War at the Margins

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INDIGENOUS RIGHTS ARE INTRINSICALLY linked with land. Communities define themselves in terms of a homeland, and sovereignty and self-determination often depend on control of land and natural resources. War, too, centers on command over territory. By the mid-twentieth century, many Indigenous populations lived in relatively inaccessible or less productive areas—places where they were “at home” and the combatant powers were not. When front lines crossed their territory, local knowledge became a strategic resource. Indigenous soldiers fought on their own land, defending their homes, providing expertise to foreign armies, and gaining experience, confidence, and new ideas that would shape postwar futures.

This chapter begins with northern Europe, then turns to Asia-Pacific battlegrounds. As we examine these complicated conflict zones, keep in mind that this is not a general history of the war, but a look at what happened to certain Indigenous peoples during it.

Arctic Europe: Sámi

War first touched Sápmi, the Sámi homeland, when the USSR invaded Finland at the end of November 1939 (the Winter War). As citizens of both countries, Sámi faced other Sámi across battlefronts. That war ended in March 1940, with Finland agreeing to relinquish certain border areas (including Sámi lands in Petsamo) to the USSR. Just weeks later, a new conflict reached western Sápmi, when Nazi Germany invaded and occupied Norway. The following year, the German Army launched attacks on the USSR from northern Norway and Finland. Caught between two aggressive powers, Finland opted for cooperation with Berlin, allowing Germany to use Finnish territory and joining in the attack on the Soviet Union to recover lost territory in the Continuation War (June 1941–September 1944). Most of the USSR-Finland border was an active front
for three years, from the German Army’s invasion of the USSR in June 1941 to its retreat in 1944, and again there were reports of Finnish and Soviet Sámi firing on each other.

During those three years, German troops remained in Sámi homelands, in northern Finland as allies and in Norway as an occupying force. In September 1944, Finland signed an armistice with the USSR that required it to expel German troops, at that point numbering more than two hundred thousand. In this final phase of war in Sápmi—called the Lapland War (September 1944–April 1945)—Finnish infantry drove the German Army across northern Finland into Norway, where it remained in control until the end of the war. The destructive retreat required hasty evacuation of tens of thousands of civilians and had lasting effects on Sápmi (chapters 8 and 10).

By the time of the Winter War, Sámi men who were Finnish citizens were conscripted into regular forces, valued for their abilities in wilderness and winter conditions. Finnish Sámi losses were few in number but in the same proportion as the nation as a whole. Three men earned commissions, others held non-commissioned officer status, and soldiers and reindeer herders were honored with service medals. In Norway, Sámi fought in the regular army against invading Germans in spring 1940, and they aided the resistance during Nazi occupation, as when brothers Jonar and Bengt Jåma guided an American unit to sabotage a railway line. Sámi fishermen were well-positioned to gather intelligence on naval operations. Sámi smuggled escapees from Nazi prison camps along reindeer migration routes and guided other refugees to neutral Sweden, as did another set of brothers, Mikal and Paulus Utsi.¹

On the USSR side of the border, men from Sámi, Komi, Nenets, and other Indigenous groups in the northwestern arctic served in the Soviet army. At least a quarter of some eight hundred soldiers sent to the front from the Sámi area of Lovozero on the Kola Peninsula never returned, and many civilians were killed as well. Nenets and other herders were conscripted along with their reindeer and equipment into provision and transport units that supplied meat and hauled the wounded, weapons, ammunition, and food, rescued pilots, and even towed downed planes; reindeer sledding was the only transport possible in some areas. Sámi herder Galkin recalls that during the Red Army’s advance into Norway, “we harnessed all the deer we could and ran with the rest of the Army, swimming the deer across countless rivers and streams, floating ourselves across on cape-tents stuffed with moss. It was a great [sic] to be chasing the enemy. Sometimes we even caught isolated German soldiers by lasso!” Sámi skills were so essential that other soldiers were told to protect them even if it endangered their own lives.²
In Norway and Finland, publicity about Sámi, especially their military service and losses during the destructive German retreat, fostered public sympathy for a postwar push for Sámi rights. But war and its aftermath hardened the national borders that split Sápmi, cutting off Sámi in the USSR from communities and kin to the west until the 1980s.

