

A Proposal for a Civilian Service Medal to be issued to PNG Wartime Carriers

by Major Charlie Lynn MLC psc



Introduction

One of the most shameful omissions of successive Australian governments since the end of the Pacific War has been their neglect to issue a civilian service medal to the New Guinea Carriers who were indentured to support Australian troops during our darkest hour in 1942. It is a fact that our troops would have been defeated in the Kokoda campaign without the support of these Carriers.



The issue has never been resolved in Australia because of the risk of admitting some form of liability for further compensation.

This is a cop-out because the issue of compensation has been resolved between the two governments and any further claims will be managed and resolved by the PNG Government.

Background

According to our official history of the war in the Pacific by Dudley McCarthy (Australia in the War 1939-1945, p116) the Australian New Guinea Army Unit (ANGAU) was authorised by the Australian government to provide for:

'the conscription of whatever native labour might be required by the Services'

Rates of pay were to be determined and the Senior Military Officer or District Officer was empowered:

'to have the natives so employed to enter into a contract with the Australian Government.'

It has been estimated that some 10,000 PNG nationals served as Carriers in support of the Australians during the Kokoda campaign and it is a matter of historical fact that we would not have been defeated without their assistance.

A further 42,000 are estimated to have been indentured to support Australian troops in the Milne Bay and the Buna/Gona campaigns. They were paid 10 shillings per month.

According to wartime journalist, Osmar White¹:

'ANGAU contrived a maximum mobilization and use of native labour. At the critical period, its method of conscription was even more arbitrary than German recruiting in the early days. In some villages every able-bodied male over the approximate age of sixteen years was rounded up, transported to the clearing centres, and thence drafted to whatever type of work had priority in the



immediate emergency. Brutal disciplinary measures had often to be taken in the field; but when the first and worst crises of invasion were surmounted, ANGAU did what it could to conserve the life and health of its native levies and to maintain the viability of native communities depleted of 40 or 50 per cent of their able-bodied men. Under military rule, the labourers' health was more carefully considered and their diet in general better than under private employers before the war. ANGAU was fully aware of the value of native labour and co-operation to the Allied effort.

'As the danger of a complete Japanese victory receded, the more far-sighted officers of the administration realized that their work might be fraught with strong political implications.

'During and after the Owen Stanley campaign, war correspondents give great publicity to the part played by carriers and stretcher-bearers on the Kokoda Trail. They emphasised the endurance, gallantry and loyalty of the natives, and the consideration with which they treated wounded Australian soldiers making the long and cruelly arduous journey back to Port Moresby by foot or on litters.

'While it is true that some natives did show the qualities for which they were praised, it is equally true that the majority did their work only because the white men in command bullied them into doing it. Few if any were serving voluntarily and most would have deserted if possible. At this stage they knew of no reason and felt no desire to fight on the side of the Australians against the Japanese; but the habit of obeying white men, inculcated by about sixty years of colonization, was hard to break. In some cases, of course, loyalty was a factor, but it was usually a matter of personal attachment between master and servant, not a spontaneous expression of gratitude by the brown race for benevolent leadership and protection by the whites.

'At the time, of course, such unromantic realities could not have been either reported or discussed. The Australian public was in a highly emotional state, alarmed and

humiliated by the ease with which the Japanese had swept through the Pacific and threatened the continent with invasion. It was in desperate need of some reassurance that it was fighting on the side of the angels – an alignment which is presumed to ensure eventual victory. Failing the apparition of celestial angels in the New Guinea stormclouds, to match the reported phenomenon at Mons when the Germans were carrying all before them in the First World War, terrestrial angels would have to suffice. A sentimental soldier with a bent for versification wrote some lines of doggerel which described native stretcher-bearers on the Kokoda Trail as ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels’. The phrase caught on. Almost overnight even the most sullen, reluctant New Guinean employed on the military supply routes became in the minds of a large section of Australians a heroically faithful underdog offering proof by gallantry and devotion that he was not only a Christian gentleman at heart but he was also profoundly grateful for the benevolence of Australian policy and performance in the past. The speed with which the public image of a New Guinean was transmogrified from that of bloodthirsty cannibal with a bone through his nose to that of a dusky-skinned, mop-headed, sexless Florence Nightingale must forever remain an inspiration to political propagandists.

