

The Vanuatu Labor Corps Experience

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It has been nearly fifty years since American forces occupied what was then the Franco-British colony of the New Hebrides. US military personnel first came ashore on Efate in March 1942. They stayed less than four years. The New Hebrides bases were rolled up by the end of 1945. Since the war Islanders have experienced the gamut of economic and political forces that have given shape to contemporary Pacific nations. The most important event of the postwar era was the achievement of national independence in 1980, celebrated by the renaming of the archipelago. James Cook's "New Hebrides" is now the Republic of Vanuatu. Still, fifty years beyond the outbreak of the Pacific War it remains impossible to overlook the decisive effects of those few years in the lives of the people who witnessed and took part in wartime events. And it is impossible to understand what has happened during the past half century in the Pacific without taking into account the transforming effects of the war upon island political and economic structures.

This paper explores the residues of wartime encounters in the lives of men who live on Tanna, an island of southern Vanuatu. Nearly every man and boy who was able to work traveled north to Efate to join American military labor corps. In addition to the impact this experience had on individual lives, the war also gave shape and impetus to a postwar, anticolonialist movement on Tanna: the John Frum movement. This, in altered form, is still active on the island today. It is an important organization in the contemporary political arena. Many of the movement's rituals, symbols, and ideological goals were borrowed from the labor corps experience. To document the continuing effects of wartime encounters, I have been collecting war histories, stories, and songs from labor corps veterans on Tanna since 1982.¹

The War in the New Hebrides

In early 1942 the American military command decided to occupy a number of South Pacific islands, including Efate, in order to forestall the Japanese

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advance southward, and to protect sea-lanes to Australia. A task force from New Caledonia landed on Efate in May 1942 to supplement units that had arrived earlier to begin construction of a major airfield. Military information about the New Hebrides and about Japanese movements in the region was sketchy. Servicemen landed at Port Vila in full battle dress, unsure whether the Japanese had already occupied the town. In Port Vila, also, residents were guessing which side would occupy Efate first. Islanders who observed the fleet approaching from over the horizon report that people said, "In an hour we'll know if we'll live or die." European colonials, at least, were relieved to see the occupation fleet displaying the Stars and Stripes, rather than the Rising Sun.

On Efate the Americans developed installations at Port Vila and also at Port Havannah. Several months later they established a second advance base on Espiritu Santo, a hundred and forty miles closer to the fighting that developed on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. During the Solomon Islands campaign most of the men and materiel on the American side passed through these two advance bases. Many of the wounded were evacuated to Efate or Santo for medical treatment. During the first years of the war Santo was the largest American installation west of Pearl Harbor. Efate, at its peak, housed 15,000 service personnel. Santo was home for over 40,000. Hundreds of thousands more passed through the New Hebrides on the way to and from the front lines to the north. (Information about the American presence on Efate and Santo is provided by Garrison 1983; Geslin 1956; Heintz 1944; Kralovec n.d.; and Wallin 1967.)

By 1943 the Americans had turned back the Japanese advance at Guadalcanal and had begun to push northward up through the Solomon Islands. The advance bases in the New Hebrides were transformed into rear-line support facilities for the remainder of the war. Efate was rolled up in late 1944; Santo a year later. In 1942 the Japanese managed several times to bomb and shell (from submarines) these bases. Attacks ceased as the war turned against the Japanese in 1943. The war experience in Vanuatu, thus, was not one of battle. Rather, people experienced a brief but intense period in which their lands were overrun with thousands of new sorts of people, and heaped with tons of military cargo and materiel. At the height of the battle for Guadalcanal, for example, three cargo ships a day arrived at Second Canal on Santo, with men and cargo to unload.

These wartime population and supply movements must be put into local context. In 1941 the entire population of the New Hebrides numbered only 40,000. Port Vila and Santo were small, sleepy port towns serving an under-developed plantation economy located on the fringes of the colonialist world. There were few roads, no airfields, and no municipal water supply or

telephone systems. Although some Islanders were engaged in plantation labor and in coconut cash cropping, subsistence agriculture remained the economic mainstay of village life, which retained, in general, its traditional character. Within a few months of the American occupation, however, Seabees and army construction units had built fighter and bomber airfields, port facilities, water supply systems, large encampments, acres of Quonset and Dallas huts for storage, movie theaters, new roads, restaurants, clubs, and bars--the whole apparatus of a large military base.

