An oral history collection recording the memories and stories of Papua New Guineans about World War Two

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Voices from the War

Name: Matthew Flenders Borari
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Chief interviewer: Barnabas Orere
Time interview concluded: 3:13 PM
Duration of interview: 04:23:44
Main language of interview: Notu
Image: N/A

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER

This is interview number 11, the final interview at Beama Village held on May 24 2014. We have here Mathew Flinders Borari of Eroro Village who is going to tell us the wartime experiences of his father, the late Eutychus Borari. He is going to tell the story in his language.

BORARI

My father is Eutychus Borari. He was a carrier during the war. Before the war came to Papua, my father worked as a cook for a white man at Tufi, Captain Paul. When the war came to Papua, he left Tufi and came to his Eroro Village. At that time ANGAU officers were visiting villages and recruiting strong young men as carriers and labourers to work for Australian and American troops during the war. When he was at Eroro, he heard that ANGAU officers went to Baberada Village and were getting names of men who want to be recruited and engaged as carriers and labourers. He went along to the Baberada Guest House and an ANGAU officer recorded his name and the names of 52 other men. This meant that ANGAU officers recruited these men to become carriers and labourers and help Australian soldiers who coming along Kokoda Trail from Port Moresby to Kokoda and then to Gona, Sanananda, and Buna. ANGAU officers assembled these men and explained to them the purpose for recruiting them was to help Australian soldiers to fight the Japanese by carrying supplies and ammunition. After the talk, ANGAU officers guided these men to walk from Eroro to Sangara, Awala, Kumusi River, Gorari, Oivi, and Kokoda. It was the first time for Eroro men to travel to Kokoda, but they did not really understand why they were sent to Kokoda. While they were at Kokoda, they came to clearly understand that their job was to carry supplies for Australian soldiers.

My father’s gang with other men were at Kokoda when the Japanese fought and chased the Australians to fall back to Kokoda. The native carriers and labourers with Australian soldiers also fell back to Deniki and Isurava where the big fighting took place. There many soldiers on both sides were killed. Seeing this fierce fighting at Isurava forced the natives to flee and take refuge in the deep unknown jungle and to feed on bush fruits to survive. Some of them died, and he does not know how many. No Eroro men died because they helped each and stayed together.

The Japanese were strong, fought hard, and pushed Australians and the native carriers and labourers
to again fall back to Iora Creek, Templeton's Crossing, Kagi, Efogi, and Ioribaiwa. The natives saw these fighting and got very scared, and this is where the carriers and labourers began to desert the labour lines, thus forcing the collapse of the supplies from reaching the frontline. Eroro men decided at Kagi to run away and they did run away and managed to journey through this unknown country to the Kokoda side of Orokaiva land.

INTERVIEWER

I believe that you have not told your father's experiences of the fighting, the carrying of supplies and the work in the cold climate on the mountains. Would you be able to tell us the story if you have heard from your father?

BORARI

Yes, I have missed out some of my father's experiences on the Kokoda Trail. Kokoda Trail is a bloody track which was tainted with the blood of many Japanese and Australian dead. It was tough and difficult going and coming. It always rains and the track is always wet, slippery and with smelly mud when trodden by men. The track is full of uncomfortable rocky ground. The uphill and downhill goings were tough. Muscles in their bodies ached. Their knees sometimes refused to keep them going so some men collapsed to lie on the wet ground to rest and recover. Some men never recovered and joined the line. They were buried in nearby bushes to be forgotten for good.

Cold high altitude air bit the men once night came. Exhaustion and hunger always disappointed the men or discouraged them from continuing their walk on many occasions. The men had not enough sleep, not enough food to eat, and not given adequate medical treatment. They suffered badly and nobody cared, but they carried supplies to keep the white soldiers going without public complaints although they complained among themselves. The men walked in this rough track with heavy loads. They over-worked with little sleep or rest, and always going hungry and exhausted. Not enough food to eat, but worked, and worked for no reward. It was not their war, but they were recruited to help the white soldiers.

My father says that working on the Kokoda Trail was a hard work, or rather a punishment because they did not know much of what was going on in the war. The could not evade ANGAU officers who recruited them and who gave the tasks of not only carrying supplies, but also helping to build shelters, supply depots, toilets, evacuating the sick and wounded soldiers from battlefields to safety places and hospitals, and tenderly caring the wounded and sick before evacuation.

INTERVIEWER

What did your father think of the tasks performed by the native men and hardships they faced?

BORARI

My father said the native carriers and labourers performed these tasks during the difficult times for the army, but the army never thought of them and even did not recognise their war service so they were not paid their war entitlements. He says that the native men were not recognised for their war service and sacrifice because the army did not regard them as helpers, but they regarded them as "prisoners." Helpers or contract labourers were paid their wages when they were engaged by colonial "mastas" to work on goldfields, plantations, and on government stations during the period before the war came to Papua. Therefore, the native men were called the labourers, but during the war, they were recruited as carriers and labourers, and sadly they were not paid due entitlements. So the army treated them as not helpers and labourers, but used them as "prisoners" so there were no entitlements paid until all these men have already died without respect and honour.

My father recalls of severe hunger and hardship of being always cold and wet faced by the native men. There were no blankets for protection of these men against the bitterly cold nights of the mountains. Such incidents makes my father to say the native men were not carriers and labourers...
during the war, but they worked as prisoners like in the pre-war colonial period. He said he felt bad, sad and disappointed about the whole matter.

