Visit to Papua-New Guinea

I have just come back from eight days in Papua-New Guinea. The main reason for my visit, of course, was to have a look at the Army build-up in the Territories and to see for myself the bearing and standard of the Pacific Island soldiers. Quite apart from this, however, it was an exciting week.

It was the first time I have been to the Territories and much of what I saw was unexpected. For example, I think most of us in thinking of New Guinea bring to mind heat and humidity and tropical jungle. But our first night was spent in the Highlands at Goroka. Here the climate is perhaps one of the best in the world. The days are warm but not hot, it rains nearly every night and the evenings are cool enough for blankets. At least, this is what the local District Commissioner told me would happen and it did.

I also met one of the pioneers of this region, Mr. Jim Leahy, the first white man to prospect over the Highlands in the 1930's looking for gold. After the war he came back and established himself as a coffee and tea planter. He has experimented in many other things and has demonstrated that first class pastures can be grown in these areas and that cattle and horses do very well with little attention.

He had an interesting story to tell about his return after the war. He wanted to get the highlanders to work. They would work for knives or tomahawks, or
for shells which were their own form of currency, but he only had pound notes and they were not interested in those. He thought he would educate them to work for money so he collected two plane-loads of knives and tomahawks and set up a shop near the airstrip. He was soon sold out. He came back with more some days later but by this time one or two of the highlanders had begun to learn what it was all about. During the night one thousand highlanders wanting to buy knives and tomahawks collected outside the shop but one, more astute than the others, had got his friends and relatives into the front of the queue. They came in and bought knives and tomahawks for about 10/- each and as soon as Jim Leahy had sold out the highlander opened up his own shop in front of the store. By this time he was selling the goods for £2 each.

A lot has happened since then. Coffee is quite widely planted and the highland coffee is some of the best in the world. On a brief view, I would think that there will be a considerable future for a cattle industry, too, in that area.

Our time at Goroka was all too short but from there we went to Vanimo, which is an outpost on the north west of Papua-New Guinea and the nearest military post to the West Irian border. Here, a year before, one of the young Lieutenants in the Army on a 30 day patrol in the very rough country to the south, had come across a tribe who had never before been detected
by police or army patrols. He was the first white man to be seen by the tribe.

Anzac Day was spent at Wewak and except for the main centres in Australia I doubt if more enthusiasm or more interest could be shown anywhere. I was told that this was the normal thing for Wewak. There were possibly 5,000 people at the ceremony and after the service, I spoke to Australian and Pacific Island ex-servicemen, many of whom were wearing wartime medals. They were obviously immensely proud of the service they had performed in support of our own forces.

Wewak is one of the centres where a large new army establishment is being built. The expansion programme announced for the Australian Army in 1964 was paralleled by an expansion of the Pacific Island Regiment from a one to a 3 battalion force. The construction of the new barracks buildings at the five centres - Wewak, Lae, and in Port Moresby at Murray Barracks, Taurama and Goldie River - is very much the same as the construction being used for the new Australian Army barracks at Townsville. The standards for the buildings are the same and there are only minor differences in the internal areas. In all, the Commonwealth will be spending about $33 million on the new construction in the Territories and this should be completed by 1968. It will be a permanent and lasting asset to the Pacific Island Regiment.

During the visit I opened the new Training Depot at Goldie River, not far from Port Moresby, and it was interesting to compare the old construction with the new buildings. The Pacific Islanders call their local building materials "sak sak", and they consist mostly
of timber and palm leaves. They are quite well adapted to the conditions of the Territories but the maintenance, as you can imagine, is extraordinarily high. The units should be able to operate much more effectively out of the new quarters.

I found the standards of training and performance of the Pacific Island Regiment to be very high and members of the force had an obvious pride in the Service. I attempted to point out wherever possible that the development of the Pacific Island Regiment is not basically an extension of the Australian Army. We are developing a viable force which will be able to play its proper part in the development of Papua - New Guinea and it will be an Army for the defence of these territories. Over recent years we have been speeding up the training of the Pacific Island officers and non-commissioned officers because when the time comes for independence the Army must be in a position to stand on its own feet and be responsible to the political power. In these circumstances, of course, if they wanted continued support from the Australian Army I am quite certain that this would be forthcoming, but I would imagine that this would be a decision that the people in the Territories would make themselves.

There are two other points that I would like to mention. The Army has a very extensive education programme for recruits and this is continued after the soldiers move to battalions. There is an emphasis on teaching the soldiers to speak English fluently and well and also in stimulating a sense of civic responsibility and national pride. This education programme is of great importance because the Army is
one of the principal unifying factors in the Territories. They have 700 languages and 2000 dialects and very often the people from one tribe never meet those from another. The Army quite deliberately recruits from all over the Territories and thus, people from different tribes live and work together and learn to have a sense of unity. Thus, together with the Administration and the Police, the Army is one of the main forces for unification and the development of a national identity.

There are quite a number of National Service teachers serving in the Territories and with their training as teachers they are of tremendous benefit in the education programme that is being pursued. Indeed, without these National Service teachers I doubt that the Army would have been able to muster the skills that are necessary for the programme.

During the normal course of training Army patrols go into some of the most rugged and difficult country and make contact with people who are in the most isolated areas of the Territories. The Army will, in future, be doing what it can to help these people in small acts of community aid. We will manage this in this way - when patrols are going into a certain area the Army will make this known to the local District Commissioner and will ask local Administration officials if there are any particular community aid tasks that they might be able to undertake during the course of the patrols. This will always be done with the prior agreement of the Administration but it will help I believe to give some
additional services in a small way, especially to those in the remoter parts of the country, and it will also help the Pacific Islanders to understand that the Pacific Islands Regiment is their Army for their help and protection.

There is only one other thing that I would like to mention. It was in Wewak of course that Edward Kenna won his V.C. for his magnificent service in the Australian Army and I found that his name was well remembered by many of the people up there. I was also shown the areas where his acts of bravery were performed. It was nice to know such heroism is well remembered.