

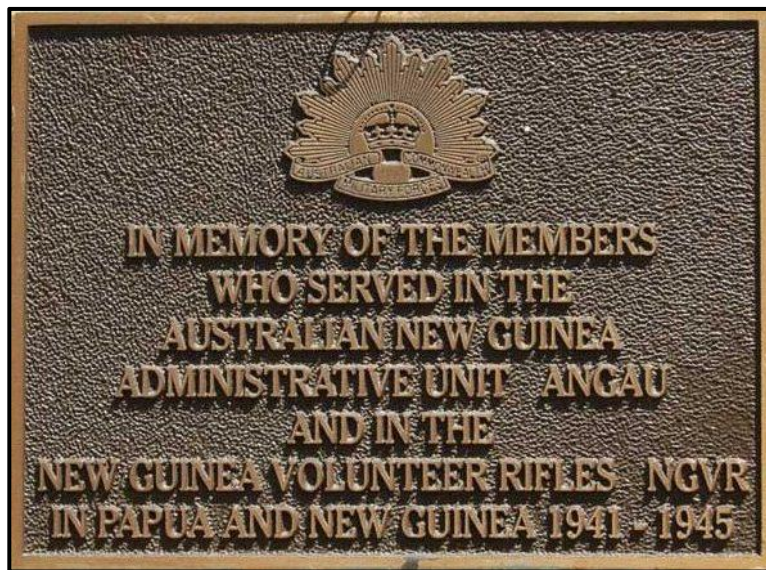


## Stories from the Plaques

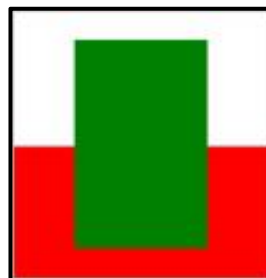
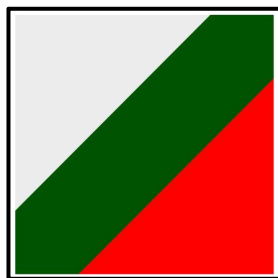
### No. 8: Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) and New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR) 1941 - 1945

While many battles and campaigns in Papua and New Guinea during the Second World War are focused on Australian-based militia and units of the Second Australian Infantry Force (2nd AIF), the service of men in the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) and the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR) is just as worthy of our understanding and respect.

A plaque in the Walkway's Memorial Rose Garden commemorates both groups, and while their responsibilities, structure and operations differed from the other, both operated in the same challenging environment and played a vital role against Japanese forces in Papua and New Guinea throughout the war years.



The plaque honouring members of both ANGAU and NGVR units. (location: South Arc, position 29/1)



The colour patches for ANGAU (left) and NGVR units (source: Wikipedia)

## Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU)

In 1906 Australia had taken over responsibility (from Britain) as the colonial administrator for the external territory of Papua, the southern half of today's Papua New Guinea. Meantime, the northern section of the island (up to 1914) was under the control of Imperial Germany and known as German New Guinea. Following the First World War, the League of Nations mandated this territory would also come under Australian rule. New Guinea was, in effect, a post-war 'reward' for Australia after it had seized control of the region in its first action of the war in 1914.

For over two decades, both territories were administered separately by Australia, but still retained their own identities. The capital of New Guinea was Rabaul (on New Britain), while Port Moresby was the capital of Papua. Both had small settlements scattered among vast areas of mountainous tropical terrain, plus some coastal populations. There were few aerodromes or roads, and transport was undertaken either by small vessels plying their trade along the coast or by journeys on 'tracks' that linked inland settlements. With many isolated villages, warring tribes, linguistic diversity and few profitable industries, the territories presented vast challenges for Australian administrators and European expatriates who were vastly outnumbered by indigenous populations. For example, in 1941, the total of non-indigenous residents - a mere 7,200 people - was only one percent of the total population.