Southeast Asia

The war in Asia began as Japan expanded its empire to control Manchuria in 1931. It widened into war with China in 1937, then into what is commonly called the Pacific War in December 1941, when Japan launched strikes against US, British, Dutch, and Australian territories. The Allied empires, already at war with Germany and Italy in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, had few resources to spare for their Asian holdings. Japan succeeded spectacularly through the first half of 1942, occupying enemy colonies in Southeast Asia and forming alliances with independent Thailand and the Vichy administrators of French Indochina.

Japanese occupation of Malaya was complete with the February 1942 surrender of Singapore. In Burma, the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) forced British and Chinese Nationalist forces to retreat to India (March–May 1942).\(^3\) In the Philippines, Filipino and US forces fought until their May 1942 surrender at Corregidor. Japan’s invasion of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and air raids on northern Australia in the first half of 1942 marked the empire’s southernmost reach. Allies had little choice but to organize clandestine resistance until they could mount counterinvasions. Over the next three years, they recruited Indigenous peoples in sabotage, espionage, and guerrilla activity behind Japanese lines. Local assistance was, as it always is, key to success in guerrilla warfare.

Malaya

In the uplands of British Malaya, small groups of Orang Asli (the “original people,” a general term for the many Indigenous tribes of the Malay Peninsula) lived by hunting, gathering, fishing, swidden gardens, and trade in forest products. Japan never securely held these forests, which remained a site of resistance—not only by British-led irregulars but also by Chinese Communists who had fought colonial rule before the war and would continue to do so long after. British and Communists agreed for a time to cooperate in anti-Japanese activities. Orang Asli were caught between the three forces, all seeking help with intelligence, food, and labor.
Before the Japanese invasion, in 1941, the British had set up a reconnaissance network in the hills along the Thai border. H. D. “Pat” Noone, an anthropologist who had married into the Temiar people and served as first Protector of Aborigines in Malaya, brought Temiar into the network. After British defeat, Noone went into the highlands to live with his wife’s people. He and other agents organized Orang Asli assistance and liaised with Chinese Communists. British special forces, Communist guerrillas, Japanese occupation troops, and lowland farmers escaping the Japanese pressed into the forest, bringing Orang Asli unprecedented contact with outsiders and entangling them in a conflict that continued into the postcolonial/Cold War era (chapter 7).4

India-Burma

After forcing British and Chinese armies out of Burma by May 1942, the IJA paused at the edge of the highlands. It settled into governing occupied territory in alliance with Burmese nationalists whose focus was Burman ethnic identity and Buddhist religion. Instead of recruiting hill tribes, as the British had done, the IJA supported a new majority-Burman army—the Burma Independence Army (BIA)—further sharpening highland/lowland antagonisms.5

Even as the IJA solidified collaboration with lowland Burmese, Allied agents were setting up behind-the-lines resistance. In retreat, the British disbanded regular tribal battalions, but veterans were integrated into irregular “levy” units forming a defensive screen around Japanese-held territory. In north Burma it was Kachin Levies; to the east, Karen Levies; in the northwestern hills, Chin Levies supported by the Burma Frontier Force; and in the Upper Chindwin and Naga Hills of the India-Burma border it was the stay-behind “V” Force supported by the Assam Rifles, and intelligence-gathering “Z” Force. Levy recruits, including village headmen, police, and retired soldiers, were primarily used for patrol duties, though many saw action when front lines crossed their territory.6

Over time, British and American special units mounted numerous operations in Burma. British SOE (Special Operations Executive, Force 136) worked with Karens. “Chindits” were British Army Long Range Penetration Groups infiltrating behind Japanese lines. The US Office of Strategic Services (OSS, predecessor to the CIA) organized Detachment 101 in 1942 and the US Army formed a special operations unit the following year. The region became crowded with activity, Allies competed for local help, and enlistees came and went as battle lines shifted.7 Japanese authorities responded forcefully, with reprisals against civilians and a build-up of their own intelligence system supported by Burmese allies.
The importance of ethnic minorities and hill tribes to the Allied cause won praise at the time and is not forgotten in modern histories, where they are credited with a key role in stymieing the Japanese advance.8

