

The “Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels”: looking beyond the myth

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Abstract

The popular myth of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels has throughout the generations asserted the belief that Papuan carriers, during the 1942 battle for Kokoda, willingly provided assistance to the Australian war effort as volunteers. However, contradictions surround the history of the Papuan carriers concerning their recruitment, treatment, and working conditions. The contrasting stories of Papuan experiences as carriers have been left out of Australian memory for a number of reasons. This exclusion has in turn affected the way Papuans see their role as carriers in post-war history, and also raises issues of recognition, compensation and remembrance.



William Dargie, *Stretcher bearers in the Owen Stanleys*, 1943, oil on canvas, 143.2 x 234.4 cm. AWM ART26653

Introduction

The romanticised myth of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels has lingered in Australian public memory since 1942, when Sapper Bert Beros of the 7th Division, Royal Australian Engineers, wrote the poem entitled "The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels". Expressing fondness towards the "black angels" who were assisting the Australians in the war against Japan, the poem found instant fame in Australian papers.

Two months later George Silk, a photographer for the Australian Department of Information, captured what would become the iconic image of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel, a black-and-white photograph depicting blinded Australian Private George Whittington being led to a field hospital near Buna by carrier Raphael Oimbari. These two impressions of the Papuan carriers were strengthened by the attitudes and views of some Australian soldiers in war diaries, letters home and press reports, which led to the creation of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel myth.

This popular Australian myth has throughout the generations maintained the core belief that Papuans were loyal friends voluntarily assisting the Australian war effort during the New Guinea campaigns of the Second World War. In turn, it is argued that Australians are indebted to the Papuans who, as Australian Professor Hank Nelson suggests, displayed "bravery, faithfulness, endurance, compassion and cheerfulness in the face of adversity."¹

Numerous contradictions surround the history of the conditions and treatment, perceptions and attitudes, and remembrance and recognition of the Papuan carriers of the Second World War. Evidence of mistreatment, poor conditions, and conscription of labour present a contrasting story of some Papuans' experiences as carriers. The diverse Papuan experiences and recollections of the war have been excluded from the Australian narrative, leading to a "white" version of events. Issues relating to recognition and compensation still persist; Papua New Guineans have mixed feelings about the alleged disregard of such issues by both the

¹ Nelson, Hank, "The enemy at the door: Australia and New Guinea in World War II", in Toyoda, Yukio and Nelson, Hank (eds), *The Pacific War in Papua New Guinea: memories and realities*, Rikkyo University Centre for Asian Studies, Tokyo, 2006, p. 136.

Australian and Papua New Guinean governments. These numerous contradictions surrounding the history of the Papuan carriers during the 1942 battle for Kokoda are the focus of this report.²

Origins of the myth

The sentiments expressed in Bert Beros' poem, composed on 14 October 1942, illustrate the idealised and romantic way in which the carriers were viewed. Nelson argues that by performing the crucial job of stretcher-bearing of the Australian sick and wounded, the Papuans became regarded as "dedicated, devoted and gentle servants, faithful unto death".³

Bringing back the badly wounded,
 just as steady as a hearse,
 Using leaves to keep the rain off,
 and as gentle as a nurse.

* * *

and the look upon their faces
 makes us think that Christ was black.
 Not a move to hurt the carried,
 as they treat him like a Saint.⁴

It casts the carriers as heroic black angels, which reveals the apparent affection felt for the Papuans by some Australian soldiers. The poem also served to convince those waiting at home that their boys were being taken care of. Beros' words created an image of the Papuan carrier that was adopted and spread to the Australian public

² This report will refer to the Papuans who carried supplies and the wounded for Australians rather than general labourers, the Papuan Infantry Battalion, or the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles. It must also be noted that the term "Papuan" refers to the inhabitants of the Territory of Papua up to 1949, while the term "Papua New Guinean" refers to all inhabitants of the independent state Papua New Guinea from 1975.

³ Nelson, "The enemy at the door", p. 136.

⁴ Poem, H. Beros, 14 October 1942, Exhibition documents, AWM, EXDOC134.

by various forms of media.⁵ First published in the *Courier Mail* (Brisbane) on 31 October 1942, the poem firmly cemented in the public mind such views of the carriers already expressed by some correspondents who had been briefly mentioning them in reports. The Australian public were informed of the carriers' "uncomplaining and lion-hearted endurance ... which has won the hearts of the troops"⁶; their "devotion and almost superhuman exertion"⁷ in carrying wounded Australian soldiers; "the conduct of an already difficult campaign would be immensely harder, perhaps impossible, without the help of the natives."⁸ As a result of this positive publicity there was a growing feeling among many Australians, of debt, gratitude and acceptance of the carriers who had "suddenly become real and courageous, and very remarkable human beings".⁹

The outpouring of praise and affection for the Papuan carriers was sustained by the Australian Department for Information photographer, George Silk, who on 25 December 1942, captured what would become the iconic image of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel. The image of a blinded Australian soldier, Private George Whittington, being led to a field hospital near Buna by carrier Raphael Oimbari, has held a significant place in Australia's public consciousness.



Image 2: George Silk (AWM 014028).

⁵ Nelson, "The enemy at the door", p. 136.

