria. For dinner we were required to have neckwear, which for most of us was a cravat. Civilian ‘Haus Bois’ did our washing, in the Goldie River with Velvet soap and rocks for scrubbing collars and cuffs. The life span of garments was further curtailed by starching and ironing. Most haus bois weren’t into long-term employment, working for periods of time - from weeks to months - to earn enough money to get them by for a while, and then they would disappear and send their wantoks along to keep the cycle going.

Keith Bryant, Leo Howman and I happened to get along really well with each other from our early days at Goldie. Actually, Leo and I had been well-acquainted for a number of years, having completed our secondary schooling and Teachers College training together in Ballarat, as well as our Army Recruit Training at Puckapunyal. After several weeks at Goldie River the three of us pooled together to buy a second-hand Peugeot 403, which became our means of independent transport and “escape” from Goldie for leisure and recreation activities. Port Moresby, Boroko and surrounds were our usual venues for activities such as movies at the open-air Boroko Theatre, eating out at a Chinese Restaurant, training sessions and playing Aussie Rules football with the Army Team (home ground at Taurama Barracks) and drinks at the Moresby and



Boroko Hotels. The Peugeot served us very reliably, until its body and chassis parted company on a return trip from Moresby just a few days prior to our departure from the Territory.

We were regularly bemused, at the Boroko Hotel after footy games, by the drinking customs of the “wantok” groups of native soldier colleagues on weekend leave. Whereas we would buy one round of drinks in turn, their practice was for everyone in the group to buy however many beers they could afford and place them all together on the table top. Then it virtually became a game of last man standing, with those who wilted progressively falling asleep in their chairs or on the floor alongside. Another thing we were bemused by followed the occasional bush barbecues we went on, usually out near Rouna Falls at the foothills of the Kokoda Track. When scraping clean the hotplate to pack up, one or more locals would emerge from the surrounding bush, requesting to take the charcoal scraps and any leftover newspaper for “gutpela redirab” (making roll-your-own ready-rub cigarettes).

In late October 1967, we were replaced by a new contingent of Nasho teachers and returned to Australia and to our home states. A couple of days later, Leo and I reported to Southern Command Personnel Depot, fully anticipating to be sent off on some of the accrued leave we were entitled to. Not to be however, when the Commanding Officer there realized that with our rank and qualifications we could solve their staffing shortfall for processing the discharge of all the Victorian National Servicemen from our Intake 3. So, I spent the last 8 weeks of my National Service as a discharge clerk at SCPD, give or take a few days sick-leave to recover from an ankle injury incurred whilst skating at St Moritz in St Kilda and the regulation stand-down days over the Christmas period. A week before Christmas, a number of men in SCPD awaiting leave and discharge had their plans set back for a day or two due to being detailed into a search party for Australia’s then Prime Minister, Harold Holt, who was reported missing and presumed drowned following a swim at Cheviot Beach near Portsea.

Reflectively, I consider my National Service and particularly the Territory of Papua New Guinea posting as a very positive, productive and beneficial experience. Avoiding service in Vietnam, with the associated short-term and

long-term tragedy and trauma for many or most who served there, was certainly a good thing. (The Unit, 2 Composite Ordnance Company, where I served prior to the Papua New Guinea posting, left for Vietnam a couple of months after I left them.)

My mateship with Leo and Keith, which subsequently extended to enduring close friendships for my wife Jill and I with them and their wives, Bon and Pam, and all their families, has been a most enjoyable and rewarding outcome. We keep regular contact, particularly for significant occasions, and have managed social get-togethers every few years, despite Leo and Keith living in Western Australia (and me in Victoria).



Sergeants' Mess Goldie River 2014 (Photo Greg Ivey)

