

The Fading Barrier

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LATELY much emphasis has been placed, not unduly, on the purely operational roles of the Australian Regular Army, whether with the Royal Australian Regiment or with the SAS Regiment. The Pacific Islands Regiment, however, has an additional interest in this field that is both military and exploratory, and to which the medium reconnaissance role is well suited. Such was the case in August 1966 when a company-sized operational exercise was mounted in the border area with West Irian, out from the Green River Patrol Post.

Aims of the Operation

The main aim of the exercise was to carry out operational training in the role of PIR, and also to gain the goodwill of those of the local population with whom contact was made. It was realized during the planning stage that these aims might be difficult to achieve, since no information was available about more than half of the area which it was proposed to traverse.

Troops Taking Part

The troops participating comprised 'A' Company 2 PIR from Wewak, supported by a single Cessna 180 from 1 Division Aviation Regiment, with two officers and two senior NCOs attached from 1 RAR. The normal attachment of members of the Royal Papuan and New Guinean Constabulary to each platoon patrol was made, but it was noted that their customary effectiveness diminished as the patrols penetrated into areas that had never known the influence of Administration Patrol Officers.

Sequence of Events

The activity was planned in three phases:

- The positioning of each platoon patrol in its area of responsibility.
- Detailed patrolling within those allotted areas.
- Final regrouping and return to Wewak.

During Phase 1, all personnel, rations and stores were flown in RAAF Caribou aircraft to the Green River Patrol Post, a distance of 180 miles. Among the stores were an assault boat, a 40 horse-

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final patrol area. No time-table was applied to these phases as Phase 1 varied from 5 to 11 days depending on the patrol's route.

Phase 2 saw patrols penetrating into their separate, allocated areas of responsibility and the establishment of patrol bases. As the area was unmapped, sub-unit patrols proceeded from these bases and the resulting information influenced the commander in the positioning and route to his next proposed base. As the standard of patrol reporting from the Pacific Islands' NCOs in charge of sub-unit patrols improved, so the movement of the patrol base became more confident with sub-unit patrols actually regrouping on the new base. Many was the time, however, when the razorback limestone ridges and moss forests would not allow this procedure.

Phase 3 was comparatively simple as indicated by the fact that one platoon took nineteen days walking to reach the terminal point of their patrol but only five to return to the start-point, using information collected en route.

Topography

Maps of the area close to the Sepik River had been printed only seven months earlier and were reasonably accurate. As the patrols progressed to the area known as West Range, however, the detail became less accurate, and eventually a stage was reached where even the map detail was only a blank green shading with notations indicating hills.

In all directions immediately around the Green River Patrol Post (300 feet above sea level) the area is swamp cut by slow-flowing, meandering rivers which are tributaries of the Sepik. These conditions exist for 25 miles on the patrol routes until suddenly they give way to the West Range area which rises to an altitude of 7,000 feet. These mountains are very steep, and narrow on top, formed of limestone and scarred by huge landslides. After rain the creeks in the narrow valleys become raging torrents.

Vegetation

Vegetation ranged from the usual sago palm, kunai and secondary growth in the swamp areas to primary jungle on the mountains with some secondary growth along the creek banks. The primary jungle on the mountains gave way to moss forest at an altitude of about 5,000 feet. Water problems were overcome at this altitude by squeezing the moss into Millbank filter bags.

Advance to Contact

It was during Phase 2 of the operation that 1 Platoon, commanded by the writer, penetrated an area never before seen by white men to make contact with a group of people previously unknown. It happened this way.

Within a week of leaving Green River, the foot hills of West Range area were reached. However, once the summit was reached, a descent had to be made below the cloud cover to receive our resupply from the light aircraft. Resupply complete, the patrol moved as a unit south-east across several smaller ridge lines and finally cut its way into a comparatively large river valley, a total drop of some thousand feet from the first ridge line. Here a patrol base was established and sub-unit patrols investigated the valley floor.

The platoon then moved directly south along the river line climbing to a height of 5,000 feet. There was no doubt by this time that we had reached the headwaters of the Idam River, a tributary of the Sepik. From here the patrol continued along a ridge line that ran east. At this stage the cutters recruited from villages close to the Sepik began to show signs of apprehension about going on. However the constable accompanying the patrol, by dire threats, persuaded them to remain, and that afternoon another resupply was taken at a *DZ* constructed on top of another 5,000 feet razorback ridge. Freezing winds from the snow-covered Star Mountains to the south-west howled through the base that night and it was impossible to keep warm. The cutters suffered particularly as it was quite obvious that they had never before ventured to such an altitude even though their home ground was only a matter of a few miles away.

The patrol continued in a generally south-easterly direction down from the ridge lines into the mere trickle which was the headwaters of the Right May River, another major tributary of the Sepik. As this river was followed downstream the patrol passed through gorges several hundred feet deep with near vertical stone walls.