**Karen, Shan, and Kachin.** Karens are a large minority living mainly in eastern Burma and the Irrawaddy Delta. Long-standing links with colonial authorities and Christian missions set many Karen apart from the majority Burmans, and they were seeking a path to a separate state under British protection. Burman-Karen tension intensified during the war; violent BIA attacks on Karen and other minorities harmed relations in ways that persisted long after its end. Karen men had served in the British Army for generations. They readily volunteered for regular units and Chindits and served as officers and soldiers in the Northern Kachin Levies and with other guerrillas, forming a large and important element of anti-Japanese activity.9

Karen homelands were surrounded as the IJA advanced through lowland Burma, but the invasion slowed at the foothills of Shan and Kachin territory. While Karens and Kachins were largely pro-British and anti-Japanese/anti-Burman, Shan views were less uniform. Shan leaders in January 1940 passed a resolution of loyalty to Great Britain and gave generously to British war efforts, but Japanese successes forced them to accommodate the new rulers, whom they persuaded to withdraw from the Shan States of eastern Burma in return for an oath of loyalty. Many fought alongside the Allies, but Shan engaged with both sides, seeking primarily to preserve their own security and autonomy. They emerged from war with a keen awareness of vulnerability; after four years of suffering, the Shan political scientist and activist Chao Tzang Yawnghwe wrote, they “were determined not to become anyone’s dependents or subjects.”10

Kachin in Burma’s north and northeast hills were historically pro-British, having links with the British Frontier Service, Christian missionaries, and the British Army. Many men were already serving in regular units at the start of war. Home-based resistance grew as Japanese patrols violently intruded on their territory. Kachin mounted their own guerrilla activity and worked with Allied special operations, notably British SOE and Northern Kachin Levies, and US Detachment 101. By war’s end a large proportion of the community, some twelve to thirteen thousand Kachin, were fighting; boys as young as ten or twelve guided foreign guerrillas through familiar territory. In the last phases of war, Kachin joined Allied armies pushing the enemy south. They served largely as scouts and irregulars, but also played a role in the Battle of Myitkyina (March–August 1944), the culminating battle of the Japanese retreat from northern Burma.11
Kachin aid to Allies was widespread and consistent. Running one of the first Chindit expeditions, Bernard Fergusson found protection, material help, and accurate intelligence on enemy movements in every Kachin village. Detachment 101 depended on leaders like Zhing Htaw Naw, praised as having “the courage and cunning of a tiger,” who commanded 150 guerrillas supplied and trained by the American unit. Kachin women also supported the resistance, though less is recorded about their activities. Hka Shan Rawng, whose brother was killed by the Japanese, cut her hair short and fought with a levy company until she was disenrolled after a medical examination revealed her secret.12

For their part, the Japanese at first saw Kachin as potential allies, but that faded as war went on. When Sergeant Tokuhei Miura’s platoon ran a reconnaissance mission in Kachin territory in early 1943, he thought the Kachin did not see them as enemies and were willing to fight the English. But at the Battle of Myitkyina in March 1944, Miura experienced a horrifying atrocity when his commander blamed local people for colluding with the enemy and Muira was forced to take part in a mass execution of villagers, a massacre that stunned and distressed him.13

Chin Hills. Japanese generals saw the roadless Chin Hills of Burma’s northwestern highlands as an impassible barrier, delaying their invasion of India but also protecting them from British attack, until the first Chindit expedition from India struck behind their lines and showed that the mountains could be crossed. The IJA’s subsequent decision to push the offensive to India through Chin territory in 1943–1944 made the region a battlefield en route to the pivotal contest at Imphal-Kohima.14

A close look shows how Chins fought on their home territory.15 After the British retreat, only one regular unit remained in the Chin Hills: the Chin Hills Battalion of the Burma Frontier Force, consisting of about 1,300 men. To build defenses, the deputy commissioner declared a levy and called on local civilians to enlist (at the April 1942 meeting with Norman Kelly described in chapter 2). Levies were structured “with an eye to tribal custom”; that is, with men protecting their own villages. Until supply lines were established, levies used their own rifles, some of them antique flintlocks, or made do with makeshift weapons. Their role was harassment and ambush; they were not expected to engage in intensive combat. Meanwhile, the British began building a road into the Chin Hills from their base in Imphal (chapter 10). The road allowed a British Army division to occupy Tedim, a Chin village along a six-thousand-foot-high ridge, overwhelming the 150 villagers with “four mule companies, a mounted reconnaissance regiment, jeeps, ponies and carriers.” They held Tedim
from November 1943 until forced to withdraw in March 1944 ahead of a Japanese advance that brought shelling and combat right into Chin villages.\textsuperscript{16}

