

A Tribute to the Coast Watchers of the Pacific Islands

1 “An Overview”

“Lest we Forget”

Commentary compiled

by

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During the early years of WW 11, one may argue that Australia had become a little complacent about security due to its remote geographical location. However, pride and support for King and Country was at the forefront in the mind for most young Australians, resulting in large numbers of volunteers joining the armed forces to combat the Germans.

The war seemed so distant that it did not overly concern most Australians, other than for the wellbeing of their country's finest young men and women who had been shipped overseas to serve in other theaters of the conflict. The comfortable lifestyle in Australia went on as usual, and the land of plenty continued to provide an agreeable existence, for most residents, despite the distant European war.

However, the entry of Japan into WW 11 was a wake-up call for many, especially following the rapid collapse and occupation of Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and parts of the Indonesian Archipelago and the Philippines, during 1941/42. This, together with the unprecedented speed of aggression southwards, through the Pacific Islands, made Australia an obvious target for the Japanese Imperial Forces, particularly following the bombing of Darwin. Suddenly, Australia became a vulnerable target, partly because of its relatively low level of military preparedness. Australia's vast wealth of mineral resources would always be an ongoing ambition for the Japanese. So, the continued well-being of country became a matter of great concern, for Mr. and Mrs., average Australia.

Volumes have been written concerning the Pacific Campaigns of WW 11, much of it overshadowing the heroic exploits of a relatively small band of allied operatives, known as the **“Coast Watchers”**. It is of these, brave few, this short narrative is concerned.

The progressive occupation of the Pacific Island by the Japanese aggressors stimulated the Australian and New Zealand military commands to expedite the urgent need for intelligence, concerning the movement of Japanese troops and naval forces throughout the Pacific region. A Coast Watcher Service had been formed in 1939, but the imminent conflict brought about the need for the rapid expansion and

deployment of the “Coast Watchers”. These Coast Watchers were also referred to as the Coast Watch Organization, Combined Field Intelligence Service or Section C, Allied Intelligence Bureau.

New Zealand had developed its own Coast Watching measures from the 1930s. From the outbreak of war, the New Zealand Naval Board controlled Coast Watching stations located around the New Zealand coastline and in the eastern Pacific. Stations were established in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Tokelau, Samoa, Fanning Island, the Cook Islands, Tonga, and Fiji.

Coast Watchers were covert allied military intelligence operatives, stationed and strung out amongst the remote Pacific islands during World War II, to observe enemy movements and rescue stranded allied personnel. The Coast Watchers reported on Japanese troop movements, warned of attacks by sea and air, and saved countless civilians, downed airmen, lost soldiers, and shipwrecked mariners – (one of which was to become a future US President, John F. Kennedy).

Mostly Australian, with some British, New Zealand and American members, the Coast Watchers hid in the dense jungle on the various remote Pacific Islands, continually moving their location to evade detection by enemy patrols, all the while reporting their intelligence via tele-radios. The Coast Watchers' exploits in the Pacific Islands in World War II clearly demonstrated the extraordinary influence a few individuals could have, even in a global conflict, involving thousands of combatants. Coast Watchers became particularly adept in monitoring, and observing Japanese military activity and movements, in the roughly one thousand islands that make up the New Guinea and Solomon Island groups. Avoiding detection by simply vanishing back into their remote jungle hideouts. These bands of Coast Watchers became a real source of irritation and annoyance to the Japanese military, mainly due to their elusive capabilities.

Originally confined to Australia, the Coast Watching Service was bolstered after the outbreak of war in 1939 to include New Guinea, and to the Solomon Islands. About 400 Coast Watchers served in total—mostly Australian military officers, New Zealand servicemen, Pacific Islanders, or escaped allied prisoners of war, as well as members of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate Defense Force and 13 civilians. Most were commissioned with honorary ranks, usually in Military Reserve Units, to provide a modicum of protection under the Geneva Convention, if captured by the Japanese. However, the complete disregard by the Japanese Military for the Geneva Convention, applicable to Prisoners of War, has been well documented. Regrettably, some Coast Watchers were unfortunately captured, and were summarily executed by the Japanese.