It was also while following this riverline that the patrol crossed what was either a human or animal pad — the first seen in fourteen days of climbing and tumbling over ridge lines and river lines. Faintly discernible, the pad led from one side of the riverline to the other. It passed through what was the first patch of secondary growth located in many days. This was thirty metres in width and had the appearance of an abandoned garden but was very old. The track from here onwards was better defined and excitement ran high throughout when the leading scout found a flat, roughly cut piece of bamboo, two feet in length, that was fire blackened at one end and gave all the appearances of being a 'fire stick' or perpetual match. Close behind this discovery a recently ringbarked log was seen.

The pace quickened and within another fifteen minutes the signal was passed from the front — a house! It was newly-constructed, less than a month old, and showed evidence of having been occupied within the last thirty-six hours. To follow the track further was a lesson in tracking techniques but finally another house was reached, again deserted, but faint chopping was heard in the distance.

The platoon went to ground and the constable, scout and the writer edged forward; the policemen's technique, however, must have left something to be desired! A shout went up and all but one of a group in the clearing fled to the bush.

The Lost Tribe

By shouting the only greeting he knew in the Idam language, the constable managed to coax this survivor to approach, but his apprehension grew as the scout and I appeared. His curiosity overcame his fear, however, and after some mutual staring, he laughed; strange hands were touched in a form of greeting and he laughed again.

The remainder of the platoon then appeared, and gifts of beads and a steel knife were given to our guest. At this stage it was revealed that the language of our cutters from Idam and that of this man were vaguely similar and interrogation was possible, although it is felt that a lot was lost in translation.

He could not be encouraged to call forward his wife, children or pigs who had fled to the bush, nor could he conceal his amazement when he learnt that we had come from the north across what we now knew was a hostile natural boundary. He directed us on to a well-established track still leading south but would not accompany us from his own home ground.

It was along this track that we surprised another four men who fled to the bush and could not be coaxed to come close. This was understandable as the sight of thirty obviously armed strangers must have been terrifying. So it was decided to establish a base and remain in it, showing no outward signs of aggressive intention. At the same time security was maintained at a high standard just in case these people were grouping and putting new barbs on their arrows.

Our actions must have convinced them of our friendly intentions and after a wait of a day, small groups approached to watch our activities, receive gifts, be interrogated and generally have their curiosity satisfied. They obviously had never seen a white man before and one can easily imagine how deeply they must have been impressed by his magic: by his ability, for example, to talk to a giant roaring bird in the air that dropped eggs in their garden for the strangers to collect, break open and eat. It was at this stage that sub-unit patrols were recommenced and slowly a picture of this group's habits and culture was built up.

Habits, Culture and General Description

These people of the Sebi Valley, which is their local name, were a much healthier, more vital group than their cousins from across the range in the Sepik Valley. Throughout all the patient questioning

there was a friendly but guarded attitude by both parties but they did not dodge any questions that were put to them through the interpreter or by means of sign language.

The men generally wore their hair long at the crown but had shaven foreheads. About the forehead some wore a shell head-band or string woven cap. All wore beards until given a demonstration of the power of the razor blade, many of which were given out as gifts; they turned out to be a two-edged weapon, however, as our census was confused by the number of clean-shaven faces appearing. Noses were pierced in three places and bone or wood slivers were passed through them. Ears were treated in the same fashion. Beads, tusks or shells were generally worn about the neck and were the only ornaments except for a belt of bamboo or tusks and a phallocrypt that ranged in shape from shells to part of a human skull. A few wore plaited grass bands about the upper arms or calf.

All of the men carried bows and arrows that were of a particularly high standard of manufacture. The bows were of a blackened palm with a bamboo string, with a spare string attached to the bow on the outside. The arrows had long, hardened tips and each was designed for a specific type of target — pig, man, or bird — the 'man' arrow having two sets of reversed barbs to complicate extraction. Stone axes and bone knives predominated but there were a small number of steel knives that had found their way into this valley by barter along ancient trade routes.

There was a lesson here for the modern soldier. These primitive men always had some type of weapon at hand at all times. This is because they live in constant fear of attack from another group. It is this fear that made tracking them so difficult. They do not develop tracks and when walking they bury the foot under the fallen leaves and humus, thus eliminating foot prints. If a group is moving together they often break track and follow various routes, regrouping further on, so as to confuse any tracker. The 'bridges' over the mountain torrents are merely saplings, sufficient to carry one man but light enough to lift and throw into the torrent to delay any pursuer.

Any such pursuer would have only about thirty minutes of pursuit as these people live in single family houses that all appear to be evenly spaced that distance apart. Each house is tactically sited in the middle of a clearing, surrounded by gardens. From the house all likely approaches can be observed because they are about eighteen feet above ground level, standing on a scaffold of relatively thin saplings. There is only one means of entry to the house — a grass ladder which is drawn up each night. This was the explanation given to us for the way in which the houses were constructed. Once the grass ladder was drawn up, any would-be attackers climbing the

scaffold would make the building shake, thus causing all the animal bones hung from the roof to rattle and giving sufficient warning for defence measures to be taken.

This constant fear of attack was one of the reasons that the patrol sighted very few women or children although they were obviously in the area. Those we did see had short hair, beads about their necks and short grass mini-skirts with babies in 'bilum' bags hung over the head. Children were usually dressed in the same fashion as the older members of their sex.

