

Preface

This Occasional Paper presents discussions from the conference on Cultural Encounters in the Pacific War held at the East-West Center over four days, 18-21 May 1988, and sponsored by the East-West Center, the University of Hawaii's Center for Pacific Islands Studies, and the Hawaii Committee for the Humanities. The conference provided an occasion for Islanders, scholars, and others interested in the Pacific region to discuss the meanings and impacts of the Pacific War from local points of view. Like the conference, this collection combines scholarly papers with the testimonies of Islanders from diverse regions. The aim is to review wartime experiences in terms of their significance for the social and political history of island societies. Pacific historians have long noted the importance of the war as a moment of transition, whether toward independence or some new form of relationship with metropolitan powers. The papers and narratives that follow pursue these local significances by assessing the meanings of the war in a range of societies. Taken together they provide a wide-angle lens through which to assess the war's impact on the region as a whole. Given that World War II continues to be invoked in statements about current events, these papers also shed light on the relevance of that war to contemporary identity and political relations.

The conference consisted of nineteen presentations, combining both written papers and oral testimony. These included a mix of seven Pacific Island "veterans" with scholars of various nationalities (five Americans, three Pacific Islanders, two Japanese, one Australian, and one New Zealander). Most of these presentations focus on Pacific Islanders' experiences and recollections of the war, although three papers focus on American and Japanese perceptions as well. These latter add important complementary information to our understanding of the war's cross-cultural encounters. The participation by two Japanese researchers, Hisafumi Saito and Wakako Higuchi, was especially helpful in balancing the inevitable American or European bias in conference discussions. The reader should be aware that, even though our focus is on Islanders' recollections of the war, the American context of the conference probably leads participants to focus somewhat selectively on topics and events seen from an American or European vantage point.

The papers encompass a wide geographic scope. Although certainly not exhaustive or comprehensive, they are grouped to reflect the broad sweep of

Preface

the war across the entire region. Following the order of presentations at the conference, the papers are organized by traditional culture areas--Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The ordering parallels roughly the chronology of the Allied offensive, beginning in the Southwest Pacific and moving northward and westward toward Japan. The first section focuses on Melanesian societies, followed by discussions of the war in Micronesia. The only Polynesian case included here is that of American Samoa, which, like Hawai'i, figured importantly in the war as the site of a rear-area American base. The collection concludes with papers on American and Japanese perceptions of Melanesian Islanders. The most noticeable omission from this inventory of island war history is the absence of any accounts from New Caledonia or French Polynesia.

Two major themes emerge from this collection's review of Islanders' experience of the war. The first, and one that is often minimized in military histories, is the suffering, disruption, and destruction wrought by the war in island communities. The second theme pertains to the war's impact on social relations, particularly the manner in which the war led to a rethinking of relations with colonial powers. In some areas, such as the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, this rethinking led to moves for greater autonomy, while in other areas it accelerated a process of integration, as in the case of American Samoans or Hawaiian Japanese.

The war's toll on island communities will never be known adequately or tallied. In part this is because of the "invisible" nature of native populations, which were little known to most combatants. The numerous cases related, in which planes from both sides bombed and strafed villages where little or no evidence of enemy presence existed, testify to the casual military attitudes toward the safety and well-being of Islanders. One example is the bombing of the artificial island of Laulasi offshore from Malaita in the Solomon Islands. The residents of Laulasi, other Solomon Islanders, and even the British resident commissioner were baffled about why an American squadron of seven torpedo planes bombed Laulasi in an area far from any Japanese troop concentrations, resulting in the deaths of twenty-two men, women, and children (more than half children). Flight reports recently uncovered by Hugh Laracy with the assistance of John Lundstrom show that this bombing was nothing more than a matter of poor navigation, mistaken identity, and a lack of adequate cautions about the presence of local villagers. The tragic result at Laulasi was repeated many times over in Papua New Guinea where saturation bombings of Japanese-held areas accounted for a large proportion of the estimated fifteen thousand Papua New Guineans killed in the war.

