

ARMI WANTOKS JOURNAL

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

Editorial Team: Greg Ivey (Contact: greg_ivey@msn.com)
Ian Ogston (Contact: ozoggies@hotmail.com)

Welcome to the first edition of Armi Wantoks Journal for this year. Much has happened since the last Journal and the information is detailed below in the News section.

For the main part of this Journal, Greg and I have delved into the archives and found some material that we wrote some years ago. Greg's article reviews a film called 'Kokoda' which was released a few years ago. Given the ever-changing historical interpretation of this campaign, it is worth following up this review with a viewing.

I have contributed an article that I wrote after meeting and hearing the experiences of Chalkies from other bases in PNG. I have included a few illustrations.

NEWS

Anzac Day approaches and we will again be represented at the Brisbane parade with the PIB/NGIB/PIR/HQ Association. Many of you will have received details of the day from Greg. Please feel free to attend this gathering if you have not come before. It is quite an experience. The

Association annual general meeting will be held after the parade at the Geebung RSL. (Note the change of venue from last year.)

The creation of the visual record of our time in PNG using the slides and other material that many of you provided is complete and copies are now being produced. (Oddly enough, my computer is not happy about this and is causing me a few problems.) Unfortunately, because of this, it is unlikely the finished product will be available on Anzac Day. I have been able to make some copies and one of these will be presented to the RAAEC on Friday night at the corps anniversary dinner.

The whole project is a good visual record of our time in PNG. The original material will be available on Anzac Day for those that come for the march. Other arrangements will be made for the remaining material. I will be in contact with individuals over this.

Ian and Greg

GOLDIE WAS DIFFERENT

Ian Ogston

The Chalkie experience at Goldie River was different.

‘Goldie’ was the Papua New Guinea Training Depot, to give it its full name. It was known universally as ‘Goldie’ because of its location on the floodplain of the Goldie River. Its purpose, in what was then known as PNG Command (of the Australian Army), was to provide training for newly-recruited soldiers and as well, provide specialist courses for medics, drivers, cooks, clerks and signallers.

Goldie’s differentness was defined not only by these particular functions but also by its isolated location. The thirty kilometre-long winding gravel road to Port Moresby was never a particularly fast trip. As well, we had to contend with flooding of the road in the wet season and the one or two settlements of local people along the way who were generally regarded as being not particularly partial to army types. ‘You did not want to break down along this road,’ we were always told.

Goldie was surrounded by occasional rainforest remnants and grassland - not a particularly attractive physical environment. In the dry season, it was brown and in the wet, it was swampland.

The brown and rather turbulent Goldie River which flowed past the camp was rarely visited by most. Apparently, a crocodile attack some years before guaranteed its unpopularity. On the upstream boundaries of the camp were the Koiari village lands and this was well and truly out of bounds to army personnel.



Goldie - from the Sergeants' Mess (affected by the mould of 40 years!)

