

Kesekeo

the experiences of a guide to US Marine landing and
later as a coastwatcher in the British Solomon Islands



by
C. Eric Spencer

FOREWORD

Two members of the RAAF were among seven Australians who guided the US Marines into the Solomons. They were Pilot-Office E Spencer and Pilot-Officer C Widdy. Spencer guided the Marines on to Haleta Point and Haleta Village, and was probably the first man to set foot on enemy-occupied territory in the first US offensive action. He led the initial landing at Tanambogo, took the wounded back to Gavutu, and thence to the US hospital ship, and returned to Gavutu with a thousand men. Operating from Tulagi he led ten raids in twenty-one days. He was twice hit, but never wounded, lost all his possessions, and returned to Australia in borrowed clothing.

A surprise summons one Saturday afternoon to RAAF Headquarters was the prelude to Spencer's adventures. Within a few hours he had been promoted from ACI to Pilot-Officer, and sent on his secret mission. For four years before the War, Spencer had lived at Tulagi and he knew every inch of that island and he also knew Florida well. He was attached to the staff of a US general and on the way to a Pacific Ocean rendezvous he was present at all staff conferences and his advice was sought by the US commander on the features of Tulagi. To simplify understanding of these and to illustrate the rugged terrain, Spencer constructed a relief map in sand of the island and indicated danger spots.

Once the Tulagi sector had stabilized, Spencer was returned to Australia and was immediately recruited by Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) for work in the field as a Coastwatcher and within two weeks he was back on Guadalcanal for transportation to a northern Solomon Island, four hundred miles behind the Jap lines to establish a coastwatching post - the transportation was by submarine.

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KESEKO

THE EXPERIENCES OF A GUIDE TO US MARINE LANDING
AND LATER AS A COASTWATCHER IN THE
BRITISH SOLOMON ISLANDS

BY

C ERIC SPENCER

The author, a native of Sydney, was selected in 1929 for a Short Service Commission in the Royal Australian Air Force. A Short Service Commission was one year's training followed by three years' service training. The purpose of this was to have a nucleus of trained personnel on the reserve in Australia in case of national necessity.

After graduating as a pilot from the Flying Training School, Point Cook, Victoria, in 1930, he served for three years in the Royal Air Force in England. Returning to Australia and civil occupation at the end of this period, he worked as a draftsman in Sydney and as a hobby he took an active interest in the Boy Scouts Movement.

An appointment to the Colonial Civil Service in 1938 for service with the British Solomon Island Government was an outward sign of the adventurous spirit stirring within him once again. Always keen on out of door activity, he spent most of his leisure during his four years' residence exploring neighbouring islands and making long canoe trips which won him the respect and esteem of the natives.

After being in Tulagi, the capital of the Group, for two years the author started a Boy Scout Troop for natives - the first troop started in the Solomons. From a very small beginning 1st Tulagi Troop grew to twenty-five well trained native scouts whose ages ranged from seventeen to twenty years. These youths later played a most important part in the War which followed. Before the War, however, they were all employed by the residents of Tulagi, although their home islands may have been at the other end of the Group, some four or five hundred miles away. In fact, there were some boys from each of the major islands of the Group.

When Japan entered World War II with the bombing of the American fleet at its base at Hawaii, we in the Solomons were brought much closer to hostilities than previously. We had no defence. The War in the Pacific spread rapidly south with the Japanese occupying island after island in their thrust towards Australia. Tulagi, the tiny island capital of British Solomon Islands, was occupied in that thrust. Before the Government was evacuated from Tulagi just prior to the Japanese occupation, all natives were returned to their home islands and likewise the author returned to Australia to rejoin the RAAF.

Turned down on medical grounds at first attempt to enlist because he had suffered a black-out on one occasion when serving with the RAF, he was not daunted and later gained admission to the RAAF as an Aircraftsman Draftsman by not disclosing his complete medical history and withholding the fact that he had previous experience in service. Then followed some weeks of employment in the Directorate of Technical Services at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, but soon specialised knowledge of the islands led to a Commission and ultimately his transfer to RAAF Intelligence and, within four months of joining up, the author was back in the Solomons on special duty. The following pages are a documentary account of the author's experiences, first as a RAAF Liaison Intelligence Office with the United States Marine Corps during their first landing in the Solomons and later as an Allied Intelligence Bureau Coastwatcher in the Japanese occupied British Solomon Islands.

Coastwatching was an Australian idea conceived by Commander Eric Feldt, RANVR. In the organisation were men from all services, experienced bushmen with a knowledge of the islands and their peoples. These experienced personnel, it was considered, could establish themselves on an island under the very eyes of the Japs and be reasonably safe by virtue of their superior knowledge of the locality and the friendliness of the native people. The jungle, too, under these circumstances could be a real friend, for it is easy to hide when the party is of only one or two. These tiny field parties were usually conveyed to their destination by American submarines or patrol torpedo boats, arriving in the dead of night to be transferred to a rubber boat or canoe and left to finish the last mile to the shore by paddle.

The role of the Coastwatcher was to observe and report land, sea and air activities of the enemy forces, twenty-four hours a day, without either being seen or heard. Each Coastwatcher in the field was equipped with a two-way Teleradio for keeping in contact with Allied Intelligence Bureau Headquarters (AIB) and for reporting. It was a Coastwatcher's job to organise the friendly natives into an espionage ring and to extract a maximum of valuable intelligence from his area. In effect, the Coastwatching organisation worked like a screen of radar stations spread around the islands forming the northern and north-eastern approaches to Australia. Being an Intelligence organisation it was extremely hush-hush and received absolutely no publicity during the War and very little has been written about it since; yet this organisation can boast probably the highest percentage of decorated men of any single organisation in the War.

As intelligence during wartime must be up to the minute, it is essential that AIB should have completely independent communications system from the usual services communications. Soon after the Americans landed on Guadalcanal, AIB set up a wireless station adjacent to Henderson Field, right at American Field Headquarters. AIB field parties spread out behind the Japanese lines communicated direct with AIB station on Guadalcanal which had the call sign of Ken. All AIB messages were sent on the Teleradio in clear language using a code comprising of five letter groups. When a message was coded it took the form of ZAME, XTFNA, etc, which would be called over the

radio telephone as "Zebra apples Mary easy exray Thomas Fanny nose Albert etc. Each individual Coastwatcher had his own pet way of calling the letters and this helped confuse the Japs. The code was a simple one which had elements of it changed frequently, thus helping security.

See map of the Solomon Islands.

CHAPTER 1

Tulagi, that tiny capital of the British Solomon Islands, was so remote from troubled Europe that in 1941 one could not imagine it ever being ravaged by war. The tempo of life on Tulagi Island, however, was given terrific acceleration early in 1942 when on 10 January the Japanese dropped their first bombs on the Island.

Tulagi, in the happier days before the War, with an European population of sixty, boasted an excellent 8 hole golf course with a very comfortable clubhouse, two tennis courts, a sports oval complete with cricket pitch - a most essential amenity wherever Britishers live.

This was my home and for a lover of nature the fringing reef was a delight, with its multi-coloured sea growths and most spectacular fish of all sizes and shapes. It made a fascinating study. An afternoon in a native canoe on the reef was my ideal recreation, and one of which I never grew tired during the whole four years of residence on Tulagi. Exploring the deep pools and the contour of the outer edge of the reef made me familiar with the gaps in this protective barrier, a knowledge which was largely responsible for my being chosen for a special assignment with the United States Marine Corps when they later commenced their Pacific Campaign in this area.

Tulagi, only two and a half miles long and half a mile wide, possessed no roads; shady cobbled paths connected each of the residences which were mostly built on top of hills; but every step along those paths unfolded dazzling beauty.

Beneath the overhanging canopy of mango trees grew hibiscus of every shade, matching their beauty and brilliance with that of the vivid colouring of every variety of croton. Tulagi was a place of wild natural beauty; not of the Botanic Gardens variety but rustic with the exotic perfume of frangipani ever present in the moist air. From every path one caught glimpses of the surrounding sea, framed in gently swaying palms, with here and there a trading schooner with white sails skimming across the azure sea. Beyond lay the green shores of Nggela Island, where mangroves dipped leafy boughs to meet the rising tide; here and there a small palm-fringed cove with sandy beach offering a pleasant break to the continuous mass of the dark green mangroves and the thick jungle beyond.

There were small islands too, two of which, Gavutu and Tanambogo stood sentinel over the harbour entrance. These two made history later on, but no-one would have thought of such a thing before the War. Gavutu was a beautiful garden set amidst the regular lines of coconuts, for it had originally been planted as a plantation but later became the head-quarters of Levers Pacific Plantation companies. The three or four families living there had done their utmost to make the island a bower of flowers set off by an avenue of shady crimson flowering poinsianna trees: a more peaceful spot it would be hard to imaging.

Then came the blast of bombs, dropped right on the shores of Tulagi from Japanese flying boats. Being without any defence whatever, the British Solomon Island Government was evacuated to Sydney, Australia, just prior to the Japanese landing. I rejoined the Royal Australian Air Force.

Still smarting from the Japanese destruction of the United States Pacific Fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbour, America was forced into World War II, and began immediately to plan a Pacific campaign against the Japanese.

Colonel Frank G Goettge of US Marine Corps visited Melbourne in May 1942, as Director of Marine Intelligence. He was in search of reliable information on the British Solomon Islands which, by this time, had been overrun by the Japanese in their advance towards Australia. The United States of America was preparing a task force in New Zealand which was to strike at the Japanese with sufficient force and with such overwhelming numbers that their advance was to be halted at all costs. The spot chosen for this strike was Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the British Solomon Islands, where simultaneous landings were to be made.

I was introduced to Colonel Goettge by the Director of RAAF Intelligence, Wing Commander Frank Packer, as an authority on Tulagi. A lengthy interview ensued. A few days after this interview, Colonel Goettge made a formal request to RAAF Headquarters for my services to accompany the US Marines on their first Pacific Campaign of the War. Thus, I was attached to General Rupertus' staff and consequently spent practically my entire war service in an American theatre of war.



General Vandergrift and staff planning the Solomons campaign en route to the Solomons. Colonel Frank Goettge is second from right

D-day for the campaign was 7 August 1942. We were out of bed by 3am and were given a very early breakfast on Marine Transport "Elliot", which had conveyed us from Wellington, New Zealand, where the task force had stayed. The personnel in "Elliot" were by no means alone, for the force was a mighty one comprising over seventy surface ships and I know not how many submarines. The three Australian cruisers, HMAS's "Australia", "Canberra" and "Hobart", were part of the escort force all the way.



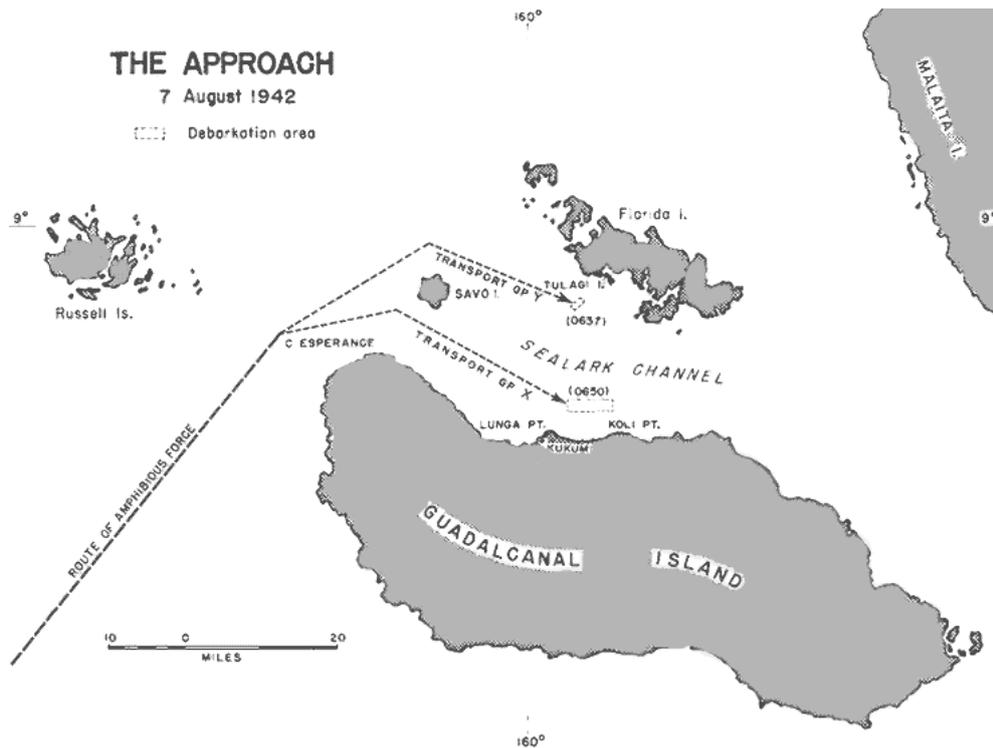
Generals Vandergrift (left) and Rupertus in Wellington NZ July 1942

I had been allotted a special task by General Rupertus, who was commander of the Tulagi landing force and who was second in command of the Task Force. The landing on Guadalcanal, which was simultaneous with our landing, was commanded personally by the commanding General of the Task Force, Major General Vandergrift.

The beach where the main landing on Tulagi was to take place was vulnerable to enemy fire from a point of land on the nearby island of Nggela (this island is also known as Florida), and I was to guide a party of some sixty Marines to a small cove near this point, from where we were to move up to the point and deny the Japs any possible use of it, while the main landing force landed on Tulagi. Our landing therefore was timed for H-hour minus thirty minutes, so we were to land at 7.30am.



It was rather exciting guiding the first boat in but I am afraid I did not realise then that we had such a special role. We assembled at our battle stations on the eventful D-day morning: all keyed up and, I might add, each man carrying 36 hours rations besides his battle kit. Personal gear was to be left on the ship and it was to be landed the following day. Nobody anticipated any sleep the first night so that arrangement was sound. Just as dawn broke the ships of the invasion force were steaming in line ahead when suddenly out of the darkness Savo Island appeared. This was the spot where the convoy split into two forces, one going each side of Savo, the first bound for Guadalcanal and the second for Tulagi.



It was a very black morning and by the time daylight arrived our carrier based aircraft had dealt a knockout blow to the only Japanese aircraft in the area, and the warships meanwhile put up a withering barrage on Tulagi Island. The Japs had four four-engined flying boats and eleven zeros on floats at anchor just off Gavutu and Tanambogo Island in Tulagi Harbour and our carrier land aircraft had knocked out the entire force before the Japs had time to realise what had happened.

I went over the side and climbed down the net to No 1 boat and took up my position beside the coxswain. As soon as the boat was full we pulled out and commenced to orbit around a point about a quarter of a mile from No 1 net. As the succeeding boats belonging to our party filled, they joined the merry-go-round. As soon as all was ready, we were given the signal to move off to our landing point. To reach the cove some five miles off where my party was to land, we had to pass through a gap in the reef.

The barges in which we were transported were flat bottomed and squarish, of thick plywood construction and powered by outboard engines. Each held about twenty men and their battle equipment. The great weakness of these craft (known as Higgins boats) for island warfare, was their plywood bottoms, which were ripped to pieces if they hit the coral reef. It was therefore of the utmost necessity that the gap in the reef be found.

It is easy to recognise this gap looking at an aerial photograph, but it is impossible to indicate the exact location from about six feet above the waterline and at approximately five miles out. The shore line was just a thin line of palms surrounded by green jungle covered hills, featureless from such a distance, yet, as luck would have it, a white triangle became visible high up

in the mass of greenery in just the location wanted, giving the coxswain a spot to head for. It was easily picked out and we made good progress. All eyes were on us for the reception we got might give an indication of what was to be expected. With very little variation, of course, the white triangle guided us through the reef and we landed on the beach almost beneath the very palm in which this strange beacon was hanging.

It had been such a help to me in directing the coxswain of my boat that after the tenseness of the landing was over I took the trouble to inspect the white triangle and discovered it to be the parachute of a parachute flare which had apparently been fired by one of our ships in the early morning and, the flare having burnt out, the 'chute descended and finally became tangled with this palm on the beach, displaying to seaward a perfect white triangle. By chance or by God's own direction it caught upon the very palm on which we should want to set our course when coming to land some hours later.

When about 200 yards from the beach, the Higgins boat machine gunner, Corporal Gabbard, a Kentuckian, who was standing on my left asked permission to test his gun by firing a single shot. This was given and it happened to be the first shot fired by an individual of the landing force in the whole of the Solomons Campaign. Two years later I met this same young Marine who then asked me to testify to this incident, for he said, if he could have his story corroborated by an Officer, his name would go down in Marine history as being the man who fired the first shot by any landing force in this offensive. I remembered the incident well for it was one of the narrowest escapes I experienced during the whole of my war service. The Navy had so completely surprised the Japs in the area on which we were to land that they had fled, leaving everything behind, consequently we experienced no opposition fire from the shore, but, as this lad cleared his gun, the Higgins boats behind, on hearing the shot, let fly with everything they had and their bullets whistled over us, coming altogether too close to our ears. We in the first boat landed to the accompaniment of withering fire, but it was from our enthusiastic comrades, and we could only hope they knew what a Jap looked like and not pot us. We had been instructed to make quick time between the boats and the edge of the jungle. We certainly did! Our whole party had landed before a single shot was fired by the Japs.

Having accomplished this much of my task, I was eager to get on with the next portion. While Captain Crane and half of his men occupied the point overlooking Tulagi, I was to take the other half and make our way to Heleta village, which was the nearest village to the scene of operations and to clean out any Japanese remnant that may still be there.

Heleta had received a pounding in the early hours of the morning and we did not expect any great opposition but it was nevertheless necessary to reach the village without using the jungle trails, for we could not afford to run the risk of booby-traps. This made our going slow and arduous, hacking our way through the jungle. There was such little evidence of Japs having been in the village in very great numbers that we decided to return by the jungle trail. The

return journey was made in a quarter of the time and without incident. It was now well into the afternoon though, by the time we rejoined Captain Crane and his men, the main landing on Tulagi had been completed and our troops there were meeting stiff opposition from Japs hidden up in trees and in the caves. We could hear the continuous bark of machine guns coming from across the passage separating Tulagi from Nggela.

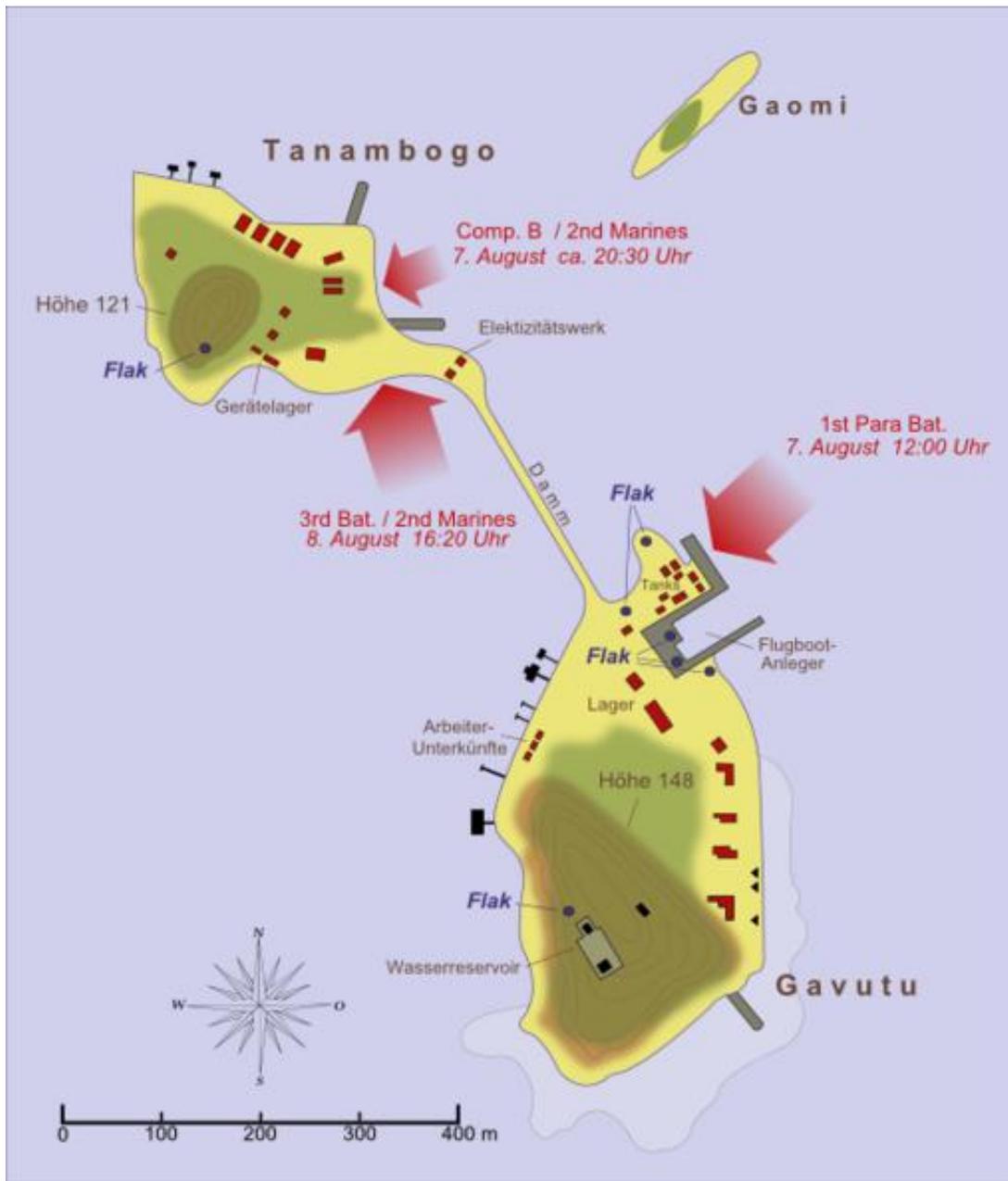
My party had just thrown off their gear and were resting awhile when a message was received over our wireless that we were to be withdrawn and were to assemble immediately at the beach where we had landed. As we withdrew to the beach, the occasional "ping" of a sniper's bullet could be heard as it hit the trunk of some nearby tree. At the beach I met Major Innes of General Rupertus' staff who instructed me that I was to guide the Higgins boats from Heleta Point of Nggela to Gavutu Island, which was one of a group of three small islands about three miles off the other end of Tulagi, and a distance of about nine or ten miles from where we were. Major Innes told me that the battalion of paratroops had landed on Gavutu at about 11am and, by this time, the Japs had had time to prepare for the worst, consequently the paratroopers who had landed from the Higgins boats instead of from the air, but armed with only the light arms used in their regular mode of invasion, were rather badly knocked about, suffering something like 40% casualties on landing. Major Williams, commanding the paratroopers, had been picked off by a sniper early in the piece and was badly wounded. As we made our way to Gavutu we ran along the coast of Tulagi about three miles off shore: we could see the Japs' gun positions on Tulagi just above the Hospital receiving a terrific pounding from Grumman dive bombers. A three inch gun had been placed right on the highest point of a rocky bluff and nothing short of a direct hit would do any damage at all. Bombs which undershot the mark slightly fell into the water on the reef below. I shall never forget the sight as we passed this point. Huge columns of red and violet coloured water were thrown up hundreds of feet, then they seemed to remain poised for some seconds before falling with a terrific crash as the noise of the bombs bursting on the reef reached us. Divorce the scene from the hideousness of war and it was really one of beauty when viewed from where we were three miles out - but not from the Japs' position in their slit trenches and tunnels in the target area.

Of the three Islands, Tanambogo, Dead Island and Gavutu, the last is most remote from Tulagi; hence we had to go the longest way round in order to reach Gavutu, and it was just dusk when we arrived. As we pulled in to the side of the old concrete wharf, we were hailed by Captain Stollings, a very capable young Marine Officer, who had his company in position along the wharf area. The Executive Officer was Acting Commanding Officer, but it was Stollings who kept things going. Stollings was standing behind the ruins of a concrete fuel tank near the wharf and he spoke to us while we were still in our Higgins boats between bursts of fire from his Rising Gun. Captain Crane was informed that the situation on Gavutu was in hand. All the Japs who could, had apparently crossed the causeway joining Gavutu to Tanambogo and made a stand there on the hill from which they continued to send over a rain of machine-gun fire. Stollings estimated there could not be more than 50 Japs

on Tanambogo and we were asked to make a landing there. We had 69 in our party, including myself, who was the official guide. My days of sailing and canoeing about the waters of Tulagi had not been spent in vain. I knew the passages and the gaps in the reef that a canoe could get through. This knowledge was invaluable, for a Higgins boat draws very little more than a canoe.

We were informed that it had been arranged for the Navy to shell Tanambogo for five minutes preceding our landing and we were to push in as soon as fire ceased. To reach Tanambogo we had almost to circumnavigate Dead Island as the only approach was on that side. As we went along the Gavutu side of Dead Island, we were obscured from the Japs but the Navy began to hurl shells on to the side of Tanambogo on which we were going to land, and this made the little yellow men keep to their tunnels. We rounded Dead Island and were coming in slowly and silently in the darkness until the fire from our warships ceased.

I immediately gave the signal and Coxswain Evans in my boat, taking the lead, sped forward followed by the others. We were making straight for a small sandy beach by the side of a jetty which we had built during the brief period that Tanambogo was a RAAF flying boat base (before the Japs came into the War). When we were only 150 yards from the shore, I saw the flash from the guns of one of the destroyers which had been assisting in the barrage. Realising what would happen if we kept going, I ordered the Coxswain to make a sweeping turn, which, fortunately for us was just in time, for a shell hit the beach at the very spot I was making for. Shrapnel from the burst hit me on the shoulder but we were far enough away for its force to be spent and it just fell to the bottom of the boat without even cutting my shirt. Not only did this delayed shot from the destroyer hit where we were to have landed, but in doing so it also hit a Japanese petrol dump which went up with a roar, throwing 45 gallon drums of petrol all around us. The water seemed to be burning and a huge spiralling column of dense black smoke and flame whirled upwards for hundreds of feet. The bay, which had been pitch dark with the darkness that follows the last light of the tropical sun, was suddenly plunged into a light of blinding brilliance. Blinding for us, but better for the Japs, for we were looking into the furnace that once was a tiny beach. No sooner had this last shell burst than a rocket was sent up from Gavutu. This I recognised as the cease-fire signal, so immediately we began another rush for the shore. We were spotlighted as on stage the whole of the bay was flooded with light, naturally we moved as fast as we could but found on reaching the shore that we were sandwiched between the fire and a recently constructed Jap jetty. It was impossible to get the Higgins boats into the shore because of the mass of wreckage on one side and the fire on the other, consequently we had to get out into the water and cling to the side of this low Jap jetty. The decking of the jetty was not more than ten or eleven inches above the water's surface. We had two heavy machine guns with us on the first boat and managed to get these rigged on the jetty behind some packing cases. As soon as the gunner opened fire, tracers (bullets which glow for the entire trajectory), gave away the position of our guns, and the Japs turned everything they had on to them,



knocking them out very smartly. Occasionally we caught sight of a Jap moving through the smoke behind the blazing petrol dump, but let one of us show even the dome of his hat above the decking and a rain of 50 calibre bullets would descend upon it. Here we were, trapped, unable to move laterally between the fire and the jetty without exposing ourselves fully before an enemy which we could not even see. We were unable to retreat because the Higgins boats had returned to their ships. There we remained, submerged to our noses, waiting for the light from the flaming dump to subside. In darkness we would have had a fair chance but, under the existing conditions, we had none. My guardian angel was surely working overtime that eventful day.

Coming to this landing, I had been standing by the coxswain, who is placed directly between the two machine-gun cockpits of the Higgins boat. One of the machine-gunners was killed and the other badly wounded and I received a hit

on the dome of my steel helmet by a bullet which ricocheted off, just leaving the paint scratched. For four hours we clung to the side of that jetty up to our noses in water and the brilliance of the glare from the fire diminished little.

Moving along the line of Marines, I found Capt. Crane and proposed that all who remained should crowd into the one Higgins boat, which had stood by to pick up wounded, and take our chance of reaching the beach further down at a place away from the light of fire. We had no other option, for we dare not be in this position in the daylight. However, upon reaching the boat we found it to be already full of wounded under the care of two Corps men. Capt. Crane proposed that I take the wounded back to Gavutu and then bring the empty boat back and then we could see what we could do. In the meantime, he proposed creeping down to the shore end of the jetty to learn what he could of what was going on behind the fire. The coxswain started his boat and we quickly pulled out and ran for the gap in the reef through which we had come. As soon as the roar of the engines was heard, an endless stream of bullets came at us from the foot of the hill just back from the beach. We zig-zagged as much as we could and opened the engines full throttle, while 50 calibre bullets of mortars chopped the water just short of our stern - but not one hit the boat.

Once around Dead Island, we were out of the line of fire and all breathed a sigh of relief. I reported to the Acting Commander on Gavutu and told him the tale of our unsuccessful landing and our plans for using the boat as soon as the wounded had been taken over by the doctor. With a few extra Marines as reinforcements, I returned to the boat and we started to pick up Captain Crane and his men. All was quiet as we rounded Dead Island and approached the much decreased circle of light caused by the burning petrol dump. Just about 200 yards from the jetty we saw a dinghy with six men in it coming towards us. The men were paddling with their hands, having no oars. At first we were not sure that they were not Japs, but as they came closer we challenged them, whereon they replied with our password, so we allowed them to come alongside. They told us that it was no use going in to pick up Capt. Crane and party for they were the only survivors. It appeared that when we started up the Higgins boat to bring the wounded out, a party of about a hundred Japs rushed the jetty and seeing the Marines in the water clinging to its side, they walked along, spraying each side with machine-gun bullets. The six lads in the dinghy were on the extreme end of the jetty at the time, and seeing what was happening, they shed their equipment and swam under water as far as their lungs would allow them. When they came up they made for the dinghy which was drifting nearby and hid on the dark side until the last of the Japs had left the jetty. Then they scrambled into the boat and, not having any oars, they commenced silently to hand paddle themselves back to Gavutu.

I had promised Capt. Crane that I would be back; I still maintained we might have a chance of finding some of the lads, but the Lieutenant in charge of the reinforcements believed the odds too much against us, therefore we returned to Gavutu with the dinghy in tow. I reported again to the acting CO, who

suggested I should endeavour to get some rest. I had not realised how tired I was until then, for we had been up since 3am and it was now well after midnight.

The only building left standing on Gavutu was Lever Bros' Store which was just a shell, from which the gable at each end had been shot away. The Doctor had turned it into a casualty clearing station and the whole of the floor space was taken over by the wounded lying on the bare ground in rows. It was pitch dark in here and the Acting CO introduced me to the Doctor by the light of his torch. The Doctor pressed into my hand a small flask of Red Cross brandy - a most welcome gift. I groped around in the dark just where I stood and found a table on which I promptly sat and nearly as promptly lay back full length on my back. But this was not restful, for I was still dripping wet from the four hours in the water, and the Japs kept this building under continual machine-gun fire. The shots, which seemed to be mostly tracers, were entering the building via the gable which was no longer there and passed beneath the roof and out the other end. The ceiling had been ripped out previously by the Japs; thus, lying on my back upon the table, I could not help but watch this hideous sight. Fortunately, the Japs were unable to depress their sights for topographical reasons and the constant hail of machine-gun fire was doing me no harm. I soon became fed up and decided I should be better off beneath the table where I could not see the tracers. Groping my way, I slid off the top of the table and felt underneath for a vacant space. The Doctor and the Executive Officer were there already!

A little later I heard a familiar voice outside. I went out to investigate and, sure enough, it was Capt. Crane himself with two of his lads.

As we left with the wounded from the Jap jetty, Capt. Crane said he and these two lads decided to investigate the shore end of the jetty, and just as they reached the shore they saw this party of Japanese coming forward. Hoping they had not been seen, they dropped into a ditch near where they were and feigned dead. The Japs came right over them and they heard them machine-gun their comrades, who were still clinging to the jetty. They dared not move, so they waited in their shallow ditch until the Japs passed back over them and disappeared into the caves at the foot of the hill, but they left behind a number of sentries who mounted guard along the beach front. Each sentry marched up and down his beat, each beat abutting on the next. Crane had the horrible experience of being in a shallow trench just where the sentries met. They used to have a little pow-wow together every time they met, and on one occasion, one of them unconcernedly kicked loose clods into the trench as he talked to his cobbler. These three intrepid Marines realised they must get out of the trench before daylight and also that their only means of escape was across the causeway to Gavutu.

Lever Pacific Plantations had connected the small Tanambogo Island to Gavutu by a coral causeway for easy access. The two islands were quite close to each other, separated by a deep channel which was too deep to walk across even at low tide. They waited until the sentries set off in opposite directions,

both going away from their hiding place, then Capt. Crane took a quick look at the lay of the land. The beach was fairly well strewn with debris, and also there were plenty of bomb craters made by our own aircraft during the early morning bombing. Slowly the three Marines made their way to the causeway joining Tanambogo and Gavutu via bomb craters under the very noses of the Jap sentries.

Once at the causeway, they entered the water on the dark side and noiselessly waded towards Gavutu. Fortunately, the water is shallow on this part of the reef, the only swim being the channel in the centre of the causeway. Once across the channel without detection they thought their troubles were over, but back on Gavutu at about this hour we were experiencing a series of alarms coming from the sentries around the Island. First, a number of logs were reported mysteriously floating in towards Gavutu on all sides. Gunners on duty discovered that these logs ceased to move towards the shore after being sprayed with machine-gun fire. Guards were doubled and increased vigilance was ordered to look out for Japs trying to infiltrate back to Gavutu. Shortly after, we were advised that a number of oil drums were floating in towards the shore. These were each picked off by the machine-gunners. It was during all this excitement that Capt. Crane and his two men made their final dash to reach the shore of Gavutu. They will never know how near they were to being shot in mistake for Japanese. They had discarded all their gear and were soaking wet when they emerged from the shadow of the causeway and scrambled up the shore of Gavutu. The Marine on guard in this section challenged these three woebegone figures and when Capt. Crane told who he was he was still held covered, the sentry considering he had caught a Jap who could speak good American. The trio was handed over to two guards who marched them up to an officer for interrogation. Fortunately this officer recognised Capt. Crane and he was allowed to go and report to the Acting Commander. It was Capt. Crane talking to the CO that I heard and, on recognising the voice, I groped my way out and shook his hand sincerely. I was so pleased to think he had escaped.

Hearing me about, the Doctor asked me whether I thought I could pilot a Higgins boat out from Gavutu to where the transports were supposed to be, while it was still dark. He explained that he had such a large number of wounded on his hands that he hated to think what was going to happen as soon as daylight came and the Japs could see that all their shots were going through his clearing station without doing further damage. There were many more wounded than the staff could deal with and, if the necessity of moving to a safer place should arise, there was just nowhere else to take them. I assured him we could get at least one boatload away before daylight, so he went to work there and then and sorted out the worst casualties and had them loaded into the boat. They were packed like sardines but most of them were drugged so they knew little of this ordeal. Before leaving, I was instructed by the Acting CO to bring back as much water and ammunition as the Higgins boat would carry, as the island was out of water and ammunition was perilously low.

It was still dark when Coxswain Evans started the engine of our boat on this errand of mercy and the Doctor wished us good luck as we left the old launch jetty at Gavutu. As soon as the roar of the engine started, that was a signal for the Japs, who showered us with a continual hail of machine-gun fire. The water behind and to one side was boiling as the fire fell short of our small craft. We raced, never on a straight course, and after a few minutes we became obscured behind a point of Gavutu which interceded on our behalf. Not to be outdone, the Japs then opened up with mortar fire. This was even more frightening, for we could see these flaming cricket balls coming towards us and hear the sizzling sucking thud as they hit the water, sometimes in front and sometimes to one side or the other, sometimes just a fraction short, but by the mercy of God our boat was never hit. By the time we were out of range we were nearing the long point of the reef which runs out on the north-east side of Gavutu. It is shallow water for a long way out on this side of the island and in the dark it was difficult to gauge when we were far enough out to clear. Through the darkness there appeared on our starboard side the ghost of Japanese might in the shape of a Kawanishi four-engined flying boat with its nose submerged and its tail high, a victim of our dive bombers twenty-four hours earlier. We gave it a wide berth, thinking the reef might extend still further out. It was fortunate we did, for, as we came abreast and were silhouetted against the light sky of approaching dawn, a volley of machine-gun fire rang out and splinters of wood flew off the gunwale of the bow of our boat. Someone suggested manning the cockpit gun but, what was the use, for the odds were with the Jap. At best we might only kill one Jap, yet, if he so much as holed our boat it would probably be the end of all of us, for we were heading out to the open sea with only my memory of operational orders - the location of the transports on D-day plus one - to guide us.

It had rather amused me earlier that I, a humble Pilot Officer, RAAF, had been given a copy of operational orders for the complete operation to read before I left the President Jackson, for this was marked top secret and was a volume of forty-odd pages. When reading it and noting which one was acting as a hospital ship on D-day plus one, it had seemed all superfluous knowledge to me, but I am afraid I had not fully realised the magnitude of my job. As we cleared Gavutu in the dark that section of the voluminous operation orders for D-day which dealt with the relative position of various ships came back to me in a flash, just as had the meaning of the "cease-fire" yellow flare from Gavutu when we were about to try to land on Tanambogo. I remembered USS Elliot was acting hospital ship and I also remembered the location of these ships, thus we set a course in the darkness and hoped for the best.

We were not long in suspense for the light of a new day disclosed the shape of a ship on the horizon ahead of us. It was about ten miles off and by the time we reached it the sun was up. We came alongside and I spoke to the Officer on the bridge and he pointed out which was the USS Elliot. As soon as we pulled alongside, I told the duty officer that I had wounded from Gavutu, including amongst who was the Commander of the Paratroop Battalion, Major Williams. While the wounded were being taken aboard, I reported to the Executive officer, who, after I had stated my requirements of ammunition and

water, suggested I had better come and have some breakfast. I don't think I have ever tasted bacon and eggs quite so delicious as that meal. Perhaps it was something in the cooking, maybe it was due to the fact that I had not had time to eat since breakfast at 3.30am the morning before, but my, how I enjoyed it!

While I was drinking my coffee, General Rupertus came in and wanted the latest news of how things were going on Gavutu. I told him as much as I knew and also of our unsuccessful attempt to land on Tanambogo. He questioned me about the naval shelling and its effectiveness. This was the chance I wanted, for the destroyer which shelled the beach prior to our landing was on the wrong side of the island to do an effective job. The Japs were hiding in a series of tunnels under Tanambogo's only hill and the entrance to these shelters faced the beach, thus providing an effective cover for their troops guarding the beach. The shells fired from the destroyer came over the low brow of the hill and fell on the beach area but the entrances to the tunnels were not harmed. I suggested that if another attempt was contemplated, the destroyer should go between Gavutu and Nggela and blast the entrances to the Japanese hideouts. Then I told the General that my orders from the Acting CO were to return with as much water and ammunition as possible and as soon as I could. He replied that his Executive Officer would see to that for me and that before I left the ship to see him.

The Ship's Officers were very good and did all they could for my personal comfort. One asked me was there anything else I required. I remembered my automatic pistol when we were fired on by the sniper in the crashed flying boat and it had failed to function. This was quite understandable for it had been submerged for hours in salt water while I was clinging to the jetty at Tanambogo and then after that it had been rolled in the sand while I was trying to rest under the table in the Casualty Clearing Station on Gavutu. It looked a horrible mess, but the Armament Officer took charge of it and before they had finished loading my boat, it was returned shining like a new pin. For this I was most thankful, for the pistol was all I carried in the shape of defensive weapons.

Shortly afterwards, word that my boat was ready was passed to me and I sought General Rupertus to report my departure. He informed me that I was required to lead reinforcements back to Gavutu and that it would be left entirely to me to land them where I thought fit. He suggested that I report to colonel Hunt, who was in command of reinforcements, before we set out. As I walked to the side of the ship with General Rupertus, I saw a milling circle of Higgins boats and my own Higgins boat waiting below the net. The reinforcements I was to guide back to Gavutu consisted of a complete battalion of 960 men.

Colonel Hunt told me to lead the way we had come, but this time it looked like a huge sea serpent moving across the face of the blue water. Leading-Seaman Evans, the coxswain of my boat, which was J13, had been my coxswain right through and this made the third landing party he had led in the course of 24

hours. On the way back to Gavutu we had the boat to ourselves and on looking around it in the light of day it was not a pretty sight to behold.

As we approached Gavutu, I decided to land the battalion on the reef and let them wade ashore, for the state of the tide made this preferable to exposing a large body of marines to the Jap fire they would have got had they landed on the jetty. This proved a wise move because we were able to get all ashore without any casualties. The Higgins boats all returned to the ship with the exception of J13, which stood by me to take me wherever I might be needed next. I have often heard of a roving commission but until now I had not fully realised its meaning. I was certainly a rover in my present role. I was responsible to no-one but General Rupertus himself and yet I seemed to be in the thick of it right from the word go.

As soon as everyone was ashore, Colonel Hunt took over command and set out on a tour of the island. The newcomers were under their section leaders in little groups behind whatever cover was available. Gavutu with two thousand men on it, why, it was a wonder it did not sink! It did not, however, but it certainly was crowded. Some young Marine amongst the newcomers apparently was standing by a recent bomb-opened grave for he immediately cried, "Gas!" - it sure was gas but there was a lot of that about. It does not take long for a dead body to produce gas in the tropics. The mention of the word gas sent the whole of the new battalion diving for their respirators. It then dawned on me that I had left mine under the table where I had tried to get forty winks the night before. I rushed to the spot and donned it, as everyone around me had theirs on. Once I had fitted securely into my mask I found I could not breathe - the salt water the previous night had seeped into the apparatus thus rendering it useless. To breathe I had to remove it and when I did I could not smell gas of any kind. I then tried to persuade the group nearest me that there was no gas, and cautiously one by one they ran two fingers up under the cheek of the mask and sniffed delicately. One by one they removed them and normality was restored. I don't know whether the chap sheltering behind the grave could be convinced, but he was entitled to wear his mask if he must stay there. This was the only occasion in three years in the service that I used my respirator, although I carried it everywhere. We might look upon them as wasted material in the light of our present knowledge but, seeing that every Jap carried his and the preparations the Japs had made for chemical warfare, our precautions were by no means wasted. It at least showed him that we were prepared for gas and perhaps if ever it came to using the inhuman stuff, we were better equipped to master the art than were the Japs.

