Leading up to World War II, Australian administrators and settlers constructed Papua New Guineans as primitives in contrast to white Australians. During the war, the negative stereotypes and disparaging attitudes justified exploitative recruitment, negation of indigenous agency, poor working conditions, inadequate compensation, and casual abuse. Certainly in the post-war period white Australians expressed some appreciation for Papua New Guinean participation in the war. But analysis of discriminatory experiences of Papua New Guineans working for Australia suggests that World War II was not a period of drastic change for Papua New Guinean labour. Rather, labour relations represented continuities of colonialism and adhered strictly to continuing racialisation of labour.

One of the most enduring images of World War II from Papua New Guinea is the George Silk photograph of a wounded Australian soldier, Private George C. Whittington, being escorted by a Papuan named Raphael Omibari. The photograph, taken in late 1942 during the Buna Campaign, shows the wounded Australian soldier, his eyes bandaged, clearly dependent upon his Papuan companion. The photograph portrays Papua New Guinean loyalty amidst adversity and evokes genuine affection for the Papuan attendant, symbolic of all Papua New Guineans toiling for the allied war cause.¹ Silk’s photograph represents much of the mythology surrounding World War II in Papua New Guinea: the injured digger, the difficult trek, and the extraordinary loyalty and support of Papua New Guinean ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels’.² Certainly the loyalty of many Papua New Guineans merits praise, and the affection for Papua New Guineans epitomised through Silk’s photograph is genuine. Yet it is what Silk’s photograph does not depict – the harsh treatment of Papua New Guinean labourers during the war – which has remained on the periphery of Australia’s national memory and which is the subject of this article.

As the course of World War II placed increasing labour demands on Papua and New Guinea, the mass employment of Papua New Guineans became vital to the allied war effort. The pamphlet You and the Native, issued to Australian soldiers serving in New Guinea, stated:

we absolutely need their [natives’] help in order to win. So we may have to make them work for us whether they like it or not. That is a hard thing. But it will come easier to them, and the work will be better, if we try to deserve our prestige and treat them fair.³

Another military assessment of New Guinean labour in 1943 declared: ‘[t]he native is overawed by the white man’s powers and regards him as a superior being, adopts a submissive attitude and accepts the European as a superior. It is worth a lot of trouble to maintain this state of affairs’.⁴ These documents highlight the Australian government’s attitudes towards Papua New Guinean labour during the war. Notwithstanding indigenous people providing critical logistical support, officials
continued to position them as compliant labourers. The documents rationalise colonialism by asserting that Papua New Guineans embraced notions of inequality and white supremacy. The ‘state of affairs’ alluded to really signified continuing Papua New Guinean subservience to white power, conscriptive recruitment tactics, relegation to menial labour tasks, poor living conditions, unequal wages and sometimes even physical abuse.

World War II provided a unique chance to shake up the labour system in Papua and New Guinea. The former Treasurer of Papua even wrote to the armed forces in 1942, declaring ‘some things merit correction now, not after the war, where they can be corrected by a military regime’.5 However, as this article argues, the military did not take the opportunity to overhaul the labour system and instead perpetuated the status quo. A number of scholars have discussed the role of Papua New Guinean labour in World War II, most notably Alan Powell, Hank Nelson, and Neville Robinson.6 This article differs from their work by focusing specifically on ongoing poor conditions, the abuse of labourers and the role race played in justifying such circumstances. Anthropologists such as David Counts, Marty Zelenietz, Hisafumi Saito, and Carl E. Thune all describe World War II as a brief interlude, after which Australia reimposed the previous unequal relationship between colonisers and colonised.7 However World War II did not represent even a temporary rupture of colonialism in Papua and New Guinea. Although the war was certainly a watershed in global history, and the ramifications would resonate in Papua New Guinea, during the war, the Papua New Guinean labour conditions magnified the status quo of colonialism through racialisation of labour. The post-war reconstruction period similarly brought reforms while maintaining the underlying ‘state of affairs’, preserving the dominance of the colonisers at the expense of indigenous agency and equality. Although individual attitudes towards race and indigeneity may have changed among various soldiers and indigenous labourers, the fundamental racialised labour structures persisted through the war.

This article first examines the racial constructions and labour conditions in Papua and New Guinea prior to the war. It then explores how racial constructs of Papua New Guineans played out through the organisation of and (mis)treatment of indigenous labourers working for Australia during the Pacific War.8 The article concludes by looking at the aftermath of World War II and how reforms to the political and labour system still did not redress the inequalities experienced by Papua New Guinean war labourers.

Colonising Papua and New Guinea Labour

Australia’s strategic interests in New Guinea began in the late nineteenth century because of German ‘possession’ of the northeast portion of the island. Historian Patricia O’Brien has even argued that Australia’s interests in Papua reflected an Australian Monroe Doctrine, with objectives ‘to keep this territory and others adjacent to the mainland out of the grasp of competing powers’.9 In 1901 Australia accepted responsibility for Papua, and in 1906 British New Guinea became the Australian territory of Papua. Australia occupied German New Guinea from the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, and after the war, the League of Nations granted Australia authority over the Mandated Territory of New Guinea. The administrations of Papua and New Guinea never merged until after World War II
primarily due to legal and financial reasons and racial prejudice. Though governors pursued different policies in the separate territories, similar structures of colonialism manifested in practice.10

