

Unit 35: The Impact of the Second World War on the Solomon Islands - Invasion and Infrastructure

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Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands became involved in the Second World War when they were invaded by the Japanese Army in 1942.

The British Administrators fled the country, leaving the Japanese soldiers to occupy large parts of the Islands. The Japanese captured Tulagi Island, the former British capital, and then moved on to Guadalcanal where they built a large airbase for attacking shipping and allied bases in the Southwest Pacific. The Americans then landed on Guadalcanal to capture it from the Japanese. After a short but bloody campaign, the Japanese secretly evacuated Guadalcanal leaving the Americans in control. The next major campaign was further north in the Solomons on Bougainville island..

The War did not have an impact on all Solomon Islanders. Some worked for both sides at different stages of the war as labourers, helpers and coast watchers. Many men obtained employment working for the Americans. Labourers were given gifts of clothing and equipment, especially as American troops headed home or further on to the front. This was kept in large trade boxes. The British confiscated and burnt these boxes when they returned.

The experience of helping the Americans during the War changed the Solomon Islanders' perceptions in relation to Europeans and the former British colonial administration.

- a) they saw the British flee and thus realised that Europeans could be also defeated;
- b) they were treated much more equally by the Americans than they had been by the British
- c) they saw African Americans, or "Blacks" being treated equally by the whites.

The Americans talked about the changing world order, shared clothes, equipment and particularly food, and this behaviour was rare if not impossible under the British.

In practical terms at the end of the War the Solomon Islanders benefited by the infrastructure that was left behind such as Henderson airfield on Guadalcanal. Examples of these services include the Central Hospital, wharves, buildings and roads that formed the basis of Honiara (which later became the capital of the Solomon Islands).

(Note: In Unit 29 you can study the *Maasina Ruru* movement, a post-war protest movement in the Solomon Islands. The Solomon Islands gained independence 33 years later in 1978.)