

Papua New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (PNGVR)

A summary of its formation, history and post history.

Commencement of the Australian CMF post war.

In early 1946 the vice-chief of the general staff presented the army's first policy paper on the nature of the post-war army, and this was approved by cabinet in June 1947.

In 1949 a WWII veteran reserve officer wrote to the administrator of PNG about formation of a CMF unit in PNG. This was passed to Northern Command HQ in Brisbane and resulted in approval for a CMF infantry battalion in PNG. In 1950 the first PNGVR commanding officer was appointed. Lt Col N.R. McLeod, a Duntroon graduate.

In September he toured the main centres of PNG to obtain a feel for the country and make arrangements for accommodation for ARA staff and facilities for training depots. **He was told by Nthn Command not to enlist anyone until so ordered.**

In March 1951 Lt Col N.P. Maddern replaced Lt Col McLeod and commenced recruiting for headquarter company. Other actions followed in 1951.

- I) The administrator, Col J.K. Murray became honorary colonel of PNGVR
- II) A Coy was raised at Lae in April that year, B Coy at Rabaul in May and 3 PI A Coy at Bulolo/Wau in June.
- III) All enlistees were white with the majority being WWII veterans.
- IV) During the lifetime of PNGVR, units were also raised at Banz, Goroka, Kainantu, Samarai, Madang, Mt Hagen and Wewak, although the sub units at Bulolo/Wau, Kainantu and Samarai were deactivated and never reformed.
- V) Co PNGVR also became area commander which included being responsible for the raising of Pacific Islands Regiment (PIR).
- VI) In December the co led a party of PNGVR and civilians over the Kokoda trail and the Pacific Islands monthly gave the trek good coverage. Prior to this walk no civilians with the exception of kiaps and locals had walked the trail since WWII.
- VII) PNGVR ended 1951 with a strength of less than 200 and until 1964 the strength of PNGVR never exceeded 200.

A lot of problems faced the co PNGVR.

- i) The administrator was lukewarm in dealings with him
- ii) Lack of accommodation was a major problem with the administrator: it was felt that the army was stealing their housing as, prior to 1951, the administration had been told by Nthn Command that it would not need Murray barracks housing.
- iii) Some district commissioners seemed to see the army as an opposition as PNGVR was attracting young kiaps and police officers to its ranks.

Some encouraging matters were.

- i) All sub units were appointing PNGVR NCO's.
- ii) An instruction team had been created to teach these NCO's methods of instruction.
- iii) At Rabaul, B Coy, was presented with a US distinguished unit citation by the US military attaché in Australia for safekeeping. The citation was for actions on Los Negros Island in the Admiralties in WWII in which attached ANGAU and ex-NGVR men were involved.
- iv) 12 men from a Coy, PNGVR Lae, carried out a patrol from the mouth of the Buang River to Boana, a Lutheran mission, following a well known wartime track used by Warrant Officer Peter Ryan when behind enemy lines in 1942.

Also, in 1951 the Australian government introduced a form of national service where every Australian male of the age of 18 was required to attend a compulsory camp of full time training followed by a period of 5 years CMF service.

This proved beneficial for PNGVR as many men coming to PNG to work had to complete their military service and PNGVR was the only unit in PNG where they could comply with this.

I will now briefly cover the PNGVR situation over the following years.

by 1953. PNGVR was declared a going concern

PNGVR strength was 7 officers and 175 other ranks.

3bz wireless transceivers were installed at each sub unit, making administration duties easier.

Promotion exams for corporal and sergeant were held at Murray barracks.

The governor general visited Lae for the opening of the recently completed cross of sacrifice at the Lae war cemetery and PNGVR provided an honour guard.

A parade for the queen's coronation was held at Ela Beach oval, Port Moresby, and included PNGVR.

1954. The governor general, field Marshall Sir William Slim visited Rabaul for the opening of the gates at Bita Paka war cemetery and PNGVR provided an honour guard.

Equipment was still WWII style. Uniforms were khaki trousers and shirts, the slouch hats did not always have chin straps, tan boots were issued and members had to blacken them. The boots also had brass cleats which were dangerous in cement drill hall floors, so the cleats had to be removed. Belts and gaiters had to be blanched and early WWII style gaiters were issued. Much of this, by the way, when I first joined PNGVR in 1959 had not changed but by then we had jungle green uniform in lieu of khaki and modern gaiters. The .303 rifle issued to me was a 1916 model.

Although each major centre had an army jeep there was no other transport to carry troops to bivouacs. In the case of B Coy many of the members of PNGVR were shell employees so the shell vehicle was used. I recall in Madang in 1959/early 1960's we used a variety of calaboose and administration trucks depending on who had one to spare at the time.

1956. The Duke of Edinburgh in the royal yacht "Britannia" visited Rabaul and was met with a guard of honour by B Coy, PNGVR.