With little manpower and light weapons, stopping the IJA was impossible, but defenders had the advantage of intimate knowledge of terrain and a tradition of warfare. Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Balfour Oatts, a British officer with Chin Levies, describes creating a line of defense when the IJA neared Haka lands. Some two thousand men immediately responded when he called out the levies, spread over 150 miles. Oatts described Hakas as “good fighting men” and “the most battle-worthy natives I have ever met” but lamented that they were “quite untrained and undisciplined.” As he got to know them, he saw that the way they fought was shaped by local history rather than abstract rules. “In the defence of their territory the Hakas had many generations of experience behind them, and accordingly knew where to go and what to do without my telling them. I had picked out the features of tactical importance on the map, but the Hakas knew them already.”\textsuperscript{17}

British forces planned a fighting retreat toward India, drawing the Japanese to Imphal, where—hampered by a long supply line—they would be vulnerable. As the British withdrew, they evacuated villages, destroying food stores and livestock to deny them to the enemy. Villagers fled into the forest, or if they stayed, faced Japanese demands for food and labor (chapter 8). Levy officers came to expect “piecemeal defection” during the withdrawal, as soldiers left to protect their families. Even as British-led units retreated, some chiefs had already established contact with the advancing Japanese.\textsuperscript{18}

Some 1,200 Chin Levies with twenty officers continued to operate behind enemy lines, supported by villagers until air drops could be set up.\textsuperscript{19} One who stayed behind was the man Norman Kelly called “the most famous” “cloak and dagger boy” of Z Force, Major Sam Newland, son of a Chin mother and British father. He had served as a sergeant in the Indian Defence Force, studied forestry at Edinburgh University, and joined the Burma Forest Service before enlisting in Z Force and returning to the Chin Hills in October 1943. Newland was widely known, making it easy for him to recruit an intelligence network and encourage resistance despite enemy pursuit. For his work during the war, he was awarded the DSO (Distinguished Service Order). Other individual Chins were also recognized: for example, Zahu, a village headman who recruited 250 villagers for British levies and fought with them, was awarded an MBE and a Burma Gallantry medal.\textsuperscript{20}

After successful invasion of the Chin Hills, the IJA, supported by the Indian National Army (INA), established divisional headquarters at Tedim. The Japanese established their own Chin Defence Army of about two hundred men,
ran an intelligence service, and appointed local officials. Some joined the new order willingly, even deserting the Chin Hills Battalion to serve the IJA; some remained neutral; others used the cover of collaboration to protect Chins and feed information back to the British. Vum Ko Hau (who had worked for Norman Kelly) and Pau Za Kam (headman of Tedim) both held senior positions in the Chin Defence Army and worked at Japanese headquarters, but at the same time communicated with British-run Chin Levies and their own Chin resistance organizations.\(^{21}\)

By mid-1944, as manpower demands for the invasion of India pressured the Japanese, conditions in the Chin Hills deteriorated and resistance flared. Even villagers who had not supported the levies began to rebel as the tide turned.\(^{22}\) After defeat at Imphal-Kohima, surviving IJA and INA troops escaped through the Chin Hills to the Burma plains, pursued by British forces—a horrific retreat during monsoon season that caused tens of thousands of casualties, not only from combat but also from illness and starvation. As villages were recaptured, civilians returned from forest shelters and refugee camps. By mid-November 1944, the Chin Hills was declared free of Japanese, and most levies went home, though some continued alongside the regular army.\(^{23}\)

In lowland Burma, Aung San and other nationalist leaders shifted their stance near the end of the war to build a new anti-Japanese coalition, reaching out to groups who had been fighting them all along. The BIA—which had cooperated with the IJA and even attacked and occupied Karen and highland areas—turned against the Japanese in March 1945 and helped force them out of Rangoon by May. But Karens and hill tribes did not forget the behavior of Burmese allied with and supported by Japanese power, and it solidified their resistance to lowland domination (chapter 11).