The Lieutenant-Governor of Papua from 1906 to 1940 was John Hubert Plunkett Murray. Throughout his tenure, Murray emphasised ‘protection’ of Papuans and sought peaceful exploration and penetration of the interior. New Guinea administrators, on the other hand, pushed for the active employment of New Guineans in the labour force. Administrators such as Murray maintained a paternalistic, assimilationist attitude, believing that overall it was in Papuans’ best interests to work for settlers. He wrote: ‘give them [Papuans] every opportunity of serving under European employers, and so acquiring habits of industry which
later on they may, if they like, put to a use which will be more directly to their own benefit. Historians such as Heather Radi and Edward Wolfers argue that the extent to which policies were truly designed to 'benefit' the status of Papuans and New Guineans is questionable. The conditions of Papuan and New Guinean workers were often deficient despite supposed humanitarian efforts to ensure their fair treatment. Murray argued that '[t]he good treatment of the labourers may be regarded as assured, and I think, would not be seriously questioned by any one who had a knowledge of the labour conditions in the territory'. Historians such as D.C. Lewis and Wolfers have debunked the assertion that employers usually applied the minimum legal protections for Papuan and New Guinean workers. Abuse of labour was also widespread; examples range from the use of boss-boys as plantation overseers, to roping recruits together on journeys from the highlands to the coast. A mining boom in New Guinea in the late 1920s increased the demand for labour and further abuses occurred. Anthropologist L.P. Mair summarises race relations in both colonies thus: 'New Guinea residents, pinning their faith on “bashing the coons” as the only sound basis of race relations, regarded the “humanitarian” attitude of Papuans as pure hypocrisy'. Employers justified violence on the grounds that indigenes’ child-like nature required beatings, or because as ‘warrior cultures’, Papuans and New Guineans would respect violent employers more. More likely though, imposing the fear of harsh punishment served to protect settlers from potential uprisings.

During the era of Australian colonialism in Papua and New Guinea, racial discourse about Pacific Islanders often regarded Melanesians as primitive and thus unsuitable for indirect rule. The discourse about Papuans and New Guineans changed over the course of Australian colonialism in Papua and New Guinea to suit the goals of the administration. Brenda Johnson Clay argues that discourses about inhabitants of New Ireland shifted over three phases: at the end of the nineteenth century, as warlike and savage; during the early period of Australian colonial control as lazy but with physical stamina; and in the late 1920s to 1930s as weak-bodied victims of inhumane colonialism. Clay’s argument is applicable to both Papua and New Guinea because similar racial discourses rationalised Europeans’ control of indigenous labour and laws regulating interracial contact.

The evolution of racial discourse from savagery to inferior workers mirrored the growth of the colonial economy and non-indigenous expansion into the interior. In the 1930s, white explorers encountered new groups in the highlands and, despite some explorers’ and missionaries’ praise for highlands cultures, the ‘savage’ discourse continued. As anthropologist Jeffrey Clark summarises, '[t]he more remote and unknown the natives are, the further from civilization, the blacker, shorter, uglier, and even more violent they become [in discourse]'. Clark also observes that constructs of highlanders changed from primitive savages to productive colonial subjects as more entered the labour force. Regis Tove Stella argues that Europeans often rationalised coerced plantation labour ‘by framing it as “rescuing” them from savagery and the brutal life of their own communities’. For instance, Murray commented that ‘[a]n uncivilised people who come into contact with Europeans will inevitably be led, sooner or later, to abandon their old customs and beliefs’. Amirah Inglis emphasises that ‘no amount of giving up dancing and other foolishness, no amount of embracing Christianity, no amount of going to work, or learning English
could make the Papuan an equal’. Murray himself argued in the 1937-38 annual report that:

it would be unwise to give the Papuan a first class education unless the way to advancement is to be fully opened to him ... And to give them the same opportunities as we give to Europeans would, under present conditions, be out of the question.

Instead, what a Papuan or New Guinean could best achieve, in European eyes, was to emulate and mimic Europeans.

Racial constructs of Papuans and New Guineans circa 1940 justified white superiority, segregation of the races, and the racialisation of labour. There were some individuals who did not necessarily mark all Papuans and New Guineans as inferior. For instance, a number of anthropologists condemned Australia’s policies as perpetuating native hardship. But these persons were certainly in the minority, and most were foreigners from the United States or United Kingdom.

Murray acknowledged that not all Papuans were innately inferior, but still upheld white supremacy when he stated that ‘the best Papuans are superior to the worst Europeans, but that Europeans as a whole have an innate superiority over Papuans’. These prevalent attitudes justified abuse of Papuan and New Guinean labour and segregation of the races because of notions that ‘[f]amiliarity breeds contempt’. In contrast to the indigenous role in society, the 1937 Official Handbook of the Territory of New Guinea regarded:

the function of the white man in a tropical country [as] not to labour with his hands, but to direct and control a plentiful and efficient supply of native labour and assist in the government of the country, or to engage in opportunities for trade and commerce from an office desk in a bank or mercantile firm.

The preservation of separate spheres was thus a central tenet of colonialism in Papua and New Guinea. World War II would disrupt the separation of indigenes and whites in the public sphere, but as the duration of this article reveals, the changed wartime situation still preserved racial hierarchies through the employment and treatment of labourers.

**Working for Australia: Papua New Guinean Wartime Labour**

During the Pacific War, Papuans and New Guineans were thrust into the thick of action by virtue of Japanese occupation and allied defence. Those in occupied New Guinea were forced to bear the burdens and blessings of Japanese occupation. Those in Papua and unoccupied areas of New Guinea had to protect their own livelihoods, as well as the interests of their white Australian ‘mastas’. These Papua New Guineans worked as allies in the war effort while the Australian government continued to treat them as subjects obliged to work for the colonisers. Stella succinctly summarises this unequal relationship thus: ‘[t]he war taught the two races friendship, but this friendship was on the white soldiers’ terms’.

