

Remembering the War in the Solomons

Jonathan Fifi'i

The Coming of the War

The white people told us that a war would eventually come. But even though we listened, we didn't believe them. We couldn't think of any reason that fighting would come to the Solomons. Other people advised us that if fighting did come, we shouldn't be afraid. They said that even if a bomb fell, it would be five minutes before it exploded. All we had to do was pick it up and throw it to where it would explode away from us!¹

In 1942 I was still at school at Kwailabesi, in northeast Malaita. One day we saw the Seventh Day Adventist ship *Melanesia* arrive. But there were no Solomon Islanders aboard, only missionaries. They warned all of the students that fighting was coming soon. They said "We will be leaving tonight. We can't say if we will ever see you again. But though we are leaving, the Americans may come to evacuate you. You must not worry, because there are Seventh Day Adventists among the Americans too."

Some of the other students and I prepared to see our teachers off. At dusk we boarded a small postal boat, and we and the *Melanesia* traveled along in the dark, without any lights. By daybreak we had reached Siota, on Nggela, and at Taroaniara we camouflaged the two boats with branches. We went in two dinghies to Tulagi, the capital at that time, to see what was happening there. Very few people remained in town. A Chinese child had been left behind in the evacuation so the police took him to Auki.

We heard two warplanes approach and at first they flew over us, but then they turned back, and one flew off toward Savo Island. The second plane returned to Tulagi and bombed the wireless station. A second bomb hit the resident commissioner's house, and a third was dropped on the prison. That night all of the missionaries fled, and we ran away too. By the next morning we were back on Malaita again. When we arrived we spread the word that we wouldn't be able to pick up any bombs to throw them away!

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The same day that we arrived back on Malaita the fighting grew stronger. Bombs were bursting all day long. The next day, and the next, no Americans had arrived. We were all alone at Kwailabesi. We ate all the ducks and chickens and the goat too. The missionaries had told us we should.

Days later we saw the first American airplanes above. There were lots of small ones, and perhaps thirty big ones. The next day we saw a Japanese plane go over us flying very low. It came back past us and went down toward Ata'a. After it ditched the four Japanese aboard got their things, including a machine gun, and went to the Ata'a tax house, where they slept. People passed the news to Auki and the government sent six policemen, headed by Corporal Ben Ramo'alafa, to pick them up. When the police got to the head of the trail they took off their uniform sashes and guns and hid them. They tied up *kabilato* (loincloths) for themselves, and mussed up their hair so they would look like villagers when they went down to visit the Japanese. Then they went down to the tax house and greeted those four Japanese there, and rested with them, and got into a friendly conversation. Then they suddenly jumped up and wrestled the Japanese to the ground.

The name of the fourth Japanese was Kawaiama and he had worked at Tulagi before, repairing ships. He recognized Ben Ramo'alafa. "It's Corporal Ben. You kill us. We have come here to die," he said.

But Ramo'alafa said, "No. We have not been given orders to kill you. We were ordered to take you with us. We are to take you to Auki if possible." The Japanese agreed to go along with them. When they reached Feranagona they were being given food when one of the Japanese tried to commit suicide by pressing one hand down on top of his head and pressing the other one up under his chin, and biting down on his tongue. They had to tie his hands so he couldn't try that again.

Meanwhile some Kwaio men had come to Kwailabesi to escort me and the other Kwaio students back home. They told us that on the way they had seen the Japanese and that the plane had crashed near the river at Ata'a.² The next morning we were all walking along the trail when we came upon those four Japanese and those six soldiers. We continued along the trail with them until we got to the big river at Fokanakafa, and the man who had tried to commit suicide before leaped into the water, with one of the others tied to him. Some of the soldiers jumped in after them and pulled them back to shore. When we parted with them there, they were still asking to be killed. But the soldiers didn't want to kill them, since there was no reason for it.

To Guadalcanal

When we arrived back in Kwaio the two government headmen, my relatives Sirifa and Brown Kwarialaena, announced that the government had sent a paper saying they needed people. One of the headmen was my uncle. he said to me, "My boy, I want you to go to fight." He told me, "I want you to go because you've been to school, you speak some English and I want you to lead the group because the Americans don't speak Pijin English." I was only about twenty-one years old at the time, but they instructed me on how to look after the men, and I was willing. I said, "Oh, I would like that." I was made sergeant of our section on the spot. There were twenty-five of us, including myself. Altogether there were one hundred of us in four sections of twenty-five people each. Some just joined because they were interested and curious about war.