1958. C Coy commenced recruiting in Goroka. A Coy, Lae, flew to Madang for a 5 day bivouac over Easter at the 'Siar' training camp.

HQ Coy exercised for 7 days with the PIR at Goldie River.

3 PNGVR members from Port Moresby completed a crossing of the Kokoda trail in 7 days, receiving good press.

1959/60. Annual camp was held at Goldie River. Problems being that some 70+ members of the unit were, for different reasons, unavailable for the camps.

In 1960 the battalion structure altered to the newly introduced Pentropic division structure which added a support company to the battalion. This was located in Port Moresby.

1961. The new SLR (self loading rifle) the replacement for the .303 was introduced to PNGVR and fired for the first time at Goldie River training depot during camp.

An application was made for theatre and battle honours for PNGVR, and a regimental colour was designed. Our association president, Phil Ainsworth, played a large part in this design. For those not aware PNGVR colours were unique in the Australian army, having the d'albertis creeper (flame of the forest) on the colours in lieu of wattle, on the colours of all other Australian units.

An incident occurred at the flooded Laloki river during a PNGVR bivouac where a Papuan civilian was rescued and two PNGVR soldiers were awarded a BEM (British Empire Medal).

About this time members of PNGVR commenced attending various army courses in Australia.

PNGVR strength was 156.

1962. About 90 members attended annual camp at Taurama Barracks with field training being carried out at Goldie River.

PNGVR was awarded the NGVR battle honours as custodians.

“Imperial Echoes” was selected as the PNGVR Regimental march. Those who attended either our formal or field dinners would recall “Imperial Echoes” being played for the march in and out of the flags.

1963. About 150 members attended annual camp at Murray Barracks (the largest number to date), and it was the last time Goldie River training area was used by PNGVR.

PNGVR were the first CMF soldiers to fire the GPMG M60 – the new medium machine gun which replaced the Bren gun.

1 SAS Coy arrived in PNG for a large scale exercise in which PIR was heavily involved and PNGVR provided a number of umpires over the exercise. “long hop”, as it was called, was the largest field exercise conducted in PNG since WWII.

The Anzac Day march in Port Moresby that year was attended by PNGVR, PIR and SAS and a film of the march is today held in the Australian War Memorial.

1964. January 1964 saw the biggest change in the PNGVR since its inception with the enlistment of PNG citizens, including men of Chinese and Malay descent. The integration of these people was a new learning curve for PNGVR officers and NCO’s and worked out well. Many of the new local recruits, even though the minimum education standard dictated grade 6 level, did not have a good command of English, and I recall in Goroka it was not unusual for an instructor to sometimes move into pidgin during a lecture if it became obvious that English was not getting across. I did that myself on occasions.

One other difficulty was introducing recruits who had previously never been allowed to use firearms to rifles, machine guns, grenades and other explosives.

Annual camp 1964 was at t Ambra, in the Western Highlands.

Mt Hagen. This camp resulted in the largest peacetime troop movements in PNG in a single day since WWII when 350 troops were flown into Mt Hagen.

1964 was a year of change for PNGVR. That year PNGVR was issued with juniper green uniform as walk out dress in lieu of jungle greens, local enlistees were issued boots and gaiters instead of sandals which had been their initially issued footwear, and, after annual camp at mt Ambra, the slouch hat, which had been issued to European members only, was withdrawn and all ranks then wore a navy beret.

After these changes the biggest problem faced was the pay rate. Nationals received much less than Europeans. This was addressed on numerous occasions but never satisfactorily resolved.

As previously stated 1964 saw the biggest changes ever in the history of PNGVR.

The range of indigenous recruits into PNGVR was huge. In Goroka we had doctor Alan Taratea and dentist Geoffrey Timu, both of whom had graduated at the Suva medical college and were employed at the hospital in Goroka. In the Australian army a doctor and an dentist would have entered the army as captains in the medical corps, but both Alan and Geoffrey were firm in their wish to remain privates and just be part of the platoon.

At year's end effective strength of PNGVR was 28 officers and 520 OR's, this being its greatest strength since inception.

1965/66.

Best described as "years of consolidation" after the huge changes in 1964.

Annual camp 1965 was again at mt Ambra and in 1966 on the Butibum river outside Lae. The latter was actually an old army site from 1943 when the Australian 9th division made an amphibious landing at the Bumbu river and commenced their advance on Lae, crossing the nearby Butibum river. Over 500 men attended each camp.

From my own perspective I was most unimpressed with the 1966 camp as it was held during the wet season and my opinion was that the constant heavy rain hindered training, not assisted it. It is very difficult to train soldiers who are wet, cold and miserable. The higher brass in PNGVR however reported that it had subjected the PNGVR members to "challenging conditions". From my point of view, they were "challenging" alright.

1966 also saw the raising of the university platoon, PNGVR. This was raised in June at the university of PNG, Port Moresby, with members coming from the administrative college and university students.