**Nagas and the battles of Kohima and Imphal.** The war first affected Nagas when the 1942 retreat of British and Chinese armies from Burma to India precipitated a flood of refugees across the border, causing food shortages and disease, including a dysentery epidemic that killed thousands of Nagas. Local people joined in to help with the emergency, building camps and evacuating the ill or wounded.\(^{24}\) Their crucial role, though, came two years later in the Imphal-Kohima battles.

In December 1942, Ursula Graham Bower set up the V Force network of Naga and Kuki scouts watching the border for the first signs of invasion. This unit, run by the so-called “Queen of the Nagas,” became one of the most widely told stories of the war.\(^{25}\) After eighteen months of vigilance, they reported sighting fifty enemy soldiers in March 1944. Bower recalls that she and her 150 scouts
were armed only with “one Service rifle, one single-barrelled shotgun, and seventy muzzleloaders.” V Force sent more weapons and supplies, with orders to report as long as possible. The group set up beacons and runners, and for three weeks lived ready to flee at any moment.\textsuperscript{26} The border intrusion was the start of the linked battles of Imphal and Kohima (March–July 1944), the turning point of the war in Southeast Asia. Imphal, Manipur’s capital, lies in the Manipur River Valley south of the Naga Hills. Kohima, northwest of Imphal, lay on the main supply route for Allied forces at Imphal. The sprawling battle stretched across Indigenous homelands along the Burma-India border. It was close and hard-fought, with heavy losses on both sides.\textsuperscript{27}

The smaller battle of Kohima, which more directly affected Naga people, lasted sixty-four days. A Naga village was situated adjacent to Kohima, and Naga (and other) villages occupied nearby hills. Because of the long history of interclan conflict, hill tribe villages were sited and built with attention to defense (ditches, walls, narrow approaches, and clear fields of fire). This made many of them tactical goals, destroyed as they were fought over. Both armies also got food from villages, used them to house wounded, and sought labor and information from residents. Japanese were at a disadvantage, since they were strangers and had to rely on English-language phrasebooks to communicate. The British benefited from long-standing personal relationships, especially on the part of Deputy Commissioner Charles Pawsey, who was well known among local Nagas.\textsuperscript{28}

Naga help was essential to the British for combat, for labor, and for intelligence. Among regular troops at Kohima and surrounding areas were Nagas, along with men from other hill tribes. Naga Havildar [sergeant] Sohevu Angami recalls that he first became aware of the enemy’s arrival when a Kuki comrade was shot. Hill tribe men enlisted in the First Assam Regiment, Assam Rifles, Naga Levies, and other units received many military citations including Military Crosses. Civilian Nagas also fought, ambushing Japanese foraging parties and other soldiers. Hundreds of men and women did military labor—often under fire—digging trenches, evacuating wounded, carrying supplies, interpreting, and guiding patrols. Hilly terrain limited the use of vehicles, requiring mules and human carriers along with air drops. Though they were noncombatants, carriers and guides were in the line of fire, and were killed, shot, beaten, and robbed of their loads by Japanese patrols.\textsuperscript{29}

Naga police constables and civilians also contributed valuable intelligence, evaluating routes for marches and supplementing patrol reports. Pawsey several times argued against acting on official intelligence when local people were giving
him different, more accurate information. Nagas could infiltrate Japanese lines, and several conducted dangerous spying missions. Perhaps most surprising to the British, they did this work consistently despite the dangers of combat and the threat of Japanese reprisals and did not ask for—and often refused—payment.30

What of those who did not support the Allies? Guite reminds us that the “dominant historiography” of tribes loyally aiding the British needs to be corrected, especially regarding Kuki, who were hostile to the colonial regime before, during, and after the war. Many who at first joined V Force, Chin Hills Battalions, or other Allied units eventually left or shifted to fight with the IJA or INA.31 British officers spoke of cooperation with Japanese as “treachery” or “pusillanimous conduct” or “giving in” or playing a “double game,”32 but as we saw in chapter 2, Indigenous communities pursued their own goals. Hill tribes in Burma and Northeast India were (and are) consistently seeking autonomy.