⁶ "Human side of war in New Guinea", *Advertiser* (Adelaide, online edition), 17 October 1942.

⁷ "Papuan Natives", *Western Mail* (Perth, online edition), 15 October 1942.

⁸ G. Tebbutt, "Fuzzy Wuzzy does much for Allies", *Courier Mail* (Brisbane, online edition), 29 December 1942.

⁹ "Australia's debt: black Samaritans of New Guinea", *Cairns Post* (online edition), 9 November 1942.

First appearing in the *Courier Mail* on 18 March 1943, its constantly repeated use through the decades to epitomise Papuans as Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels has effectively perpetuated the myth for generations of Australians past and present.

Similarly, Damien Parer's 1942 documentary *Kokoda Frontline!* drew the attention of the Australian public to the hardships and nature of the war. Working for the Australian Department of Information, Parer, like Silk, captured footage of the war in New Guinea that would become iconic in later years. It showed Papuan carriers transporting the wounded along narrow muddy paths, up steep mountain tracks, around precarious cliff faces and through fast flowing rivers. The narration informs the audience that "the care and consideration shown towards the wounded by the 'natives' has won the admiration of the troops."¹⁰ It also makes the bold statement that with the Australians, "the black-skinned boys are white" suggesting that the carriers were viewed and treated as equals.¹¹ This footage and narration expresses the idea that the Papuans were helpful, loyal friends, further strengthening the myth shaped by Beros and Silk. Thus, these three examples – the poem, photograph and film – exemplify the argument proposed by Janice Newton: "Wartime provides fertile soil for the mythologising of people and their actions."¹²

Difficulties with censorship shaped the images of and attitudes towards the Papuans. Australian war correspondent Osmar White wrote of the hardships faced in reporting anything useful or worthwhile in his book *Green armour*. Correspondents were unable to report the true conditions and realities of the war in Papua and New Guinea owing to "the insistence of [General] MacArthur's ... headquarters that field censorship was not competent to decide all matters of security".¹³ Upon reflection White thought:

no war correspondent can ever tell unpalatable truths soon enough to do any good. Once news sources are officially controlled by censorships, no

¹⁰ Parer, Damien, *Kokoda frontline!*, Cinesound Review, 1942.

¹¹ Parer, Damien, *Kokoda Frontline!*, Cinesound Review, 1942.f

¹² Newton, Janice, "Angels, heroes and traitors", *Research in Melanesia*, 20, 1996, p. 144.

¹³ White, Osmar, *Green armour*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1945, p. 66.

individual writer can deflect by as much as a hair's breadth the impact upon the public mind of the tale wartime leadership wants to tell.¹⁴

It can be surmised that visual records such as Silk's photograph and Parer's film were more influential and persistent in forging specific images of the Papuan carriers than written records. Images can be circulated en masse with any meaning, purpose and/or interpretation attached to them. Images such as Silk's and Parer's can be placed in or out of certain contexts depending on what story or 'angle' is required by the author.

Despite the veneration of the Papuan carriers as the saviours of Australian soldiers, similar to the veneration of Simpson and his donkey in the First World War, "the popularity of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel" according to historian Lachlan Grant "overshadows the insidious face of colonialism also evident within the New Guinea campaign."¹⁵ The myth and subsequent portrayal of the Papuan carriers by white Australians has, according to Australian historian Liz Reed, placed them within a colonialist construct.¹⁶ This colonialist construct can be traced back to the formation of the Australian New Guinea Administration Unit (ANGAU) on 10 April 1942 which was designed "to help win the war; ... to preserve law and order; [and] to look after the welfare of its inhabitants".¹⁷ Yet this organisation, despite all its good intentions to look after the Papuans, did so in a colonial and paternalistic manner. The officers of ANGAU were the white masters, or '*taubada*', and the Papuans the servants, as prescribed by their skin colour and perceived lack of civilisation. Viewed as an inferior 'other', the Papuans were manipulated by ANGAU in order to serve its own interests.

The colonial constructs through which the carriers have been viewed has led to their war stories becoming mystified and the carriers themselves nameless. Rarely

¹⁴ White, *Green armour*, p.68.

¹⁵ Grant, Lachlan, "The AIF in Asia and the Pacific 1941-1945: A reorientation in attitudes towards Asia, Empire and Nation", PhD thesis, Monash University, 2010, p. 150.

¹⁶ See Reed, Liz, "Part of our own story': representations of Indigenous Australians and Papua New Guineans within Australia Remembers 1945-1995 - the continuing desire for a homogenous national identity", *Oceania*, 69:3, March 1999, p. 161.

¹⁷ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, February-April 1942, appendix 12F, AWM52, 1/10/1.

are carriers specified by name but rather by generic terms we would now consider racist. Thus far in the history of the carriers, there has been no examination of individual experiences and recollections thus obscuring a more human dimension to the study of the subject. In particular, Karl James argues that the term "natives" used by Australians during the war period had "clear implications of white authority and colonial values" in the relationship between Australians and Papuans.¹⁸

The lack of a human dimension to this narrative is illustrated by the fact that Raphael Oimbari, the carrier in the iconic George Silk photograph, was only identified in 1972. To the white man, carriers were all the same; indistinguishable from one another and lacking individual identity. War correspondent Raymond Paull provides a telling anecdote about Australians viewing Papuans in this way. Senior Medical Officer Rupert Magarey of the 2/6th Australian Field Ambulance and Warrant Officer Lord of ANGAU "walked up to Iora Creek village and seized upon 140 carriers" to save the stretcher cases at Alola.¹⁹ After following the group of carriers down the track to Alola, Magarey and Lord found only twenty carriers waiting for them.