While Colonel Hunt was summing up the position on Gavutu, I was standing near the old launch jetty when suddenly a machine-gun by me commenced rat-a-tat-tat. Following the stream of bullets I saw a man in the water swimming towards Gavutu, apparently from Dead Island. As soon as the bullets hit the water around him he raised his hand and tried to wave. The gunner was one of the new battalion and knew nothing of the previous night's activities, so naturally he thought any movement from that direction must be

enemy. I stopped the firing and called Seaman Evans to take me out to where the lad was. We pulled him aboard naked. As he was too exhausted to talk we landed him and put him in the care of the medical orderly. Just then another naked figure appeared at the water's edge at Dead Island. This was another Marine so off we went again in the Higgins boat, but we could not get right in for the reef, the water being very shallow on this side of the island. The Marine began to run through the water over the sharp coral, falling this way and that in his eagerness to reach us. It made me wince to see him in his bare feet, knowing what terrible damage coral can do so I called to him to stay where he was, and I jumped into the shallow water and carried him back to the boat. Just then another fellow broke through the palm fringe and waved frantically to us. He, too, was naked, they having shed their clothes and equipment as soon as the Japs had made them vacate their hold on the jetty the evening before. These three brought our total of uninjured survivors from the first Tanambogo landing up to thirteen. There were about 30 wounded in the boatload we brought back to Gavutu but the remainder were all killed.

CHAPTER 2

I left Gavutu in J13 for Tulagi later that morning. General Rupertus had instructed me to meet him there as soon as I had finished guiding the battalion in to Gavutu. Tanambogo was taken by the Marines late that afternoon. Three destroyers were brought up around Tanambogo and they shelled the island for fifteen minutes, one of them coming right in between Gavutu and Nggela. This destroyer was able to shell the mouth of the tunnels leading to the beach. Colonel Hunt's battalion opened up a barrage from Gavutu with mortars and heavy machine-guns while the Marines crossed the causeway. At the same time, a tank lighter landed two small tanks on the beach where we had tried to land the evening before. These tanks broke up the pill boxes along the beach. One of them later got jammed between a concrete slab-wreckage, which had been blown up by a bomb, and a coconut stump. As soon as this happened Japs from one of the tunnels rushed it and tried to set it on fire. They swarmed all over it until the gunner opened up his hatch and with his machine-gun he mowed down the swarming attackers. Afterwards, there was a ring of Jap dead around this tank, but one Jap got through and fatally stabbed the young Marine gunner in the back.

In a later check-up on Japs killed on Tanambogo it showed that there were over 500 on the island instead of 50 as we were led to believe when we made the initial attack. An inspection of the tunnels under the hill showed an amazing labyrinth of passages and cross passages, large enough to house hundreds together with stores and ammunition. It was an impossible job to get each individual Jap out of this warren, so the remaining entrances which had not been closed by the shelling were dynamited, thus forming a spacious grave for all who remained inside. Tanambogo, as I knew it in peace time, was a very pretty little island, green and well covered with coconut palms. The flat side of it had one time been made into a nine-hole golf course, but after it was

wrested from the Japs, it looked like a rubbish tip with not a vestige of greenery on the island. The trunks of a few coconut palms which remained standing looked like broken off telegraph posts. I revisited Tanambogo about a week later with a party of war correspondents. I shall never forget Tanambogo and Gavutu at the time of that visit. Five or six hundred dead Japs welcomed us before we set foot on the land. The unsealed graves of Japs who had been buried under the ruins of pill boxes and in tunnels where just the entrance had been roughly closed with rock, allowed the stench of their rotting remains to pervade the whole atmosphere - there was no escape - the smell was in my nose long after I had returned to Tulagi.

My first landing on Tulagi, after leaving there as a civilian just seven months earlier, was made solo. Leading Seaman Evans, the coxswain of J13, brought me from Gavutu in the afternoon of D-day plus one and landed me at the old Police Lines. I felt particularly alone, as I hopped out of the Higgins boat on the edge of the reef and waded ashore, not knowing whom I should meet at this spot. Leading Seaman Evans, as soon as I left, returned to the convoy there to rejoin his ship, USS President Jackson. Of all the Marines and American naval men I met during this campaign, I don't think I have ever met a man more devoted to his duty and ready to volunteer for a mission involving a boat, no matter how arduous it promised to be, than this young coxswain, Evans. He had been in charge of my boat and taken me everywhere I wanted to go, despite the fact that his offside had been killed during the original attempted landing on Tanambogo.

Once ashore on Tulagi I met Major Fuller, who was the battalion commander and with whom I had shared a cabin for the first part of the journey to the Solomons on board USS Elliot. I asked if I might attach myself for the time being to his HQ until I found General Rupertus. While talking over the success of the landing and the campaign so far, Major Fuller, whose Marine Raiders were responsible for clearing the Police Lines Area of Tulagi, told me that I would never realise what a service I had done the USA in modelling the relief map of Tulagi on board USS Elliot (I had made a large scale sand model of Tulagi Island for the purpose of pointing out the location of the caves bordering the path along the seashore to officers of landing troops). He said that in light of this knowledge they approached this area with extreme caution and discovered that hordes of Japs were hidden there inside the caves with machine-guns which fired through the entrances, thus covering the path with a dense cross-fire for hundreds of yards. He said if the Marines had moved along this path, no matter how cautiously, their casualties must have been terrific, because to the unsuspecting no caves existed, so well concealed were they by nature. At this early stage in America's war history, the marines were not equipped with flame throwers, hence getting the Japs out of these caves was a long and hazardous task.

I spent the night at the Police Lines with Major Fuller and I can assure you that I did not need much rocking to sleep. I rolled out my poncho (American ground sheet) under the trees on the sand as was asleep almost as soon as my head was down. I knew absolutely nothing until a sudden boom followed by

ear splitting crashes had me to my feet in an instant. It was round about midnight. Everyone was astir. Out on the direction of Savo we could see the flashes in the inky darkness of the big artillery of warships at it in earnest. We were all wide awake now as we sat on the edge of the beach and watched fascinated. I had always wanted to see a naval engagement. A warship in harbour always seems rather awe inspiring, but to witness warships baring their teeth in mortal combat is a thrilling spectacle, provided you are sitting on a beach twenty miles away and not in the target area. The darkness of the night, I think, added to the spectacle, for one could follow each individual shell glowing red hot as it traversed an arc from the spurt of fire at the muzzle of the gun to the ultimate explosion rendering it incapable of further destruction. So rapid was the fire that it was possible to see five or six shells between the flash and the explosion of the first shell. There was a series of flashes from somewhere near Savo Island accompanied by a thunderous roar as one of the battleships let loose a broadside, then came a terrific crash accompanied by an explosion out of all proportion to any previously heard as a belch of dense black smoke and flame was sent billowing spirally upwards for hundreds of feet. This fiery column stood out bright in the black night and against it momentarily was silhouetted the fighting top of a cruiser. For a few minutes spellbound, we beheld the spectacle in silence, and then someone cheered; we all cheered, for that was one Jap cruiser less! Not until the next day did we learn that the good shooting which we had applauded so loudly was that of the enemy who had surprised our cruiser squadron on guard between Savo and Guadalcanal. By steaming in silently behind Savo from the southern end of Ysabel, Savo's volcanic cone gave the Japs a radar screen behind which to approach in the darkness of this stormy night and they had surprised our convoy guard by their sudden onslaught. Our ships may have been caught off their guard but the Japs did not reach their objective, which was obviously the heavily laden troopships and transports spread out between Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

Soon after the initial onslaught, the flashes became fainter and fainter and finally all we could see was the reflection of the gunfire on the clouds and we could hear the delayed rumble of the guns as they got further and further away out in the open sea beyond the northern end of Guadalcanal. This was the navel battle in which Australia's flagship, HMAS Canberra was lost. I am glad I did not know at the time for I thoroughly enjoyed the entertainment, but I shouldn't have, had I known HMAS Canberra and the American destroyers Astoria, Vicennes and Quincey, besides the American cruisers Blue and others had been the price we paid.



Canberra - 6.30am after the Savo Island battle, alongside is USS Blue, USS Patterson astern.

Just as though the gunfire had blown holes in the clouds, we had no sooner settled ourselves when down came the rain. It was a real tropical deluge. There was a small area with a roof over it which covered more Marines than I had ever thought possible. I therefore stayed just where I was and covered head and all with my poncho and let it rain. You just could not stop it anyhow! I was so tired I slept soundly. It was still raining when I woke up in the grey light of dawn, wet through.

Upon looking around, I discovered one Marine who had apparently made an effort as I had done to get under the roof when the rain started but, being unable to secure a square inch, he lay down just outside and had apparently made himself comfortable in a bit of a hollow in the ground. With the downpour the hollow turned out to be a waterway, and when I woke there was a stream of water coming down this depression which entered his poncho at the neck and flowed clean through and out at the foot. At his neck, leaves and sticks washing down had dammed the flow until it made sufficient height to flow over his neck, and yet he slept without a stir.

We moved our location the next morning to the Resident Commissioner's house right on the top of Tulagi. In peace-time this had been a beautiful site

but the gardens had been bombed and bombed and the house itself had narrowly escaped, judging from the huge craters all around it. The wide stone steps leading up to the entrance had disappeared, so you had to climb up as best you could over slippery clay. From the number of senior officers about this place, I concluded it must have been Marine HQ on Tulagi, hence I decided to stay until the General arrived. He was on the island but on the other side, so I guessed it would not be more than a day or so before he arrived here.

Who should come walking in while I was there but Lieutenant Henry Josselyn, RANVR. He had been loaned to the Marines by the Royal Australian Navy, and had landed on Tulagi with Colonel Edison's Raider battalion on D-day. Henry and I were both Colonial Civil Servants and had been resident on Tulagi before the War. We had much to talk about.

As night fell, we seemed to be right in the thick of the fighting. We were standing in the darkness on the verandah of the Residency. Before dark all had been quiet but with the dark came the Jap snipers with their intermittent firing. By this time Tulagi, with the exception of the north-east corner (the hospital area), was in our hands, but there were still snipers at large even within our own lines. They hid by day in caves, etc and came out by night to do what damage they could.

Next morning some excitement was caused by the appearance of a Japanese submarine. It came from the open seas and approached Tulagi without any hesitation. Fortunately all our shipping had gone and, to all intents and purposes, there never had been an invasion, or so it appeared with this Jap submarine coming to the surface. As it approached the entrance to Tulagi Harbour, we were watching it through glasses and could see Japanese officers on the conning tower peering our way. Suddenly, it altered course and made out into the seaway between Nggela and Guadalcanal. Unfortunately there was not a gun on Tulagi capable of firing at the sub, so we had to just watch it make away.

Next morning at about the same time this or another Jap submarine surfaced and approached the harbour entrance. This one came close inshore, but made a quick get-away when one of the Marines units on Tulagi sent a few mortar shells in its direction. The submarine altered course and then submerged. That same morning the Japanese three-inch gun, mounted in front of the Doctor's residence on one of the hills of Tulagi, had been captured by the Marines and, although the sights had been damaged, it did not take long to have the gun in firing order. Next morning, again the Jap submarine was reported from the observation post and everyone keenly awaited its approach. The gunners allowed it to come as close as it dared and then without sights guessed the aim and sent over a shell, which fell a long way ahead and beyond the sub. A second shot fell in line but short, and a third passed over the forward deck, just missing the conning tower. The Japs apparently began to respect the gun layer for they immediately crash dived and we saw no more of them. The general opinion was that their visits were

by submarines which had been normally based on Tulagi and that these subs were returning from patrol in ignorance of the fact that the Americans had taken Tulagi and had landed on Guadalcanal.

The following morning I walked down to the wharf and viewed the havoc wrought to the Government Administration Building, both by the Japs and our own bombing. The Lands Office had disappeared, all that was left was a quantity of charred wood and twisted galvanised iron in the midst of which stood the reinforced concrete deed room with its Chubb strong room door still securely locked, but with the whole of the back of the room missing. The Government Store, Post Office and Treasury buildings were intact and had apparently been used by the Japs as stores. As I entered the Post Office building I met a Marine with his two hands around a bundle of new one pound notes six inches high. He excitedly called to his buddy, "Say, how much is a pound worth?"

His buddy replied, "Guess it's more than a dollar!"

As I passed I supplied the information that it was worth about four dollars. His eyes danced as he exclaimed, "Say, I've got more money than I have ever dreamed about!"

Taking a look at his wealth I hated to disillusion him, for they were Jap printed occupation pound notes, not worth the paper they were printed on by monetary standards, but as souvenirs I guess the lad did well out of his find. This was the first let-up in the fighting and Marines were treasure hunting in earnest.

I next entered the Treasury building which seemingly had been a Jap clothing store, for the place was littered with all kinds of Jap clothes, new and old. Rummaging in the litter I was attracted by a very fine looking snapshot album which had a Jap flag emblazoned on the outside cover in colour. Looking through it, it appeared to be a photographic record of the owner's life, for the first pages were of a child dressed in old-fashioned sailor rig. First as a young man, as a midshipman in the Navy, and later as an officer, together with various Japanese warships. Then apparently he had taken to flying, for he appeared in helmet and goggles beside a plane of training type and other pictures of bombing raids, etc. There then followed a section of scenic snaps, which included island scenery, one of which I recognised as Tulagi golf course taken when it was in its prime, and that must have been years before the War. There followed one of a group of Europeans taken on board a passenger ship, and, to my amazement, I recognised two of the group as friends of mine. Turning to the next page, there was a close-up of my two friends - it was without doubt a man and his wife who used to live at Tulagi. Apparently this Jap Naval man had been a fellow passenger aboard a ship somewhere in the Pacific with my friends at one time or another. I decided that this album would be my souvenir, so I marched off with it under my arm. I knew people would never believe my story without the evidence.

On Tulagi, the business section of the island is on the harbour side and the residences and Club are on the other side. In the early days a steep razorback ridge divided the two sides, but later a cutting about a hundred yards along was cut through the hill to save having to climb the hill when crossing from side to side. This cutting was about ten or twelve feet wide and the Japs had tunnelled into the solid rock on one side and had made quite a spacious bomb-proof shelter. The only entrance was through a narrow passage opening on to the middle of the cutting. This entrance was in turn baffled, so altogether it was a very safe place. They had run a pipe-line from a nearby spring and had thus provided running water inside the shelter. A number of Japs had retreated to this hideout and the Marines were trying to get them out. Hand grenades thrown in at the doorway did no good, for the Japs would just hop around the baffle and, as soon as the smoke from the explosion had died, they would announce their well-being by firing a machine-gun into the wall opposite the entrance. Every effort of the Marines was replied to by this same action on the part of the Japs until it became rather monotonous. An American Officer who was a Japanese interpreter was brought and he tried to hold conversation with the Japs, telling them to surrender and that they would not be ill-treated if they did so. All that this accomplished was a series of rude replies and more machine-gun fire. Next a hefty charge of TNT was tied on to a fuse and with a rope it was lowered down and swung into the entrance of the tunnel from above. The charge did not get past the baffle, for after the smoke and dust had died down all that had been accomplished was to enlarge the entrance slightly, thus allowing more bullets to spend their force in the rock wall opposite. Next a bundle of hessian soaked in kerosene was lighted, then lowered to the entrance level and swung pendulum fashion from a small foot bridge over the top of the cutting and which happened to be directly above the entrance to the shelter. The flame and more particularly the dense black smoke from this seemed to find its way in to the Japs, for shortly afterwards, with a roar of defiance, one very big Jap ran out, turned right and ran into the rifle fire from about fifty Marines. He was hit early in his mad career and, dropping his automatic rifle as he fell, his hand went to his belt, but before he could properly detach a grenade, he was hit again and he pitched headlong into the gutter half way out of the cutting. With the passing of this Jap madman, interest centred again on the tunnel and within a few minutes another Jap came out and turned left with no better success than the first. Within a quarter of an hour ten Japs came out in like manner; each was shot before he reached the beginning of the cutting, and after each episode the firing of the machine-gun from the tunnel entrance into the rock wall opposite by live Japs still in the shelter added a sort of note of defiance. Guards were mounted on either entrance to the cutting, and during the first night six more Jap snipers were shot as they tried to escape from the tunnel. On succeeding nights like this, numbers were shot until the total for the shelter was thirty-two. It appeared that this had been a Jap HQ, for phones and wireless records and maps were found when ultimately it became possible to turn it out.

Next morning, General Rupertus arrived at the Residency, having been driven from Sesapi by mosquitoes. Knowing Tulagi as I did, I confess that one of my

main reasons for not finding the General earlier was that I knew the possibilities of the mosquitoes in the Sesapi area. The General decided to put his HQ not at the Residency, but in one of the smaller houses which were not so conspicuous. The house chosen was on the side of the ridge facing Guadalcanal. It was handy to the OP on the crest of the ridge just behind and also convenient to a suitable spot for building air raid shelters to be fitted up as command HQ for use during raids. It was a very busy period for the Signal Corps these early days on Tulagi immediately after the cessation of fighting. Telephone wires were laid on the ground and there had been so many different circuits put down, both Japanese and our own, that the paths were practically paved with telephone wires.

In our new HQ we actually had a table and also a few chairs but, when it came to messing, the array of jam tins, milk tins and baked bean tins we used was astonishing. Mess kit had not been included in our light kit carried on D-day. Each man's pack, which included his wardrobe, was left on board the transport and was to have been landed on D-day plus one. Unfortunately for us, a Jap air raid interrupted our shipping just as the gear was being unloaded, with the result that all baggage belonging to one battalion and the general staff went overboard and was lost. Subsequently, we spent the first six weeks on Tulagi in the clothes we stood up in. Nobody had a change and there was very little water in which to wash, a pint per day being the ration for washing, cleaning teeth and washing one's clothes. Soap, too, was as scarce as gold. My toothbrush and razor, etc were in my kit which went to feed the fishes, so my pint of water was used for a wash, using my steel helmet as a basin. The American steel helmet is an excellent basin which sits so conveniently into the three pronged fork of a bush - the hibiscus bush is very good for this purpose.

As the weeks passed, one became used to the smell of sweaty, unwashed bodies, but this smell was nothing to the stench of the unburied dead, which for the first ten days just lay and putrefied in the tropical sun. It took a week to capture Tulagi entirely and, during this period, none of the dead, Japs or Americans, was buried. It is hard to imagine such a smell, particularly around the path through the cutting where thirty-two Japs lay in the space of a hundred yards. Respirators came in handy for once; the burial parties wore them when at last the clean-up was started. It fell to the lot of the Engineers to open up many of the caves and tunnels occupied by the Japs, those which had previously been closed by blowing up the entrance, thus trapping the occupants inside; but these caves etc were not sealed as a grave should be, hence it became necessary to clean them out and bury the Japs in a proper grave for health reasons. With seven thousand Marines on Tulagi Island, an area one and a half square miles, it became of the greatest importance to safeguard the health of the troops.

CHAPTER 3

One of the first things I was asked upon taking up quarters at the new command HQ was: how do we fare for water? Seeing that I had just returned from a walk around all the remaining buildings on Tulagi, I was able to reply with assurance. Tulagi depended solely upon roof catchment for its water supply, and since most of the 400 gallon tanks had been holed in the battle for the island, water storage was nil. There were two natural springs on the island but being the dry season these were not running very fast. However, I set off with a young Marine Lieut. belonging to the Engineers, to inspect these springs and see what could be done with them.

As we walked down towards the Police Lines via the shore path, the Lieut. said he wanted to see how some of his lads were making out opening up a previously sealed Jap cave. Just as we approached, a Marine came running up to say one of his buddies had been shot inside the cave while he and another Marine had been pulling out dead Japs. We went along to find that they had already recovered ten dead Japs and, while inside, there was a pistol shot followed by the voice of the Marine calling, "For God's sake, give me a pistol!"

Then there was another shot and no further sound. The second of the two, who had been inside the cave, explained that there were two compartments in the cave, one on a higher level than the other, and his buddy had gone in to the second level when the shot rang out. He had gone in again to try to get the body of his buddy, but the wounded lad had fallen to the entrance to the second compartment and his legs had jammed. One foot, however, was protruding and they were then awaiting the arrival of a rope to pull him clear. This cave had been sealed up with big boulders too heavy for one man to move, and inside there had been ten dead Japs. Judging from the state of the bodies, they had been dead a long while, yet there was at least one live Jap still inside. He must have been existing in that reeking atmosphere all that time.

At first we thought it impossible that anyone could live in there without food and water so we immediately looked for some other entrance. The cave was under a high rocky bluff, a place which used to fascinate me in peace time when I often climbed amongst the boulders there. Knowing the area, I volunteered to seek for the possibility of a shaft entrance to the cave on top of the bluff. The Marine scouts and I climbed up and made a thorough search without success. Finally I climbed out on to the rock face above the entrance to the cave. It was a precarious position and I was more or less spread-eagle on the cliff face but, from such a position, I was better able to guard the entrance of the cave, where the party working there had managed to get a rope on to the leg of the Marine who had been shot inside the cave. The entrance being on the right, it was impossible to see anyone coming out until he was well outside and, since the Jap had used his revolver, he was probably waiting for another shot. For this reason the working party was kept well clear on each side after it was found possible to move the body of the dead Marine from the entrance of the second chamber by aid of the rope. In my position above the entrance, I covered anyone who attempted to emerge from the entrance

without being in his line of fire.

Just when the excitement was most tense I heard a bullet go "ping" past my ear and hit the rock not six inches away. Someone was firing at me from across the gully. I raised my body to look in that direction when another shot hit the same spot as before, causing me to duck very smartly. After a pause I chanced another look and my curiosity was answered by the same "ping", followed by the sound of the bullet hitting the rock face. There was no doubt I was the target, so I called to the Marines below to watch in the direction of the other side of the gully while I raised my head again. Unfortunately I was unable to get down without raising my head and crawling back in this sniper's direct line of fire. No sooner had I put my head above a nearby rock than "ping" went another bullet past my ear. Luckily for me the Marines on the path below saw the puff of smoke come from a crack in the rock on the opposite side of the gully and they opened up a barrage on the spot with their automatic rifles. I took advantage of the melee by climbing down in record time. The two scouts and I then made off in the direction of the sniper's hideout to settle our differences with him, but by the time we reached the spot the hideout was bare and the blood-thirsty little Jap had gone. However, it was interesting to see the kind of place where one might expect to find a sniper. There was a natural fissure in the rock which opened to about one and a half inches wide. This fissure ran slightly off perpendicular down the face of a rocky crag a couple of hundred feet above the level of the path which followed the coast almost at sea level. The crag was set fully three hundred yards back from the head of a gully, which was thickly timbered, but the rock face of the crag had overlooked the vegetation and, from a small hole, partly natural and partly Jap made, about two feet back from the facade of the cliff, a sniper small enough to fit down into the recess could look through the 1 1/8 inch crack caused by the fissure, but, since his eye was a couple of feet back from the facade of the cliff, his field of view was restricted to a narrow strip which included the seashore path, just where it rounded the bluff, and above the path, the rock face which overlooked the entrance to the cave. In other words, the few square feet in which I had taken up my position to guard the entrance to the cave. My guardian angel was still on duty by me that day! By the time we returned to the cave, the Marine's dead body had been recovered and, to save any further fatalities, hand grenades had been tossed into the inner chamber and then the entrance securely filled with stone and earth.

Hank, the Marine Lieut. of the Engineers, and I continued our inspection of Tulagi's natural springs whilst he made plans for conserving the water. When we were at the spring behind the Police Lines we heard the air raid warning go and, soon after, twenty-two Jap bombers came over at about 20,000 feet. This was my first experience of enemy bombers. I had left Tulagi in January 1942, only three days before the Japs bombed it. These, however, did not drop on Tulagi, their mission being Guadalcanal, for shortly after they had gone we heard the dull thuds of the bombs on Guadalcanal, about 25 miles across the water.

Three mornings running we were visited by two Jap destroyers. They usually

announced their presence in the first light of dawn by firing star shells over Tulagi. These shells were frightening even if not damaging, for they usually awakened one with a terrific start; then to find everything bathed in the reddish hue of artificial light was even more baffling. The Japs were obviously looking for shipping and were not disposed to waste their shells on anything else. They had a most disconcerting habit of switching their searchlights on and training them all on one particular object and then leaving them there for five or ten minutes, then switching to another. The Residency fell for a great deal of limelight during these visits and, when the singled out Command HQ two mornings running, General Rupertus decided to remove to another house directly above the wharf at Tulagi.

On my part there was a certain amount of irony attached to this move, for we were moving into my own home, or at least the Government bungalow I had occupied for some years before I left Tulagi to join the RAAF. It had been badly knocked about, but by some miraculous coincidence the water tanks were in good order and all full of water. The Electrolux refrigerator, too, after a good clean, worked like a charm, not that we had anything but water to keep in it. Knowing the cool spots of the house, I selected the kitchen for my bunk, seeing that the General and his chief of staff were occupying my sleep out and there was nothing to cook in the kitchen. The kitchen had been built of fibro-cement sheets and as a result of the bombs which might be described as near misses, the blast had shattered the fibro sheets like glass, and all that was left were jagged edges still being held by the nails to all the studs and wall plates. From the middle of the floor in the kitchen one could get a good panoramic view of the island and you were sure to catch any breeze that was going. It had a roof and a floor - what more could one want if one was to be done out of the use of the completely gauzed sleep-out? I was quite happy, but apparently it offended American propriety for me, the only Australian in the HQ, to be sleeping in the kitchen. I had just got my camp stretcher set up when the Chief of Staff came out and told me to come and put my bunk on the verandah. I assured him that I had especially chosen this spot so he left me to it. Five minutes later the General came out and told me he had selected a spot on the verandah for me to occupy. With a roving commission one usually does as one pleases, but it is always best to fall in with the wishes of a General, and he did not know that this was my own home. Hence, I upended my Yankee cot and made it up in the corner allotted to me. It was the holy of holies screened off from the rest of the building by two of my reed screens and contained the bunks of Divisional Commander, C of S, Doctor Padre and myself, all very nice and private but a bit warm. I had a great feeling of satisfaction sleeping in my own house again, so soon after the Japs had taken it. They had occupied it from May until August 1942. The walls were perforated by shrapnel from bombs which had burst close to the house. The concrete path which led from the front steps to the main path (there are no roads on Tulagi) turned at right angles and, just at this turn there was a huge bomb crater about eight or ten feet deep. The clay from the bottom of the crater had been thrown all over the concrete path and the nightly rain had made a slippery mess of it. Just at this time the first ships since the original landing had arrived, and the Japs had been busy in the air every day, making

unloading hazardous and slow. The ships used to go out of the harbour before dark and, if loading had not been completed, they returned the next day. At this stage we had no aircraft of our own; the Henderson field on Guadalcanal had not as yet been taken, so the Japs had a free go. Apparently, in the hope of catching some shipping in the harbour, a Jap cruiser visited us for a period each day and adopted the star-shell tactics. Each morning, bang would go a star-shell while the cruiser steamed to the entrance of the harbour and by the aid of searchlights the Japanese admired all our new equipment piled high around the harbour shore of Tulagi, but that is all they ever did. Not a shot was fired into the dumps of aviation spirits and bombs which constituted the first three cargoes to arrive. To make it more congested on Tulagi, ships which had been unable to complete unloading on account of raids at Lunga on Guadalcanal, where there is no harbour, would come to Tulagi and finish unloading there. After the second visit of the Jap cruiser the General decided we should all spend the nights in our newly constructed battle stations. I went two nights, and unable to sleep on account of the heat in the shelter, I ended by sleeping on top of the sandbag parapet.

If I was going to sleep on top of the shelter, there seemed little point in leaving the moderate comfort of my American canvas stretcher back in my old house. In consequence I had a word with the Doctor and we decided to occupy our respective beds and be damned to the Jap cruiser, of course not breathing a word of our intention to the General. Everything went fine until about an hour before daylight when with a terrific crash something shook the house. The Doctor was out and away to a flying start, breaking even over the hundred yards to the shelters. I had a handicap, for, coming in late the afternoon before from a patrol, my pants were still wet when I turned in, so I had taken them off and hung them over one of the screens. My gun belt and helmet were beside me. In my hurry to dress, I picked up my helmet and jammed it on my head, then grabbed my trousers, and in the dark did not notice one leg had turned inside out when I had taken them off. I could not get into the damn things, and all the time shells were busting overhead. I felt terribly alone; my knees were knocking; then I discovered my trouble and hitching on my belt, I took two strides from the edge of the verandah to the right angle turn in the path, missing the steps altogether, but alas, I had not allowed for the slippery red clay covering the concrete. My two feet went from under me and I ended up on the broad of my back in a pool of muddy water in the bottom of the bomb crater.

Well, when all is said and done, what better shelter could one have anyhow, so there I stayed until the cruiser had satisfied its curiosity and all was calm again. Then I beat it up to the shelters and, rolling out my poncho, I slept a while on the roof of the one I was supposed to be occupying. In the early grey light I awoke and decided I would go back to the house before the general exodus began. As I walked down the path, I noticed white patches on my trousers. I could not make it out, never having seen them before, but on looking into the matter, I discovered I had put my trousers on inside out in my hurry and excitement, thus the white linings to the pockets were on the outside. Maybe it was just as well I left early, for I was able to turn them back

right away with the mud inside and thereby escaped having to tell a story against myself at breakfast.

The only ships which had arrived at Tulagi to date had brought only equipment, no food of any kind had arrived. As a result it became necessary to cut down on the food ration. Where each man had been getting three complete "C" ration per day, it was now reduced to two "C" rations. This did not affect the individual greatly where a large number were messing together, but for men doing patrols it was not so good.

Time passed and a further reduction became necessary. General Rupertus had been in contact with General Vandergrift on Guadalcanal, only to learn they, too, had had to reduce to one "C" ration per man per day. This was a third normal rations and, needless to say, every Jap dump was gone through carefully to discover anything that might supplement the food ration. I had been detached from Command HQ for a few days and was living with one of the units further down the island. In this I was lucky, for one of the officers had unearthed from some Jap Officer's old dugout a case of mixed tinned fruits. They were large tins, too, so it had been decided that one tin should be opened for each meal and divided amongst about eight of us. Each tin was similar but evidently some character on the label denoted the name of the fruit. In our ignorance we just opened the tin and were pleasantly surprised when pears, peaches or mandarins came out. One Officer, on opening a tin of fruit one day exclaimed, "Why, Hell! This is not fruit, it is tea!" Someone else inspected it and pronounced, "It sure is tea!", whereupon there was a cheer from all hands, and promptly a can of water was put on to boil.

We had not had a hot drink since leaving the ship. When the tea was poured our remarks followed with reference to Japanese tea; nevertheless, the can was drained and the brew was regularly repeated with each meal. A week or so later, a visiting Officer, who was a Japanese interpreter, was dining with us, so we let him into the secret of the tinned fruit. One of the Officers turned to him and asked, "What about writing the names of these fruits on their respective tins, Elmer?"

Elmer promptly responded by writing "peaches", "cherries", "apricots" etc on the remainder of the case. Then one of the crowd said, "Say, Elmer, what kind of tea is this?", handing him the opened tea tin. Elmer read the label and roared laughing. "Why, this is not tea, this is dehydrated spinach!" Poor Popeye, what would he say if he had known we had been throwing the spinach away and drinking the water?

One of the most impressive services I have ever attended was the service held by the PC Padre on the King George V Memorial Oval at Tulagi on the Sunday morning following the landing. With the help of a couple of Marines he had set up an altar, sheltering his candles by a screen of palm leaves. The time of the service was made known, the attendance being entirely voluntary, but I have never seen a better attended service, and, judging by the small proportion who took Mass, there must have been many like myself who were

not of that particular faith. The Padre was a man popular with everyone, yet still the complete man of God. He told me that at the end of a particularly arduous day burying the dead, a Marine, a regular tough guy, had come to him and told him that he had often wondered why the authorities attached Padres to fighting units in war time, but said the Marine, "After seeing you work the long hours that you have today in the blistering heat of the tropical sun burying my buddies, I guess I don't wonder any more. Padre, you've done a swell job!"

Having travelled part of the time on two different transports from New Zealand with the Marines, I had become known by name to quite a large proportion of those occupying Tulagi. It was therefore understandable, but nevertheless rather embarrassing for me when one morning the General asked me to take him around the island and, when we came to the first detachment of marines who were busy cooking their breakfasts, one of them looked up and suddenly exclaimed, "Why it is Lieutenant Spencer!" Then followed a series of cheery remarks from each of the other lads, and yet not one of them tumbled to the identity of my companion. Of course, none of the officers at this early stage were wearing their badges of rank and the General without his badges looked like any other Marine, when all are dressed in jungle green. The "old man" allowed the conversation to centre around me for a while and then pulled out his cigarette packet and handed it around. The first Marine took one and, in doing so, got a good look at the General whom he immediately recognised and, with a sudden stiffening of his body, he snapped a salute and said, "Thank you, Sir."

We moved on and at the next batch we came to, exactly the same thing happened. I was recognised and the General was not. Once again he produced his cigarettes, with a sly wink at me, and bought his recognition. The trip around the island cost "the old man" dearly, for cigarettes just then were at a premium.

Arriving back from our six mile walk around Tulagi, I was hot and wet from perspiration and, sitting on the steps of my house, I was presented with a most acceptable gift. One of the lads during a heavy downpour had had the forethought to put a bucket under the broken down-pipe at the side of the kitchen and filled it with water; this he gave to me. I don't know what the Japs had done with the bath tub, but it was gone from the bathroom. I was not to be outdone, for down on the flat on the other side of the sports oval the bath tub was all that remained of one house. There it stood amidst the charred remains and twisted roofing iron; so off I set with my bucket of water and the community cake of soap down to the bath tub in the middle of the ruins. It possibly presented a humorous sight, but I could not be worried for my enjoyment was intense. The first complete bath in fresh water for weeks! To celebrate the occasion fittingly, I washed my clothes in the water afterwards, then hung them on the wire surround to the tennis courts, or what used to be the tennis courts at the Club, while I ran around naked until the outfit dried.

When I returned to HQ it was rumoured that our baggage had arrived. Some most certainly had, but ours was at the bottom of the sea. However things were improving, for limited quantities of clothing were obtainable. The food position, however, was still very acute.

CHAPTER 4

The experience I gained of the native people and the knowledge I gained of the surrounding district while training 1st Tulagi Scouts two years before the Was was one of infinite value to me now. The nucleus of trained scouts was also of tremendous value, to say nothing of the personal reputation I had gained unwittingly throughout the Solomon Group.

To make it easy for the natives of the Scout Troop, I had asked them to give me a native name - the name they selected was Keseko, pronounced "Kesyko".

The native people of the Solomon Islands, although originally cannibals and ferocious head-hunters, have much in their old native lore and tribal customs that would grace any code of justice and some of their ancient chieftains must have been men of noble character, for their names and the story of their deeds must have been handed down from father to son with great respect, for generations. Keseko, a name revered by New Georgian natives, was one of the old chieftains, now regarded as a legendary figure. He was able, according to the present members of the tribe, to be anywhere at any time, to step across the sea from one island to another in one stride; he knew the inner secrets of all natives and could tell when they were failing to speak the truth; he also had the power of disappearing or making himself very small so that his presence could not be noticed.

Just how I measured up to any of these qualifications I do not know. Whether my six feet one inch impressed them, or they considered my long legs, I do not know; but Keseko was the name they chose for me, and so Keseko I became from then on to all natives.

When the American convoy was just south of the Fiji Group on our way to the Solomons, General Rupertus asked me during a conference one evening whether I knew any trustworthy natives that we might contact soon after landing at Tulagi. I immediately told him of the Boy Scout Troop I had trained and assured him that, although natives had been returned to their home islands before the fall of Tulagi, there were some local natives living on Nggela, the large island adjacent to Tulagi, who had been members of the Troop, and these I would be able to contact as soon as we met with any natives. I also casually remarked that three of my best boys, the Troop Leader and two of the patrol leaders, had been selected by the Government for specialised training in Fiji and that they were at present at school in Suva. The General was very impressed and asked me to give him a list of the boys, showing also the

islands to which they belonged.

The list delivered, I thought no more about the matter, for from then on there was too much of interest to occupy one's mind.

All organised resistance on Tulagi was overcome in about a week, but a few snipers were still at large during the night. It was the habit of these snipers to hide all day and come out at night as soon as it was dark and infiltrate into the Marine lines. Guards were posted all along the various ridges throughout the island; between the ridges were deep gullies, many of them timbered and in most cases there was dense fern and other undergrowth. The Japs used to hide in the gullies by day and climb up into the marine lines by night. Then suddenly they would open up with a machine-gun on to the ridge opposite. Naturally, the marines on the other ridge would reply; then, as soon as the sniper had succeeded in his mission of getting marines to fight marines, he would withdraw from the fray and retire to his cave. As soon as darkness closed in on the island during those early days, one was certain to hear machine-gun fire start up in at least half a dozen different spots. Then, once started, they blazed away at each other all night.

This battle of Marines versus Marines became a costly pastime and the General was genuinely alarmed at the number of casualties each night caused by Marine gunfire. So firmly convinced was he that Jap snipers were at the bottom of it, that he issued an order that guards, instead of being in small groups, were to be placed singly at closer intervals. They would be allowed to make for themselves whatever cover they liked so long as they had a complete field of vision over the area they were guarding. Guards were to fix bayonets at dark, and it would be an offence to fire any weapon after dark. Anyone hearing machine-gun fire or the like must treat it as emanating from the enemy, and such would be dealt with by the guard nearest the zone, using bayonet or knife, whichever was most convenient. The first night that this order was in operation eight Japanese snipers were killed, and there was not one Marine casualty. For three nights the bag was equally good and then, either there were no more snipers or else they left the island, for Tulagi was not worried by Japanese land forces any more.

Colonel Edson, of 1st Raider Battalion was going personally to supervise the first raid on a Jap outpost stationed on Nggela, and I was asked to guide him in to this village, which was to be reached by sea. We were to travel by Higgins boats to a point three miles off shore, level with the village, then in order to affect surprise the party was to take to rubber boats and make a silent landing in the dark on the beach to one end of the village. Once ashore, it was then my task to lead the head of the column in behind and out to the water's edge on the other side of the village. The raid was timed so that we should all be in position surrounding the village by first light of dawn when, on a prearranged signal, all should close in together. I had often visited this village by canoe during peace time but then it had always been in daylight when landmarks could be recognised from miles off, but it was quite a different thing finding this place by night, especially three miles off shore.

In daylight, the shore line from a Higgins boat three miles out is just a thin line of jungle amidst which here and there one can just distinguish coconut groves; under darkness conditions there are no features visible whatsoever. Our objective was easily located on the map because of an island which stood separated from the mainland by not more than a hundred yards, and this marked the centre of the village, but from three miles off shore at night the island merged into the thin line of the coast.

The patrol set out from Tulagi at midnight and made to sea for approximately three miles, then we followed the coast up and I had to decide when we were level with the village. This was no easy decision, for in the grey light I could not see one landmark; however, after an estimated period of time, we climbed into the rubber boats and commenced paddling. We paddled and paddled and paddled, but the shore seemed to come no closer; it was the longest three miles I have ever crossed. As we approached the shore, I had to decide where the village lay. Which side were we? I led the rubber boats close in shore and followed the coast for a few hundred yards back towards Tulagi. The Raider Battalion is very highly trained, the toughest of the tough, and not a sound could be heard, not a whisper, as, paddling silently, we reached a spot near enough to land. Colonel Edison gave his final words of command to the party in a hushed voice, while a couple of Marine Scouts and I took a look around. We had landed less than a dozen paces from the first house of the village - too close if it has been occupied; but since all the natives had deserted the village on the coming of the Japs who were occupying a couple of houses in the centre of the village, all was well.

I had often visited Heleta, but on a visit one does not usually explore the country immediately behind so we were equally uninformed, and it would be hard to imagine the difficulties we met with in endeavouring to surround the place. Nevertheless, the head of the column reached the shore on the other side of the village in good time and we had only about a quarter of an hour to wait before the signal was given to advance. While I was pushing my way in behind the village, I was uneasy for fear that I had brought the Marines to the wrong place. Never did I so much wish I was fighting in my own element - the air - for from an aeroplane one can at least see the shape of the land as seen on a map; but, as I was now a pilot with clipped wings, I had to rely upon the bushcraft I had learned as a boy and which had been polished up by the outings with my native Boy Scout Troop. I was uneasy until just before the signal to advance was given, when it was light enough to see the island standing off shore in front of the village. It was Heleta!

The raid was an absolute success, for we accounted for all the Jap occupants of the two central houses, where they had a wireless, together with maps and other gear. They had seemingly just moved in with the intention of watching Tulagi, for Heleta was the village I had visited on the morning of D-day, when we found traces of one or two Japs having lived there but none were then found. This occasion was more fruitful, for not one got through our cordon and six were killed.

The next night we set off to raid the Melanesian Mission HQ at Port Purvis which had been occupied by the Japs. The Bishop's house was in a prominent position on a long narrow point of land on the south side of the entrance to Bolli Passage, a narrow, winding waterway which divided Nggela into two islands. The same method of approach was adopted for this raid as was employed the night before, but my part was much more difficult because of the broken nature of the coastline around Port Purvis.

The point I first selected in the dark as being the Mission Station at Taroaniaro was an error of judgement which I fortunately was able to rectify before all the rubber boats had reached the shore. In the dark I had missed the entrance to Bolli and had made an approach on the northern shore of the entrance instead of the other shore. Silently, we all climbed back into the Higgins boats and made off in the direction of Taroaniaro. That was one occasion I was particularly glad of the strict silence kept by Marines when on patrol, for I am sure some would have liked to express their feelings. By the time we landed it was almost daylight, so without waiting we advance on what used to be the Mission Station to find nothing but ruins of former European buildings and a few native houses. Everything moveable had been carried away, tools, workshop slipway, and the European houses had been pulled down and removed board by board. All that we gained was the knowledge that there were no Japs there. Re-embarking, we visited Bungana Island, a couple of miles north-west of Taroaniaro, which had been a Mission School for native girls. Here we found exactly the same devastation, for the house of the Protestant Sisters had been pulled down and carted away.

I remembered Bungana from a previous visit about eighteen months before, when the girls were giving a presentation of the Nativity Play and, as we landed, the paths were lined with smiling girls, brilliant hibiscus and crotons, the Sisters of the Cross regaled in their spotless white frocks and wearing royal blue stoles, the blue cloth of which I was informed was made by the girls on the school's own loom. In fact, there was little on Bungana that was not made by the girls themselves. The school was completely self-contained with the exception of the flour - such things as starch and fuel oil for their lights were all made from the island's products - and it was not a very large island either.