Papua New Guineans did not ask for this war, and many were disillusioned because it was not their conflict. *You and the Native* summarised: ‘[t]hey [natives]
are now in an unfortunate position. This fight is not theirs, and they might well be excused for wanting to keep out of it.  

As Peter Ryan observed, ‘[c]ircumstances had made shrewd politicians of these natives, for they were caught between two opposing forces and were determined to side with the ultimate winners’. Australians worried about the possibility of Papua New Guineans siding with the Japanese. Certainly this did happen in parts of New Guinea, but flawed assessments by individuals such as R.M. Melrose in August 1941 stated:

A native is not capable of distinguishing between the nationalities of the white races. With him they are just white men – in which definition he includes the Chinese and Japanese. Therefore they are all the same to him and it simply means that the white man in possession for the moment is his overlord. A change of white man simply means a change of overlord.

To ensure Papua New Guinean loyalty, the Australian military embarked on a two-pronged campaign to win over indigenous hearts and minds. First, white coastwatchers and patrol officers aimed to garner support by convincing village heads of Australia’s capacity to regain control of all New Guinea. The other component of the strategy to ensure indigenous loyalty was through propaganda. In regions of Papua and New Guinea where Australia maintained ostensible control throughout the war, loyalty was, for all intents and purposes, ensured. It was in these areas that Papua New Guinean labour would play a critical role in the war effort.

The majority of indigenous labourers never enlisted in the Australian armed forces. In fact, military commanders discouraged enlistment of indigenous labourers on the grounds that enlistment under the Defence Act is not understood by the natives and in any event it is difficult to administer. It offers no advantage over the present system of indenture under local native Labour Ordinances other than giving the CO of units power to deal with disciplinary cases.

The decision to indenture wartime labour under existing ordinances was the principal determinant that preserved the status quo of Papua New Guinean labour conditions, because at a policy level it ensured continuity of the pre-existing labour regime.

The recruitment of Papua New Guinean labourers proceeded aggressively without consideration for the desires or needs of the locals themselves. The Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) assumed control of areas of Papua and New Guinea not under Japanese occupation on 10 April 1942. Its main tasks were to recruit and manage indigenous labour, to maintain law and order, and to gather limited military intelligence behind enemy lines when possible. Though Army directives took precedence, ANGAU wielded significant influence and control over the daily lives of Papua New Guinean labourers. When seeking non-indigenous employees to oversee Papua New Guinean labour, desired qualifications included bush experience, time in Papua, New Guinea, or Solomon Islands, and ‘[a] desire to understand the peculiarities of the native and the manner in which he must be treated to obtain better results’. Thus ANGAU desired candidates with interracial experience because they were deemed more likely to uphold pre-war labour conditions.
The pay rate throughout the war for unskilled labour was between six and fifteen shillings per month, while skilled labourers could earn up to 100 shillings.\textsuperscript{35} The pay rate depended upon the location of contract; pre-war New Guinea had a minimum wage of six shillings per month while Papua’s minimum wage was ten shillings. These minimums continued to operate through the course of the war – another signifier of the continuing colonial labour regime in operation. The Army even justified such wages on the grounds of ‘particularly having in mind the future labour market in the Territory under peacetime commercial conditions’.\textsuperscript{36}

At first recruitment was voluntary. Rarua Tau, a volunteer who worked for ANGAU during the war, recalls being recruited thus:

Next morning Labour in charge rang the bell and blew the whistle and told us to stand in line so we did stand in line. An ANGAU officer came around and asked the people could they tell them the names of the places – i.e. departments they worked. After that some men were sent to labour work.\textsuperscript{37}

Insufficient volunteers by early 1942 led to conscription; the \textit{National Security (Emergency) Control Regulations Act} and subsequent regulations gave ANGAU loose powers to draft indigenous labourers. Despite standing orders against recruiting more than 25 per cent of able-bodied men from villages, in some regions excessive enrolments left local villages unable to function. As the war progressed and the allies made advances, the demands for labour increased; manual workers were needed to fill the gaps as machinery moved north with the frontlines. In some instances, the new labourers recruited were those who had previously been working for Japanese under harsh conditions. When insufficient men volunteered, ANGAU officers and police sometimes seized valuables, ate household foods, threatened to rape women, and recruited young boys.\textsuperscript{38} These tactics represented an extension of previous colonial ploys to draft indigenous labourers.

By the end of the war, new quotas allowed Army patrols to recruit up to 40 per cent of all adult males. One ANGAU report from New Britain in late 1945 declared:

Practically the only villages under-recruited were the inland ones and the people thereof showed a marked reluctance to leave home. In one case recruits who had been ordered to work deserted, and when recovered had to be placed under police guards. On word of termination of hostilities recruiting ceased and those obtained were sent home, and I carried on with a much clearer conscience with the ending of a distasteful task.\textsuperscript{39}

In another 1945 report on ANGAU labour, Brigadier General J.E. Lloyd acknowledged:

Recruitment since the inception [of ANGAU] has not been voluntary, but on close observation it is found that the natives in general once signed on have carried out the tasks allotted in good spirit.\textsuperscript{40}

Official ANGAU estimates from February 1942 to November 1945 place the number of Papuan indentured labourers at 24,500 and New Guineans at 25,500, for a total
of 50,000.\textsuperscript{41} Labourers were contracted for three years, but as one ANGAU report indicates:

we have been unable [to] release [indigenous labour] owing inability recruit new labourers due over recruitment coastal areas … Most these natives recruited three years ago by methods that could not be regarded fully voluntary on grounds operational necessity that time.\textsuperscript{42}

