

Comment for Launch of

We Fought in the Jungle: My guerrilla struggle in Dutch New Guinea in the Second World War

by Sergeant M. Ch. Kokkelink

This book is a vivid reminder of the horrors of war. It is a story of astounding courage of the protectors of the countries invaded by Japan in World War II. These protectors experienced deprivations of most of the facilities of normal life: of dry accommodation, comfortable beds, roads or even tracks, medical care and pharmaceuticals but also often of food, and even water, radio or telegraphic communications, news of the progress of the war or of even the wellbeing of family and friends. Coping with the dense forest, the slimy marshes, the leeches, mosquitos and disease was a constant struggle. To read about these deprivations and impediments will cause all readers to be profoundly grateful for both the comforts and delights of our own lives, and for the sacrifices made by those protectors.

Kokkelink and his colleagues had extraordinary initiative, discipline and resilience in struggling with the deprivations and horrors of their situations during the three and a half years they were guerrillas in the jungles of the Vogelkop in Western Papua. The effort just to survive involved constant attentiveness, especially to avoid direct violent encounters with their Japanese enemies, but also minute attentiveness to planning provision for food and water, and minimising misuse of scarce ammunition. Protecting and transporting the injured, sustaining morale, balancing the concerns and interests of diverse allies – Indonesians, Dutch, many separate Indigenous Papuan tribes and Americans – was complex enough, but was repeatedly made more so by the struggle to share scarce food and other supplies and exposure to risk.

This is certainly a story worth translating and reading. Does it have any implications for the future? It probably does but these are likely to be interpreted in different ways by people in various situations. The principal lesson is clearly about the importance of attempting to avoid violent conflict. The most effective way of making societies secure is to settle conflicts before they become violent. Fortunately, the commitment of nation states and the United Nations to peaceful conflict resolution has strengthened greatly since the 1940s; and the capacity of many countries for diplomacy, and of the UN and of peace-building non-government organisations for addressing conflict through mediation has grown substantially.

Another outstanding lesson is about how cooperation and dialogue grew between the Indonesian and Dutch settlers and the Papuans when threatened by the common external enemy. It is striking how well the Indonesians and Papuans shared the struggle to walk through the jungle, cross the rivers, protect their bivouacs and share in the fighting when that was necessary. The question now is can ways be found of easing the tensions between the Papuans and those who have moved to West Papua from other parts of Indonesia. This partly depends on how comprehensively and thoroughly human rights are implemented and how effectively democracy is applied in the Provinces.

A third lesson is that obsessive nationalism is an outdated and divisive ideology, as is military over political solutions to conflicts. The global adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals by unanimous vote of the UN General Assembly in 2015 expresses the heartfelt wish of humankind to live in inclusive, harmonious societies which enable all peoples to flourish.

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