What made their valor even more deserving of praise and recognition, was, Coast Watchers undertook their duties at a time when there was no certainty that the allies would be victorious against the seemingly unstoppable Japanese onslaught. During these uncertain times, knowing their fate if captured, the Coast Watchers risked their lives, when the Japanese exercised total control of the regions in which they operated. They played a significant role in the Pacific Ocean theatre and South West Pacific theatre, particularly as an early warning network during the Guadalcanal campaign.

As described, the Australian Coast Watching network was established to provide information on the movements and disposition of enemy forces in the South Pacific, drawing upon the local knowledge of inhabitants throughout the area. Their operations were code-named **FERDINAND**, from the children's storybook character, Ferdinand the Bull. In the book, Ferdinand, the main character, unlike all the other Bulls, refused to fight. The code-name was selected as a reminder to the Coast Watchers that it was not

their task to directly fight the enemy, but rather to observe and report on military information they procured. The intelligence that they gathered played a significant part in the execution of the war in the Pacific.

The establishment of a formal Coast Watch network had first been thought of early in 1919. In March 1922, the Combined Services agreed that a Coast Watching network in Australia was a necessity, but it was left to the Admiralty to establish and administer the network through the Royal Australian Naval Intelligence Division. By the outbreak of WWII, hundreds of Coast Watchers had already been recruited throughout Australia and the South Pacific. Responsibility for the network fell to Lieutenant Commander Eric Feldt, RAN, Staff Officer (Intelligence) Port Moresby. Lt. Cdr. Feldt first joined the RAN as a midshipman in 1912 and retired as a lieutenant in 1922, when he relocated to New Guinea and became a local administrator, somewhat similar in capacity to a Kiap. He re-joined the RAN when WW II began and was a superb selection for the task assigned to him, due to his experience and knowledge of the region, its peoples and geography.

Cdr. Feldt toured the territories during 1939, recruiting additional Coast Watchers as he went, and set about obtaining more tele-radios to fill the gaps in the network. The additional Coast Watchers and their tele-radios were in place by August 1940, all of them civilians excepting for one naval rating. Each Coast Watching station transmitted its coded messages to receiving stations at larger allied hubs, such as Port Moresby and Rabaul, which, in turn, forwarded them on to the Naval Intelligence Division HQ in Australia, for evaluation and dissemination.

In 1941 **FERDINAND** started to become a more formal naval operation. Cdr. Feldt moved to the newly established Combined Headquarters in Townsville, while new Intelligence Officers were appointed in Rabaul, Port Moresby, Thursday Island, Tulagi and Vila, each overseeing a network of civilian Coast Watchers. Cdr. Feldt assumed overall control with the new styled title of **Supervising Intelligence Officer, North Eastern Area**.

Whilst the intelligence network was becoming more structured, the sheer distances involved meant that decentralization was equally essential so that individual Coast Watchers could act on their own initiative. Cdr. Feldt encouraged self-reliance and a wide decision – making scope for the Coast Watchers, based on the notion that being isolated in the jungle, they alone being on the spot were the only real competent judges of their own prevailing circumstances.

The Coast Watcher's operational area stretched from the border between New Guinea and Dutch New Guinea in the west to Vanuatu in the east. The Coast Watchers themselves were all experienced islanders, mainly white Europeans who had settled in the territories, Administrators, District Officers, plantation owners, miners, coastal ship masters, and others familiar with their territory, some having married local women. As a group they were tough and resolute, proud, and independent, they were aptly suited to the deprivations they would experience over the ensuing years. Many spent countless months isolated and concealed in the jungle behind enemy lines, while continuing to provide intelligence which often proved to be crucial to the execution of the war.

All Coast Watchers relied heavily on the support of the Indigenous people. Most native islanders remained loyal even in Japanese occupied territory, and many died carrying out their duties, in defiance of the brutal aggressor. The bravery of so many native peoples has been understated in many cases,

without whose help and assistance the Coast Watchers would have been hard pressed to function to the level of efficiency they attained during the Pacific Campaign.



