

Lessons of War from Pohnpei

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What exactly happened to the island of Pohnpei and its people during World War II? As Lin Poyer (chapter 7) has pointed out, written sources of the period are based primarily on Allied military documents, and the information they provide is limited to strategic plans, dates, and targets of attack plus some intelligence data on Japanese activities (Crowl 1960; Morison 1975; Richard 1957; Sherrod 1952). The limited nature of this information combined with the use of such seemingly innocuous labels as "neutralized" and "bypassed" tends to downplay wartime activities on the island. Furthermore, the reader is left to wonder if there were any native inhabitants on the island or how they were involved.

Yet it is clear to all but the most casual visitor to the island that the people of Pohnpei were significantly involved in the war and that they consider World War II to be an important part of their own history. In 1980-1981 I lived in the Wene area of the Kitti chiefdom located in the southern part of Pohnpei. During my stay World War II was a topic that was still discussed by older men and women in daily conversations around the household and at informal kava gatherings of neighbors and friends in the evenings, and warsongs continued to be broadcast over the local radio station.

I returned in the summer of 1985 to ask women and men of Pohnpei to share their memories of the war with me. They recounted their wartime experiences vividly in songs, anecdotes, and personal narratives. These accounts provided detailed descriptions of the variety of wartime activities in which they participated and also revealed how they themselves understood, felt about, and coped with the war (see Falgout 1989). These accounts at times were filled with emotion. I was impressed that World War II was really a watershed event, a turning point in their lives and in Pohnpei history. I believe that the enormous scale of this foreign war, fought with advanced technology, and the rapid, dramatic social changes that accompanied it continue to shape the lives of those who experienced it. Let us look then at

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what happened to the people of Pohnpei in World War II and at the important lessons these wartime experiences have held for them.

Wartime Experiences in Pohnpei

When Pearl Harbor was attacked on 7 December 1941 Pohnpei had been under Japanese colonial rule for twenty-seven years. Fertile Pohnpei had been well suited for Japan's initial goals of resettlement of its burgeoning population and for economic production for the homeland (Fischer 1957). Shortly before the war broke out, economic production on the island was stepped up, with a goal of furnishing supplies for war efforts on other islands (Bascom 1965). Military construction projects (such as land communication and radar installations, defensive gun emplacements, blockhouses, shelters, a seaplane base, and two small airstrips) were also begun (Ashby 1983; Denfield 1979). The people of Pohnpei were among those hired to work on various wartime projects. At first their participation was on a voluntary, wage labor basis. Men went to work on construction projects and on agricultural plantations. Some young women also went to work in the fields, hoping to earn a little money and to have a bit of adventure.

No major battle would actually be fought on Pohnpei soil. However, some men were drafted into the Japanese military and were transported to other islands. In July 1942, 20 men from Pohnpei (5 from each of the four chiefdoms existing at that time) were drafted and sent to Rabaul to join the fighting (Higuchi 1984). Once they reached Rabaul these men were assigned to different units. In July 1943 another 179 Pohnpei men were drafted and sent to Kosrae. For reasons widely speculated about, but ultimately unknown, all of these men came from the chiefdom of Kitti and represented all remaining able-bodied men from that area. Kitti women had been left behind to care for their families, farmsteads, and community.

Events in 1944 would change Pohnpei's role once again. Allied forces had decided to "neutralize" and then "bypass" Pohnpei before proceeding with the attack on Enewetak. This process of "neutralizing and bypassing" an island, however, was not as innocent an action as it sounded. The people of Pohnpei recalled seeing several Allied planes flying reconnaissance missions over the island in early February. A few days later the bombing began. According to Allied reports 42 B-24 Liberator bombers of the 7th Air Force based on Tarawa struck Pohnpei. Within two weeks 5 Allied raids dropped a total of 118 tons of high explosives and over 6000 incendiary bombs. Then on 1 May, six US battleships (*Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina*) shelled the northern portion of the island, including the port town and Japanese colonial headquarters of Kolonia. The

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attack was halted after 70 minutes when it was determined that no worthwhile targets remained. Indeed, all air bases had been destroyed and of the 940 buildings in Kolonia, an estimated 75 percent were leveled (Denfield 1979; Hanlon 1981). Furthermore, shipping was effectively blockaded. The new Japanese goal in Pohnpei necessarily became one of self-sufficiency. The people of Pohnpei were pressed into forced labor units, and the level and harshness of the Japanese demands increased.

