

This image of native bearers (popularly known as Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels) was taken during WWII as they carried heavy loads of supplies and equipment for Australian troops on one of many long-distance marches



Remembering the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels

David Howell

Photos courtesy of the Australian War Memorial

The village of Kagi, nestled high in the mountains half-way along the Kokoda Track, is home to a devout community of Seventh-Day Adventists and subsistence farmers. Until Christmas Eve just past, Kagi was also home to a national hero of both PNG and Australia.

Havala Laua was one of the last living links to a very special generation of Papua New Guineans, a generation which, 75 years ago, toiled over the Kokoda Track, transporting

the much-needed supplies of food and ammunition, before carrying wounded Australian soldiers to safety.

With Havala's death, it is time for both Australia and PNG to revisit how we recognise and remember men like Havala and the legacy they leave behind. Many readers would be familiar with the famous Bert Beros poem "The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels" that painted a picture of gentle, loyal and devoted native carriers. These were people who put aside their own needs

to faithfully carry out their duty of carrying wounded Australian soldiers home to safety. The poem reads in part:

*Slow and careful in the bad places
on the awful mountain track
The look upon their faces
would make you think Christ was black.*

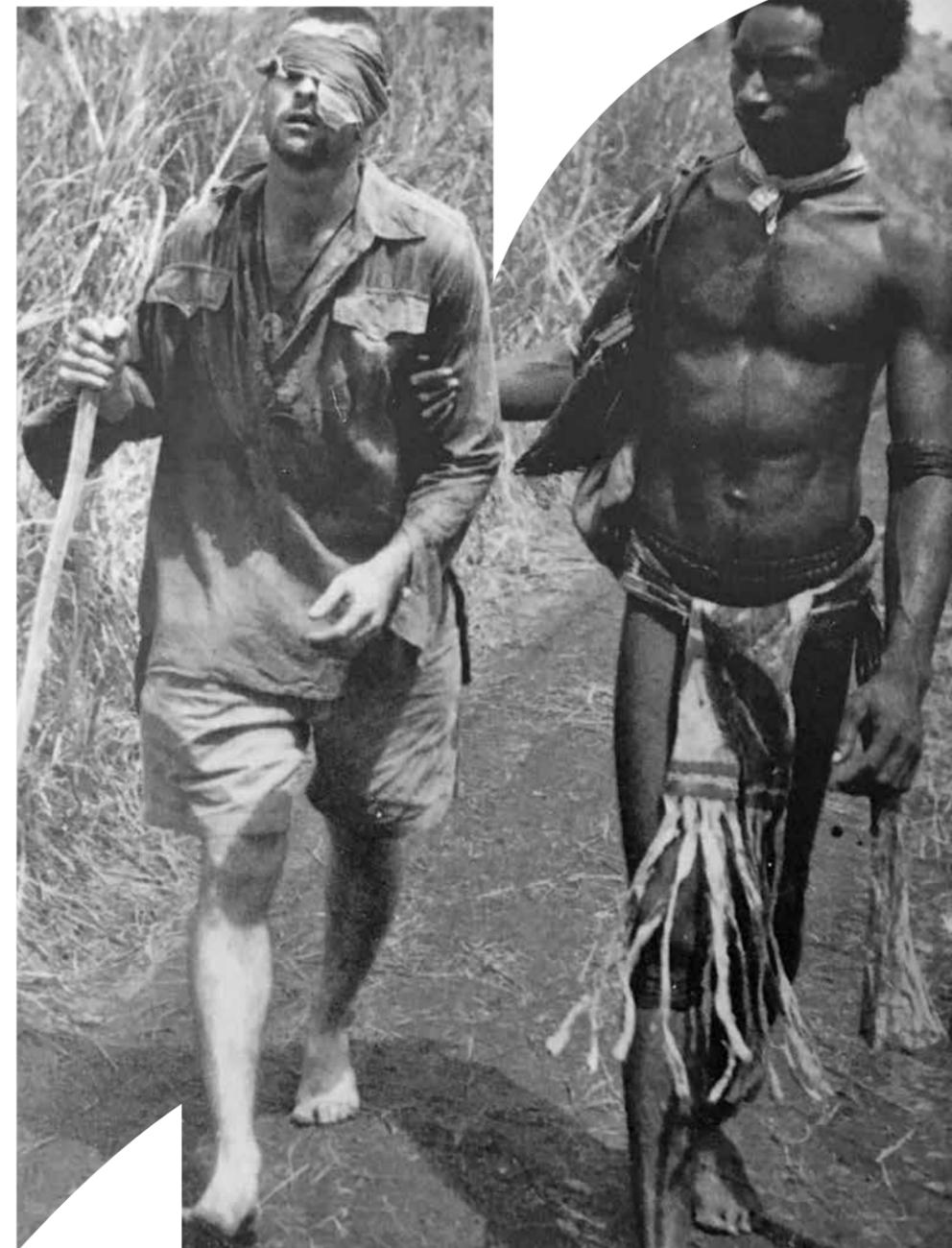
*Many a lad will see his mother
and husbands see their wives
Just because the Fuzzy Wuzzy
carried them to save their lives.*

