

*Overlooking Injustices for National Pride: Inside the Australian War Memorial's  
Representation of the Papua New Guineans During WWII*

Erika K. Smith, Western Sydney University, Australia

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2016  
Official Conference Proceedings

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

War is sometimes argued as necessary for maintaining peace and justice. During the Second World War the Australian government sent troops to Papua New Guinea to thwart the imminent invasion of Australia by the Japanese. Papua New Guinea was then a British colony under the mandate of Australia, and it was voiced that its peoples ‘should remember that he belongs to the British Empire; and he should be ready to do anything he can to help his empire win’ (Inglis, 1971: 507). The Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea became the site of some of the most desperate and vicious fighting encountered by Australian and Japanese troops during the Second World War. Although not extensively publicised, the savage and fierce fighting in the region also resulted in tens of thousands of Papua New Guinean deaths from introduced diseases, deprivation and violence.

In recent decades the Kokoda Track has become a cultural phenomenon in Australia, with a strong overarching focus on linking its military history<sup>1</sup> with the concept of Australian national identity. Furthermore, the Track itself has grown in popularity as a site of pilgrimage and adventure tourism for many Australians (Smith, 2016: xix). With some exceptions<sup>2</sup>, the discussion of the Kokoda Track in Australia has focused on Australian experiences, and very little has considered the experiences of the Papua New Guineans. The Australian War Memorial in Canberra is Australia’s national memorial to those who have served the Commonwealth of Australia, and ‘its mission is to assist Australians to remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of war and its enduring impact on Australian society’ (AWM, About). This paper examines the Australian War Memorial’s representation of its allies of the then-mandated colony, the Papua New Guineans, in the Second World War Gallery.<sup>3</sup> The main methodology for this paper was several site visits to the Australian War Memorial (2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) and one week trekking the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea (2010). Therefore, prior to any analysis and discussion of the findings, these sites require introduction before they are examined.

---

<sup>1</sup> When discussing military history this paper predominately refers to WWI and WWII. However this author, unlike the Australian War Memorial (which focuses on conflict from the time of Australian Federation in 1901), does recognise that part of Australia’s military history should include its Frontier Wars between the First Peoples of Australia (or Indigenous Australians) and white settlers.

<sup>2</sup> *The Path of Infinite Sorrow* (Collie & Hajime, 2009), *The Bone Man of Kokoda* (Happell, 2008), *Cannibal Tours* (O’Rourke, 1988), *The Kokoda Campaign 1942: Myth and Reality* (Williams, 2012), *Angel of Kokoda: Kari* (Wilson, 2010), *Angels of Kokoda* (Mulligan, 2006) and the work of Australian historian Hank Nelson on the subject of Papua New Guinea have offered accounts from Papua New Guinean (the latter four texts) and Japanese (the former two texts) perspectives.

<sup>3</sup> In 1902 Papua New Guinea was placed under the authority of the Commonwealth of Australia (Roberts-Wray, 1966: 132), later confirmed in The Treaty of Versailles (1919) when Germany’s colonies were sanctioned and thus German New Guinea became a British colony under the mandate of Australia.

## The Australian War Memorial



Plate 1: The AWM Canberra (photograph by author, 6/09/12).

The Australian War Memorial at the northern end of Anzac Parade in Canberra was officially opened on Remembrance Day (11 November) 1941. The AWM consists of three parts: the Commemorative Area (shrine) which includes the Hall of Memory and the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier; the Memorial's Galleries (museum), and the Research Centre (records). Outside the AWM the garden is home to sculptures and plaques of every Company of every Australian Battalion. The main entrance on the upper level consists of the Roll of Honour along two walkways leading up to the Hall of Memory. At ground level there are two galleries on either side of the building; to the left is the WWI Gallery and to the right the Second World War Gallery. The lower level contains 'Conflicts 1945 to Today', the 'Research Centre', 'Education Space' and the 'Special Exhibitions Gallery'. The AWM museum (the two galleries) possesses Australia's largest collection of artworks, relics, artefacts and documents from colonial conflicts in other countries (including the Boer War and the Boxer Rebellion) to conflicts of the present day.