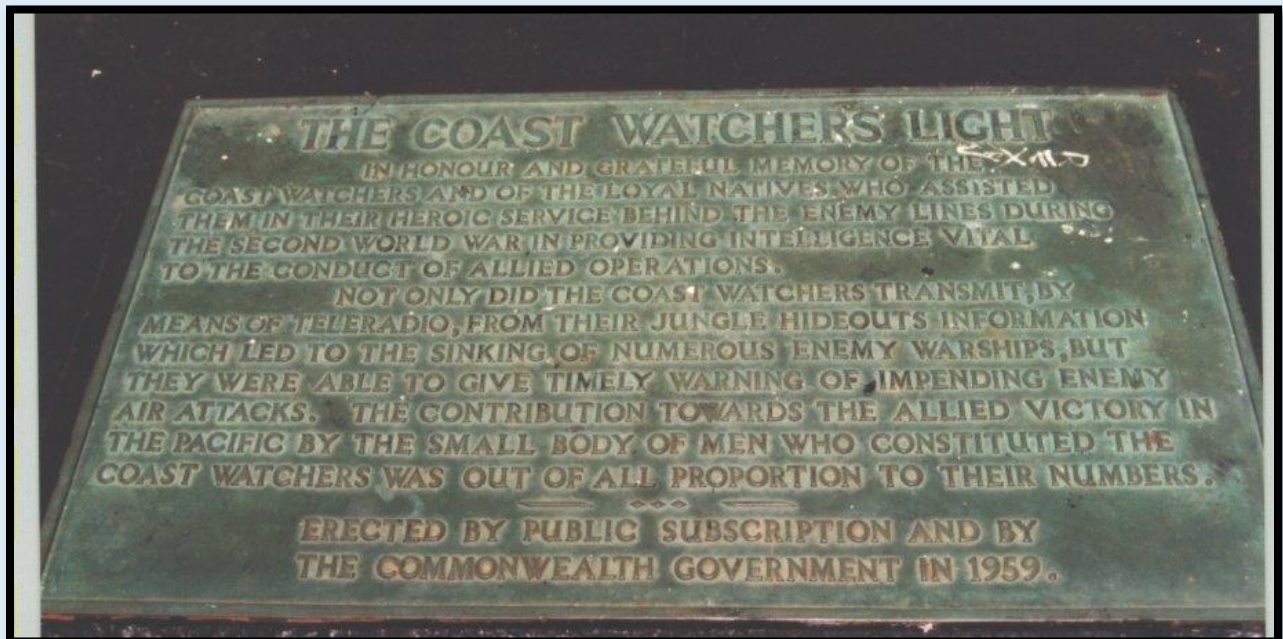
The Coast Watchers Memorial Lighthouse at Madang, in Papua New Guinea, erected by the Commonwealth Government in 1959. The Plaque reads:

"In honor and grateful memory of the Coast Watchers and of the loyal natives who assisted them in their heroic service behind enemy lines during the Second World War in providing intelligence vital to the conduct of Allied operations. Not only did they transmit by means of tele-radio from their jungle hideouts information which led to the sinking of numerous enemy warships, but they were able to give timely warning of impending enemy air attacks. The contribution towards the Allied victory in the Pacific by the small body of men who constituted the Coast Watchers was out of all proportion to their numbers."

(copyright unknown)

Watchers Lighthouse.

Below is an image of the actual plaque at Madang Coast



More than 700 people served in **FERDINAND** during the War, all making their own contribution to the war effort, and with their own stories to convey. It is impossible to do justice to their contribution here, but after the war, Cdr. Feldt himself noted the Coast Watchers had done their job well and, for their few

numbers, had made a significant contribution out of all proportion.... These unheralded heroes performed extraordinary feats.

When the Japanese overran the Gilbert Islands in 1942, 17 Coast Watchers were captured. Imprisoned at Tarawa, they were executed by the Japanese in October 1942 following an American air raid. These unheralded heroes performed extraordinary feats. Two of their most remarkable members, worked on Bougainville under the most harrowing circumstances; with constant enemy patrols trying to eliminate them, with few supplies and uncertain support. Their warnings played a critical role in allowing the Americans to triumph on Guadalcanal.

One of their most important contributions in the Pacific theatre was the intelligence provided during the allied campaign at Guadalcanal, which involved some 16,000 US marines, 48 combat ships, 28 auxiliaries and 670 aircraft. The Coast Watching intelligence network in the Solomon Islands, was the only one to include a female, an Honorary Third Officer of the, WRANS; she continued to provide intelligence, even as the Japanese occupied the islands, including information about the construction of a strategically important airstrip near Lunga Point on the north coast of Guadalcanal.