Wartime Encounters

Islanders first observed and then were drawn into this military activity and development. On the books, at least, a number of antifraternization orders existed to restrict contact between military personnel and the local populace. A curfew on Santo restricted Islanders and a community of Vietnamese plantation workers to their villages and quarters from 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM. Restrictions existed also on visits by Islanders to military camps and on attendance at outdoor cinemas. Servicemen were restricted from visiting villages. Military Civil Affairs records, however, report that these regulations were widely ignored (see Kralovec n.d.). Islanders and servicemen encountered one another in various sorts of activities and contexts.

These contexts included a lively trade in carvings, bows and arrows, pigs' tusks, and grass skirts. (Even men took up grass skirt manufacture--traditionally a female occupation.) In addition to artifact and food marketing, some Islanders went into the laundry business. The Americans established, at one point, eight coastwatching stations scattered throughout the northern New Hebrides and the Santa Cruz Islands. Personnel at these camps recruited local assistance. The colonial government also created the New Hebrides Defence Force. Two hundred men, mostly from Malakula, joined this unit that coordinated its activities with the American military.

Other Islanders encountered Americans in more informal activities. Pig hunting on Malakula, for example, was especially popular among American officers. The war's photographic record documents some of these expeditions in which Americans encountered inhabitants of remote mountain villages. Other encounters occurred at church services, at cinemas (Santo possessed forty-three indoor and outdoor movie screens), and at dances wherein local performers entertained American troops.² Undoubtedly the most intensive kind of encounter between Islanders and Americans was the labor corps experience. Here, men left their homes, went to live on the US bases, and worked long and difficult days under direct American supervision.

The Labor Corps

Both the Japanese and the Allied militaries recruited civilian labor to support their war efforts. In the New Hebrides the Americans almost immediately rounded up Islanders to help build the first airfield on Efate. Men from Efate and from the Shepherd Islands just to the north worked to build Bauer Field, named after a flyer shot down in the Solomons. This local labor pool was soon exhausted. More hands were required, and the military turned south to the island of Tanna, which had a relatively large population of 6000. By the end of 1942, 1000 Tannese men were working on Efate--essentially the entire male able-bodied work force of the island. Recruits signed on for three-month tours of duty; many stayed longer.

In most of the Pacific the American military recruited labor through colonial middlemen, such as the British-officered Solomon Islands Labour Corps or the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU). This permitted prewar colonial powers to maintain some semblance of authority over local peoples. It also buffered the potential dangers of direct contacts between American servicemen and Islanders. In Vanuatu, however, although the British and French at first assumed responsibility for labor recruitment and supervision, this did not last long. The American military, in part spurred by workers' complaints about terrible food, soon took over both labor recruitment and supervision. In part this abrogation of colonial authority followed from the locally peculiar situation in which the British and French jointly governed the "Condominium." The US military was annoyed by frequent disputes between the two colonial powers that disrupted American plans. Also, the bases in the New Hebrides were among the first the United States established in the Pacific. Policy regarding civilian labor recruitment had not yet hardened into the form it would later assume, wherein the Americans were more concerned to respect colonial sensibilities. Later in the paper I will remark again the importance of this direct, unmediated contact between American supervisors and island workers.

Workers on Efate were split into monolingual gangs of twenty-five or so men and divided between the army and the navy. The principal American supervisor on the army side was Major George Riser. On the navy side, a Seabee named Thomas Beatty was in charge. These two men are still renowned today on Tanna as "Tom Army" and "Tom Navy."