To rationalise the increasingly conscriptive nature of recruitment, a military document stated:

Despite the popular belief that the native is out to help us to the limit (there is a danger of too great sentimentality towards the native) at the present time it is doubtful whether more than 5% of the eligible males would recruit. So the fact must be faced that it will be impossible to provide the labor estimated, by the voluntary systems.\textsuperscript{43}

While the war necessitated increasing numbers of Papua New Guinean labourers, this position negated the agency of participants. Captain Gloucester even declared in July 1944:

Their patriotism was referred (i.e. appealed) to with nil result, until finally they were informed of the main and customary reason for going—they had to … I personally have recruited over 2,000 natives for work in forward areas … of these about 20 were not forcibly recruited.\textsuperscript{44}

The most common indentured labour tasks included serving as stewards, laundrymen, unloading ships and aircraft, stacking equipment, constructing airstrips, bridges, wharfs, barracks, and drains, growing vegetables, or working in repair yards. Military officers considered Papua New Guineans more valuable for menial manual labour because ‘whites can do cooking, cleaning, shelter erection as they were trained’.\textsuperscript{45} The racialisation of labour was customary because military officials believed it was the most efficient means to provide ‘suitable’ work. \textit{You and the Native} declared: ‘[t]he native does not expect the white man to do manual labour. He is ready to do the hard work or the dirty work himself under the white man’s supervision’.\textsuperscript{46} The racialisation of labour based on ‘natural’ affinity also entailed the segregation of the races for fear of undermining the ‘superiority’ of whites. \textit{You and the Native} instructed soldiers: ‘[a]lways, without overdoing it, be the master. The time may come when you will want a native to obey you. He won’t obey you if you have been in the habit of treating him as an equal’.\textsuperscript{47} Military records similarly stated:

Some members of the forces have, by fraternising with the natives, tended to lower the prestige of the European. Drastic action should be taken to warn troops of this danger—you cannot fraternise with natives then expect their obedience [sic].\textsuperscript{48}

This racialisation of labour points to the continuing colonial mindset and rac(ial)ist ideas, even as Australians grew to depend on Papua New Guinean support and participation.\textsuperscript{49}
For Papua New Guinean workers, life under the military and ANGAU was not easy. There are some signs that labourers’ diet and medical treatment improved over pre-war conditions. In some areas, such as Hisui Point, oral testimony indicates that ANGAU rations were ample and provided methodically. Mr Mea testifies:

The Angau soldiers had all our names written down and twice a week we were called out to collect our ration. There was plenty of tinned meat and rice but we were told to build gardens in case the supplies ran out.⁵⁰

ANGAU provided treatment for common pre-war malaise; the army provided a good medical budget, treating approximately 85,000 Papua New Guineans between February 1942 and September 1944. Anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner estimates that ANGAU oversaw 1,000,000 medical treatments of Papua New Guineans by April 1946.⁵¹

There are indications in many other situations, though, that living conditions were deficient. Historian Paul Ham writes that Papua New Guineans ‘were rounded up and “held” for service – they were corralled into pens. Many were pushed to the limits of physical endurance’.⁵² Accommodation was always segregated from white troops, though sometimes this was ‘a malaria control measure’.⁵³ While sanitation and water supply were generally good, housing was not weatherproofed and clothing issuances were insufficient.⁵⁴ There were often problems of poor food, hygiene, overwork, and lack of adequate medical attention. Nora Vagi Brash recalls:

And when they were sick – if they fell ill – they wouldn’t take them back to their village but they’d take them to Wakemo hospital and some of the young men died outside. And the families didn’t know about the deaths of the husbands and later, you know, when they found out they just cried their eyes out.⁵⁵

Some officers such as Captain G.H. Vernon recognised these poor conditions, describing camp life as ‘a meal that consisted only of rice and none too much of that, and a night of shivering discomfort for most as there were only enough blankets to issue one to every two men’.⁵⁶ Whenever possible, officers such as Vernon tried to improve diet, rations, and rest. This was not across the board because it was the job of ANGAU – not the military – to administer, feed, house, pay, repatriate, and hospitalise Papua New Guinean labourers.⁵⁷ Ham uses the phrase ‘unusual devotion’ to describe Vernon’s support for Papua New Guineans during the war.⁵⁸ One official report from 1944 declared: ‘[e]very native who worked for the Army [in Mambare District] was issued with sufficient rations, but enough was not available up to that time, for distribution to refugee natives’.⁵⁹ Thus it was often the strain of wartime resources, rather than malicious intent, which prevented ANGAU from supplying adequate rations to Papua New Guineans. Yet even if there were not sufficient supplies for labourers, it did not lessen their work burdens.

Poor conditions extended from the living environment to the actual work of Papua New Guinean labourers. Carriers in particular had a rough time given the nature of their task, carrying large quantities of weaponry or injured soldiers over rough terrain. Sometimes Australian soldiers even threw their own packs or weapons on top of the overloaded carriers.⁶⁰ One description of carriers’ loads stated: ‘mortar bombs had to be carried into an attack. Each bomb carried 10 pounds … They were...
in strong cardboard containers – packed four to a box – two slung on a pole. You can see we needed carriers. War correspondent George H. Johnston described ‘[o]n the track back to Moresby there are long lines of loyal Papuans, slipping and stumbling back with crude stretchers on their shoulders’. Somu Sigob recollects:

We also toiled to carry the wounded, many of whom had broken arms, had lost their eyes or had intestines hanging out. We carried many of them, and some died on the way, while others managed to reach the hospital.