When we left for the fighting at Lungga the older people sacrificed pigs in the shrines to the spirits of our ancestors so they would guard us from injury. They asked them to make the Solomon Islanders strong so they could protect the islands from being spoiled. They sacrificed to the spirits to make the fighting be finished in one place and not spread to other areas. They were afraid that the war might spread to Malaita and spoil the ancestral shrines there. The spirits were asked to make the enemy dizzy and slow and to cause them to make mistakes, and for their rifles to misfire and miss their targets. Pigs were sacrificed for our minds to be strong and clear for whatever we had to do.

You and I may not believe such sacrifices could work, but those people did. And it seems as if they did work for them. Notice that even though the enemy was strong, the fighting didn't spread to Malaita. And the war was finished quickly on Guadalcanal. The heavy fighting only lasted a few months.

So only two days after I had arrived back home, a large group of us set out across the island. That night we slept in the bush at Duukwasi, and the next day we arrived in Auki where we were given food. The government officer Mr Trench said that after we had eaten, we should be brought back to him for inspection, and we would be leaving that night on the *Mendana*. We would arrive at Lungga the next morning. Trench told us, "If any of you are afraid to go to war, if you care too much about your family, care about your life, don't go."

We said, "No, we're going to go. We don't mind. What's the difference? If we stay on Malaita we will probably be killed, too, by the Japanese. And if we go we'll be killed, so what's the difference?"

Lungga

When we approached Guadalcanal we saw miles and miles of tents, masses of people, and trucks of all kinds going back and forth. The sea was full of ships, there were planes above us, and we could hear gunshots in the bush. But there were no Solomon Islanders there, the people were mostly American Marines. And there were no black Americans, or Australians, or New Zealanders there yet. There were not even any Guadalcanal people. The Fijians had just arrived. When we got there the place was just starting to fill up with people.

Four more sections of Kwaio and other Malaitans went to Tulagi. While they were there a store of ammunition blew up and six men were killed. One Kwaio man, Takaaba'e, was badly injured in that explosion and he was in such chronic pain that he eventually hung himself. Another Kwaio man, Suda, was blinded in one eye. At Tenaru there must have been three thousand of us. With us were several plantation managers [Labour Corps officers]. They were supposed to look after us.

They organized us into groups. "This group over here. You go with that leader there. This group over here go with that leader over there." I was the interpreter at that time. Some people were left there to put up our tents. There were four tents [one for each section of twenty-five], and also one where our meals were prepared.

During a war there's no time to waste. You just can't play around. We had just arrived but right away we were put to work. The water that we drank was polluted by dead bodies. But where else could you get water from? We just drank it. The Americans had brought along tablets that they put in the water to purify it. And so we got down to work.

At Lungga we unloaded and stacked the American cargo, and chopped wood for building storehouses to put it all into. We served as porters carrying goods, guns, and ammunition for the soldiers patrolling in the bush. We also aided the wounded and carried and buried the dead. Americans were always well buried in the ground, but the Japanese bodies were just covered enough to stop the stench. You could see their legs sticking up out of the earth.

It didn't appear then that the war would be over as soon as 1945. The fighting seemed too strong. During the daytime it was usually quiet because the American airplanes were flying around overhead, but one time Japanese airplanes attacked the Lungga airfield and dropped four bombs on it. Another time we were working at Lungga beach and a Japanese plane dropped two bombs in the middle of us there on the beach. The next day it bombed us again. There must have been fifty men killed during bombings. What would happen is that new recruits who had just arrived wouldn't obey

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orders. If the air raid sounded then we would all jump into the fox holes, but the new arrivals would try to run away from the bombing instead. That's why so many died.

One time [26 January 1943] we were camped there with those Labour Corps officers, and about four in the morning the air raid sounded, and we all dived into our foxholes. Then they told us it was all clear, to come out. When we had all climbed out of our foxholes, the enemy attacked again. Some people became confused and they panicked and dashed off in all directions, and many were killed by the bombs. We were angry about that and we asked to be taken back home to Malaita. Mr Widdy [Labour Corps commanding officer] tried to calm us down, but we wouldn't listen to what he said. Then two American officers came and talked to us: "If you all go back, then this fighting will go on for a long time. What if we soldiers have to stop fighting in order to do the labor too? Because you are here to do the work, this fighting will be finished quickly."

And we answered: "We want you to tell those British officers you are going to put some Americans in our camps. Second, we want an American officer to be with them. And another thing, tell them they can't forbid us from visiting the Joes [Americans]."

They told us: "We will go talk with them, and will tell you tomorrow if they agree or not."

Then we added, "There is something else we want. We want them to give us our pay. They have not paid us yet."

The next day they came back and said it was all right. Then we were happy, and two hundred fifty of us went back to Lungga beach, and others went to Aribé'u, and some to Mataniko.