In Kitti all able-bodied women were now conscripted to work on various agricultural projects around the island. Young mothers were forced to leave their children in care of the aged or infirm now left behind. Those women who joined the workforce put in long hours from sunrise to sunset. Days off were reduced to alternate Sundays, then completely canceled. Toward the end of the war some workers were even locked in compounds and forbidden any visitors, not even their own children. Those who had been left behind had to fend for themselves. Farmsteads suffered from neglect, and consumption of farm products was carefully monitored by the Japanese.

Many Kitti women went to work initially in the tapioca and rice fields in Sokehs chiefdom located in the drier, flatter northern end of the island; later some toiled in the tobacco fields established in the southern Madolenihmw chiefdom. Living conditions in agricultural compounds were poor, and the work was backbreaking.

Allied forces repeatedly bombed the island in order to prevent the rapid rebuilding efforts of the Japanese. (Denfield [1979] estimates 250 airstrikes were mounted from February 1944 to August 1945.) One Kitti woman who worked in the rice fields of Sokehs remembered being able to set a clock by the arrival of the planes. The crew began work at 5 AM. When the planes arrived at 8 AM workers hid in bunkers and ate their breakfast. When the alarm sounded again they went back to work. But sometimes the planes arrived unexpectedly. This woman vividly recalled shaking with fear as she tried to run for cover. She is a large and somewhat awkward woman. She stated that she started to give up trying to escape and would just lie down in the open field to accept her fate. After several near misses a kindly Japanese supervisor assigned her to kitchen detail. But even here, she pointed out, she was not safe. One morning a bullet struck the chair in which she had just been sitting.

These extreme efforts on the parts of the Japanese and the people of Pohnpei were apparently effective. There was a severe shortage of cloth. Some people were forced to fashion clothing out of old handkerchiefs, stockings, or even hospital gauze; others stayed indoors, only venturing out under cover of darkness. However, they do not recall any serious lack of food during the war.

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Those men who had been drafted and relocated to other Pacific arenas were not so fortunate, however. Of the twenty men sent to Rabaul, where fighting was intense, only three were returned (Watakabe 1972). Kitti men who had been relocated to work on construction projects in Kosrae (along with Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean soldiers, plus natives of Kiribati) also suffered extreme hardships after the bombing began in 1944. In February 1944 four American planes sunk the Japanese ship *Sun Sang Maru* and destroyed the warehouse, airstrip, and other military buildings. After this incident three large ships carrying numerous Japanese reinforcements from Chuuk were dispatched to Kosrae. Allied bombing of Chuuk shortly after disrupted further transportation and effectively stranded these soldiers and cut off needed goods. Food was in very short supply, and an emphasis was now placed on establishing agricultural plantations. But the number of people on the island was too great; strict rationing was begun and starvation soon set in. Other defensive military construction projects were initiated, with work continuing night and day with little rest. No one remained idle. Even the sick and dying were assigned tasks according to their remaining abilities.

The Japanese assigned different foodstuffs to each of the different cultural groups on Kosrae according to a hierarchial ranking. The best foods, including all large fish and most other sources of protein, went to the Japanese themselves. Kiribati men, because they were former British subjects and considered prisoners of war by the Japanese, were given last priority in obtaining food. The people of Pohnpei fell in between. At first Pohnpei men were given breadfruit and coconuts to eat, both important items in their traditional diet. Natives of Kiribati were given only less desirable swamp taro. As times got tougher the people of Pohnpei were given the Kiribati foods. Kiribati natives then subsisted on the few tiny potatoes that still grew and finally on just potato leaves cooked in a "soup." Anxiety over food ran high fed by rumors of widespread cannibalism in Tarawa and one suspected case in Kosrae. One informant reported his delight in finding a single coconut one morning; he believed this would insure his survival until evening. Many of the Kiribati reportedly died from malnutrition. Japanese soldiers unaccustomed to the island foods and environment, did not fare well either. Kitti men describe in vivid detail Japanese soldiers who had degenerated into walking "stick men." It is a sight they cannot forget.