"The famous George Silk photograph of Papuan carrier Raphael Oimbari escorting injured Australian soldier George 'Dick' Whittington along the Buna road helped immortalise the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel in the minds of the Australian public"

Sapper Beros was a member of the 7th Division Engineers who had seen first-hand the effort made by the carriers. In October 1942 when his poem first appeared in Brisbane's *The Courier Mail*, the Australian public was already becoming aware of the contribution made by the people of Papua. A month earlier, Cinesound Productions released the newsreel, *Kokoda Front Line*. War photographer Damien Parer's Oscar-winning work not only brought home to Australians the realities of the war in the Pacific but also images of natives carrying injured Australian soldiers.

A few months after both the newsreel and poem were released, the famous George Silk photograph of Papuan carrier Raphael Oimbari escorting injured Australian soldier George 'Dick' Whittington along the Buna road, appeared in *The Courier Mail*. The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel was becoming immortalised in the minds of the Australian public.

However, mythology often focuses on the triumphs and leaves out the unpleasanties. In the narration of Parer's newsreel he states: "the black-skinned boys are white". So too in Bero's



This famous image, taken by war photographer George Silk, depicts injured Australian Army Private George "Dick" Whittington being helped along a track through the kunai grass towards a field hospital at Dobodura, Buna, in Oro Province on Christmas Day in 1942. The carrier helping him is Raphael Oimbari. Whittington was with the 2/10th Battalion at the time and had been wounded the previous day in the battle for Buna airstrip. He recovered from his wounds but died of scrub typhus in Port Moresby just over a month later

poem, similar words conjure up an image of equality: "...make you think Christ was black". The attempt to raise the status of the Papuan carrier to be equal with that of an Australian soldier was an idealistic one. Not during the war, nor in the following post-war years, did the Papuan carrier receive the same pay,

conditions or recognition as his Australian counterpart. The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel legend was founded on a master-servant relationship. Papua in 1942 was an Australian territory. In February of that year, civil administration had given way to martial law. European men who were deemed non-essential



Taken in the Sanananda area of Oro Province on January 27, 1943, this photo shows PNG carriers wading through swamps to evacuate wounded allied soldiers. Photo: Clifford Bottomley

to the war effort, along with European women and children, were repatriated back to mainland Australia. By April 1942 the Australian New Guinea Administration Unit (ANGAU) was created. Although ANGAU had in its charter a duty of care to the local populace, the reality was that the people of Papua had no option but to stay in their villages.

By June of 1942 the New Guinea Force Commander, Major General Basil Morris, gave orders on how native labour

for the war effort was to be contracted. Morris issued the Employment of Natives Order which stated that Papuans could be contracted for up to three years, during which time they were not to be absent without leave, to desert or refuse to carry out their duty. If any carrier broke any of the rules of the order they were often dealt with quite harshly by their administrators. Punishment ranged from loss of privileges such as pay or tobacco to more harsh penalties such as being

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drilled with a heavy pack on, jail or, in some cases, flogging. Of course, if any carrier was seen to be aiding the Japanese, they could be executed.