An ANGAU report succinctly summarised the significance of the carriers in the Kokoda Campaign of 1942: ‘[t]hey in fact formed a living supply line without which the [Kokoda] campaign could never have been brought to a successful conclusion as expeditiously was the case’. Despite the critical nature of carriers’ jobs, their experiences and treatment were harsh. Often their wakeup was at 5:00am, breakfast was at 5:45am, and the carrying began at 7:00am. There were problems with overloading, overwork, exposure, and bruised and battered feet covered with blisters, contradicting instructions to white soldiers ‘[d]o not demand the impossible, whether in working hours or weight of loads’. Many carriers were not accustomed to the highlands climate, as they were coastal people. Malnourishment often forced carriers to rely on local villagers’ charity for sustenance. Asi Arere testifies: ‘[m]any of the carriers got sick and died in the bush. There was very little food. I was lucky to get home’. Carrier veteran Ovivi Arai recalls the horrific experience:

It was so terrible as a labourer that we had to sleep in our own shit. Australia has treated us like that – like shit! I had to sleep on the corpses of the Japanese. I drank water full of their rotting flesh. But for enduring all this we have got nothing.

When they finished the terms of their employment, most carriers were not repatriated but instead were diverted to other tasks. The poor conditions often led labourers to desert ANGAU or their carrier positions. The high desertion rate – estimated as high as 30 per cent after the Battle of Isurava – stemmed primarily from sickness, exhaustion, demoralisation at the sight of wounded, lack of blankets, visiting wives, or shortage of tobacco and other commodities. Somu Sigob recalls: ‘[w]hen they ran away they didn’t head for Moresby but went through the bush until they reached their villages. Later the kiaaps caught them, gave them some punishments and then sent them back’. Despite instructions against physical abuse, punishments for desertion were severe, including thrashings, stretching across drums, caning, digging drains, cutting grass, hanging from a tree in a bag, and cuffing. ANGAU considered the fundamental causes of desertion to be due to the following factors:

1. They are not volunteers; 2. In the head of the moment, many promises were made that when the Japs were driven away, the labour would be returned to their homes—circumstances have prevented these promises being kept; 3. Villages have been so heavily recruited that labourers are worrying about their gardens, womenfolk, etc. 4. Unsuitability of some of the natives for the work on which they are employed, and 5. Lack of experienced control.
You and the Native recognised that ‘if a man treats his labourers too badly they will desert, and when they have fled into the New Guinea bush he will not get them back in a hurry’. Despite recognising the causal relationship between poor conditions and carrier desertion, the armed forces and ANGAU did not address the causes of desertion.

Documents and oral testimony point to abuse of Papua New Guinean labourers as more than just isolated incidents. Asi Arere recalls:

Some Angau soldiers were looking after us and organising the labour line. They did not treat us properly. They were always hitting people and knocking us over. One man from Porebada who was making copra was kicked in the stomach by an Angau soldier with boots on, and was badly hurt. He died the next day.

Though condemning the practice, You and the Native acknowledged ‘[p]unching natives grows into a habit with some people. They even boast of their victories’. Mair suggests that ANGAU officers also flogged into submission those who did not wish to re-engage with ANGAU upon completion of their contracts. Oral testimonies in regions of Papua and New Guinea that had significant contact with Americans demonstrate disapproval of ANGAU methods by contrasting benevolent Americans with the abusive ANGAU. For instance Auwepo of Kegebwai hamlet, Loboda, remarks:

They [Americans] would call, they said, ‘Hey, boys, you come and let’s eat’. We thought about it and we went up and ate with the American soldiers. But we were afraid of the ANGAU soldiers. We said, ‘If we go up and eat with the Americans, they [the ANGAU soldiers] will see us and they will scold us’.

Anthropologists Marty Zelenietz and Hisafumi Saito similarly describe situations when ANGAU agents confiscated and destroyed food and clothing provided to Kilenge by Americans.

One anonymous white resident of Papua wrote a complaint to the Minister for the Army in 1945, condemning the abuse of labourers. The letter alleged: ‘[w]hen these poor illiterate natives did not supply satisfactory answers to his [WOII Healy] questions, he had two of them unmercifully flogged and later one was forced to dig his own grave and then callously murdered in cold blood’. An investigation into the behaviour of Healy uncovered testimony from both indigenous people and white soldiers indicating incidents when Healy beat Papua New Guinean labourers, but Healy was acquitted of wrongdoing. Major John Steward Milligan ruled: ‘[s]ummary punishment promptly inflicted for disobedience was a means that justified the ends in the circumstances’. The term ‘disobedience’ could have a loose interpretation, though. Soldier Eddie Allan Stanton wrote in his diary:

Today, a native was hit with a paling by the A.D.O. because he persisted in smiling while being spoken to. This action cannot be tolerated in any form. The native cannot hit back, and the white man knows it. If he could return the blow, the white man would not have the courage to hit him. Thus, we see a good example of the uplifting nature of a certain type of Government Officer.
Stanton on another occasion wrote: ‘[t]he Australian native Labour Overseers seem to take delight in hitting the natives’.\textsuperscript{83} Stanton’s comments suggest that abuse of labourers was not merely about just punishment for crimes and misdemeanours. Rather, violence and brutality were means to reinforce the unequal power relationships.

