

In 50 years of Pacific history recorded in PIM, no single event had a greater impact on the Southwest Pacific than did World War II. But against the censorship, emotions and attitudes of wartime how complete are the histories already written? Here MACLAREN HIARI in Port Moresby tells of a new documentary film project which is drawing heavily on the memories of forgotten people and on wartime archives only just released by the Australian government.

New viewpoint for film dealing with Pacific War impact on PNG

The Australian National University in Canberra is producing a 90-minute documentary film which will concentrate on a largely ignored facet of World War II — the impact of the war on the people of Papua New Guinea. Film interviews have been carried out in PNG itself, and a major source of material is the Australian government wartime archives from which restrictions have now been lifted.

The team producing the film comes from the Pacific history department of the Research School of Pacific Studies at the university. A research fellow from the department, Dr Hank Nelson, is leading the team. The two other members are the head of the department, Professor Gavan Daws, and another research fellow, Mr Andrew Pike. Dr Nelson, who is widely known as a Pacific historian, is a former lecturer at the University of PNG and is also writing a book about World War II in that country.

The film will be produced from hundreds of thousands of feet of material shot by wartime cameramen in Papua New Guinea which is now stored in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and from new material shot in Papua New Guinea.

The university believes that most recorded history of the war in PNG tends to concentrate on the military campaign and on the actual combat, largely ignoring the immediate and long term effects of the situation of PNG communities and on PNG society. The university sees the film as a 'useful counterbalance to many books and films dealing directly with military history'.

The voices of people who participated in the war will be

included in the film with a linking documentary which will be kept to a minimum. Sounds and voices of the film are also being collected from tape recordings in Canberra and Port Moresby.

Research by the film makers located many Papua New Guineans who were able to talk about previously unpublicised wartime experiences, and many tape recordings were made of these interviews before film shooting.

As a Papua New Guinean I believe this film will fill in one of the gaps which has been ever-present in World War II histories — the impact of the war on our own society.

In 1941 there were no more than 5 000 whites working throughout the country among the two million local people. In the following four years, millions of soldiers from Australia, America and Japan fought their way through the country but within six months after the war ended invaders and defenders were gone, leaving behind them the scattered wreckage of combat.

For Papua New Guineans the war was unprecedented experience where they saw one 'masta' after another — Australian, American and Japanese — in victory and defeat. On the islands and along the north coast of the country, the people observed the withdrawal of all white women and children and most of the men, then Japanese surveillance flights, bombardments, and the landing of Japanese troops. At Milne Bay, Papua New Guineans saw the Japanese in desperate fighting and defeat. At Kokoda in the Northern Province they saw the Japanese march triumphantly south, and within a few weeks they saw them again in abject retreat.

In some areas of the country,

the Japanese ruled for over three years. Towards the end of the war, Papua New Guineans trapped in Japanese-held areas lived in terror. The allied forces bombed and strafed settlements and gardens, they had no medical supplies, and the Japanese, their backs to the wall and fearful of betrayal, became more and more demanding and brutal. Village people under duress, or hoping to ingratiate themselves with the Japanese, or using the Japanese in traditional fighting with tribal enemies, denounced other local people and were caught up in a cycle of destruction. It was a matter of obeying whoever was holding a gun, and then making the best of the situation.

But there was also the relationship which existed between the Papua New Guineans on the one hand and the Australians and Americans on the other. How good or bad it was, how much it varied from place to place and what long term effect it had are all questions which modern research can help to answer.

Apart from the impact of the war on people themselves, there was also the technological impact. In a matter of months, the war pushed thousands of Papua New Guineans through the industrial revolution when they began to ride on trucks for the first time, and watched planes landing and taking off. Some of them also learnt to operate lathes and to service the internal combustion engine as well as undergoing the stress of industrial labour in the permanent overtime conditions of war.

Papua New Guinean men travelled over wide areas for the first time, seeing parts of their own country that they had never seen before. They encountered new languages,

and learned to talk in Melanesian Pidgin and Police Motu, and some of them learned English and Japanese.

The lives of many village women were also transformed by the war. Along the northern coast of the country, able-bodied men were recruited, and in communities where previously a strict division of labour existed between the sexes, women found new roles. Very few women served in the army or with labouring teams, but traditional relationships were disturbed, in some cases permanently.

There was some argument about arming Papua New Guineans recruited into the army. In the end their skills in jungle warfare ensured that they were used throughout the PNG campaign. They were used, too, in quickly-formed guerilla units created to mop up stranded Japanese soldiers. Sometimes illiterate and non-English-speaking subsistence farmers became gun-carrying soldiers within a few days.

It has been estimated that more than 7000 Papua New Guineans served in the army and the police and another 1000 worked as medical orderlies. Most of them served in the war as unskilled labour but hundreds worked in skilled and responsible jobs such as wireless operators, drivers, linemen for signal units, carpenters, painters, metalworkers, winch-hands, and mechanics.

The film plans to explore these experiences from a new viewpoint, and its release is awaited with interest. Under present arrangements the film will be distributed on a non-commercial basis in Australia and PNG — including availability to exservicemen's organisations — and later it will be distributed internationally.