‘The new image did not quickly fade. It endured through the war long into the peace, and it provided a favourable political climate for expensive experiments in education and ‘hothouse’ social development undertaken by the Commonwealth Government from 1949 onwards, However, it must be conceded to the credit of ANGAU that long before the invaders were cleared out of the islands, it laid the foundations for the much-publicised New Deal for Papua-New Guinea which began soon after the Japanese capitulation and the creation of the United Nations Organisation Trusteeship. While the war was still in progress, the Australian Government for the first time moved with relative vigour into the fields of education and public health. A large secondary education establishment was founded at Sogeri near Port Moresby, and medical patrolling was stepped up.’

It is a fact that these Carriers worked much closer to the front lines than other labourers who worked for the Australian New Guinea Army Unit (ANGAU).

During the period 1944 to 1957 approximately 2 million pounds was paid by the Australian Government in compensation for property damage to PNG nationals by the Australian Government. In 1975 PNG gained independence and the PNG Government assumed all legal obligations for compensation of its veteran community.

Unfortunately the PNG Carriers were excluded from benefits under legislation for compensation of PNG nationals who served in the Defence Force. In 1980 they were also deemed to be ineligible for the PNG War Gratuity Scheme for ex-Servicemen.

In 1981 the Australian Government paid \$3.25 million to the PNG Government under the Defence (PNG) Retirement Act as a final payment for compensation for Carriers. In 1986 the PNG Government introduced payments of PNGK1,000 for each surviving Carrier. The payments ceased in 1989 and many Carriers claim to have not received any money.

During the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign the issue of payment and compensation for many of the Carriers who claim they were never paid was raised with the Keating Government.

On 21 April 1992 The Australian newspaper reported that returned servicemen in PNG had called on the Australian Government to pay hundreds of local war veterans who helped Australian troops during the Kokoda campaign. According to the report:

“The President of the PNG Returned Services League, Mr Wally Lussick, said Australia had sent about \$3.5 million to PNG to help compensate local war veterans in the early 1980s, but much of the money had gone to the wrong people and a large group of carriers missed out.

“Mr Lussick said much of the money went to those press-ganged into being carriers for the Japanese and many people who took no part in the war received payments.

“The visit to PNG later this week by the Prime Minister, Mr Keating, for Anzac Day services to mark the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda battles would provide a good opportunity for Australia to make a commitment to the surviving carriers, he said.”

In the PNG Post-Courier of 24 April 1992, the Prime Minister of PNG, Sir Rabbie Namaliu called on Australia ‘to help compensate WW2 carriers and stretcher bearers’. He raised the issue with Prime Minister Paul Keating at the time. According to the Post-Courier:

“Most of the carriers and ex-servicemen received compensation payments from Australia in the mid-1980s, but many legitimate veterans from the Southern Kokoda Trail near Port Moresby, missed out.

“PNG authorities estimate up to 200 surviving carriers are still waiting for some kind of payment from Australia for their wartime labour and service.

“Mr Namaliu said the Government was considering making an approach to Australia to identify and pay those carriers who have gone unrewarded for half a century.”

On 5 May 1992 the Bulletin with Newsweek reported:

“Keating says compensation cases will be dealt with on their merits and all worthy claims examined; but no concrete sum for individuals has been discussed. The difficulty of maintaining a list of the original carriers is underlined by how few speak English. Family members of dead carriers are calling for posthumous compensation – after all, they took part in a battle that Keating described this week “as more important to Australians than any other battlefield in Europe or Africa.”

I believe Prime Minister Keating was genuine in his desire to resolve the issue but the Department of Veterans Affairs most likely put it in the ‘too hard basket’ at the time.

The argument that *‘it would be inappropriate for the Australian Government to consider taking any further action on this matter in the absence of a detailed proposal from the Papua New Guinea Government’* was an effective cop-out at the time, notwithstanding the approach from the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea. It was unrealistic to suggest that a National Government who often cannot provide oxygen in the operating theatre of their national hospital in Port Moresby would divert resources to research an issue for such a small number of surviving ‘wantoks’.