Sexual relations also became an arena of violence. Despite explicit warnings that ‘[i]f the woman is not consenting, then intercourse is just rape – whether the victim be white or brown’,\textsuperscript{84} there are some stories of white Australians, white Americans, and Black Americans sexually assaulting Papua New Guinean women.\textsuperscript{85} Stanton wrote about relations with white Australians: ‘[i]n New Guinea, the troops had much pleasure in offering native girls sticks of tobacco for sexual satisfaction. When tobacco is short, might exerts itself. In Port Moresby, one girl died from such an attack’.\textsuperscript{86} Stanton excused sexual abuse on the grounds that ‘[i]n New Guinea, the native woman is the only cure for oversexed gents. Consequently, one must not blame the soldier too much’.\textsuperscript{87} There was also disconcertion among white Australians about Papua New Guinean men and white women. Stanton records that when a group of Papua New Guinean men saw a show put on by the United Service Organizations and expressed interest in the white female performers, they received a flogging.\textsuperscript{88} This incident highlights the severity of the supposed crime of miscegenation between Papua New Guinean males and white females. Even the hint of breaking down longstanding barriers warranted severe punishment. While this was nothing new per se, it certainly demonstrates the continuity of colonialism and the abuses associated therewith as World War II impacted Papua and New Guinea.\textsuperscript{89}

**Compensation and Recognition for Papua New Guinean Labourers**

Enemy action killed an estimated 46 indentured labourers, and between 1,962 and 2,024 died of other causes. When surviving labourers returned home, they found high food prices, destroyed villages, and insufficient resources or capital. The halted production of peacetime goods during the war made village reconstruction slow and difficult. One journalist from Brisbane’s *Courier Mail* even wrote in April 1949: ‘[f]ive years after its recapture from the Japanese, this town [Lae] looks dirtier and more dilapidated than when I saw it through a coastwatcher’s field glasses in 1942’.\textsuperscript{90} A series of censuses conducted in 1947 estimated that in some areas, one-third of all village populations had been killed. Australian colonial officials also asserted their pre-war armed police patrols of villages, much to the ire of villagers who even used Japanese weapons and arms to resist such incursions.\textsuperscript{91}

Despite some camaraderie with Australian soldiers, the poor conditions during and after the war translated into much Papua New Guinean resentment and dissatisfaction. As early as September 1945, reports were coming out of places such as Wewak declaring ‘[d]issatisfaction is being expressed … on the failure to fulfill the promise of payments of pre-war wage claims, and natives are feeling it is unwise to make further labour contracts when they remain unpaid for work previously done’.\textsuperscript{92} The main reason that most labourers did not receive sufficient payments after the war is that, as civilians, they were deemed ineligible for war gratuities. The outcome of deliberations over gratuities in 1946 determined: ‘it is intended to pay War Gratuities only to such natives who were actually members of the Australian Forces and not to those employed in a civilian capacity’.\textsuperscript{93}
The Australian government certainly addressed some of the grievances of Papua New Guineans following the war. In October 1944 the government appointed a committee to develop a War Damages Compensation Scheme. The fund passed the Australian Parliament with the purpose of compensating for death, injury, or property loss. The administration replaced livestock, repaired infrastructure, and laid new roads. By 1950 the government had invested almost $2 million in compensation and reconstruction of Papua and New Guinea. On 14 December 1946 a new Trusteeship Agreement from the United Nations formally united Papua and New Guinea.94

The goals that accompanied reconstruction of Papua New Guinea were succinctly laid out in the Australian Parliament by E.J. Ward, the Minister for External Territories, on 4 July 1945:

Apart from the debt of gratitude that the people of Australia owe to the natives of the Territory, the Government regards it as its boundless duty to further to the utmost the advancement of the natives, and considers that can be achieved only by providing facilities for better health, better education and for a greater participation by the natives in the wealth of their country and eventually in its government.95

The Australian government reformed labour laws to introduce a 44 hour work week, improved the rations scale, and placed a 12-month limit on contracts. Wages increased slightly, child labour was abolished, a workmen’s compensation scheme began, diets improved, local self-government at the village level began, and there was a gradual repeal of apartheid-like legislation.96

These reforms were significant, but fundamentally the structures of colonialism in Papua New Guinea continued to operate. Historian Nicholas Gaynor argues that security concerns led Australian and New Zealand post-war planning to seek ‘control of the political reins of these [Pacific] island territories thus subjugating millions of native peoples of the South Pacific and South East Asia’.97 Debate surrounding the Papua-New Guinea Provisional Administration Bill in 1945 centred on maintenance of Papua New Guinea as a buffer against future Asian aggression. Although there was some concern about native welfare, several parliamentarians emphasised that the interests of white residents in Papua New Guinea must be upheld first. Moreover, racial hierarchical ideas continued to dominate debate, as speakers referred to Papua New Guineans as having yet to ‘evolve’ beyond the ‘mentality of a child’.98 Press coverage in the immediate post-war period also sometimes denigrated Papua New Guineans as unprepared for the responsibilities of ‘civilisation’. For example, one article in The Age from 1948 declared:

They [natives] had found a new freedom while the Australian troops had been in New Britain, but unfortunately they had had too much money, and had developed a desire for the privileges of European civilisation without the corresponding responsibilities.99

Despite the growing international trends of self-determination, Papua New Guinea remained an Australian colony until 1975. The policy directive of Papua New Guinea from 1947 technically was to aim for self-governance, but this would not happen until the implementation of self-government in 1973 and independence in 1975.
Australia essentially set up a mercantilist system, whereby government officials would negotiate the purchase of native land, found/impose small plantations, and establish an export industry in Papua New Guinea before returning control of the plantations to Papua New Guinean residents. The policy clearly set the priority of Papua New Guinean agriculture as oriented towards Australian interests, with indigenous concerns secondary.