We didn't get any days off from our work, not on Saturdays, Sundays, or even Christmas or the New Year. Some of our men complained and said, "Why didn't we celebrate these holidays?" And I said to them, "There's no time to celebrate anything. Get down to work." We did the same kind of work as the Americans and the British, but we weren't allowed to wear the same uniforms. We wore lavalavas, yardage. It was forbidden for us to wear trousers or shirts. We sergeants were given a piece of khaki that had three stripes painted on it. They tied strings onto the cloth, and each of us were to tie the cloth onto our arms. The white officers all wore their stripes sewn onto their shirts, but all we got were those pieces of khaki. I was ashamed to wear it like that, so I would just carry it around in my hand.

We worked all day long until dark. Laborers were paid just \$2 per month, and sergeants eight dollars. We thought that was a lot of money at that time. Before the war wages had been only 10 shillings per month, or £1 [US\$2] if you had worked someplace for a long time. So we were very happy. There was

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always enough food because the Americans fed us when we worked on their cargo. They told us to take anything that we wanted for ourselves. We took extra, thinking that, if we could find a way, we would send some of it back to our relatives on Malaita. When we were working with the Americans, we were never hungry, but no one grew fat either. That's because we never slept at night with the enemy planes always coming.

We requested clothing for the women back home. There on Malaita clothing was in such short supply that women were having to tear their pieces of cloth in half so there would be enough to go around. They couldn't cover their breasts; they only had enough to wrap a skirt around their waists. The Christians, that is. The bush women were all right, because they didn't mind going naked. I asked the Americans for cloth, and they told me that they hadn't brought any with them, only things for the fighting. But they did say they would look for old mattress covers, and if we washed them we could have them. So the Marines found some mattress covers and they brought them to us and said, "Here, send these to your women back on your island. This is the best we can do. It's not peacetime. We understand your need. Take these mattress covers for the time being and let the women use them." But there was a problem because our British officers were usually watching when our trucks arrived in the evening, bringing us back from work. I asked the advice of the Americans supervising us, and they told us that when we were carrying gifts we should jump down off the trucks before they reached the camp, and then we could slip in later.

Our officers tried to forbid us from visiting Americans, but when we told the Americans of this they told us not to worry about it, so we kept going. When an American had finished eating he would wash his plate and give it to me and tell me to go stand in the line for food. One time a Labour Corps officer saw this and told me I couldn't eat that food. A man named Kirsh told him "Go fuck yourself!"

While at Lungga we would collect things from the military dumps, wash them and store them in our tents. Whenever a Labour Corps section was ready to return to Malaita, the British officers would search through their possessions and confiscate forbidden things, like trousers. They gave out word that we were not supposed to take military items back home. But the Americans said that was a lie. They said the things we were taking were only rubbish, and anyone could just pick them up. Some of the American soldiers even scavenged at the dumps themselves.

The Americans gave us lots and lots of sheets, shirts, trousers. They even gave guns away. Some men got pistols, others carbines. One time they gave one man a machine gun. We wanted to take all our cargo back home with us, but it was difficult. They said each man could take home only one box about

thirty inches long. Some men made special boxes. A relative of mine, Gwauni, made our boxes for us. These boxes had a false bottom, and when Officer Widdy would inspect them he would reach into the box and touch the wood and think that was the bottom. Some men hid cartridges, while others disassembled rifles to conceal inside. My, but those boxes were heavy!

But one day, when all the sections had gone off to work, the Labour Corps officers summoned together some police and they searched through all of our tents. They confiscated all of the things that the army had given to us. They put the clean clothes into a separate pile by themselves, and then they poured kerosene over all the old clothes and set them on fire. They took those good things to their own quarters and later sold them in their store. When we arrived back at our camp we objected, but they said those things were not for us boys but were only for white men. We saved this episode in our memories.

On the night of 15 January 1943 Ru'uboo, Te'efu, 'Ui'aniaria, Tome Niuboo, and maybe fifty Kwaio and other people met. These men said they were going to kill the British Labour Corps officers. But I forbade it. "You cannot kill them, because we are in the midst of a war. It will be bad for all of us." They said "We can claim a bomb killed them."

I told them, "But those of you who do the murders will still have to adhere to the strict religious taboos that a man must follow after killing someone, and people will see from that what is going on." I ordered them not to do it.

I'm talking about these things because we were an oppressed people in the Solomon Islands. We had been oppressed for some time up to that point. Not only a single moment, it's something that happened each day all the time. And then when we would complain the American Marines would listen to us. They didn't mind. They would listen to us complain about the situation in the Solomon Islands. And when we worked and the British people would come and say, "Get cracking. What are you waiting for?" the American Marines would come and say, "Shut up, get out of here," in our defense. And they would tell us, "You have to struggle, you have to do something. If you just obey, obey all the time, nothing's going to be done for you." And then we got the idea from that time. They would encourage us and say, "Struggle. They may kill you, they may torture you, they may do all kinds of things to you but don't give up. Keep going." That was the beginning of Maasina Rule.