Because Islanders were relatively powerless and lacked access to forums where they might voice their suffering, they often endured death, disease, and

destruction in obscurity. On the larger islands whole coastal communities could quietly disappear as they sought refuge in forested interior regions. Although this may have gotten villagers out of the way of battles and bombings, it often left them, unable to obtain adequate food supplies or medical care, to face starvation and disease. The residents of small atolls that were the site of massive invasions may have experienced the most horrific calamities of war. Unable to leave their tiny habitats, residents of places such as Tarawa or Kwajalein recall cowering in bunkers as the earth shook around them for hours, only to emerge (if they were lucky enough to have survived) and see nothing but shattered palm trees, with every bit of vegetation stripped from the coral surface. Even other Pacific Islanders accustomed to the more robust and lush environment of high volcanic islands have difficulty imagining the completeness with which an atoll may be devastated. These differences emerged in the conference when Jonathan Fifi'i, from the large island of Malaita in the Solomons, asked quizzically why Sam Highland dwelt at length on the loss of plants and trees from Betio islet in Tarawa, saying "The same thing happened in my home, but I don't worry about it in the bad times of war." However, unlike Malaita where people could always find and grow food in the interior, tiny Betio was stripped clean of vegetation by the Japanese occupiers intent on fortifying the place. The result was complete dependency on external food sources, with years of work required to regenerate taro pits and the like. Because atoll populations could not hide, they were also more vulnerable to victimization as forced labor. In one of the worst cases of suffering under forced labor, nearly half of the population of Nauru was taken by the Japanese to work in Truk and Kosrae. Of the eight hundred on this journey, more than half perished before returning.

For the colonial powers, relations with "native" peoples during the war were often framed in terms of "loyalty," epitomized in images such as that of the Papua New Guinean "fuzzy wuzzy angel" who carried Australian supplies and wounded soldiers through rugged terrain. Although the issue of loyalty may crystallize the problem of native relations for colonial and military regimes, the concept may have little or no relevance in rural island communities. Whereas loyalty was often presented by the warring powers as a clear-cut matter of alignment with one side or the other, Islanders whose relations with colonial "masters" were ambivalent at best prior to the war often did not regard the conflict as their war. While Jonathan Fifi'i's comment at the conference that "the British were worse than the Japanese" may be somewhat extreme for many areas, his observation underlines the sentiments of many Islanders who suffered invasion and counterinvasion under conditions of immense confusion and uncertainty. For many who witnessed the collapse of prewar colonial regimes, approaching new military outsiders from Japan,

Preface

America, and elsewhere was fraught with danger. Many people adopted a kind of humane pragmatism that only translated into alignment with one side or the other once new or renewed colonial arrangements began to take shape. Those who misjudged often paid for their mistake with their lives or careers. One such person was the Solomon Islander George Bogese discussed here by Hugh Laracy.

From one island group to another the local meanings of the war frequently depended upon the prior history of colonial experience. The papers show the range of variation in local responses to the war, with some communities such as Palauans or indigenous Fijians seeking greater involvement and advancement in the colonial apparatus, and others building on wartime experiences to assert local autonomy and disengagement, as in the postwar Maasina Rule movement in the Solomons. In Japanese Micronesia, where the war was preceded by a growing militarization of the region, the outbreak of hostilities resulted in the recruitment of Micronesians into labor groups and quasi-military units under a rhetoric of coparticipation in the Japanese national cause. Whereas this sort of recruitment was undertaken as an expansion of opportunity and trust in many islands, it was just the opposite in those areas of Micronesia such as Guam, Kiribati, and Nauru that had been under American or British control. The indigenous populations of these places were subjected to harsh and regimented conditions aimed at putting them to work for the Japanese war effort and at preventing any possibility of sabotage or betrayal. As several of the papers in this collection show, these policies resulted in starvation, sickness, or death for many so affected.

The formation of labor and military units in Japanese Micronesia was paralleled in Allied Melanesia and Polynesia. In Papua New Guinea, where the Japanese occupation was longest, and the fight to expel them the most extensive, the need for local labor resulted in coercive recruitment strategies that saw nearly fifty thousand people of Papua New Guinea volunteering or being pressed into service under dangerous and difficult conditions. Many of those who worked as carriers not only suffered extreme hardships on mountain trails, but also left wives and families behind who found themselves struggling to survive without able-bodied men to assist with the requirements of subsistence. For the most part, Allied labor corps formed in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and elsewhere met their needs with volunteers who signed on for the opportunity to acquire new experiences, dollars, and surplus materiel from American troops generous with government-issue property. As several of the Melanesian papers in this collection show, the impressions created by these American "exchange partners" had similar effects throughout the South Pacific. Specifically, unregulated contacts and interactions with military personnel who had no interest in maintaining the guise of European

superiority tended to rupture the prewar status quo, which was based on a code of racial separation and superiority. Encounters with black American servicemen, often perceived as beneficiaries of Western education and economy, also served to challenge color-coded systems of colonial rule.