**Battlefield Islands**

The Indigenous peoples of the islands of the Southwest Pacific, Southeast Asia, and the Central Pacific occupied three different theaters of war. In August 1942, the Allied counterattack on Japanese-held areas in the Southwest Pacific began with the Battle of Guadalcanal and moved through the Solomon Islands and New Guinea. In island Southeast Asia (including Timor, Borneo, and the Philippines), Allied guerrillas mounted anti-Japanese resistance in anticipation of eventual counterinvasion. The US Navy-led Central Pacific offensive began with the recapture of the Gilbert Islands in November 1943, followed by attacks on Japan’s Micronesian territories. Few Micronesians were engaged in military roles, but in the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asian islands both sides enlisted Islanders for war.

**New Guinea: Soldiers and Carriers**

Japan attacked the Southwest Pacific simultaneously with assaults on Southeast Asia. The islands were scarcely defended; the January 1942 invasion was swift and overwhelming. Nearly all civilian Europeans fled, and the small Australian infantry and police detachments were immediately overrun or disbanded for their own safety.33 Japanese forces sped through the Bismarck Archipelago and the northern Solomon Islands (New Britain, Bougainville, and nearby islands), landing in March along New Guinea’s north coast at Salamaua, Lae, and Fin-schhafen, and in Dutch New Guinea. Tens of thousands of troops and workers built Rabaul (New Britain) into a major air and naval base.

But the southward rush proved too great a reach; by mid-1942 the tide began to turn. The Battle of the Coral Sea (May 1942) blocked Japan from naval
MAP 3.1. The Pacific Islands. Reproduced with permission.
invasion of Port Moresby, and Allies repulsed landings at Buna and Milne Bay in battles that lasted through the rest of the year. The main link across the Owen Stanley Range of eastern New Guinea was the Kokoda Trail, a steep track that became a war zone from July–November 1942 as Australian forces repelled Japanese efforts to reach Port Moresby by land. By late 1942, the Japanese were in retreat. Most of New Guinea remained in Allied control, though combat continued on the north coast and on some islands for the next three years, trapping civilians between shifting front lines (chapter 8). In March 1942, Papua and New Guinea civil affairs were merged under the Australian military government as ANGAU (Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit), which managed labor and production for the war effort. The Allied cause strengthened as American industry funnelled resources into the area. Japanese supply lines, in contrast, were strangled by US Navy control of sealanes. Troops were forced to reduce rations drastically, then to survive on their own, planting gardens and living on what they could extract from local villages.

Japan sent more than three hundred thousand men to New Guinea and nearby islands, where over half died, more from sickness and starvation than combat. At least a million Americans and nearly half a million Australians, as well as New Zealanders, Dutch, Fijians, Tongans, and others made up the Allied forces in the region. (Australians were the major presence in Papua and New Guinea, with US bases and operations along the coast and dominating the Solomon Islands campaign.) They were also helped by Islanders in combat roles. Unlike men in Burma or other Southeast Asian colonies, Papua and New Guinea men had not been recruited into imperial armies before the war, but they had been enlisted as police. The Royal Papuan Constabulary (RPC), initially dissolved in the face of invasion, was soon reconstituted, first for policing in non-combat areas but later also as combat infantry, scouts, and spies. Some three thousand policemen took on military roles and another 955 were medical orderlies, winning both military and civilian awards for bravery and service.

The Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB) was founded in 1940 as a unit of the Australian Army. Colonial whites and the civil administration had initially resisted enlisting Indigenous men for combat, due both to racist devaluation of their capacity and fear that it would be harder to control a trained and armed population after the war. Despite such opposition, combat units were formed, and many Islanders served with valor. PIB were among the first Allied troops to encounter the Japanese and fought alongside Australians in Kokoda and later campaigns. PIB success led to the formation of two New Guinea Infantry Battalions (NGIB), which were combined with PIB in November 1944 as the Pacific Islands Regiment (PIR). More than 3,500 Papua and New Guinea men served in
the PIR, earning a reputation as skilled and effective fighters. But enlistees also experienced and protested discrimination in rations, uniforms, pay, and pensions, and discipline problems contributed to PIR demobilization at the end of the war.58