Subsequent inquiries showed that the other 120 bearers, going forward to collect the wounded and supply loads, had been intercepted ... by ... the 53rd Battalion ... and turned ... back. Since, to the Australians, all the natives looked much alike, the bearers passed Magarey and Lord unrecognised.²⁰

Military publications such as *You and the native*, given to soldiers as a guidebook to the Pacific, reinforced the colonial and paternalistic manners in which white soldiers should interact and behave toward Papuans. The directions given illustrate an air of superiority and arrogance; for example, "It is not too much to say that ... [the native] stands in awe of us. He thinks we are superior beings. We may not all deserve this

¹⁸ James, Karl, "White, black, and brown: attitudes to race as reflected during the Bougainville Campaign, 1944-45", *Alpheus*, 1, June 2004, p. 7.

¹⁹ Paull, Raymond, *Retreat from Kokoda*, Melbourne, Heinemann, 1958, p. 152.

²⁰ Paull, *Retreat from Kokoda*, pp. 152-3.

reputation, but it is worth acting up to."²¹ Thus, the idea of a submissive relationship between the Australians and the Papuans was imposed; the white soldier as the superior master and the inferior Papuan as the servant.

Always, without overdoing it, be the master. The time may come when you will want a native to obey you. He won't obey you if you have been in the habit of treating him as an equal.²²

Thus, friendships between the two were not allowed, and these directions do suggest that because the 'native' was supposedly in awe of the white man he would also be loyal.

Loyalty and friendship

Within the story of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel is the belief that the Papuans' admiration of the white man propelled him to serve. From soldiers' letters and war correspondents' reports, the Papuan carriers were presented in a highly positive manner. "What a tremendous job they did" was sentiment most commonly expressed by the soldiers towards the carriers.²³ Many considered them the real heroes of the war, with some soldiers informing those back home of the ordeals the carriers supposedly happily endured as part of their job:

Believe me, when this war is over and its history written there is one chap that should get a large share of the praise. He is the lowly 'boong.' ... He sometimes arrives with bleeding shoulders, puts the wounded gently down, shakes himself, grins and off he goes for another trip.²⁴

Portrayed as the saviour of the Australian soldier and a loyal servant of Australia and the Empire, the figure of the black carrier became instilled in the minds of many.

²¹ *You and the native: notes for the guidance of members of the forces in their relations with New Guinea natives*, Allied Geographical Section, South-West Pacific Area, 12 February 1943, p. 2.

²² *You and the native*, p. 4.

²³ War diary, Lt A. Black, 1942, AWM PRO1960.

²⁴ "New Guinea heroes tell their battle stories", *The Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney, online edition), 24 October 1942.

War correspondent Allan Dawes propagated the idea of Papuan loyalty when he wrote in *Soldier superb* (1943):

the native is loyal. ... He is loyal all right. ... He values the white man as much as master as he does as friend. He needs the white man's help, craves the white man's guidance; for these he will give the brown man's service loyally and to a degree of veneration.²⁵

Some have suggested that as a result of this supposed loyalty, friendships were forged between the Australian soldiers and the Papuan carriers. This was clear in soldiers' war letters and recollections post-war. Captain John McCarthy, in his 1963 recollections *Patrol into yesterday*, described how "there was no master and servant relationship here, for the frontline men treated the black men as equals, with nothing false or patronizing in their friendship."²⁶ McCarthy, like many others, valued the carriers as friends and was appreciative of the services they provided. As Allan Dawes claims,

Brown brother has done a fine job. These boys, so gentle and compassionate with men in pain ... hold a justly honoured place in the esteem of every Australian.²⁷

Captain Geoffrey Vernon, a medical officer, was quite aware of the relations Australians had with Papuans. In his diary he wrote, "whatever colour prejudice may have existed among Australian people was certainly broken down between soldiers and the Fuzzy Wuzzies along the Kokoda LOC [Line of Communication]."²⁸ Even the Australian newspapers were propagating this idea of friendships forged, with the *Advertiser* in Adelaide writing,

²⁵ Dawes, Allan, *Soldier superb: the Australian fights in New Guinea*, Sydney, F.H. Johnston Publishing Company, 1943, p. 52, 55.

²⁶ McCarthy, John, *Patrol into yesterday: my New Guinea years*, Melbourne, F.W. Cheshire, 1963, p. 214–15.

²⁷ Dawes, *Soldier superb*, p. 51.

²⁸ War diary, G. Vernon, July–November 1942, Papers of Lieutenant A. Salmon (39 Bn), AWM PR00297.

