

ARMI WANTOKS JOURNAL

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The Journal of the Australian teachers who served in Papua New Guinea in the Royal Australian Educational Corps from 1966 to 1973.

Editorial Team: Greg Ivey (Contact: iveygj@gmail.com)
Ian Ogston (Contact: ozoggies@hotmail.com)

Hello All,

This is without precedent!!!

Four Armi Wantoks Journals in one year!!!

This has occurred because of the excellent material that has been produced as well as the great number of events happening in our Chalkie world. The major article in this issue is the story of a 1PIR patrol to the Milne Bay area in 1968 provided by Terry Edwinsmith. Patrolling was always seen as the high point of the Chalkie experience. Not too many of us were able to participate in one of these so it is important to read of these exceptional experiences to gain a full picture of the work that was done in PNG.

I trust you will enjoy Terry's account.

Ian and Greg

NEWS

Most of you will know by now that three of our number, Terry Edwinsmith, Norm Hunter and Kev Horton visited PNG in August. All went well and all three arrived home after a very special experience. We will hear more from them in future volumes of this journal.

I have enclosed photos of the travellers below.



Terry, Norm and Kev with Kini Rava outside the Sergeants' Mess, Taurama



Kev, Terry and Norm with CO of 1PIR Colonel Emmanuel Todick at the rugby union match at Goldie River

The trip to PNG will be the focus of our get-together on October 2. The venue will be the Kedron -Wavell Services Club. I will send out details of this shortly.

PATROL FROM WANIGELA TO GURNEY

(D Company, 1 PIR)

March/April 1968



PIR patrol entering a coastal village - Northern District

One of the most important tasks of the Australian Army in the 1960s -1970s was to assist the development of the Pacific Islands Regiments in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea and help guide the military personnel towards the country's independence. To this end the regiments engaged in regular defence force training and civic action duties to help local communities all over the country. The patrols that ventured into most parts of the Territory undertook a variety of civic action projects, such as bridge building and repair, track maintenance, general village repairs and gardening work. More specialist corps soldiers provided medical aid, road development, civic buildings and bridge construction.

These activities helped create constructive attitudes in the minds of the soldiers towards the diverse people and such activities helped identify the people with their Army. It comes as no surprise that these patrols assisted recruiting in the remote areas, and helped minimize any tribal exclusivism in forming an integrated National Defence Force. The soldiers themselves developed a pride in their history and unique culture as they patrolled even the remotest villages of the Territory.

So it was with some of those goals in mind, a desire to conduct a census enroute and also to check the accuracy of the maps of the day with the actual features on the ground, that an RAAF Caribou aircraft was loaded at Jackson Field, Port Moresby with members of 1 PIR's D Company heading for Wanigela in the Northern Province. Sgt. Tribuna a Papuan, was in charge of loading.

The (DHC) Caribou, first purchased in 1964, was the workhorse of the Australian Air Force until 2009. The Caribou was a versatile transport aircraft, capable of short takeoffs and landings on unprepared runways of more than 365 metres. Its rear opening ramp doors enabled personnel and cargo to be unloaded quickly. Aircraft could carry 32 troops or 2 jeeps or the equivalent. The rear loading ramp could be used for dropping soldiers with parachutes... A purpose built urinal at this ramp had few users when the tail gate was lowered in flight. It is noted that Ansett-MAL operated a single Caribou in the New Guinea Highlands.

An early morning start for D Company based at Taurama Barracks in mid March had most personnel and provisions in Wanigela by early afternoon. Wanigela airport was built by the Allied Forces in WWII and consisted of a single grassed runway primarily used for transport flights.

As well as the aforementioned Sgt. Tribuna Company NCO, the Company was led by Major Robert (Bob) Warland who took up administrative duties in the Milne Bay area during the patrol, 2Lt Richard (Dick) McEvoy and 2Lt John Alcock, a regular soldier who had risen through the ranks and then attended officer training school at Portsea in Victoria.

I was assigned to 2 Lt Alcock with 10 and 12 platoon who were to march from Wanigela to Alotau/Gurney keeping to the coastal tracks as far as practicable.