Native Solomon Islanders infiltrated into the Japanese camps under the pretext of being laborers, doing work, and later related what they had seen to the Coast Watchers. This intelligence was used in maps of Lunga, Tulagi and Gavutu, identifying the position of Japanese guns, defense works and other installations. Following the landing on 7th August 1942, Coast Watchers on Buka, Bougainville, and New Georgia Islands alerted the allied forces on Guadalcanal to imminent Japanese air raids, allowing them to prepare for, and repel, the enemy aircraft.



(copyright unknown)

Above, an old image of a Coast Watcher's base camp believed to be somewhere in the Solomon Islands. The huts and ramshackle buildings, usually erected by local natives for the Coast Watchers, were intended to be easily camouflaged, thus, blending in against the backdrop of tropical jungle; or to create the impression they were small native compounds or villages; to avoid visible detection and conceal their true identity, from the air or from seawards by the marauding enemy.

The Japanese conducted frequent patrols in attempts to detect and capture Coast Watchers, which they knew operated throughout the Islands, but the Coast Watchers were generally forewarned by their native scouts - "hidden eyes and ears" - who reported to their "Bosses" on the whereabouts and movements of enemy patrols. It is hard to believe that without the aid and support of these native

peoples, many of which were members of the Solomon Islands Protectorate Police Force, so many Coast Watchers would manage to evade capture.

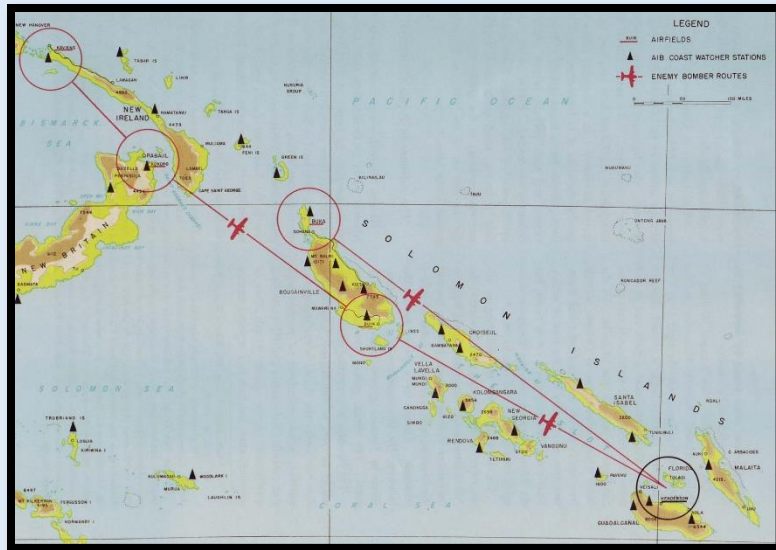
Technically, as civilians, most Coast Watchers were advised to cease their operations and evacuate as the Japanese advanced into their territory. However, the majority, chose to continue their activities in the knowledge that capture could result in their execution as spies. One of the most highly decorated Coast Watchers was Sergeant Major Sir Jacob C. Vouza, who retired from the local Solomon Islands Protectorate Constabulary in 1941, but then volunteered for Coast Watcher duty. He was captured and interrogated brutally by the Japanese, but luckily, he survived and escaped, eventually making contact with the US Marines, warning them of an impending Japanese attack. He recovered from his wounds and continued to scout for the US Marines. He was awarded the Silver Star and Legion of Merit by the United States, and later received a knighthood as well as becoming a Member of the Order of the British Empire.



A flight of Japanese “Betty” bombers, photographed by a Coast Watcher, presumably somewhere on Bougainville Island. The bombers are seen flying towards a target probably at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. Australia’s defenses in the territories at the outbreak of War in 1939 were sparse and thinly dispersed. Consequently, they were not expected to do more than delay any Japanese advance. The larger Coast Watching stations such as Port Moresby and Rabaul had contingency plans to continue operating at close – by alternates in the event of Japanese occupation. (copyright unknown)

Japanese air raids in the Bismarck Archipelago began early in 1942 when Rabaul was attacked by 22 heavy bombers. Advance warning of the attack, provided by a Coast Watcher, stationed on Tabar Island, ensured that casualties were comparatively light, but that was just a prelude to the Japanese invasion of New Britain and New Ireland, later during the month of January.