One or two novel features of the play stick in my mind, the first that, instead of being presented in a hall with a restricted change of scenery, the play was enacted outside where various spots in the grounds formed the ideal setting. The audience was conducted from spot to spot by Mother Margaret, the Principal of the School. I must say the idea was good and most effective. The second thing that is impressed on my mind was the last scene which was enacted inside the School's native-constructed chapel. Here, all the tiny tots were given their opportunity to take part in the play. They were dressed as angels in white gowns and wings, which really emphasised the blackness of their little faces. One tiny tot, the smallest of them all, was the angel adorning the centre of the Holy table and she had apparently been instructed that she

must not move her body or she would spoil the act, so when in the middle of the act a fly began to bother her by crawling on her nose, she kept looking straight ahead and did not attempt to move a hand, but the irritation became so great that she began to try and shift the fly by moving her lips and nose, thus producing a marvellous display of ugly faces. This, coming from the central angel of the group, nearly broke me up and, on commenting on it after the show, I found everyone was in a stifled state of mirth.

That was Bungana, happy, shady, cool, with beautiful flowers everywhere. Today, it presented a horrible scene of devastation.

Fortunately, the Mission had removed the Sisters and the girls just prior to the Japs arriving, for I was informed by a native who paddled over to us when he saw us on the island, that the Japs had about 600 men on Bungana for some time and when they left they pulled down all the European buildings and loaded the timber on barges, which took it to Tanambogo Island, where they were building their flying boat base. The only Jap we encountered on the island was in his grave, with a wooden pole in which were cut Japanese characters at the head of it. This Jap, we were informed, was bitten by a shark while a crowd of them were in swimming one afternoon; he had died of his wounds and they had buried him on the beach.

The native who had arrived at Bungana took a message to Evo, a Nggela native, who had been a member of my 1st Tulagi Troop of Boy Scouts. I wanted a few trustworthy boys to assist me in guiding Marine patrols on cleaning-up operations.

The following day, Evo arrived at Tulagi with a companion, Aleko. When I proposed he should stay on Tulagi, he was rather hesitant, so I asked whether he was afraid. He assured me that he was not afraid, but from his manner I knew something was wrong. I asked him in Pidgin English, "What something the matter, which way you no want to stay along Tulagi?"

He replied, "Me no fright, Keseko, but one day behind me catch 'im Mary, and now me make 'im house for this Mary belong me. Suppose me finish house belong me along one week, maybe two, alright, me come."

In other words, Evo had taken unto himself a wife the previous day and was building his house for her and could not come until he finished.

However, Aleko volunteered to stay with me in the meantime, and he ultimately became my shadow. I don't know what I should have done without him; he was with me on every patrol I did. Aleko was a Malaita native who had remained on Nggela after the Japs arrived. He was a well-built boy with the typical crop of fuzzy-wuzzy hair.

The following day a patrol set out on a three-day Jap hunt and reconnaissance of Nggela. I was again asked to be the guide. We went by Higgins boats up a mangrove creek as far as the boats could go, and then we

set off overland. There was a sandy bar at the entrance to the creek, with a channel running around one end, which fortunately Aleko knew. Once into the creek we had to go cautiously on account of the number of trees which had been washed down, forming snags at frequent irregular intervals. The water too, was muddy, thus making it harder to navigate. Knowing the extent of the swamp through which this creek meandered, I was confident we would not strike any opposition in this area so I stood up on the bow of the leading boat and piloted it through the snags. The mangrove creek was a new experience for the Marines and none, as I looked back, seemed particularly cheerful as they sat low in the Higgins boat with their rifles at the alert, pointing out over the sides. The watercourse grew narrower and narrower until in the late afternoon we reached the canoe "wharf" - a large log beside which stood a native canoe house. We landed and set off inland, the boats returning to Tulagi with orders to return at midday three days hence to pick us up.

We did not go far into the jungle before making our bivouac for the night, as Aleko knew where to find fresh water close at hand. The night passed without incident, and we made an early start next morning. The jungle appeared peaceful enough, but we had to advance with caution, not knowing when we might run into Japs. I enquired before we broke camp how the officer in charge of the patrol proposed to advance. His answer was the standard text book model, that is, with scouts out on either side, slightly in advance, etc.

I pointed out that the nature of the country we were in was going to alter that very excellent plan. We intended following the jungle trail, which was like a goat track, and the steepness of the hillsides around which this trail wound made it impossible to have anyone out on the wings of the advancing party, if we were to cover our scheduled distance in three days. The best method and certainly the most workable one, was for me and my scouts to lead. By this time, I had recruited a few local natives besides Aleko, who knew the area, and they went in front spaced out far enough to be able just to pass a native warning signal back, one to the other, should the leading man notice anything suspicious.

I had complete confidence in these natives, who all knew me from pre-War excursions through their island. I did not know them individually, but their hatred of the Japs reassured me of their loyalty to us. If anything pertaining to Japs was noticed as we went along, the boy observing the clue would make a low hiss which was just audible to the man ahead and behind. The man ahead kept going as though nothing was wrong - he after all was just a native on "walkabout" visiting the neighbouring village. This was arranged so as not to give us away to the Japs who would be put on the alert if the scout were to stop and run back.

As soon as the warning reached me I passed it to the Marine Scouts, who then deployed to each side while the word was passed to the Marine Officer at the head of the main column. The Marine Scouts were mostly Red Indians or

Mexican lads. My native scouts knew the country so well that they could detect the slightest encroachment upon their domain, and their hearing was so attuned to the noises of the jungle that they could immediately detect a strange sound.

The patrol went without incident until just as we approached Gumu village. A local native informed us that they had a Jap airman in the village. He had been shot down over the jungle and had made his way to this village, which was more than a day's walk from the coast. He obviously was lost and as the natives had not been molested in any way by the Japs, he had been given a house to live in and food; but they seemed to be relieved that we proposed removing him. We halted a little way outside the village and the headman came out and talked to me. He told me that the Jap had been in the village for a week and, although he had made no trouble, they did not like him. He suggested that before we attempted to get him, he wanted time to remove the Maries and piccaninnies from the village out of the way of stray bullets that might result. This was a reasonable and wise request so we let him go back quietly and prepare for our coming.

The Jap was in a leaf house which had a door on each end. We decided that two Marines could guard one entrance while the interpreter and I went to the other. We had learnt from the headman that the Jap was without weapons of any kind, so I suggested to the interpreter that he approach the door unarmed and I would cover the door with my Rising gun. The Jap apparently heard us talking, for he at that moment popped his head out of the door. One glimpse of our Marine uniforms was sufficient for him. He bolted straight through the house and out the other door, nearly knocking the guards over. The house was only several yards from the creek, which the Jap made for, and with a headlong plunge he disappeared through the low bushes on the water's edge. At the same time shots rang out from both of the Marines at that end of the house. We rushed to the edge of the water but could see no trace of the Jap.

Being an airman, I was keen to take him alive for intelligence purposes, but that was not to be. There was no trace of him in the water, and at first we thought he had swum underwater downstream, but just as we were searching a few reeds growing close to our feet, the Jap came to the surface face down. Pulling him out for an inspection revealed he had been shot through the chest. The Corpsmen took charge of him and, after they had emptied a quantity of water out of him he set up a moaning, consequently they administered morphia and attempted to dress his wound. The bullet had passed through his lung, and air was being inhaled and exhaled through the hole as he breathed. Even with expert care our chances of ever getting him to talk seemed very remote and, even if we took him back in his present state, any information he could give would have been of little value by the time he would have been well enough to recount it. Thus we were faced with a problem, a wounded Jap on our hands, and a day's walk from the creek where we were to pick up the Higgins boats. A decision had to be made quickly, for already we were running behind schedule, so I suggested that the corpsman administer another dose of morphia, which he did, and which solved all our difficulties.

Within a quarter of an hour the Jap was on his way to collect the reward which is supposed to come to all Japanese warriors who die fighting. I have no spasm of conscience for having ordered his death in this way, for when one considers the torture inflicted upon our men who later were unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of the Japanese, such a painless death was too good for a Jap.

The object of this patrol was mainly to contact the natives and find out where the Jap forces on Nggela were located. We returned to the point from which we had started our inland patrol, at the appointed hour and were pleased after hiking through such rough country to hear the engines of the Higgins boats coming to meet us. We were first at the "Canoe Wharf" and, after a while, it dawned on me that the noise of the engines was not getting closer. The boats were apparently having difficulty in finding the channel around the sand bar.

I found a one-man canoe in the canoe house, but there was not a paddle to be found anywhere, so it was necessary to improvise with a piece of bamboo stick. I made slow time getting to the mouth of the creek, and great was my disappointment just as I rounded the last bend in the creek to see the boats disappearing around a point on their way back to Tulagi. Back I paddled upstream to tell the sorry tale to the Marines, who were wet and weary. Just as I returned, a six-man canoe with four natives in it came down stream. I persuaded these natives to take me to Tulagi, from where I brought the Higgins boats back to pick up the patrol.

When we reached the bar the coxswain was sure he could not cross, which was true, but we could get around the end if we knew the location of the channel; it was impossible to see it with such muddy water.

Later that afternoon, several natives in a canoe arrived at Tulagi and I was sent to interview them. They were from a village on the sandy beach opposite Bungana. The headman told me they captured a Japanese prisoner and had brought him in to hand him over. Sure enough, there lay a Jap bound hand and foot in the bottom of the canoe. The native headman informed me the Jap had swum to their village from Gavutu - a pretty long swim - and had landed on the beach in a rather exhausted state, so they had "cared" for him.

When General Rupertus was informed of these natives' visit, he asked to see them and made the chief a gift of some tinned meat and tobacco. The gift was appreciated, there was no doubt, for in a few days the same village captured and delivered another Jap. Up until the time I left Tulagi some weeks later, this village had in all handed over five Japanese soldiers as prisoners.

By this time most of the local natives knew we were established on Tulagi. We passed the word around that every Tuesday would be a market day, and if the natives had any fresh foods, they might bring it in and we would trade with them. It fell to the lot of the few British officers attached to the Marines to do the buying. The job came my way eventually and on this particular occasion there were about seventy canoes, each loaded with their saleable product. The

market was held on Makambo Island, an island within Tulagi Harbour. Here two Marines were detailed to assist me. Makambo had had its share of bombing, for all that remained of Burns Philp's Copra Store and other buildings were masses of heat-twisted corrugated iron and broken concrete. The trading was taking place on the concrete wharf at Makambo, and we were gradually converting a pile of tins of Spam (American pressed beef) into a much larger heap of sweet potatoes, cucumbers, taro, pineapples and paw paw.

About half way through the business, an air raid warning was given, so I quietly told the natives we were expecting some Jap planes and that I thought they should leave their goods and take their canoes and paddle across the passage to Nggela and hide in the mangroves until all clear. If the Japs did drop bombs on Makambo, the natives would be safe enough on Nggela. They did not need a second bidding: they knew too well the destructive power of bombs. The two Marines and I sat on the edge of the wharf and yarned until the drone of Japanese bombers could be heard.

When we sighted them there were twenty-four and they seemed to be heading straight for us; then we decided it was high time to take cover. The two Marines, of course, being stationed on the island, had their fox holes, but being a Tulagite myself I had to do a bit of hurried looking around. Right before me, amidst the debris of the copra store, was a nicely prepared slit trench, which had been lined with palm leaves and all as a protection against the mud. Made to order, I thought as I jumped in. For a few moments I sat in silence, listening to the planes approach, I was seized with a sense of loneliness and looked out to see if there were any Marines nearby, but there was not another soul in the vicinity. Then what I did see explained my isolation. Around me in small dumps, spaced like the hours on the face of a clock, were 44 gallon drums of petrol, covered by twisted corrugated iron. The realisation paralysed me: I was in the middle of the petrol dump! Yet, it was too late to run; the planes were overhead - one, two, three, the seconds passed and so did the twenty-four planes. We were not the target, so I am able to tell the tale, but before I was out of that trench I could hear the thud! thud! thud! of the bombs exploding on Guadalcanal.

CHAPTER 5

Next day with a new patrol, we set out by boat to Mali Ali then to trek through to a village on the Sandfly Passage and from there around the Nggela Coast to the northern entrance to Boli passage. The patrol was to last three days and, as rations were being cut, we wanted to get as much native food as possible; therefore, it was decided to camp in a village that was half way along Sandfly. As soon as we entered the village we were met by a boy who used to work for me in peace time and he very soon passed the word around that we were there to protect the natives.

I asked to see the chief, or headman as he is known in this part of the Solomons. Along came the old headman with a few offsidiers so I started to put our case to him.

"What name belong you?" I asked.

"Name belong me Paula", he said.

"Well, now Paula, you savvy me, time behind?" I enquired.

"Me savvy you, master. Me Savvy Spearline too", he answerd.

"You savvy Spearline, Mr Wilson, eh! Well, Spearline he no stop - Government he no stop Tulagi, altogether too much soldier belong you and me, him he stop along Tulagi now. Altogether soldier belong Japan he die finish. You hear 'im big fella fight?" I enquired.

"Me hear 'im - big fella fight too much - boom! boom! Altogether people belong my he fright too much, master", replied the headman.

"These soldiers you look 'im they belong America and altogether solider him hungry too much. Which was, altogether people belong you catch 'im plenty potato, plenty taro, plenty paw-paw?" I asked.

"Him 'e no plenty, some a stop", replied Paula.

"Solider belong Japan he steal 'im kai kai belong you?" I asked.

"Him 'e stealin everything, something belong one fella garden - garden 'e all up finish, altogether people belong me make 'im another fella garden along bush close up side belong mountain."

"I see, Paula. Well maybe altogether people belong village he cook 'im little bit no more potato, taro or paw-paw for altogether soldiers. Altogether soldiers he stop along village tonight. First time we go walkabout and look in any Japs 'e stop close up along Boli. Time we finish look 'im altogether, him 'e come back along village belong you. Which way now, you think altogether people him 'e make kai kai for soldiers belong you and me", I said hopefully.

"He all right, master", readily answered Paula.

"Good! We will be back along village belong you close up sun he die finish", I replied.

This was great news and, as I surveyed the crowd of village folk who had congregated to hear the pow-wow between Paula and me, I noticed one chap with a fish spear and this inspired me to ask whether there were many fish about. It being always policy to address the headman, I asked Paula, who replied, "Some he stop!"

"Plenty he stop?" I asked.

"Him 'e no plenty too much", he replied.

"Well, could some boys catch 'em fish enough fit 'em thirty soldier?" I asked. Roars of laughter greeted this and all began to cheer the boy with the spear. This made me ask, "Any fish net 'e stop?"

Paula replied, "No".

"What, in a big fella village all the same, no fish net 'e stop?" I remarked derisively.

Paula responded to the irony of my tone and said, "One fella boy he got fish net but net he mussed up, plenty hole 'e stop."

"Bring the boy who got one falla net me talk along him", I ordered.

I had worked with the Yanks long enough to know where there is a will, there is a way.

The boy was brought and I addressed him, "What name belong you?"

"Koko", he replied.

"Paula, him he say you got one fella fish net", I said.

"Fish net 'e no stop him, he old too much - him he no catch fish - too many holes, he stop", Koko answered.

"Suppose some boys help 'im you, you savvy, med 'im holes?"

This was greeted with a coy look as the boy drew a pattern in the sand with his toe. In that look and that action, I recognised I had him thinking, so I continued, "Suppose six fella boys help 'im you, you could mend 'im hole quick time then altogether boys he go along canoe with you - you catch 'im plenty fish."

Koko could visualise a mended net for future occasions and he answered guardedly to cover his enthusiasm, "Suppose six fella boy mend 'im hole along net him he all right."

I asked Paula to detail him six boys to help with the net and catch some fish for the patrol. I also added that he might have them cooked too.

The patrol moved on and after about an hour's walk my guides met a native coming in the opposite direction. This native told them, and they in turn reported to me, that a little way further on there was a Jap lying on a bed of

leaves in a cave. The cave, we were told, was right on the path as we rounded a headland. I talked with this native for a few minutes whereon he volunteered to come back with us in order to warn me when we were near the cave. He held me as we walked along that the Jap was sick, having been there for three days, and that other Japs occasionally brought him food and left it by him.

When we came close to the headland, the native warned me, so we halted the patrol and I passed on the information I had gained to the Captain in charge. On his suggestion, the Doctor, who had accompanied us on this trip, the Captain and I, each armed, continued cautiously on. Of course, by my side was Aleko, who had become so attached to me that he would not let me out of his sight. I did not mind, for Aleko would be a good companion if ever we got into trouble. He was one of the most powerfully built Malaita men I have ever met. As we rounded the corner, the path led through a high open cave and lying on a bed of leaves with his back to us was the Jap. The Captain, Doctor and I spread out fanwise, each covering the limp body with our weapon.

Suddenly, like a startled cat in a corner, the Jap made an effort to get to his feet, but smartly Aleko was by his side. I called to Aleko to make him sit down, remembering that the Japs are very keen ju jitsu exponents. The Jap for a moment stared from the native to each of us in turn and then seemed as if he were going to obey Aleko's gentle pressure on his shoulder and sit down. He went down on to his knees and then bent over, putting his hands on to the leaves of his bed, the whole time staring wide-eyed from one to the other of us. With the suddenness of a reptile striking, that Jap grasped a heavy stick about four feet long and two inches in diameter from beneath the leaves and dealt Aleko three cracking blows on the head and, before we could realise what was happening, he made a bound, at the same time bringing down his stick with a crash upon the right wrist of the Captain, who was just sighting his Rising gun. Then with the other end of the stick which was held in the middle, he caught the Doctor whose pistol arm was extended. Realising I was next, I moved around so as to clear my companions from my line of fire and, as I raised my pistol, the Jap turned on me and holding his stick by the end, he made an effort to hit me on the head. Instinctively I raised my right arm to ward off the blow from my head and in doing so collected it on the elbow. The paralysing effect caused me momentarily to lose control of my pistol; at the same time I stepped backwards, and in so doing my feet slipped from under me on the moss, and down I went, flat on my back. The Jap in his efforts to reach me with the stick tried to hurl it at me. The instant I fell he sprang like a wild animal at me, hands and fingers spread claw fashion, his eyes flashing and his face twisted into a most diabolical expression. It was fortunate for me that I slipped, for by falling I cleared the line of fire from the other two, who had recovered from their surprise sufficiently for both to open fire at the little demon attacking me. Their shots were well aimed, for he landed on my chest a gory mess, dead. Aleko was at my side in a flash he seized the Jap's body, raised it above his head and thumped head first over the rock ledge. We examined the body afterwards and were amazed how a human being in the half starved condition of this Jap and with feet in such a sore state could be responsible for such violent action as he was.

Continuing the patrol, we did not see another Jap, but we did receive information from some natives of a small party of Japs who occupied a certain native house further along the coast. I will always remember that village because as we came upon the first house, I noticed a strange device over the front door. It was done in white on a piece of old board and to me looked for all the world like a large letter "V". I talked to the native but did not comment upon the device at that time, my attention being distracted by a string of village people, each carrying green drinking coconuts, coming our way. The coconut wireless had seemingly been at work, for no native had passed the patrol going our way since we left Paula's village, yet these folk had expected us and had cut about thirty coconuts and had them prepared for drinking on our arrival in their village. Each Marine was handed a cool coconut drink as the patrol passed. Each house in that village, I discovered, bore a white "V" at the entrance. Talking to one of the young men, I asked, "What something this?", pointing to the sign.

Looking a little embarrassed, he replied, "Him 'e something."

"Yes, but what name belong him?" I asked.

"Me no savvy", he replied.

"You savvy what something this fella him 'e mean?"

Then followed much coyness and twisting of toes, but after a little more coaxing, he said, "Him 'e mean we altogether win 'im something."

Could Webster have given a definition of Victory more concisely than "we altogether win 'im something"?

The patrol arrived back at Paula's village at about five o'clock, weary, hot and hungry. We had scarcely dumped our gear on the ground when along came Paula followed by two of his men each carrying an enamel wash basin piled high with potatoes, taro, piping hot, and the last one containing the dessert-ripe paw paw sliced with coconut cream over it. It was indeed a beautiful sight. Next came the fishermen with a huge dish of perfectly cooked fish. Fish of all shapes and sizes, steaming hot and they were really delicious. When all the food had been delivered, I called Aleko to bring my tobacco bag and, approaching Paula, suggested I would like to pay the people responsible for it. Paula shook his head and said, "This one him 'e present, master, present belong altogether soldier."

Such generosity from a Nggela village nearly knocked me over. Nggela, being so close to Tulagi, the natives were spoiled by their contact with the business centre of the Solomon Group, and usually they drove a hard bargain. I know that many old Islanders who knew Nggela natives before the War will shake their heads at this story, yet it is a fact. I was astounded myself, especially as tobacco was unprocurable. I saw one old man, just a few minutes before

squat down beside a fire and withdrawing a stick, he tapped the glowing lump of charcoal into the bowl of his old broken-stemmed clay pipe, then with a few puffs to make sure it was still alight, he sat back and smoked the charcoal.

I did not press Paula in case he weakened and spoiled a generous action on the part of the village; so thanking him and his people once more, we distributed the food and hoed in ourselves. Taro was new to most of the Marines, but there was none left over; and the fish, too, was received with great enthusiasm - such a treat from the small tins of baked beans which we carried.

Paula enquired the time we would be leaving next morning, and at about half an hour before the set time he arrived with another basin of hot potatoes which went very well with our breakfast ration. Just as we were about to leave the village, I called Paula and thanked him for his people's kindness and, to show our appreciation, I told him the soldiers wished to make a present to his people. With that I took as much stick tobacco as I could contain in two hands and presented it to the open-eyed headman, asking him to distribute it to all who helped in the preparation of the food.

Some days later I was out with another patrol, seeking a party of Japs who were quartered close to a native garden on the edge of Sandfly Passage. The Japs, from native reports, were in the habit of entering the garden at daylight each morning to dig potatoes and taro, which they cooked and ate in the garden before splitting up into small parties, which dispersed in different directions for the day. We reached one of the villages on the Passage in the afternoon, and from there we planned to make our strike. Enquiries from local natives revealed that hours of hard walking could be saved if we were to cross the bay by canoe. The bay was semi-circular and with one of the largest mangrove swamps in the island fringing it. For the past fourteen days I seemed to have spent most of my time foot slogging through jungle swamps, always wet, day and night, so naturally it was little wonder I jumped to attention to a proposal that would save us walking through another swamp. The natives had three large canoes on the bay side of the neck of land on which their village was located. Here I arranged for a team of paddlers to accompany us.

We planned the whole campaign on a native estimate of time between point and point of the trip. I was beginning to be able to convert native time over a distance to Marine time over the same distance with some degree of accuracy. We planned to set out at midnight, first having to cross the hills separating us from the shore of the bay. The path across was steep and winding and we had no assistance of light from either stars or moon. It was one of the blackest nights I have experienced. Soon after starting I found I could not see my native guide even though we decreased the distance between us to a mere arm's length. His black curly head and black body dissolved into the night with the result I was continually walking into stumps and rocks. From behind came the Marines, who were no better off, and the muffled noises and occasional crack as someone fell broke the stillness. It was no good: we could

not make progress under these conditions. Just then one Marine slipped and tumbled down into the creek below with resounding echo, and we had to halt while he climbed back.

During the interval I had a brain wave. Close by where I was standing an old log was it up with luminous fungus. I broke off a piece of fungus and placed in the native's hair - he shone like a beacon. I gathered more and walked along distributing it, and before long we were on our way making good time, each being guided by the fungus on the back of the man ahead.

Reaching the shore on the other side of the ridge, we found the natives ready with their canoes, and it was to long before the three veryheavily laden little craft were heading into the blackness over the water. Fortunately it was calm at this hour and the water was like glass. I realised on our way back when we made the return journey in the daylight what wonderful powers of sight and navigation these natives have; for the bay was a mass of reefs and sand banks; yet we came through with no trouble that night, despite the fact the canoes had no more than one inch of freeboard.

Reaching the other side of the bay, the head canoe entered a small creek in the mangroves, and I expected we would travel some distance through the murky swamp. Just as we entered the mangroves there was a resounding splash and two pairs of small red lights passed us silently on one side. Some of the Marines near me were somewhat apprehensive and whispered, "What's that?", to which I replied more offhandedly than I felt, "Don't let it worry you; its only a couple of crocodiles that we have disturbed."

A few more strokes of the paddles brought us side by side with the other canoes. Thinking a snag was holding them up, I waited a few moments and then, as no effort was being made to do something, I asked the lead boy what was wrong.

"Him he all right, master, altogether walk now", he replied.

I began to wish I had not mentioned crocodiles, for the word was on everyone's lips. I passed the word along for everyone to probe the mud with a paddle before getting out of the canoe to make sure there was no crocodile asleep on the bottom. We beat the surface of the water with the flat blade of the paddles and listened - all was quiet. Crocodiles are timid animals and if you make plenty of noise and don't corner them, they usually prefer to get out of the way. The natives assured us it was alright, so I suggested they lead the way. We all followed waist deep in water and knee deep in mud, which together with the inky blackness of the night and the stench of the stirred-up mud filled us with a deeper hate for those little yellow friends who had caused us to wallow in such filth.

Wet to the waist and smelling foully, we continued, accompanied by the boys who had ferried us, they having hidden their canoes for use on our return trip. It was nothing new to be wet, if not by crossing waterways, or by tropical

downpour, then by steamy humid atmosphere which soaked our clothing in our own perspiration.

The natives had it on us in this respect: nature had endowed them with perfect equipment for jungle conditions, i.e. hard feet, a mop of hair and black skin which neither soaks up rain nor perspiration, yet at the b time it dries quickly and is perfect camouflage. We wear jungle green, but black is just as good, for there is just as much black by way of dark shadows, etc, as there are green highlights in the jungle. For the next mile after crossing a stream, our feet would be heavy and squelch until the water soaked out of our boots; and boots have a habit of collecting stones and pebbles, whereas a native with his splayed toes and hard soles knows none of our foot troubles unless some thoughtless person makes him a present of a pair of boots.

I saw some of the first Fijian native troops, who landed in the Solomons in 1943 with equipment as good as any British soldier, including helmet, jungle green and heavy military boots. But why make a native wear boots, no matter what else you put on him. These lads had just completed a twenty-five mile march and half of them were footsore, more than a dozen were laid up for days at my camp as a result of wearing boots. Their toes and heels were in a terrible state, the dye from their new boots having poisoned the wounds. Their officer, a European captain, told me all their training in Fiji had been done barefooted, and it was not until they were boarding the transport to come overseas that the Fijian authorities suddenly decided to put them into boots. I wish the man responsible for the order could have seen them as I saw them. Their efficiency was just about halved by the addition of boots to their equipment. It is natural, if you give boots to a native who has not been used to wearing boots that he will wear them irrespective of whether or not they are crippling him. How I wished on many occasions that I could have discarded my boots and go along as the natives could!

Excusing this digression and to continue with the patrol, we made good progress and reached a village near the garden which was to be our trap for the party of Japs an hour before daylight. I recruited an old man from the village who knew the district well, including the hills and gullies off the beaten track, and he proved a champion. We were just approaching the garden area from a line of hills; our column had split and one half was going one side, and the other, which I was leading, was making for the far side. The old native from the village was a few paces ahead of me when suddenly he stopped and listened, then he turned to me and said, "Japan man, 'e come."

I listened but could hear nothing suspicious, but he persisted, "Plenty Japan man he come - me hearim talk talk too much."

I stood listening and at first thought he was fancying things, then gradually the sound of Japanese chattering became audible. I quickly passed the word back and we deployed each side of the trail and awaited their coming. This seemed too good to be true; it was just breaking day and here was our quarry, just about to deliver themselves into our hands. The voices increased in

volume, and from my position I had a view of the track as it came down the side of a shallow gully, but I could not see the bottom of the gully where they had to cross a small stream. Two or three of the party were carrying buckets and a few seemed to be carrying arms. We waited tense in anticipation. I counted the Japs as they came down the side of the gully and disappeared from my view. There were twenty-two in all, and as the chatter grew louder we expected the head of the column to appear before us. Quite unconscious of our presence, the Japs, fortunately for them but disappointing for us, then turned off at right angles and walked down to the stream. From our position we saw them make into the garden, where I thought they would dig their potatoes and prepare a breakfast as they had done for the past ten days. Therefore, seeing they had not walked into our trap, we decided to complete the encirclement of the garden and, on a given signal, all were to creep in for a prearranged distance and catch the Japs as they sat around their breakfast.

My section of the patrol got into position and the signal was given to creep. This was done quite noiselessly but to our amazement the twenty-two Japs were missing. Upon examining the garden, we discovered they had taken the last produce it contained the morning before, and on this occasion had just used their path to the garden from their hideout for the purpose of getting to the seashore, then along the sandy beach on which they made their way to another garden further along the passage. All our care and energy for naught!

The Captain sent a section of the patrol in pursuit but it was impossible to overtake the Japs who had half an hour start and were all travelling light, whereas the Marines were carrying full equipment. It was a fruitless patrol, yet one of the most gruelling I have been on. The margin between success and failure on that occasion was so finely drawn that we had just cause for our bitter disappointment. To make matters worse, after walking all the way back to where we had landed from the Higgins boats, there was a downpour for about an hour while we waited for the boats to return to pick us up.

After landing on Tulagi, I returned to General HQ and was busy removing my water-sodden, mud covered footwear, when General Rupertus entered with no less a person than Major General Vandergrift himself. He had been flown over to Tulagi by one of the naval float planes. I am afraid I was too tired and too dirty to be worried who our guest was. With the conclusion of this patrol, I had completed 14 days out of the past 21 days on patrol. It was a different bunch of Marines each time, but the same old local guide - it was certainly telling on me. I had lost a lot of weight in those first few weeks.

You can imagine my joy when the next day I was summoned to the wharf at Tulagi, there to find Situ, Solomon and Gigini, three natives of my 1st Tulagi Troop of Boy Scouts, who had been attending school in Fiji. General Rupertus had made the request to the British Authorities that these natives be brought back to Tulagi to assist me. I had a job for them right away, for there were two reports I had to investigate. One was an intermittent blue light flashing on Nggela, thought by the observer to be a sparking generator on a radio, and the other a native report of a party of Japs living in a native garden behind Halavo.

The first one I assigned to Situ, who was the Troop Leader, and the other to Solomon and Gigini. Situ searched the area and nothing could be traced, and with his native bushcraft he could tell nothing or no-one had been through the virgin jungle before him. The light, which appeared again later, turned out to be a firefly a few yards ahead of the peep hole through which this fellow used to keep watch.

When I suggested to Colonel Vance, who was in charge of mopping up operations, that I intended sending Solomon and Gigini on a reconnaissance to gather information about the Japs mentioned in the native report, he was inclined to contend that it would be better if I went; but having trained the Scout Troop for just that type of work, I felt confident that these two natives could do the job and do it well, so off they went. They were away two days and, when they returned, Solomon handed me his sketch of the garden area, giving the location of the native house, with dimensions indicating the distances from the various corners of the house to where the jungle started. There was another sketch plan of the locality showing how the garden could be approached whether by canoe or by jungle trail, and with it were appropriate notes indicating landmarks etc. When Solomon and Gigini explained everything to me, there appeared little information that they had neglected to ferret out. They knew exactly how many Jap soldiers were quartered in the house, having ascertained this by hiding in a tree on the edge of the garden and watching the Japs the whole of one day from daylight to dark. They knew which corner of the house they kept their rifles; they told me two of the party were sick for they did not leave their bunks and one of the party used to bring them their meals. They observed that all, with the exception of those sick, sat on the ground outside around a common pit, and ate from the pot with their hands at breakfast, and that this was the only time during the day that all were grouped together. They had noted, too, that eight had rifles and two who apparently were officers or NCO's wore pistols. One thing that rather amused me on the plan of the garden area was that the dimensions were given in yards. The largest I recall was 22 yards, so just to check up on Solomon's estimate of distance, I asked him to show me how far he considered 22 yards. He looked about for something to indicate and then suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, just the length of a cricket pitch!" Solomon was a bright lad; he had been educated in a Mission School in the Solomons, and had taken up cricket as a sport at the school he had been attending in Fiji prior to his recall to assist me.

When I passed on the intelligence gained to the Colonel, he was quite impressed and decided to send a patrol right away to clean out these Japs. His suggestion that I might guide them seemed futile since Solomon spoke perfect English and could talk directly to the Captain in charge. He knew the set-up, so I detailed Solomon and I took a much needed rest.

The patrol came back very bucked and all acclaimed Solomon as a hero. He had guided them to the garden in the dark and had the men placed around the garden in good time, where they waited for daylight and breakfast to start. As the Japs squatted around their food-bowl, the Marines opened fire from

their ambush and took full toll of the Japs.

My native scouts became very popular, especially as they could speak English.

One patrol set out to clean up a Jap gun emplacement on the headland at the south-eastern entrance to Sandfly Passage. The Higgins boat landed the party at a small sandy cave inside the Passage. We were manoeuvring in daylight to attack the Jap position from the rear. The Japs must have heard our approach, for they opened fire with machine-guns to which we replied; and so it went on for some time, blind firing, for I don't think either side could see the other. However, gradually we worked our way into an advantageous position and suddenly the Japs' fire ceased. We did not know what was going on and suspected some cunning move on the part of the Japs. Bit by bit we crept forward through the thick jungle until finally we were right on the gun emplacement, but the Japs had gone.

We searched the area but not a trace of them remained, until someone looking over the edge of the precipice saw four Japs on a raft paddling as hard as they could out to sea. Leaving part of the patrol to look around, the remainder of us returned to our Higgins boat, which was on the other side of the bluff from where the Japs had embarked and we set out to overtake the raft. The Japs watched us gain on them, but they did not miss a stroke with their paddles until we were about thirty yards off, when without any apparent full they put down their paddles, drew their revolvers, and each man blew his own brains out without even firing a shot in our direction. There is no mistake that a Jap will take his own life rather than be taken a prisoner, but of course, not every Jap believes with the same intensity the teaching of his national religion, just as we have varying degrees of faith in our religions.

I once read a translation of a Japanese doctor's diary. He had spent many years of his life in America, and the love of Western living and the influence of Western beliefs had undermined his Shintoism. He did not want to die; in fact he said he was scared to, and he had doubt in his heart as to whether dying as a warrior of the Son of Heaven would be sufficient in itself to assure him of a happy hereafter. That doctor was killed. I hope something he learned from our Western civilisation comforts him now.

Colonel Ed Hill, the Battalion Commander whose cabin I shared, together with Lt. Frank Stackpool, AIF, on the transport, President Jackson, asked me to come and stay with him in his battalion HQ, which was then at the Police Lines, the spot where I spent my first night on landing at Tulagi. I liked Colonel Hill, so I asked General Rupertus if I might go just to renew acquaintance with his boys. The point in mentioning this is the fact that while I was there the first shipment of Red Cross supplies arrived, and each Tom, Dick and Harry, officers and men, were given a little bag containing soap and washer, razor, pencil and paper, etc, and lastly, something more precious to us than the rarest treasure, a toothbrush. Having lost my baggage, I had nothing but what I stood up in, and for more than three weeks I had not cleaned my teeth. The joyous sensation of the first cleaning I shall never

forget. I made a vow then and there that, if and when I returned to civilisation, I would never pass a Red Cross box without subscribing. It is a wonderful service and a world-wide institution of which civilisation might justly be proud.

The landing on Guadalcanal which took place simultaneously with that on Tulagi met with little or no opposition in the early stages: it was later that the bloody period developed. Just when the position on Tulagi had become fairly stable, word came from Guadalcanal of Japanese treachery. Being thoroughly surprised by the landing of the Marines, the Japs had fled to the foothills behind Henderson Air Field. One morning a Jap soldier came across the grass plain waving a white flag. He spoke English and explained he represented a party of 40 Japs who wished to surrender; the remainder of the party had stayed back in the hills to make sure that they would be treated fairly. Colonel Goettge, General Vandergrift's Chief Intelligence Officer, was, of course, thrilled by the prospect of forty prisoners and, carried away by his enthusiasm, he decided to go out with a small staff, accompanied by the Jap, and bring in the party who were surrendering.

They set off, accompanied by a Solomon Island native, Sergeant of Police, Sgt Vusa, as guide. The Jap of the white flag led them to where the remainder of his fellows were to be, but instead of meeting a party wishing to surrender, the Marines were led into an ambush, and not one of them escaped to tell the tale. The only survivor of the party was Sgt Vusa, who some days later, in a very poor state, crawled into the American perimeter. He had five bayonet wounds through his throat, and from his story it appeared that after firing on the Marines from their cover, the Japs then bayoneted to death any who were only wounded. Vusa, who had been shot in the leg, was promptly dealt with and left for dead by his attacker. When he came to, there were still Japs about, so he feigned dead until all was clear, then he crawled back to the American lines. The terribly mutilated bodies of the Marines, including Colonel Goettge, were found by a patrol that went out to seek the Japs and make them pay for their treachery.

The most indelible impression of my association with the US Marines with whom I served, was made by the hand-picked assault troops, known as the Raiders, commanded by Colonel Edson. Colonel Merrit A Edson of Chester, Vermont, was a wiry man, with a lean, hard face and steel blue eyes. His speech came from his hard lips with a crisp snap - a true fighting man, and so were the men he commanded. They were so keen, so alert, every man a seasoned soldier proud of the traditions of the Marine Corps and determined to add to the glory.

The support troops on Tulagi, commanded by Colonel Harold E Rosecrans, of Washington DC, were younger and less experienced than the Raiders, but what they lacked in battle experience they made up for in enthusiasm.

The US Marines and Navy are volunteer services, and that is probably why they are such a fine bunch of fellow. I have nothing but the happiest

memories of my association with both services, and am proud to have held an Honorary Commission in the Marine Corps.

CHAPTER 6

Word came through after about twelve weeks campaigning with the Marines that I was to return to the RAAF in Australia. My return trip was by ship to New Caledonia, where I was to wait five days for air transportation to Brisbane. There being an outbreak of infantile paralysis in Noumea, we were not allowed to land so I was transferred to a US Store ship in the harbour and spent the five days there relatively in the lap of luxury. Various ones of the ship's officers gave me articles of clothing, which at least gave me a chance of getting out of my jungle suit. The only things of my own RAAF uniform that I possessed were my wings and a small crown and eagle. This later I mounted on a Marine khaki forage cap and with my RAAF wings on a US Naval Officer's khaki shirt and another naval man's black tie, plus a pair of somebody else's trousers, I felt as if I were in my own uniform. Apparently other people thought differently when I stepped off the flying boat at Brisbane, for I became very self-conscious of being looked up and down by my own countrymen.

The Americans certainly do things well - the trip from Noumea was made in a US Flying Boat - it was like a comfortable peace-time airliner with adjustable chairs and every convenience, even to lunch being served en route. When we alighted on Brisbane River, a speed launch took us to the jetty, where waiting cars took us to the Canberra Hotel and I was shown to a room.

My movement order was to Melbourne, and so far so good, but when after a few days in comfort at the Canberra I discovered I had to make my own arrangements for transportation from Brisbane to Melbourne, I became a little apprehensive as to how I would get out of the Canberra Hotel, for I hadn't sufficient money even to make a telephone call to a local RAAF establishment. However, on looking up the telephone directory, I discovered that Wing Commander Packer's Department was now in Brisbane. Soon I set out in my outlandish uniform to walk to the address given.

The Wing Commander was away when I arrived, but I managed to borrow ten shillings from an RAAF Officer, who was his assistant. This tided me over until I returned in the afternoon to see W/Comdr Packer.

My departure from Australia had been so hush hush that my paybook had to be left behind at Bradfield, so here I was in Brisbane penniless, with no means of identity, dressed in a comic opera uniform, not knowing a soul, and staying in one of Brisbane's leading hotels without the means of getting out. All depended upon the Wing Commander's return that afternoon. He was surprised to see me and very soon he had me signing on the dotted line in the Finance Branch, where he vouched for my identity and I was given an advance of 20 pounds.

With money in my pocket, I felt more like an RAAF Officer and less of the comic opera touch. However, I felt I must buy some clothes first thing, so visited Pike Bros in Queen Street and there made a selection of the necessities. The shop assistant totalled the amount. He said that will be so much and so many coupons. "Coupons?" I echoed in amazement. "I have no coupons. What are they for?"

"Sorry sir. Without clothing coupons I cannot let you have these", and with that he slid the articles I had chosen off the counter. This was a new innovation in my absence and, since I had received no mail in that time, I knew nothing of it. In a dilemma I returned to Wing Commander Packer and sought his counsel. On hearing of my clothing problem, he promptly made a car available and sent me out to RAAF Stores Depot, where I was fitted out free, no coupons required.

That evening I returned to the Canberra, more sure of myself and with a feeling I could now pay my bill and leave at will. However when I did leave I found that I had been staying there as the guest of Uncle Sam, who had taken over two floors of the hotel for use of American Naval Personnel in transit, hence all my concern was groundless.

After writing a report on my liaison work for the Director of Allied Intelligence, I was allowed to continue my journey to Melbourne, the point from which I had started. I apparently had been taken over by the Intelligence Department for, on reporting in Melbourne, I was immediately posted to an Intelligence course which was just starting and was told that I could take some leave as soon as the course was completed.

On my first spare afternoon I paid a visit to the Drawing Office of the Directorate of Technical Services, my old section with an ACI (I had been promoted to Pilot Officer just prior to joining the Marines). It was just the same hive of industry but, when I appeared in the uniform of a Pilot Officer, wearing wings and all, I am afraid it was like throwing a spanner into the works. I sighted Bram, my old cobbler, so I went along to him but before long the occupants of the whole room had left their boards and were standing around, keen to hear of my doings. There was so much to explain that I am afraid the War effort in that room was halted for an hour or so. One of the lads, after listening intently for a while said, "Gee, it is good to know that at least one of the fellows from this room has seen real active service!"

I used to be the continual moan of the fellows there that, as draftsmen, they were rooted to an HQ usually situated in a capital city. My meteoric rise to Pilot Officer had fairly knocked them but, when I explained that the wings were on a previous commission in the RAAF, they were unanimous that they could not see themselves joining up as ACI, had they been in my position and held a commission prior to the War, but I guess they would have felt much the same as I did in the circumstances.

The Intelligence Course was interesting and not too long, after which we all

received posting to various units. It was thought I needed a rest after my last assignment, so I was posted to RAAF HQ, Sydney, as an Intelligence Officer. This was just the period when Japanese submarines were very active on the Eastern Coast of Australia, and the Combined Operational Intelligence Centre (COIC), to which I was attached, was the nerve centre which kept all services informed on operational intelligence. At times it was far from a rest home, but this was all to the good, for a job without action had no appeal to me.

I was at RAAF HQ in Sydney for about four months watching, ever watching for an opportunity of a Northern posting, but nothing came my way. Other more junior officers were attached to COIC for a few weeks and then on they went, posted to Operational Squadrons in the North. I grew restless, and more restless until one day I received a personal letter which made my blood tingle. It was from Commander Long, RAN, who was the Director of Naval Intelligence in Melbourne. I had been introduced to him by the REsident Commissioner of British Solomon Islands one evening while I was doing the Intelligence Course in Melbourne. He knew about my previous assignment as Liaison Officer to the US Marines, and, as a matter of fact on that particular evening, he asked me whether I would consider a commission in the Navy. Having had a fight with the Medical Branch to get back into the RAAF, I told him I did not wish to change over to the Navy then. Apparently Commander Long was not satisfied with my reply and had kept track of me for some reason or other, because in this personal note, he wrote, "Spencer, what the Hell are you doing sitting on your tail in Sydney?"

