

THE JAVELIN COLLECTION

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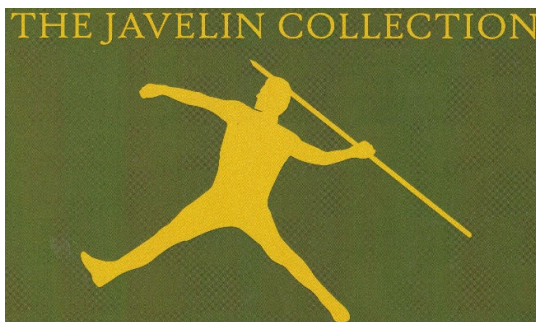
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RABAUL, JANUARY 1942

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ITS AFTERMATH FOR ONE AUSTRALIAN
SERVICEMAN

compiled by Diana Figgis



Monograph Number One - RUSI- Australia

Diana Figgis

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*Editor and Editorial Advisory Committee: Diana Figgis, Lieutenant Colonel Ian Wolfe CSM RFD,
Captain Ian Pfennigwerth RAN (Ret'd), Lieutenant Colonel Ron Lyons RFD (Ret'd)*

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All inquiries and editorial correspondence should be addressed to:

The Editor - Monograph Series

RUSI NSW

PO Box A778, Sydney South NSW 1235

Email : diana.figgis@rusinsw.org.au;

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R.U.S.I. – AUSTRALIA
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RABAU, JANUARY 1942
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ITS AFTERMATH FOR ONE AUSTRALIAN SERVICEMAN

Preface

In May 1996, my late father Peter Ernest Figgis (16th November, 1915 – 20th November, 2009) handwrote a statement which I typed up and which he signed and dated 22nd May, 1996; PEF was then eighty years old. The document here is also typed up by me DHF, twenty-six years later, and is the same statement as the original. The only difference between the two documents is that (a) I have excluded submissions to the DVA and (b) in italics, I have added dates obtained from Eric Feldt's book "The Coastwatchers" (1946.)

This is an account given by an Australian soldier who was at Rabaul when it fell to the Japanese in January 1942, and what he did after surviving that fiasco. Having escaped New Britain in April 1942, PEF returned there in February, 1943 as a 'Ferdinand' Coastwatcher. In a party with Malcolm Wright, Les Williams & Pita Simogun, he was positioned at Cape Orford. PEF was awarded the Military Cross.

DHF
Diana Figgis
August 2022

STATEMENT OF VX44411 MAJOR PETER E. FIGGIS - 22nd May 1996

I was the Intelligence Officer of the 2/22 Battalion, 23rd Brigade of the 8th Division A.I.F. This unit was the main component of LARK Force for the defence of Rabaul on the island of New Britain. Later, when small numbers of specialist units were added, I was appointed Area Intelligence Officer, with responsibility for intelligence matters in Manus, Kavieng and Buka, as well as Rabaul. This involved close liaison with the R.A.A.F. and R.A.N. officers. At the time I held the rank of lieutenant.

Towards the end of 1941, as the Japanese threat became serious, as Intelligence Officer I was aware that some 5,000 troops, anti-submarine nets and other equipment were on their way from Australia to reinforce Rabaul. As war with Japan became more certain, these reinforcements were retained in Port Moresby. It then became clear that Lark Force was not going to be reinforced and was not going to be withdrawn. In other words, Lark Force would be left to its fate.

When on 23rd January, 1942 the Japanese did invade Rabaul, they quickly overcame the Australian troops and airmen, all of whom were inadequate in numbers and deficient in all military arms and equipment.

I was the last Australian soldier to leave Rabaul township, endeavouring to maintain radio communication with Port Moresby. It was at this stage that the radio transmitter was put out of action and I was blown through the side of a hut, when a Japanese bomb exploded nearby. I was deafened by the blast and my ears rang for about three weeks afterwards.