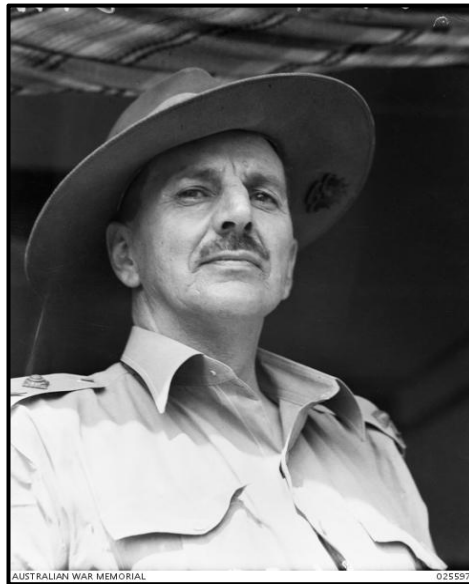
**The external Australian territories of Papua and New Guinea, including a highlighted section of the Kokoda Track. (source: National Museum of Australia)**

In January 1942 the civil administration in Port Moresby was suspended due to the growing threat of a Japanese invasion. With its deep harbour, port facilities, airfield and proximity to Australian supply lines, Port Moresby (like Rabaul in New Britain) was seen as a desirable target for the Japanese to base marine and air operations.

On 21 March 1942, ANGAU (usually pronounced as 'Angow') a new military organisation responsible to 'New Guinea Force', a military command unit for Allied and native troops in both territories. ANGAU was to administer the civil affairs of both territories, which was unique in Australia's military history. It was in charge of civil matters across a vast swathe of sparsely populated territory, much of it was under the threat of Japanese forces. From 1943 onwards,

ANGAU play a pivotal role in supplying manpower, logistical support, intelligence gathering and long-range reconnaissance for Allied forces as Japanese forces were pushed back from 1943.

From its formation until the war's end, ANGAU was under the command of Major-General Basil Morris. Morris, a decorated career Army man and veteran of the First World War. Following overseas postings in Palestine, Bombay and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) since January 1940, he was appointed commandant of the 8<sup>th</sup> Military District in May 1941, and headquartered in Port Moresby. He was key in establishing ANGAU before civil administration was suspended mid-February 1942: he incorporated its functions into a military organisation, including posting many of the conscripted officers of the Papuan and New Guinea public services into ANGAU.



**Major-General Basil Morris (source: AWM)**

The numbers who served in ANGAU reflect its claim to be the largest force of its kind during the war, and its most diverse:

- An estimated 3,300 men (non-natives) served with ANGAU.
- At its peak strength (in July 1945) it mustered 366 officers and 1,660 other ranks, totaling 2,026 men (this number excluded native labourers - see below).
- In July 1944, approximately 37,000 native labourers were employed by ANGAU - a far cry from the meagre 38 labourers it employed in January 1942.
- Its medical service (50 officers and 163 other ranks at the war's end) was key to ensuring its many native labourers and inhabitants received medical support, with over one million natives (many multiple times) receiving inspections and 250,000 being hospitalised.

ANGAU ranks consisted of former plantation owners and workers, patrol officers, agronomists, drivers, police officers, mechanics, guides, interpreters, civil servants, lawyers, bankers, businessmen and others who used their skills accordingly in day to day operations across the territories. Danger was ever-present: many often worked solo (accompanied by native helpers), behind enemy lines for lengthy periods of time or assisting front-line troops.

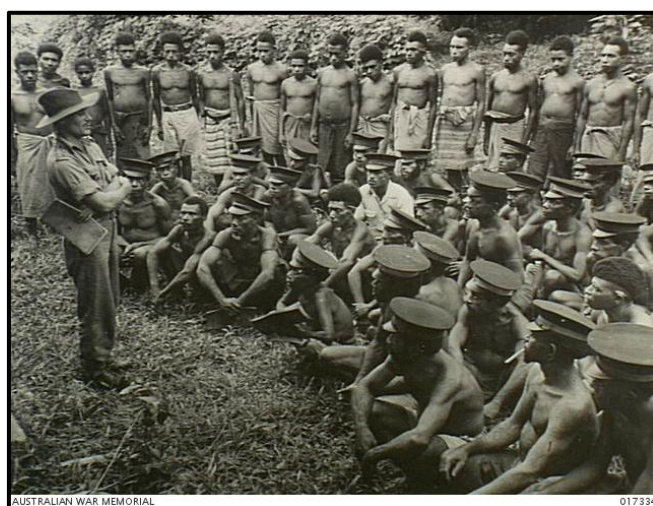
As a military unit, it was armed but only participated in limited combat operations, however it was far from being a frontline unit. Service with ANGAU in the sparsely populated inland region and