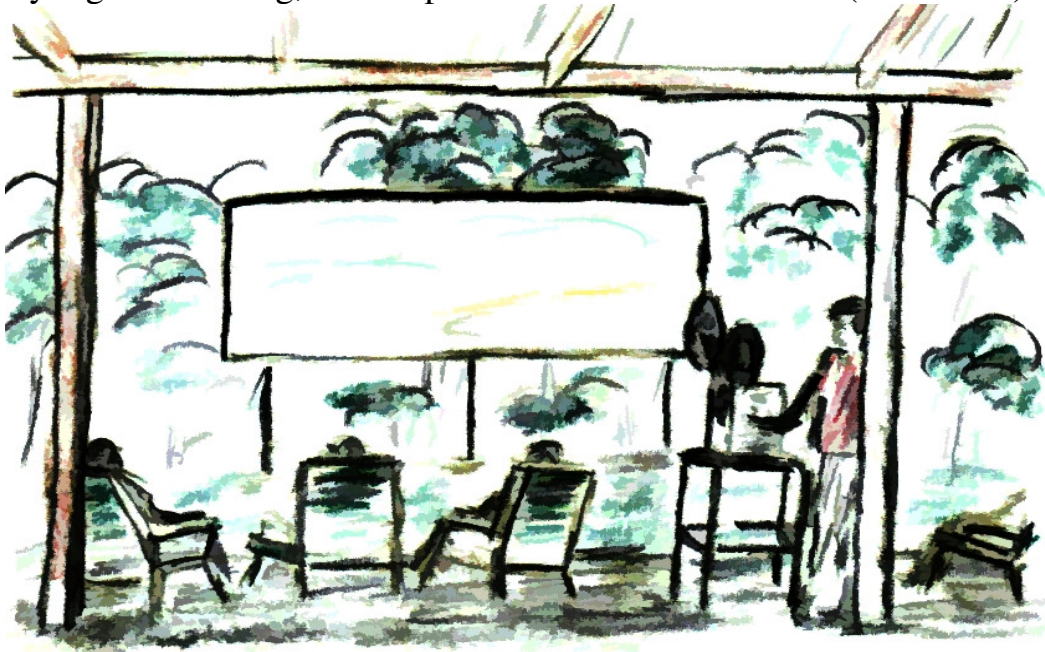
All of this contrasted with the other locations that Chalkies were posted. Places like Wewak were invariably described as 'paradise' and bases at Port Moresby and Lae were integrated into the social web of these urban areas.

In Goldie's fairly remote location, the Army way pervaded every aspect of this small community. (A similar situation exists in mining towns in remote areas where the company is everything.) From the moment you woke up in the morning to the time you went to bed, it was Army. In this situation, people were thrown together more closely than usual and the consequences were often stifling and conducive to destructive friction. On top of this,

Goldie's function as a training camp created an atmosphere of strict discipline (for the benefit of the recruits) and inflexibility. Inordinate attention was given to such pettiness as dress, saluting, marching, looking 'military' and other small games enjoyed by the martinets of the army world. There was a strong sense that this was very 'Army' and don't you forget it. It reminded me very much of Singleton Barracks.

Physically, Goldie was a relatively new, well-designed island of buildings in the wilderness. The soldiers were housed in large, three-storey cement block buildings. There was a chapel, a squash court, several tennis courts, a hospital and one large mess hall for the troops. As well, there were a variety of other buildings essential for the functioning of a military establishment such as the Q Store, main administration building, theatre/hall and the canteen/shop/post office. The trouble was that everything was built of grey cement blocks. Grey was the colour of Goldie.

The Sergeants' Mess was one of these buildings. It was set apart from the main group of buildings and consisted of a two storey accommodation block and a nearby single story block consisting of the bar and mess/kitchen. It was the hub of social life and physically, not an unpleasant place to be. There were comfortable chairs, fans, a well-stocked bar and movies every Friday night on the big, white open air screen out the back. (See below)



Our problem was that more than a few Australian sergeants did not

particularly like Chalkies very much. They thought that we were not real soldiers (let alone sergeants!) and to make matters worse, we were getting paid too much. The Army pay structure meant that we were certainly on a very high rate of pay, even more than a second lieutenant (at least for a while).

This seemed to contrast with the experiences of the Chalkies in other places. The esprit de corps of the battalions at Wewak and Taurama was something remembered with some pride and fondness by those posted there.

While the situation at Goldie created some uncomfortable moments for us in the mess, we enjoyed our work with the recruits and the various activities we did together. We usually went to Port Moresby on the weekend in our clapped out old Volkswagen and played hockey and cricket for army teams on Saturdays for most of the year. As well, we took up the Army's offer of free study and did courses out of the University of Queensland by correspondence. This involved quite a bit of reading, writing assignments and visits to the University of Papua New Guinea at Waigani. One of the parts of the subject I was doing involved education in developing countries and this was immensely interesting given my situation. Another advantage was that the library at the university was full of books relevant to this topic.