These units worked primarily at patrolling or ambushing and harassing the enemy, often in association with Australians or Americans. PIR received eleven battle honors along with many awards for individual servicemen, a number of whom took on dangerous tasks entering Japanese areas disguised as civilians. Lance Corporal Bengari, for instance, masqueraded as a porter to report details of military dispositions in Salamaua. Bengari later received a Military Medal after a second undercover reconnaissance. Sergeant William Matpi became well known for his combat abilities; his Distinguished Conduct Medal citation indicated that he had personally killed more than one hundred Japanese.39

Japanese commanders also recruited, trained, and deployed Islanders in military units and used them as guides, scouts, and informants. Impressive early victories and local resentment of European rule won them support, notably in northeastern New Guinea and parts of Bougainville. After the Allies gained strength, though, more village leaders cooperated with them or requested arms to mount their own anti-Japanese guerrilla activity.40

Among those best known for assisting Allies was Paramount Luluai (chief) Golpak of New Britain, who, at great personal cost, ran an escape line for downed airmen and protected European coastwatchers. One of them recalled Golpak reassuring him, “I’ve got the Japanese captain in my pocket and there’s no need to worry about them.” But conditions grew more dangerous. At one point, “Golpak fled into the bush with two airmen he was sheltering. His loyal followers were tortured and killed, his son-in-law Bubu executed, his daughter Nowamon raped and Pamar was appointed to his office. Yet he never lost his nerve, kept ahead of his hunters and continued to exert influence over his people on behalf of the Australians.”51 Some double agents survived for long periods, like Kiroro on north Bougainville, who “became the confidant of the Japanese commander” and forwarded information to the Allies for three years. Reverend Usaia Sotutu, a Fijian missionary who had lived for twenty years on Bougainville, refused a Japanese offer of safe conduct, sent his wife and children to safety, and risked his life to assist the Allies.42

The largest use of New Guinea’s people was not as soldiers or spies, but as military porters. Historians at the time, and increasingly since, recognize supply carriers as key in enabling Allied forces to fight and move across difficult terrain lacking transportation infrastructure. Japanese operations, in contrast, came to be limited by a lack of such support.43 Japan brought tens of thousands of recruited and forced laborers and POWs to New Guinea, but this could not
compensate for a lack of local labor for tactical moves, which became one cause of military failure. (Wartime labor is described more fully in chapter 9.)

Carrying to the front lines was the most dangerous work, apart from that of scouts, guides, and soldiers themselves. The job entailed hauling food, ammunition, and other supplies, evacuating wounded, and much other labor—in the battle of Sanananda in late 1942, porters hauled tanks across creeks in the swampy ground. Among the more than two thousand deaths of Allied laborers in New Guinea, at least forty-six were killed by enemy fire, and ninety-one were wounded. Several men acting as “boss boys” of carrier lines received Loyal Service Medals. When they could, carriers fled danger, escapes that military reports characterized as “desertions,” but porters in combat zones inevitably came under fire. In a January 1943 Australian raid on Mubo in northeastern New Guinea, the officer responsible for the four hundred porters supporting three hundred Australian soldiers objected to taking them close to the fighting. The commander’s response: “They’ll have to stay.”

Solomon Islands: Coastwatchers and Battles

Most of the European administrators, planters, and missionaries in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate evacuated in the face of invasion, but Resident Commissioner William Marchant and five other officials stayed, recruiting a network to report enemy movements. The local constabulary, hastily formed into the Solomon Islands Defence Force (SIDF), at first with fewer than two hundred men, scattered to their homes, joined the coastwatchers, or went into hiding on the island of Malaita, which became the center of Marchant’s phantom government and an SIDF training site.

