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AN EARLY INVASION JAPANESE CURRENCY BANKNOTE

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One shilling occupation currency banknote.

In early March 1944, nearly 18 months before the defeat of the Japanese forces in the Pacific area, a signal (message) was received at Buna Base Headquarters in Papua New Guinea that American forces under General Douglas Macarthur had landed and captured Hollandia in what was then Dutch New Guinea, and a number of Allied prisoners of war who were Sikhs had been liberated.

These personnel were being transported to Buna by barge, Buna being the administrative centre for the Australian Army on the North Coast of Papua at the time.

Early 1944 was not especially auspicious for the Allies in the South West Pacific Area, for though the Japanese had been stopped in New Guinea mainly by Australian troops, the Japanese navy had suffered set-backs from the U.S. fleets, and some Pacific Islands had been regained by U.S. forces, the defeat of Japan was by no means certain, so the news caused considerable excitement, as these were the first Allied soldiers liberated from the Japanese. A number of conferences took place in preparation for their travel to discuss such matters as diet, clothing, ablutions, and toilet facilities, etc., and as regimental medical officer to the Details Depot Buna (a transit unit for the Army) I was involved in these meetings.

The P.O.Ws duly arrived and were fed, outfitted, medically examined and rested.

The next day they were paraded, and the parade was taken by Colonel Joe Lang. Col. Lang was known as "Tiny", a typical example of Australian understatement, as he would have had some difficulty fitting through the average sized door. He had served the British



Group of Australians and Sikhs at Details Depot. Buna.

Raj in India and was accustomed to commanding colonial troops. The Sikhs were lined up by their non-commissioned officers and then Col. Lang called out "Subhadar!" (a subhadar is the chief native officer of a company of sepoys – a term probably going back before the Indian Mutiny days.)

The subhadar came forward, saluted smartly, and handed the parade over to the C.O. Col. Lang then addressed the troops in Hindi, much to their surprise. My recollection is that the Sikhs drilled as if they had never been off a parade ground, even though they had spent more than the previous two years in captivity as P.O.Ws.

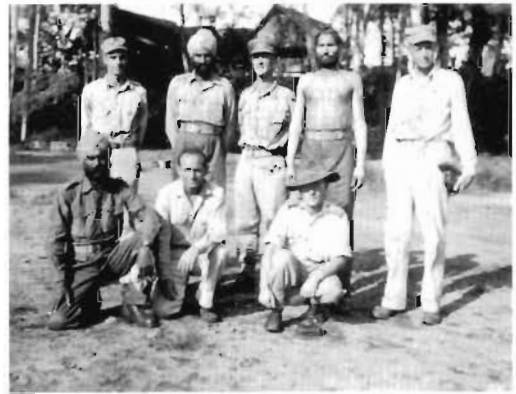


Sikh Ex-P.O.Ws on parade.

One of their medical personnel kindly gave me the illustrated banknote which he autographed and inscribed with his unit 19 (the 19th Indian General Hospital).

Japanese occupation currency had been printed by the tonne in anticipation for use in the countries Hiroshito's Imperial Forces were to conquer but never did, so this note must be one of the earliest seen outside the areas under Japanese administration at that time.

After resting for a few days the ex-P.O.Ws were flown back to Australia for repatriation to India.



Group of Sikhs, Americans and Australians. Author kneeling right.