The first section of this volume consists of six Melanesian presentations that deal with the war in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Papua New Guinea is discussed in a paper by historian John Waiko based on the keynote speech he gave at the conference. Waiko summarizes the findings of his own and others' studies of New Guineans' experiences of the war, while also considering the problems of incorporating information from oral traditions in history writing. Given the size of Papua New Guinea, and the fact that many areas experienced long occupations by the Japanese, it is regrettable that more material on that country could not be included in this volume. Another Papua New Guinean, Maclaren Hiari, was invited to the conference to present his work on the oral history of the Kokoda trail campaign, but was unable to attend at the last minute. Waiko's piece is followed by Brij Lal's discussion of the effects of the war in Fiji, particularly its relevance for this history of relations between indigenous and Indian Fijians.

Of the remaining four Melanesian presentations, three deal with the Solomon Islands and one with Vanuatu. Anthropologist Lamont Lindstrom discusses Vanuatu, focusing on ni-Vanuatu labor corps experiences. Involvement in local labor corps and contact with military base personnel is perhaps the central issue for many areas, such as New Caledonia or Tonga, which did not become the site of open combat but rather experienced another sort of invasion--that of construction battalions and support units that turned quiet south sea isles into citylike military bases. The Solomon Islands, lying between Bougainville and Vanuatu, experienced the effects of both kinds of invasion: the disruption of prolonged military struggle as well as the novel opportunities offered those working on rear-area bases. The war in the Solomons is discussed in three presentations--two by Solomon Islanders David Gegeo and Jonathan Fifi'i, and one by historian Hugh Laracy. Gegeo, a doctoral candidate in political science, gives an overall discussion of the cultural meanings and impacts of the war in the Solomons, and Fifi'i presents a firsthand account of his experiences as a leader of a section of labor corps recruits from Malaita working on Guadalcanal.

The war in Micronesia is discussed in eight presentations, four by Micronesians who experienced the war themselves, and four by researchers (three anthropologists and an oral historian). Lin Poyer opens the section on Micronesia with an overview of the course of the war and its historical significance for the region. This is followed by discussions of the impacts of the war in

Preface

Nauru, Kiribati (Tarawa), Marshall Islands, Pohnpei, Guam, and Palau. This collection has benefited from a paper by Nancy Pollock on Nauru not given at the conference, but incorporated subsequently in order to detail some of the little-known history of Nauruans during the war. Like the people of Pohnpei discussed by Suzanne Falgout, Nauruans suffered extreme deprivations because of occupation and isolation, even though their island was never the site of a counterinvasion. The experiences of Micronesians whose islands were the site of major battles are graphically portrayed by Sam Highland for Tarawa, by John Heine for the Marshalls, by Tony Palomo for Guam, and by Ubal Tellei and Wakako Higuchi for Palau. Although contrasts in experience (eg, between those of American-oriented Guam and Japanese Palau) are dramatic, the dangers of alignment with one or the other of the metropolitan powers are brought home in all of these presentations.

Following the section on Micronesia, wartime experiences in the American territories of Hawai'i and Samoa are discussed. Ted Tsukiyama, an American of Japanese ancestry (AJA), discusses the significance of his own recruitment and that of other Hawaiian nisei into the American war effort. As anyone familiar with modern Hawai'i knows, the heroic service of American Japanese in both the European and Pacific theaters of World War II did more than any single event to validate the American identity of people of Japanese ancestry living in the islands. Ted Tsukiyama's presentation at the conference was but one instance of many occasions in which AJAs' World War II service has been cited as a symbol of national identity and loyalty. The contrast here with the situation of Fiji Indians described by Brij Lal could hardly be greater. Both Hawaiian Japanese and Fiji Indians descend from groups brought to the Pacific to work on plantations as immigrant labor. Both now represent major segments of the states in which they reside and have moved into the full range of professional and business occupations. However, whereas the AJAs of Hawai'i have achieved substantial political power through elected government, Fiji's Indian population has not--a fact underscored dramatically by the 1987 military coups in that country. The different histories of these two groups' involvements in World War II can be read as an ominous precursor of their different fortunes in the modern Pacific. Whereas the wartime experiences of AJAs in Hawai'i helped them overcome skepticism about their loyalty and ability to serve, the relegation of Fiji's Indian population to continued plantation labor during the war added yet another factor that differentiates their history from that of indigenous Fijians, who compiled an impressive record of wartime sacrifice and heroism.