There is nothing more interesting to watch than the growing friendship between the Australian soldier and the Papuan. It is a good-humoured, rather paternal relationship, with a lot of genuine kindness in it.²⁹

Yet the belief that Papuans were loyal to Australians can be contested as evidence implies that in most cases the Papuans were not performing such laborious tasks from friendship or loyalty. Nor were they happy or willing to be doing so. Indeed, the assumption that the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel were volunteers should be open to dispute as records of ANGAU illustrate they were in fact a conscripted labour force.



Image 3: Six Papuans carry a wounded soldier up a steep track through the rain while another carries supplies. (AWM013286)

²⁹ "Human side of war in New Guinea", *Advertiser* (Adelaide, online edition), 17 October 1942.

Contradiction 1: Willing volunteers versus conscripted labour

The assumption that the carriers were volunteers stems primarily from the descriptions and comments given by soldiers in letters home and articles published in the Australia press. Words such as willing, loyal, cheerful, devoted, and caring all imply positive connotations of voluntary service. As one Australian war correspondent, George Johnston, wrote, "The natives here work willingly and with laughter on their lips."³⁰ The impression given from these accounts is of happy Papuans performing gallant deeds out of loyalty. However, such tales describing why the Papuans assisted the Australians are not accurate. Rather the residents of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea were during this period, as Reed proposes "a subdued, conscripted, colonised race"³¹ thus making loyalty a negligible concept. As the *Argus* reported in October 1942, "one kind of master would be much the same as another; service to all, loyalty to none."³²

On 15 June 1942 Basil M. Morris, the General Officer Commanding of the New Guinea Force, created the Employment of Natives Order under the National Security (Emergency Control) Regulations. This set out the conditions under which natives could be contracted for employment by ANGAU officers to help with the Australian war effort. Under this order, Papuans could be employed for up to three years and once engaged in such employment were not to "desert ... [be] absent ... without leave, [or] refuse or neglect to perform any work which it is his duty to perform".³³ This became ANGAU's mandate to coerce Papuans into labour, because the need to transport supplies and the wounded through the Owen Stanley Ranges became vital from July 1942. The methods used to conscript Papuans into labour were objectionable, by the standards of present Western society, and quite different from what is conveyed in the myth that many Australians regard as fact. ANGAU district officers employed a mixture of propaganda, promises, and sometimes force

³⁰ G. Johnston, "War in the wilderness", *Canberra Times* (online edition), 2 July 1942.

³¹ Reed, "Part of our own story", p. 161.

³² R. Vivian, "Are the New Guinea natives friendly to whites?: a former resident magistrate reveals some interesting facts about their point of view", *Argus* (Melbourne, online edition), 10 October 1942.

³³ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, May-June 1942, appendix 26F, AWM52, 1/10/1.

to satisfy the demands for labour. This was noted by Australian war correspondent Osmar White, who was of the opinion that

the majority [of Papuans] 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.³⁴

Propaganda was used extensively to recruit Papuans to the Australian side. In August 1942, ANGAU officers were instructed to use propaganda to foster a Papuan aversion to the Japanese.³⁵ Such propaganda consisted of pointing out that the Japanese did not pay, were placing Papuans "in the frontline", and that it was in the best interests of the Papuans "to assist our cause, so that, at the earliest possible moment, he may return to normal life".³⁶ At this stage the fighting at Kokoda was entering a critical stage, with ANGAU's propaganda successful in conscripting 4,947 Papuans for the month of August 1942. This was an impressive increase from the number conscripted a month earlier, 3,354, and the 2,033 in June. From August, the number of carriers decreased rapidly. In September Captain W.H. Thompson of ANGAU reported that carriers were "adopting an attitude of 'passive resistance' to carrying", with many Papuans going 'bush' when "a Patrol comes near their village".³⁷ A month later, illness among the carriers and an increasing number of desertions became major problems, with carrier lines for the forward advance to Kokoda being "depleted ... to less than 1,000 carriers".³⁸

In response, ANGAU implemented propaganda that was more forceful and persuasive by December 1942. Now ANGAU officers were to point out, among other

³⁴ Inglis, Ken, "War, race and loyalty in New Guinea, 1939-1945", in The University of Papua and New Guinea and the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University (eds), *The history of Melanesia*, the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1969, p. 504 quoting O. White, *Parliament of a thousand tribes*, London, Heinemann, 1965, p. 129.

³⁵ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, July-August 1942, appendix 37, AWM52 1/10/1.

³⁶ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, July-August 1942, appendix 37, AWM52, 1/10/1.

³⁷ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, September 1942, appendix 40, AWM52, 1/10/1.

³⁸ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, September 1942, appendix 44, AWM52, 1/10/1.

things, "what a bastard the Japanese [was]: ... the ill treatment of natives [under Japanese rule]... [that the Japanese would] steal native land ... [and were not] Christians".³⁹ Officers were also to compare what the Australians had previously done and would continue to do for the Papuans, such as providing "food ... medical services ... law and order ...[and] good employment with certainty of being paid."⁴⁰ This change in propaganda helped the Australians, as the total number of Papuans employed by ANGAU in December 1942 was 16,563.⁴¹ In four months, from August to December, 11,616 Papuans had been conscripted into service by ANGAU. It was also at this time that natives from Rabaul, transported by the Japanese to New Guinea, were appearing in the northern areas of the Owen Stanley Ranges and were picked up by Australians on their advance to Buna. These half-starved, beaten natives proved to be a great selling point, helping ANGAU show Papuans why they should serve with the Allies and what the consequences would be if they did not. Covered in slashes and wounds on their backs and backsides as a result of being prodded with Japanese bayonets if they stopped from exhaustion, the people from New Britain were examples of Japanese cruelty.⁴² However, such brutal treatment was not only the work of the enemy. In order to recruit the urgently required number of carriers in the Owen Stanley Ranges, some ANGAU officers resorted to beatings and threats during their visits to villages to fulfil their quotas.⁴³