Because of their dispersal over a large area there appeared to be no social structure but respect was paid to the elders and the dead. Immediately after death, the body is laid out on a platform in the vicinity of the house. After the flesh has decomposed, the skeleton is secured in the fork of a tall tree in the jungle, being reached by building a scaffolding around the trunk. After the skeleton is secured the scaffolding is demolished. No signs of skeletons were found but one sub-unit patrol did find the decomposing, nude body of a young woman on a platform near a recently lived in but deserted house. It is still not known whether it was the patrol's presence or the body that caused the evacuation.

Birth appears to be a simpler affair with the women bearing their children inside the house, not in the bush as is the custom with the majority of primitive groups in the Territory. Again it indicates a fear of attack from neighbours.

There was no real evidence of the group being inbred although this state must exist as there is no migration. Marriage is purely a matter of the male suitor reaching a verbal agreement with the parents of the girl and then the occupation of an in-law's house or their own. There is no bride-price to be paid as elsewhere in the country.

The newly-weds' home would be eighteen feet or so above ground-level, as previously stated, with one or two rooms and an external verandah running along three or perhaps four walls. Once the single ladder is drawn up at night all possessions of the occupants are either inside the house or on the verandah: sago, chickens, pigs, fire and weapons. No one ventures to the ground after dark although in this connection no taboo or magic beliefs became evident throughout the interrogations.

Many photographs were taken of topography, dropping zones and the people encountered during the patrol. Unfortunately patrol conditions and high humidity destroyed the emulsion and these records were lost.

Comparing Notes

On regrouping at Green River it was revealed that the other platoons did not have the good fortune of 1 Platoon. Though each platoon's area had not been penetrated previously 3 Platoon did make contact with a small group that had never before been encountered by PIR or Administration patrols but these people did know of the existence of the patrol post and were beginning to live a kind of centralized village life.

All patrol commanders now flew over their patrol routes for confirmation, and the writer's flight revealed a large number of houses that we had not visited in the time we had available. These approximate positions were plotted, and discussions began with the Green River patrol officer who had once served at the May River Patrol Post. The talks led to the conclusion that there is still an area of unexplored territory between the extent of our 'A' Company patrols and the most distant patrols ever mounted either from the May River or Telefomin Patrol Posts.

Conclusion

The writer hopes that readers, quite apart from the military and professional aspects of this patrol, will perceive the high level of interest and keen sense of personal achievement that were shared by all members. The suspicion of the presence of a primitive race of people in this area had been confirmed. Thirty-one people — nineteen men, five women, two boys and five girls — were counted, and more are awaiting discovery. Every member of 'A' Company who experienced the excitement of this first encounter is hopeful that he will be chosen to take part in PIR's next journey of exploration. □

Two Newspaper clippings of the time:

15 September 1966

Primitive tribe found in NG

PORT MORESBY, Wednesday I.A.A.P. — A group of primitive native people, who live in fear of being killed and eaten by their hostile neighbours, has been discovered by an Army patrol in New Guinea's Sepik District. R.L.S.A.K.E

The tribe, which had never seen white men before, lives in a jungle village in Sebe Valley, near Green River, in the Western Sepik area.

BRISBANE COURIER MAIL
OR
ROCKHAMPTON MORNING BULLETIN

PATROL FINDS NEW TRIBE

A life of constant fear

A group of primitive people, who had never seen a white man and who live in constant fear of being killed and eaten by their neighbors, has been discovered by an Army patrol in the West Sepik District of Papua-New Guinea.

The patrol, from the 2nd Battalion, Pacific Islands Regiment, found a village of about 30 jungle dwellers in the Sebe Valley, in the West Range south of Green River.

First sight of the soldiers sent men, women and children scurrying into the jungle.

However, they began to return when they realized the patrol was friendly.

GIFTS

Inquisitive, but still suspicious, they gained more confidence after an exchange of gifts with members of the patrol.

The Battalion's Commanding Officer Lt.-Col. D. Ramsay, said the patrol commander had reported that the people were armed with bows and arrows, stone axes and knives made of bone.

They had never seen a white man before and their entire life seemed to be dominated by fear of attack.

Isolated in their valley by a range of mountains reaching to 7000 ft, they refused to leave for fear of being killed and eaten by the people on the other side of the mountains.

These people had a reciprocal fear and never entered the valley.

FEAR

However, as the languages of the two peoples were similar, the patrol commander had been able to speak with them through his guides.

Because of their constant fear of attack, the people dared not leave the tracks in the jungle, Lt.-Col. Ramsay said.

Their houses were built on 18 ft stilts with access only by one removable ladder. They never moved unarmed, and spare weapons were kept in their gardens.

The patrol commander

had reported that when an Army light aircraft dropped supplies to the patrol, all but two of the people fled. These two appeared too frightened to move.

Lt.-Col. Ramsay said the patrol, which had just returned to battalion headquarters at Wewak, had spent five days in the valley, talking with the people and giving medical aid.

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