I immediately replied by ringing him up and saying, "What the Hell am I doing in Sydney?" I felt I could be doing much more if I were in the Islands where I knew the natives. He asked if I would consider joining Allied Intelligence Bureau? I could not give him an affirmative quickly enough.

Some weeks passed and at last the long awaited signal came, posting me to RAAF Command, Brisbane, for attachment to Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) for Special Intelligence duties in the field. That certainly was much more to my liking.

Upon arrival in Brisbane I reported to AIB, and next night was on my way back to Guadalcanal, twelve months to the day from my previous landing in the Solomons with the Marines.

As soon as we flew within view of Guadalcanal, I was astounded at the mass of equipment assembled there ready for the forward thrust which was to penetrate deeper into the parts of the Solomons still occupied by the enemy. It had taken twelve months to clear Guadalcanal of Japanese, and it had been a bloody business; but now a strong base had been built up with dumps of war materials and huge stores ranging as far as the eye could see.

I spent a few days at AIB Headquarters on Guadalcanal awaiting details of my new assignment - which was to be my first as a Coastwatcher. During my wait, I had a good look around and viewed at close quarters the tremendous

mass of war equipment. Details of my assignment came through a day or two after my arrival. I was to relieve Lt Henry Josselyn, RANVR, my old friend who had with one companion and a wireless been put ashore on the West Coast of Vella Lavella Island about six months before from a US submarine. Henry's cobbler had been relieved some time previously. I had never been on Vella before but I could speak Solomon Pidgin English, and, knowing Henry as I did, I guessed things there would be fairly organised. I was thrilled with the prospect, for it would be a job worth doing.

These small groups of lone officers, mostly Australians drawn from all three services controlled by Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) and known as Coastwatchers, were put in on Japanese occupied islands throughout the Solomons and New Guinea to watch and report enemy activity, but the Yanks referred to them (and not disparagingly) as "poor man's radar". Coastwatchers went to parts hundreds of miles behind the Japanese front lines in seas controlled entirely by the enemy, and there they were left to their own resources by our furtive submarines, usually dropped a couple of miles off shore in the dead of night with a canoe load of provisions and a complete portable transmitting and receiving wireless unit. Coastwatchers are a band of heroes: men who have pitted themselves, mostly alone, against a ruthless enemy outnumbered thousands to one, but who have come through it to be decorated by our own and allied services for the tremendously valuable intelligence they had been able to wring out of a ruthless enemy by organising the native population into a secret service.

I packed the previous evening and set off in the early morning for the Henderson Field in a jeep. It was still dark when we arrived alongside the Douglas aircraft which was to take me to the newly prepared strip at Munda. My personal gear and three months' provisions were all packed in small cases so that they might be loaded and unloaded into canoes, etc without difficulty, also that they would not be too heavy for the native carriers who would transport them inland up into the hills where Henry had his base camp. It took only two hours and twelve minutes to reach Munda, where I had breakfast with the AIB Officer in charge there; he was responsible for arranging my forward passage to Vella Lavella. Munda looked rather like the island of Tanambogo after the Japs had been blasted out of there. There was scarcely a green shoot showing anywhere, and the red clay was churned up to a watery consistency wherever the heavy motor transports had passed over. There had been no time to make roads: the engineers had been flat out on the preparation of the coral air-strip, and a fine strip it was. The AIB camp was up on the brow of a hill overlooking this devastation, but beyond was the blue water and the many jungle-clad islands still unscarred, their tropical beauty contrasting in a refreshing way. Large cumulus clouds billowed languidly across an azure sky. The view beyond seemed a glimpse into another world. Nature's paradise, so different from this man-made mire amidst which we were camped.

The Japs visited us in force that evening, dropping bombs down the air-strip, while every A/A gun on the island blazed away at them. The planes were very

high but their bombing was accurate; however, with all our aircraft dispersed and in revetments the damage was slight. Next afternoon I was taken with my gear to the Patrol Torpedo (PT) Boat base by a barge. The base was a hive of industry, some boats preparing for the night patrol, others just returning, while a couple of war-scarred veterans were being repaired. I left my gear on the barge until I contacted the Officer I had to see re my forward passage to Vella Lavella, and, as the boat I was to travel on was refuelling, it was necessary for me to land all my eighteen cases, and as it looked as though there would be a tropical downpour at any moment, I asked if I might put them in some form of shelter. The officer in charge of torpedo workshop, which was at the end of the jetty, said I might put them in the workshop until I wanted them - and that was a dry place. It was dry and how! Shall I ever forget that torpedo workshop?

The Master Sergeant, an old permanent Navy man, assisted me pack my gear into a corner of his workshop and when we had finished, he asked me if I would care for a drink. There was no question about it, for I was very hot and thirsty too, so I said I would like one very much indeed.

"OK", said the Master Sergeant, "What would you like, pineapple or grapefruit?"

"Oh, grapefruit, please", I replied.

He was absent for a few minutes and then he returned with an American canteen containing the drink. It was brimful and I took it eagerly, quaffing almost half without letting up. Then I thought the top of my head had lifted off. I coughed, I spluttered and, as I coughed, the drink went up my nose making my eyes stream with tears. The Master Sergeant stood back with a look of amazement on his face, then, when I ceased coughing, he asked me if I should like a little more juice in it to break it down. "It's good stuff, 100% pure alcohol, won't hurt you. We drain it out of the torpedoes", he said.

Whew! What a drink! I had often heard of torpedo juice, but never before had I tasted it, and I never want to again. The old Sergeant looked as if he had been hardened to 100% alcohol, but I am afraid it was too much for me. After this episode I looked up the skipper of the boat I was to embark on and discovered we would not be leaving until after the evening meal, which at this base was served under the palms at about 4.30 pm. I saw a couple of officers taking a shower, and, as that seemed to be a good idea, decided to follow suit. It is easy to see men taking a shower at this spot because it all takes place in the open.

At about half past five the officers of the PT boat patrol assembled and were briefed for their operation. The boat I was on was to patrol the western coast of Vella Lavella from Ganongga to the northern point of Vella. It had been arranged that I was to be dropped of Jorio Point on the west coast of the island at midnight.

Before leaving Munda, I had been in touch with Henry Josselyn by wireless, and he arranged to send a native canoe out to rendezvous with the PT boat at this point. A system of codes had been arranged so that the canoe would know we were a friendly boat and not Japanese. At a position one mile off Jorio Point, we had to flash a light, three short and one long flash, this signal to be repeated at two minute intervals.

My gear was loaded on to the forward deck of the PT boat and the whole was covered by a tarpaulin and tied down. When all was completed, we pulled out from the jetty and were followed by two more PT boats. Once out of the narrow channels we took up formation and the leader opened the throttle. This was my first trip in a PT boat, and I must say I enjoyed its surge of power as the throttle opened and the bow of the boat lifted until it was planing on the step which is about half way back, just under the bridge. Fortunately the water was calm and we were able fairly to scoot along, with spray shooting out each side and with a roar which was as loud as a formation of aircraft. As the light failed, lightning lit up the heavy black storm clouds which seemed to cover the whole sky.

The skipper told me that we were not into Japanese seaways, and that we might expect a visit from Jap aircraft any time now. In case of such an eventuality, he suggested I lie close beside one of the deck torpedoes, this presenting more cover than anywhere else on deck, then I would be out of the way of the crew manning the guns. However, until the Japs should make it necessary to take cover, I was given a rubber mattress on which I stretched out on deck beside the bridge in an endeavour to gain a little rest, for I did not know what was in store for me once I left the PT boat. I had just begun to doze when down came the rain in torrents, so dense that I heard the Skipper call the other boats on either side by wireless telephone and tell them to slacken speed and to close in on him.

It was little use in getting up, for there was nowhere to go - all hands have to be on deck while on patrol in case of emergency, so I drew my waterproof sheet closer around me and went off to sleep again. A little later the Skipper wakened me and asked if he might compare my photographic mosaic of Valle Lavella with his chart, as he was not too sure of the accuracy of the chart of this coast of the island. I accompanied him into the chart room and there we rolled out my photograph beside his chart. After a while we agreed upon which represented Point Jorio, and he gave orders to the engineer to slacken speed, for by now we had parted from the other two boats and each was now patrolling a different section of the coast. We were heading towards the western coast of Vella, just north of Baga Island. Along this coast the Japs had had a fair quantity of barge traffic in the past, supplying the numerous garrisons situated along the coast of Vella Lavella. The PT boat was just a little cautious once we entered this region, and we proceeded at reduced speed in order to eliminate the excessive noise of our engines. Only the week before, one of these plywood constructed PT boats had engaged a barge in this area, to discover the barges were carrying 20mm cannons. Badly mauled, the PT boat, which relies on its speed for defence, had to break off the engagement

and limp back to its base. Later on the PT boats mounted canons too, then the tables were turned once more, and these intrepid and cocky little craft would go about looking for trouble, and often found it, to the detriment of the Son of Heaven's barge fleet.

The skipper called to the Radar Officer for a check on the boat's position - this was my first glimpse of radar at work. Immediately a dial lit up and over a grid of concentric circles developed a map, which I recognised as the west coast of Vella. The centre of the circles indicated by a spot of light, I was informed, was the ship's position, and in no time at all the course and distance to our rendezvous was read off. The Skipper further reduced speed to slow, and we glided forward over a calm but inky black sea, making barely more noise than a canoe. We were two miles off the point, and the rendezvous was one mile off shore. We quickly closed this distance, receiving constant position checks from the Radar Officer. The sky was heavy with black clouds, the presence of which were occasionally revealed by lightning, the air was still and the sea was now like a sheet of black glass. The Skipper looked at his watch as we stood on deck peering forward into the dark - ten minutes to midnight - we were ten minutes ahead of time, so the order was given to stop engines and we had to listen. The only sound was the lap of the water on the sides of the boat. I have never experienced such an interminable period as than ten minutes while we waited for the prearranged hour to give the signal to the natives on shore, with whom it had been arranged to meet me with two canoes.

"One mile off Jorio", came the voice of the Radar Officer from the chart room below. The Skipper, the signaller and I walked out on to the bow of the boat where, with a signalling lamp specially screened so that the light could not be seen except in the direct line of the beam, we flashed out my code signal. Everyone was tense, peering landwards, endeavouring to see or hear the approach of the natives. All was still, stiller than anything I have ever know, the eerie effect of which was heightened by an occasional low rumble of thunder. The signal was repeated at two minute intervals until the Radar Officer's voice broke the tension by an announcement, "Target approaching on port bow, sir!" Everyone peered into the blackness until the strain hurt the eyes, but nothing was visible and not a sound could be heard. Then came the Radar Officer again, "Target increasing on port bow, sir."

Down below on the screen of the radar dial a tiny blob had appeared off the port bow and was gradually increasing in size and the shape was becoming more defined as time went on. Was it a Jap barge stalking us? Was that the reason we received no reply to our signal? Nothing was said on deck but everyone had such thoughts revolving in his mind. The Skipper ordered, "Action Stations!" It was unnecessary, for already every man was at his gun, tensely waiting. Again came the voice from below, "Target growing larger just of port bow, sir!"

A minute passed, during which the only sound I could hear was my own heart thumping. Then noiselessly emerged from the blackness off our port bow two

large native war canoes, each paddled by about fifteen natives moving their craft with the silence and grace of a swan. As they came close one could see every eye focused on the personnel of the PT boat. I spoke, breaking the silence, whereupon the leading canoe came closer and we indicated where it might come alongside. No sooner had contact been made than a babble of muffled native voices broke loose in the canoes. They too, had been tense, for they were not sure whether we were the right boat, as many Japanese craft had been seen in the vicinity during the previous few days. They had seen our signal, and rather than reply from the land they had, with usual native caution, thought it better to go and have a "look see first time".

I asked for the boss boy and one stood up in the middle of the canoe and handed me a note, which was from Henry Josselyn directing me how to proceed. The boss boy, Ati, was to conduct me to him, and he added I could trust Ati implicitly. He cautioned me, however, to be wary as there were Japs all along the coast and that it was essential to be off the coast before daylight. My stores were quickly loaded by the natives into the canoes and then, with a brief round of farewell handshakes with the ship's officers, I lowered myself over the side and took a seat in one of the canoes beside Ati. As we pushed off, I heard the Skipper's crisp voice give directions to the engine room for slow ahead, then silently the PT boat with a gentle bow wave wash rocked us farewell as it disappeared into the black night.

We could have been anywhere in the middle of the sea as far as I was concerned, for we were out of sight of land, so I left my destiny entirely to the natives.

For an hour and a half the boys paddled unceasingly, and to make matters worse the threatening sky disgorged great quantities of its moisture, making it necessary for me to become the canoe's bailer. During the whole of the canoe trip I did not see land, nor did I see the other canoe after we left the PT boat, but the end came suddenly. We ran on to sand with a bump, and when I asked Ati if we had struck a sand bank, he replied, "This one is the beach, master".

I was greatly surprised to find we were actually on land and that palms and jungle began to emerge from the darkness. Ati conducted me to two small native huts. Quickly a small fire was kindled inside while the boys carried the cargo up and placed it inside. When all was completed, the canoes were carried into the jungle and hidden. Ati told me that I might sleep for two hours and then we would start on our walk up to Henry's observation post - he assured me that it would be quite alright to sleep as there would be an armed guard on duty all night. I rolled out my Marine poncho and slept until awakened by Ati a couple of hours later. All the boys were astir and before long we had all the cargo out of the hut and carried back into the jungle and safely hidden in a gully. To avoid making tell-tale tracks, we walked up stream in the water of the bed of the creek for some distance and then over rocks to the location of the store.

About half a dozen boys then accompanied me on my trip to report to Henry. He was due for leave and, as I was his replacement, he was looking forward to my arrival with double interest.

By daylight we had left the coastal area and were well up in the hills. The going was exceedingly rough and steep, because in order to cover up our tracks we had to keep to the stream, walking in the running water. Before we left the camp site of the night before I instructed ATi to detail two boys to remain behind in the native hut until daylight so that they could carefully obliterate any of my booted footpaths that might have remained from the night landing on the beach.

As we penetrated deeper into the jungle the grade grew even steeper. The boys who were carrying my personal gear were making heavy weather and personally I felt the benefit of a ten days' hardening course I had done at the AIB Camp out of Brisbane. Knowing what jungle trails are like, I made the most of the course because I maintained that the better my physical condition and ability to move fast, the greater would be my chances of shaking off Japanese pursuers, should the location of my camp ever become known to them.

As we climbed, Ati told me that we would first reach Deneo, another observation post, which was manned by natives who were in communication with Henry at Topolando by walkie-talkie radio telephone.

In due course we arrived on top of a densely wooded spur, and here was a native house, old and dilapidated, which appeared to be used only by travellers passing across the island. Ati asked me to wait there a little while, then carefully picking his steps from rock to rock, he disappeared into what appeared to be virgin jungle. Very soon he returned in the same manner, accompanied by another native who was carrying a walkie-talkie on his back. As I looked up, this native's beautiful, even, white teeth flashed as his face portrayed a beaming smile of welcome. I was about to speak to him when it dawned upon me that this was Esau, one of the patrol leaders of 1st Tulagi Boy Scouts, whom I had trained back in 1940, and here he was now, one of the key men in this native espionage ring which had been developed in this island by Henry in the four months he had been there. The amount of valuable intelligence that was coming from this lonely Coast-watching Post was simply amazing, in fact, phenomenal. It was hardly credible that one man through his vigilance and prompt action in reliably reporting useful information would bring about such terrific destruction to the enemy forces, land, sea, and air. The reputation of NRY, that being the call sign of the post, was very high at Allied HQ, and I felt it a great honour to be going there to take over command of the post to allow Henry to proceed on leave, of which he was most deserving. Coastwatching was usually crammed full of thrilling experiences and one did not have time to be lonely; but the constant state of tension in which one lives, being mostly the only white man on an island occupied by thousands of Japanese soldiers, will in time take severe toll of a man's health if he is left too long in one spot and not given a break in the

bright lights every now and then.

CHAPTER 7

Esau called NRY and spoke to Henry from Deneo, just at one would make a call on a city 'phone. Esau then led me to his camp which was well concealed and here, too, he had a lookout up in a big tree known as The Big Tree - it was a Banyan tree which went up easily 50 to 60 feet before the solid trunk started, then a further 30 feet before the branches, in which a platform was concealed. To reach the platform one climbed up a bush ladder - twisting about in the vine-like base, then vertically up the solid trunk. The platform was like the bridge of a ship, extending across the base of the leafy bowl. From here one could see the coast and the sea beyond for many miles. There was a constant watch on duty day and night, and any movement of Jap sea or air forces was radiophoned to NRY immediately.

Two hours after leaving Deneo, I walked in on Henry at Topolando after traversing some of the roughest country on the island. At Topolando the set-up was much the same, with a lookout in a tree on the crest of the hill from where it was possible to watch the coast to the northern most extremity of the island. The view from the Big Tree and here overlapped by about one bay, thus with the two posts being manned a very thorough watch was kept upon Jap shipping in this region.

The camp site was hilly, very hilly in fact. When I asked if they had a water supply, Henry, who was up to his eyes with messages at the time, indicated that there was a good shower under a waterfall down the path a bit. "Red" or Corporal Cunningham, of US Army, who was the wireless operator, added reassuringly, "Say, it's a great little shower."

I did not wait for further introductions but just stripped off all but my boots and with soap and towel went off for the cool refreshment of a cold shower. The path dropped away steeply and, when I say dropped away, I certainly meant it, but the shower was a delight. A bamboo pipe brought the water from the face of the rock out over a wooden platform, and there it ran into a tin can which was the improvised shower rose. The pressure was good and the water really cold, a most enjoyable combination. However, as this is the trouble with most natural showers in these islands, you get so hot climbing back up.

By the time I got back I was ready for another shower, and I was so winded that I could not speak for a while. Bulu, the native cook, had anticipated my condition and was just setting out the table for a cup of tea, and in a few minutes he returned with a plate of scones and much hot tea.

Henry, Red and I sat down and chatted as we ate. Henry was a rare sight, clad in long pants and a singlet, his beady little eyes sparkling through an

over-growth of ginger whiskers which were topped by a battered RAN cap worn at a rakish angle, from the back of which rather long fairish hair protruded. Henry's four months on Vella were leaving their mark in the strained look on his face, but his sense of humour was still as lively as ever. There was one other member of the party, Tom Mungovern, writer, RANVR. Tom was sick and confined to his bed, so as soon as tea was over, Henry took me in and introduced me. Tom certainly was sick; his temperature was 104 degrees and he had all the pains and aches of malaria. I asked Henry what was being done for Tom and he said he had quinine and aspro etc, so I made him my first care and set to, to do a bit of nursing.

Bulu provided an enamel basin and some warm water, then I proceeded to give Tom a sponge bath, the first wash he had had for days, and probably enjoyed all the more on that account. That evening his fever broke and perspiration soaked his blankets and canvas stretcher - he must have lost pints of perspiration. Having had the cursed disease myself, I knew the treatment well. As soon as Tom cooled off, we transferred him into another bunk. There seemed to be nothing lacking about this little camp in the way of equipment, most of had been supplied by the Japs, even to beautiful white blankets (best Australian Merino wool, you may be sure).

Next morning Tom's fever had gone, but it had left him very weak, for he had been over a week in bed. We kept the food up to him, and it was not long before he was back to his job of coding.

There were only two paths which led to Topolando and these were extremely steep, heart-breakingly so. The northern path led to one of the main jungle tracks across the island, and the southern track led back to Deneo. Henry in his wisdom had established small dumps of food, and fuel for the battery charger, at a number of places throughout the island in case the Japs should discover us and it be necessary to beat a hasty retreat. Since the Japs were in occupation of the entire island, it became a necessity to remain hidden deep in the jungle. We had sixteen native scouts who had enlisted in the British Solomon Island Protectorate Defence Force, and whom ultimately we were able to arm as we captured or stole more Japanese equipment. These sixteen boys had rifles, bayonets, belts and ammunition and we supplied them with a khaki and blue lava lava. They were paid by BSIP Govt at the rate of one pound per month. These were special scouts whom we trained for the particular work we were doing and for our own protection, if need be. Besides these the whole of the native population of Vella and nearby islands were loyal to our cause and, although they knew of our presence on the island, they never betrayed. Henry and his original companion, John H Keenan, RANVR, had landed on Vella before the American advance was beyond Guadalcanal, and to them goes the honour of building up the organisation of NRY, which later I was able to exploit to the full. Intelligence from NRY ultimately was responsible for the complete overthrow of the Japanese on this island; an island which provided an advanced base and airfield for sea and air forces as they pushed the Japs back further and further towards Tokyo.

Every village on Vella and Ganongga Islands had a number of sentries who kept guard on all the approaches to their village. Whenever Japs were noted approaching a village, a native messenger would race ahead unobserved, and all the Marys and piccaninnies would be hurried to a place of safety before the Japs came near. This system, maintained by the men of the village, helped the village folk and, by arrangement, a messenger was also despatched to the nearest of my intelligence centres reporting the facts. From here reliable mission-educated natives would write a note to me in the native language, giving details and this would be sent immediately by native runner to my location. As soon as it arrived, Ati, the native who met me on my arrival, would translate the message and then, if it was of sufficient value (and it mostly was), I would make a radio message of it to Allied Intelligence Bureau HQ, where it would be passed immediately to the forces most concerned. By having our own wireless set-up, Allied Intelligence Bureau was able to receive most valuable information while it was still "hot". The fighting services live on "hot intelligence" - it is of little use telling the Commander of a Naval task force that there was a heavily laden troopship in a certain position a week ago - a week ago! Why, the Air Force may possibly have sunk it by then. Yet to tell the Commander of a Naval task force of a troopship in his area at such and such a position at a time and date, which proves that the intelligence is only ten or fifteen minutes old, then that is hot intelligence, and that is what will make even an Admiral smile with delight.

Sometimes the native reports coming in would call for an investigation, then two of my trained scouts would be sent to the area to make observations. Sometimes it would be necessary for them to hide their arms and proceed as ordinary village natives. They always carried their make-up in their little bag for this purpose - a dirty and worn old lava lava. Sometimes they would get right into a Jap camp - they nearly always seemed to get into the Jap ration store, where, I don't doubt the officer-in-charge would later discover he was down a bag of rice.

On one such occasion as this, two scouts were detailed to investigate a report of a party of Japs who seemed to be doing a cross-country hike. The two boys trailed the party all one day unobserved and, in the evening when they camped, the scouts considered this a good opportunity to find out what was in some of the Japanese packs which were being carried. Stealthily they edged in while the Japs squatted around the common pot containing their evening meal, and silently the two boys decided which pack was worthy of investigation. While Ete kept watch, Ereko began the search. he had just succeed in unfastening the buckles of a pack when one of the Japs stood up and walked in his direction. Ete made a loud hiss to warn Ereko, but he was not quick enough. The Jap yelled and the whole group was aroused. Ete managed to escape, but half a dozen Japs were on top of Ereko. Ete returned as fast as he could to the nearest village, and word was sent on to me announcing the fate of EReko. This was unfortunate, particularly as everything indicated that these were only a party of Japs moving from one garrison to another location, but such are the risks a spy will take, and occasionally one has to pay the penalty. But not so Ereko. He got himself

into trouble, and he got himself out. Two days later he returned to my camp, not much behind a special messenger who had been despatched to inform me he had escaped.

When Ereko was caught, the Japs tied his hands and feet then tied him to a tree all night. Next morning a Japanese Officer asked him if he knew the way to Bangaranga Village on the north-west corner of Vella Lavella. He pretended not to understand and, after an hour or so, the brought water and biscuits and told him that he might have them if he consented to guide them to this village, which was about thirty miles away as the crow flies. He told me he was "hungry too much" but to the Japs he maintained he did not know the trail. There are two ways to go from where this Jap party had camped. One around the coast which is longer but easier walking, the other goes through the jungle over hills that are as steep as any I have ever been over. By evening Ereko was suffering acutely from thirst and, when the Japanese Commander again brought water and biscuits it was too much for Ereko, who said he would guide them to their destination.

Looking up into my face with a very guilty look, Ereko said, "Oh master, belly belong me him 'e cry out - me hungry too much". All the next day he led the Commander, being tied with his hands behind to a long rope, one end of which was fastened to the Japanese Commander's wrist. They gave him two drinks of water and two hard biscuits for his day's ration, but by afternoon, walking as he had all day, he was feeling the need of food. Ereko told me, "Master, me hungry too much, me pray along God belong me. Oh, me hungry too much, belly belong me he cry out!"

Shortly afterwards there occurred one of those tropical downpours which started with suddenness and without any warning that the Japs were caught without their coats. The Jap Commander hastily pulled out his coat and tried to put it on but, having the rope tied around his wrist he could not get it on, so in desperation he slipped the rope off his arm. Ereko was watching and he knew this was his chance quick as a flash he dived into the jungle, his rope trailing behind him. The Jap Commander shouted orders and all set out after the boy, but what chance had they? Ereko ran fast, but only a short way, and then lay down pulling leaves over himself. The Japs were hard on his heels and passed right by the spot where he lay. Knowing they were tired and would soon give up, he got up and doubled back in the opposite direction. Needle pointed lawyer-cane tore at him as he ran but nothing could stop him, and his hands were still tied behind his back. Something clawed at his lava lava, he felt it slip from around him, but on he went naked, his black body glistening as he penetrated deeper into the sanctuary of the jungle. Shortly afterwards he stopped only long enough to free his hands, then on again without stopping, fear supplying energy, until finally exhausted and unable to speak he halted in his own village. It was some time before he could tell his story. Only resting one day, he then came on to me to report and to assure me that he told the Japs nothing, and when I asked him which path he led the Japs along, he looked up with a quick smile and said, "Me no go along sand beach, master, me go along mountain and altogether Japan man he puff puff

too much!" The intonation of the boy's voice as he told me the latter showed how he enjoyed the Japs' fatigue.

CHAPTER 8

I have often heard it said that the Solomon Islander has no sense of humour but, believe me, it was the lively sense of humour of my native companions that made bearable those long months of isolation while coastwatching in enemy territory. Few members of the fighting forces experienced isolation in quite the same degree as did the coastwatchers dotted throughout the South West Pacific. Inwards mail was a rarity, possibly once in three months when fresh stores arrived, dropped by parachute from an aircraft; but outward mails, well there were none, except occasionally when either a submarine or a Catalina flying boat called on us as a special mission to pick up hot intelligence in the form of Japanese documents which we were sometimes able to acquire. During my whole six months on Vella I did not receive a single letter, yet this was one of the most interesting periods of the whole of my service.

Topolando consisted of a boy's house at the top of a very steep climb, then at a more gentle grade the track climbed to the very crest of the hill where stood our house, built in the native fashion with a bettlenut floor and closed on three sides only. It was fairly weatherproof, being sheltered from the wind by the dense jungle, which we dared not cut away for fear of making our location visible from the air, because Jap planes in the early days were nearly always overhead. Just near our house there was a large tree growing on the brink of a precipice.

A telephone connected the lookout to the house and, as we kept a continuous watch on duty at the lookout, the eyes of NRY never closed on this section we were watching. If anything was observed from the lookout it was immediately reported over the 'phone when appropriate action would be taken. Across a small footbridge, which spanned a sort of moat, one reached the kitchen and store, both native huts which occupied a very small knoll to themselves. The ground fell away suddenly on the far side for a drop of about twenty feet. At the foot of this drop we had a small lean-to shelter over the battery charger and fuel supply. With the battery charger in this natural cutting it was not necessary to silence the exhaust, as I had to do in other places.

Under a tree just outside our house, the natives built a table with seats attached, and here we worked except when the inclemency of the weather drove us in. It was a busy spot with natives coming and going, messengers from remote villages, and always some of our armed scouts who acted as interpreters. It was always necessary to have at least ten natives around the camp, for this was the minimum number of carriers to transport our wireless gear, should we have to make a hurried departure at short notice. Living in this state of tension necessitates our being constantly packed up. The

wireless batteries were fitted with loops so that they could be carried on a pole; the battery charger had a box which fitted over it and screwed down with a couple of thumb screws. This was our heaviest unit and was really a two-man load when carried on a pole, but we had one boy, Billy, who made this his special job, and whenever we were called upon to up camp and away, Billy always carried the battery charger on his shoulder, and with it he could make better time over difficult country than most of the scouts carrying normal loads. Most of our kit was packed into tins - they were really biscuit tins slightly larger than a kerosene tin; these also acted as chairs when in camp. The beauty of the tins was that they were waterproof when exposed to the tropical downpours which were always a feature of every move.

It took a little time for Henry to hand over command to me. Of course, the native headmen who had for so many months been loyal to Henry had to be informed that Sugu was now about to return to Australia and that another "No 1 Master, name belong him Keseko" was about to take over command.

I found in the course of time that I needed no introduction on Vella Lavella, for my name was familiar to all natives there. The voice of Esau had apparently announced me in very favourable terms, for I was accepted by all Vella as their leader. Of all these Pacific Islands where coastwatchers were stationed, it became the accepted thing both with the civil administration, if any, and the native headmen that the coastwatcher was in supreme command. This was naturally of first importance to our organisation, for without the voice of authority it would be very difficult to carry out such a perilous task. In order that such authority be not abused, the coastwatchers were picked men, and it did not matter to which service, Navy, Army or Air Force they belonged, all were welded into Allied Intelligence Bureau for the purpose of wresting from the Japs their closely guarded secrets.

Our troop movements were causing increasing movements amongst the Jap forces, which in turn kept me ever on the move keeping out of their way.

Tom had made a complete recovery from his fever and, in order to get him into some sort of trim for the track, I suggested that he should take one of the scouts with him and go for a morning's hike, the purpose of which being none other than to harden him up in preparation for any emergency march should we suddenly have to break camp and get away. Tom set out along the inland trail and was expected to be away for not more than a couple of hours. Anywhere you walked from Topolando meant steep descent and equally steep ascent, so I figured Tom would have had all he wanted by two hours.

Native voices, one of which I recognised as Ati's, talking rather excitedly, soon told me that something unusual had happened. Sure enough, scarcely had I made this deduction than Ati informed me a runner had just arrived with information that a large party of 300 Japs had suddenly appeared as if from nowhere and were now only twenty minutes walk away. My first thought was for Tom, who had set out along the path by which the Japs were approaching. The native who brought the message had met Tom and had told the boy with

him of the danger, and they had turned about and were returning as fast as they could travel. Tom was not far behind the messenger however, he had made the ascent in record time. He certainly looked all out, so I made him rest whilst all hands turned to and prepared for the trail. Before taking the aerial down, I sent HQ a signal telling them we were moving in a hurry but would call later. There was no need to go into great detail; they knew the meaning of that terse message and all it implied. Since then I have witnessed the effect of similar messages from field parties on our Chief at HQ - you would have thought the Japs were on the old boy's tail, so uneasy would he be until an Okay message came from the party. He looked upon the Coastwatchers as his family.

Although we were ever ready to move, there was always a lot to be done in those final few minutes which counted so much. Topolando had been our HQ for so long that we had almost thought it safe; as a consequence, the terrific amount of junk about the place, all such tell-tale junk, too, for Japs to find. There were captured Jap machine guns, rifles and bayonets galore, cases of Jap ammunition and grenades, all booty taken from Jap dumps and straffed barges in our sector by my scouts in the course of their work. All this, which was too heavy to carry with us, had to be buried together with surplus stores which I had carelessly allowed to accumulate at this one spot. Corporal Tommy was put in charge of the carriers and ten of them got under way with the wireless gear, while Red supervised a gang of natives who carefully buried the surplus stores and tell-tale souvenirs. I personally disposed of our spare wireless set. This we wrapped in canvas and buried in holes which had been prepared some time before. While we worked I sent Bulu, our cook boy, to gather plenty of dead leaves and ferns, etc from the other side of the track, and on his return we spread these over the top where the gear was buried, making it appear as though the earth had never been disturbed. Natives are very quick at detecting footprints or any derangement of the undergrowth, and they excel in the art of camouflage. Minutes were fleeting, and every minute meant the Japs were so much nearer.

I got Tom under way, carrying just his own kit and tommy gun. Red went with him, loaded more like a pack horse; they had been instructed to keep going as fast as possible until they had crossed the stream which marked the boundary of the safer area. With the Japs approaching from the point, we had only one line of escape, and until we crossed that stream ahead we were in great danger of being trapped.

Saturated with perspiration from the digging operations, I then found I had more than a load to carry in what I had left for myself. I had a water bottle and pistol and knife on my belt, arm pack on my back, two pouches of tommy gun ammunition slung around my neck, a haversack full of trade tobacco over my shoulder, a tommy gun and a brief case containing my maps etc, in the one hand and two grenades in my pocket, beside my codes, which were printed on very thin rice paper and wrapped in thin rubber to protect them from getting wet.

These codes were always on my person from the day I took over from Henry, and being on thin paper, the drill was to eat them should one be captured by the Japs. I was last to leave Topolando and, after starting all the carriers on the road, I looked around the area to make sure no papers had been left visible. I crossed the little bridge to the kitchen and here found Bulu labouring beneath such a conglomeration of tins of food, pots and pans etc, that he looked like a tinker's cart. One thing I do remember about him was the care he was taking of a silver coffee pot - yes a real silver coffee pot - but the story of the coffee pot I must tell later, for just now the Japs are expected at any moment. Goodbye, Topolando!

Bulu and I set off as fast as we could to catch up with the main party. Bulu, although loaded like a camel, was as sure footed as a mountain goat. I am afraid I slid more than one embankment on the seat of my pants. There had been a heavy shower of rain and the track was very slippery; however, knowledge of what was behind goaded us on, and it was with a certain amount of relief that we caught up with the stragglers of the main party.

A little further on we found Tom and Red slipping and sliding in the general direction of our destination. I was sorry for Tom, who had had quite enough exertion in his morning walk for one recuperating from fever. I walked along with them until finally Tom suggested that I go on and he and Red would take it easier. They were over the worst of it then, so Bulu and I pushed ahead, and as soon as we reached the stream I asked two of the carriers to hide their packs on the far side of the river, and then go back to Red and Tom and carry their packs for them. It was hard luck for the two native boys, but I wanted to have the whole party over the river with the minimum of delay. I then pushed on and arrived at Deneo, our new camp site, at just about the same time as the wireless, so without waiting to cool off, we put up the aerial and rigged the transmitter. soon I put a call through to HQ, giving them my new location and telling them that my party was safe.

When night fell with no sign of the Japs, we hoped they had turned back, but we could not take any chances. Sentries were posted all the way back along the track as a precaution, then next morning a couple of trained scouts made a reconnaissance of Topolando, and we learned the Jap party had halted and spent the night at the foot of the final knoll upon which our Topolando camp was situated. These natives learned from the tracks that not one had gone up the hill - knowing how the Japs must have felt, I do not wonder, for it was some climb.

Further reconnaissance revealed that this party of Japs had apparently come across country following a compass course, hacking their way through virgin jungle. Their course happened to coincide with the stretch of path leading into Topolando, and that is how they came to appear suddenly near our camp. After bivouacking for the night they continued to cut their way through the jungle from a point where our track deviated from their course.

Some time later I followed along a considerable length of this track and was

amazed to see where they had really gone. In some parts they most surely had to use ropes to climb the precipitous rock faces over which their compass led them. The path itself was about six feet wide and as straight as a surveyor's traverse line.

CHAPTER 9

Bulu, complete with pots and pans, arrived at Deneo safely and was soon busy in his new kitchen putting the coffee pot to good use. Bulu loved that coffee pot, although on one occasion it cost him chastisement. The silver coffee service most certainly was a luxury, situated where we were, but it had a history. One day from Topolando lookout came the 'phone message; "Hello! Wardroom? Bridge talking! Me look in one fella ship close up along shore, him he no go quick time, him he stop. Me tink maybe him be fast along reef."

I replied, "All right, me come and look 'im."

Sure enough, there it was, a rare sight, for it was assuredly a Jap ship of about 1,000 tons. I took my map and carefully pinpointed its position and sent a message to HQ, repeating it to our station at Munda, New Georgia, where there were American Marine Air Force Squadrons. We did not have long to wait, for the drone of the approaching aircraft told us it was time to take a grandstand position and witness the exit of one Jap ship. It was pretty to watch the way those Marines handled that job. As soon as the ship was hit she began to settle on the reef and the Jap crew took to the boats only to be blown sky high by the next bomb which seemed to burst right amongst them. It was thrilling to us, and the boys began to discuss the possibility of going out to the wreck to see whether there might be something of value on board. The looting of bombed barges, etc actually kept my little bank in arms, ammunition and food, and the prospects of a good haul from this ship were very bright as she settled on the reef and water extinguished the fire. The silver coffee service was once the property of the late Skipper, but now we used it to great advantage as we also did the ship's cutlery.

Bulu erred on one occasion and never quite lived it down. He was only fifteen years of age, but a cheery little soul and an excellent cook in a primitive way. The coffee pot had been allowed to become very tarnished and Henry, who was then with us, told Bulu that that would never do, and that he had better clean it before the next meal. He did! Poor Bulu, in his enthusiasm to please, he took a handful of sand and made a proper job of it. When I saw it I nearly died, trying to contain my mirth, but Henry was genuinely annoyed. The scratches were too deep to do anything about them, so why be cross with the lad who had done his best? As a punishment, Henry sent Bulu down to the coast to gather some limes, but he did the distance there and back in record time to prove how sorry he really was.

After we had settled in at Deno, I sent Esau and his mate to stay at Topolando

and to report by walkie talkie any activity that might be going on up there. The walkie talkie was a very compact little radio telephone, not weighing more than six or seven pounds, which fitted into a small pack worn on the back. The aerial, a telescopic type, was rather like a car aerial, and this could be worn up, provided trees did not obstruct it. Of course, in our job it was impossible to go along with the aerial up, so whenever working the set, we placed on the ground where the aerial could be extended without fouling branches of overhanging jungle vegetation. It was of comparatively short range, ten to twelve miles, but was so simple to operate that it was ideal for the native Scouts to use. I had two of these sets, one which I kept at my end, and the other used as Esau was doing. Messages over the walkie talkie were always sent in plain language, but we devised our own method of jumbling it to make it hard for the Japs to read. The two boys operating at either end of this set-up usually spoke two native tongues, one would give his information in Rovania and the other would reply in Billowan. Thus, even if the Japs got on to our frequency, they would have to know these two different native languages to be able to follow the talk. I used to alter the combination frequently just to make it all the harder for the Japs. There was no doubt they knew of my presence and that from time to time they used to pinpoint our location on the map by getting a direction on our transmitter while we were sending our messages. Two or more of their sets in different locations listening at the same time would each get a different bearing on our transmitter, thus by plotting these bearings on a map it would be possible to find the spot common to all.

Whenever three runners all brought in messages that Japs were approaching about the same time from three different directions, it was always a good indication that the Japs had been listening to us and were coming to look us up. If I considered it warranted such action, we would beat a retreat while the going was good and pay a visit to one of the other camp sites. The Japs in these islands did not trust the jungle and soon gave up a search if it led them too far inland, but we could not afford to take risks, and so often moved camp needlessly.

To the natives of Valla Lavella I owe more than I shall ever be able to repay for their devotion and wholehearted loyalty to our cause. Of the paramount Chief of Vella Lavella, Bamboo, I would like to say that I have never met a finer gentleman. He was a most outstanding native, devoted to the welfare of his people, intelligent and one hundred percent co-operative. In the absence of the Government after the evacuation from the Solomon Islands, Bamboo maintained law and order amongst his people with the efficiency of a judge. All court proceedings were recorded and judgements noted, just as though there was a Government still in Tulagi holding him responsible for the island. The whole people of Vella reflected Bamboo's wise leadership. On one occasion before my coming to Vella Lavella, Henry had a heart-to-heart talk with Bamboo on the War in general, and Henry had shown him some pictures illustrating the devastation of German bombing raids on London. Henry, who was an Englishman, probably told him, with a great deal of feeling, how the people of London were digging in, making air raid shelters and slit trenches all

over the city so that people could take shelter during raids. Bamboo took it all in and, when he went back to his village, he surveyed his domain and at once called together the men and explained his plan. Boro was a particularly exposed village, being situated on a bald spur of a ridge overlooking the coast. From the air it was quite a landmark, and Bamboo decided that as soon as the advance of the Jap was checked, all the masses of Japanese planes which used to fly over Vella on their way to bomb Munda and Guadalcanal would probably drop their bombs on Vella, so to be ready for such an emergency he formed an Emergency Service of his own. These men set to and dug a slit trench for every house in the village. The earth which had been disturbed in the process was very carefully camouflaged and, by the time I visited the village a few months later, I was amazed to find such ingenuity displayed in the matter of draining the trenches. Where a trench could not be drained, it was roofed and a drain made around it to prevent water running off the roof into it. Believe me, the poorest of these trenches would have put many an Australian's backyard shelter to shame, though I will concede these natives know more of the meaning of bomb raids than folk in the Australian mainland did.

Our fare on Vella Lavella was mostly confined to a tinned diet. The Japs had stripped all the old native gardens of fruit and vegetables, and their new gardens had not started to produce as yet. Tinned rations consisted of M & V (meat and vegetables) Vienna sausages occasionally, some Jap salmon, which was really excellent, when we were able to make a successful raid on a Jap food dump - another item, of course, which was always received on such escapades was Jap rice for feeding the natives I had attached to me. you may depend there would always be a good supply of rice, for rice was the natives' staple diet. One of my luxury lines was tinned butter, or I should give it its correct nomenclature out of the courtesy to real butter. It was a US Army ration "Tropical Spread". It looked rather like a cross between lemon butter and axle grease, with a bigger strain of axle grease. It tasted like cosmoline, the thick grease guns are packed in, and it certainly would not melt in the tropics, in fact it would not melt in your mouth and the more you chewed the more it seemed to adhere to teeth and tongue. It was surprising how a tin of that stuff lasted and, if it had not been for a brain wave of my native cook who used it for frying, I am afraid I should never have got through a single tin. My food store was spread over several small dumps throughout the island, usually in most inaccessible spots from the enemy's point of view, yet, in such a location to enable me to have a supply of food should the Japs jump my camp site, causing me to leave hurriedly, leaving everything behind. Each food dump was housed in a small native hut which contained a drum of drinking water, and one of petrol for the battery charging engine without which my wireless would have been out of commission in two days.