This paper selected the Australian War Memorial for critical examination for four key reasons:

- It describes itself as one of the world's greatest museums (AWM Annual Report 2010-2011, 2011: xii), and is regarded by some as Australia's most important historical museum (Lake, 2006:5).
- The Memorial houses Australia's largest collection of artworks, relics, artefacts and documents from colonial conflicts in other countries (including the Boer War and the Boxer Rebellion) to conflicts of the present day. It also has over 35,000 works of art and 'has one of the largest thematic [photographic] collections in the world', with almost one million negative photographic images, of which over 250,000 have been digitalised and made available on the Memorial's website (Wilkins, 2010: 24; Lakin, 2006: vii, xi).

- The AWM attracts approximately one million visitors and 3-4 million online visitors annually.
- The Australian War Memorial states that its purpose is to ‘assist Australians to remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of war and its enduring impact on Australian society’ (AWM, About).

The significance of the Memorial, the extensive material at its disposal, its popularity, and its purpose as detailed in the aforementioned dot points, make it not only worthy as an incredibly influential institution, but also in need of extensive discussion and critical analysis. In recent decades the worrying trend of linking the concept of Australian national identity to Australia’s military history has been made all the more normalised (Smith, 2016: 51). Therefore it is unsurprising that in the AWM’s annual report for 2010-11 (2011: 14): Nine out of ten surveyed visitors believe that the Australian experience of war has been a very important factor in shaping the Australian identity. And in 2012-13 reports, 80 per cent of survey respondents rated the Australian experience of war as being important to extremely important in shaping Australian identity (2013: 14).

Arguing that there can be links between war and national identity is not a new assertion that lacks extensive discussion and critical examination. In post WWI Britain, historians such as Eric Hobsbawm (1983), Robert Arnot (1967) and George Mosse (1990) viewed construction of war monuments as part of a deliberate attempt by the authorities ‘to consolidate the idea of nationhood, unity, and the meaning of war, in the face of the communist threat’ (Abousnoug and Machin, 2010: 140). Similarly in Australia some have argued that there has been a strategic move to ‘takeover the symbolic repertoire of Australia’s radical nationalist past’ (Ball, 2004) by ‘narrowing [...] national mythology to one key legend<sup>4</sup>, which encapsulated values, defined the moment of national birth and gave rise to a military tradition’ (McKenna, 2009: 7), based on a belief that history is the building block of ‘social cohesion’ and ‘national unity’ (former Prime Minister John Howard cited in McKenna, 2009: 4-5). In Australia the success of linking its military history to national identity has been demonstrated in the numbers of Australians who attend Dawn Service across Australian cities and towns to commemorate Anzac Day (25 April), pilgrims to Gallipoli in Turkey (where the Anzacs landed on 25 April 1915), and the annual number of trekkers to the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea. It is the latter site that is the focus on this paper, which brings this paper to provide background information to Papua New Guinea and the Kokoda Track.

---

<sup>4</sup> Here McKenna refers to the Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps - ANZAC) legend. According to the Australian War Memorial (<https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/dawn/spirit/>) the Anzac legend was born on 25 April 1915 when Australian soldiers displayed characteristics (courage, endurance, initiative, discipline, and mateship), which have become well known as qualities of the Anzac spirit.

## Papua New Guinea



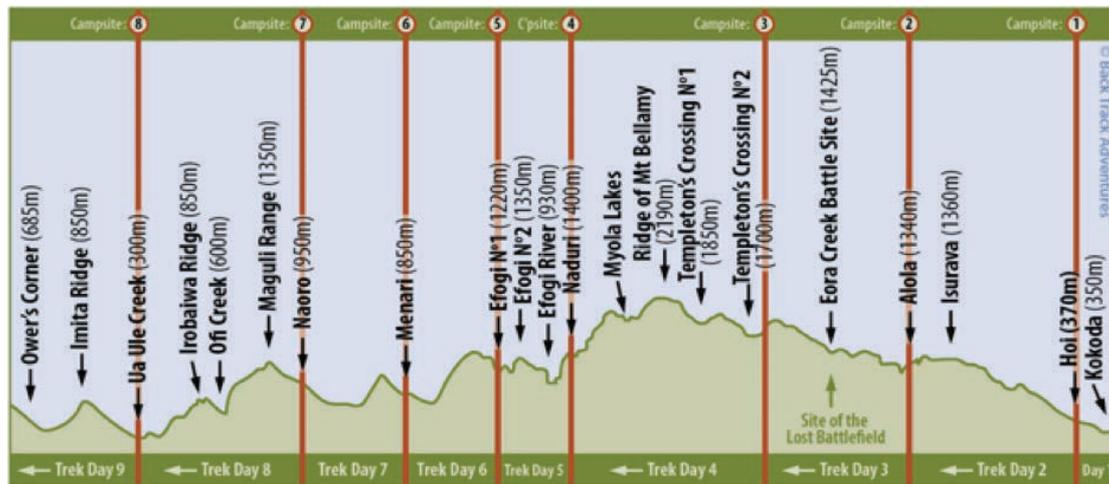
Papua New Guinea has a population of 7,821,000 (census 2013, REF), most of whom live in customary societies, where over 800 distinct languages are spoken, making it one of the most heterogeneous nations in the world. Given the great diversity of the cultures, languages, customs and traditions, the naming and homogenisation of the region and the peoples we today know as ‘Papua New Guinea’ and the peoples to be ‘Papua New Guineans’ by Europeans and the British is problematic.