Regulations within Papua New Guinea also continued to disadvantage indigenous residents and social problems persisted. The Native Employment Ordinance of 1958 replaced ‘contracts’ with ‘agreements’, which essentially continued to function as an indentured labour system. The legislation extended the permitted agreement period, authorised employers to withhold wages for ‘illegal absences’, and one draft of the bill contained a provision (later removed) that would have required workers to carry identity cards. Labourers became classified into various categories, each carrying different levels of autonomy and requiring workers to obtain certificates from district officers. Notwithstanding increases to the minimum wage, wide disparities persisted between indigenous and non-indigenous workers. Until 1958, the Administration of Papua New Guinea racially segregated education and hospitals into separate facilities for Europeans, Asians, and mixed-race persons. A United Nations Mission visit in 1950 determined that while health and education standards for Papua New Guineans were improved over the pre-war situation, their living conditions were the same as pre-war and for other races the situation had actually deteriorated. As historian Hank Nelson remarks, ‘[t]he wartime generation have had the frustration of having endured, having seen what the rewards might be, but never having been able to possess them’.

As already mentioned, problems with remuneration for the war effort have also continued to plague Papua New Guineans. Asina Papau claims: ‘[w]e worked hard despite all the danger. We were promised compensation and I ask now for what we were promised’. Stella notes that ‘[t]he job the natives perform is, by implication, not comparable to soldiering; they are merely carriers of the wounded’. As recently as 2004, Ham described veteran Papua New Guinean labourers living ‘much as they did then, in villages without sanitation, proper medical care or running water, dependent on their market gardens for food. In fact, their circumstances have regressed’.

Veteran William Metpi succinctly summarises the sentiments of under-compensation felt by many Papua New Guineans: ‘[w]e fought side by side with you, (Australians), and our labourers carried your wounded. In fact we helped in almost every way and we expect a better deal than this. We want to be recognised’. This is not to say that all Papua New Guineans are resentful or angry at Australia. At the opening of the United Nations General Assembly on 10 October 1975, Papua New Guinea’s first Prime Minister Michael Somare declared:

After the Second World War Australia’s role became less and less that of an overlord. As our political autonomy increased, on our own insistence, Australia took up a new role as a generous and sympathetic donor of aid. It has guaranteed that this role will continue in our new relationship as partners and neighbouring states in the Pacific.

Notwithstanding the abuse perpetrated by some soldiers, many Australians who served in Papua New Guinea have recognised the valuable role of Papua New
Guinean labourers. For instance, one Major-General wrote in 1943: ‘[t]he devotion to duty of the natives, their care of the wounded and their general helpfulness were probably the more appreciated as they were unexpected by officers and men’.\textsuperscript{107} General Thomas Blamey declared:

These natives can’t be given too much praise ... They’ve carried stretchers through feet-deep mud with the Australian wounded, down slimy defiles, through terrible jungles. They were almost at the point of exhaustion, but they always kept two men awake at night to take care of the patients, to wash their muddy limbs, to attend to their bandages and to give them their meals. The work of these natives has been astounding. We owe them a lasting debt.\textsuperscript{108}

Yet many white assessments meant to praise Papua New Guineans have been tainted with racial constructs of inferiority. The most ubiquitous archetype from the war, embodied in the George Silk photograph, is the idea of the ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel’ popularised by the 1943 Sapper Bert Beros poem.\textsuperscript{109} Liz Reed argues persuasively that the enduring construct of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel constructs Papua New Guineans ‘as a homogeneous “other” and suggests a desire to maintain control over what had remained the preferred image of the colonised subject’.\textsuperscript{110} Certainly the humanity and loyalty of Papua New Guineans depicted in the George Silk photograph merit praise. As this article has shown, though, the wider history of Papua New Guinean labour in World War II departs from the image of the soldier and his devoted ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel’. The relations between Papua New Guinean labour and white Australia more accurately align with coastwatcher Eric Feldt’s reflection: ‘[t]o many, natives were just “expendable”, and not even human expendables’.\textsuperscript{111}

Noah Riseman completed his PhD in History at the University of Melbourne in 2008. His thesis, which was awarded the 2009 C.E.W. Bean Prize for Military History, examines the impact of World War II on settler-Indigenous relations in Arnhem Land, Papua New Guinea, and the Navajo Nation in the United States. Riseman now works as a lecturer in History in the School of Arts and Sciences on the Melbourne campus of Australian Catholic University.

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Endnotes

* This article has been peer-reviewed for Labour History by two anonymous referees. Sections have also been published in Noah Riseman, ‘Black skins, black work: race and labour in World War II Papua and New Guinea’, in Bobbie Oliver (ed.), Labour History in the New Century, Black Swan Press, Perth, 2009, pp. 63-75.
2. In the context of this article, I use the term ‘Papua New Guineans’ to refer to indigenous residents of Papua and New Guinea under Australian (rather than Japanese) control during World War II. The persons to whom I refer would actually have been known as ‘Papuans’ or ‘New Guineans’ during the war depending upon their place of origin. The division of the two groups was artificially based on colonial divisions of the island pre-World War I.
3. Allied Geographical Section, Southwest Pacific Area, You and the Native: Notes for the Guidance of Members of the Forces in their Relations with New Guinea Natives, 12 February 1943, p. 17.
4. ‘Native labour Australian New Guinea: an appreciation’, no date, in AWM, series 54, item 506/3/1: [Natives – Labour] Utilisation of Future Possibilities, particularly regarding the
Labour History • Number 98 • May 2010

178

Mandated Territory of New Guinea, 1943. You and the Native similarly states ‘[l]t is not too much to say that he [the native] stands in awe of us [whites]. He thinks we are superior beings. We may not all deserve this reputation, but it is worth acting up to’, You and the Native, p. 2.