Yet the most common and effective method of conscripting Papuans was to offer promises that would later be broken.⁴⁴ ANGAU officers promised villages whose men they recruited that the men would be returned when their contracts expired or their tasks were complete. Neville Robinson's *Villagers at war* reveals that ANGAU Headquarters were aware that

³⁹ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, November–December 1942, appendix 61, AWM52, 1/10/1.

⁴⁰ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, November–December 1942, appendix 61, AWM52, 1/10/1.

⁴¹ Stanner, *The south seas in transition*, p.79.

⁴² Paull, *Retreat from Kokoda*, p. 270.

⁴³ Robinson, Neville, *Villagers at war: some Papua New Guinea experiences in World War II*, Canberra, Australian National University, 1979, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Robinson, *Villagers at war*, p. 37.

some Native Labour Overseers were encouraging their labour gangs to work hard by saying, 'come on boys, finish the job and then you can go home and cease work for the rest of the war.'⁴⁵

The effects of such false promises were felt with mass desertions and malingering of Papuans throughout the campaign.

Still, it must be mentioned is that not all Papuans were bullied into serving the Australians. A key example is the Orokaiva tribe in northern Papua who served the Japanese during their advance to Kokoda and Port Moresby. According to ANGAU war diaries, the Orokaivas were loyal to the enemy because they believed that the Japanese would win the war. Consequently, the Orokaiva people were deemed to be treacherous, and Australian soldiers were told to be wary of them. Herbert Kienzle, a Lieutenant in ANGAU, wrote to his wife Meryl sometime in October 1942 saying, "the Orokaivas are in for a heavy time when we recapture that area, they are running with the Japs despite the cruelties inflicted, probably had no option."⁴⁶ As a result Papuans living in areas occupied by the Japanese had to make decisions about how best to survive: to serve under the enemy or go bush. This uncertainty is evident in many cases where tribes were constantly transferring their allegiance between the Australians and the Japanese, depending on the outcome of each battle – behaviour which was viewed by some ANGAU officers and Australian soldiers as traitorous and disloyal.

If this was the manner in which Papuans were recruited, then what could be expected for their conditions and treatment during service?

Contradiction 2: Conditions and treatment: kind versus harsh

The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel myth conceals the experiences of carriers and their relationships with Australians, proposing in their place notions of racial equality, friendship and 'looking after a mate'. While many accounts from Australians during

⁴⁵ Robinson, *Villagers at war*, p. 37.

⁴⁶ Kienzle, Robyn, *The architect of Kokoda: Bert Kienzle – the man who made the Kokoda Track*, Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2011, p. 167.

the war express sentiments of friendship, kindness, and an overwhelming respect for the Papuans, there were numerous incidents in which such sentiments were totally absent. Such contrasting accounts present another contradiction that surrounds this highly romanticised myth.

Claims that the welfare of the Papuans was at the forefront of ANGAU, are indeed debatable. Rather than being looked after as would befit the critical work they were completing, the carriers were overworked, underfed, and harshly punished for deserting, malingering and other actions deemed defiant of orders. For most of the war, the carriers endured extremely poor conditions, with only slight improvements being made in late 1943 and early 1944. Working tirelessly to help the carriers as best he could for their health, working conditions, and general wellbeing, Medical Officer Geoffrey 'Doc' Vernon was one of only a handful of men who were sympathetic to their plight. In his diaries, Doc Vernon wrote of the poor conditions endured by the Papuans working in the Owen Stanley Ranges:

The condition of our carriers at Eora Creek caused me more concern than that of the wounded ... Overwork, overloading ... exposure, cold and underfeeding were the common lot. Every evening scores of carriers came in, slung their loads down and lay exhausted on the ground.⁴⁷

The desertion of Papuans from carrier lines understandably became a considerable problem for ANGAU officers to manage. Reasons for desertion were varied: lack of rations, over-work, illness, poor treatment and a desire to return to villages and families. Australian author Paul Ham claims that by mid-to late August 1942, after the battle of Isurava, "the desertion rate was said to be 30 percent".⁴⁸ Regardless of warnings in *You and the native* that soldiers should "pay full attention to ... food, shelter, clothing, health, tobacco and pay" of their carriers, and to "leave slave-driving to the Japanese" in order to avoid desertions, such instructions were

⁴⁷ McCarthy, Dudley, *South-West Pacific Area – first year: Kokoda to Wau*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1959, p. 132 quoting Captain Geoffrey Vernon.