along the coast was not without risks, hardly surprising since Japanese forces appeared to be in the ascendancy in 1942. Their reputation for inflicting brutality on any enemy, European or otherwise, armed or not, was well-documented.

Activities undertaken by ANGAU staff focused on marshaling the resources of land and the people for the war effort: it maintained law and order for the civilian population (including the native inhabitants), managed primary production, organised coastal vessels for transporting supplies, provided medical services. As time progressed and Japanese forces retreated, following the re-occupation of towns and districts, ANGAU members were tasked with another competing priority - restoring administration, and the repair and reconstruction of villages and infrastructure. Yet ANGAU's most prominent role was supplying labourers from among native populations.



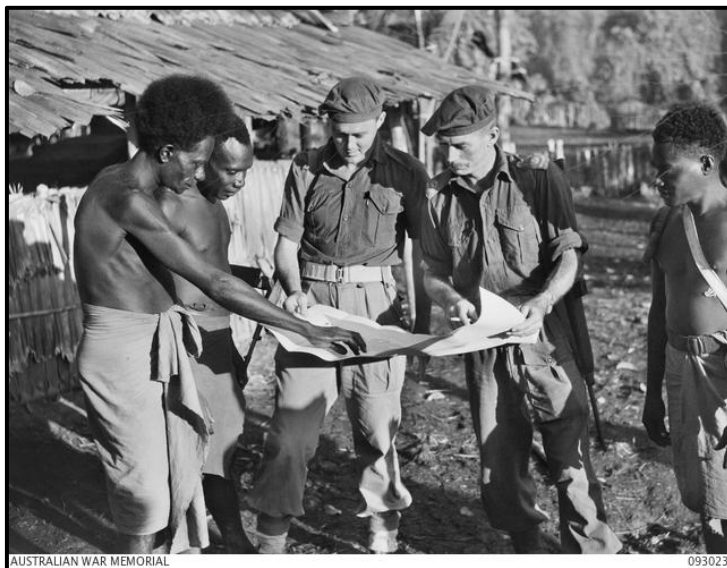
**October 1942: ANGAU staff watch native carriers unload communications equipment. (source: AWM)**



**June 1944: An ANGAU officer speaks with village chiefs on a northern island. (source: AWM)**

The use of natives as labourers was a complex issue, often overlooked by the romanticised perception of the legendary 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels'. The work undertaken by natives until the Japanese surrender was vital in ensuring Australian (and later American) forces received weaponry and supplies, and with subsequent efforts in carrying wounded and ill troops back to medical aid, usually over tough, uncompromising terrain, and often under direct threat from the Japanese. It was usual for six natives to carry a single casualty, subsisting on meagre rations, and exposed to

the same elements as their patient. ANGAU-employed natives also supplied intelligence on enemy locations and other information to Allied commanders.



**Bouganville June 1945: natives from ANGAU are seen providing information to an ANGAU and 2/8 Commando Squadron officers. (source: AWM)**

The praise from Australian troops for their work was sincere and well-documented, particularly back in Australian newspapers, albeit often couched in paternalistic language of the time.