In the early 1500s Portuguese explorer Jorge de Menezes named the island ‘Papua’, a word derived from *puaHPuaH* or *pepuaH*, Malay words for the distinctive frizzy hair of the people (Wood, 1870: 898; Ballard, 2008: 161). A couple of decades later the Spanish explorer Yñigo Ortiz de Retez, identified what he saw as a resemblance between the people of Papua to the people of Guinea, on the west-coast of Africa. Based on his observations he named the region ‘Nueva Guinea’ (or New Guinea). Thereafter ‘Papua’ and ‘New Guinea’ have been used in the naming a renaming of the region, largely for the purposes of colonial powers to more easily divide and refer to the island, and for making sense of the ‘black’ Other (Smith, 2016: 31).

Based on this brief history of the naming of Papua New Guinea, and the diversity of the peoples of this region, we can recognise that a perpetuation of colonial ignorance, racism and – in the foundation of term ‘Papua New Guinea’, making any collective representation inherently inaccurate. Put more simply, the diversity of the people we know as Papua New Guineans is based on colonial ignorance, and to view the peoples as a homogenous group is a myth that makes any representation problematic, to say the least. But this argument goes beyond the focus of this paper and its examination of how Papua New Guineans are represented at the Australian War Memorial, nevertheless it is important to recognise the underlying problems and complexity in any analysis of Papua New Guinea and its peoples.

## The Kokoda Track

The Kokoda Track from Ower's Corner to Kokoda in Papua New Guinea is a narrow passageway through steep mountains, rainforests, rivers, grasslands and barren earth. The Track is known as a challenge for Australian trekkers due to the environment and the conditions, such as high altitude, heavy rainfall, thick mud, heat, humidity and slippery surfaces.



As highlighted in the Introduction, the Kokoda Track has become a popular site for Australian tourism in recent decades. Approximately 3,000 Australians undertake the trek annually (Smith, 2016: 56) and in the last ten years over 52 trekking companies have been granted trekking licenses (Smith, 2016: 67). The aforementioned challenging environment and conditions of the Track have seen a large number of evacuations and a number of deaths. Approximately 50 trekkers are airlifted from the Track annually (SBS, 2009), and since 2001 there have been fifteen Australian deaths associated with the Kokoda Track.<sup>5</sup> There has also been extensive media coverage of violence towards trekkers in and around the region. In September 2013 a group of seven Australians, one New Zealander and twelve Papua New Guineans were attacked while trekking the Black Cat Track<sup>6</sup>. Kerry Rarovu and Matthew Gibob, two of the Papua New Guinean guides, were hacked to death with machetes (Fox, 2013), and most of the other guides had their calves and Achilles tendon sliced (Hoffman, 2014: 3).<sup>7</sup> Although investigations are still being carried out, in January 2016 a British man and an American woman claimed two Papua New Guinean men with machetes ambushed them while trekking the Kokoda Track. The British man claimed to have been beaten and robbed, and the American woman reported to being raped (Hill, 2016). Violence, crime, tribal conflict, assault, theft and murder are realities of the

<sup>5</sup> There was one death in 2001, one death in 2008 and four deaths in 2009. In August 2009 a light plane carrying 13 people, nine of whom were Australian trekkers, crashed *en route* to Kokoda Airport killing all on board.

<sup>6</sup> The Black Cat Track is an overland track that runs from Salamaua to Wau in Morobe Province.

<sup>7</sup> Two of the Papua New Guinean guides were killed and one later died of injuries sustained in the attack. It was later found, despite media hype around the Australian trekkers involved, that Kerry Rarovu was the target of assassination (Hoffman, 2014).

region, like many other places in the world, which outsiders can be ignorant of.<sup>8</sup>

Given the Memorial's perception of its role as shaping Australian identity through its representations of war, and the cultural phenomenon of the Kokoda Track in contemporary Australian society the sections which are relevant to the Kokoda Track require critically examined. The following section derives photographic images captured during numerous site visits that are relevant to this paper and its analysis of how the Papua New Guineans are represented.