Work gangs built their own coconut-thatched housing in camps set aside for them. The military provided food, clothing (surplus army or navy issue), cots, blankets, cigarettes, and so on. A couple of men in each gang were appointed "boss boys" (selected primarily because of their knowledge of Bislama, the local Pidgin English). Other men were appointed company

cooks. The men received some medical care from both American and colonial doctors. A weekly dose of atabrine was a notable part of this care. The military was concerned to protect its troops by shrinking the island's malarial pool. Each man was also issued a numbered dogtag. Workers were paid around US\$0.25 a day (or about US\$7.50 a month). Men today state that these wages were purposely kept low at the insistence of the British and the French. It is certainly true that both colonial powers feared postwar wage inflation. Many workers augmented their salaries by performing various sorts of casual services for the troops.

Men today recount the difficulty of the work they performed. Ten-hour days were common with only one day off every two weeks. War work was in several ways similar to the sorts of prewar plantation labor some of these men had experienced. For example, workers were organized into all-male gangs, set joint tasks to perform, and housed in barracklike quarters. But the organization of labor during the war was in other ways very different from prewar plantation work.

First, new sorts of tasks were assigned. One of the most common of these was stevedoring. Labor corps veterans tell stories of their ignorance when first boarding a military cargo ship. They did not know how to find the holds, how to move between the densely packed cargo, or how to struggle with bulky and heavy material. Other unfamiliar wartime tasks included working in mosquito abatement crews spraying diesel oil on standing water; working in military hospitals and having to burn up amputated American limbs; working on trucks delivering supplies to the various encampments; and so on.

A second difference between the war's organization of work and prewar forms of labor was the American reliance on machinery and technology. Workers report the wonderful powers of tractors on the large vegetable farms the military established on Efate. They were impressed with the efficiency of bulldozers and graders in the construction of airfields and new roads. In addition the machines of battle itself were both impressive and fearsome: warplanes, artillery, bombs, jeeps, trucks, and radar (which the Tannese call by the Pidgin English word *stil* 'steel'). Prewar employers relied almost solely on cheap labor. As many of these labor corps recruits had themselves *been* that cheap labor, they were deeply impressed with the efficiency of American technology.

A third difference between wartime and plantation labor was the military's utilization of shift work. The fact that one team of laborers worked all day and then was replaced with a second team that worked all night under lights is a key point in many people's recollections of the labor corps experience. Never before, and never again, had Islanders worked nights.

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A fourth difference that characterized war work was the prevalence of danger and death. Although there were only a few Japanese attacks on American installations in the New Hebrides, warning sirens howled frequently to signal suspected sightings of Japanese planes or submarines, or to signal drills. Workers tell of the clutching fear they experienced when the sirens sounded. Although no workers died from military action, many became ill from disease, from injury, and from overwork. A significant number of Tannese men died on Efate and remain buried there today. Workers also pitied the American dead and wounded they observed return from the Solomon Islands. They tell of walking along the road to the airfield and seeing trails of blood that had dripped from passing ambulances. And they tell of hearing the moans of wounded servicemen as these ambulances passed by on the way from airfield to hospital.

Finally, during the war the Tannese worked alongside a different kind of people from those of the prewar period. They worked for Americans, many of whom were black Americans. The segregated, black American 24th Infantry was a part of the main landing force on Efate. The army component of the task force from New Caledonia that landed on 4 May 1942 consisted of 4612 men. Of these, approximately 3400 were black (Garrison 1983). Most of these black troops were in service units. Some, however, such as the 198th Antiaircraft Artillery Regiment, were combat troops. The fact that blacks were isolated in quartermaster and transportation units reflected American racism of the times and military reluctance to use black troops in battle. From the Tannese perspective, however, *these* were the troops in control of American stores and supplies. In charge of the cargo, black Americans' lowly position within military society, ironically, was at least partly revalued by Tannese observers.³

The two most salient features of the labor corps experience that are recalled and that continue to have an effect today are first, the war's cargo and the establishment of new sorts of exchange relations; and second, a new style of interpersonal relations between Islanders and Europeans. The bases in the New Hebrides were, for much of the war, supply bases. They were hoards of stores and military materiel. Islanders received food, clothing, cigarettes, and many other kinds of goods from American benefactors and employers. Islanders' war stories incorporate long lists of the things people enjoyed during those years. But these stories also stress that these goods were obtained within relations of exchange. People recall the many sorts of things they received from the Americans. They also point out, however, that they reciprocated with their labor and assistance with the American war effort. They stress the hardships they endured in return for the gifts they received. Wartime exchange, in peoples' accounts, thus recapitulates traditional

reciprocal exchange patterns, the goal of which is to ensure an essential equality and appreciation of each side. People also tell of more spiritual sorts of assistance rendered to the American effort. A number of local sorcerers, particularly from the island of Ambrym, loosed their magic powers to ensure that the Americans won Guadalcanal.