**Typical work undertaken by the Fuzzy Wuzzy natives: carrying supplies to frontline troops (left) and transporting wounded and ill men back to medical assistance. (sources: AWM)**

The courage, heroism, compassion and kindness of these native men is remarkable, given they have been described by one source as ‘colonial subjects at best, slaves at worst’ by all factions during the war. While the employment of native labourers by ANGAU was often forced, this should be viewed in comparison to Japanese techniques, who used indiscriminate terror and brutal conscription, often against whole villages or tribes. The ongoing efforts of such legendary Australians as Lieutenant Bert Kienzle and Captain Geoffrey ‘Doc’ Vernon in the Kokoda campaign, ensuring the native labourers received food and medical supplies, stands in stark contrast to how the Japanese treated their conscripted labourers. Overall, it is undeniable that the efforts of the native Papuans and New Guineans was impressive, and undoubtedly contributed first to the

success of the Kokoda campaign and then beyond in the subsequent campaigns in New Guinea until the war's end.

The competence and bravery of ANGAU members is, in some ways, reflected by 134 awards conferred onto ANGAU members (such as the Military Cross, Military Medal, Mentioned in Dispatches among others) during the war. Service was not without fatalities, injuries or illness given it was wartime, and the landscape was harsh. Nearly 50 white ANGAU personnel lost their lives during the war, together with 46 native labourers killed in action, while 91 natives were wounded in action and a further 200 dying from other causes. These statistics for native casualties is heightened by the fact many of the males recruited were young single men, their deaths or injuries often occurring far from their families and villages.

ANGAU continued to operate in both territories until the end of the war, conducting a wide-range of operations, both civil and military in nature. In 1945 it handed back control to the new combined Administration of Papua and New Guinea. Many of those who served during the war continued in this new organisation, which was responsible for post-war colonial civil administration until eventual independence in 1975 for the new nation of Papua New Guinea.

ANGAU was a unique group in Australia's military history, and deserves recognition for its many competing roles that took place against a background of occupation, warfare and civil administration. All those who served, whether white or those native to the territories, played their part in the war effort in an environment that tested all equally, and the unit deserves its reputation as a 'third force' that ably worked with Australian and American forces.

### **New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR)**

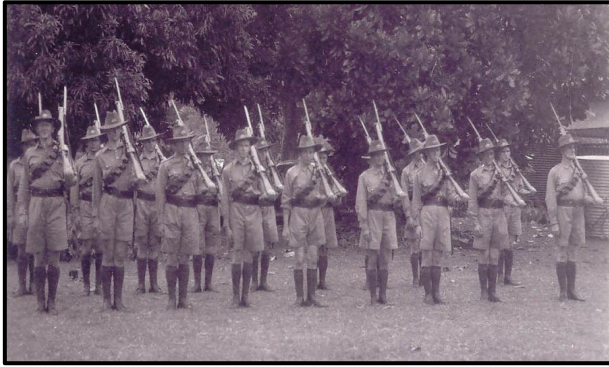
Unlike ANGAU, the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR) was a military force in the true sense of the word, first as a militia unit, then activated for full-time service following the Japanese landings in early 1942. While it existed until only April 1943, during that time (and in the following period when former personnel joined other AIF units), its members served with distinction and bravery, despite its meagre resourcing and manpower limitations ultimately causing its demise.

Immediately following the outbreak of war in September 1939, the NGVR was authorised to raise a militia battalion in Rabaul. Its initial establishment was limited to just 21 officers and 400 other ranks, and only consisted of white Australians or European expatriates (the exception being German and Italian civilians who were interned, and sent to mainland Australia) who were mostly longtime residents of the territory.

One source provides a perspective on the makeup of the NGVR:

*Anyone glancing at the Nominal Roll of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR) would be excused for thinking that Australia had maintained a Foreign Legion at its northern outposts in January 1942. Such names as Lars Waldamar Bergstrand; Carlo Lugarno Cavalieri; Bruno Chou Lai; Alistair Stuart Fraser-Fraser; Francisco Trojaolo and Hubert Behrendorff appear and are an indication of the cosmopolitan nature of the volunteer movement. (source: diggerhistory.info)*

As a militia unit all members were volunteers, and paid only a very small allowance annually and had their uniforms made locally. Members' occupations ranged from gold miners, prospectors, planters, bank employees, government officials, businessmen, traders, civilian seaman and the like. Many were veterans from the First World War, and those who enlisted in 1939 were undoubtedly keen and eager to serve, but as time progressed this initial enthusiasm was tempered by many harsh wartime realities.