My first task was to visit the local school at Wanigela and visit a Standard 6 Class housed



Loading the Caribou at Jackson Field, Port Moresby

in a locally made classroom. Students wore shorts or skirts only which was very practical for the prevailing humid conditions in that part of the country. A hospital was also part of the complex. It may have formed part of the Anglican Mission in the area at that time.

The patrol set off in fine weather. Each soldier carried clothes, food, bedding and water as well as their army issued rifle with a small amount of live ammunition. The platoons consisted of 12 soldiers each with members drawn from Papua, New Guinea mainland and New Britain. The locals would have marvelled at the ethnic diversity of the group, all dressed in jungle greens, bush hat, back pack and rifle in hand. Food was bought from the locals to supplement the rations. A heavy reliance on rice was to be our fare for the ensuing month. Some of the back packs were placed on outrigger canoes and local village men would ferry the back packs to the next village or to where the next night stop was to be made. This gave the platoon plenty of time to view the marvelled scenery of Collingwood Bay as we walked along. Much of the time was spent crossing river mouths. Whilst our luggage remained dry in the canoes, we encountered a series of river crossings then drying out before moving on. It did allow us the opportunity to keep reasonably clean but it did have a large impact on my feet. I was wearing a canvas and rubber styled boot, but with the constant wetting of my socks together with the continual walking, the soles of my feet began to peel away badly, so much so, that I had trouble walking with more than half of the journey yet to be completed. The initial decision was that I would accompany the patrol for ten or so days, and then I would return to base after a food drop halfway into the expedition. Alas this did not occur and I hobbled along with

the group. Finally it was decided that I would spend some of my day on the canoes with the luggage. This was to be my saving grace.

The patrol would often camp near a coconut plantation as the land was reasonably clear, but no one pitched tents in the plantation as falling coconuts would certainly disturb the sleeping group. It was left to Privates Karau and Makley to build my 'haus' each night. This was always performed with great humour and pride as it was a simple and easy job to do as outlined in any good boy scout manual. Two A frames were quickly erected from bush materials for the head and foot of the tent. A longer pole joined both standing A frames at the top to support the large roof ground sheet. A smaller bed sized ground sheet with provision for parallel rails to be inserted lengthwise, gave the bunk its shape. The two poles slipped onto the standing A frames to make a bed at least a metre above the ground with a covering A shaped tent above the bed that could be adjusted to cover the bed and occupant entirely, keeping out any torrential downpour that might occur. The weight of the body on the mattress gave stability to the entire structure. It was a very simple and remarkable undertaking which each soldier performed for themselves nightly and only required a sharpened machete, two ground sheets and bush material growing nearby. This was luxury unsurpassed and after a meal of rice and tinned meat, a quiet chat with Sgt Tribuna, we retired for the evening.

As we moved through the rainforest in the southern section of Northern Province, Private Esa managed to find and capture a Toucan (bird) which was later served up in the night stew. I endeavoured to dry out the head and bring the famous beak back to Taurama but on an occasion when I was a guest at one of the village guest houses, sleeping on a rough pole floor (instead of my very comfortable tent) the toucan head which I had placed on an ant bed for night cleaning, disappeared. Upon leaving next day to continue our trek, the village dogs gave me a knowing wink as I slowly trudged southward with a kink in my back and neck from the previous night's accommodation.

Every bend in the track revealed more of nature's wonders. The greenery of the forest was in stark contrast to the blue of the sea close by. Tracks passed through many villages and the locals came and watched our group as we trekked onward often stopping for information regarding the next evening's stop or to purchase vegetables from the market gardens nearby.

On one such morning following an early breakfast of rice and our daily ration of quinine tablets for malaria, we broke camp and found ourselves blocked in our journey by a deep fast flowing river. No canoes seemed to be available at that time, so it was decided to cross the river at its mouth using the sand bank at the estuary entrance as our pathway. The use of the term 'estuary' prompted someone to say 'crocodile', so for the next few minutes marksmen placed several rounds of ammunition into likely looking logs lying on the river banks. Nothing was seen or heard, so one by one each of us set off with our back packs and rifles held above our heads arching out in a semicircle until we reached the other side of the river. After a quick dry out we moved onward, all arms and legs intact.

