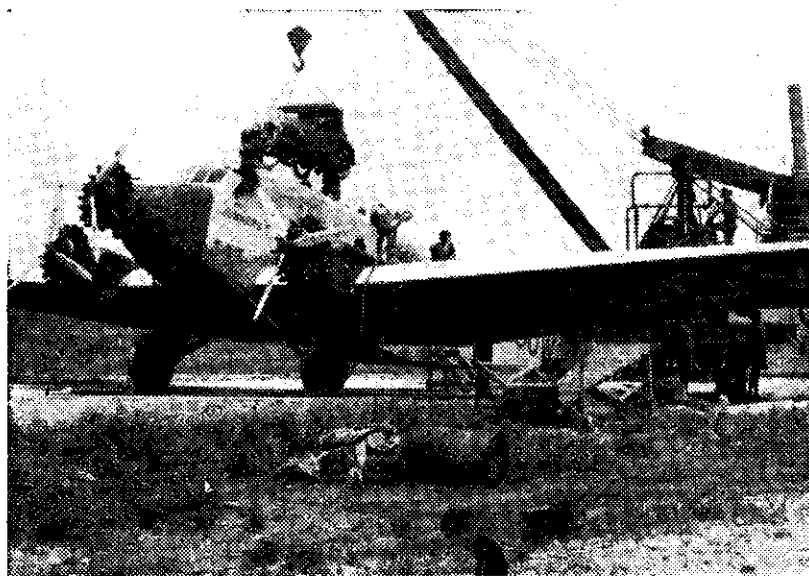


LAND OF COPRA, GOLD, AND OIL

This is the second of two articles specially written for "The Listener" by B. W. COLLINS, M.Sc., F.G.S., who spent a year in New Guinea prospecting for oil.



COAL, copper, iron, zinc, rubber and rice in Indo-China; tin, rubber and rice in Thailand; tin and rubber in British Malaya; antimony and tungsten in China; and oil in Borneo (where Japan boastfully announces her expectation of putting wells back in production within a month)—a formidable list: and all these are now in the hands of the Japanese. Of what else in the way of raw materials is Japan in need, and how far can the Territory of New Guinea aid in supplying them? Japan is largely dependent on imports for her supplies of the following industrial materials besides those already mentioned: aluminium, chromite, lead, nickel, manganese, phosphates, and potash. Probably New Guinea can supply at present, or within any reasonable time, little, if any of these materials. Ores of platinum, tin, copper, iron and manganese, and sulphur, phosphates, mica, and coal are known to exist, but little development work has been done. What then would Japan gain, and what would Australia lose, if the Japanese succeeded in occupying New Guinea?

These Head the List

My impressions of the natural resources of New Guinea are bound up with the three words, copra, gold, oil. Numerous and varied are the other raw materials that lie hidden in that thick tropical jungle or that could be produced in New Guinea—but those three at present head the list, or rather, the first two head the list of actualities, while the third is still only a potential asset, though a highly probable one.

Copra and gold together accounted for 98½ per cent. of the total value of all exports from the Territory of New Guinea before the war. This figure still probably remains the same, although the proportion of copra and gold must have altered considerably. The 1941 annual report of the Bank of New South Wales emphasises the fact that "the position



AVIATION opens up New Guinea to the gold-seeker. At top: Loading a baby motor-car into a three-motored 'plane for transport into the interior. Above: A view of the plant at the Edie Creek goldfields

of copra producers in all the Pacific Islands has deteriorated badly since the outbreak of war. Many growers have had to go out of production. European markets have been cut off, and shipping difficulties have caused some dislocation in those markets which remain. Some form of government action has grown increasingly necessary if growers are to remain an integral part of the economic life of the Islands." But "the value of gold production in these territories"—Papua and New Guinea—"continues at a high level."

What Copra Means

"An integral part of the economic life of the Islands"—in fact often known as "the backbone of the South Seas"—copra is the very *raison d'être* of European activity in most of the South Pacific. The word itself conjures up pictures of waving coconut palms, blue lagoons, naked brown bodies; and glistening shoulders—romance, history, wealth—to those who don't know the Islands. But to those who do, copra

means long hours of work, troublesome native labourers, constant scanning of market reports, bills of lading, and that ever-present penetrating half-acrid half-oily smell like rancid butter.

There are between four and five hundred plantations in the Territory of New Guinea, and about a quarter of a million acres under cultivation—practically all coconuts, so an average plantation would contain about 500 acres of coconuts and usually about the same area of undeveloped country. The trees are planted about fifty to the acre, and the yield is roughly fifty nuts per tree per year. That works out at half a ton of copra to the

to leave their villages.—and then fed, clothed, housed, given medical attention when necessary, and paid monthly by their employer. Ordinary outside workers—nut-gatherers, copra-cutters, grass-cutters, and so on—get 6/- a month. Half of this is paid in cash—"long hand," the boys call it—and half deferred until the end of their term of contract, which is usually one to three years. Young boys—known as "monkeys"—from about 12 to 16 or 17, who usually do the washing and ironing for their white "masters," cooking, waiting at the table, and general housework, get 5/-. Girls—called "marys"—for the same work get 4/- a month, half in each case "long hand" and half "long paper."

What the Natives Prize

Beside his wages and food, each boy is issued weekly with an ounce and a half of tobacco, a box of matches, paper for rolling cigarettes—newspaper preferred, and if that's not available a couple of yards of toilet paper will do instead—and a piece of soap which, strange to say, is nearly always used. Each month he gets a new two-yard length of calico—the sole normal article of clothing, known as a "laplap"—the lavalava or sarong of other parts of the Pacific. A new blanket every year, and a spoon, food bowl, and wooden box or rucksack for the safe keeping of his worldly possessions—given when he first signs on (with a dirty thumb) or "makes paper"—complete the list.

Labour then is cheap in New Guinea, but has to be looked after—and the Government is quick to deal with negligent employers. A good master has to be almost a father to his boys. Sickness, quarrels, and love affairs all have to be attended to. A plantation manager's job is no light one—no life of ease and gin and bitters.

Your typical plantation may be in a variety of settings. Some are within a few miles by motor road to Rabaul, the capital—or rather, the erstwhile capital, as on account of continued volcanic activity there, the Administration decided a few months ago to move to Lae on the mainland. A position such as this means afternoon tea parties for the women, evenings at the club for men, dances, church services, regular weekly air mails, week-end sports, and even access to a library. Or it may be on a lonely strip of coast, backed by bushed mountains and hostile natives, nearest European 30 or 40 miles away, loneliness and even danger, ships calling once a month and so on. Or it may be on some forgotten atoll with a genuine blue lagoon, no other inhabitants except the plantation boys, a hundred miles of open sea to the next-door neighbour, a ship (hence the grocery order) once or twice a year. Take your pick.

(Continued on next page)