After the war, when I went back to Malaita, I wanted to do what they had said. I wanted to start Maasina Rule, but my uncle who was the headman wouldn't allow it. He said, "Let other people start it and then you can join them, but don't start it yourself." That was because my uncle was a government headman. That was an important position in the British colonial system. He told me, "Let other people start it and then you can join them."

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After the war we had courage, whereas prior to the war we would always just give in.

The War Back Home on Malaita

Americans bombed Laulasi, Gamuo, Uru Island [East Kwaio], and Fousaari'i, South Malaita. The Americans were just playing around, but it was bad for those places they bombed.

I heard two explanations for why Laulasi was bombed. The first is that when the airplane was going over, men were putting thatch on the houses and they waved at the planes. The second is that when Japanese came to Auki in [July] 1942 a man named Sale 'Abakomu met them at the wharf, and he and some other Laulasi people led them to the government office. Also, a false rumor went around that they were hiding Japanese at Laulasi Island. At that time Mr Bengough, the district officer at Auki, had fled. Later, Sale 'Abakomu and others who had assisted those Japanese were jailed for six weeks.

Of the bombing of Gamuo they say a man had gone outside and was staring at that American plane and it just started bombing. Near Uru Island people had gotten into a big canoe and were paddling hard to flee to the shore when they were bombed. At Fousaari'i, near Maramasike, they just attacked a rock out by the reef in deep water. They dropped four bombs, but they were just messing around practicing and didn't get close to any houses.

One American plane went down near the mouth of Sinalagu Harbour, in Kwaio. The pilot's name was Allen. His plane sank in the sea but he had a rubber raft, which he paddled along with his hands. The waves carried him to the edge of the reef at Ririsiana, and a man named Gi'u saw him and thought someone must have capsized their canoe. But then he noticed it must be something different because the man's skin was white. And that rubber raft was red, and too short to be a canoe. Pilot Allen saw Gi'u too and thought he was an enemy scout. So Allen jumped in the sea away from his raft and sunk into the water with just his face and nose showing. A wave carried him up to the shore. He moved to a place to land on the beach and tried to hide there, but he was ready to swim back out to sea if he spied trouble. Gi'u went to the point of the reef and saw that he was a white man and beckoned to him to come to him. Pilot Allen had also just realized that Gi'u was a black man and he swam over to him on shore. Gi'u asked him "Where are you from?"

Pilot Allen told him, "I am an American, they shot my airplane's fuel tank and when I reached here it was empty and so I fell down here, the plane sank, and the waves carried me and my rubber raft to shore. Are there any Japanese here?"

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Gi'u told him "No, there are no Japanese here on Malaita." Gi'u said they should go to the place where I, Fifi'i, am from, and he told him "You musn't be afraid, I won't trick you." Pilot Allen said that first they should carry his raft onto shore, and then they let the air out of it. Gi'u and he took the raft and moved to the place Farisioa, a Seventh Day Adventist village. The only clothes Allen had left were his trousers.

Many airplanes were searching for him afterward over on the Guadalcanal side, as they thought that he must have gone down near where his plane had been hit. But instead, he had taken a route that took him across land.

They dried out his pants for him, and gave him a dry shirt, and he stayed there for five days. The Auki police came to escort him to Auki from which he would be sent back to Lungga. Pilot Allen was a young man. Maybe he is still alive, or perhaps he died in the fighting. People asked him and he said that if he survived the war he would come back to visit the place where he had been rescued.

Guadalcanal Chapels

During the war there must have been three thousand Malaitans working on Guadalcanal. There were also people from Makira, Ulawa, and Ugi Island. These were the only people I saw working with the Americans at Lungga. We built a large chapel at the cemetery for the war dead. The people from Ulawa decorated the inside. When it was finished people from all the different Christian denominations gathered there every Sunday, or whenever their sabbath was, to pray. Only the Kwaio hill people didn't go there to pray. Where would they get pigs to sacrifice? And their people were already performing sacrifices for them back on Malaita for the fighting to be calm. Their chapels were their foxholes, because when the fighting began, they would pray to the spirits of their ancestors while inside them. That was the Melanesian way.

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Notes

1 Most of the paper was written in the Kwaio language by Jonathan Fifi'i in May 1988, during his stay in Honolulu, and translated into English and edited by David Akin. In some places additional material has been added, as requested by Mr Fifi'i, from his 1988 conference talk and from a series of interviews taped by Akin in 1982, 1987, and 1988. The editor would like to thank Geoffrey White for help in the editing and production of this paper.

2 The exact crash location was Manua, near Suanaga'i (Ben Burt, personal communication to editor, 1984).