As the war on the Kokoda Track intensified, so too did the need for more carriers. Often false promises such as better conditions and shorter contracts were used to recruit carriers. Between August and December 1942, over 16,000 Papuans were employed by ANGAU, many of whom would work on the Kokoda Track. While some came from the villages that were high in the Owen Stanley Ranges, most came from the low-lying townships and coastal settlements. The cold mountain climate, especially at night, along with poor rations and sleeping gear, did not offer much in the way of comfort. ANGAU officer, Captain “Doc” Vernon, a veteran of World War I who gave medical attention to soldiers and carriers alike, noted in his diary:

“Every evening scores of our carriers came in, slung their loads down, and lay exhausted on the ground; the immediate prospect before them was grim, a meal that only consisted of rice, and none too much of that, and a night of discomfort and

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Members of the 2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/3rd Australian infantry battalions on the move up the Kokoda Track and across the Owen Stanley Ranges. This image was taken in October, 1942, near Nauro and Menari

shivering as there were only enough blankets to issue one to every two men..." Sickness of the carriers was of major concern. As mentioned, many were not used to the colder climate of the mountains in the Owen Stanley Ranges, and pneumonia was rife. War correspondent Osmar White wrote in his book *Green Armour*: "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." If the food, medical support and sleeping conditions were not bad enough, the work of the

carriers was back-breaking. The Kokoda story is full of accounts of the heavy packs carried by the Australian soldiers, but little attention is given to the weight that carriers had to bear. The carriers not only had to deal with carrying their allotted equipment of ammunition, rations and medical supplies for the troops, they had to carry their own food. Bert Kienzle, like Vernon, entered service with ANGAU. Kienzle, a man who knew the Territory and the people well, became instrumental in organising the carrier lines. Kienzle noted in his diary: "A carrier carrying only foodstuffs consumes his load in 13 days, and if he carries food supplies for a soldier it means 6 1/2 days' supply for both

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soldier and carrier. This does not allow for the portage of arms, ammunition, equipment, medical stores, ordnance, mail and dozens of other items needed to wage war, on the backs of men." The impact was not just on the carriers themselves, the war was indiscriminate. As Japanese and Australian troops moved through villages, they trampled crops, destroyed huts, and took precious food from the gardens. Terrified villagers fled into the jungle, desperately trying to escape the fighting or take cover from air-raids. In the process, villages were destroyed and an uncounted number of villagers were killed, injured or mistreated. For those communities that were not in the path of the fighting, they still had the effect of having their menfolk - husbands, brothers and sons - away from the village. With no men to work the gardens or do the heavy lifting around the village, the impact was detrimental to the community's well-being. In retrospect, the Papuans had little reason to be loyal to their "Taubada" or white masters, who often treated them as second-class citizens in their own land. It is understandable that some carriers deserted and returned to their villages and families. After the carriers made the journey over the Kokoda Track with their load of military supplies, they turned around

and carried out the wounded Australian soldiers. This is the part that the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel legend plays up to, and rightfully so. There is not one report of any Australian soldier being abandoned by the Papuan carriers, not even during heavy combat. They will always have the eternal gratitude of the Australian soldiers and their families as it was on them that their survival depended. Many Australian veterans to this day look back with immense gratitude for the help received. In February last year, Havala, thought to be the last known Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel living along the Kokoda Track, visited Melbourne. During his visit he met several veterans of the 39th Battalion, including Alan 'Kanga' Moore. The meeting was an emotional one - two old warriors together for one last time. Although the language barrier between the two men made it hard to communicate with words, a simple embrace and the expression on both men's faces conveyed the great admiration both had for one another. When a reporter from the ABC asked Kanga if the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels had received enough recognition for their work during the war, Kanga replied: "I think they were treated very badly. They were promised things they never got. They