Arriving at one of these emergency camps hurriedly one day, I opened a case of meat for the preparation of a meal and discovered that instead of containing as was usual an assortment, the only line was asparagus. Yes, I can hear you say "what a pleasant surprise!" Well, yes, it was for the first meal - I thoroughly enjoyed it but after I had had three meals of asparagus without

any bread, just hard biscuits and tropical spread for butter, I had begun to curse the man who had packed that case! Asparagus - asparagus - asparagus for breakfast, dinner and tea, and the Japs hemming me in to such an extent that I could not even send a native out to get something from one of the other stores. I longed for some bully beef, the much maligned bully beef, but, when you are forced to exist on a single item diet for a period, I think you grow less tired of bully beef in the long run than you do of delicacies such as asparagus.

After this episode I paid a personal visit to each of my food stores and made sure of a more equitable distribution of my rations. There was plenty of tinned food on the island and after a redistribution I found I lived very well. The only thing I lacked was bread, so I sought to overcome this defect by making an oven, for we had any amount of flour. The incident which awakened the bread craze in me was the arrival of Silas, headman of Parramatta Village, who presented me with a gift, and when I opened it I found a small loaf of fresh white bread - I could not believe my eyes, it seemed a miracle to me, but, on interrogation, Silas told me he had got the flour from the Jap ship which had been bombed and abandoned and that his wife, who used to cook for a plantation family before the War, had made coconut yeast with which she produced the bread.

Deneo seemed as though it was going to be my permanent headquarters, for Allied forces had landed on the southern tip of Vella and were pushing the Japs back into the northernmost districts. This camp was well placed for the last phase of operations against the Japs. Henry had used it as his headquarters earlier in the campaign, and that accounted for the native house which was partly roofed with galvanised iron to form a water catchment draining into a water tank - that tank was a present from the Japs. Just when this camp was being constructed, a big Japanese aerial convoy passed overhead and just then one of the fighter planes jettisoned his belly tank which came crashing down not thirty yards from the new house. It struck the ground end first and, although it flattened the streamlined rounded end it did not fracture the metal. It could not have been better, for with the aid of Teta nut it was soon fitted with a short length of pipe, to which a length of Jap hose pipe was attached (the hose having been thieved by my gang from a Jap chemical warfare dump). The tank was placed on a sloping bed so that the outlet hose was in the lowest part and the other end of the hose was fitted with a hook so that it could be hooked up higher than the water level in the tank: an improvised tap, to be sure, but life here was a series of improvisations. The Teta nut is the islanders' cement, used for all manner of purposes where a watertight joint is necessary. Like a cork cricket ball in shape and texture, the nut when split open yields a greyish substance very similar in appearance to sheep's brains. This, when pulverised, forms a putty which is easy to apply and which sets like cement overnight. The natives use Teta for caulking their canoes and in them it lasts for years.

Fortunately, it rained practically every day at Deneo, ensuring a plentiful supply of drinking water. The nearest spring was quite a distance from the camp, and once a day was exercise enough to visit it; the climb back was

almost as steep as Topolando, so it was little use taking a clean change down to put on after a shower because the clean change would be wringing wet with perspiration by the time you reached camp again. With no women to dictate man's attire, this was easily overcome and clad simply in a toothbrush and a cake of soap, one could make good time and arrive back in camp just nicely dried off and feeling the benefit of a cold shower.

CHAPTER 10

The New Zealand Arm troops had taken over Vella Lavella as a NZ Command and there was much activity along the coast as detachments were put in at all strategic points. Jap parties, too, were making their way as best they could to the northwest corner of the island.

One of the NZ Army units took up quarters at Wataro Plantation near Kila Kila, the spot where I first landed on the morning of my arrival at Vella and, as this was only half a day's walk from Deno, our life of isolation was rapidly changing to one of much company. Why, the New Zealanders even had a picture show and while they were there a concert party touring the forward areas dropped in.

Brigadier Potter, at NZ HQ, on seeing my signal of our hasty evacuation of Topolando, became very concerned for our safety and instructed Colonel Landwell at Wataro to provide a party of sufficient strength to guard us against surprise by any more cross country Japs. It was a fine gesture on the part of the New Zealanders, but really quite unnecessary, for we were just on the point of being recalled from Vella. The place for Allied Intelligence Bureau field parties was behind Jap lines, not behind our own, and now that the final round up of Japs was taking place our job was done and we were keenly awaiting a new assignment. However, I accepted the offer and a party of 15 soldiers, in the charge of a Corporal, came up to Deneo. We made the most of the company and thoroughly enjoyed having them there. They rostered themselves to form a party of three to go to Topolando for three days each. The two native scouts, whom I had left at Topolando, on hearing that a bodyguard of 15 soldiers had arrived for Tom, Red and me at Deneo, began to think they were in too dangerous a position altogether and wanted to return to Deneo, so the only way I could pacify them was to send them a bodyguard too.

We had plenty of stores to feed our visitors, with the exception of biscuits, so I suggested we make an oven out of an oil drum. The lads soon had an efficient oven built to Bulu's delight. We had plenty of flour and very soon the smell of freshly baked scones made a most appetising reminder that it was time for tea. Not being satisfied with scones, Bulu soon was busy on a yeast bottle and in a few days time was turning out bread that would do any baker credit.

The NZ Forces on the coast, working on intelligence supplied by my scouts, were rapidly accounting for the remaining Japs, and before many days I was

able to advise HQ that all Japs on Vella Lavella had been accounted for. Such a statement, no matter how true, was too much for NZ HQ to accept, for it was evident they did not know the efficient set-up of Allied Intelligence Bureau on the island. The bodyguard incident was proof of a great lack of understanding on the part of the Commander, but we did not worry, for we began preparing for the closing-down of the post, which had been in operation on the island just twelve months.

The day Henry had arrived by submarine, our nearest forces were at least 400 miles south and he had but one companion; today the Allies occupied the island and all the Japs had been taken care of; so to celebrate we had a working bee and the natives cleared much of the jungle from around our quarters and let in the sun for the first time. They cleared quite an area around their own quarters and erected a flagpole on which to fly a huge Union Jack we had taken out of the Jap barge we had reported and the Air Force had shot up. Besides the flag, a bugle had been discovered by Markruso, an ex-bugler of Tulagi Constabulary. Until now he had not been permitted to blow it because of fear of attracting the Japs to our position, but now, with all the Japs behind wire, we could celebrate, therefore Markruso commenced practising his calls for the big ceremony of raising the flag, or as it is termed in Pidgin English, "Up 'im flag." Corporal Tommy had his scouts, fifteen of them, all busy shining up their rifles and bayonets; lava lavas were washed and webbing equipment cleaned with a local clay which made a good substitute for white cleaner. When all was ready, the flag of the British Empire was run up the pole with all the dignity imaginable, while Markruso blew his bugle with unfaltering notes, and the parade stood at "present arms". This really marked the successful conclusion of twelve months hard toil and the end of NRY as a forward field party.

We remained at Deneo for a fortnight longer, awaiting marching orders. However, we spent the time pleasantly, relaxing after the strain of the past few months. Tom, REd and I each had a day off in turn to do whatever we each liked - a whole day with no official duty to perform, free of the constant thought of bumping into Japs - it was really glorious! We had lots of callers too, for the NZ troops at Wataro were getting more time off, and they used to like to hike up to Deneo if for no other purpose than to climb our big tree, in which we had the lookout. This huge Banyan tree was fast becoming famous and hardly a day passed without someone coming up to see it. It was surprising, however, how many who were curious, could not stomach the height when it came to climbing up to the lookout.

I remember on day when Jap aeroplanes coming down from Booka encountered American fighters just overhead and there ensued a ding dong fight. We could hear the machine-guns through the roar of the diving aircraft, but we were not able to see a thing, so dense was the jungle about our camp. Not being able to stand it any longer without seeing what was happening, I went up the big tree only to find I was no better off than on the ground. The aircraft were still at it, so I decided to climb and kept climbing until I could see the fight. Up, up, up, I went, not daring to look down; the limb I was on

became very slender and was swaying with my extra weight, and at last I was able to poke my head through the leaves. Just at the moment I broke through, a Jap fighter who had broken off his engagement whizzed directly over the top of the tree, so close that the wheels nearly clipped my ear and the wind from his slip stream made my perilous perch rock dangerously. I had never been so close to a Jap plane on the wing. The big red spots under the wing seemed an immense size. Fortunately it was all over in a split second and I was given no time to think or I might have fallen out of the tree with fright. I watched him cunningly skim the tops of the trees as he flew down a gully which led to the coast. Above, our fighters were still circling, having dispersed the enemy raiders, and this lone Jap was running for it, probably to take the news back to his base of how so many more sons of Nippon were assured of a happy hereafter, having died in battle - "a glorious end". That is one point on which I find I can agree with the Japs, but to me then, the more Japs that died the more glorious the end would be.

The day before the New Zealanders commenced their major offensive on the Japs in the north-west pocket on Vella Lavella, Woku, a headman of the village which the Japs were occupying, and a seasoned old warrior too, came to me and suggested that he go walkabout - normally such a request would have been sanctioned, for Woku had been giving very loyal service, but seeing that the New Zealanders were just about ready to strike, I tried to impress upon him how much he was needed for duties as guide, but words would not alter his resolve. Understanding the ways of these natives, I realised something was troubling him, so I asked, "Which way you want to go walkabout time big fight he come up, what something the matter, Woku?" To which he did not reply immediately, but looked down at his toes, then after I had repeated the latter half of my question, he raised his old head and said, "Keseko, Mary belong me have 'im piccaninny." Well, that at least was something that would not wait even for a war, therefore I had to let him go, cautioning him, "As soon as piccaninny he come, and Mary all right, then you must come quick time along me."

"Me come, Keseko", he replied, as he grinned and shot off on the trail which led to the temporary hill village of his people.

When the Japs invaded the coast, the natives vacated the coastal villages and made temporary houses and started new gardens in the hills. Woku has been one of my best warriors, a canny bushman who could even smell Japs long before they appeared. He had been of particular value in placing our forces around the trapped Japs; he knew every feature of the jungle and, no matter whether it be night or day he could find his way with such unfailing certainty that he was uncanny. Woku was recognised by his own people as being one of the old warrior type, and was feared and greatly respected in his capacity as headman of his village, but there was one thing that troubled Woku more than anything else and that was that he had two daughters but no sons. This coming event meant more to him than anyone less acquainted with his private life might have suspected, for nothing in his demeanour suggested that he harboured a grievance with life. Although it was forbidden for security

reasons for my scouts to use their weapons except as a last resort in self-defence, Woku could not be deterred in his relentless hatred of the Japs, and I have record of quite a number who became better Japs at the hands of this old chief.

Fortunately the final push by the NZ Forces was delayed for two days and Woku arrived back just in time to continue his good work. He came straight to me to report and, as soon as I saw his face I knew the news was good, but not wishing to rob him in the least degree of the pride in breaking the news, I did not anticipate his obvious disclosure.

"Keseko, Mary belong me all right, piccaninny him he come." Then, visibly swelling with pride he added, "Master, him a boy piccaninny." Pride and joy fairly shone in Woku's ebony face, as I gave him his orders for the day's work. By the end of the week the final battle was over and Woku came to me and in a wistful way he asked, "Keseko, what name me call this piccaninny belong me?"

"Well, Woku, I think a good native name is the best name for a piccaninny, who will one day be chief of his village", I replied. But that to Woku was not a satisfactory answer so he came to me again.

"Him he got one native name, but me want one good fella name for piccaninny."

I realised he must want a Christian name, so I told him all the boys' names I could think of and still he was dissatisfied.

"No, me want one god fella name", he repeated.

I then gave him a few Biblical names; natives are usually very fond of such, but still he had not found a suitable name for the son and heir of a warrior chief. I then asked him, "You savvy No 1 man along England?"

"Me savvy! King, he No 1 man along England", he replied.

"True King he the No 1 man, but you savvy No 1 man along fight?"

To this he replied, "Me no savvy."

"Well, Woku, No 1 man along fight along England name belong him Winston, him he Winston Churchill."

"Winston", repeated Woku, then again he said it, "Winston, Winsonie", giving it the peculiar native twist to the pronunciation. Finally with a face that disclosed his success, he knowingly said, "Ah! Him a good name, Keseko."

So away he went to his village to teach the new name to his Mary.

Woku's work had been such to earn him a mention in despatches by the New Zealand Commander to NZ HQ, so he had really earned a week or two leave.

At the end of the second week he arrived back at my camp with his son and heir, having brought him down specially for me to see him. He was a chubby little chap, for all the world like an animated ebony Buddah. I asked whether he had a name yet and Woku replied, "Yes, one native missionary in village belong me he christened him two days behind."

"And what did you call him, Woku?" I asked, to which he proudly answered, "Winsone Woku."

With a double name like that, I am sure Woku will leave behind him an able young warrior to take his place as headman of the village.

One day during the last two weeks at Deneo, Tom and I left Red in charge of the radio and we set off to do a bit of prospecting. The head waters of the creek we had crossed on our way out of Topolando was our objective, and, armed with entrenching tools and a pickle bottle each (the latter being the nearest to a miner's pan we could get) we set off up stream hopping from rock to rock while the water cascaded down the steep gully. The going was hard, and we were approaching the falls at the head of the gully when suddenly I slipped on the smooth surface of a water-worn rock and fell with the pickle bottle in my hand. Of course it shattered and in doing so it gashed my fingers to the bone. Tom fortunately was wearing a pair of light cotton white underpants, which he tore into bandages and bound up my hand which was bleeding profusely. That put an end to the expedition, we had "panned" only two washes with not very encouraging results so we plodded our weary way over a track upon which an inch of rain had not made the going any easier.

It is nothing for an inch or more of rain to fall in a single deluge lasting only ten minutes on Vella. The clouds roll away just as fast as they gather, and out comes the sun again to suck up the moisture once more. During such downpours, whenever I was caught on the trail, I invariably shed my shorts - that being all I wore - and wrapped them in a large leaf and kept merrily on through it, for by doing so one would not get cold, and then when the sun came out the naked body soon dried, and a dry pair of shorts are much more comfortable to walk in than wet ones. My native scouts used to laugh at me for doing this at first and I could not get them to see the wisdom of it, but one day I happened to meet a couple of my boys coming in from a patrol just as I was going out along the trail during a shower, and here they were, each naked with their lava lavas under their arms wrapped up in their umbrella mats, and each holding a broad banana leaf, umbrella fashion, over his fuzzy wuzzy mop of hair. This was my turn to laugh, and I only wish I had had a camera to record it.

By the time Tom and I reached camp, Red had decoded a signal from AIB HQ on Guadalcanal to say that they were sending in silver coinage for the purpose of paying off our scouts - it looked as though the big day was rapidly

approaching. I had Ati busy immediately writing notes in the native language to each of the headmen in the various districts requesting them to come to Deneo to collect pay for their particular villages. There would be nothing to keep us once we had paid off the natives, as Tom and Red would be due for some leave, Red back to the States and Tom to his home in Australia. Little persuasion was needed to start them on sorting out our junk ready for disposal. It was amazing the assortment of stuff we had accumulated. Being an intelligence unit, every piece of Jap equipment was of interest to us, and it was a standing order with the natives of the island that all equipment found, captured or stolen must first be brought to me so that any useful information could be passed on without delay. Speed in getting information to HQ meant everything, even though to a casual observer it seemed like repeating the same old story time and time again; often the only difference in half a dozen makers' name plates sent in, taken from say, a particular type of instrument out of six crashed Jap aircraft, would be the different serial number. But this was significant because when all field parties in AIB organisation were all collecting similar information, it gave HQ a chance to estimate the output of various Japanese factories, this being deduced from the information contained on name plates attached to all manner of components making up an aircraft or a gun. The Jap factory manufacturing components even put their name and address on the small metal plates, little dreaming that back at Allied QH hundreds of trained personnel were recording all this vital information and compiling maps of the Japanese islands with little coloured pins marking the factor sites. The colour of the pin corresponded with a key colour chart showing the various priority of targets. The factory which was a bottle neck to Jap aircraft production was, of course, No 1 target, just as the famous ball bearing factory in Germany came in for terrific destruction by our raiders quite early in the War. The Japs never seemed to get wise to us and continued the practice right to the end. One aircraft would yield at least 200 little tell-tale aluminium nameplates.

Next day we received word that the money had been forwarded in the care of Coder Johnnie Blenkin, RANVR, a young coder who had been breaking his neck to get into a field party. When he arrived, I remember he said to me, "I will now be able to tell people I was with NRY."

NRY was our call sign and the coastwatching posts were always known to the operators by their call signs. NRY had been very busy of late and for one month we had despatched over 300 signals, which means quite a bit of work coding alone.

A party of scouts returning from a mission to Ganongga Island managed to get a lift in a barge coming up the coast delivering stores to the NZ units. The art of hitch hiking had caught on with the canoemen as well as the landlubbers. Billy, a Malaita native, one of the toughest of my band of scouts, who had many Japs to his credit, not being used to such rapid transportation, caught a chill on the way up and developed pneumonia, so I had a yarn to Tom, who offered to hike across to Parramatta Village and take some medicine to Billy. I could not send a boy because it was necessary to be more sure of the

complaint before administering sulphanilamide and it was necessary to watch the patient's reaction - not all people can take the drug. The quickest way to reach Parramatta was to walk to Kila Kila, where we had two canoes in a canoe house, and then up the coast for about three hours paddle to the mouth of a creek where the canoes had to be left, and then walk up into the hills - a tough climb for about two hours.

Tom set out early, and on reaching the canoe house found two very perturbed sentries who said that a New Zealander had come to take the canoes and, when they had protested that they were there to guard them and could not let them go without permission, he put one over them by writing a note and telling the boys that that would make it alright with me. They reluctantly had to give in whereon he took both canoes out. Tom had no alternative but walk, since he must reach Billy that afternoon, so on his way through the NZ camp he made enquiries about the canoe, but no-one knew anything. It took a lot to ruffle Tom Mungovern, but his Irish blood was surely up as he with his two native guides set off on a four hour walk.

As Tom and his little party were crossing the NZ compound, an officer, not wearing his badges of rank, called to the two guides and tried to order them to do something for him. At that Tom strode up and demanded, "What the bloody hell do you think you are doing? These natives are with me!"

The authoritative person, feeling somewhat taken aback, for he was none other than the Commanding Colonel, coughed irritably and spluttered, "My man, do you know who I am?"

Tom replied, "I don't give a damn who you are, but I wouldn't be surprised if you're not the thieving cow who stole my canoe!"

The Colonel stood on the path in front of Tom, determined to impress him with who he really was, but all Tom cared about was that valuable time was being lost and he strode on in an impatient effort to pass. The Colonel, livid, and on the point of exploding, barked, "I am the Commanding Officer here, and I will have you turned out of this camp area." But Tom, not waiting to hear the conclusion of the sentence retorted, "I don't care who you are but you can go to Hell!" Then he was on his way, leaving the poor old boy aghast.

Tom told me the story when he returned and I was greatly amused, but the thought of having to face the old boy later was not so funny, he being an old Indian Army Colonel, who had retired and joined up again for the duration.

Tom found Billy very ill, so he commenced his treatment there and then, leaving a supply of sulphanilamide tablets with an intelligent native, who had at one time been a hospital dresser at Tulagi Hospital, he returned to Deneo, having to walk the whole way.

Silas, headman of Parramatta, sent a report on Billy's progress each day by a native runner, and after the second day he requested that I come as Billy had

added to his ills by being bitten by a dog, and now he was "sick too much".

I could not quite see how a dog had bitten the sick boy, but I knew Silas well enough to realise that I best go if we were to save Billy's life. I owed much to Billy; he was one of the fierce Malaita men who had married a Vella Mary and had settled on her island; he had done outstanding work for AIB so I was bound to do all I could for him.

I set off with my medical outfit for Kila Kila and there picked up my small canoe, which by this time had been returned, and with one of the sentries and a scout paddled up the coast to the creek which was the nearest point on the coast to Parramatta Village. The beach here was untrodden, but I deemed it advisable to hide the canoe in the edge of the jungle and the washies (paddles) we took with us for a further distance inland and then hid them separately. We knew there were no Japs in the area, but we were afraid of losing them at the hands of some NZ patrol.

Billy was a very sick boy when I saw him, quite delirious, with a horrible wheezing noise in his chest. It appeared that the village folk were busy planting their potato crop and all hands had to turn out, which meant Billy's male nurse went too, leaving him to fend for himself during the day and, while he made a stumbling journey for some water, a village dog rushed out and bit his leg, making a horrible wound.

His condition was serious, and I did all I could for him. Finally, I decided to leave my scout with him to nurse him and make sure he took his medicine at regular intervals day and night. This I felt was his only hope. Estabella, the boy I left, had worked a lot with Billy and admired him greatly, so I felt confident that if there was any chance to save his life all that we could do was being done.

When I arrived back at the beach after walking down from Parramatta, I retrieved the washies and continued on to where we had put the canoe, but no canoe was there! Immediately I looked about for tracks and sure enough, there were the tell-tale footprints, one of heavy military boots with an iron shod heel, the other of heavily barred rubber sandshoes, NZ Army type. The tracks were leading from the NZ camp direction and ceased at the canoe. There across the sand was the furrow made by the keel of the canoe as they had dragged it into the water. I hurried out on to a point, but there was no sign of them. They apparently had at least a couple of hours start. My feelings and what I uttered about our fellow New Zealand Allies there on the beach would best not be recorded, for really I have a fond regard for New Zealanders as a whole.

The loss of the canoe meant that I should have to follow the scalloped coast for miles into deep bays and out around long jutting points, to say nothing of the numerous muddy, swampy mangrove creeks to be crossed, where crocodiles basked on logs or lay lazily in the mud below the shallow water with mouth open patiently waiting for a meal. If you happen to swim between those

wicked jaws, just visible above the surface of the ooze, or tread on them, thinking them the stump of a dead tree, until you put your foot down, then suddenly you may have one less foot to worry about.

At each crossing I hoped that an old man crocodile would upset the pair of thieves who had taken my canoe. Just near Wataro Plantation was a sizable river which was too deep to wade and this meant we would have to leave our weapons and swim, but luck was with us, for there was an old punt loaded with stores being rowed along by two soldiers on the other side, so after much yelling they decided to come over, whereon we piled our rifles etc on board and then swam and pushed the boat to the other side, thankful to get our equipment across dry.

Thanking the two soldiers, we went along the beach, keeping a sharp lookout for our canoe, but saw nothing of it. Suddenly we came to a notice on the beach, reading, "All ranks keep out." I was curious, for it was the path into Wataro Bungalow. Then I could see another notice, "commanding Officer, so and so, so and so ..." Dripping still from the swim, which had not washed off all the stinking, slimy mud from the previous swamps, I strode up the beach determined to call on the Colonel and enlist his aid to find my canoe.

The house was very quiet. I rapped on the steps with my stick, and just then in a shady corner of the verandah I saw Colonel Landwell (that was not his name but it will do) sitting in an easy chair that had been left behind by Mr Mackenzie, the owner of the plantation. The Colonel raised his eyes over his glass and blinked, so I walked across to him, my boots going sqelch, sqelch, as water ran out of them, forming a little puddle at each step.

"Colonel Landwell?" I enquired.

Slowly he replied, "Yes."

"Spencer is my name. I am AIB Coastwatcher on this island."

The word "Coastwatcher" was a magic word with any Allied organisation at this time; so instead of being ordered off his "private" verandah, I was asked to take a chair. He removed his reading glasses and then looked me up and down.

"Why, you are wet!" he exclaimed, then his eyes followed my recent progress from the steps and his nose puckered as though he could smell an unpleasant odour. This was just the opening I wanted, therefore I told him exactly in very straight-forward terms just why it was that I was all wet and covered in stinking mud.

"Oh! It could not have been some of my men. It was probably a couple of Japs", he said.

To that I replied, "It may be news to you, Colonel, but the last Japs on Vella

were accounted for over a week ago, and AIB signalled to NZ HQ to that effect, and in due course you will probably find that the NZ Commander, Brigadier Potter, will issue similar advice to you. The footprints of the two persons who put my canoe into the water and presumably paddled it away were made by NZ footwear, one with an iron-shod boot and the other a rubber soled sandshoe. Such footprints I have never seen on this island during my six months' duty here until your forces arrived a few weeks ago."

At this he coughed and spluttered, then reached for his telephone and called the adjutant and instructed him to instigate a search for my canoe.

During the waiting period, the old boy asked if I should like a cup of tea. Over the cup of tea I informed him that this was the second time my canoes had been stolen within the short period his troops had been in the area. I then related how one of his men had put it over the native sentries at my canoe house and had taken both canoes away over a whole week-end, during which time I needed them for one of my men to go to one of my native scouts who was seriously ill.

Sure enough, Colonel landwell recalled having been told of the incident by my man, and he added, "The young ruffian, do you know what he said to me? He told me to go to Hell!" He then added, "He came towards me in such a menacing way that I thought he was going to strike me, so I had to let him know I was the Commanding Officer here and that I was of half a mind to have him removed from the camp area."

I tried to assume a look of innocent amazement, but inwardly I was bubbling over with mirth. I could picture Tom Mungovern encountering the Colonel. Tom was only short, but wore his black hair fairly long with an untrimmed black beard; he had an unhappy knack of always looking scruffy and wore his uniform, a mixture of American Army and Australian tropical kit in an untidy fashion, mainly because such clothing as was available to us was always a couple of sizes too big for Tom, so he would hack off the bottoms of his trouser legs with a knife until they were near enough to his length, and that is how they would remain. When his Irish blood was up he could come out with a most amazing flood of language.

The Colonel's telephone rang and he was informed that my canoe had been found and was now awaiting me on the beach.

I chuckled inwardly again to see the old Colonel's obvious embarrassment, so pleading the excuse of a long walk to my camp yet ahead of me, I left him to argue out with his adjutant what they should do with the culprits.

I called at the medical quarters while I was at the camp and told the Doctor about Billy and what I had done for him. He agreed from what I could tell him of the symptoms that it was pneumonia, and he said there was nothing better than the treatment I had prescribed. It all depended now on Estabella and his loyalty to Billy. The first two reports on succeeding days showed no

improvement, then on the third day, which was about the fifth of his illness his temperature, which had been around 103 to 104 degrees, began to drop and the fever left him. Apparently the crisis had been weathered and the fever left him, but it would need care and patience to get Billy back on his feet yet. From then on he did not look back and about ten days later, I was amazed to see Billy and Estabella walk in to camp at Deneo. It seemed a miracle and one for which I was heartily thankful, for Billy had lived through all the perils of the Jap occupation and had by his gallant services to the Allied cause earned the right to enjoy peace on his own island once more.

CHAPTER 11

A few days later Cdr A I Blenkin, RANVR arrived with 540 pounds, all in one shilling pieces. They were brand new coins and still in the wooden boxes as they had come from the Mint. The shilling, in peace time, was the smallest coin, in fact mostly the only coin in circulation here. The island had been flooded with Jap occupation money, but natives despised it, and we had impressed on them the worthlessness of it, so to be able now to pay off in shining silver coin would have a great moral effect on rebuilding our prestige.

At Deno, just near the engine house, the path passed a very tall tree from which hung numerous Monkey vines - long fibrous ropes capable of holding considerable weight. These had been a source of interest to the lads of our NZ bodyguard, and it was not long before they had cleared a take-off patch and, by hanging on to one of these ropes it was possible to swing far out over a deep gully, then back to the landing. One by one each plucked up enough courage to try it, but when I said I wanted a go, Tom said, "Don't you try it!"

I answered, "Why not? You have had a go."

"Yes," said Tom, "but none of us can fix a broken leg if you should crash!"

But I had my turn, and I think I used it more than anyone afterwards.

When Johnnie saw it he put a bit of variation into the show. He could climb hand over hand almost to the top of the vine, then down sailor fashion. Johnnie joined the RA Navy at seventeen years of age as a boy writer and had his eighteenth birthday while with us, and he was thrilled to have actually reached NRY, his first glimpse of a field party's hideout. His greatest moan was that we were packing up and he would have to go back to base again.

Next morning when I went to start the charging motor, I happened to look towards the monkey vines on the tall tree and, to my amazement they had vanished. Looking again, a cold shiver ran down my spine, for I could see the vine in a tangled heap at the foot of the tree. An examination revealed that our weight swinging on it had chafed the vine where it passed over the rough bark of the tree until it finally had broken. Only the evening before Johnnie had climbed almost to the top and, if it had broken with him on it, he would

most certainly have been killed, to say nothing of what would have happened to any of us if it had gone, as we went swinging out over the valley: I doubt whether we would ever have found the body.

Red was to have the day off and he intended going down to the sea at Kila Kila to do a bit of fishing. He took two Jap grenades as bait and, as he would be near Wataro, I asked him to drop in and deliver a letter to Colonel Landwell for me. When Red came back he had a tale to tell. Red was an American Army Corporal with wavy red hair and a long red beard to match; he stood every bit six feet and was quite well built into the bargain. As we were such a small party, rank meant nothing to us, we lived and ate together always and we seldom wore badges of rank. On arrival at "All Ranks Keep Out", Red strode up the steps and met Colonel Landwell on the verandah where he introduced himself as Cunningham of AIB as he handed over the letter. The Colonel then asked him to take a seat and ordered morning tea. Red played up to him but nearly had a spasm when the Colonel's Intelligence Officer, Capt. Graham joined the party. The Colonel asked if he had met Cunningham - of course he had, Capt. Graham often used to walk up to Deneo and have a meal with us - so when the old man was not looking he raised his eyebrows at Red then winked. The Captain was thoroughly enjoying the joke of a snobbish old Colonel entertaining a Corporal to morning tea. In due course Red excused himself and went out fishing, the Colonel having enjoyed his company.

CHAPTER 12

With the arrival of the pay, there was great activity getting our accounts in order. I began to wish that I could adopt T E Lawrence's method of paying the Arabs during his campaign in the desert: just open the bag and let each one take as much as he could grasp in both hands. It certainly would have simplified things, but the Treasurer of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate was far too careful for such methods; he wanted signed pay vouchers accounting for every shilling.

At this stage we discovered a discrepancy of 30 pounds and, looking back through the cash book, I found that nine months earlier Henry's companion had found 30 pounds in silver, rather a load for a hasty retreat from Deneo, so he had buried the money at the foot of a tree behind the kitchen, and apparently the money was still there. Lieut. Firth, RANVR, had left no map or sketch of where the treasure lay, just a note in the cash book, and had apparently forgotten about it. From a roll of galvanise wire I cut about a dozen lengths a yard long, then called up the scouts and explained what I wanted. Then they set to the task of systematically probing every likely hiding place around all the trees within a reasonable limit behind the kitchen. They entered into the spirit of it and made it a real treasure hunt. Eventually, one of them probed and the wire struck something metallic, so they began to dig and there from a small area they dug up every single shilling of the thirty pounds. The big bag had rotted, but the silver was still bright.

Some days later, Bulu, our cook boy, informed me that he knew where Mr Firth had buried the money, because he had helped to dig the hole - he being the only native present. Mr Firth made him promise on his honour that he would never tell anyone where the money was. Bulu had promised, and his conception of that promise would not allow him to divulge the secret, even to me. If Bulu had been other than a lad of fifteen, I would have believed he had an ulterior motive in keeping the secret from me but, as it was, I think he was genuine.

We were just sitting down to our midday meal as black, threatening clouds obscured the sun, making it quite dark. Bulu was in the kitchen, which was separated from our living quarters by about twelve paces and, as we ate our first course down came the rain, a terrific downpour, accompanied by very vivid lightning and crashing thunder. We sat watching the rain while Bulu stood opposite in the kitchen awaiting a let-up before he could serve the second course. It seemed to be easing and he prepared to make a dash for it. He started and then hesitated. Next second, a blue fork of lightning obscured the kitchen as the charge struck the ground directly between the kitchen and us. Blue flashes ran along the aerial lead and around the hut and the field telephone was knocked over. Momentarily blinded by the brilliance of the flash, my first thought was for Bulu, who if he had not hesitated would have been on the spot. By the time I could see the kitchen, Bulu had put down the plates and, rubbing his eyes with his hands, was still there, but stunned by the earsplitting clap of thunder and scared quite white by the blinding flash of lightning. It was the nearest I have ever been to being stuck and never have I seen such a thick fork as at the point where the charge hit the ground. Just as suddenly as it came the storm was gone, and the sun commenced to shine, but not until then would Bulu venture out of his kitchen.

With the arrival of the various headmen, there came a repeated tale of woe from all districts. It appears Colonel Landwell, who was the Commanding Officer of all the New Zealand units around the Vella coast, had ordered intensive patrolling by all units for the purpose of cleaning out any Jap stragglers. This meant a party of up to twenty soldiers would go bush for one or two days allegedly Jap hunting. They went far enough inland to reach the native villages, which had taken every precaution against Jap intruders but, since these soldiers were Allies, they relaxed their vigilance, with the result that on their way through native gardens the New Zealanders helped themselves to pineapples, bananas and other fruits. To a novice in these parts, a native garden could be mistaken for virgin land and I did not altogether blame the troops at first but, after repeated appeals to the Commanders of the various units to warn their troops and make generally known the loyalty of Vella Lavella natives and the part they played in overthrowing the Japs, when it still continued, I was put into a very embarrassing position. To all intents and purposes the Coastwatcher on Vella was supreme ruler, his word was law. The present day Keseko was as powerful as the natives' legendary Keseko of old. The necessity for this dictatorial power was obvious; but, having this power, the natives could not see why I could not prevent the New Zealanders from looting their property.

Everywhere I went I was met by natives complaining of the loss of fruit, loss of vegetables, loss of fowls, loss of pigs or loss of canoes. They were genuinely bewildered and would say, "Which way, Keseko, altogether soldier he friends belong you and me but him 'e steal 'im every something belong me fella. Time Japan he stop me fella hide every something true, since Japan he no can find. Altogether soldier belong Japan 'e die finish now, so altogether boy find 'im canoe belong him to catch plenty fish, but soldier belong you and me now he take 'im canoe, he go walk about along salt water. Altogether boy, 'e no savvy Keseko."

It took hours of patient explanation to try and make as little of the offenses as possible, but in my heart I knew the natives were being wronged, and do what I might, I could not prevent the continuance of such gross injustice. I walked miles and miles to explain personally to the NZ Forces at various points and to appeal to their sense of fair play, but still it continued. Finally I was forced to take the law into my own hands when Woku, that loyal old man who had not spared himself in his service to our cause, came to me one morning with tears in his eyes to tell of the fate of his much treasured possessions. Two large wooden chests which Woku owned and which he had fitted with padlocks had been hidden in a little bush hut all through the Jap occupation well up in the hills, where they had remained secure right to the end; but the previous day he had gone to get them and discovered that a NZ patrol had been through and, finding two locked chests, their curiosity was aroused to the extent that they battered the lids off the chests only to find the usual collection of bits of native fishline, a few shells, bits of dirty coloured rags, absolutely nothing of value to a white man, for so the patrol must have thought, for they scattered the odds and ends everywhere, inside and out, bashing the second box to pieces out of sheer disappointment at not having found anything of value to them. What is junk to us is treasure to a simple-minded peace-loving native and, when Woku told me his story with a look of reproach in his eyes, I could stand it no longer, whereon I promised him that I would stop this looting if it were the last thing I ever did.

I called Corporal Tommy and told him that all the scouts should remain in camp as I might want them for urgent work. Then, grabbing a signal pad, I wrote the following signal:-

"From Officer-in-Charge (AIB Vella Lavella)
To Commanding Officer, New Zealand Forces,
NZ HQ Marovari, Vella Lavella.
Repeat AIB HQ Guadalcanal.

With due consideration of the valuable co-operation and continuous loyalty of the native people of Vella Lavella over the past 12 months and with regard to their gallant services rendered to the AIB Coastwatcher on this island during that period, the practice of looting native gardens and villages and the misappropriation of native canoes and other property by certain New Zealand Army Units must cease immediately or else most drastic action will necessarily be taken.

Spencer, Flying Officer, RAAF"

Tom coded it with a broad grin and a twinkle in his eye; there was nothing he loved more than a fight and he calculated this would raise more than the dust.

"But what are you going to do if they don't act?" asked Tom.

"Why, cut all their bloody telephone lines at the same time on the same night from one end of the island to the other, and we will keep on cutting them as fast as they repair them until someone decides to heed me. I just can't face any more reports of looting from the natives", I answered.

The New Zealanders had had lots of trouble with their inter-unit wireless and in desperation had run telephone lines practically all around the island, linking unit to unit. With my native organisation throughout the island, I could have brought them to their knees very quickly, had it been necessary; but fortunately Brigadier Potter hearkened to a mere Flying Officer and I received a prompt reply.

To NRY
From NZ HQ

Immediate action taken, copy of my orders to unit Commanders being forwarded to your for reference.

Potter, Brigadier.

From that day on I had no further reports from natives in this respect, but the copy of the Brigadier's order never reached me, although Graham showed me a copy of it, and I realised then why the Colonel had not made any special effort to have my copy delivered. He, being the greatest offender amongst the unit Commanders, necessarily received the greatest kick in the pants, but it did not worry me, not receiving a copy of the order, so long as the natives were left to enjoy the peace they had fought for so well.

From then on there was no more trouble, and so we were able to fact the headmen for the big pay-off without embarrassment. Besides paying the native scouts, I had decided to distribute all our surplus junk which could be of any use to them, and what was left over we would destroy together with a quantity of Jap grenades, ammunition, guns, rifles and such like, which it was not wise to leave intact for the natives to start private wars of their own. The pay parade was scheduled for 2 pm and by that hour Red, Tom and I had sorted out all the clothing and other gear, hanging the useful things on lines so they could all be viewed by a native making a selection, and the useless junk was placed in a deep hole which a couple of scouts had spent the morning digging. Fortunately the hole was large, for there was much to go into it.

This we called the grave of NRY and decided to leave it open until the last in order to bury the rubbish after the final clean up of the site.

Tom and I were going to do the paying, so we arranged the 560 pounds off all in one shilling pieces on a table out in the open, and the parade commenced when Corporal Tommy arrived with the scouts all looking their best in blue lava lavas, Jap belts, rifles and side arms. Everything, including their ebony faces, shone in the bright sunlight. The headman had already taken up their position on the opposite side of the square, old Bamboo, the Paramount Chief of Vella Lavella, heading the line. First we paid outstanding accounts to the headmen for carriers supplied on various occasions during the past twelve months - a carrier earns a shilling a day. Accurate records had been kept by my predecessors, so really my job was relatively simple. Next the headmen of certain districts were given sums of varying amounts, to be distributed or spent to the advantage of the young men who had voluntarily done sentry work in the villages. This was a special grant made available by Allied Intelligence Bureau, and it was left to my discretion to allot it in accordance with my estimate of the value of the work that had been performed.

Next, I made a distribution of food to the headmen and, lastly, a special personal gift to Bamboo. This was a very nice safety razor in a nickel silver case, one which had been received in a Red Cross package which was in with some of our stores. I had kept it for this day, realising how fitting it would be. Judging from Bamboo's face the gift was appreciated, especially as it had a packet of blades with it also.

Then came the pay parade proper, corporal Tommy being first on the list; and he set a fine example of soldierly bearing as he marched up, saluted, took a step forward and gathered up twenty-two pounds in one shilling pieces and still had a hand with which to salute again after he had retired a step, turned about with drill instructor precision and marched to his place.

The next man was not so polished, for he tried to salute with a handful of shillings, with the result that there was a shower of coins and a slight delay while he retrieved them. I could see they would all emulate tommy, so I instructed them to omit the final salute - but that was reducing the ceremony, and no native likes to dispense with ceremony, so the next man, after he had received his coin, retired with a step and stamped his foot, paused a moment, then turned about, so from then on that was the drill. It was without a doubt the most humorous parade I have ever been on.

After all the scouts had been paid, we then called through the pay lists in order and each man was allowed to take a pick of all the things we had hung on the lines - real Xmas tree style, and so the lists were called over and over until everything had been cleared. I have never witnessed such high spirits as they watched each boy make his choice, hoping against hope that some article they wanted would be there by the time their pick came.

After the pay parade, one of the boys came to me and asked if Red, Tom and I

would attend a sing sing they were going to have as a finale to the memorable day. By the time we had finished our evening meal and made our way around to the boys' quarters, the sing sing was under way. A fire had been built for illumination - not warmth - and five or six headmen, including Bamboo, were there. Three blocks of wood had been placed for us and when we arrived Bamboo came and sat by me and, as the various items were rendered he explained their meaning to me. I had often been to a native sing sing, but this without doubt was the most interesting of them all, mainly on account of Bamboo's interpretation.

Half way through the evening, Gordoni and Aleko came to light with a couple of ukuleles and, after a short duet, they played "Advance Australia Fair", apparently added to the programme for our benefit, but the amusing part of this was the complete copy of the wireless rendering of it. It used always to be played preceding the news and they had seemingly learned the tune while waiting to hear the news. So well had they copied it that as they struck the last chord, both spoke in unison, "And here is the news" - to them that was part of the tune.

Gordoni was the star turn of the evening, possibly because his headman father was present and he wanted to gain his consent to his accompanying me to my new location. He appeared a little later in the role of a sole dancer; he was dressed for the part with a white lava lava twisted up to form vees, and on each wrist he had fastened a small square of white rag the size of a handkerchief. Around his ankles he wore rattles. a more graceful dance I have never witnessed. As he warmed up his black body shone with perspiration giving added effect to his costume. He was the surprise of the evening and everyone watched silently spellbound as his lithe young body gracefully swayed and bent like a reed in the wind. Then suddenly a second figure appeared, dressed identically, and he commenced to dance in the same fashion. At first everyone watched in silence, then someone, probably with a keener appreciation of humour than most, broke into peels of laughter, then it could be seen that the second dancer was a burlesque: he was fat and awkward yet executed the same manoeuvres as Gordoni but with awkwardness in lieu of grace. He thumped about like a baby hippopotamus, perspiration streamed off him, and the crowd went into shrieks of laughter. On and on he went until everyone was in such an exhausted state through laughing that it broke the party up completely.

Before I left the sing sing, Corporal Tommy came to me and asked, "Which way along morning, Keseko, me up 'im flag?"

"Yes, Tommy", I replied, "All the same every day, then when everyone ready to leave Deneo, we down 'im flag and put 'im along haversack belong me and altogether we lose 'im Deneo and go along Kila Kila to catch 'im boat."

"We have 'im parade along time we down 'im flag, Keseko?" asked Tommy.

"Yes, every boy he stop along parade and we three fella come along parade,

too", I replied.

"Him 'e good, master", commented Corporal Tommy.

That final little bit of ceremony was to be Tommy's crowing achievement, and he did not want to be robbed of it.