On 24th January, a Coast Watcher’s message reported that Kavieng had been occupied. Contact with Rabaul, however, had been lost and two Coast Watchers from Talasea, began a 320km trek to report on the situation. At Pondo, on Open Bay, they met 12 soldiers who had evacuated from Rabaul and were told that some 700 people, including those from the Coast Watcher station, were scattered on both the north and south coasts of New Britain. What ensued was an incredible search and rescue mission involving Coast Watchers in New Britain and New Guinea, in which more than 550 people, starving, and inflicted by malaria and other tropical diseases, were rescued, and transported to safety.



A Map of New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands – “Hot-Spot Central” for Coast Watchers during occupation by the Japanese during 1942/43. (copyright unknown)

The landings at Guadalcanal did not, however, immediately result in victory for the allies. The fight that ensued on the island over the next six months has been described as some of the most fierce and vicious in the Pacific theatre. Following the disastrous Battle of Savo Island on 9th August, allied sea control was both

fragile and uncertain. However, the allies did maintain air superiority, while Coast Watchers continued to provide information about Japanese naval, air and troop dispositions. The Japanese were obliged to use destroyers to reinforce and re-supply their forces by night, dubbed the **‘Tokyo Express’**, making a fast transit of New Georgia Sound, known as **‘The Slot’**. However, this method prevented the re-supply of heavy equipment, such as artillery and vehicles, and drew the much - needed destroyers, away from other areas of the Japanese naval campaign.

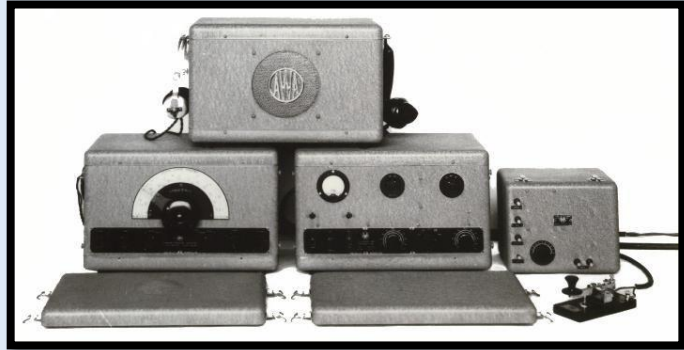
Towards the end of October, the Japanese were preparing to mount a counterattack on Guadalcanal. Japanese troops on Guadalcanal launched a determined but unsuccessful attempt to capture the airfield at Lunga Point and in early November, Coast Watchers on Bougainville reported detailed information about the buildup of Japanese forces at Buin, as well as the passage of 11 large transports heading south towards Guadalcanal. Subsequent reports from the Coast Watchers on Bougainville on 11th and 12th November prepared allied forces for incoming air raids in which few of the Japanese aircraft survived. The Japanese transports came under air attack on 14th November, of which seven of them were sunk. The remaining four landed at Tassafaronga (north coast of Guadalcanal), with only 2000 of the original 10,000 embarked troops, where they came under allied air attack the following morning.

The Japanese position had become untenable by the end of the year, and by 7th February 1943, some 11,000 Japanese troops had been evacuated from Guadalcanal. Both sides had lost 24 warships in the battle for the island. Estimates of casualties vary but range as high as 7000 allies and 30,000 Japanese killed. The intelligence provided by the Coast Watchers was integral to the successful allied campaign at Guadalcanal, providing information about Japanese naval, air and ground forces. Such was the Coast Watchers contribution to the campaign that Admiral of the Fleet, William F Halsey, USN, later said ‘The Coast Watchers saved Guadalcanal, and Guadalcanal saved the South Pacific.’

More than 700 people served in **FERDINAND** during the war, all making their own contribution to the war effort, and each with their own stories to tell. It is impossible to do justice to their contribution in this short narrative, but it is certain that without the significant element of intelligence which the Coast Watchers provided, the war years in the Pacific theatre may have been far more prolonged and costly in terms of human life and sacrifice for the allies.



A memorial dedicated to the Coast Watchers situated at Honiara. The National Museum in Honiara has WWII relics and cultural artifacts, including features on the Coast Watchers. (copyright unknown)



Typical of a wireless set, used by Coast Watchers

(copyright unknown)

End

Coast Watchers of the Pacific Islands # 2 “Notable Exploits” will be uploaded shortly on this website.

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References: Acknowledgement is made to the various military archives, records, and documented accounts, available on public domains, concerning Coast Watchers and their contribution to the Pacific Campaign during WW 11, used for reference purposes by the author in compiling this commentary.