Engineers build a bridge on the track between Kokoda and Buna, one of many needed along this stretch. Photo taken by George Silk on November 19, 1942

were lucky if they got a cup of rice a day... I think they should have been better treated by the Australian Government... We wouldn't have won the campaign without them." How was the service of the carriers recognised after the war? As the fighting in

the Owen Stanley Ranges concluded, and only two weeks after Kokoda had been reoccupied, a banquet and presentation to the carriers was held at Kokoda by the Australian Army. Lieutenant Bert Kienzle had requested stores of yams, taro, tobacco and calico, along



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A native carrier receives a medal of honour from Army Major General George Vasey, the Commander of the 7th Division, AIF, at Kokoda in December, 1942. Not many carriers received medallions despite the fact they played an often-critical part in the allied advance. Photo: George Silk

with extra rations for a 'feast'. Kienzle also sought permission for the carriers to have "one day's rest".

Major J. H. Jones from ANGAU sent a memo stating: "...it has been decided to award medals to natives who have performed brave or gallant acts". The memo also requested that field staff nominate the names of worthy recipients. Men like Kienzle put names forward and a small percentage received a medal. One side of the medal had the Australian Coat of Arms and the other the words: 'For loyal service'. However, the fighting at the northern beachheads was still to come and many Australian service personnel believe the small recognition given by the army was a strategic move to encourage existing carriers to continue working.

Calls to give financial support to all carriers in Papua New Guinea who contributed to the

war effort were promoted as early as 1943. In the Sydney publication *Pacific Islands Monthly*, it was proposed that an annual Christmas payment of £10 be made to all carriers until their death. This idea never eventuated and it would be 40 years before any money was forthcoming. In the 1980s, the Australian Government gave AU\$3.25 million to the PNG Government. Some payments of K1000 (approx. AU\$500 at the time) were made to individual carriers. The most famous Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel, Raphael Oimbari, received a one-off payment of K2000 and was recognised with the Order of the British Empire in 1993. However, for many carriers no payment eventuated and, even at that stage, it would have been too late as most had long since died. As for remembrance, perhaps the most significant gesture was not done by either government but rather by an individual. In

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1959, Bert Kienzle, who returned to his home near Kokoda after the war, built a memorial at the Kokoda Plateau recognising the contribution of the carriers. Kienzle had hoped the design in the centrepiece would be struck as a medallion and given to surviving carriers, especially those who had not received the Loyal Service Medal.

The idea of a medallion seemed to fizzle out and it would not be until 2009-2011 that the Australian Government issued medallions. Only 68 surviving carriers in the whole of PNG received a medallion. Around this time, the Australian Minister of Veteran Affairs, Hon. Alan Griffin MP stated:

"...there are no plans to make payments to surviving Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels. Instead the focus is on providing aid and support towards improving the capacity of the communities that many of these people came from"

At last year's Anzac Day dawn service on April 25 at Bomana War Cemetery out of Port Moresby, Havala was in attendance. So, too, was the Australian Governor-General, General Sir Peter Cosgrove. The service marked not only Anzac Day but the 75th anniversary of the Kokoda Campaign. Sir Peter took Havala by the hand and the two of them laid a wreath at the cenotaph. Sir Peter later presented Havala with the



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The late Havala Laua, our last Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel, (clockwise from top left): when he met 39th Battalion veteran Alan 'Kanga' Moore in Melbourne last year; with his Governor-General's medallion; saluting during his visit to Melbourne; and shaking the hand of Australia's Governor-General, General Sir Peter Cosgrove, at Bomana War Cemetery on Anzac Day last year

“With the passing of the last Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel, all we can do now is honour their memory by never forgetting their service and sacrifice”

Governor-General's medallion. For all the countless other Papuan New Guineans who helped Australia during the war, their individual recognition went unrecognised. Now, with the passing of the last Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel, we have lost that living connection. All we can do now is honour their memory by never forgetting their service and sacrifice. PNG and Australian school children should be encouraged to find out, not just the real

story behind the legend but the personal stories of these impromptu angels. ▲

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