

Unit 36: Fiji - A Military Training Ground

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Fiji had a minor role in World War II when it hosted 50,000 allied troops – mainly from USA and New Zealand. Fiji also served as a strategic port to replenish supplies of fuel and water as men and equipment moved to the front further to the west in Melanesia.

The armed forces had two important reasons for being in Fiji: first, to hold onto the island as a strategic territory in case of Japanese attacks, and second, to train soldiers for tropical combat in the south-west Pacific. The Japanese did not attack Fiji.

Military bases were set up in Nadi and Suva. Fijian soldiers taught the allied troops bush warfare and also familiarised them with the rugged terrain of the tropics, which was similar to the fighting grounds in the Solomon Islands. 6,400 indigenous Fijians and 260 Indo-Fijians engaged in critical training exercises in Fiji.

Naval bases were set up at Momi Bay and Saweni in the Western part of Fiji. A defensive network was established to protect Fiji against attack, as early in the Pacific War in 1942-1943 there were fears of air and sea raids.

Fijian soldiers also served in the campaigns in Melanesia. Those who fought in the Solomon Islands earned the respect of the Allied Command, the British colonial government and the people at home. The soldiers' self-esteem and pride of achievement grew, as they mixed with the allied troops. They gained an insight into Western culture and saw themselves as equal to the European soldiers because of their contribution during combat. Army life broke down some of the local and tribal prejudice among Fijians.

The war effort strengthened Fiji's relationship with Great Britain, but also made Fijians feel more confident to manage their own affairs. One great leader during the War was Ratu Sir Lalabalavu Vanayaliyali Sukuna. A soldier and a leader, Sukuna had a long career in which he encouraged Fijians to participate in democratic institutions.

At Momi, Saweni, Suva and Nadi the impact was obvious. Businessmen and traders began to cater for USA and New Zealand tastes. Clubs and restaurants livened up nightlife in Suva. Socialising between Fijians and allied soldiers was common. For the majority of the people of Fiji, life continued unchanged during the war.