Until the disbandment of PNGVR in 1973, the University Platoon had a controversial history with ongoing differences between the University hierarchy and the Army.

Also, in 1966 the Wewak detachment of PNGVR which had been running for a year officially became "D" Coy and Madang, which had over the years been attached to A Coy Lae, C Coy Goroka, and A Coy Lae again, became 12 Platoon D Coy attached to Wewak.

1967.

Annual camp saw 450 soldiers moved by road to the Bulolo valley and then spent a week moving on foot back to Lae using the Wau-Lae road as an axis of advance in a counter insurgency exercise.

1967 also saw the first CMF officers being posted to Vietnam as "observers". During following years, quite a number of PNGVR officers saw active service in Vietnam.

That year PNGVR headquarters moved from Port Moresby to Igam barracks, a newly built complex, outside Lae.

1968 to 72. Annual camps were held at Igam barracks with field exercises in the nearby Atzera ranges.

The first week of the 1969 camp was devoted to preparation for the presentation of the queen and regimental colours which were presented to the co PNGVR by the administrator of PNG on 17 May. The second week consisted of a 4 day exercise in the Atzera range.

Battalion parades were also held at Igam Barracks during the 1970 and 1971 camps. The University Platoon, which had usually held its annual camp separate to the main PNGVR camp due to clashes with the university academic programme, attended the 1970 camp.

The field exercise for the 1972 annual camp was held in the Finisterre Ranges, the site of a number of battles during WWII. Attendance now had fallen to 357 all ranks.

1973. The last camp of continuous training by PNGVR was in 1973 at Finschhafen and again PNGVR had the assistance of PIR soldiers. 324 all ranks attended.

It was at the end of this camp that the official disbandment of PNGVR at the end of the year was announced.

A number of reviews had been held re the future of PNGVR and it was disbanded as it was considered that it was not possible to maintain after independence when it would move from the Australian Army to being part of the PNG Defence Force. It was not a suitable unit for use in internal security operations and its administration was difficult. Moreover, PNGVR regional bases could provide a source of power for areas disaffected with the central government.

When it was disbanded PNGVR was represented at:

- Port Moresby – Admin Coy, Support Coy and University Platoon.
- Lae – A Coy. Igam Barracks, Lae – HQ PNGVR.
- Rabaul – B Coy.
- Goroka, Mt Hagen and Banz – C Coy.
- Wewak and Madang – D Coy.

Events which followed the disbandment of PNGVR.

The current association.

Formed in the early 1990's it is still a viable association, even though the membership is an ageing one. An example of this is the number present here today which would have been even greater except for the effects of COVID-19 which has restricted interstate travel.

Laying up of PNGVR colours.

Anzac Day 1974 saw the laying up of the queens and regimental colours in Canberra.

They are now held in the Australian war memorial and can be viewed if sufficient notice is given to the AWM.

Marching on Anzac Day.

Ever since the formation of the association we have marched as an association on Anzac Day.

With the declining membership as we age the numbers have reduced from over 100 in the 1990's/early 2000's to 25 this year.

Montevideo Maru services.

The association holds an annual service on the 1st July each year to remember the sinking of the unmarked Japanese POW vessel "Montevideo Maru" with 1053 soldiers and civilians aboard, with no prisoner survivors. This service commenced in the early 1990's with the formation of the association and is one of the few official Montevideo Maru services held in Australia.

Establishment of the museum.

Our museum opened in February 2006 and is one of the features of the association. There is a lot of rare memorabilia held in the museum and a dedicated group of volunteers keep it in tip top condition for show to the public.

Harim tok tok

This newsletter is the main contact between association members spread all over Australia and overseas. It is produced each two months and has been the one continuous means of contact with members ever since the association was formed.

Web and Facebook sites.

The association also has both a web and Facebook site and these contain many photos and information on both the PNGVR and the NGVR.

Service in PNGVR. For those of us who served in PNGVR that service left indelible memories. It is not often during ones' military service that you have the unique experience of serving in areas which had been occupied during WWII, or the privilege of having carried out exercises and TEWTs (tactical exercise without troops) in areas that had been fought over during WWII.

One will never forget the experience of moving into a copra plantation and seeing trees chopped in half, and others, still growing, with bullet holes through them.

I once had the experience of participating in an examination in which I had to put in a platoon attack on a hill in the Markham valley where Richard Kelliher was awarded a Victoria Cross for his actions when his platoon attacked that same hill during the advance on Lae in WWII.

PNGVR was a unit unique in the Australian army.

It was only the second Australian CMF or militia unit to be raised offshore, served offshore, and disbanded offshore, our PNGVR predecessor – the NGVR (new guinea volunteer rifles) was the first.

It was also unique in its structure – a mix of Europeans, Chinese, Malay and indigenous PNG citizens.

All in all, PNGVR was a unique experience for all those who had the privilege of serving in it.

Thank you. If anyone has any questions or comments, please see me over coffee or after the luncheon.