After the Japanese landings, those Australian troops who were not immediately taken prisoner escaped, some heading for the north coast and others to the south coast. I was among the latter and, with the Naval Intelligence Officer, immediately considered what the possibilities were of getting away from New Britain and to the mainland of New Guinea. All radio communication with the outside world was now cut off and all the boats and launches belonging to the coconut plantations along the coast had escaped to the mainland. Only a few troops managed to reach any of these boats before they left.

The remaining troops were rapidly deteriorating through starvation, sickness and fatigue. Many of them stopped at Tol and Waitavolo plantations on Wide Bay. They were cut off when Japanese naval vessels landed troops in the vicinity. Over a hundred Australian troops were in no condition to oppose the Japanese and they had

no alternative but to surrender. Instead of making them prisoners, the Japanese took them into the coconut plantation where they were either bayoneted or shot. Two managed to escape although badly wounded. Several who were sick had taken refuge in the abandoned house on Waitavolo plantation. The Japanese found them, set fire to the house and the Australians troops were burnt to death.

My small party, including the Naval Intelligence Officer, reached Tol plantation several days after the massacre of which we were, at that stage, unaware. We soon discovered what had happened and found some of the bodies in various parts of the coconut plantation. Most were without their identity discs, but we were able to recover a small number, also a few partly burnt pay books.

By this time the Japanese had occupied Gasmata about half way along the New Britain south coast, effectively cutting off the retreat of some of the troops slowly heading in that direction. In the event they gradually congregated in and around the Pal Mal Mal and Wunung coconut plantations near Cape Cunningham on the western side of Jacquinot Bay.

The Officer Commanding A Company of the 2/22nd Battalion, Major Owen, who was the most senior officer on the coast, had managed to get some organisation among the troops. The Japanese had not at that stage started patrolling the coastal strip and Major Owen's group of about one hundred were left alone but were caught between the Japanese forces at Rabaul and Gasmata.

My party was camping nearer to Rabaul and had been able to establish contact with a Government officer whose base was at Talasea on the north coast. He had a small ship available and he could still communicate by radio with Port Moresby. He was getting the Australian troops there organised and had advised Port Moresby that he would soon be setting out for the New Guinea mainland and evacuating the troops. Fortunately just before he was leaving, he received a message from us stating that we would endeavour to concentrate the south coast troops at Pal Mal Mal.

When this message was passed to the Naval Officer-in-Charge at Port Moresby, he immediately arranged for a small Government motor launch, presently near Milne Bay, to cross to New Britain by night and determine the position. When the man in charge of the launch reached Pal Mal Mal safely, he found that there were in fact about one hundred troops and a few civilians in the area and he radioed Port Moresby to that effect. On receipt of this information the Government ship "Laurabada" was despatched and arrived safely at Pal Mal Mal. Operating at night it successfully

evacuated all the troops in the area, my party included. *DHF: the "Laurabada" reached Australia in late April, 1942 with one hundred and fifty-three evacuees on board.*

I eventually reached Melbourne and had several weeks' leave granted. Word soon got around that I had come from Rabaul and rumours were circulating that Australian troops had been massacred in New Britain. During my leave period I was approached by a number of very worried relatives asking if I could tell them anything about the fate of their husbands, sons, etc. This was very distressing because, in some cases, I did know that the soldier concerned had been massacred. But I had been ordered not to divulge any information as next-of-kin could only be given information through official channels.

As the 8th Division had been lost at Singapore, Timor, Ambon and Rabaul, it had been decided that it should not be reformed. After leave in Melbourne and treatment for malaria, I was sent to the Commando training centre at Wilsons Promontory where I completed the course and was posted as second in command of the 7th Independent Company in the process of formation. Not long after this I was ordered to report to Victoria Barracks in Melbourne, where I was asked if I would join the Ferdinand unit (Coastwatch) as it then was. I agreed to do so.