⁴⁸ Ham, Paul, *Kokoda*, Sydney, HarperCollins, 2004, p. 214.

not always observed.⁴⁹ The problem of rations is highlighted by Major General Morris in a note on 23 September 1942 to the New Guinea Force Headquarters, that "reports received by me indicate that one of the most serious causes of desertion is lack of or inadequacy of rations ... It is quite impossible for me to retain any labour line at all unless natives are fully rationed."⁵⁰

In addition, illness was a major problem which plagued the carriers. Many after being sourced from coastal regions, were unable to acclimatise to the persistent cold and rain of the mountains and died of pneumonia. In his book of recollections, *Green armour*, Osmar White wrote of the severity of pneumonia:

About six pneumonia cases came back every time a carrier line went into the mountains. The carriers were mostly coast boys acclimatised to heat and humidity. After a couple of crossings, the sharp cold of the mountains, the poor food, and the labour of lugging loads over the passes broke them.⁵¹

Evidently, the reality of carrier conditions and treatment was inconsistent with what had been promised and intended. War correspondent Allan Dawes believed soldiers and ANGAU officers conveniently forgot during this period that the carriers were "after all ... as human as the Diggers themselves".⁵²

Carriers also suffered harsh punishment and physical abuse for what ANGAU officers deemed to be 'stepping out of line'. The type and severity of the punishment depended on the offence committed, varying from reasonable to extremely brutal. For non-compliance with employment contracts, carriers could be gaoled or fined.⁵³ For desertion, as Robinson details in *Villagers at war*, the disciplinary action ranged from digging drains, and caning, to pack-drill in which "an offender would carry a weight such as a bag of rice at a running pace for a specified time, usually for six hours."⁵⁴ Robinson also writes of incidents reported in 1943; in one, a carrier was

⁴⁹ *You and the native*, p. 15.

⁵⁰ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, September 1942, appendix 46b, AWM52, 1/10/1.

⁵¹ White, *Green armour*, p. 102.

⁵² Dawes, *Soldier superb*, p. 52.

⁵³ McCarthy, *South-West Pacific Area*, p. 116.

⁵⁴ Robinson, *Villagers at war*, p. 79.

placed "over a 44-gallon drum and ... caned in public", while others had their chests branded by fire.⁵⁵ For acts of betrayal, that is helping the Japanese in any form, Papuans could face the death penalty.⁵⁶

So how is one meant to remember the Papuan carriers in light of these contrasting stories that surround the myth of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels?



Image 4: Two Papuans carrying a heavy load of supplies. The pole is padded to protect their shoulders. (AWM 013002)

Remembrance

What should we as a nation believe about the carriers of Papua who assisted the Australians at Kokoda and elsewhere during the Second World War? Were they angels or mere men? Where are the voices of the carriers within this narrative? Have

⁵⁵ Robinson, *Villagers at war*, p. 78.

⁵⁶There are multiple reports of ANGAU publicly executing "natives" by hanging. The hangings of a number of Orokaivans in June–July 1943, who murdered both white civilians and combatants, are the most notorious. See Grahamslaw, Thomas, "Recollections of ANGAU", unpublished manuscript, Australian War Memorial, MSS1920, pp. 41–45; and Reed, "Part of our own story", p. 161.

the carriers been appropriately remembered, appreciated and compensated? The answers to such questions are complex and varied. There is no single right answer.

Nearly everything that has been written or presented on this topic – including this paper – has been produced by ‘outsiders’, with very little sourced from the Papuans. Australia’s story of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels excludes Papuan voices and their experiences in a war which was not their own. The conditions and treatment some carriers had to endure throughout the war were often in extreme opposition to what the Australian story has dictated, so contrasting stories emerge.

The myth portrays the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel as kind, friendly, loyal, gentle and persevering. But these are qualities and expectations which have been placed upon the Papuans by the white man. Even today, nearly 70 years after the war ended, there remain few Papua New Guinean perspectives regarding their roles as carriers and labourers during this period. This absence was reflected in and reinforced by the Australia Remembers 1945–1995 campaign. Reed states that the Australia Remembers campaign

sought to commemorate and celebrate Australia’s involvement in the Second World War in ways which included all Australians ... Papua New Guineans were included in what became, essentially, an exercise in imaging a national past. ... [and continued to be viewed] as “the other”.⁵⁷

The campaign preserved the Papua New Guineans as ‘a colonised subject’, while obstructing any opportunity to suggest or reveal claims contrary to the myth.

Likewise, Reed writes, William Skate succumbed to this false representation of the carriers when he said:

they were happy to participate in the war on the side of the Australians
 “because Papua New Guineans love helping their relatives and friends. It is part of our culture”.

⁵⁷ Reed, “Part of our own story”, p. 157.