The second enduring memory from the war concerns a new style of interpersonal relation with amiable outsiders. The colonialist prewar era in much of the Pacific was characterized by rigid sumptuary codes that maintained clear boundaries between Europeans and Islanders.⁴ These codes in particular regulated eating habits. Islanders, generally, ate certain kinds of food, while Europeans ate other kinds. The code prevented the two peoples from eating together. Dress was also regulated. Only Europeans could wear shoes, long trousers and, in some parts of the Pacific, shirts as well.

Many Americans, whose interests in the Southwest Pacific were short-term, were unconcerned to uphold these codes of interpersonal behavior, even if they realized they existed. War era photographs depict American troops dining with Pacific Islanders, sharing and lighting cigarettes for island "friends," giving away shirts, trousers, boots, hats, and so on. No doubt the tenor of interaction between American servicemen and Islanders was often paternalistic, but it was different in important ways from the quality of relationships Islanders had experienced with colonials before the war. Americans and Islanders also occasionally made common cause against Europeans. More than one worker from Tanna recalls being supported by American servicemen in disputes with French or British colonialists. More than anything, what people recall from the war is this new kind of interpersonal style, and the richness of wartime relations of exchange.

The War and the John Frum Movement

Besides recollections and war stories, not much was left behind when the Americans rolled up their bases and went home. There were, of course, the airfields, new roads, and a few Quonset huts and jeeps. Most of the supplies and stores the Americans did not want to ship back home were simply bulldozed into the sea.⁵ The labor corps experience itself, though, has continued to have important effects on Tanna--first in Islanders' relations with the British and French and, more recently, in their relations with the independent government of Vanuatu. These war experiences have provided a new way to phrase Tannese opposition to alien control of island life. The war offered a new language of symbols to demonstrate this opposition. The most organized form of this opposition has been the John Frum movement.

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Postwar "cargo cults" are well known, and among these is Tanna's John Frum movement. (For more detailed accounts of this movement, see Guiart 1956; Worsley 1968; Lindstrom 1981.) Briefly, around 1939 a mysterious figure calling himself John Frum appeared in southwest Tanna. Unclear is exactly who or what this figure was. At the time some suspected a Japanese spy who was preparing the way for invasion by fomenting unrest. The condominium administration eventually concluded that a conspiracy of Tannese men had dressed themselves up as John Frum in order to con their fellows. The administration made a number of arrests and, in fact, continued to arrest and deport movement leaders until 1956. Whatever he might have been, John Frum fits easily within Tannese notions of the supernatural order. Apparitions of ancestral and other spirits who give advice to the living are still common on the island.

Among his various pronouncements John Frum predicted the arrival of Americans who would help the Tannese in their struggle against the British and the French. The colonial administration, in fact, intercepted letters to this effect in 1941, several months before Pearl Harbor. And sure enough an American fleet soon landed in force at Port Vila. Tannese labor corps veterans explain that they were pleased, but not surprised, by the American occupation. Advised by John Frum, they were ready to recruit in large numbers to the American labor corps. This Tannese willingness to sign up contrasts with what occurred in other parts of the Pacific theater. In Papua New Guinea, for example, Islanders were understandably reluctant to volunteer for dangerous work at poor wages. ANGAU experienced significant difficulties in meeting its labor needs. In Vanuatu, however, where people expected Americans to arrive at any moment, men report that they were happy for the opportunity to help the war effort by joining the labor corps.