Next morning, the scouts worked hard carrying our gear down to the salt water, each made two trips while Tom, Red and I disposed of the remains of the camp. The hole claimed most, and finally I dumped about forty Japanese rifles and numerous Jap machine-guns into it. Lastly, we tipped a drum of petrol in and followed it with a match. It burnt well and soon the heat started the ammunition off and then the grenades, until it became so willing at one stage we had to take shelter behind trees until the shrapnel ceased flying about. The fire certainly made a good job and I had no worries about leaving the remains behind. Subsequently, we filled in the hole and were almost ready to move off when Billy came to me and said, "Altogether boy him he want one fella prayer time we make 'im parade along flag."

This rather knocked me, coming from Billy, so I said, "You want to talk out one fella prayer, Billy?"

"No more", he replied.

"Who then, Billy?" I asked.

"One fella him he talk out", answered Billy.

It was obvious Billy had been chosen as spokesman, being the least likely one to know a prayer, so I gathered I was the one they wanted to say a prayer at the conclusion of the parade, so I replied, "All right, Billy, we have one fella prayer."

Time was short, only a quarter of an hour off parade time, consequently I had to think quickly of a suitable prayer. The Scouts Prayer, which is said at the conclusion of all meetings of the Boy Scouts, all the world over, seemed most appropriate, so hurriedly I wrote it out, just in case I should forget it at the critical moment.

With nothing but our packs left to go down, the parade was assembled and Corporal Tommy handed over to me - my first time on parade with the scouts. Red and Tom also fell in for the first time, and it was the first time we were all in uniform, too. Red was a Corporal in the US Army, Tom a Writer in Royal Australian Navy and I a Flying Officer in Royal Australian Air Force, so there was nothing very uniform about our uniforms, but the natives were impressed.

As soon as the "present arms" was given, Markruso sounded "down 'im flag" and Corporal Tommy, with all the dignity of a Guards Sergeant Major lowered the flag, slowly timing the operation exactly to the bugle call.

Now, I felt was an opportunity to say a word of thanks to the scouts, and in conclusion I asked them to bow their heads and I would say the Scouts Prayer.

"Almighty and everlasting God by whose grace we are enabled to fight the good fight of Faith and ever prove victorious, we humbly beseech Thee to inspire us Scouts that we may yield our hearts to Thine obedience and exercise our lives on Thy behalf. Help us to think wisely, resolve bravely and act kindly. Bless us in body and soul and make us a blessing to our comrades. Whether at home or abroad may we ever seek the extension of Thy Kingdom. Amen."

As I started up I heard the voices of at least two of the boys repeating it with me word for word. They were Markruso and Esau, who had both belonged to the Boy Scouts in Tulagi before the War, and they still remembered it. Corporal Tommy packed the flag into my haversack. I have kept it as a souvenir, and on VP Day I flew it over my home on the harbourside in Sydney. It is not a good Union Jack - it is Jap made, hence the crosses are not the correct size and the colours have run, but it gave me infinite pleasure to fly it on VP Day in Sydney.

From the parade ground the scouts who were going to Kila Kila filed off down the track towards the beach; the remainder who came from Boro side of the island were leaving us to return to their homes, so that now all that remained to be done was to bid farewell to my old friends. This, indeed, proved one of the hardest tasks of all, for never have I been so moved as at that time.

Bamboo said little, but his handshake and eyes spoke volumes.

Corporal Tommy broke down completely and wept like a child and, after he had regained control of himself, he came to me and said, "Me sorry too much, Keseko, me cry alsame piccaninny, dis heart belong me sad too much because people belong me no look 'im any more, you friend good too much belong me fella."

That, indeed, was a tribute to be proud of, coming from Tommy, who was Bamboo's elder brother and really No 1 man of the island, although he had forfeited his claim to be paramount chief by joining the constabulary and leaving the island to live in Tulagi for a number of years in his youth.

CHAPTER 13

Arriving at Kila Kila, Tom, Red and I camped in the same little native hut near the beach that I had slept in the night I arrived on Vella. It did not seem so long ago, gauging it by time, but by events it seemed an age. Yet people have said to me on hearing the nature of the work I was engaged on, "Weren't you bored and terribly lonely?"

Having everything ready on the beach for the 8am barge next morning (the

New Zealanders were running a regular service around the coast) I called for three native volunteers to accompany us around to marovari to assist us to unload all our gear, after which I could get them a passage back to their district. All fifteen of the remaining scouts wanted to come, so in the end I said they could all come and see me established in my new camp, provided they did so without pay, for my pay account was closed and I had no more money for them. Pay was a mere detail: they would all come, happy to be of service.

Next morning we assembled on the jetty with all the gear in front of Wataro. We learned that there was a large number of NZ troops going down on the barge and it was doubtful whether we could crowd aboard. When the barge arrived, it amounted to us leaving our equipment for the following day. There was no other way of getting a message to Marovari, since our wireless was packed and I did not feel like unpacking it.

We waved to Red as the barge left and, as I walked down the jetty a voice said, "Too bad, you could not get on board!" I looked around and it was Colonel Landwell and Capt. Graham. I walked up to them and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tom with a party of natives wading through the shallow water back to Kila Kila. Colonel Landwell asked, "Couldn't you have put some of your party on board?"

I replied that I had sent one man, Corporal Cunningham and I laid undue emphasis on the "Corporal". Graham, who was standing almost behind the Colonel, opened his mouth in a silent laugh, realising the significance of my thrust. The old boy quickly changed the subject and ended up by asking me to stay the night at the "Taj Mahal", as the troops had christened his bungalow, with all its "Taboo" and "Keep Out" signs. Of course, this would be impossible. I found some ready excuse, and then, giving him an opportunity of doing me a favour by requesting I be permitted to place my equipment in one of his stores until next morning. He assured me it would be perfectly safe on the wharf, but I knew Aussie and NZ troops better than that, so I made the possibility of rain the major reason for moving it. He asked Graham to contact the QM and it was put in his store.

Capt. Graham came to me in the store and said, "Whatever you do, don't let the old man know that I knew Cunningham was a corporal, for he will shoot me for not having tipped him off. I told all the other officers about him asking your corporal to tea and they thought it one hell of a joke."

I remarked, "Did you see his face when I said "Corporal" Cunningham this morning?"

"No", replied Graham, "but I saw the back of his neck go red and then almost purple. He will shoot me for sure if he ever finds out I knew."

I think it is as well I am saying farewell tomorrow", I commented.

The day passed pleasantly enough swimming, fishing and playing deck tennis on the beach. It was a regular picnic for all. Bulu, who was a Boro native, came from the other side of the island and had returned to his village with Bamboo and Tommy; they did not come down to Kila Kila so I was without a cook but, Gordoni, who was the son of the headman of Sipato, filled the gap and proved he was as good in the kitchen as he was in the field. Gordoni had a very good record as a scout. He and his friend Aleko persuaded me to keep them on, for they wanted to go wherever I went. I explained that Tom and Red would be going home and that I would probably be landed further up in Japanese occupied territory to start up another post, and that it might be another six months before I should be able to get them back to Vella Lavella - but that made them all the more keen. Aleko was about 19 or 20 and Gordoni a year or two older; they were very good friends and good company to have about, especially on my next assignment where I was on an island without any white companions for several months, and amongst natives with whom I had never had much previous contact.

Just before the barge landed us next morning at our destination, I advised the native scouts with me to stick to their Jap rifles and not be persuaded to sell them to Americans or swap them for American rifles. Firstly, because if they sold them they would not be able to get another one for shooting pigeons, and secondly, if they were found in possession of an American or New Zealand rifle, they would have it confiscated and would probably end up in gaol. It proved a timely warning, for scarcely had we set foot on land than American sailors besieged the boys wanting to come by their rifles. Yarning with one of these chaps, I discovered the price they were prepared to pay for a Jap rifle was 9 pounds 10 shillings. I could scarcely believe it, but they were sincere. Then I remembered the 40 Jap rifles I had burnt in the grave of NRY two days before - three hundred and eighty pounds and it had gone up in smoke!

AIB had opened a relay station, RJH, at Marovari when the New Zealand HQ moved there, and word came through for me to take over this station from the Naval Lieutenant who had been running it - he being due for leave. We were a bit crowded for space in this station, being right in the NZ camp, therefore I soon began to look about for another camp site. It was a popular move, for I was told the Brigadier did not like natives living within the camp area - he was just a little afraid he might get malaria from them. I too, was unpopular because being RAAF, I could wear shorts, which were forbidden for NZ troops. They even offered to issue me with long pants, but I had lived too hard in the past twelve months to take kindly to dressing up in sweltering attire so near the equator.

Just when we were about to commence the buildings for the new camp, we received a signal from headquarters advising that Captain Robertson ("Dry Robbie" as he was known) was on his way to RJH from Kolombangra. Then the day after he arrived, we received another signal instructing me to hand over RJH to Robbie and to prepare myself to go to Choiseul Island, there to take over the station from Lieut. N Waddell, RANVR, who in peace time had been District Officer in the Civil Administration in this district. Nick had been

on Choiseul Island without a break almost twelve months, having gone in about the same time as Henry Josselyn went in on Vella Lavella. I was thrilled with my new assignment, but Robbie was very disappointed for he had thought he was a certainty for it. Contact was made with Nick, who then made all the necessary arrangements for my reception at his end, and Headquarters arranged with US Navy to deliver me to the appointed spot at the appointed hour.

I had two days to gather my equipment and stores and just for full measure I had a boil or something very aggravating in the middle of my back which was just working up to a head. I had been attending the NZRAP for a couple of days, then on the day before my departure for Choiseul, the orderly at the RAP suggested I report to the Doctor and let him have a look at it. When the Doctor removed the dressing, he took one look and replaced the same dressing, sat down at his table and commenced filling in a form. Then he said, "I am putting you in the field hospital for a few days to get that cleared up."

At this late date it was impossible and, when I told the Doctor I was leaving the Island next morning, he asked, "Going south?"

"No", I replied, "north."

He looked at me, somewhat bewildered, and asked, "Where to?"

I replied, "I am going to Choiseul."

"Choiseul? Choiseul!" he exclaimed, "Why, there are Japs there!"

"There certainly are", I said, "seven thousand odd of them, and that is why I am going. I belong to AIB and our work is done once our own forces catch up with us."

He continued, "Do you know what it is?"

I replied, "I guess it's a man-sized boil, Doc, by the feel of it."

"Boil!" he snapped, "Why, that is a man-sized carbuncle and they can be very dangerous; you just go to the hospital!"

"Well Doctor, I am afraid that is just impossible; you no doubt have heard of AIB and realise the amount of arrangements that go into putting one of our field parties in. I happen to be leaving tomorrow morning by an American ship to be taken to some place where I am to connect with another form of transport which will lend me at the submarine base; and from there I shall be taken to a rendezvous with some natives in a canoe who in turn will land me. I tell you this in confidence, Doc, because I must get you to realise the impossibility of my failing to appear. The party on Choiseul have left their

wireless now and are on a three day trip down to a point on the coast where I am to be at a certain time. It is imperative that I be there for there is no way of letting them know."

To this the Doctor replied, "That is all very well, but I am responsible for your health. Who is your CO?"

I answered, "I am the Officer in command of our post at the moment."

"Well," he said, "you are taking your life in your own hands."

That rather amused me, but I replied, "Not a new experience for members of our organisation, Doc, but I realise what you mean, and I promise that I shall lay up as soon as I reach Choiseul."

"But", he protested, "you need someone to dress that every few hours; you cannot do it by yourself, why, you can't even see it!"

"I have a first class medical kit with everything I shall need, and I have a native who can dress it", I replied.

"A native!" he fairly exploded.

"Yes", I said, "one who used to be a dresser in Tulagi Hospital before the War."

"Well," he said finally, "it's your own back and I hope you know what you are doing. Now is there anything you want to add to your medical kit?" He named one or two items, all of which I had, in fact, I could probably have staggered him if he had known the completeness of my medical kit. With that he wished me good luck, and I went quietly out of his surgery, for every step I took seemed to make an extra throb in my back. I said nothing of the encounter with the Doc to Robbie and kept my back out of view as we turned in. I did not sleep much either; I had too much on my mind and my back.

Next morning early the jeep and a truck loaded our gear and I left RJH accompanied by Gordoni, Aleko and Markruso. Markruso was a Choiseul boy, so he could act as interpreter if necessary. The other two boys were my personal cook and assistant. Aleko was quite well educated and he became an expert cipher hand. Going to a strange island, I felt it was wise to have at least three boys upon whom I could rely. We loaded our gear on board and just stood around waiting for the little ship to get underway. It was a hot business; there was practically no shade and the sun was fairly sizzling, and where the ship lay we missed any breeze. My back began to play merry hell and I felt I must find somewhere to sit down. Poking up forward, I found a hammock swung with a ground sheet for awning, so I hopped in and took it easy.

If I had not, I think I would have passed out - I was beginning to believe the Doctor was right: I should have gone into hospital. The rest in the shade,

although it was still hot, worked wonders, then as soon as we left we felt a breeze and it was not too bad from then on. By evening we reached a small inlet where suddenly, well camouflaged below nets and canvas with painted palms, we came along the mother ship and her brood. Once on board the mother ship, my boys asked if they could have a drink of water. We had had nothing to eat or drink since breakfast. I enquired where we could find drinking water and an American Navy Officer took us to where there was a drinking fountain in the passageway. It was the coldest water I have ever tried to drink, so cold it seemed to burn. The boys, first of all fascinated by the porcelain and chrome drinking fountain, were astonished by the temperature of the water: they could not believe water could be so cold.

We struck it lucky, for the evening meal was just about to be served. One of the coloured seamen took the boys away and looked after them, and I was taken into a wardroom where I was introduced to the Skipper of the boat that was going to land us. He told me we would be leaving soon after our meal or as soon as my stores were stowed in his boat. The sun had set, and it was becoming dark just as we brought the last package aboard. It was a day of experiences for my three native boys. They eyed the submarine very suspiciously, and when we were below they could not believe we were under the surface of the water. There was great Jap activity along the Choiseul coast maintaining their strip on Kolombangara, and the barges and patrol boats were everywhere, so we had to creep in to the rendezvous. We surfaced about two miles off shore - the night was pitch black with no breeze - so we closed to one mile which was the rendezvous station and from the conning tower we flashed a predetermined signal, dots and dash on the lamp. With not so much as a glimmer of light from the shore we waited patiently, and out of the blackness came two big Choiseul double-ended canoes. They approached cautiously and circled the sub twice before they came near enough for me to call out, whereup a voice from one of the canoes said, "Is that you, Spencer?" This was Carden Seton, Nick Waddell's mate, who lived on Choiseul before the War.

He came aboard and while the gear was being loaded into the canoes I left Carden and the Skipper talking on deck while I slipped below - I felt I must sit down or else I may have fallen down - my back was throbbing and my head ached and suddenly I had become sick on the stomach. It was probably a combination of the sulphadiazine tablets I had been taking and the effects of the carbuncle just reaching breaking stage. I made for the lavatory and just sat on the seat, my head down between my knees. But it was so hot now below that my brow was wet with perspiration and I felt clammy all over. The thought ran through my head that I must not faint here so I climbed up the conning tower again and sat on the lid. Coming into the cooler air must have revived me for my eyes cleared and I felt myself again. Thank goodness, neither Carden nor the Skipper knew what was going on within me or I still may have been carted off to hospital. By this time the canoes were ready and Carden and I went aboard. The submarine Skipper waved us farewell and wished us luck, then gradually darkness closed about us as we made in the direction of the shore while the submarine resumed her hunting. It seemed to

me an interminable age that we sat in these canoes, but eventually at Bambatana we landed in the pitch dark.

There was a big native house which seemed to have been used as a store. Here Carden and I rolled our groundsheets out, and there he slept but I could not, tired as I was - my back was playing up a treat. I don't think I more than dozed once all night. We planned an early start, which meant we could reach Wasso, Carden's headquarters, by lunchtime, it being a six hour walk. There was only one thing that kept me on my feet, and that was the thought that I could lay up as soon as I arrived.

We were on the trail before daylight, and Carden, who was a good walker, made the pace. The carriers had been started off and they were to come along at their leisure. Gordoni and Aleko carried my equipment: it was all I could do to carry myself. We stopped for a drink in a creek and as we started up the steep slope on the other side Carden twisted his knee when stepping over a log. It was so painful he had to sit down for a while and massage it. For the remainder of the journey he hobbled like an old man, putting up our time considerably and resulting in our reaching Wasso at 40pm after nine and a half hours on the road. Never have I been so glad to reach a destination as that one!

I had a bath and then asked Carden to change the dressing on my back because it had been two days without being touched.

"My!" he exclaimed, "What have you got here? It had a dozen heads!"

I said, "It certainly feels like it."

It had broken but not much was coming away, so I was in for another bad night, but apparently I was too fatigued to feel my back, for I was asleep as soon as I hit the pillow. Next morning Carden was all for lancing the carbuncle, but his local anaesthetic was on the other side of the island, so it was allowed to take its course. He stayed with me for two days and in the meantime got hold of the native dresser and explained to him exactly what had to be done.

On the third day Carden left on an important patrol about thirty miles south, and from then on I was on my own at Wasso, with Nick thirty miles north. Gradually the sulphur drugs took effect and my back cleared up in quick time, but I bear the scar of it to this day. Carden did not return to Wasso but established another post down in the region where he was working under the call sign of CAS.

I brought four of NRY wireless sets with me from Vella Lavella, and this enabled me to extend our sphere considerably on Choiseul, which is a large island over a hundred miles long. Two natives worked the Walkie Talkies, and a Native Medical practitioner, who was Markruso's brother, worked a Teleradio on the east coast. Carden had an American Army 212, while Nick had a

Teleradio up on the northern end of the island, whilst i had the main station at DEL where we were using a Teleradio. This net enabled us to get information out whilst it was hot and also allowed us good scope for finding and spotting targets for the Allied Air Forces.

CHAPTER 14

As soon as I was myself again I spent a considerable amount of my time patrolling, checking up on our food dumps, and generally getting the lie of the land. On all these expeditions I took my own three scouts to enable them to get their bearings, too. Gordoni and Aleko had never been on Choiseul before and could not speak the language and, since it had been less touched by traders, pidgin English, the language of the Pacific, was not much understood either, or at least not amongst the hill natives.

The walk in to Wasso from the western coast normally took two days, but DEL was a matter of a few hours from the coast on the eastern side. The path to the east was very rugged and finally ended up on top of a high rocky bluff at the base of which the sea pounded. For a while I thought it would be a good spot to have my headquarters, there being a couple of native houses on the bluff, which were sufficiently tucked away to be camouflaged from the sea or from the air. The beauty of this spot, I thought, was the easy access to the sea, which could be reached by a fairly vertical descent down a goat track. This meant a sure supply of fresh fish, a very welcome addition to the rather monotonous diet of tinned food.

We moved in and had everything nicely set up and had enjoyed more than one meal of fish, when one morning the native on sentry duty half way up the cliff face signalled the approach of a Jap party from the sea shore. How they got there unobserved we did not know, nor did I ever satisfactorily clear it up. All I knew was we should have to dismantle everything and hide in the bush, trusting they would not choose to stay. Desperately we buried all the wireless equipment, food and stores, covering it up to make the earth look as little like having been disturbed as possible. This is easy in the jungle where the ground is always wet and dead leaves are in abundance. It was indeed fortunate for us that this was so, for the Japs came up that track, not as though they were exhausted shipwrecked sailors; on the contrary, they were out on a definite mission, and I have reason to believe that we were their objective. Probably they had detected our transmitter working as they often did, and this, with other sources of Jap intelligence, I believe had guided them to the cliff track. We made the camp look as disused as possible, even to burying the kitchen fire and replacing it by old ashes and charred sticks which we kept on hand as a set piece for this express purpose. By the time we had completed this, the lookout indicated they were near the top, so we decided to hide ourselves close at hand with a goodly supply of hand grenades and ammunition at least to be able to put up a last stand if need be. The latest report from the lookout indicated there were ten Japs - there were eleven of us, not counting the lookout who was too far away to take part in

any scrap. The next few minutes were probably the tensest I have ever experienced. We waited in ambush each side of the track just where it left the camp towards the hills. For Japs their approach was very quiet, something which still makes me think we were their objective. The first to step over the rim of the cliff was a big Jap, easily six foot and, although dressed like his nine men, he carried a pistol whereas the remainder had rifles. As he stood up the temptation was great. He was a sitting shot with my tommy gun, but was one Jap officer and possibly nine Jap soldiers more to me or to AIB than the intelligence I might get out of this island in the next four months? One thing we had always been taught in our training for this work was that it was of far greater importance to get information secretly without giving away our presence than to wipe out a whole company of Japs and advertise by doing so our whereabouts on the island; that was the role of guerillas, for they operated in sufficient numbers to be able to fight a delaying action. One man and ten natives could not hope to do that on an island where the odds were so much against us. Therefore we sat tight, hoping we would not be detected.

The party approached the buildings cautiously, taking advantage of every bit of cover, then two entered the kitchen and looked around; calling something in Japanese, the remainder of the party came from cover more assuredly and looked around. They entered the wireless hut and we could hear them banging at an old native box, which we had carefully replaced, it being a bit more of our camouflage. Finally they got it open and there was much chatter and, although we could not see what was going on, I could picture them turning out the conglomeration of native junk that was in the box. Eventually the officer and one of the soldiers came out and casually looked about them, then went over to the edge of the cliff and exchanged conversation punctuated by much pointing. All this time we were breathing as carefully and as noiselessly as possible, wishing that we could only understand what they were saying. More of the soldiers came out of the house and, while two sprawled out full length on an old bench in the shade, two more came directly in our direction. I gripped my tommy gun and took aim, ready should either display the slightest indication that they suspected our presence. Within half a dozen paces from me, they parted slightly and prepared to obey nature's call, chattering to each other the whole time. That reassured me that we were not in any immediate danger, and we commenced to breathe again.

After a blow and a smoke, the Japs had a little pow wow and off they set along the path in the direction of Wasso. As soon as they had gone far enough away, we called up the native at Wasso on the Walkie Talkie and told him to post sentries along the path approaching the camp, as it was possible these Japs may keep on going in that direction. I detailed two boys to trail the Japs far beyond the junction of the path leading to Wasso. Next day they were reported from village sentries further up the coast. After following their movements, I was firmly convinced that our transmitter had been detected and that this party had been landed for the purpose of tracking us down. How disappointed they would have been had they known they walked right through our camp, and one man actually sat on our transmitter or on the ground above it! This says much for native camouflage or against the

observance of Jap scouts.

After this experience I decided to move DEL back to Wasso, which in some respects resembled Topolando on Vella Lavella. There were many ways out if Japs suddenly appeared, and being inland it was less likely to have stray Jap parties paying calls. Japs mostly hugged the coast on Choiseul, and seldom came into the rough mountainous interior during the whole of my term there. Once back again at Wasso I decided upon a few improvements to make life a little more comfortable. The first was to build an engine shed to house the charging motor, which Nick and Carden had installed in their hut. The noise and the fumes I decided I could easily dispense with. Another improvement was to build a proper flyproof privy. Their method had been a small trenching spade, used only when necessary - effective yes, but decidedly primitive.

With the new stations all working through me, I found I was being kept so busy on my own coding, decoding and sending that I instructed Aleko and Markruso in the art of using the code. They were filled with pride and were very apt pupils; in no time they coded a message entirely on their own and which I did not check. I asked the receiving station to report on the correctness of the groups, and to my amazement they reported all correct. This made a wonderful difference to me, and soon we were putting through most valuable information almost as soon as it had been collected. This resulted in DEL providing some major targets for the Allied Air Force.

We were situated at this period of the War right in the midst of Jap sea activity. From the lookout tree at Wasso it was possible in clear weather to see the entrance to Buin Harbour, which is on the southern extremity of Bougainville Island. Buin was the centre of a great deal of Jap barge traffic. Barges had to come down the west coast of Choiseul on their way to Kolombangara for the purpose of taking supplies to the Jap garrison on that island. After the US Marines landed at Munda, which is north-west of Kolombangara, the Japs decided to evacuate the island, but by a stroke of good luck and the passing on of hot intelligence, DEL played a big part in a grand coup.

A Jap fighter was shot down just off Bamatana and the lookout on duty at DEL reported the pilot to have made a successful parachute jump and had landed in the sea some miles off the coast. He could be clearly seen from our lookout with the aid of powerful glasses to be clinging to some kind of rubber raft. His position was given in a signal originated at DEL and which was passed on to the US Navy, who directed a PT boat patrolling in that sector to pick up the Jap aviator. He was located during the afternoon and taken back to the PT base where interpreters of the intelligence section interrogated him. Jap prisoners were almost invariably good sources of information, provided they possessed the knowledge. They were never taught security as we were because this clashed with their national Shinto beliefs, so when interrogated they always told all they knew.

Shintoism, the chief observances of which were ancestral worship and

sacrifices to departed heroes, venerated a man who died while serving as a warrior, but if he should allow himself to be taken prisoner, he ceased to be, in the eyes of his religion. He lost his name, his wife, his family, and the State confiscated his estate. The Japanese, being such religious fanatics, would prefer to take their own lives rather than be captured. The fact is, it was expected of them and that is why no provision was made in their security training for what a prisoner should tell his captors. This explains why Japanese prisoners usually told all they knew. This particular aviator was well informed, and he told the Officer that on the night of the 3rd and 4th instant, a mass evacuation of Kolombangara was planned, using every available barge from Buin, to ferry the Japs across to the south-western tip of Choiseul. From there they would make their way overland up the west coast of Choiseul to the north-western corner, a distance of over a hundred miles, then eventually they would be moved back to Bougainville by barge. It was the first of the month when this aviator was interrogated, that allowed two full days to arrange a surprise packet. Allied HQ at Munda must have fairly buzzed over this period because a most elaborate plan was evolved.

I received a signal instructing that a vigilant watch be kept for barge traffic during the next 48 hours and to report everything immediately. From the unusual nature of this request, I realised something was afoot. I heard the full story afterwards. It appears every available PT boat, destroyer and submarine in the area was sent to the straits between Kolombangara and Choiseul to be in wait for barges or whatever else attempted an evacuation of the Kolombangara garrison which numbered three or four thousand.

On the night of the 3rd we reported several barges going south down the west coast, but this was only normal traffic. The Navy and Air Force sat and waited for the order to strike but nothing happened. HQ were a little disappointed but not dismayed, the same program held for the night of the 4th to 5th. In case it was necessary, DEL was on the air nearly all night on the 4th reporting an endless stream of barges, which started at dusk, all going south. On the night of the 4th, it looked as though our preparations were not in vain. The Commander of our task force withheld his fire and allowed forty odd barges to cross the water from Choiseul to Kolombangara. Then placing his force so that he could inflict the maximum damage, he silently awaited the return of the loaded barges. The Japs had apparently chosen a dark night purposely and in so doing they had played into our hands, for had they seen the fleet of small ships waiting for them, they must surely have changed their plans. The Air Force at Munda was kept informed of the situation and the planes were standing by to join in the action as soon as it started.

A few hours before daylight the loaded barges began making for Choiseul. The signal was given and destroyers shot up a mass of star shell, turning the dark night into day, and under the canopy of light, chugging furiously, were the much overloaded barges, sitting shots for the speedy PT boats turned loose against them. In the chaos that reigned, some of the barges tried to make a break straight back to Buin, skirting the coast by a wide margin, but as soon as daylight came the Air Force made short work of these too. Of the mass of

barges employed, the Allied Forces sank forty, all fully loaded with Jap troops, and it was estimated that a very small proportion of the total reached Choiseul with their troops. This magnificent coup, or terrible slaughter, whatever it may be termed, was the result of one man who knew, telling what he knew.

On one other occasion the lookout boy rang through to my hut and informed me that he could see two warships leaving Buin. I immediately ran up to the lookout and took a sighting. Sure enough, there were two Jap destroyers just setting on to a course after leaving harbour. Waiting only long enough to get an approximate course and speed, I ran back to the wireless and made a signal, reporting them. Darkness closed in soon after and so far as we were concerned the destroyers held no further interest. Next morning, I received a signal from HQ referring to my signal reporting the destroyers. It read: "Ref your signal No 234 - both destroyers hit with bombs this am, one sunk, the other burning. Good work, DEL".

I was proud of that signal: it is not often the higher-ups thought of praising a field party's efforts. Ever after that, whenever I felt the urge to take a shot at a stray Jap, I used to recall that signal and think, "No, maybe I will be able to report another destroyer if I do not give my location away". I read the intelligence report on the bombing of the two Jap destroyers later when I was at AIB HQ. It appears on receipt of my signal giving their position, course and speed, a Catalina was detailed to shadow them during darkness hours and to report their position one hour before daylight. The Catalina gave their position and two bombers took off to intercept them, which they did at daylight. They dive bombed them, and one was hit and blew up, the other hit and burnt out with the total loss of both crews.

Was makes one callous and makes life seem cheap, but for the Coastwatcher in those days it was a matter of destroy or be destroyed; the odds were so much against us that we could never allow the enemy a single chance. We had too much evidence of what happened to the few of our gallant band that suffered capture by our fiendish foe. One, whose treatment was witnessed by natives, I had known in our training camp. He was a fine fellow, full of life and fun, but a man with a heart so stout that all the devilish tortures the Japs could devise and, believe me, the are terrible even to think of, could not make him divulge the secrets of our organisation. Each of their heinous methods met with similar failure, so finally exasperated to the limit, they put a rope around his neck, passing the free end between his naked legs and then over his wrists, which had been bound behind his back. Then pulling the rope taut they made him bend almost double and in this position they compelled him by jerking the rope, to climb the steep side of a volcanic crater. He could now see where he was going, and every time he stopped for breath or stumbled two guards prodded him with their bayonets. Dripping with perspiration, exhausted and bleeding, the party finally made the rim of the crater where this gallant hero was made to kneel while a Jap holding a two-handed sword severed his head from his unfortunate body, both of which toppled over the brink of the crater into the bottomless inferno below, but he died with his secret, yet his spirit lived on and carried on his good work until

final victory.

After the Kolombangara show the Japs made a definite effort to round up the Coastwatchers on Choiseul. Natives brought us reports that they were being offered all kinds of rich rewards for information of our whereabouts. They seized a village headman in my area, who had in fact organised a party of carriers to move some of my stores from one dump to another a few days before. They apparently suspected Natali of collaboration but, having no definite proof, fancied that torture would be sure to open his mouth. They employed all their standard tricks, including burning his finger nails off with cigarettes and running sharp bamboo splinters under the toe nails. The more they displayed their barbarity the dumber Natali became. He swore no knowledge of any white man being on the island and acted so naturally that the Japs gave up, convinced he did not know anything. Natali lost no time in reporting his experiences, and remained with me a few days while I doctored his fingers.

Soon after this, HQ requested me to obtain a Jap prisoner if such was possible without jeopardising my own security. They evidently wanted information as to which Jap battalions were on Choiseul. At that time I held counsel with my scouts and it was decided that a small party should go over to the west coast and trail a Jap party we had tabulated in that area. There was a constant stream of small parties making north up that coast so we should be in luck. The scouts set off in high spirits, for they had often wanted to manhandle a Jap. Four days later, hot and tired, they returned to camp carrying one very uncomfortable Jap NCO. They had contacted the party almost at the predicted spot and had tagged along with it, keeping noiselessly under cover of the jungle until this Jap detached himself from the main body to take an observation or do whatever they duck off to do on their own. Before he knew what had happened he was bound and gagged and being speedily carried off in the opposite direction from his party. With generations of bushcraft and cunning bred into them, what a formidable foe these natives would have been fighting on their home island! How glad was I that they were on my side!

The Japs realised their value all too late. In the early part of the Solomons campaign they ignored the natives, looted their gardens, stole their pigs and poultry, and raped their women, with the result that the entire native population withdrew to the hills, evacuating all the coastal villages, all the while nurturing in their minds a hatred for these ruthless invaders. Many of the younger men, seized with the curiosity of youth, returned to the Japanese occupied area only to find themselves conscripted into labour gangs under extremely hard task masters. The loads they were given to carry doubled them up and the scant food was not nearly sufficient to maintain them. Many of them became sick and were beaten when they could no longer work. Medical aid was denied them and they received no pay for their labours. consequently, when we, the Coastwatchers, came in in ones and twos, we were greeted like old friends, and they were all eager to join our cause because they knew we were at war with the Japs. A great proportion of our stores were for medical use amongst the natives, and we brought real silver coins to pay

for labours performed, also to buy fruit and vegetables, but by the time I reached Choiseul there were neither fruits nor vegetables to be had. The Japs had cleaned out the gardens and the natives were short themselves. Their new gardens in the hills took time to bear.

The Jap prisoner the scouts had succeeded in capturing and had carried off to a safe distance refused to walk when they untied his legs so, sooner than risk being overtaken by a search party, they retied his hand and foot and ran a pole through his legs and arms and carried him they way they carry a pig. How knows the native mind well enough to say that this was not a designed insult as well as an expedient method of transportation? When they untied him he certainly could not walk. They had not spared him on the trek back. Now we were faced with a problem: he had to be guarded as no prisoner had ever been guarded before. Should he escape, my stronghold was finished, for once he gained the secret of the trail leading up to me and told the Japs, my life would not be worth living. I assembled all the scouts and impressed them with the urgency of not allowing him to escape, for on his retention depended all our lives. If he should by any chance make a break for it he must be shot dead without any mistake. We had no barbed wire, so he was confined to a native hut with guards all around it. He was given a Jap blanket and he curled up on the floor. I left him, sure he would not give any more trouble for at least twelve hours.

I then despatched a signal advising HQ that a prisoner had been taken and requesting I might be relieved of him as soon as possible. Word came back for me to indicate a safe bay in which a Catalina might land to receive the prisoner. Consulting my map, I thought, "No No seems to be a good spot". It was well out of the Jap area on the east coast, a day's canoe trip south of where we could make the east coast from Wasso. We had a canoe house hidden up a river at this spot, and word was sent by runner to the canoe skipper that it would be wanted for a trip down to No No and back. The Choiseul canoes were large double-ended canoes which carried in the vicinity of 25 crew. This particular one, which was always available to me, carried the paddlers besides myself and a quantity of equipment on one trip I made in it. The east coast of Choiseul is exposed to the open sea, and at times it is necessary to go outside the reef to get by certain headlands. The canoes have to be large to stand up to the rough seas which pound the coast and natives have to be born seamen to handle these large canoes in such seas.

To get the prisoner to the canoe would mean a two-day hike through very rough country, and this would mean extreme care on the part of the guards, for it was of paramount importance that this Jap should not get into the hands of his countrymen alive. I stressed this point to the scouts on every available opportunity in an effort to impress it firmly into their minds. As soon as the runner returned from the canoe house to report the canoe's crew standing by, I contacted HQ and made final arrangements for the rendezvous. Soon I received a signal "okay" for the time and place, so all that remained now was to get the party started on time. They would be on the road three days and were supposed to rendezvous with an American Air Force Catalina in

the No No Bay on the morning of the fourth day.

During the few days that the prisoner has been at Wasso, he had been confined to his bed every time I inspected him, no matter what time of the day or night I visited him. To look at him, one would think he was dying, but the guards saw another side of him, and this was regularly reported to me. One of the guards had managed to converse with the Jap in pidgin English cum language of signs. After the second day this boy came to me and said, "Masta, this Japan man he no sick, him he gammon das all. Time he no look 'im you, he walk about the house belong him - he talk along me - he ask what something he stop along nother house close up. One time he ask 'im me him he climb up along look out - me tell him no more, Masta be cross too much - Sometime him he want to walkabout outside house belong him. Me say no - still him he want althesame. Then me talk along one fella boy, him he put feet belong him in big fella boot all the same Masta and him he walk all the same masta. Time Japan man hear him boot belong you, quick time he get into bed belong him."

Whenever the prisoner began to be troublesome, one of the guards would don a pair of heavy boots and walk on the path leading to my house, The Jap, then thinking I was coming, would duck back to bed and feign sick. Each succeeding day he was becoming more and more cocksure until one evening he proposed to Honga, the guard with whom he could talk, that he should let him escape. Honga quickly replied that this was impossible because Keseko was able to overtake them, no matter which way they should go and that he would shoot them both. The Jap argued that they could overcome that by Honga first of all killing me and then it would be easy. His persistence troubled Honga so he said it would be necessary to get a couple of other guards into the plot. As soon as Honga, who was head boy of my Choiseul scouts, was relieved by the new guard he came straight to me and told me of all the Jap had proposed. It perturbed me somewhat, for it confirmed my contention that if this man every got back to his countrymen alive we were as good as dead. Honga also revealed his own proposals to the prisoner and added, "But, Keseko, me only gammon along him."

I trusted Honga, but I had not known him long enough, and then there was the possibility that some of the other guards might be approached by the prisoner in the same way, and I had only Carden's word that they would be loyal. Unlike Vella, Choiseul was not a hundred percent with us. There were one or two tribes that had become pro Jap, and I hadn't been on the island long enough to be able to pick my own scouts. All I could do was to take every precaution for my own safety, and to this end I had Aleko bring his bed and sleep in my hut. He slept on my bed, while I rolled up in a mat on the kitchen floor. Nobody ever knew this but ourselves. A native's hearing is much more acute and sensitive to strange noises at night than mine, therefore I thought by having aleko with me he might hear any foreign move before I could and by changing places a warning from him might give me sufficient time to become master of the situation, should such arise. Gordoni and Markruso took turns to lie awake at night while they slept in the boys' house just in case of any

undue activity.

Next night the Jap proposed escape once more while Honga was on duty, and Honga did his best to counter each argument. When the prisoner suggested breaking my radio, Honga replied that this would be of no avail because if I did not talk to the Americans first thing each morning they would send a party to look for me and these would soon overtake the escapee and kill him. It was with great surprise that the Jap learned there were any American forces close by. He wanted to know how many and where they were situated. Honga played up to him and said about 2,000 were camped just beyond the first ridge one could see from the lookout. The prisoner wanted right or wrong to climb up the tree and see for himself, and Honga had to resort to the old trick of instructing one of the guards to don the heavy boots. Then in a very surprised manner he said in Pidgin English, "Masta, he come" as the sound of heavy footsteps approached. In a flash the Jap was in his bed gasping and groaning. After Honga had related all this to me, I told him that he would be in charge of the party to take the prisoner down to No No Bay where he would deliver him alive and in good order to the Skipper of the flying boat that would alight there for him. I had every trust in Honga now and considered it better to let him select his own party and make his own arrangements after I had stipulated the time and date they would have to be at No No, and having already warned the canoe skipper to be standing by at the coast. Honga certainly made an excellent job of his preparations, the full details of which I did not know until he returned from his mission.

The night before the scheduled day of departure, Honga came on guard duty, obviously much annoyed about something, or so it appeared to the crafty little Jap prisoner, who was ever ready to seize any opportunity to cause a breach between me and my native scouts. Little did he know what an excellent actor Honga could be, for this was just a turn put on by Honga to get the Jap to walk into his net. Watching Honga's apparent smouldering wrath, the Jap spoke to him with actions calculated to be sympathetic, then after he had drawn Honga into conversation he once more tried to prove how much better off he would be if he were a friend of the Japanese, offering all kinds of wealth and power if Honga would run away with him. At this stage Honga began to nibble and ask questions, indicating that the little yellow man's persistence was gaining ground. By the time the new guard came on duty, Honga had decided that he would run away with the Jap provided he could take three of his friends with him who had also supposedly been wronged and wanted to run away. This was considered a good thing as it would weaken my position and give them a better fighting chance.

The time of departure was fixed for two hours before daylight, that being the commencement of Honga's watch, and he would see to it that the three friends would be on guard with him. Before starting on guard duty, the guard usually had a cup of tea, so it was decided that Honga would get a cup of tea and some biscuits for the prisoner, because they would not be able to stop for breakfast once they left the camp. "Little Japan man think this one good idea", related Honga. However, what the Jap did not bargain for was the

craftiness of the Solomon Island native. As soon as Honga realised that he would have to take the prisoner to meet the flying boat, he knew that if the prisoner were to sense he was being taken away for interrogation, then again he would feign inability to walk, and as time was precious once the rendezvous time and date were set, they would have to get him there even if they had to carry him as they did on the two days trip up from the west coast. Honga was determined they would not carry him for two days through all that rough hill country on the way to the east coast where the canoe was waiting. It was on this account I allowed Honga free rein to make the best he could of the task. He kept me informed of all of the plan up to the cup of tea and biscuits before leaving, but it was not until after he returned that I learned of the perfection of his planning. In his own mind Honga was a bit worried that as soon as the Jap realised the trail they were following, he would bolt at such speed that the boys would have difficulty in keeping up and, as he was duty bound to deliver him or witness his death, they must find some way of retarding his progress. So into the cup of hot tea they tipped an overdose of epsom salts with the idea of reducing his surplus energy as quickly as possible. The hot drink and the early exercise produced rapid results from the epsom salts. The Jap's progress was impeded every little while by compulsory stops decreed by nature, allowing the four scouts ample time to catch up. After a whole day of this, the prisoner was so exhausted by night that he did not need a guard, he was only too happy to sleep and would have slept much later had not his guards deemed an early start necessary.

The second day on the trail, the Jap was not the same spirited escapee he had been on the previous day and by afternoon, when they reached the canoe on the coast, he had lost all interest in his escape. Slowly it dawned upon him that he was being taken for a ride. As a safety precaution they bound his hand and foot that night on the beach, and in the morning when they released him to wash himself in the sea, he sulked and would make no attempt to do so. A little manhandling was necessary, so they dumped him in the water and two of the scouts scrubbed him with coconut husk. He seemingly had no energy to resist and took it. Later I asked Honga, "Why did you bother with him if he did not want to wash himself?"

"Keseko, this Japan man him 'e stink too much. Altogether boy belong canoe he say he no go along canoe althesame", replied Honga. I could not help chuckling at the primitive but most effective methods the boys employed.

After he had been taken from the water, the Jap refused to eat and put up a show of resistance when ordered to get into the canoe, then one of the boys tapped him on the head, thus inducing sleep - an old native custom. He was bound hand and foot and placed in the canoe, and the boys gleefully piled in on top and set to sea in their canoe, keeping well out from the coast to get the favourable currents. By dusk they had reached No No Bay without further incident. Here they camped on a small island which was blessed by a good spring of fresh water. The flying boat was due at 7.30am next morning, so they were up early and tended to the prisoner, who seemed far less stubborn and much more inclined to eat. Honga said he kept constant watch over the

Jap, because he thought his high spirits were only gammon and he was awaiting a favourable opportunity to commit harikari just to cheat them out of the final success of the mission. I have every reason to believe Honga's fears well grounded from my own experience of these people. I therefore give all the more credit to Honga and his party for successfully achieving this mission.