Wartime Lessons for the People of Pohnpei

"War is the greatest hardship," is the phrase Pohnpei men and women use over and over again to sum up their experiences in World War II. To the outsider wartime conditions in Pohnpei were certainly not as bad as in some

other locations in the Pacific theater, and miraculously few people of Pohnpei died in the crossfire. Nevertheless, the nature and scale of the hardships they suffered exceeded anything previously known to them. Common themes running throughout the war accounts I collected concern the miserable conditions, the poor treatment by Japanese and Allies alike, and the general question of why Pohnpei had been caught in the middle of this foreign war. Some people stated that they still find it difficult to discuss this period in their lives. At times a person would shudder at the memory of an event, ask for a break, or even halt the interview. I believe these World War II experiences have caused the people of Pohnpei to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their traditions and to reconsider their relationships with outsiders. Here I will limit my remarks to just two examples.

First, I believe that as a result of their wartime experiences traditional Pohnpei gender distinctions became blurred and in need of revision. Pohnpei men, proud of their traditional roles as hard workers and fierce warriors, came to sense their limitations in this foreign war fought with advanced technology. For example Kitti men who had been relocated on Kosrae reported experiences of acute loneliness, fear, and nervousness after the bombing began. One young Kitti man observed the bombing of Kosrae as he lay flattened out among the roots of a breadfruit tree--the only shelter he could find. He recalled how hard the ground shook during the bombing and the scenes of death and destruction after the smoke cleared. Later he sat alone, his body still trembling violently with fear, trying to regain his composure. Some Kitti men were diagnosed as having a dread Pohnpei disease, "sickness of unhappiness," a debilitating disease affecting both body and mind (Ward 1979). Reportedly, several died from it. People living near the airstrips and agricultural plantations in Sokehs that were bombed repeatedly were afraid to go outside; some chose to forego eating for several days at a time rather than venture out into the fields.

The impact of the war on Pohnpei women was no less profound. For example, Kitti women who had traditionally been unaccustomed to heavy work and scenes of combat, reported severe hemorrhaging toward the end of the war. Some women blamed their subsequent infertility on the wartime hardships they endured. Yet, the wartime experiences of these women helped them to realize they could overcome traditional limitations on their activities. After the war Kitti women did not completely revert to their traditional roles. These women also began to accompany men at their tasks. This generation of Kitti women, I am told, is renowned for overstepping traditional gender boundaries in both work and politics, and for helping to open the way for further changes in women's roles brought by the subsequent American administration of the island.

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Under American policies of universal education and affirmative action, Pohnpei women have been encouraged to pursue advanced education and to work in the modern sector (see Falgout 1988). While Pohnpei women remain statistically underrepresented in the workforce and rarely hold high level positions, the people of Pohnpei do recognize a number of benefits in having educated and working women as members of their households. These women bring cash incomes to their own natal families and to that of their husbands. An education is now considered an additional asset in women and has become a consideration in marriage choice. Some Pohnpei employers prefer to hire women as workers in positions such as secretaries, teachers, nurses, and storekeepers. They believe that women are more open by nature and thus are less prone to shame others or become shamed themselves in business transactions. Some families may even prefer that the women in the family are the ones to work in the modern sector. This will free the men to engage in traditionally important activities, such as agriculture or community service. In this way a family can get ahead in both worlds.