5. E.C. Harris, late Treasurer of Papua, to Mr. Forde, 14 December 1942, in National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) Melbourne, series MP508/1, item 247/701/953: Pay of Native Workers in New Guinea.


18. Stella, Imagining the Other, p. 130. Fitzpatrick likewise comments, ‘[t]hey were seen and treated as only capable of playing a part in the colonial economy in dependent relation to the colonist’. Fitzpatrick, Lao and State in Papua New Guinea, p. 73.


20. Inglis, ‘Not a White Woman Safe’, p. 5.


28. Stella, Imagining the Other, p. 111.

29. You and the Native, p. 17. Peter Ryan similarly comments, ‘[t]hey wanted neither Japanese nor Australians wandering round their country. Both were merely nuisances to them – useless people who ate their food, had to be carried for and shown their way round the bush’. Peter Ryan, Fear Drive My Feet, Angus & Robertson Ltd, Sydney, 1959, p. 166. See also Robinson, Villagers at War, p. 169.

30. Ryan, Fear Drive My Feet, p. 95. See also Bryant Allen, ‘Remembering the War in the Sepik’, in Toyoda and Nelson (eds), The Pacific War in Papua New Guinea, pp. 15, 18.


35. ANGAU, 23 April 1943, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 247/1/1/1290: Conditions of Service: Natives of Papua New Guinea [and Torres Strait Islanders]. Unskilled labour made up 95 per cent of Papua New Guinean labourers while skilled labour was only about five per cent. *Ibid.* See also ‘Report on the Activities of ANGAU in Respect of Native Relief and Rehabilitation in the Territory of Papua and the Mandated Territory of New Guinea. February 1942 – September 1944’, Appendix B, pp. 17-18, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 5/3/147: Australia-New Guinea Administrative Unit ANGAU. There was also a scale of rewards depending on the task performed, with achievements such as rescuing pilots or capturing enemies being more valuable than salvaging aircraft or reporting on enemy movements. See Finance Authority for Expenditure, 10 September 1945, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 131/1/82: ANGAU Reward to Natives.

36. F.R. Sinclair, Secretary, to E.C. Harris, 11 January 1943, in NAA Melbourne, series MP508/1, item 247/701/953.


40. ‘Survey of native labour in all aspects Territories of Papua and New Guinea made by Brigadier J.E. Lloyd….’, pp. 2-3, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 285/1/1/680A.


42. First Army, to Landforces, 7 August 1945, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 247/1/1152: Conditions of Service: Natives of Papua and New Guinea Enlisted in or Employed by the Forces. Document also appears in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 247/1/1172: Pay of Native Troops & Native Labour in Papua and New Guinea.


44. Captain Gloucester, July 1944, in Stanner, *The South Seas in Transition*, p. 82.


46. *You and the Native*, p. 15. See also Notes of Interview, Lieutenant-Colonel Sharpe, HQ Q’LD L of C Area, Lieutenant-Colonel B.J. O’Loughlin, AAG First Aust Army, no date, in AWM, series 54, item 628/1/1B: [Torres Strait Area]: Torres Strait Islanders, 1944. File dealing with enlistment, rates of pay, conditions of service, and employment of natives in the Army [1st copy]; Iven Mackay, 1/4-Gen, GOC New Guinea Force, 29 March 1943, in NAA Melbourne, series MP729/6, item 37/401/1904.


49. F.H. Moy pointed to the growing dependency of the Army on indigenous labour when he wrote, ‘[f]urther the attitude has become … that as native labour is available, then every unit commander demands his quota like a comforts fund issue’ See Captain F.H. Moy, District Officer, to District of Mambare, Headquarters, 6 May 1943, in AWM, series 54, item 506/5/1.


52. Ham, *Kokola*, p. 213.

55. Nora Vagi Brash, in *Angels of War*, produced and directed by Gavan Daws, Hank Nelson, and Andrew Pike.
59. ‘Report on the activities of ANGAU…’, Appendix A, p. 6, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 5/3/147. See also NAA Melbourne, series MP729/6, item 2/401/154.
64. ‘Report on the Activities of ANGAU…’, Appendix B, p. 23, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 5/3/147.
66. Powell, *The Third Force*, p. 113; Scheps, ‘Chimbu Participation in the Pacific War’, p. 82.
67. Arere, in Modjeska, ‘The wartime experience of Mr Asi Arere’, p. 16.
73. ‘Native labour Australian New Guinea. An Appreciation’, no date, in AWM, series 54, item 506/5/1.
74. *You and the Native*, p. 17.
75. Arere, in Modjeska, ‘The wartime experience of Mr Asi Arere’, p. 16.
76. *You and the Native*, p. 16.
81. Major John Stewart Milligan, 6 December 1945, in *ibid*.
84. You and the Native, p. 8.
86. Stanton, *The War Diaries of Eddie Allan Stanton*, 11 October 1942, p. 84.
89. See Inglis, ‘Not a White Woman Safe’.


99. ‘Bet their wives on turn of a card’, *The Age* (Melbourne), 7 January 1948, in NAA Melbourne, series MP927/1, item A131/2/43: War gratuity natives of New Guinea and Papua who are members of the Forces. See also ‘Natives gambling wives in NG’, *Herald* (Melbourne), 1 June 1948, in *ibid*.


102. Asina Papau, in *Angels of War*, produced and directed by Gavan Daws, Hank Nelson, and Andrew Pike.

103. Stella, *Imagining the Other*, p. 111.


107. Maj-General, GOC, ANGAU, 6 February 1943, in NAA Melbourne, series MP742/1, item 5/1/34: Future native welfare in Territories of Papua and New Guinea.


111. Feldt, *The Coast Watchers*, p. 293.