From this Reed concludes that "Mr. Skate willingly engaged with the imagery of the 'fuzzy wuzzy angels' as stereotypical colonial subjects who did not exercise choices in response to the war's disruption of their lives."⁵⁸

While it has been often asserted that both Australian soldiers and Australia as a nation are indebted to the natives of Papua and New Guinea for their superb efforts during the war, there is debate as to whether Australia has repaid this debt and to what extent. As early as October 1942, attempts were being made to repay the Papuans for their loyalty and support, with talk among staff at Administration Headquarters of ANGAU that "a suitable inexpensive medal ... be made and awarded ... to individual natives who have shown exceptional courage, initiative and devotion to duty."⁵⁹ This became a reality in early November 1942 at Kokoda, when particular carriers were awarded a medal consisting of "the Australian coat of arms ... [and the] inscription 'for loyal service'."⁶⁰ Eight years later, Bert Kienzle, a former lieutenant in ANGAU, personally funded the construction of a memorial to the carriers of the Kokoda Track which, as James succinctly puts it, "symbolise[s] the unity of the Australians and Papua New Guineans in their single purpose of defeating the Japanese."⁶¹ That the memorial was funded as an individual gesture, rather than by a government or organisation, reveals the lack of official consideration of the Papuans and their role in the war. This was most evident when the memorial was unveiled in October 1959. The Australian Minister for the Department of Territories wrote:

Little value is seen in the proposal to seek publicity through illustrated weekend magazine stories for a monument erected at the expense of a private

⁵⁸ Reed, "Part of Our Own Story", p. 162, quoting D. Kingston, "Angel to fly in for peace festival", *Townsville Bulletin*, 5 August 1995, p.5.

⁵⁹ War diary, Headquarters Australia New Guinea Administration Unit, 1 October 1942, AWM52, 1/10/1.

⁶⁰ "Loyalty Rewarded", *Cairns Post* (online edition), 11 November 1942. It is also worth noting that during the Christmas of 1942, 800 gifts were distributed to Papuan boys who worked as carriers as a gesture of thanks. See "Christmas Gifts to Papuans", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 December 1942.

⁶¹ K. James, "The Track - a historical desktop study of the Kokoda Track", Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, 2009, accessed 15 February 2012, p. 85, <<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/publications/kokoda/awm-report.html>>

individual. This is particularly so since publicity received would undoubtedly make numerous over-sentimental references to the "Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels".⁶²

Despite these efforts by Australians in the early years, Papua New Guineans feel issues regarding recognition and compensation have not been satisfactorily managed or fulfilled by either the Australian or Papua New Guinean governments. Papua New Guineans are divided by how this issue should be addressed, if at all, the issues of recognition are sensitive and complex matters. As early as January 1943, the editorial section of *Pacific islands monthly* (Sydney) suggested that after the war the carriers should be given "a gratuity of £10/- cash, every Christmas week, until his death".⁶³ However, such a gratuity was never made, even though the actions of the Papuans were described some 50 years later by then Prime Minister Paul Keating as "one of the great humane gestures of war - perhaps the great humane gesture of our history."⁶⁴ Instead, the carriers were deemed to be civilian workers and were thus not entitled to receive dividends post-war.⁶⁵ The manner in which issues of recognition and compensation have been managed by the Australian and Papua New Guinean governments has led to diverse and complex responses by Papua New Guineans. Many residents, post-war, have come to feel resentment and anger at their continuing ill treatment and the neglect of their contributions to the war. Andrew Pike's 1982 documentary, *Angels of war*, provides an insight into these feelings. As two former carriers recalled:

We worked hard despite all the danger. We were promised compensation and I ask now for what we were promised. Australian government said you work, you will be like us, but it hasn't happened. Work for us, we all sit down at the same table, same spoon, same food hasn't happened. Worked day and night

⁶² Letter, the Minister to [unidentified] 23 October 1959, NAA, A452, 1959/4558.

⁶³ "Plea for 'breathing spell' for Papuan natives", *Pacific islands monthly*, 13:6, 18 January 1943, p. 36.

⁶⁴ Nelson, Hank, "Kokoda: the Track from history to politics", *The journal of Pacific history*, 38:1, 2003, p. 120 quoting Mark, Paul, (ed.), *Advancing Australia: the speeches of Paul Keating, Prime Minister*, Sydney, Big Picture Publications, 1995, p. 281.

⁶⁵ Riseman, Noah, "Australian [Mis]treatment of Indigenous Labour in World War II Papua and New Guinea", *Labour history*, 98, May 2010, p. 174.

so that things would change, I thought of nothing else. I worked hard for nothing. Australian men went home and got pensions. I'm just rubbish. Old men like me are dying without getting anything ... nobody counted how many of us were killed.⁶⁶

In contrast, other Papua New Guineans believe that the care provided to Australian wounded was just an ordinary act of humanity.⁶⁷ These differing views in turn affect how these men perceive their role in post-war history, as well as issues of recognition and compensation.

During the 1980s the Australian and Papua New Guinean governments attempted unsuccessfully to provide compensation to the carriers. Australia gave "\$3.25 million to the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Government under the Defence (PNG) Retirement Act" with the PNG government supposedly handing out payments of 1,000 PNG Kina to each surviving carrier.⁶⁸ Controversy arose, as many carriers argued they did not receive this money.

These issues were again raised in 1992, during the 50th anniversary of the battles in Papua and New Guinea of 1942, by Raphael Oimbari, the carrier recognised as **the** Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel. He was apparently coerced into making several visits to Australia for various Papua New Guinea fundraising initiatives and commemoration ceremonies related to the Second World War.⁶⁹ These left him feeling exploited as a "wartime puppet". He believed that

many of the media personnel, historians and researchers, as well as the governments of Papua New Guinea, Australia and the United States, have done *nothing* to both appreciate and recognise this important piece of war history, but had only used me for their thesis and for their commercial gains.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Daws, Gavan, Nelson, Hank and Pike, Andrew, *Angels of war*, Ronin Films, 1982.