### **Representations of Papua New Guineans in the Australian War Memorial**



Plate -: Kokoda Campaign Dome in the centre of the room (behind the car), Section 9 of the Second World War Gallery, AWM (photograph by author, 05/09/12).

---

<sup>8</sup> During the author's site visit of the Kokoda Track there was an attempted robbery. When we (the trekkers) went to bed there was a commotion outside our tents, the author was able to look outside her tent only to see men with machetes. The *raskols* (rascals) had stolen our trek leader's pack (which contained money to pay each village we camped at) but we were told after several hours of trekking through the night the Papua New Guinean guides and our trek leader managed to recapture the pack.



Plate -: 'Stretcher Bearers in the Owen Stanleys' by William Dargie, 1947 (AWM ART26653), display on the left wall next to the Dome, Section 9 of the Second World War Gallery, AWM (photograph by author, 05/09/12).



Plate -: Entrance to the Kokoda Campaign Dome, Section 9 of the Second World War Gallery, AWM (photograph by author, 05/09/12).



Plate -: Inside the Kokoda Campaign Dome, clips from Damien Parer's film *Kokoda Front Line* play on the large projection screen, Papua New Guineans, Section 9 of the Second World War Gallery, AWM (photograph by author, 05/09/12).



Plate -: Inside the Kokoda Campaign Dome, clips from Damien Parer's film *Kokoda Front Line* play on the large projection screen, Papua New Guineans, Section 9 of the Second World War Gallery, AWM (photograph by author, 05/09/12).



Plate 5.63: 'Papuan Native Carrier' by George Allen, 1947. Papua New Guinean depicted wearing a lap-lap and carrying a tin of rations, Section 9 of the Second World War Gallery, AWM (photograph by author, 05/09/12).

## Results

The photographs show that the Memorial Papua New Guineans played two significant roles during the Second World War, both as soldiers and carriers of the wounded.<sup>9</sup> In reality the roles of Papua New Guineans were far more diverse, including: scouts/intelligence stewards, laundry cleaners, carriers of equipment, cleaners, cooks, soldiers, police, labourers, construction workers, farm hands, repairers, manual labourers, carriers of ammunition, and stretcher-bearers for the wounded (Riseman, 2010: 9).

The other key finding was that the Papua New Guineans are represented as friends and allies of Australia during WWII. What has been omitted from this picture is the physical abuse, racism, discrimination, executions, conscription and forced labor of Papua New Guineans by Australians. Additionally, there were Papua New Guineans who were forced to work for the Japanese. Historian Ken Inglis (1971: 517), the documentary film *Angels of War* (Nelson, Pike, Daws, 1982) and the television show *Foreign Correspondent* and one of its journalists Steve Marshall (Bormann, 2007; Marshall, 2007) have all brought to light historical evidence that during the War Australians shot Papua New Guineans who were suspected of working for the Japanese or who pretended to be members of the Papuan Infantry Battalion. On one

---

<sup>9</sup> An important finding was that representations of Papua New Guineans were male. This finding is in keeping with texts on the subject of the Kokoda Track and Australian military history. Though an important finding, it goes beyond the scope of this paper.

occasion in 1943, 17 men were executed by hanging in front of hundreds of school children 'as a lesson not to co-operate with the Japanese' (Marshall, 2007).

The abuse Papua New Guineans experienced by Australian soldiers is well documented in texts, particularly more recently published works. Paul Ham in his book *Kokoda* (2004: 213) described how Papua New Guinean carriers 'were rounded up [...] corralled into pens. Many were pushed to the limits of physical endurance [...] expected to work long after their contracts expired, without pay'. In 2011, Papua New Guinean Frederick Soka described the hard work that he had to perform during the War, including carrying ammunition and food for Australians when he was just 12 years old. During the War, Academy Award winning cinematographer Damien Parer described how Papua New Guineans carried heavy loads of equipment and supplies, approximately 50lbs (22.6kgs) each, or 70lbs (31.7kgs) between two (AWM, 1942).

