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# FROM SEA TO SEA ACROSS PAPUA

HOW difficult is the journey across Papua? Can the Japanese move over in force, or is the mountain chain really impassable? Very few in New Zealand know, and very few in Australia. But the territory is by no means terra incognita. As far back as 1906 it was crossed from east to west by an Australian Commission which was investigating conditions in Papua for the Commonwealth Government. The journey took 22 days, and was fully described by the leader of the party (Colonel Kenneth Mackay), in a book published 33 years ago. We referred briefly to this book last week. Now, owing to the Allied offensive in Papua and the Solomons, we quote more fully.

ON the morning of October 15, we saw long lines of black figures (every second one carrying a pole), marching along the beach to the Government Depot, and at eight o'clock we went over the side and were rowed ashore, armed with revolvers and water bottles.

Passing through a village, we tramped along a narrow track which would have been a quagmire in bad weather, through tropical forest broken by open patches of high, coarse grass, and eight miles out, crossed a broad but shallow river, and camped in at least comparative safety, as malarial mosquitoes were not so numerous from here on.

After a wet night, the day came in fine, and striking camp at 7.15, we almost at once left the main track and plunged into primal Papua. Following native paths, we clambered over a rude fence to find ourselves in the largest garden we had yet seen. Here, amidst a perfect riot of vegetation grew plantains, taro, sugar-cane, and other edible fruits and roots. Then on we tramped, the great trees making so thick a canopy that even the tropical sun could not find us, by the banks and through the channels of crystal streams fringed with great bullrushes, while around and above us were palms and vines, trees and plants in indescribable variety. Crossing a plain of high grass and fervent heat, we approached, amid cries of "orokolo" (peace), a small but beautifully clean village. Here they came and laid wooden bowls of sago, boiled yams, and baked plantains before us as offerings . . . In what part, I wonder, of civilised and Christian England or Australia could a hungry man walk into a town or village and have the best its people possessed put at his feet unasked, and on the off-chance of being paid for?

We marched again into the forest at 7.20 next morning. After a walk of one and a-half hours, through dense bush and hot patches of grass, we struck the Yodda Road once more, and tramping on through splendid aisles of timber, came to a picturesque river.

### Native Gardens

On resuming our march after a meal, we waded through lakes of grass breast high (the path so narrow that we had to brush the stems aside), and bordered by towering trees, vines from 30 to 40 feet long (and thick as ropes), hanging from them, while over all glowed a wealth of colour, which rain and sun alone can give. Then, hot and sweltering, we reached the end of the last patch, and passing once more into the shaded distances of the forest track, got into camp just ahead of the rain.

In the morning, we did 12 miles at a pace which took it out of my leg, the

country being densely-wooded, and in parts we marched through acres of old native gardens, overgrown and full of wild plantains. One of the first things that must strike a visitor, accustomed to even the sprawliness of much of our Australian farming, is the almost universal Papuan custom of deserting a garden after a year or so and starting a fresh one, the old one, I was told, being often left unused and utterly neglected for 10 or 12 years.

Every now and then, we crossed beautiful streams by means of single logs, sometimes from 30 to 70 feet long, and often slippery as glass.

### To the Kumusi River

Starting at 6.50, we did the first five miles in great form, constantly crossing streams on logs and "sloshing" through wet patches, for we were on falling ground to the Kumusi River, a broad, rapid, and picturesque stream where first we touched its right bank.

We camped on the river bank in a native-built Government house. Just in front, the Kumusi, here confined between high banks, rushed swiftly by, on the opposite shore a meadow of dense kangaroo-grass spread, bounded by wooded ranges stretching away to our right front. On our left rose Mount Monckton, its rugged peak shooting 8,000 feet into a cloud-strewn sky. Behind us was the tropical forest, and all about us the palm-shelters of our carriers.

The hills looked lovely when at 7.15 Little and I crossed the Kumusi in a cage—so called. This cage is in reality a round stick to sit on, with two ropes above to cling to, and is hauled over the water along a single wire rope.

Leaving the river, we pushed on for six miles, passing over several most picturesque native suspension bridges. In constructing these, vines are used as cables, and trees take the place of stone or steel towers on each bank. Some have floors of split softwood lashed in place with fibre, the protecting rails being vines pulled taut. Others are all cane, three or four being stretched across and tied in places for foothold, while the sides are of an open wicker-work. One we crossed had, I should say, a span of 60 feet.

### "The Divide"

Soon after, we had to take to the bed of a gorge, clinging by roots to its sides, the foothold being often a matter of inches, then, on crossing the slippery head of a beautiful waterfall, sheer in front of us rose "The Divide."

It was only about 250 feet high, but so nearly perpendicular that a slip meant a roll half-way to the bottom, and after the level country the climb landed me

(Continued on next page)

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