Midway through our time at Goldie (1971), the Prime Minister, Billy McMahon, announced a reduction of the time National Servicemen were required to serve. It went from two years to eighteen months. We could have left immediately but we chose to stay to complete our work with the second intake of recruits for the year. It was good work as the new soldiers were keen to further their education both for themselves and their country. It was a pleasing view of what they needed to do and also demonstrated an awareness of the bigger issues facing their country. It was an attitude that I fondly looked back upon as I later taught more than a few adolescents in Queensland high schools who cared little about their education and certainly even less about the contribution they could make to the betterment of their society.

At the end of our time at Goldie, we were farewelled by the mess and parted in good spirits. The farewell consisted of the presentation of a suitably inscribed pewter mug (still in use!) which had to be filled with the local beer and skolled amid much cheering and encouragement.

By this stage, we were not sorry to leave Goldie. The weather was diabolically hot and humid and there was the promise of a new life and the restarting of a stalled career in civilian teaching. It also meant an end to the less attractive aspects of being in the army.

None of us were in any doubt though, as to the value of the PNG experience. It was an exotic adventure which used our professional skills and opened up a country and its cultures in a way not available to the vast majority of people. It was the best thing that could have happened to a Nasho. As well, it made an indelible imprint on our lives that enriched us immeasurably.

Ian Ogston

On Thursday of this week, the ABC is showing a documentary on Kokoda. It is listed by the Weekend Australian as being among the best programs to watch this week. The growing interest in Kokoda began, perhaps, with Paul Keating's famous kiss of the sacred ground when he was Prime Minister. Since then, many have walked the trail (including Greg) and as well, there has been much re-valuation of the roles of the various units in the whole campaign.

Greg has provided a review of a film that was made a short while ago, which attempts to dramatise the events of this incredible campaign.

KOKODA

(A film directed by Alistair Gregson)

This film captures the essence of young Australian soldiers fighting a much larger and experienced Japanese army pushing to and through Isurava on the Kokoda Track in 1942. It recreates the saga of a forward platoon sent to confront the Japanese but they are surrounded and struggle to regroup and return to Isurava. In this small group of 39th Battalion soldiers, the film portrays personalities and characteristics of the many Aussie diggers who

fought with local soldiers on the Kokoda campaign. Likewise, the scene of close jungle fighting, confusion in the dark, Japanese brutality and impossible obstacles, are typical of the broader Owen Stanleys battleground. The dialogue is understated and demands careful listening by the audience, which is difficult when the jungle scenery is overwhelming and dark. The introductory narration and the concluding titles attempt to tell the audience how crucial the Kokoda campaign is to our history. The importance of the struggle is not lost on the soldiers at the time. It is expressed in the film realistically, by the doctor (Shane Bourne, in a telling cameo) and in a classical vein, by Colonel Honner on parade (William McInness). Earlier in the film, the reputations of Generals MacArthur and Blamey are jokingly and justifiably criticised. Despite this, such soldiers displayed extraordinary courage and endurance to halt the Japanese advance on Port Moresby. The appeal of the film will be to those who have a considerable knowledge of the Kokoda campaign. Although filmed in Australia, the film is as accurate as possible and consistent with the record. The film could have appealed to a wider audience if the producer had used visuals of the broader context of the campaign. Without these, the viewer is as lost as the soldiers, trying to relate to the bigger picture heard only in the distance.

A debatable aspect is the uneven characterisation. The elected leader, Jack, and the Bren gunner, Darko are admirably drawn but the other patrol members are short changed (as in life?). For example, the background of Sam (played by Steve Le Marquand), could have been provided in the early stages. His ultimate sacrifice is too lightly concluded; because sacrifice is a key element in the Kokoda legend. The injury to the brother Max and deciding how best to proceed at the hut, reveals different motives among the remaining patrol members. Here, opportunities for the character development are lost although an attempt is made.

Maybe the individual characters are less important. The true characters of these “chocolate” soldiers is shown when exhausted wounded leave the Aid Post for the front line again on hearing that the regular soldiers are in danger of being over-run.

So the film succeeds in presenting the essence of the early Kokoda campaign, particularly the 39th Battalion action. A modern film of this campaign will be the role for others, such as producer Yahoo Serious, to present other battalions and other aspects of this historic battle.

Well worth viewing (and re-viewing) especially with young adults.

