

A PEOPLE ADrift

By Sgt. J. A. EVANS

THIS WAR has now brought large numbers of New-Zealanders into contact with the peoples who live in that part of the Pacific north-west of Fiji and Samoa, which are places fairly well known to us. However, few of us knew much about parts farther afield when we left home with the Third Division, but after nine months spent in the Solomons and farther north opinions have begun to form, and we understand a little of the situation in which these neighbours of ours find themselves.

Before European culture influenced them, the primitive people of the Pacific lived in accordance with complex economic and social patterns. Their pagan ways were not haphazard, as one might think, but had been evolved slowly over very many generations, as environment reacted on the genius of their race.

We found that the native of Vella Lavella had possessed in former times a comprehensive system of religion. It endowed every natural object with a spirit, and formulated customs associated with birth, death, and all the major events of life. When he was confronted with a problem, custom told him what he should do. Some of his old social institutions, such as headhunting or widow-strangling, are repulsive to us, but they were part of a rounded system of life, by which the native had worked out for himself a defined place in his surroundings.

To him the human race was grouped in clans, which were quite small in size. His own life was practically confined to a group of hamlets. He cultivated his gardens and caught fish, and he did not have to go on long journeys to supply the needs of life. He had a well-developed system of currency, for which he used objects which were scarce, but had no



intrinsic value, such as shell rings ground with laborious care, or whale's teeth.

Since these small communities were self-sufficient, the standard of culture was maintained by handing down unimpaired from one generation to another the skill of the craftsmen. These skills were often of a high order by our standards. A technician in an American Construction Unit said that he admired the skill in woodwork employed by the natives of Nissan when they made their simple houses. This was in the Bismarcks, north of the Solomons, and the general level of culture had seemed lower to us than that of the Vella natives of the New Georgia Group.

When the native built a dwelling he used only the materials in the bush around him, but there was no slipshod work, and he did everything so neatly that often at the same time the effect was highly decorative. He did not use much conscious ornament, and he seemed to have an instinctive eye for good proportions. In Vella the natives built a chapel to honour our dead, and they put their finest work into it, so that we