The involvement of American Samoans in the war is reviewed in a paper by anthropologist Robert Franco and an oral presentation by Tuala Sevaetasi, a veteran of the Samoan Fitafita Guard. As in the case of the

Hawaiian Japanese, World War II opened up avenues of recruitment into the regular US military that marked a significant deepening of participation in mainstream US society. Franco's paper, based on documentary and interview data, is complemented nicely by Sevaaetasi's personal narrative of activities beginning during the war that gained him a military career and eventually brought him to Hawai'i.

The final section contains three papers that step back and consider the war's cultural encounters from the point of view of American and Japanese military personnel. By considering the ways the combatants in the Pacific conflict perceived Islanders, these papers add an important complement to this volume's main focus on Islanders' experiences. Hisafumi Saito and Marty Zelenietz, both anthropologists who have worked on the island of New Britain in Papua New Guinea, use published materials to examine the ways Japanese and Americans regarded Melanesians. Their discussions suggest that, for both groups, "natives" were less significant for military personnel than military personnel were for many Islanders. However, whereas Zelenietz writes that Melanesians were "invisible" to many Americans, Saito cites Japanese comments about their friendship and good relations with local people. Note, however, that these attitudes were evident in the propaganda-driven publicity of both sides that emphasized the "liberating" effects of freeing Islanders from oppressive occupation by the enemy. It is apparent that military perceptions of Islanders, as reported in journals and newspapers of the day, were extensively molded by wartime needs to find "loyal natives" and "brave allies."

The conference on which this volume is based was supported by the East-West Center's Institute of Culture and Communication, the University of Hawaii's Center for Pacific Islands Studies, and the Hawaii Committee for the Humanities. In addition the conference and this volume have benefited from support of the editor's research on island histories of the war by a grant from the Interpretive Research Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The assistance of all these organizations is gratefully acknowledged.

For the Center for Pacific Islands Studies, the conference was the thirteenth annual Pacific Islands Studies conference. The organizational efforts of Director Robert Kiste and Outreach Coordinator Tisha Hickson made possible an event that reached a great many people in Hawai'i, continuing a tradition of annual conferences that brings significant Pacific Islands issues to the attention of the community. Donald Rubinstein, formerly executive director of the School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies, played a central role in conceptualizing, conducting, and evaluating the

Preface

conference from the time of its inception. The quality of discussions owes much to his knowledge and understanding of island cultures.

Conference discussions benefited greatly from the participation of several scholars from the University of Hawaii who acted as discussants and facilitators. In addition to Donald Rubinstein, others who contributed their considerable knowledge and skill to the deliberations were Murray Chapman, David Hanlon, Leonard Mason, and Karen Watson-Gegeo. The discussions also benefited from comments by Roger Keesing, anthropologist at McGill University and long-time associate of the late Jonathan Fifi'i.

For the East-West Center the conference was an important part of a larger project on Pacific recollections of the war that involved a previous conference held in the Solomon Islands in 1987, research in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and several publications based on collaboration with colleagues in the region. Several people at the center worked tirelessly to see the conference run smoothly, especially Nancy Taylor and Edith Yashiki. We would also like to thank Edith Yashiki and Joy Teraoka for their help with the preparation of this Occasional Paper.

The East-West Center project on recollections of World War II in the Pacific Islands has already produced several publications. These include *The Big Death: Solomon Islanders Remember World War II* (University of the South Pacific, 1988); *Taem Blong Faet: World War II in Melanesia* (Solomon Islands USP Centre, 1988); *The Pacific Theater: Island Representations of World War II* (University of Hawaii Press, 1989); and the photo-essay *Island Encounters: Black and White Memories of the Pacific War* (Smithsonian Press, 1990). The current volume complements these other publications in several respects. First, its cultural and geographic sweep is broader than most of the books, the first two of which focus solely on Melanesia. Second, our primary focus on indigenous recollections is here expanded with information on American and Japanese perceptions of Islanders, thus adding greater depth to the portrayal of the war as "cultural encounter." Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this volume combines both research-based papers and firsthand accounts by Islanders telling about their own experiences. As the reader will find, this somewhat unusual mixture of voices adds to the immediacy and texture of the volume's portrait of wartime experiences. The contributors hope that these narratives and discussions will inspire further oral historical work with those Islanders who know and speak a different history from that which circulates most widely in the books and films of the metropolitan powers.

GEOFFREY M. WHITE