There is the popular perception that the Papua New Guineans 'came down voluntarily from their villages and helped carry the Australian troops over the Kokoda Track. The reality is of course that they were indentured labour' (Duffy, 2007). For many of the Papua New Guineans who were involved in the War there was no choice. These accounts are reflected in the work of well known WWII war correspondent, Osmar White (1987: 29), who witnessed first-hand the recruiting of indentured Papua New Guinean labour and recorded that:

In some villages every able-bodied male over the approximate age of sixteen years was rounded up [...] Brutal disciplinary measures had often to be taken in the field [...] The majority did their work only because the white men in command bullied them into doing it.

Hank Nelson (2007: 81) in 'Kokoda and Two National Histories' described that a tactic of the Australian military to reduce desertion among the Papua New Guineans was to recruit them from areas outside Central and Oro Provinces on the logic that:

[o]ther Papuans recruited from the south coast had to pass through country where strangers were likely to be killed; they found it hard to find rations to carry with them; and they were likely to run into Australian police and Angau posts where they would be punished and returned to the Track.

The Australian War Memorial held a conference on the subject of Kokoda in 2012. Deveni Temu, the son of a Papua New Guinean labourer (he chose the term 'labourer' over 'carrier'), described his father's mistreatment and abuse at the hands of Australian soldiers during the War, astutely claiming that this area of history has been overlooked.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined how Papua New Guineans have been represented in the Australian War Memorial and found that their inclusion is limited, simplistic, tokenistic, and avoids uncomfortable truths in regards to the treatment, conditions and attitudes at the time by Australians. The Australian War Memorial states that 'its mission is to assist Australians to remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of war and its enduring impact on Australian society'. The reality is that

an aspect of the Australian experience of war, specifically the Second World War and the Kokoda Campaign, is the injustices Papua New Guineans experienced by Australians. By presenting an easy to digest, overly simplistic account of Australian military history the Memorial, as Benedict Anderson (1983) pointed out, assists visitors to envisage themselves as members of a community made up of millions of people most whom they will not meet but who contribute to this concept of the Australian nation.

It has been argued that people place greater trust in the information that they gain from museums and memorials than from history teachers (Lake, 2006: 5). War monuments and memorials turn public spaces into representational battlegrounds where power structures and historical narratives are contested (Lake, 2006: 2). And if we agree that 'memory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure' (Young, 1993: 2), then institutions such as memorials and museums representing history have a responsibility to represent more than one point of view. Earlier this paper argued that there have been strategic moves to push Australia's military history to the forefront, giving rise to a strong military history that is evidenced in Anzac Day observance within Australia and internationally. A number of academics have attributed a large proportion of this movement as political (REF).

Museum studies academic Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1990: 66) asserts that most governments want museums to be more financially independent and more discerning about their collections. The museum, therefore, becomes a market-driven, corporate industry that relies on the paying customer to survive. In other models, museums are funded by corporations and others are funded by philanthropic bequests. In contrast to those models, the AWM is heavily funded by the Federal Government. For instance, in March 2011, the Gillard Government announced an \$8 million annual increase on top of the \$38 million that the AWM receives every year (Snowdon, 2011). In the 2014 budget the Abbott Government subsequently increased its funding of the AWM while cutting funding to many other government agencies and services. In addition to the funding the AWM receives from the government annually, since 2012 the Director of the Memorial is former Federal Opposition Leader, Dr. Brendan Nelson. Increasing the funding of the AWM appears to be a rare area for agreement by both major political parties. The AWM's sustained government funding calls into question its content, themes, styles and representations.

Based on the analysis of displays in the Second World War Gallery of the Australian War Memorial the Papua New Guineans are represented as carriers of the wounded and soldiers who worked alongside Australian soldiers. To represent the roles of the Papua New Guineans more accurately and bring to light the injustices they suffered complicates and challenges the Anzac legend and the image of the heroic Australian soldier. The Australian War Memorial has a duty to represent and do justice to historical accuracy. However, based on the evidence examined in this paper, Australia's WWII history, specifically in relation to how the representation of Papua New Guineans and Australian soldiers, has been controlled, limited, politically influenced and over simplified. As a consequence a single narrative, that is at odds with historical evidence and first-hand accounts, promotes a false sense of Australian history and national identity.

## References

*Commonwealth and Colonial Law* by Kenneth Roberts-Wray, London, Stevens, 1966. P. 132 where it is noted that "On March 18, 1902 Letters Patent [S.R.O & S.I. Rev. II, 1096] made for the purposes of section 122 of the Australian Constitution, placed the territory under the Commonwealth of Australia"