Leaving the Independent Company I reported to the Ferdinand headquarters in Townsville. "Coastwatch" was deliberately misleading as it was generally thought to be a chain of observers along the north coast of Australia. In fact the Coastwatchers all operated deeply in enemy territory in the New Guinea mainland, the Solomon Islands and New Britain, usually several hundred miles from the nearest Allied bases which were at Port Moresby and later at Milne Bay and Finschhafen.

The intention, at this stage, was to establish coast watching posts on the north coast of New Guinea and possibly on New Britain. This was to be achieved using a forty ton ship, formerly a Torres Strait examination vessel.

Before this operation was started, the Japanese landed at Salamaua and Lae, effectively preventing the projected operation. The United States Navy very much wanted a coastwatching station on the south coast of New Britain to cover the sea and air movements from the Japanese base at Rabaul.

At this stage there were no Coastwatchers on New Britain and it was decided that the most feasible way to insert a party was by submarine. It was decided that this operation should be undertaken and I and two other officers were selected to make up the party.

[DHF: On 21st February 1943:] Leaving from Brisbane in the U.S. Submarine "Greenling" we were successfully landed at Cape Orford a week later. Fortunately there were no Japanese in the nearby area at the time and there was no interference by them. The local natives also were anti-Japanese.

In due course we established a post on a ridge overlooking Baien village and with a wide view to seaward. We then began transmitting warnings about Japanese naval and air movements. Many of the naval reports were of surfaced submarines running supplies to the Japanese bases at Lae and Salamaua.

For five months we operated as the only coastwatchers on New Britain. We were kept supplied by parachute drops at night, mostly by long range Catalina flying boats and occasionally by B17 Flying Fortresses.

In preparation for the projected landing by U.S. troops at the western end of New Britain, it was decided to set up additional coastwatching posts on the island to cover likely movement of Japanese aircraft which might attack the U.S. landing troops.

Accordingly, more coastwatchers were successfully landed at Cape Orford from the U.S. submarine "Grouper." After preparing their gear at the post which we had established, they set off for the allotted areas. I remained in charge of the Cape Orford post.

Before it reached its destination near Gasmata, one party was betrayed by local natives. In the gun fight which followed, two of the party were killed and the leader taken prisoner. As a result all our cyphers and my position were compromised. New cyphers had to be air-dropped to each party. In view of this I received orders to leave the original post and move inland. Shortly after this the Japanese found the old post and destroyed it.

There was a lot of aerial activity at this stage, with the U.S. Air Force attacking Rabaul and the Japanese making every effort to defend their base. Two U.S. airmen, whose aircraft was damaged in raiding Rabaul, landed in the sea off Cape Orford and managed to get ashore and were brought to my base. They created problems as one of the airmen was wounded.

Leaving the Cape Orford post to move inland, my party numbering about twenty-five including native carriers, set out through very rough country and continuous rain. A new camp - later known as Camp Figgis - was set up further inland and was to

become a rallying point for other coastwatch parties on New Britain. During the move inland a further three U.S. airmen were collected.

As a result of the five U.S. airmen now in the party our supplies were becoming low. An airdrop was therefore arranged, but continued rain and cloud prevented this for a week. Then when the weather cleared enough to enable the operation to proceed, the aircraft involved crashed in taking off from Port Moresby. This resulted in a further week's delay before another drop could be arranged.

In the meantime our food supplies were almost exhausted and we were reduced to cutting down palm trees to obtain the "cabbage" at the top. This and a little rice was all we had until finally a successful drop was made. This was a time of continuous rain which added to our difficulties. Another two U.S. airmen were in the area and were brought to our camp, making seven in all, so we had to reduce rations again to eke out what we had.

By this stage our controlling radio station had moved from Port Moresby to Finschhafen. I was informed that I was to be relieved and the U.S. airmen evacuated. P.T. boats based near Finschhafen could now just reach Waterfall Bay. [*DHF: On 25th March, 1944 :*] Two boats came on a dark night bringing in some reinforcements and evacuating the U.S. airmen and myself. I had been operating on New Britain for just over a year.