At 7.30am the flying boat alighted and taxied towards the island where Honga and his party were standing by their canoe, with the Jap once more bound hand and foot ready for the final stage of their task. As soon as the flying boat anchored, they paddled out and handed my note to the Skipper, requesting him to post some mail for me, the first I had been able to get out since I arrived on Choiseul. The Skipper then scribbled a note on a page of the Navigator's pad, advising me that he had received one skinny Jap, smelling like nothing alive. He also remarked, "I don't know what you have done to this beast, but he sure does look as though he has had the fear of the devil put into him, he certainly has been upset and I mean that literally."

I knew of the safe arrival of my prisoner at HQ a few hours later when a signal to that effect was received. Whether the information they got out of him was worth the effort I never knew, but it must have satisfied the news hungry base wallahs whose job it was to keep up-to-date the order of battle. It is just as important to know the whereabouts of certain enemy troops with an up-to-date estimate of their strength as it is for HQ to know similar information relative to our own troops, and prisoners are usually the best source of this information.

CHAPTER 15

Carden seton at CSA was suddenly surprised by a party of Japs, apparently landed from a submarine. They were about fifty altogether, and their function appeared to be much the same as our own. He kept them under observation for a few days and by then they had reinforced a force of about six who were maintaining an observation post on a high bluff close to the coast. Carden and his scouts had done a reconnaissance of the area only to discover that there was but one approach to their camp and that was from the landward side. A steep trail led up and passed between two high boulders beyond which the Japs had made all kinds of battlements, the entrance to which was guarded night and day by armed Jap sentries.

Carden had prepared quite a small army for the purpose of wiping out these isolated posts the Japs were setting up along the coast. He had close on a hundred natives trained to use Jap rifles and grenades. After twelve months of passive intelligence work, he was just dying to have a crack at these outposts. He had asked permission earlier to attack one such other party, but the Deputy Supervising Intelligence Officer (DSIO) on Guadalcanal forbade it. This time he was not asking permission of anyone; what is more, when the reinforcements turned up at the Jap post he contact Lt Snowy Rhodes, RANVR, at the Rikatta Bay on Ysobel Island, and in a private code the two

made plans for a combined operation.

Snowy had set out for Rikkata Bay with cases of gelignite and yards of fuse just about the time I passed through Guadalcanal on my way to Vella Lavella. I remember him at evening sitting with a pad and pencil designing a great variety of booby traps. "If it is not allowed for AIB personnel to deliberately open fire on Japs," Snowy said, "then there is nothing in the book of words about allowing a Jap to blow himself up with booby traps". So off he sailed for Ysobel to blow up all the Japs in the seaplane base there. Unfortunately for us, the Japanese High Command decided to evacuate Ysobel the very day after Snowy arrived. They packed up, lock, stock and barrel, and with all their personnel flew out, leaving Snowy in complete control of the island. For months he had been waiting for an opportunity to have a crack at the Japs and, now that Carden has proposed he should join his Guerilla band together with his scouts, Snow was all for it.

They worked out details of the task together during their secret sessions. Snowy was to travel from Rikatta Bay by canoe and join Carden on the southern tip of Choiseul: all this preparation was in vain, for the District Supervising Officer (DSIO) happened to plug in his speaker one evening and heard sufficient of Carden's final instructions to Snowy for him to put two and two together. He immediately interrogated the wireless operators and discovered a certain amount of code had passed between Snowy and Carden of late. AIB HQ received all signals, and private codes were forbidden. In this case the HQ operations on Guadalcanal had been worded by Carden and Snowy, and they used not to take such signals; however, DSIO soon put an end to that, for he sent a signal to Snowy which read, "It is the policy of AIB field parties not to engage in hostilities unless some are unavoidable or have been specifically sanctioned by this HQ".

Snowy immediately replied, "Request permission to undertake a small mission on South Choiseul". To this DSIO merely replied, "Snowy, Snowy, Snowy, you know it is not worth the risk."

Being robbed of his chief booby trapper, Carden then gave me the position of this bluff and requested me to give it as a target for the Air Force. Next day a couple of bombers came over, but they could not locate accurately the target area, so they did not drop in case they should drop on Carden's party. They then requested that someone with a knowledge of the area should be picked up by flying boat and act as spotter for the bombers. Carden was not personally acquainted with this area so he selected an old headman for the job. The native was as proud as Punch at being given the opportunity to show the airman where to bomb. He was sent post haste back to me for delivery to Munda. I arranged for a Catalina to pick him up on the coast, and, just when everything seemed settled, the Air Force thought it might be as well if Carden came, for they were not sure of being able to understand the Choiseul native. It was a good idea actually, for I could imagine the reactions of this old man, in a plane for the first time, excitedly yabbering in a very indistinct pidgin English. With Carden there he could talk in his native tongue and all would

be well. I sent a signal to Carden, who left as soon as he could organise his troops, who were to operate under my command during his absence. It developed into a humorous operation with me thirty miles away passing my commands by wireless telephone. Carden had schooled a native in the art of working his wireless, but in order to overcome the difficulty of codes, which it was not wise to leave behind, we arranged that all signals be sent in clear in the native tongue. To make it more difficult for our Jap eavesdroppers, two different dialects were used, both of which were known to the native operators.

Tomma, the old man who was going to direct the bombers, was a circus in himself. I heard shrieks of mirth coming from the boys' house one night when he was there, and I learned next day that he was giving a demonstration how he was going to drop a blockbuster right on the house where the Japanese were living. He had an impediment in his speech and he termed it a Bl-bl-bloc-bloc-blockbuster. He was a real showman with it all, and held his audience like a professional comedian. Next evening he put on a mock trial, whereon Gordoni passed word to me. I managed to take a seat in a dark corner of the house without Toma knowing I was present. I have never witnessed a native show like it - he was a master of taking people off. He did the complete show himself, with a change of voice for each. Of course, it was all in pidgin English, as all native trials are, in these parts. The accused was being tried for rape, and the way Toma cross-examined in the cultured voice of a district officer plus his own stuttering was the funniest thing I ever heard. I only wish I could write the whole thing just as it sounded to me, but that is quite impossible, for I am sure no-one but Toma could properly portray the scene made all the more brilliant by his excitement over the bombing mission scheduled for the following night.

Carden has instructed his corporal to keep a constant watch upon the Japs at Passero Point, and he had trained them in the art of making an ambush in case the inhabitants of this impregnable little fortress should decide to come out before they were blown up. It took a few days to organise the bombing, what with transporting Carden and Toma to Munda and making sure our own guerilla band was not in the danger area. When Carden had set out on this trip he had taken a fortnight's rations for the whole of his outfit and, although only one week had passed, the Corporal requested more rations the second day after Carden had left Passero for Munda. When I queried this, he said, "But Masta, altogether plenty soldier he stop now".

"Yes", I replied, "a hundred he stop and Masta Seton take Kai Kai plenty too much fit in a hundred soldier".

"True Masta", answered the Corporal, "but plenty too much soldier belong me fella he stop too".

Very surprised at this news, I said, "Soldier belong you fella him he got rifle, him he come along fight, how many he stop?" I was staggered by his reply, for he said, "Three hundred soldier he stop and one hundred soldier belong me, him he make he stop and some he catch 'im rifle belong Japan same he got

ackus (head hunting axes) belong him altogether him he want to fight. this three hundred soldier and one hundred soldier belong me, him he make four hundred soldier altogether vantem kai kai. Rice he finish now, Masta".

It appears word had spread that the Japs had landed a considerable quantity of stores from the submarine the night armed reinforcements arrived and this had been hidden somewhere in the vicinity of their fortress, although our sentries had not seen any taken into the fortress. I felt the best way to keep order amongst a mob of volunteer irregulars like this who had no regular leader was to give them something to occupy their minds and keep their stomachs full, so I talked to the Corporal and gave him his instructions to use these volunteers in a search for the Jap store in which they must have hidden their cargo from the submarine. I cautioned him the search was to be made by night and if possible without noise of any kind. Next morning when I spoke to Corporal he was greatly relieved the search party had found the store which was guarded by barbed wire inside of which a guard kept sentry. They had discovered all this on a reconnaissance, and then they returned to break through the wire silently, and they removed ten bags of rice and there cases of salmon without the sentry knowing a thing about it. This relieved the food situation considerably and the knowledge that there was plenty more available made the Corporal quite happy.

The bombing was ordered for next morning, so I told the Corporal to send another raiding party to the Jap store that night to carry off as much as possible before it was bombed, and, if necessary, to bag the Jap guards without noise, as their commander in the fortress would not want them any more.

In our radio conversation next morning, Corporal informed me they had visited the store and had taken another eight bags of rice and ten cases of fish besides many new blankets. he said there were all kinds of gear, including wireless batteries. A party of irregulars, armed with the long-handled small-bladed head-hunting axes (these museum pieces had suddenly come to light) had silently killed the six Japs comprising the guard. The two on duty were taken so unawares from behind that they fell without uttering a sound, and the four off duty were asleep so they were easily despatched to wherever dead Japs go, without even waking. There was no time to take more from the store, because I had stipulated the raid must be over one hour before daylight so that all hands could be back safely in the safety zone before the bombing, which was timed for seven o'clock.

At eight o'clock, when I talked to the wireless operator, he said the bombs had been dropped, but Corporal still was out with the party, consequently it was not until next session that I heard the results. One bomb had hit one of the buildings in the fortress, another had landed on the battlements, but unfortunately all others had fallen on the slope of the bluff -near misses but on such a steep slope quite ineffective. The Japanese living quarters had escaped, we discovered afterwards. I informed Air HQ of the results and they indicated they would like to repeat the dose next morning. However, the Japs

on the bluff had decided that such bombing was far too close, and that afternoon six were surprised passing through the village on the beach. Corporal was not present, but some of the scouts opened fire and killed one, wounding one or more of the remainder who made a hasty retreat back to their fortress.

That night the scouts heard sounds of an engine off the beach and, when they investigated as soon as it was light, discovered many Jap footprints on the sand. Tracking these they found the bluff had been evacuated during the night. A trail of blood and much blood-stained bandage proved that there was more than one wounded during the previous afternoon's fray.

The bomb which hit the bluff had demolished what appeared to have been a first aid post but the quarters were intact. So intent were the scouts on seeing everything that they were nearly caught by the next bombing raid, which opened up with a direct hit on the quarters, but alas, the Japs had gone. another hit the store below the bluff and made a bit of a mess of things there. However, it was all Jap equipment, so it was no use crying over spilt milk. The natives sorted out what was left and it was kept for Carden to inspect on his return later. The food and blankets were distributed amongst the unpaid helpers, who had never had such an enjoyable time in their lives, unless it was one or two of the old veterans who could recall in the dim past the blood orgies and cannibal feast which were the order of the day when they were young men.

Some members of the British Solomon Island Civil Administration had remained in the Solomons all through the Jap occupation. The resident Commissioner, Colonel William Marchant, was one, and at least two or three District Officers also remained. They were, of course, forced to go into hiding after Tulagi was evacuated, but it was good to know that they were prepared to share the fate of the natives of the Protectorate. Other Administration personnel who joined the services were: Nick Waddell, Dick Horton, Henry Jocelyn and Gordon Train, who held commissions in the Royal Australian Navy. Paul Keen, Frank Stackpool, held a commission in the AIF, and myself a commission in RAAF. all with the exception of Major Paul Keen, who was killed at Salamanda leading a commando raid, returned to the Solomons on special Intelligence duties first with the US Marines and later as AIB field parties at the commencement of the Coastwatching scheme. As the Allied perimeter enveloped island after island, the Civil Administration gradually took over again the handling of native affairs. It was customary for the Coastwatcher to hand over to the District Officer whenever the Coastwatcher was moved deeper into enemy territory; until such time the Coastwatcher was in complete authority over all natives.

A funny position arose whilst I was on Vella Lavella. Ganongga, a large island off the south-west corner of Vella Lavella, was under the surveillance of the Vella Coastwatcher and the headman, Granonga, knew that I must sanction any use of canoes by them or the lighting of fires etc. One day a messenger arrived on their island by canoe from Gizo further south with instructions

from the District Officer, Martin Clemens, who had just taken over in the Gizo district, that a working party of fifty natives from Ganongga was required to report to Gizo for purpose of cleaning up Government property there. Such an order in peace time would have been in order but under the new setup I was the highest authority Ganongga natives knew, so forthwith three headmen with a party of paddlers set off, a three day trip to me at Deneo to ascertain whether they should obey the command of the District Officer. As it happened, we suspected Jap submarine activity on the coast of Ganongga, picking up Jap outposts as part of an organised withdrawal to the north, and I had every village on the island intensely vigilant. Therefore, it was quite impossible to release any of the young men from this work to go to Gizo. I told the headmen to return and carry on their good work for Alb. I said that when all the Japs had gone, it would be time for the DO to take over the Vella area, and then I would send a special messenger to let them know. Quite happy and reassured in their simple trust in me, they returned to tell DO's messenger, "Keseke say, no man belong me fella can go along Gizo - plenty Japan man he walk about along sea. Altogether me fellow must look 'im".

Within a week of taking over the Coastwatching post at Wasso on Choiseul I received a signal from the DO Northern Solomons requesting completed pay vouchers for the paid scouts on Choiseul. This was a new one on me, so I consulted Nick Waddell, who had been District Officer, Choiseul, before the War. He informed me that they had been paying the Choiseul scouts monthly in the past, but since things had livened up and he had been kept busy, the accounts had not been completed to date - he said tell him anything or ask him to come and get them. I replied by signal, "Not available". He apparently did not like such a curt reply, seeing that he was a big Massa belong Government, hence back came another signal, "When may I expect pay vouchers in respect of pay for native scouts?"

I felt this was inviting action, consequently I promptly coded up and sent the following message, "You may expect pay vouchers in respect of native scouts on Choiseul when routine supplants Japs on this island. Signed, Spencer".

If nothing more was achieved, this pass certainly gave a laugh to the other Coastwatchers at the DO's expense. It shut him up completely and I was not worried any more by him, but this was a sure indication that the tempo of War in the Solomons was slowing down - the Japs were being pushed back, island by island. Choiseul was the most northerly island in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and was the last to be freed of Japs.

CHAPTER 16

Just one week before Christmas 1944, Gordoni, Markruso's brother, the Native Medical Practitioner (NMP) who was working one of our Teleradio sets on the east coast of Choiseul, just below No No Bay, called me up and said his charging plant had broken down and he was unable to charge his batteries. Apparently, the engine was working but the fault was in the generator and no

charge was going into the batteries. I suggested several tests that he might make, but Gordoni was a doctor not a mechanic, so I had no alternative but to make the trip across the island and see just what was the trouble. Before I left I called up the wireless office at Guadalcanal and got a few tips from him on how to test and where to look for the trouble. Then so that I could keep contact I charged up a very small and reasonably light Jap Zero aircraft 12 volt wireless battery that I had and one of the boys carried it in his pack. I reckoned on three days there and three days back, with one day to work on the engine, that would make seven days, so if we carried rations for seven days that would be plenty. When travelling over country like the backbone of Choiseul every ounce counts, therefore there was no sense in taking more than the bare necessities. I planned on being back on Christmas Eve, so we could look forward to a good celebration then. I took with me Markruso, who had not seen his brother for four years, and Gordoni besides an old man guide from a village near the camp. These four were all armed. As a party we would be big enough to protect ourselves yet mobile and small enough to hide easily on the side of the track should we run into a Jap patrol. The old man insisted on carrying the battery. I thought his spindly legs would snap, but he was as wiry and tough as they are made. His own effects were contained in a very small string bag, which hung over his shoulder - an old, old pipe, a few leaves, three betel nuts and a small bamboo container with lime in it. The lime was to bring the saliva to the mouth after chewing the betel nut, which has rather the same effect in the mouth as sucking alum - they take a little lime which makes the saliva flow rather freely, causing them to spit a brick red stain. One can always see when a native has been chewing betel nut by the red stains on the ground where he has been. It stains the teeth and lips the same hideous colour and, if not countered by the use of the green fibrous husk of the betel nut used as a toothbrush, the teeth in time go black. The old men consider this just the thing, but modern youth, who loves to change the old order the whole world over, has a tendency to use the green husk after each chewing, thus producing a magnificent whiteness of the teeth. Betel nut acts as a stimulant and, if chewed to excess, the native becomes quite drunk - his eyes get that bleary look, his speech becomes thick, and he does not care a damn for anything and will eventually curl up and sleep it off.

Our journey to the canoe house was without incident and the country was much the same as any jungle country I had passed through. We spent the first night at a half-way house of native construction - it was just a leaf roof without walls - where there was a bit of dry wood and a heap of ashes. Our guide said there was water close by. As soon as one of the boys had a fire going by rubbing two sticks together, we all decided to have a wash and at the same time get some water for cooking the boys' rice and my tea. The shower under the waterfall was wonderful, so cool and the water so clear. There were a number of Choiseul beds in the shelter - Choiseul boys believe in comfort, so they make a bed by cutting thin laths about two inches wide and six feet long from the bark of the betel nut palm, then they arrange these side by side with one end, the head, resting on a piece of wood about six inches high. The effect is quite like a spring mattress. I picked out the one I was going to use and rolled out my ground sheet over it, then it occurred to me that it might be a

good idea to try the laths, for often one sagged more than the other, causing a ridge or depression. The centre ones seemed to be too stiff, so I decided to move them to the outside and move the outside ones in. I rolled back the ground sheet and lifted the two centre laths and when I did so, to my horror there was a large snake coiled tightly with its head resting on its centre, fast asleep. I yelled, "Bring 'im come one fella stick snake he stop!" In an instant Gordoni was at my side but he had no stick. I said, "Get a stick quick time", but he looked first at the snake and then at me and said, "Him all right Keseko, me kill him die finish". With that Gordoni picked up a stick about six inches long and no thicker than a pencil. I watched him in astonishment, but he continued his preparations without saying a word. From his belt he drew his pipe and removing the stem he wiped the juicy nicotine from it with a splinter of wood. Then armed with this nicotine swab and the thin little stick he bent over the sleeping snake, while I looked on, amazed at his deliberate calm. Pressing the stick on the snake's neck he caused the reptile to waken and at the same time open his mouth, displaying a forked tongue which shot in and out, indicating how much alive and awake the snake now was. Gordoni, still keeping the pressure on its neck, swabbed the snake's mouth with nicotine. He then withdrew and we watched the instantaneous effect of the poison on the reptile. It immediately dived its head into the middle of the coil formed by its body, and the whole body commenced working, tightening the coil more and more until it was in a ball. Then a quiver ran through the whole length of the snake until finally reaching the tip of the tail. Observing this, Gordoni said, "Him he die finish now, Keseko".

I was not so sure; all this had happened in the space of two or three minutes, so I said, "Might be him asleep, no more, more better you catch 'im stick and break head belong him". At this there was a burst of laughter from all the boys in chorus, and Aleko picked up the snake in his hands and held it out for me to feel how hard it was. I could be convinced without handling the loathsome creature, so Aleko wheeled around and threw it like a cricket ball over the side of the gully and we heard it crash like a stone amongst the trees below. I have never made one trip in company with natives without having learned something useful from them, but whether I would resort to swabbing a snake's throat with nicotine on the end of a match, I have my doubts.

The next day we descended from a series of high razor-back ridges into a deep gully and eventually we came to a stony crossing on the river. Hot and thirsty, all hands after taking a careful look around, made off for a drink. I walked upstream some little way and putting my mouth in the water, drank deep out of the crystal clear stream, but I couldn't help noticing that the natives all went down stream from the crossing, each picking himself a large leaf from a nearby tree as he went. I had often seen them make cups from leaves before, but I was puzzled why they should go down stream, it being elementary bushcraft to know water below a crossing is more likely to be polluted than water up stream. After I had finished, I followed them; they had disappeared around a bend in the river. As soon as I rounded the corner I found there was a small creek running into the river here, and this is where the boys had gone to drink. A few paces up the creek water fell over a smooth rock and here they

were lined up before Nature's cocktail bar with their leaf cups. When I asked why they preferred this water, the old man explained the water in the main river up stream passes by a large village and therefore he always liked to drink in this small creek. Oh my, oh my! Never would I drink from a large river again! I would in future follow the boys and only drink where they did, when in country I did not know.

We reached the canoe house that afternoon, and the old guide left us there while he went and mustered the canoe crew. We slept the night in the house and walked on down the river to the beach and were picked up there by the big canoe early next morning. the tide being out, it was not possible to get the canoe fully loaded, so only a skeleton crew brought it down, the others walked on with us. We were away by eight o'clock and made good time down to the coast. The wether was moderately calm, so we kept going, landing once to make some lunch.

There were twenty-six paddlers in the canoe and they initiated me into all the different rythms they employ on long trips. This constant variation of time breaks the monotony of a long trip and is really quite fascinating to listen to. One instant they will be doing three long strokes then a short air stroke which hits the edge of the side of the canoe altogether resounding with a hollow drum note. This continues rhythmically until the stroke now calls another tempo, and without missing a beat all swing to the new time and so it goes on varying from fast slow, then one section will spell and pipes are unearthed from the little bag and the fire stick passed back. Each of these large canoes has a fire stick, a certain kind of wood which burns slowly without flame, and one stick about two inches in diameter and twelve inches long will provide all the necessary pipe lighters for the crew for the whole day. To light the pipe without a flame, they just knock a glowing ember off the end of the stick into the bowl and that's that. If tobacco is short they are not perturbed, an ember of larger size is put into the pipe and they smoke the charcoal. By late afternoon we entered the mouth of the river where I was to disembark and the crew hid the canoe and then made off to the nearest village, there to await word from me for the return trip.

Old man, I always called him this because I could never pronounce his name, much less spell it, our guide, then led the way on the final stage to Gordoni's hide-out. He was securely hidden, for we walked up the river bed for miles before taking to the hills, and just on dark we reached our destination. I quickly had Gordoni show me his set. We connected the Jap battery and I made contact with HQ to see if there was anything of outstanding importance from them for me because DEL had been off the air for three days. I copied the urgent traffic and then told them I would call them and report progress next morning. After a bite to eat prepared by Gordoni's cook boy, I set to work on the generator, making all the preliminary tests to ascertain the trouble. In the end I was no nearer the solution and finally concluded it must be the ampmeter which was at fault, but I decided to turn in and tackle it by daylight. Gordoni was very comfortably housed, and I cannot speak too highly of his hospitality, despite the fact that his larder was almost exhausted.

Next morning I had a look at the weather and while Gordoni coded it, I called HQ. By the time I made contact the weather report was ready so I passed it to them. Then I asked to speak to the Wireless Officer and, just as I heard his voice, the set began to fade, the dial lights went right down to just a glimmer, and the voice died away altogether. I quickly switched off, and then waiting a few seconds switched on again before the valves had time to cook, this gave the battery a chance to pick up and enabled me to say the battery was done and I was going off the air. It was flat again before I got a "roger" for my message, but there was the chance someone who may have been listening in had heard it and would pass it onto HQ if they had not received it. I could not make out why the Jap battery had such a short time until Gordoni informed me that when he came to the set it had been switched on; apparently I had failed to switch right off the evening before and it had been on all night. What a wasted effort it has been carrying the battery all the way from Wasso!

All that day I worked on the generator, taking it to pieces and putting it together again after some alteration, but every time the same negative result. I was determined to find out the cause of the trouble at least, even if on finding it I should not be able to fix it. The second day passed and then the third; then I realised the next day was Christmas Eve and we were supposed to be back at Wasso that evening. Well, there was no sense in hurrying back if the objective of the trip had not been accomplished. Next morning I stripped the generator and made an endeavour to remove the armature from the spindle - an easy matter if one has the right tools and has seen just how it fits together. It was late on the afternoon of Christmas Eve that the armature came off the spindle and, on examination of the inside, there was the trouble! The tell-tale blackening of the insulation indicated it has been burnt out. I tested the wires and there was no doubt about it, this was the trouble. This meant a new armature at least, so I was satisfied that I could now return and discuss the trouble with more certainty when I called up the Wireless Officer at Guadalcanal.

Christmas is always celebrated with a feast in native villages here, so I decided to wait until Boxing Day before starting back, thereby allowing my boys to have their feast as guests of the local village people. For me the outlook on the food situation was decidedly grim. I had eaten up all my own rations as well as what little tinned food Gordoni had in his store - all that remained was one small tin of Bully beef and a yam that Gordoni had produced. On Christmas morning I was sitting on the steps of the verandah reassembling the workable portion of the generator, when without any sound a strange native appeared before me. He had in his hand a small native palmleaf basket, and I looked up and said, "Hello! What name belong you?"

"Valisi, Masta".

"Well, Valisi, what something you want?" I asked.

Stretching out his arm, he replied, "Present belong you, Masta".

"present belong me?" I said, and taking the basket from him I looked in and to my joy and amazement found it contained some of the most beautiful ripe tomatoes I have ever seen, so freshly picked that the smell of the tomato vine

was still on them. I could scarcely find words adequate enough to thank him, but he did not want any thanks, apparently my appreciation had been sufficient for, just as silently as he came, he had vanished.

If I were to finish the story here, people would surely say, "why, it was the workings of a lonely man's imagination". But there is more to it. I had just picked up a spanner and commenced to tighten a nut, when a second native appeared in the same silent fashion and without waiting for me to speak stepped forward and offered me a large cucumber, saying, "A present belong you, Masta."

In amazement, I said, "Thank you too much." and he was gone, leaving me with the cucumber in my greasy hands. At last I began to take an interest in my Christmas dinner, bully beef, tomato and cucumber - why what more could one desire for Christmas in a tropical climate? I called Gordoni and remarked, "Why, look what Santa Claus has brought us!" holding up a couple of lovely tomatoes in one hand and the cucumber in the other. he came forward, saying, "Why, where did they come from?"

Before I could reply, a grinning little head popped over the edge of the verandah where I was standing and said, as he held out a pineapple almost as big as himself, "Present belong you, Masta." Before I could speak, he dumped the pine at my feet and was off like a shot out of a gun. Looking back to Gordoni, who was walking down the verandah, I said, "And why, here is the Christmas pudding!" I am glad I waited for Christmas because I thoroughly enjoyed my Christmas dinner, and never had I received Christmas gifts which have given me greater joy than these simple little gifts so unsolicited and so unexpected, yet so appropriate a token of appreciation from a grateful native people to the Allied Forces.

I gave Gordoni a demonstration of how to replace the armature and assemble the remainder of the generator, in case I should have a spare armature at Wasso. this would save me another trip across the island, but, as I said before, Gordoni was no mechanic, he preferred doctoring the ills of humanity, not engines.

Early on the morning of Boxing Day 1944, we left for Wasso, but when we arrived at the river we found it necessary to wait two hours before the tide was high enough to get out over the reef. Such a wait never used to bore me, for I thoroughly enjoy native company. There is so much one can learn, and a study of native customs is an endless source of interest to me. Provided you show a real interest in them and do not laugh at their simplicity, these people will by degrees unfold a wealth of interesting customs and folk lore.

By the time we were over the reef, the wind had freshened and the sea was mounting, making the paddling quite strenuous work. Before long I was made chief bailer, for we were shipping quite a lot of water, despite the ability of the boys to chop the crest off a wave with their paddle just as the wave commenced to curl on top. by slicing the top off a wave just commencing to

break, it continues on as a roller and the canoe rides over it, but if allowed to continue, once it commences to break, the top curls over and the whole force of the wave crashes down into the canoe - with rather unpleasant results, especially if you are a long way off shore in shark-infested waters.

It was quite a treat to come inside the reef into more sheltered waters; there was an inside passage here which stretched for some miles. The going was good until we reached the farther end, where it was necessary to come outside again to get around a very rocky headland. Here the sea seemed to be boiling, and there was quite a long conversation going on between the skipper and one of the older paddlers. Apparently they were discussing the advisability of trying it. Just then the wind seemed to lull a little, and without further hesitation we went at it. I was kept very busy, in fact one of the paddlers had to stop to assist me, for water was coming in faster than I could get it out, even though they had schooled me in the expert native fashion of using a native water scoop. It is made of solid wood carved in the style of a large sugar scoop, which, used rapidly a la native, makes a continuous stream of water leave the canoe as by a pump. With two of these going we were able to control the water, which was not only making it heavier paddling, but was diminishing our free board, which at best of times was not more than five or six inches.

As the bow swung around the bluff, we were caught on an incoming roller, which lifted us high and carried us forward with terrific momentum, the boys all yelling with delight as Neptune relieved them of their heavy task. Inside the reef all was fine until we reached the further end again, and here a similar headland obstructed the inside passage. We did not attempt it this time, but the man on the help paddle swung us into the sandy beach near two native houses and we all disembarked. The skipper informed me that it was too rough to make the next point, and that it would be best if we spent the night here and made an early start next morning before the sea became too rough. When travelling by canoe, I invariably place myself under the orders of the skipper, so what he considered best I was quite willing to fall in with. As soon as the canoe was safely beached, I sent my four scouts off to give the place a look over, paying particular attention to tracks in order that we might ascertain whether there were any stray Japs about. Fortunately, the east coast of Choiseul was not frequented by Japs nearly as much as the west coast, mainly I think, because of the rough seas on the exposed side of the island. The scouts returned with a unanimous verdict that there had not been anyone about the place for ages. The paths were overgrown with tall grass through which no-one had walked, and there was no evidence of any recent fires, while the water spring offered no evidence of anyone having been there for a considerable period.

Gordoni, my cook, set to and had a meal ready for me in no time and my pack had been put in the smaller house, while all the boys occupied the larger one about twenty yards away along the beach. It was four o'clock in the afternoon by the time I ate and, as this was the first meal since breakfast, I made short work of the few remaining tomatoes and some taro Aleko had been given in

the native village where he and Gordoni had gone with Markruso to spend Christmas. There was plenty of native food in the party, so I should not starve, and some of the canoe boys were busy trying to catch some fish for breakfast. As the tide went out the rim of the outer reef became bare, and I walked out with some of the boys and we were lucky enough to catch eight large crayfish the size of lobsters. Oysters too, were plentiful, so on the whole it was a profitable delay.

When it came time to turn in, I felt it was not wise to have all my riflemen in one house, just in case we should be surprised. The Japs, being absolutely unpredictable, it was just as likely as not for them to land anywhere here at any time. To play safe I told Aleko and Gordoni to bring their mats and sleep with me in the small house, leaving Markruso and the old guide, the only other armed members of the party, to remain with the canoe boys. Aleko and Gordoni were like myself, strangers in a strange land, for neither of them could speak nor understand the Choiseul language. Aleko told me that night of a beautiful young native girl he had met at the feast - he was always one for the girls, and was indeed a handsome lad himself. "Keseko", he said, "me look 'im this Mary and she look 'im me, then we make talk and Mary she no savvy, she laugh no more."

I laughed too, at this young Casanova, who was so cock sure of himself that he had not allowed for the fact that all the world does not understand the same spoken word. However, his travels had begun and his education was advancing apace. I have no doubt that this incident had grown into the experience of a very worldly young man by the time he told it to the young men of his own village on his return to his native island some months later.

Before daylight next morning, we launched the canoe and rounded the rocky headland before the wind had time to whip up a sea of any size. The wind had died down during the night, and the skipper considered it would start again as the sun rose, a prediction which proved to be quite correct. (I often think, since my return to civilisation, what an asset it would be if the Weather Bureau were to employ some of these old en to forecast the weather.) By the time we reached the beach from which we had picked up the canoe on our way out, the sea was running high again with a tremendous surf pounding on the shingle beach. We stood out beyond the first line of breakers for a considerable time while the skipper viewed the prospects. Ultimately, he held a lengthy conversation with a couple of boys who kept pointing to a small sandy cove tucked around almost behind the headland. This was sheltered from the force of the sea, although quite large rollers were coming in as a kind of secondary wave motion reflected off the rocky point. The tiny beach itself nestled between two very rocky patches, where after the wave broke and the water ran back, jagged points of black volcanic rock bared themselves, flashing a malicious warning in the bright sunlight. From the conversation and the pointing, I gathered we were going to attempt to swing the canoe around the point and make a landing on the sandy beach. To me it looked impossible without meeting disaster either from the surf or on the rocks. Once he has made the decision, the skipper stood in the stern with the long

sweep paddle and watched the rollers advance towards us, passing some remark about each as it lifted the canoe and ran under us. We waited and waited, sometimes making a spurt only to be called to a stop by the skipper who was picking the one wave in a hundred that would land us on that sandy patch. To me it seemed quite impossible, because it was necessary to start off by shooting one wave then just as it commenced to break we were to connect with the secondary wave motion reflecting off the point and trust that once we had managed to drop off the first wave, the second would then carry us forward in exactly the right direction, so that the canoe would land nicely upon the sand instead of being bashed with terrific force upon those flashing great black teeth, which arrayed themselves on either side of the small sandy beach. One might say, "What of the paddlers? Why rely upon the force of the sea to land you?" The answer is, the paddlers have not a chance of manoeuvring the canoe once the wave has properly gripped it. It shoots forward with terrific speed and, if the sweep man has not got you onto the wave in the right direction, there is little you can do about it.

Our skipper knew his job, several times he called for the paddlers to paddle like fury only to call a halt as the wave reached us, it not being quite the one. For half an hour we bobbed up and down outside the first line of breakers before finally our wave came, and the skipper called for everyone to paddle his hardest. By the time the wave came and caught us we were travelling at a fair speed with our twenty-four paddles, but, as the wave caught us and the canoe tipped forward over the crest of the wave, we sped along at a terrific pace, slightly at an angle to the course of the wave front; all the time we were closing closer to the rocky point. I could see the wave before us clash with a wave rebounding off the point; spray went up as the frothing top was blown off by the force of the wind. I thought we would do the same and all be catapulted into the water, but instead we just reached the spot as the rebounding wave joined with us, lifting us off the wave we were on, the boys yelled and paddled like mad, changing our direction almost ninety degrees.

For a moment it seemed as though the new wave was going to pass us and leave us to the mercy of the next clash, but with a super effort we kept in front until finally it curled and we shot ahead like a spear, and before I realised it the bow of the canoe had struck the sand on the beach. I was advised to sit still and all the boys jumped out waist deep into the swirling water, thus lightening the canoe sufficiently to allow the stern to lift over the next wave as it came crashing in, carrying the canoe and me high and dry onto the tiny patch of sand between those forbidding rocks. We had achieved, what had appeared to me, the impossible.

As I was already overdue at Wasso, I decided to push on immediately, and Gordoni, Aleko, Old Man guide and I said farewell to the canoe crew. While the three scouts were putting on their packs, I went up to the skipper and thanked him and his crew for a successful trip and, as soon as the boys were ready, I shook hands all around. One young fellow, whom I had noticed in the canoe, who had terrible scars on his back, stood to one side apart from the others as I went around shaking hands. I noticed it was his whole body and

not only his back that was scarred. I could not conceive how anyone could be so badly disfigured and live - it looked rather as if he had been burnt. I had seen one of the members of the RAF when I was in England whose features had been burnt off in the fires of a crashed aircraft who resembled this lad, but his face was not the only part, his whole body was scarred. Thinking he was sensitive about his disfigurement and had stood away from the others while I said goodbye, I made a special point of walking over to him and shaking his hand. As I did so, his eyes lit up and if he had been able, I am sure his face would have registered a smile, but his hideously contorted muscles never moved. He looked across at his fellows with such a look of triumph that I was pleased I had gone over to him especially.

As we plodded our way up and up on our way back I talked to Aleko and I asked him if he had heard what had happened to this native who had been so scarred. He replied, "Oh him! He got some kind of sickness."

"Yes, what name this sickness?" I asked, for everything is a sickness to a native, even an accident. "Fire burn him?" I asked.

"No more", replied Aleko, "him got this something sickness name belong you fella me think it." He hesitated and turning to Gordoni, he asked something in his own tongue.

"Talk belong Masta call 'im Leprosy." replied Gordoni.

"Yes", explained Aleko, "name belong you Leprosy."

"Leprosy!" I exclaimed, as I visualised myself shaking hands with him. I automatically looked at my hands to see if any fingers were missing. I have never felt so wretchedly unclean in all my life - I wanted water, why didn't we come to a river? I drew my water bottle and under pretext of having a drink, a thing I never did on the trail, I spilled the water over my hands. What was done was done, so I thought I had better enquire what the natives thought of Leprosy and lepers. The old man informed me that there was quite a lot of Leprosy on Choiseul - that I already knew, having had to draw maps of the various islands back in Tulagi in peace time for a Dr Innes, who was doing a Leprosy Survey of the Protectorate for the Government. Each interim report had to be accompanied by maps progressively indicating the areas surveyed and the percentage of Leprosy in the particular islands, but that is as near as I had been to a leper before the incident of this day.

Aleko told me there were two kinds of Leprosy prevalent on his island, one of which they made the afflicted live to themselves, the other, from which the lad in the canoe crew was suffering, none took much notice, as it was not contagious.

All I had read about Leprosy was in the Bible stories where everyone fled crying, "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever a leper approached. By this time were back at the large river crossing, where I had had my drink upstream of the

crossing. This time I followed the boys and drank from the lovely little stream around the bend. I also took a cake of soap and a towel with me and, after the boys had gone, I had a regular scrub up, returning refreshed and easier in mind even though such action may have been too late.

On we went, making good time, and camped the night where Gordoni poisoned the snake - I made sure to look under the laths this time before rolling out my ground sheet. The nicotine must have killed the snake because he had not returned to his old haunt. We broke camp early and were well on the way by the time the sun came over the hills. I was anxious to get back to DEL and to be on the air because we were already three days overdue and, with Carden away from his station, CAS when we left, my silence would be causing concern - all depended on whether anyone heard my weak signal proclaiming my battery was done, the morning after I arrived at Gordoni's.

With the Japs on the run in our area, lots of things could happen, the situation may change overnight, so not having been in contact with what was going on about me for nearly a week, I was keen to return and get into the picture.

We were heading into the last stage when suddenly the old guide made a low whistling hiss and stopped dead in his tracks. This was our warning signal copied from a type of locust. For an instant he listened. I could not detect a sound, but he said, "Two fella man he come."

"You look 'im", I whispered.
"Hear him no more", he replied.

We automatically dispersed for cover as silently as possible and waited. Sure enough next instant we heard a twig snap as someone approached along the path, then into view came Natali and Kilo, my chief scout whom I had left in charge, and one of the other scouts. It was a pleasant surprise for them when we all stood up, for they were just setting out to look for us.

Carden had returned from Munda to his band of Brigands at Luti and, not being able to raise DEL, had sent a messenger to Natali instructing him to set out immediately to look for me, as reports had come from Nick stating that there was a party of Japs travelling down the east coast of Choiseul in a large canoe. Carden was somewhat fearful for my safety, because it appeared we must meet the Japs before reaching the spot where we left the canoe to come inland.

Next day I earned from a runner who left the canoe house the day after us, that soon after the crew had put their canoe away, some of the boys saw a large canoe well out beyond the breakers and in were six Japs. Apparently it was a foraging party looking round for fresh gardens to loot. As soon as the boys saw they were Japs, they hid and watched them. The Japs attempted a landing on the shingle beach but gave it up and evidently decided to find a more sheltered spot further on. As they disappeared beyond the headland by

which we had landed, the boys went overland to the next bay, arriving there just as it was getting dark. by this time, the wind was at its height and mountainous seas were dashing against the bluff. They searched the bay but could not locate where the party had landed. When it became quite dark, they thought they would surely see their fire, so they climbed up the back of the high rocky bluff and sat in the wind watching, and eventually gave up.

The natives camped in the native house where I had disembarked and, next morning, while searching for footprints of the Japs along the beach, they discovered a Jap cap but no footprints. This made them very curious, so they walked along the rocks towards the base of the headland, and there they found a few bunches of bananas, a couple of pineapples, paw paw and sweet potatoes strewn about amongst the rocks, washed there by the tide. Then a little further on, pieces of wreckage from the canoe and a dead Jap soldier, terribly cut about the head from being dashed on the rocks. Intensifying their search over about a mile of coast, they found the bodies of all six Japs, who had apparently met their end while trying to pass around the rocky headland.

They had either been swamped or the canoe had been caught in a swirl and dashed against some of these gigantic saw teeth rocks which had given me an uneasy feeling as we passed them during the morning. No matter how expert a swimmer was, there would be little chance where the currents swirl in and out amongst the rocks; at the same time, the water level rises and falls eight to ten feet every time a wave dashes its volume and terrific weight of water into the bubbling, boiling mass.

Once more I said a prayer of thanks for the natives who were fighting with us. My native skipper knew the coast well enough to call a halt before we ended up as the Japs had done. The natives, being hostile towards the Japs, would not accompany them, hence on such a treacherous coast they had met disaster.

I was not surprised on hearing of the Jap party in the canoe, for something told me there were Japs in the vicinity when we spent the night on the beach on the way back. It was this feeling that made me take the precaution to split our armed force between the two houses in which we slept. When I spoke to Nick, he said he had been very worried about me and was mighty glad to hear me on the air, and he was very pleased to hear what had happened to the half-dozen little brutes - we always spoke in veiled language when conversing on the air.

CHAPTER 17

Shortly after my return to Wasso, I received a stack of messages all in together. I had Aleko and Markruso working at high pressure decoding, while I was working on another one. The two boys had completed the message and were reading it over together when I looked up. "What does it say?" I asked.

"Ah! It is something about the President of the United States", said Aleko.

"What, is he coming to DEL?" I asked, as I walked over to them at the table and looked over their shoulders. One group seemed corrupt and they were trying it another way. Just then they substituted the new letters, and I read: "For Spencer. You have been awarded the American Legion of Merit for gallantry by the President of the United States. Congratulations."

Well, this was too much. I read it over again to make sure I was seeing right. Aleko looked at me and asked, "What does it mean, Keseko?"

I had to explain what it was to them and I am afraid, in my elated state, I was not very coherent. It was fortunate that we decoded this message first, otherwise we would never have known what the other signals were. Most of them were messages of congratulations from fellow Coastwatchers on our wireless net.

It was months before I knew for which particular exploit I had been decorated. It was not until after the presentation when passing through Guadalcanal on my way back to Australia. The decoration was for my part in the landing operation on Tauagi and Tanambogo and for subsequent patrol work with the Marines.

The wireless officer at HQ apparently had little faith in my mechanical or electrical ability for, instead of sending an armature as requested, he advised me that a new charging motor was being sent up to Munda for despatch to me. Shortly after this came a signal from Munda indicating that an Air Force bomber would drop one case of engine by parachute on my garden area, and also requested that I make smoke fires along the centre of the area to give the bomb aimer a guide.