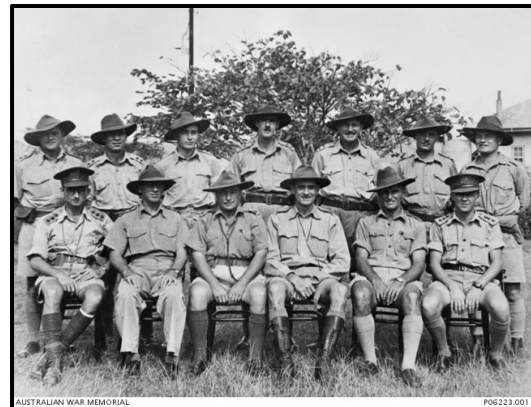


**NGVR men on parade prior to the outbreak of war against the Japanese: (left) in Rabaul, 1939 and (right) in Salamaua in 1940. (sources: New Guinea Volunteer Rifles & Papua New Guinea Volunteer Rifles Ex-members Association & AWM)**

The colonial mindset of the era dictated the decision not to recruit indigenous members in the NGVR - the fear of arming natives and providing military training was forefront in the minds of many, although the establishment of the Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB) (under the command of white officers) did subsequently occur in June 1940.

The unit had two Commanding Officers during its existence:

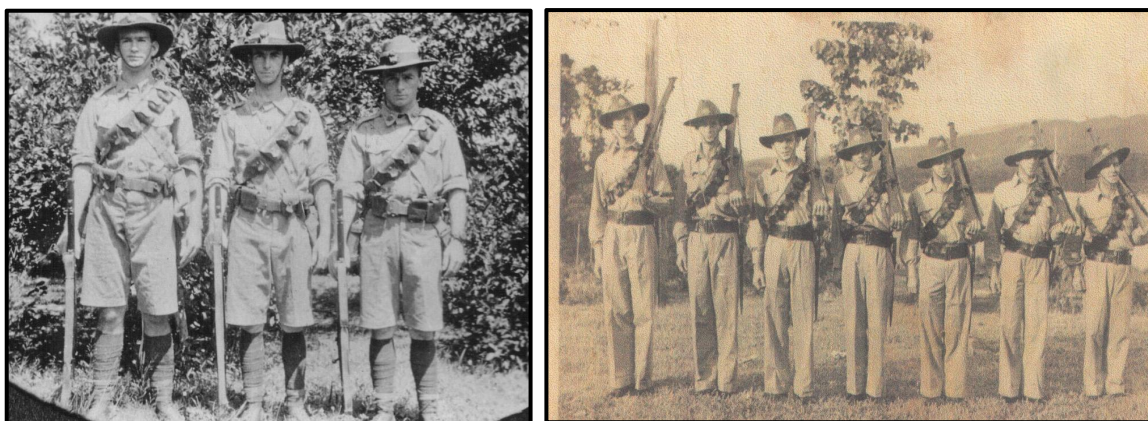
- Lieut-Col. Charles R. Field from 1939 to 1941: following his resignation in April 1941, he became the civilian Director of Public Works in Rabaul, and was captured following the fall of the town in January 1942, and died in the sinking of the *Montevideo Maru* in July 1942; and
- Lieut-Col. William (Bill) Edwards from 1941 to 1943: NG2000/NGX455, a former officer in both the First AIF and British Army in World War One, he ended his service in the Pacific Islands Regiment in 1946.



**Commanding Officers of NGVR c1940: (left) LtCol. Field (second from right); and (right) the (then) Major Bill Edwards is third from left, front row. (sources: Ian Downs & AWM)**

Both Commanding Officers faced similar problems during their tenure. By June 1940, its establishment was increased to 23 officers and 482 other ranks, but this number was spread thin, between Rabaul (its headquarters, but later based at Bulolo) and sub-units at Lae, Madang, Salamaua, Bulolo and Wau. By mid-1941 its numbers had decreased, with many younger men in its ranks joining the AIF instead, while others found the training requirements too burdensome due to long distances needed to travel to and from their residences. Shortly before the outbreak of war with Japan in December 1941, the NGVR could only count 170-180 on the mainland, out of its total of approximately 300 men.