After a period of leave in Australia I was sent to Biak, in what was then Netherland East Indies. I was in charge of projected coastwatching operations by Dutch personnel. They were not very successful as the Dutchmen were not up to the task. In any case the U.S. Forces were advancing towards the Philippines and the need for coastwatchers between there and Biak was gradually disappearing.

The Japanese regularly dropped bombs on the Biak base at night quite randomly and it was on one of these occasions that I almost had a repetition of my bombing incident in Rabaul, when a bomb exploded about thirty yards away from me.

At this stage I received orders to hand over command to another officer and move to Lae to become the Coastwatch liaison officer at 1ST Australian Army Headquarters. The only feasible means available for me to proceed to Lae at that time was to hitch a ride in U.S. Douglas D.C.3 taking mail to Australia. I was the only passenger on the aircraft and while landing at Port Moresby one of the aircraft's wheels collapsed and ground-looped across the runway. I was flung around in the cabin, but fortunately

the cargo of mail bags saved me from serious injury though I received a severe shaking up.

I took up the appointment at Lae in due course, which effectively ended my direct participation in coastwatching activities. Essentially, coastwatching as carried out was a defensive operation and late in 1944 American forces were moving rapidly towards Japan. The Australian forces were left to mop up the Japanese remaining in the Solomon Islands and New Britain. In these circumstances there was little scope or need for coastwatchers. I remained in Lae until going on leave for a few months before the war ended with the defeat of Japan.

I consider that the Americans showed a greater appreciation of the value and importance of the Coastwatchers' activities than did the Australia authorities. The Americans readily provided submarines, P.T. boats and aircraft to help the Coastwatchers even to the detriment of their own operations. The P.T. boat squadrons in particular used Coastwatch reports to locate and destroy many Japanese barges.

In 1994 the Peter Tare (P.T.) Association invited me with my wife to attend their annual reunion in Washington D.C. I was asked to be the principal speaker, my subject being a review of Coastwatch activities in general and in particular the way in which the Coastwatchers' reports led to many successful P.T. operations.

As the foregoing narrative shows, coastwatching was a special and unusual form of military activity and was carried out very successfully. It was Admiral Halsey who said "The Coastwatchers saved Guadalcanal and Guadalcanal saved the Pacific."

Being in enemy territory usually several hundred miles from the nearest friendly forces for months on end required stamina, ability to withstand hardship, physical and mental strength and constant vigilance. There was a never-ending threat of being hunted, captured or killed by the Japanese.

Many of the incidents in the foregoing narrative are described in the following books:

1. The Japanese Thrust - Lionel Wigmore
2. The New Guinea Offensives - David Dexter
3. The Coastwatchers - Eric Feldt
4. Spy Ring Pacific - Allison Ind
5. Rabaul 1942 - Douglas Aplin
6. War by Stealth - Alan Powell
7. Hell & High Fever - David Selby
8. Of Nautilus and Eagles : History of the Royal Australian Navy - Peter Firkins

9. Into the Dragon's Jaws - Lex McAulay
10. Hostages to Freedom: the Fall of Rabaul - Peter Stone
11. If I Die - Malcolm Wright
12. Taim Bilong Masta - Hank Nelson

PEF
22nd May, 1996

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DHF: The Ursula Davidson Library, which is the library of the Royal United Services Institute at the Anzac Memorial in Sydney, has copies of all books listed above between points one to eleven inclusive.

PEF's collection of books on military subjects was donated to the Ursula Davidson Library.

Further recommended reading: "The Coastwatchers" by Patrick Lindsay (2010), and on the subject of coast-watching in the Solomon Islands, "Fire over the Islands," by D.C. Horton (1970), both available from the Ursula Davidson Library.

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