Diggers’ Tributes to the PNG Carriers

In a report on the medical aspects of the fighting withdrawal in the face of overwhelming Japanese forces after the Battle for Isurava was lost, Colonel Kingsley Norris, Assistant Director Medical Services with the 7th Division praised the work of the Australian medics. No living casualty, claimed Norris, was abandoned to the enemy and overall 750 wounded and sick were shepherded down the track to safety. Norris was also full of praise for the ‘walking wounded’. They had, in Norris’ words, to be treated with ‘absolute ruthlessness’ and not provided with stretchers:

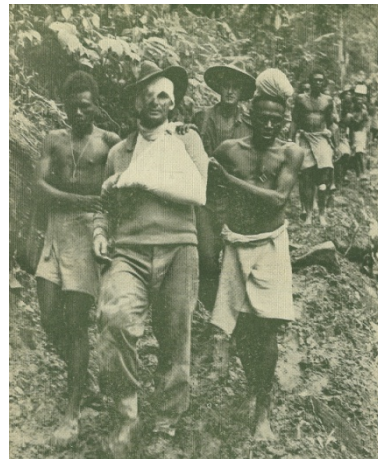
‘Those alone who were quite unable to struggle or stagger along were carried. There was practically never a complaint nor any resentment ... One casualty with a two inch gap in a fractured patella, splintered by a banana leaf, walked for six days ...’

Captain ‘Blue Stewrd, Regimental Officer, 2/16th Battalion:

“... they never forgot their patients, carrying them as gently as they could, avoiding the jolts and jars of the many ups and downs. The last stretcher was carried out by the Regimental Aid Post boys, two volunteers, Padre Fred and myself. Till then we never knew the effort needed, nor fully appreciated the work the carriers were doing. Their bare, splayed feet gave them a better grip than our cleated boots could claim on the slippery rocks and mud.



“Some of the bearers disliked the tight, flat canvas surfaces of the regulation army stretchers, off which a man might slide or be tipped. They felt safer with the deeper beds of their own bush made stretchers – two blankets doubled round two long poles cut from the jungle. Each time we watched them hoist the stretchers from the ground to their shoulders for another stint, we saw their strong leg, arm and back muscles rippling under their glossy black skins. Manly and dignified, they felt proud of their responsibility to the wounded, and rarely faltered. When they laid their charges down for the night they sought level ground on which to build a rough shelter of light poles and leaves. With four men each side of a stretcher, they took it in turns to sleep and to watch, giving each wounded man whatever food, drink or comfort there might be.



Laurie Howson, 39th Battalion:

“The days go on. You are trying to survive, shirt torn, arse out of your pants, whiskers a mile long, hungry and a continuous line of stretchers with wounded carried by ‘Fuzzy-Wuzzies’ doing a marvellous job. Some days you carry your boots because there’s no skin on your feet. But when I look around at some of the others – hell! They look crook! Then I have seen the time when you dig a number of holes in the ground and bury your dead. Nothing would be said, but you think ‘maybe it will be my turn next.’”

It is a travesty that the issue of a medal for these Carriers has never been resolved.

Papua New Guinea was Australian mandated territory during the war and carriers were contracted/indentured/conscripted to support our Australian forces. Whether they were all paid for their services or not will never be resolved.

I am not aware that the carriage of wounded Australian soldiers back along the Track was ever part of their duty statement at the time. Furthermore I cannot imagine – even after 41 personal crossings of the Track since 1991 – how they ever managed to carry a stretcher over some of the mountains between Eora Creek and Owers Corner. The fact is they somehow did it and many Australian soldiers lived because of their selfless sacrifice.

Compensation Concerns

The issue of compensation for Carriers has been resolved. Any further issue that may arise would be the responsibility of the PNG Government. Discussions with senior Ministers has revealed that they would be willing to handle any issues that were raised in this regard,

Identification of Carriers

It would be unrealistic to ask surviving Carriers, or the descendents of former Carriers to provide proof of their service. Whilst they were all issued with a certificate of identification the majority of these would have been lost over time due to the nature of their living conditions in huts in remote areas.

PNG traditions and stories are handed down to the next generation by word-of-mouth. If a young PNG national believes that their father or grandfather was a Carrier then it is likely that he was. The fact that many will not be able to be positively identified by any other method is more Australia's fault than theirs because we have failed to resolve the issue earlier.

This should not be used as an excuse to do nothing about it.

Proposal

The most appropriate way of identifying those who served as a carrier during the war would be to run a campaign via the PNG Post Courier and National newspapers and ask the families of the carriers to provide their details.

If a family believes their father or grandfather was a carrier then a medal should be issued to them with his name on it.

A parade could then be organised in Port Moresby to issue the medal to the few surviving carriers and to the families of those who have since died. There will undoubtedly be a small number who will get it wrong but we should not deny the greater majority of such an important symbolic presentation because a few might possibly slip through the net.

This action would bring closure to a long standing grievance and would be welcomed as a positive and long overdue initiative by the wider Australian community.

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¹ Parliament of a Thousand Tribes, The Cataclysm. P.129-130