The many creeks and streams provided ideal swimming conditions at the end of most treks. Clear pools provided ready diving ponds for a weary group of travellers on many occasions. This was a time for showing off, fancy diving and belly flops all of which elicited howls of laughter from onlookers. It was a chance for the coastal boys and myself to let off steam whilst the highlanders cooked their evening meals. This was a time of great bonding of platoon personnel.

At this time, we were to leave Northern Province and cross the river to Biniguni in the Milne Bay District so that night, we camped near a village guest house. It was not long after that we were resupplied with provisions for the ongoing journey. This was a plane drop into a clearing or it may have been a disused overgrown airfield. Some boxes broke on impact but it provided entertainment for the local villagers who watched these proceedings with great interest.

Not long after, we camped by a crystal clear waterfall for the night. This was the early part of April, and Palm Sunday (7th April 1968) found us trekking towards Dogura, an Anglican Mission Station with a school and a health centre on the Dogura Plain.

The Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul was a majestic sight with a red roof sitting atop a large white walled European-styled building that can be seen for miles. (This Cathedral is the largest Anglican Church in PNG and seats 800 people. The building was represented on the 21toea PNG postage stamp in 1991.) The Church was built by early missionaries and consecrated in 1939. The building remained untouched by warfare throughout the Second World War. Our group passed this building from a distance.



Gear being loaded on to canoes for re-supply for the patrol along the beach

As we walked south along the shores of the Milne Bay District, remainders of sunken naval vessels could be seen in several parts of our coastal journey. Milne Bay, located at the easterly tip of PNG was the site of a critical battle which began in August 1942 as the Japanese attempted to capture the Bay. After the Australians defeated the Japanese landings (the first defeat of the Japanese Army in World War 2), the area was developed into an important series of Allied bases and airfields which kept the Japanese confined further to the north.

One memorable overnight stay occurred when we camped close to the Kwato Mission. Lt. Adcock and I were invited to take drinks at sunset by the nursing staff. We did manage to meet several of the church representatives that evening, but the overwhelming fear of a young English female doctor was that our boys would corrupt the trainee nurses studying at Kwato Mission at the time and that they would have to live with the consequences in the not too distant future. With this piece of information ringing in our heads, we returned to our camp before moving on next day. No questions were asked of the troops next morning but only time would tell if the young doctor's prophecy would come true. I was never to know.

Kwato Mission was first opened by Charles Abel a missionary with the London Missionary Society in 1891 but it later became an Anglican Mission as the Anglicans were reasonably active in the area from Wanigela in the north to Samarai in the south. Church leaders at this mission disagreed with colonial administration in the area and, with little income coming from non existent plantations (which other missions had developed commercially) the mission closed in 1975.

A hall in the Alotau area was the final resting place of our patrol. Here we were able to rest our bodies and meet up with the other platoons of D Company. A relaxed Major Warland cast an eye over his exhausted troops. The hall's floor was no substitute for our bush tents. Several days were to pass before our homeward journey. Alotau is the present capital of Milne Bay Province in PNG and became the provincial capital in 1969 after it was shifted from Samarai further south. Samarai Island was the pre war colonial government station and seaplane base.

The airport for Alotau is at Gurney some 12 km away from the town. Gurney airfield (or No 1 Strip) was built at the western end of Milne Bay during World War 11 and consisted of two parallel runways, one now surfaced with bitumen and the other with marston matting. It was named after an Australian pilot who was killed in an aircraft crash.

The trip home was uneventful using the ever reliable Caribou aircraft and army transport trucks from Jackson Field in Port Moresby to Taurama Barracks. D Company certainly had a very interesting and incident free patrol. It is to be hoped that at least some of the goals for the trip were achieved. I certainly know that for the twenty five of us in that particular patrol it was a most memorable and character building exercise. It was a 'boys own' adventure repeated by similar groups over many years, a trip not to be missed for

those lucky enough to participate.

Later when we returned to the Taurama Barracks on Easter Monday, the Mess Sergeant served me a rice dinner with rice pudding for dessert. After 45 years some things you can never forget.

Terry Edwinsmith
Sgt, Education Corps 1967-68
1 PIR
Territory of Papua New Guinea