Second, and more significantly, I believe World War II experiences have played a major role in Pohnpei's reassessment of its relations with foreigners and the nature and significance of its role in the world context. For the more than one hundred fifty years since contact, various foreigners have had their own agenda for the island of Pohnpei and its people. Early in the days of contact with whalers, traders, missionaries, and the like, foreigners were relatively few in number, often disorganized, and at times competed with each other in their efforts (Falgout 1987; Fischer 1957; Hanlon 1988). Under these circumstances the people of Pohnpei were able to bend foreign desires to fit traditional Pohnpei goals--to acquire new forms of wealth and to gain allies with technologically superior weapon systems, and by these means to enhance their prestige within the traditional chiefdom. But, increasingly over colonial times, the people of Pohnpei became dominated by and dependent on the foreign presence, a situation reinforced by threat of military force. Although Pohnpei people were able to retain many of their traditions to a remarkable degree, these were relegated to an evershrinking sphere of activities. Looking at the island context as a whole, the people of Pohnpei were becoming marginal figures in their own land.

Foreign domination and dependency was clearly the case in Japanese colonial times. Japan ruled its Micronesian possessions with a firm hand and had achieved a good measure of success in ensuring Pohnpei loyalties. When the war broke out, the people of Pohnpei recalled, they were initially a bit excited to begin preparations. Warfare in traditional Pohnpei was the "custom of men," and many believed Japan was powerful enough to win the war. Furthermore, Japanese propaganda led the people of Pohnpei to believe that

the bumbling, stupid Americans would never pose a serious threat. The American inability to effectively use their sophisticated wartime technology was the butt of Pohnpei jokes. Indeed, when American planes initially reached the island, their gunfire was usually wide of the presumed target, often landing in the jungle or the ocean. When the bombing began, however, the people of Pohnpei began to sense the huge scale of the war and the possibility that Japan might lose. One man who worked as a native assistant and interpreter for the Japanese talked about the bombing of Kolonia: "It was only then that I realized Americans would actually fight in Pohnpei. The Japanese had given us instructions on how to protect ourselves if we were bombed. They told us to put our thumbs in our ears and our fingers over our eyes. Before this (the bombing of Pohnpei), we used to joke about it. We used it to tease our friends. Now we realized what could happen--we could lose our eyes, even our lives."

Now the people of Pohnpei began to fear Japanese reprisals for their role in losing the war. Some Japanese soldiers, sympathetic to the plight of the people, warned them that the Japanese would allow no natives to be taken as prisoners. Should invasion occur, rumor had it, the Japanese planned to annihilate the natives as they huddled in their bomb shelters. While the men continued to build bomb shelters according to Japanese specifications, they secretly made plans to escape both sides. These plans were codified in song and transmitted through the gossip network.

In the end, Japanese surrender of the island to the Allies was accomplished without incident (Momm 1945). However, according to Jack Fischer, who served as naval administrator of the island from 1950 to 1953, the people of Pohnpei considered the Americans to be just the latest in a series of conquerors. He wrote, "Moreover, some of our behavior (e.g., treatment of government land, caste and social barriers between Americans and natives) appears to the Ponapeans to confirm this view. We are considered as better conquerors than the Japanese mainly because we order people around less, do not slap them, and leave them to pursue their own ambitions" (Fischer 1949-1954).

Clearly then, the women and men of Pohnpei did play a significant role in World War II, and (at least at first) many did so willingly. But I believe that the people of Pohnpei became increasingly aware that their fate ultimately rested in the hands of Japanese and Allied forces. The wartime hardships endured by them, I believe, serve as the extreme example of the high price of foreign domination and dependency. And I believe wartime experiences have been a significant factor in their recent decisions to take a more direct and active role in defining their relations with their Pacific rim neighbors and in charting a new role for themselves in the modern world. Pohnpei involvement

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in World War II has also heightened their awareness of the strategic geographic position they hold in the world context. Some Pohnpei leaders now see this strategic position as a significant bargaining chip to be used in charting Pohnpei's future. Clearly the people of Pohnpei are no longer willing to place their fate so firmly in the hands of foreigners.

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