On the morning of the drop we lit fires and waited, then as the indicated hour approached, we heard a bomber flying high. A few minutes later it approached at tree top height and roared over our heads, rather to the consternation of the natives. The pilot made two more dummy runs, then on the third a case fell out of the bomb bay and came hurling down with terrific force. The parachute did not open, so instead of floating onto the garden area it fell short through the tall timber with a crash which echoed around the hillside. The boys had overcome their fright and were off to locate the "one case of engine", but it was no longer one case, for the case had split asunder and the engine had parted from the generator, and they were located yards apart. Such things to happen in the best of regulated services. Actually, we were now little better off than before, therefore I sent word to HQ who promptly sent me another, this time with a request that it be flown to No No Bay by the flying boat. This was a much better scheme, for it obviated the necessity of carrying the engine all the way across Choiseul. However, just to make up for the disastrous drop of "one case of engine", the Air boys flew in some mail for me - the first I had received in six months. I took the signal indicating that they were going to drop and requesting me to have the usual

smoke fires. A few minutes later we heard the drone of aircraft. I was just decoding the message when Gordoni called out that it was the same aircraft that dropped the previous day. By this time I had decoded sufficient to know they were going to drop my mail at the same place same time as the previous day's drop. Calling all the boys I raced down the hill to the cleared ridge where we were growing some sweet corn and potatoes etc. The aircraft was circling around and we were making frantic efforts to get a smoke fire going but do what we could, we could not get it to burn - everything had been drenched in a terrific downpour just a little earlier.

It was evident that the aircraft intended to drop in the next run, so I had the boys wave their lava lavas while I stood on a high stump and watched the tiny bundle leave the plane. It had no parachute, just a long red and yellow steamer which trailed out as it fell. If it had been dropped one second sooner, it would have been a direct hit for the ridge and, as it was, it overshot the crest of the ridge and, as the fall on the far side was very steep indeed, it carried on a tremendous distance before finally disappearing into the tall jungle timber in the gully below.

From my stump I was able to see it all the way. I kept the line in view while I called the boys and explained where it had fallen. They went off down into the dense tangle of trees and vines, cutting their way with long knives, while I directed them by keeping them on the right line from my stump. They searched and searched for over an hour, when, extremely disappointed, I gave up and returned to my work. Some of the boys continued to search but I was not very hopeful, for I knew what a tangled mass of vegetation there was in the gully and the chances of finding a small bag six inches wide and eighteen inches long seemed very slight.

"A for Arthur, O for orange, X for x-ray, L for London, B for Bob, over," blurted the speaker, as I copied the last group AOXLB of the message and switched on the transmitter, "DEL to RJH, DEL to RJH Roger", I said into the microphone and switched off the set. Turning to the coding table, I started to decode the message when out of breath, Aleko entered, his face gleaming with triumph and shining with perspiration as he proudly displayed a small green canvas bag attached to a long red and yellow steamer. I could not believe my eyes and before I could utter any kind of exclamation, Aleko said, "Me find him, Keseko!"

"Good boy", I replied, "altogether boy he come back".

"No more", he grinned, "me no tell altogether, time me look 'im me no talk me run along bush and come up dis fella path", he said, indicating the path which entered the camp from the opposite direction. He had left the others still looking to be sure he would be the first to break the good news to me.

It was certainly good news, a red letter day; in fact a red letter day with red and yellow streamers day!

There were about thirty letters, some of them nearly twelve months old, but that did not worry me, and it was all news from people for whom I cared. One letter, I remember, was from Allan Cocks, then a pilot in the RAAF. He used to be one of the Patrol Leaders in the 1st Enfield Boy Scouts when I was Group Scout Master not so many years before. It amused me to think of him now a Flight Lieutenant; he was one of the lads for whom I felt partly responsible for having joined the RAAF. I had taken on Scouting just after my return from three years in RAF, and the lads of the Troop used to be very keen to get me talking about flying and my experiences, and I do not doubt this caused a number of them to choose the Air Force when the War came and they made a choice of which service they would join. At this stage, after joining up as an ACI in the RAAF, I had an amusing experience of having to salute Les Osborne, who was another Patrol Leader in the Old 1st Enfield Troop, but who now was my superior officer in the Air Force. Les was then a Flying Officer, who finished up as S/Ldr RAAF, and who had been sent to Singapore during the Jap invasion to study Jap bombs. He was flown out a day or so before Singapore fell to bring back the knowledge he had gained.

Eric Swain joined the army and put some of his expert Scouting knowledge into practice. Last I heard of him, he was a Lieutenant, but I have not seen him since he was Troop Leader of 1st Enfield Boy Scouts.

These are but a few of 1st Enfield Troop who gave sterling service for their country during the War; others made the supreme sacrifice and their memory enriches the annals of Scouting.

The War was moving to an increased tempo. By now the Allied might had had time to assemble and every day found our front line further and further into what had been Jap occupied territory. We were now firmly established at Torokina on Bougainville, the large island immediately north-west of Choiseul, and this made Choiseul of secondary importance since the Jap lines of communication had been cut and the forces on Choiseul were more or less isolated. Barge traffic, which prior to the Jap evacuation of Kilombangara, had been very active along Choiseul coast, was now non-existent, and all the Japs on the island were heading towards the foreshores of Bougainville Straits with the forlorn hope that they might be ferried across to Buin or up to Kieta on the east coast of Bougainville.

Our work evolved into locating their camps and, just as they were nicely settled, a bombing raid was invariably timed to catch them while in greatest concentration, such as while they were all eating.

They varied their times and habits, but not sufficiently to hoodwink the all-seeing eyes of our native scouts. As soon as their camp had been located and blasted asunder, causing a general scatter, the remaining Japs would find a new place even more protected from the air, where they would commence building anew. We were never in too much hurry: it was better for them to become firmly established and lulled into a false sense of security by our aircraft keeping right out of the area, then it was to keep on harassing them

continually every other day, because unless troops are massed, a target which is not clearly defined from the air is a waste so far as maximum bombing results are concerned.

We worked from gridded aerial mosaic maps, upon which we could locate a target and, even though it be not clearly defined from the air, the bombing crews would drop on the map pin-point and it needed seeing to believe the accuracy of these crews. sometimes they were American Marines and sometimes New Zealand Air Force, but all did a rally excellent job. the estimate of 7,000 Japs on Choiseul when I first arrived had been decimated without landing any troops on the island. Three Coastwatchers and an army of native spies were all that was needed to direct the bombers with such accuracy that practically every mission was a winner.

This was a revolutionary form of fighting, but then was not this War revolutionary in its whole conception? Upon reflection new that the War is ended, may this not be just a dim shadow of the armyless war of the future? I say war advisedly, for the World will never survive more than one of the future type.

It is frightening to contemplate control that one man may possess over squadrons of super long range robot bombers carrying loads of atomic bombs to lands on the other side of the World, making it possible for him by the pressure of one finger to release merciless destruction and obliteration to half the World and probably to the entire World.

Armies and Navies with their absorption of excessive manpower will have no place in such a war, for the end will be before such could be mobilised. The blow will be struck not in the battlefield but in the heart of humanity - in the homes of the people.

I was just finalising preparations to go up to Nick in the north of the island, when I was suddenly recalled to Brisbane. It came without even a whisper of what was afoot and at first, I thought I must have done something to cause the wrath of the powers that be, but it turned out that I was wanted at Guadalcanal for the presentation of my Legion of Merit and, as AIB activities in the British Solomons were on the verge of finishing up, I was recalled to Brisbane, where after a few days leave, I was given another assignment as Assistant District Supervising Intelligence Officer (DSIO), New Guinea.

The arrangements for picking me up came through very quickly; a flying boat was to land at No No Bay four days hence to take me and my two boys back to Munda. This was Aleko's home island, from which he had been away for over two years. He was thrilled by the prospects of seeing his people again, but he tried to persuade me to take him with me on whatever job I was going to do. He would have been most useful to me, if I had known beforehand what I was going to do, but at it was he was returned to his native village.

At the news of my departure, Carden closed CAS and returned to Wasso to

take over DEL again. I then set off with Gordoni and Aleko and a party of carriers for the canoe house on the east coast. The whole trip was uneventful, and the canoe journey was as smooth as though it had been on a mill pond, in vast contrast to my previous trip along that coast.

We spent the night on the island in No No Bay and next morning, the flying boat arrived at the appointed hour. The coconut wireless had been at work, for by the time the flying boat was due, there were about sixty canoes in the bay and I had some difficulty to have them all rounded into one spot in order to give the pilot a fair go alighting. The American crew could not understand why the natives would not accept American coin for their curios. A native would shake his head whenever they held up their money. One airman said to me, "Say, what is the matter with these people, they won't take money?"

I suggested, "You try him with an old towel or an old pair of underpants, anything rag."

"Okay", said the airman as he dived below and soon returned with an old dirty pair of underpants a few seconds later.

Immediately there was a surging of canoes to the spot where he reappeared. Old men stood up and displayed all kinds of bangles and trinkets which they were willing to trade for the airman's old garment. Soon the remainder of the crew were producing better results bartering pieces of rag, sweat rags, handkerchiefs, old shorts, anything they could find, and the natives were falling over each other to do business.

We stowed our gear and Aleko and Gordoni proudly climbed aboard; just as I got aboard, Old Man guide who had once again led a party across, came up in a borrowed canoe to shake hands. I thanked him for his services and made him a present of some tobacco, then feeling in my pocket I found a sky blue handkerchief, which had the RAAF pilot's wings worked in one corner and, showing him that it was the same as the wings I wore over my breast pocket, I asked him if he would like it. He was so pleased and eager to have it that he nearly fell out of his canoe. I let him draw alongside the flying boat and then put the handkerchief around his neck with the crested corner down his back. My, you would have thought he had been awarded the Order of the Garter, he was so pleased and his face fairly beamed. With the paddle in one hand, he gave me a snappy salute and was off, I suppose to lord it over the other old men.

Gordoni and Aleko looked at each other with a very scared look as the Catalina gathered speed over the water and the force of the water drummed on the thin metal hull, but once we were airborne they came out and set in one of the blisters to watch everything. They became greatly excited as we passed over the village where Aleko had met his pretty young native girl at the Christmas feast, then as we flew over the ocean for quite a way, they lost interest with what was outside and became intensely curious to see the works inside the boat.

When we reached the Cat's mother ship, I will never forget them - they came to the blister to see the ship we were passing over and, as they watched, the pilot put his nose down and dived at the bridge. For an instant Aleko and Gordoni stared as the ship seemed to be racing up to meet us, then both together they turned away and covered their eyes with their hands while their faces went many shades lighter.

Later on after we disembarked, I asked them what they thought of flying. They seemed to like the idea of travelling from one place to another quickly, but Aleko said, "Me frightened too much time this fella ship him come up quick time, close up he hit 'im balus." After this experience of flying he was ready to believe anything, for he apparently thought the ship by some means or other had suddenly rushed at the aircraft, not realising the pilot had dived on the ship.

Another pleasant surprise awaited me at Munda. The Officer in Charge of AIB there handed me a signal on arrival, which read, "For Spencer. You have been promoted to Flight Lieutenant with effect 3 April 1943." This meant I had been a Flight Lieutenant for twelve months and had not know, still it represented a tidy sum of back pay.

CHAPTER 18

New Guinea was new ground to me, consequently I was used on the receiving end of the intelligence net, stationed at Finchhafen. We were the HQ for the New Guinea network, just as Guadalcanal had been HQ for the Solomon Islands network.

It was very interesting doing the job from this end for a change. One gets a better conception of the whole of the AIB organisation and a better appreciation of the importance of the work of field parties. When Allied HQ moved to Hollanida, Dutch New Guinea, the US 5th Air Force moved from Nadzab to Owi Island, just off the shores of Biak, that bloody island for which the US Marines paid so dearly. I was then posted as AIB Liaison Officer to 5th Air Force. To reach Biak, I had travelled on the Royal Australian Navy ML. The initials stand for Motor Launch I am told, but it infuriates the crew for their speedy little craft to be termed a Motor Launch. They are more in the same class as the US Patrol Torpedo Boat, carrying depth charges etc for anti-submarine work.

Setting out from Finch, I travelled as far as Madang on an American AP boat, then the RAN took me over and I boarded the ML 217, commanded by Lt Cmdr Doyle, RAN. It was a most enjoyable trip, the weather being perfect and the itinerary of the boat was all the recently recaptured spots where Allied landings had taken place. It was extremely interesting to me for, having taken part in the first US Marine Campaign of the War, to see the new methods and improved equipment that had been used on these very recent campaigns

proved how the Allies were constantly developing methods and equipment to meet the demands of this new type of warfare. Where we had landed from the Higgins boats which were terribly mutilated by the coral, the newest landing barges were all metal with a wide ramp on the bow which lowered as soon as the barge reached the shore and, in next to no time, the troops which it carried were out and under the cover of the jungle.

Of course, the Japs too, has improved their defences, and the toll of life on both sides was considerable on all of these landings. The tangled masses of equipment and the battered pill boxes and store dumps on the foreshores bore grim testimony to the fury of the onslaught. The coastline was strewn with wrecked barges, Allied and Jap, packed one against the other. On all spots where landings had taken place, scarcely a single green shoot of vegetation remained. Palms, trees and dense jungle thicket had been cut to pieces by the withering barrage from the Navy standing off shore, and great gaping holes had been blasted in the coral by the nicely placed bombs of the Air Force supporting the landing. The scene of such devastation is bad enough, but the smell of the improperly interred dead, which always pervades such places, is nauseating in the extreme. I had been through it all, living in this atmosphere on Tulagi, Tanambogo and Gavutu.

I had no wish to refresh my memory of its awfulness; it was not idle curiosity that took us from place to place. I was there as a member of an Intelligence party for the express purpose of observing - one of the most distasteful jobs I have ever tackled. If it were not for the little spots of humour, such missions would be unbearable, but there is always humour for those who can appreciate it.

Entering Hollandia Bay, that lovely harbour with its ring of blue mountains superimposed on its skyline, we pulled alongside an American Liberty Ship, which was at anchor some distance off shore. The Skipper had business aboard the Liberty Ship, while masses of native canoes came out in the hopes of doing a little trading. The Officer of the watch on the Liberty Ship would not allow the natives to come alongside his ship, but the Officer on board the ML was keen to obtain some kind of native curios, so he did not mind them coming alongside the ML.

I stood by and watched with great amusement, the ML's crew do some very smart dealing. The natives were rag hungry, anything in the shape of a garment or a piece of cloth, no matter how old, was sought eagerly by all. For a pair of worn out greasy shorts, they would give three Japanese Occupation Notes. The denomination of the note mattered not, because this money was worthless except for its souvenir value, and as such its face value did not matter.

The Australian crew of the ML were getting rid of all the old rags they could muster to the natives, then with a handful of occupation money, they would walk across their ML to the side of the Liberty Ship, where interested US sailors were ready buyers for the occupational paper money at one dollar per

note - at such a price, is it any wonder I saw one of the Aussies tear a sheet into about eight squares and trade them one at a time to natives, then sell the occupation money notes to the Yankees for sixteen dollars?

From Hollandia we went to Aitapi, Wakde and Owi and finally to Biak, where I was rowed ashore in a dinghy, complete with my gear and, with a wave to the remainder of the party, I set to, trying to locate my party who had flown up with the equipment from Nadzab. They were due to arrive about five days ahead of me, since I had been on the ML for a week.

Where I landed seemed to be miles from anywhere, a fact I discovered later, and it was by pure chance I was landed behind our own lines instead of the Japs'. I walked up the beach and stood on a very muddy track, hoping someone would come along in a vehicle. At last a truck crashed through the bushes and swung onto the "highway" (a foot deep in slush). It turned out to be a Marine truck which had just been delivering supplies to the troops in the US perimeter. I asked how far I was from the Airstrip and was told about six miles, so needless to say I climbed aboard with my kit.

We went about four miles along this incredibly rough road to more or less civilisation, at least it was an American camp and a certain amount of order had been evident although the roads were still a foot deep in slush. This was as far as the transport could take me, but there seemed to be plenty of vehicles moving about here and it was not difficult to get another lift in the direction of the Airstrip.

Once at the Airstrip I made enquiries for the location of AIB personnel, but none seemed to know anything about them. I considered for a while and decided the best person to contact would be the man who drove them to their destination. I therefore enquired of an Officer which unit was responsible for the fleet of trucks and jeeps working at the Airstrip transporting men and material as they arrived by air. He gave me the name of the particular transport unit and directions where its HQ might be located. I left my bags in his care while I plodded off through the mud to where the unit was located.

On making enquiries, I discovered that this unit was on Airstrip duty only every third day, so this was not the crowd I wanted, but they gave me the whereabouts of the unit that was on duty the day my men should have arrived. They were too far away to walk, so I had to hitch hike again, this time in a garbage truck, sitting up like Jacky amongst the overflowing garbage tins.

The negro driver pulled up and yelled back to me that this was the unit I was looking for, so thanking him, I jumped out. For once my luck was in. Waiting in the HQ tent to see the duty officer, was the very man who three days ago had transported my party and their equipment to their destination, which proved to be close at hand and where a large number of RAAF lads, who were passing through, were quartered. I immediately saw the officer-in-charge and obtained a bunk for the night at least, or until such time as I made contact

with my party.

It was a treat to be amongst my own countrymen who were all members of my own service. This was the first time I had slept in a tent with a crowd of RAAF lads during the whole of my War service. They were one of the squadrons moving up to Noemfoor Island, where the RAAF had gone in with the landing troops on D day.

They were mostly aircrew, who had nothing to do but await transportation, but they were happy to lounge around in their tents clad only in a pair of trunks or more often in their birthday suits indulging in that age-old pastime "spine bashing".

This was a lull in their activities, having operated recently from Nadzab, but they were keen to get to Noemfoor so that they could get cracking at the Japs once more. To most of them I was a curiosity, especially being RAAF and a pilot to boot, for none had ever met a Coastwatcher before, although they were familiar with our intelligence reports.

I was inundated with all kinds of questions, many of which, of course, it was impossible for me to answer; our work, being of top secret nature, was never discussed and given no publicity in any way until long after the War had ended.

The American officer-in-charge of this transit camp was able to throw some light on my lost party. He had booked them out on the previous day, when they had loaded all their wireless equipment etc into a large truck and had departed, he knew not where, but advised me to contact a certain motor truck pool, which he thought most likely to have supplied the transport.

I set off once more along the muddy road - there was no necessity to walk on the road but off it - there was mud of a sticky type which clung to the boots and made going very heavy while on the road. The mud was churned up to porridge consistency and was deep enough to cover one's boots, yet it was easier to get through and, as my boots had been wet since I arrived on the island and there was every indication that they would remain that way, why worry? At the pool I was advised that enquiries would be made from all the drivers and if I called back next morning, they would let me know what success they had met. Returning to my tent, I was asked to join a party going for a swim.

There are no formalities about a swimming party in Biak. We stripped in our tent and set off with a cake of saltwater soap each, wearing only our boots. Once always wears boots on Biak, because of its sharp pointed coral which is everywhere on the island, inland as well as on the coast. I have never seen such a mean, vicious, inhospitable island. The south-western end where the landing was made consists of a narrow coastal flat a few hundred yards to a mile wide, all coral. Then on the inland limit of this coastal strip a coral cliff rises up precipitously about three hundred feet, beyond which there are

undulating hills of coral formation covered with scrub and tall timber.

What the timber grows in I cannot tell; the roots of huge trees twine in and out of the great cracks in the coral, some of which I have failed to bottom with a ten foot pole. These cracks are particularly dangerous when walking through the scrub, for one is liable to put one's foot into a crack, mistaking thin cover of dried fern for solid ground.

The foreshore is just as inhospitable, for there are scarcely any patches around the entire coast. Not only is there broken coral on the water's edge but jagged lumps of coral stud the bottom, making it almost impossible to swim. The lads I went with knew the best spot; here there was a tiny patch of coarse coral sand, just of sufficient size for five of us to stretch out and to dry off after the dip. It needs no effort on Biak to get a good suntan, that tropical sun certainly had power. Even in the sun on this little patch of coral sand, it was cooler than in the tents, for here we had a sea breeze which did not reach our tents. We went in again and had another dip, just before leaving, the idea of this being that the heating caused by walking back was just sufficient to dry us off, and we arrived back at the tent dry and not perspiring as we would have been if we had dried off before walking back.

It was nothing to meet a party of a dozen men clad only in boots walking along the road, either going for or coming from a swim. In these early days on Biak water was scarce, although plenty fell every day in the form of tropical downpours, so the sea was the only place to have a wash.

That evening the Americans had a picture show going, so we went across and, as usual whenever I was in a place where pictures were, an air raid alarm sounded half-way through the picture. There was a stampede for cover as all lights were extinguished on the island. Not having any particular shelter to go to, I perched myself on a high rock, where at least I could see what was going on. Very soon the drone of Jap bombers could be distinguished, then the drone of our own night fighters from Owi climbing to the bombers' height.

Suddenly Ack Ack opened up and I could see the line of tracer shells shooting upwards. The Jap was very high and next instant there was a deep thump followed by another and another, then a fire shot up in the direction of Biak strip. a few seconds later we could hear the Ack Ack defence from Owi accompanied by a few more explosions. It was a pretty piece of work on the part of the Jap, for he had laid three eggs down the middle of Biak strip and one bomb and had caused an aircraft to explode, that being the fire I could see.

He was not so lucky at Owi for most fell in the dense jungle to one end of the strip. The Ack Ack had evidently put him off. When the all clear went, the pictures continued, and most of the crowd made their way back to see what happened to the innocent young country girl who had just arrived in New York.

Next morning I went back to the transport pool and there they had the young driver who had taken the party to their camp site. He was detailed to take me and my kit to them. It was little wonder that none knew their location, for they were certainly far away from anyone except the Japs. It was about four miles from the strip up on the rim of the high coral cliff over a terrible bush track.

Eventually we arrived and I was reunited with my party once more after being on Biak nearly a week looking for them. In the scheme of things it appears Biak was destined to be a large base, and we had been allotted this place by the American Official whose duty it was to plan the base.

My job was to build AIB's Comonotor wireless station at this spot, but a more unsuitable campsite I don't think it possible to find. The place where the lads had pitched the tent, which acted as wireless tent and quarters for them, consisted of incredibly sharp coral with great cracks and crevices large enough to step into. It was so bad that they had to make a rough floor of saplings.

The second day they were there, the young American lad who drove the truck that brought them returned with some rough sawn boards, which he had scrounged from somewhere, so the wireless tent was beginning to look more business-like.

We owed much to the kindly interest of this young American on the truck, for he kept us in provisions and even cans of water, since the campsite was not blessed by any permanent water. Intermittent water supply in the form of tropical downpours was in great evidence and, after we erected a couple more tents, I had one large tarpaulin spread out as a catchment area, and by this means it was possible to collect enough water for washing ourselves.

It was a standing order for whoever happened to be in the camp during a downpour: they would see to the filling of the water cans by catching the water which ran off the top of the tents. By this means we were able to provide a requisite supply of drinking water, also water for cooking purposes. The water in the tarpaulin was then used exclusively for washing ourselves and for very limited washing of clothes but, as it was so hot, we used to wear very little despite the warning I had received from the Americans on arrival that Biak was notorious for scrub typhus.

I decided to wear as little as possible because I maintained the scrub typhus mite, which gets on the body from ferns and off damp logs, was less likely to get the opportunity of burrowing into the skin if there was no shirt neck or sock tops for it to get down. The parts of the body most attacked by these mites, I was told, were around the ankles or around the waist. The reason for this, I maintained, was that the mite either fell off the leaves or was brushed off as one walked through the jungle and when one wore a shirt with an open neck and short socks, which invariably concertinaed just above the top of the boot or they fell down between the garment and the skin until their fall was checked by a tight belt or the tightly tied top of boots. Here they had time to

burrow into the skin and infect the body with their terrible disease; but if there was no place for them to lodge then they merely fell off the body, as they did from the leaf without causing any infection.

I had six men under me in these early days at Biak, and I informed them of the warning I had been given from the Yanks, and I also expounded my own theory, then told them to choose for themselves whether they wore regulation clothing - long pants, gaiters and shirt - or followed my lead of wearing as little as possible. Yes, we would even go naked while working on the building of our camp. The latter style had the added advantage that you did not have to be continually washing your shorts and shirts. If you don't change into clean clothes every day, the wearing of sweaty clothes causes skin disorders, tinea and dermatitis.

Of the six, four were for the nudists and two chose to stick to regulation dress. Within the first four weeks on Biak, five of us were as brown as berries all over, and both of the other two were suffering rather acutely from prickly heat and ringworm. Finally I had to order these two to spend at least twenty minutes every day sunbaking in their birthday suits, a practice I discovered later, adopted by many other Australian Units large enough to have their own Medical Officer.

Often Americans have come to our camp and remarked, "say, aren't you guys scared of getting scrub typhus getting about like that?" I would always reply that this was our method of preventing it, and I think it was significant that we remained in this area for about four months and did not suffer one case, while the American troops all around us suffered very high percentages of scrub typhus cases.

CHAPTER 19

Not long after I arrived at Comonotor, the Dutch section arrived from Merauke on the south east of New Guinea. This party had its own wireless and was in direct contact with their field parties in islands to the north-west of New Guinea.

The Dutch Naval Lieutenant in charge was a man with a rare sense of humour, but his humour was sorely tried when he arrived at Biak and found what a dump the place was. They had been told by HQ that their camp was ready for them to walk into. Some base wallah in Brisbane had worked out a theoretical schedule without any knowledge of the hardships that face a small party arriving at an island close on the heels of a great concourse of invasion troops.

Everyone was so set upon digging themselves in that we could get no assistance whatever. My party had to make wireless contact as soon as we arrived, and that meant two men on duty twenty-four hours a day. With two on duty, two were always resting, that left two others and myself to build the

camp and, as we did not have a cook, we had to do the cooking whenever we could.

We were four miles from the Airstrip (the hub of our universe) and, as we had no transport, movement to anywhere was difficult. When the Dutchmen arrived, I gave them a pyramidal tent, showed them the site and said, "It is all yours." They had been so used to being spoon-fed that they had even brought a crate of half a dozen hens and a rooster, but it was amazing how they learned.

The Lieutenant, when I gave the tent said, "But I have never put a tent up in my life."

I remarked, "Well, just try your hand at this one."

That afternoon I went around to see them - they had moved in, four Indonesians, two Dutchmen, one Dutch Officer, six hens and one rooster.

A few days later Lt Sprag came to me and asked if I could get him a few buckets in which to catch water. We did not have any, but the next day I did a hike around the American Stores without success. When I told Sprag there were none on the island, he exclaimed, "But whatever will we do?" That, of course, amused me; however, I offered the suggestion that seeing a Dutch plane came up twice a week from Melbourne, why not send a signal requesting half a dozen buckets?

He thanked me most courteously for the suggestion and immediately sent a signal to NEIHQ in Melbourne. In very short time we had a reply from his chief: "For Sprag. What do you want these buckets for?" When I gave him this signal, he was furious, and rushed off waving the signal. When he returned, he said, "I have told them why I want the buckets." I said, "Yes?" Then he handed me the signal he had sent his chief, "I want the six buckets to put on our heads during air raids."

He fumed and went on a treat, but later when he had cooled off, he regretted having sent the signal, so followed it up with one explaining they were required for the purpose of catching water. It was more than a high Dutch Official in Melbourne, well fed and comfortably quartered, could conceive, just why anyone would want six galvanised iron buckets.

The buckets arrived by the next plane without any further comment. I liked Sprag much better after that and he, too, seemed to fall into the spirit of things on Biak much better.

By degrees we marked out our new campsite, and then a neighbouring American works battalion cleared it overnight with a bulldozer, but we were still hampered by lack of transport. It was impossible to obtain shipping space for our two jeeps, truck and water cart, which were rotting at Finchhafen; to make it worse the truck position on Biak was most acute.

Finally in desperation one day, I went to see the American Task Force Commander, who gave me a priority for a captured Jap truck. To collect this meant a journey of about twelve miles down the coast to the ordinance depot. I hitch-hiked my way down and saw the parties concerned. Eventually, I was given a three-ton Chevrolet dump truck, which had been captured by the Japs in the Philippines and brought by them to Biak and which had been recaptured by the Americans on landing.

It had been issued to two units already, and now I was getting it. By the look of it, I was sure its history card was authentic - it was a pearl. The mechanic who started it advised me to have the brakes fixed before using it on the hills as none of them worked. I promptly got out of it and said it would be no use to me, for I had to go up a very steep hill to return to camp. It was not just an ordinary hill, but a twisty one where there was one way traffic, and often one would have to stop on the rise to allow downcoming traffic to clear the hill, and a vehicle without brakes would be out of the question.

When I explained the smallness of my unit and lack of suitable tools, the mechanic set to work on it and made the foot brake work. As proud as Punch I drove off, thinking how the lads would all cheer when I drove in on this chariot. They assured me before leaving the depot that there was plenty of petrol and oil, but half a mile down the road it stopped - out of petrol! I had to hitch hike back to the ordinance depot where I collected a can of gas and they took me back in a jeep.

With fuel, Matha responded once more and I set off, first stop a petrol dump which displayed a large sign "FREE GAS". How I wish there was a dump like that in the street where I live now! I don't know who the original Matha was, but some-one had painted the name in white letters on the front of the radiator.

My next stop was an oil dump, and this was just at the foot of the hill road, so I was making in the general direction of the camp. Just as I had pulled up at the oil dump all the personnel with the exception of one young lad had gone off to chow. I asked if I could fill up with oil and was told all I could get would be a 44 gallon drum. I said, "Right, I would take a drum." This, too, was free, but the problem of getting a 44 gal. drum into a high truck without adequate assistance was not so free and easy. However, after much exertion and a little science, we managed to roll it up two poles.

I thanked the lad and started Matha - if nothing else she started easily, or at least, I should say the engine did. I pressed down on the clutch pedal and put her into gear, let in the clutch - but nothing happened. I thought I had not engaged the gear, so I tried again, still no better results. Then I found I could move the gear lever without moving the clutch pedal - something seemed to have come adrift, but I could not fathom it.

There was an array of levers in the cabin. I tried them all but nothing

happened. The engine kept going, but do what I might, I could not get the gear to engage and turn the wheels. By this time it was growing late, the sun had set, and I was still three miles from camp, so I decided to leave Matha where she was and send out for her next morning.

One of my men professed to be a bit of a motor mechanic. The American lad at the camp assured me Matha would not be in the ways - there was naught I could have done about it if she had been - so I decided to abandon her as I wanted to make camp in daylight, because being so close to the perimeter, often Japs had been encountered on the road by vehicles after dark.

Next morning I sent the mechanic to see what he could do, but on-one had heard of the truck. It had vanished during the night. Whether the Japs took it or whether it fell into the hands of some enterprising Yanks we never knew. All I did know was that I was the proud possessor of a truck for exactly three hours. As I did not have the heart to go back to the Task Force Commander and ask for another, we just managed as best we could, hoping sooner or later to meet up with Matha on the roads, but we never did, and had to continue hitch-hiking until finally our own vehicles arrived from Finchhafen.

We had one man travel on the ship with the vehicles and two others sat on the docks all one day and night while they were unloading to make sure they were not stolen. Despite this, one had the head lamps complete and the battery stolen, and the other lost the windscreen, and the windscreen wiper was taken from the jeep.

This all happened apparently on the way up, as they were all complete when they left Finchhafen, and we had our drivers into them as soon as they were swung ashore, otherwise we would never have seen them.

Vehicles were terribly short on Biak, so the easiest way to get one was to steal it and paint a new number on it. MPs were forever checking numbers with history sheets, but whether they ever traced lost vehicles I don't know, for they certainly never found any we ever lost - in one week at Finchhafen we lost two jeeps.

A few days later I happened to be waiting for an aircraft at one of the "Piper Cub" Liaison Squadrons at Finchhafen, where I picked up a copy of their daily news sheet and, in a column "Bouquets" some member of the squadron was thanked for the lovely little jeep he had acquired - it was such a boon, the article continued, to have something to convey the boys from the Airstrip to the mess instead of having to walk through the slush and mud on the road.

I noted the location of this squadron's mess and shortly afterwards a couple of us went to the pictures at their show. We arrived in one of our own jeeps but, when the pictures came out, we were off to a flying start in two jeeps.

Once we had our own water cart and other vehicles, things began to move along apace, and we managed to get a priority for the works battalion to build

our camp - a large wireless room, store and office in one building with a real galvanised iron roof and a packed coral floor. We had a very comfortable mess and kitchen combination and a separate building to house the electric power plant.

On Biak, we had a very high-powered wireless transmitter, hence the electric power plant which also supplied power to the whole camp. What a difference to Vella Lavella days, when our only light was a small 12 candlepower bulb run from the wireless show on the surface of the table and no more.

This was fighting a war in comfort to be sure. Our strength had increased to about thirty now, so, of course we had a full-time cook, but alas we were apparently too much for the cook, for he went completely tropo and had to be returned to Australia.

Although we were very comfortable in our new camp, I wanted a short length of hose pipe to rig up a shower. One of my men said he had seen some rubber tubing on a Jap dump not very far from the camp but hidden in a particularly dense patch of jungle. However, the need was great and I set off one afternoon to look for this dump. I had become so accustomed to being about the camp without my automatic pistol that I wandered off and was quite a way from the camp before I realised I was not armed. I hesitated and then decided it was too far back now, so I kept on going.

As I entered this dense, dark patch of jungle, I began to feel I would be happier if I were armed. Everything seemed so still, an uncanny stillness that gave the impression that someone else was there and had silenced the jungle creatures by their mere presence. I stopped every now and then, endeavouring to hear some sound that might give me some clue.

Suddenly I came upon the Jap dump - there were burst bags of rice scattered about, all growing whiskery fungus in the damp warm atmosphere. The remains of a small native-built shelter sprawled in a collapsed state over a quantity of other junk, all in an advanced state of decay, then, just as I made my way over the heap, my boot kicked a Jap helmet and, as it rattled away, I noticed there was a skull inside it.

This was not the place where I was to find my hose pipe; I had been told of the old food dump by my informant. On I went and soon I came to what appeared to be a chemical warfare dump - there was all manner of gas equipment strewn about and, sure enough, some one inch hose pipe - the very thing I wanted.

Being so elated with the success of the mission, I quite forgot my uneasiness of a short time previously, and decided to keep on going along the very narrow jungle trail, thinking it must be crossed by one of the roads which ran back behind our camp area. I had not gone very much further before I distinctly heard a rustle in the undergrowth, which brought me to an instant stop. Listening intently, I tried to distinguish any foreign noise above the thumping

of my accelerated heart beats, but all was quiet. Cautiously I moved forward, avoiding putting my foot on anything but the carpet-like mossy fungus, which deadened any sound of my tread.

Then again, to one side I distinctly heard the snap of a twig which halted me as abruptly as the whistle of a bullet might have done. I was now positive someone was stalking me and, again, I experienced that awful feeling of being in enemy territory unarmed. Now I wished I had gone back for my pistol, or better still, that I had asked one of the lads to come with me.

We often heard Japs in this area at night; apparently foraging parties would break through the perimeter for the purpose of going over their old dumps, or possibly in hopes of locating some of our ever-increasing supplies. We would hear their machine-guns in an exchange with American patrols as they surprised them. On such occasions we would extinguish all lights and take cover, for we never knew which party would fire if they happened to stumble upon our clearing during such an engagement.

I was not quite sure that a Jap was following me; maybe there was more than one. I remembered seeing the end of a bayonet protruding from a heap of junk back where I kicked the Jap helmet - I now wished I had picked it up, for all I had was a small sheath knife on my belt. It could be quite effective at short range with its heavy brass knuckle duster handle, but no match for a Jap if armed with some form of firearm.

My best tactic would be, so I thought, to try to get him in front of me, without his knowing it, of course. I started to walk on cautiously, picking my steps, until I reached a bend in the path, then I sped along a dozen or so paces in very quick time and noiselessly slid in behind a large tree to one side of the path. I paused a moment and all was quiet except my heart, so quickly I lay down in the dense undergrowth with my head near the side of the path in order that I could see anything coming along the way I had come.

A well-tanned body clad only in green shorts is easy to camouflage in the jungle, tensely I waited developments. If I were being followed I would certainly soon know, and I had no intention of taking it lying down; or it would appear that was just part of my tactics, for most plants grow a few inches from the ground before they have leaves or branches; thus it was easier for a dog or small animal to see through the jungle than it was for a man whose eyes are on a level of the thickest jungle growth.

With my head near the ground, I could see much further in front of me. Just then I heard another twig break. He was coming! Tensely I strained my eyes to see, and then another sound, a little closer, indicated he, too, was off the path. I half knelt up, grasping my knife in my right hand so that I should see better through a window in the foliage, but nothing came into view. Then a rustle of leaves quite near made me pause noiselessly, expecting my adversary to be on top of me any instant.

He too was listening. I fancied I could hear him breathing, so close was he, but still I could not see him. Apparently my stillness was bothering him: he was not quite sure where I was. If only I could remain so quiet until he stumbled upon me at close range, I would have a fifty-fifty chance, no matter how he was armed.

Surprise is always the best form of attack. I waited and it seemed so did he. With the last noise so close, I thought I must chance another dog's eye view, so quietly I got down on my chest and peered through the undergrowth in the direction of the last noise. My eyes met two piercing eyes, less than a yard away, of a big boar pig. I jumped to my feet in time to hear him crash his way through the tangle of undergrowth in the opposite direction and, I think, if possible, he had received a greater scare than I had.

That night, or at about 2am next morning, we had an air raid alarm and six Jap bombers made a nuisance raid over Biak and Owi Strips. I remember it because it was one of the finest scraps I had witnessed. The radar gave the warning and the night fighters were up to welcome them. The whole sea and islands were bathed in a glorious moonlight - they always were when the Japs came over. We could hear the night fighters cracking away at them, but the droning grew louder as they approached the target area. As soon as the first bomb hit the Biak Strip, all the searchlights came on and all the Ack Ack defences opened up, the sky was criss-crossed with tracer arcs and the huge pencils of light from the searchlights waved to and fro searching for the enemy plane.

Once for an instant it flew through a searchlight beam but was lost again as the pilot executed some form of avoiding manoeuvre. All my ads were up watching the fun and, with a sudden yell from one that the lights had him again, everyone was brought out of the tents as the barrage opened up with greater intensity.

Ever so slowly it seemed to be moving, intent on its job of destruction as the bursts of anti-aircraft shells approached it. "They have got his height", said someone, when next instant a yell of wild enthusiasm went up. "Got him!" "You beauty!" The Jap had burst into flames and was falling like a comet with a long tail of fire. Further over towards Owi we heard another Jap planting his eggs with the resounding thrump! thrump! thrump! and then another comet appeared - a kill to the Owi guns.

Suddenly, all lights switched off and we heard the night fighters chase the remainder. This was the last air raid and grand finale on Biak and, as far as the Japs were concerned, it was a suicide raid, for all six were accounted for by the Air and ground defences, and only two dropped bombs in the target area. So closed another chapter of the War.

CHAPTER 20

AIB Comonotor Stationon Biak never fulfilled the real purpose for which it was established, because the Allied advance gained such momentum that no sooner had our field parties been landed behind the Jap lines than Allied advance forces were establishing anew beach head on the spot and, when General MacARthur moved his HQ from Hollandia to Philippines, the work of Allied Intelligence Bureau, as originally constituted of Australians, Americans, British, Dutch and Filipino, was virtually completed.

We still had parties in New Britain, New Ireland and Bougainville. As the Australian Army took over the task of mopping up the Japs in these parts, our parties either reverted to the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit control or were replaced by ANGAU patrols.

Quite a number of AIB personnel in New Guinea were former members of the Civil Administration, and it was logical for them to resume office in ANGAU as soon as that Unit was formed as part of the Australian Army.

I came back to Hollandia to relieve the Naval Lieutenant in charge of AIB station there while he went further south to have some urgent dental treatment. I spent two weeks there acting as Liaison Officer to the US 6th Army, which was just preparing for the Philippines offensive. I witnessed the whole staging of that huge organisation being stowed on to ships and setting sail.

Shortly afterwards, as soon as the man I was relieving returned, I went south without returning to Biak. I had been suffering from a fresh outbreak of carbuncles and boils, so DSIO persuaded me to return to Brisbane for treatment. I flew from Hollandia in a four engine Douglas, what is now known as a Skymaster, direct to Brisbane non stop. I had breakfast at Hollandia Bay, travelled 17 miles along the scenic road along the edge of beautiful Lake Senagi to the Airstrip. Eight and a half hours after taking off from Hollandia, I arrived in Brisbane in time to sit down to a very good dinner.

Something humorous happened at the meal. I rang my cousin, who lives in Brisbane, on arrival at Amberly and , of course, was invited out to the evening meal. It was late when I arrived at their house, but dinner had been delayed for me. Nevertheless she said, "I know you could do with a hot bath, so I have one already run for you." That was too much of a temptation to stand up against, so I made straight for the bathroom.

As soon as I was through I was called to eat and, as I went into the dining room, Essie squeezed my arm and said, "I have something very special for you tonight." When the sweet arrive, she announced that this was the surprise - Bartlett pears and junket. AS she dished them up for Walter and me, she said, still overjoyed at the thought of being able to supply such a rare treat on the spur of the moment, "Aren't they beautiful?"

Summoning up all the enthusiasm I could muster, I replied they were really delicious, at the same time trying to stifle a cold shiver at the thought of more

confounded pears.

We had been fed on pears so much that it is a wonder we did not look like Bartlett pears, and what should I have on my first night home but more pears! Of course, I could not tell Essie then and spoil her elation, and she would not let the subject drop either, for she must recount how they happened to be part of a stock of tinned food that they had sent up to their cottage in the mountains, when the Japs were getting perilously near, and which only the other week she and Walter had been up to retrieve, because these tinned foods had been absolutely unprocurable during the War and, knowing they had a stock, they felt it silly not to use them.

Once back in Brisbane I reported to AIB Supervising Intelligence Officer, who told me that the show was practically over as far as our organisation was concerned. Subsequently, I was posted to RAAF Command, where first of all I sought treatment for my carbuncles, which had been plaguing me for over twelve months. As soon as they were cleared up, I was given a medical board, after which I was given my discharge on medical grounds. I accepted this with mixed feelings. I wanted to see the job through to the end of the War, but then the thought of being stuck in a base job in Australia after the intensely interesting service I had had, made me welcome my release.

I was discharged on 5 March 1945, three years and three days after my enlistment. Three months after my return to Civvy Street, I was surprised one morning when reading the paper to discover that No 256323, Flight Lieutenant C E Spencer, RAAF, had been mentioned in despatches for service with Allied Intelligence Bureau in Solomon Islands and New Guinea.

When the cessation of hostilities came so soon after my discharge, I was glad to be out, feeling satisfied I had at least done my share.

all I hope is that the spirit of the old legendary native Keseko will look with favour upon my activities amongst his people, and that he will forgive me for adopting the revered name of Keseko. I also hope that in telling the tale of my own experiences as a Coastwatcher, I have successfully portrayed the loyalty and devotion of the Solomon Island natives, upon the efforts of whom my success depended.