INTERVIEWER

What happened to the Eroro men after they deserted the carrier line on the Kokoda Trail?

BORARI

Yes, the Eroro men deserted the carrier line and made their way Sengi, and Kebara, and then successfully walked back to Eroro by crossing Kumusi River and through Sasembata, Isivita, and Sangara territories. Their families were living in camps set up by ANGAU and they were very happy to see the men returned home safely after many months working on the Kokoda Trail. The men stayed with their people when Australian and American troops fought the Japanese during the Buna Battle. The Japanese were defeated when many were killed. Both Australian and American troops won the battle.

But the army did one bad thing to the native people in the Eroro area. The army hanged 12 native men at Kopure Prison, but my father says he does not know the reasons for their hangings. Only the army personnel were involved in the native men's hanging. The native people did not know that such bad thing happened in their area. The people knew this story after the war ended at the end of 1945. The people even do not know the names of the men who were hanged and which villages they come from. My father says the army had hanged these native men at Kopure Prison in February or March 1943. These men were part of many other prisoners who were kept there before transferring them to Higaum mass hanging of other Orokaivan men took place between 1943 and 1945. The hanging of native men at Higaturu was also carried by the army. Again the native people of Northern District do not know how many men were hanged and for what reasons. My father says the hanging of native men by the army confirms that the native carriers and labourers were recruited by ANGAU to be treated as prisoners and not as helpers or contracted labourers. He says he feel very very sad and disappointed about the hanging of native men by the army.

INTERVIEWER

What did your father and other Eroro men did after the Buna Battle was over?

BORARI

After the Buna Battle, American troops with the help of Australians established the Dobuduru-Oro Bay Base B Headquarters Area by building various infrastructural facilities at Boro, Embi, Urio, Hanau, Dobuduru, Barisari, Cape Sudest, Garuro, Siremi, Hariko, Borio, Buna, Ango, Hanakiro, Embogo, Keta Creek, Dombada, Kopure, Eroro, Beama, Oro Bay, and Harvey Bay. Many Papuan carriers and labourers including my father and Eroro men were used to build these facilities. While helping these white soldiers, the native people came to know that there were black American soldiers. When our people saw these black American soldiers wearing army uniforms driving trucks, working as doctors and dentists, mechanics, signallers and communication officers, and other jobs which are normally performed by white soldiers, they said they were happy to see and the black men in Papua can do likewise. The contact and relationship between our people and black American soldiers were good, but ANGAU personnel adopted a protective role over native carriers and labourers, and stopped them from having any contacts with black American soldiers. For Orokaivans, it was a completely new experience to see black soldiers disagreeing with or standing up to white people. Both black and white American soldiers disliked ANGAU and its officers and conveyed their loathing for the unit to many carriers and labourers.

INTERVIEWER

What facilities were established at Kopure, Eroro, Dombada, and Oro Bay?
BORARI

Oro Bay featured prominently during the war, but usually takes the back seat when it comes to Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels. The Eroro people lost good arable land to concrete floors where giant buildings once stood, evidence of a huge wartime city. Other relics have succumbed to the tropical conditions during 65 years rusting in peace.

Secret whispers, though, speak of underground caches of ammunition buried by the American troops in their haste to return to their country. My father knows one in the Eroro background at Green Cross. It is 50 feet long with two vents that had been bent to, obviously, keep away moisture. He spins a yarn or two, including the air raid warning at Samarai that found him in a women’s toilet.

My father claims to have cooked a meal for the famous General Douglas MacArthur at Eroro and he was active enough to show us where the field hospital was, the boiler site, the bakery, the cinema theatre, the boxing ring, basket ball courts, volleyball courts, and many other facilities. [Footnote. MacArthur had never been to Dobuduru, Buna, Eroro or Oro Bay during the war].

At Harvey Bay, a slipway rots in its watery grave. Today Harvey Bay is the roosting place for thousands of birds of all descriptions and sizes, a discovery climax for nature lovers.

INTERVIEWER

Have you got other stories of your father to share with us?

BORARI

ANGAU made big promises to the people of Papua to build roads and bridges, hospitals, and schools after the war. Papuans were told that there would be changes and lots of money would be spent to develop Papua. Many of the Orokaivan people including the Eroros believed this would happen in return for the help Papuans had given in winning the war. But nothing had happened in the eyes of our wartime carriers and labourers, and they all had passed away.

War opened the eyes and minds of the Orokaivan people. They were made aware of the military might of Australia, America, and Japan. They saw vast numbers of foreign people and more mechanised equipment than they could imagine was man-made. They were very impressed by the wealth of Australia, America, and Japan which could produce these machines. The people will never forget what they saw and experienced during the war until they die.

My father saw the fighting in the war, killings in the war, sufferings in the war, dying in the war, bombing of places and people in the war, hangings of native men in the war, whippings and floggings of natives in the war. It was the time of war when all these things happened. The native people were the victims at the end. The wartime carriers and labourers benefitted nothing. They had lived on earth with nothing from the army. They had gone to Heaven to be with God with nothing. God knows the prize they had won - the prize of love and compassion, and the prize of service and sacrifice.

My father had already passed away. What I told you is my father’s wartime experiences. And that is the end of my story-telling.