⁶⁷ Interview, D. Temu with author, 15 February 2012.

⁶⁸ C. Lynn, statement by Parliamentary Secretary of Veterans' Affairs and Member of Legislative Council, NSW, Legislative Council, 22 May 2006,

<<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LC20060511051>>

⁶⁹ Letter, M. Hiari to His Excellency B. Farner (Australian High Commissioner to Papua New Guinea), 11 May 1994, AWM PR01732.

⁷⁰ Press Statement, "Tribute to war carriers" quoting Raphael Oimbari, AWM PR01732.

However, Oimbari's views concerning recognition of and compensation for wartime services began to change after he received the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in June 1993. Reflecting upon this new-found appreciation, Oimbari said,

The Queen's award to me is a recognition of the work of native carriers during the war ... [and] is fulfilling my dream of war compensation and recognition from either the Papua New Guinea or the Australian governments for the past 50 years. I am now satisfied with this award because my services to the Australian and the American forces is finally recognised.⁷¹

In more recent years, the issue of recognition has been raised by surviving carriers and their families. In 2006 a request was made to the Australian government for a medal, which was approved. From 2009 to 2011, 68 Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels were presented with commemorative medallions which, according to the current Minister of Veterans' Affairs, the Honorable Warren Snowden, symbolise "Australia's appreciation of the Papua New Guinean civilians, who provided great care and assistance to Australian troops during the Second World War."⁷²

It is likely that this is all they will receive, as talk of monetary compensation is complicated. In 2009 the then Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Alan Griffin, said there were no plans to make payments to surviving Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels; instead the focus was on providing "aid and support ... [towards] improv[ing] the capacity of the communities that many of these people came from ... [so that they] gain better health and education facilities".⁷³ But are the medallions enough? Distributing medallions to Papua New Guineans some seventy years after the war, which was not of their own doing, provokes the question of whether such a gesture and object can truly resolve these issues of recognition and compensation.

⁷¹ Statement by Raphael Oimbari regarding Queen's Award, 14 June 1993, AWM PR01732.

⁷² Minister for Veterans' Affairs, "Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels recognised in Port Moresby", Media Releases & Speeches, 3 November 2011, accessed 15 February 2012, <http://minister.dva.gov.au/media_releases/2011/nov/va096.htm>

⁷³ Interview transcript, P. Holloway (retired Anglican priest), G. Barnett (Senator), and A. Griffin (Minister for Veterans' Affairs) by S. Donovan, AM, ABC Radio, 24 July 2009, accessed 15 February 2012, <<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2009/s2635065.htm>>

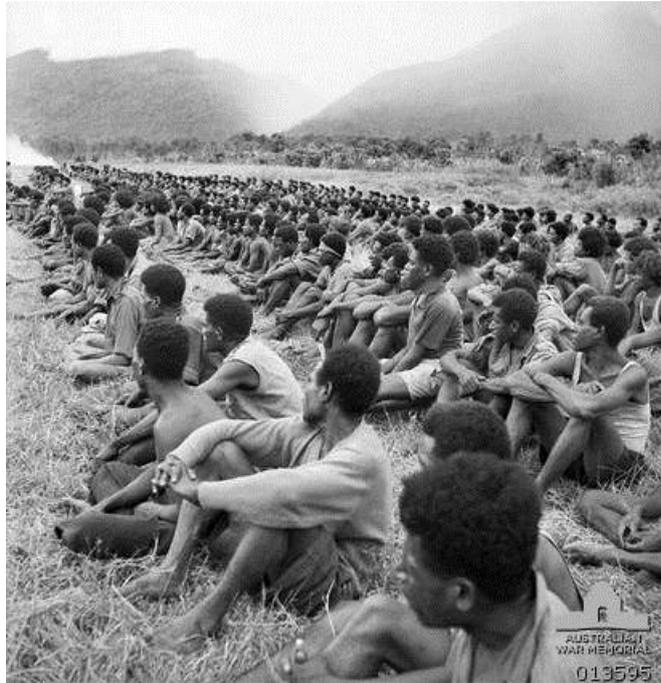


Image 5: Carriers listening attentively to an address congratulating them on their efforts. 19 November 1942. (AWM013595).

Conclusion

Alongside the romanticised myth of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel lies a contradictory and unpleasant truth of what life was really like for some Papuan carriers during the Kokoda campaign of 1942 and other subsequent campaigns. They were not all volunteers, nor were they all treated kindly with the respect and friendliness that the myth suggests. With the publication of both Beros's poem on 31 October 1942 and the George Silk photograph on 18 March 1943 in the *Courier Mail*, the myth of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel was created. It has remained in Australia's public consciousness with varying significance, yet always concealing the negative aspects of this historical narrative. Australia as a nation chooses to romanticise this past and its participants, rather than to acknowledge its own misdemeanours and confront the task of making amends for this part of the nation's history. What is most important is to recognise that without the help of the Papuan carriers, Australia would not have achieved what it did. This is the least we can do for the carriers and

their families: to rightly remember and recognise the diverse and complex experiences facing the Papuans during the Second World War.