In reality, the NGVR was never well-resourced or logistically supported. It had no air or artillery support, and was generally armed with World War One light infantry weapons (.303 rifles and Lewis or Vickers machine-guns) with minimal ammunition supplies, including no mortars or grenades. Its medical services were minimal and had limited communications. Clothing was an assortment of material, and included World War One leather belts and bandoliers. In short, the NGVR was shackled by circumstances that meant it could never reach its potential.



**NGVR members in (left) Lae, 1939 and (right) Bulolo, 1940. Note the World War One equipment.**

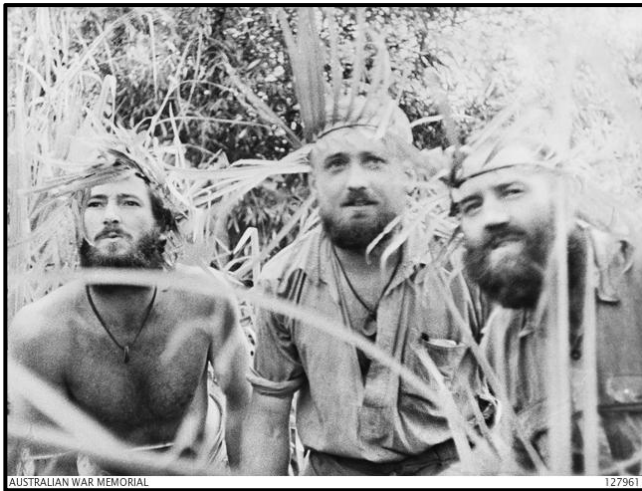
**(source: New Guinea Volunteer Rifles & Papua New Guinea Volunteer Rifles Ex-members Association)**

Once the Japanese began their offensives across south-east Asia, Australian troops in Rabaul (in 'Lark Force', together with NGVR personnel) came under attack on 23 January 1942, but the town was captured a mere 24 hours later. Surviving NGVR soldiers, together with other Australians (civilian and army personnel) faced either capture by the Japanese or attempted to reach the relative safety on the New Guinea mainland.

Those who were captured (approximately 1,000) were either executed during the infamous massacre at Tol Plantation in early February 1942, or taken prisoner. In a tragic postscript, most of those surviving prisoners (over 1,000, including 800 soldiers and 200 civilians) were boarded onto the *Montevideo Maru*, a Japanese merchant vessel heading to Japan, taking the prisoners to undertake forced labour services. On 1 July 1942, the vessel was sunk by an American submarine, unaware that it was transporting Allied prisoners. Among those killed were 36 full-time NGVR members (other part-time members of the NGVR who died were listed as civilians). Meantime, from March to May 1942, NGVR personnel did help rescue some survivors from New Britain who escaped following the Japanese invasion.

Despite being outnumbered and with numerous supply and weapons issues, the NGVR was one of the few Allied military units directly engaging the Japanese in New Guinea at this point.

However, subsequent Japanese invasion forces along the northern coastline forced the thinly spread NGVR units to only engage sporadically with the enemy. Yet their success in contributing to the war (together with some independent companies) included patrols behind enemy lines, scouting, surveillance, intelligence gathering, raiding, harassing and engaging in limited hit and run guerrilla warfare tactics, as well as destroying Japanese installations and supply dumps.



**In August 1942, Australian film maker Damien Parer filmed NGVR men while doing their tasks: (left) bearded and camouflaged NGVR members in a secret observation post, and (right) an NGVR member and Parer atop a NGVR observation post. Surveillance was a key role undertaken by the NGVR. (sources: AWM)**

In many instances, despite being numerically outnumbered, NGVR units inflicted telling blows to enemy forces across the region. The subsequent landing of Japanese forces at Milne Bay in August 1942, plus the advance across the Owen Stanleys from July onwards saw other Australian forces focus on the now-famous Kokoda campaign. Meantime, NGVR personnel continued their successful 'irregular' tactics, which now included manning observation posts to monitor enemy base positions, aircraft and troop movements, and feeding this intelligence back to Allied commanders.