When the Tannese went home from Efate they carried along memories of their encounters with Americans that fed into John Frum prophecy. John Frum supporters organized a number of anticolonialist actions against European control of their island. Some of these, such as a boycott on copra production and on trade-store purchases, made sense to condominium officials. Others, such as the construction of an airfield for American planes in north Tanna, were perceived to be mystical and irrational. The colonial administration attempted to suppress the movement until 1956. Since that time the John Frum organization has gradually been institutionalized into a combination political party and church.

Movement leaders, in this institutionalization process, have revised John Frum goals and ideology. They have also devised a set of movement symbols and rituals, borrowed to a large extent from their war experiences. Followers have constructed various John Frum ritual sites, decorated by symbolic

dogtags, model soldiers and airplanes, and red crosses (adopted from the doors of military ambulances and medic jackets). Every 15 February, the major movement holy day, a drill team of young men marches back and forth. They carry bamboo rifles and are commanded by a "sergeant" who barks out commands such as "to the right!" and "about face!" Each marcher has "USA" painted in red on his naked chest and back. John Frum leaders, on ritual occasions, dress themselves in American military uniforms. They have preserved bits and pieces of these uniforms from the 1940s; they also obtain new supplies from occasional tourists and yachtsmen. In 1978 people raised the American flag at cult headquarters. They continued to raise US flags until 1982, when the independent national government confiscated some of the movement's ritual paraphernalia, including its American flags. Recently they have raised the Stars and Stripes again.

Conclusion

The war experience in this way has continued into the present in the form of the sacred objects, ritual forms, and messages of the John Frum movement. The core of John Frum's message has been a demand for island autonomy and for unmediated relations with the outside world. The labor corps experience of seemingly unlimited cargo, obtained through reciprocal relations of exchange, and of new kinds of direct, interpersonal relations with outsiders provided a new code in which to phrase the message. During the war Tannese relations with a powerful outside force--with America--were unmediated by meddlesome third parties. Also during the war Tannese relations of exchange were vastly enriched, yet, from an island point of view, still retained a traditionally important reciprocal character.

Many John Frum prophecies speak of the return of the Americans. People hint darkly of hidden ammunition and supply dumps dug into the earth, awaiting a new American army. Yet, Islanders do not wish to go back to war, nor do they really want Americans of the 1980s actually to come to Tanna. Rather, the plea for an American return bespeaks a desire to reconstitute the kinds of exchange relations and the unmediated contact with the outside world that people enjoyed during the war. The war's experiences, in sum, matched traditional Tannese expectations of autonomy, of sociability, and of exchange.

Island demands for autonomy, for richer relations of exchange, and for unmediated "roads" to outside powers, phrased in John Frum's wartime images, were a constant irritant to the colonial administration. John Frum continues to trouble the independent national government in Port Vila. Recollections of wartime relations of exchange, and of direct contacts with

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world powers that bypass centralized national authorities, for many Tannese, have shaped an image and an expectation of what "true" independence and autonomy should be like. Although a half-century old, war recollections and images continue to have powerful effects in the present.

Notes

1 These texts are analyzed in Lindstrom (1989).

2 Workers at the end of a day, or after successfully emptying out a cargo ship, would sometimes perform a traditional dance on deck. Traditional Tannese dance utilizes no instruments. Rather, dancers clap their hands and stomp their feet to accompany their songs. Tanna's soil is volcanic in nature and booms when stomped. No doubt workers appreciated the similar accoustical properties of the decks of cargo ships. Kralovec (n.d.) reports that an American, unfamiliar with this practice, shot and wounded a worker on Santo. The sight of a work crew beginning a dance apparently evoked common American images of South Seas cannibals.

3 The Tannese reading of black Americans is ambiguous. On the one hand blacks appeared to have many of the rights of white servicemen. They drove trucks, controlled cargo, wore uniforms, and so on. On the other hand the Tannese also perceived blacks to be dangerous, terse, and under white control. They undoubtedly picked up some of the more obvious features of American racism and the subordinate position of blacks in the US military.

4 The situation in Vanuatu is made complex by the presence of French as well as British colonialists. My impression is that relations between French settlers and Islanders were often less rigidly structured.

5 Million Dollar Point, where the Americans dumped most of their excess supplies on Santo, is now a popular scuba diving site.

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