

PACIFIC COMMANDO

An Interview with Sgt. C. R. LARSEN

After his third bout of malaria, which he contracted in New Georgia during the campaign for the capture of Munda airfield, Sergeant Larsen was evacuated to New Caledonia and later invalided home to New Zealand in September, 1943. He had been in charge of the Intelligence Section of an island commando since its inception and saw action with his unit in the Solomons. He was editor of the unit's newspaper *Guerrilla Gazette*. He gave this interview on his return to New Zealand.

THE TROOPS in the unit were Fijians and Tongans with New-Zealanders as officers and NCOs," said Sergeant Larsen. "They also had some Solomon-Islanders and a couple of Englishmen attached; in fact, with the American attachments and others they had at different stages, the unit had a unique cross-section of races and classes, black and white, from all over the world. He described the O.C., Major C. W. H. Tripp, as an inspiration to his men, and a born leader: "He still packs a punch that is the envy of men much younger," he remarked. He thought that Major Tripp, although wounded, was the only one of the unit to last out the New Georgia campaign from start to finish. (It took thirty-five days to capture Munda Field.)

"In April of last year the unit arrived in Guadalcanal, where it had been preceded three months earlier by a sample force known as the 'Special Party.' The Special Party, comprising 7 New-Zealanders and 20 Fijians, did excellent work during the tail-end of the Guadalcanal fighting, and it was greatly due to their efforts that the U.S. Command asked for more commandos from Fiji.

"When we left Fiji our personnel included 40 New-Zealanders and about 165 natives, twenty-eight of these being Tongans," said Larsen, "but the unit grew considerably on Guadalcanal with the addition of the Special Party, Solomon-Islanders, &c. Captain D. E. Williams, who was in charge of the Special Party, became our 2 i/c, and first-hand information given us by the Special Party sergeants helped us considerably later on. We had the best spot on Guadalcanal for our base camp, and

the general health improved while we were there. However, we were away from our base camp most of the time combing Guadalcanal and other islands in the group for stray Japs. By that time (May-June) the Japs had left that area. The Americans did not like the word 'commando' so we were known locally as 'South Pacific Scouts.'"

Sergeant Larsen next spoke of the Commando's work in New Georgia and of the part his unit had played with the American troops in the battle for Munda airfield.

"We were attached to the intelligence section of a United States Div. for the operation, and our primary excuse for being in the push was long-range reconnaissance patrols behind the Jap lines. However, our services were so eagerly sought that we were doing all sorts of operations in addition. We were in the thick of the fighting all the time. We had to have our H.Q. right in the front line, otherwise the information we obtained would have been old and useless before the Americans could act upon it.

"Only half of the unit left Guadalcanal by destroyer for the initial landing on Baraulu Island at the Onaiavesi passage, in the New Georgia group, and while we combed the outlying islands (Baraulu, Sasavele, and Roviana) for Japanese the Americans made their beach-head at Zanana on the mainland without opposition. Apart from a five-man Jap patrol which I saw shot by the Americans, there was no action on the mainland for the first three days, as the Japs were taken by surprise.

"Captain Scherrer, the American officer with whom we subsequently worked, waited until some of our unit reached the