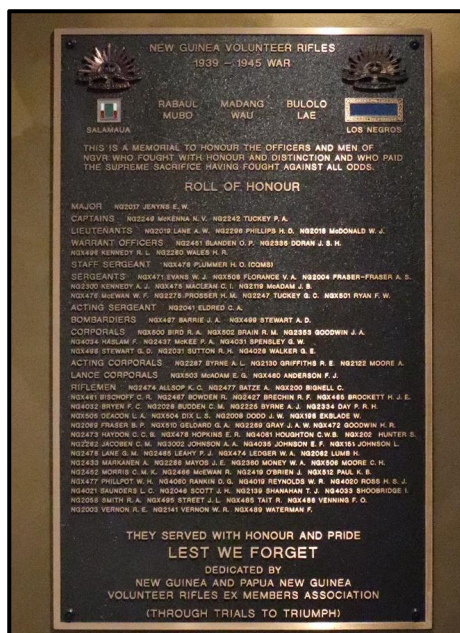


**NGVR men with a captured Japanese flag from a July 1942 skirmish. This was a still frame from Damien Parer's August 1942 film. (source: AWM)**

But the toll on the NGVR was ultimately fatal. By February 1943, the effects of illness, exhaustion (especially since many of the NGVR men were older), the heavy attrition rates (with no fresh reinforcements available) and the continuing issues with supplying its scattered units saw Army command officially disbanded the unit in April 1943, ending three and a half years of operations. While NGVR members served with pride, the unit's thin resource supply and the need for further large-scale operations against the Japanese contributed to its demise.

NGVR was unique in Australia's military history - it was the only Australian militia unit raised and then operating outside of the Australian mainland. During its time, the NGVR aided other Australian and American forces, even though it never fought as a formed unit during its existence. Members adapted and developed their own tactics in the harsh environment, and can be credited for initially organising New Guinean labourers who ably subsequently supported Allied campaigns until the war's end. A more subtle success was their presence in many New Guinea localities, demonstrating to locals that Australian forces had not been entirely forced out of these areas. Disbandment in April 1943 meant NGVR ceased to exist, but some members joined ANGAU or other units (such as independent companies, AIF units and coast watchers), where their unique knowledge of the country and experiences were invaluable, and many served until the end of hostilities.

For a force that probably only ever had 600 to 850 men in total, their casualties were high: 95 men have been listed on memorials who were killed or died during the war. The unit also saw 13 men given honours or awards, mostly Mentioned in Dispatches. Despite its limited number of personnel and severe hindrance with supplies and weaponry, members of the NGVR served with as much bravery and skill as any other unit in the war. Their guerrilla style of warfare, added with vital intelligence gathering cannot be dismissed, nor could their toll on Japanese forces (who often believed larger Australian units were attacking them) be underestimated.



Plaques and Rolls of Honour commemorating the sacrifice and service NGVR members (left) in Anzac Square, Brisbane, and (right) at Rocky Creek, Queensland. (sources: Anzac Square and VWMA)

Both ANGAU and the NGVR saw enlistments from mostly local men who lived in the Papua and New Guinea territories, who provided invaluable services in the face of the threat of invasion from early 1942 onwards. Their local knowledge was a key factor, backed by the superlative efforts of native employees. While attrition took its toll on the NGVR, both can justifiably be seen as playing a major contribution for the war effort in the territories in their own unique manner.

The operations of both units is often 'lost' in the narrative of the war in Papua and New Guinea, or viewed as a footnote in campaign histories. However, the eventual defeat of the once formidable and seemingly all-conquering Japanese forces in New Guinea can be viewed (along side other Allied units) as the proud legacy of both ANGAU and NGVR members.

Lest we forget.

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