The Japanese took the colonial capital of Tulagi and north Guadalcanal in early May 1942 and remained unopposed for more than three months. They established the new order quickly, contacting headmen, claiming victory, and promising rewards while demanding labor. Despite intense pursuit, coastwatchers ran an effective clandestine intelligence system. In New Georgia, New Britain, and the Solomons, about a thousand Islanders operated under mostly European leaders who depended on local people for supplies, spying, and scouting, and—vital—to protect them from discovery. As Marchant commented, “Clearly, if the natives were to prove disloyal, the whole project was suicidal.” Training scouts in surveillance and combat was straightforward—many had been policemen—though limited by lack of weapons until they could capture more. Civilians, especially village headmen, also supplied information and other
support. Women took part in close-to-home action; for example, keeping a Japanese patrol busy with a meal while alerting nearby scouts.\textsuperscript{49}

Many stories recount Islanders’ bravery in infiltrating Japanese activities. One scout described a landing party’s equipment in such detail that he was asked how he did it: “I wanted to know exactly what they’d got, so I helped them unload it.” Steven Vinale Zaku describes a ruse in which a few men would don tattered clothes and pretend to encounter Japanese by accident, chatting with them until they got the information they wanted. Gumu, a scout with Martin Clemens, took subterfuge further, going to work for a Japanese officer so he could steal a charging motor needed for Clemens’s radio. On Santa Isabel, headman Mostyn Kiokilo of Buala village repeatedly visited the Japanese base at Suavana to offer fruits and vegetables (wearing a coconut-frond visor and a loincloth, pretending not to speak English), established friendly relations with the commander, and brought back reports that identified bombing targets. Scouts could also use apparent civilian roles for sabotage, as when a man sent to work as a porter for the Japanese “accidentally” smashed a radio he was carrying. Still, not all coastwatcher-Islander interactions were heroic or even cooperative. District Officer and SIDF Major Donald Kennedy was famously harsh to his men, and civilians’ willingness to help varied, with some showing hostility and looting coastwatchers’ supply caches.\textsuperscript{50}

Japanese occupation forces also built intelligence networks, run by military police, but lacked the advantages of local familiarity and shared language. The longer the Japanese remained in control with no sign of a military response, and the more effectively they cultivated good relations, the harder it was for Allied agents to operate.\textsuperscript{51} People living near Japanese bases got to know the men stationed there. When a plane ditched near Baolo village on Santa Isabel, James Sao and others hosted the crew overnight, then paddled them back to the Suavana base, where the Japanese filled their two canoes with food, clothing, and other gifts. Sao and others visited the base several times, noting that “The Japanese were good people too. They didn’t make all sorts of trouble. They were just young men.”\textsuperscript{52}

Yet overall, most Solomon Islanders assisted the Allies, increasingly so after offensives began and Allied strength became evident. The Battle for Guadalcanal was the first major counteroffensive. It began with eleven thousand US Marines landing on Guadalcanal and Tulagi on August 7, 1942, and grew to a massive engagement, killing 23,800 Japanese and 1,660 Americans, and eventually sending more than 124,000 Americans to the islands. Solomon Islanders were involved with this battle from its start. Three young men who had been at school in Fiji volunteered to accompany Americans ashore. Martin Clemens came in from his coastwatching post to join the US Marine beachhead at Lunga and was given the job of organizing scouts and guides. At one point, he and his
men were issued weapons and ordered into the defense line, but for the most part they operated outside the perimeter, scouting, guiding US Marine and Army patrols, and ambushing small parties of Japanese.55

As in all wars, much bravery was anonymous, but a few men became known heroes. The most famous Solomon Islander scout was Sergeant Major (later Sir) Jacob Vouza, a policeman who had retired in early 1941, but offered his services when war broke out, joining the SIDF. Working under Clemens, Vouza organized scouts in his home area on Guadalcanal. He was awarded the British George Medal and American Silver Star after being captured and tortured by Japanese to reveal the positions of American troops, which he refused to do. He freed himself and despite grievous wounds returned to US lines, offering valuable intelligence to the Marines.54 A statue memorializing him stands in the capital of Honiara (chapter 13).

The SIDF—eventually enlisting more than eight hundred men—expanded into what Americans called the South Pacific Scouts, technically a British unit including British, New Zealand, Fijian, Tongan, and Solomon Islands soldiers working with US forces throughout the Southwest Pacific campaign.55

In *Bikfala Faei/The Big Death*, a dual-language collection of oral histories, several SIDF men tell their stories, including George Maelalo of Malaita. He joined the SIDF at the age of eighteen, and with twenty-two other Solomon Islands men trained with Fiji Commandos on Guadalcanal, then took part in landings on New Georgia and Bougainville. Only seven of the twenty-three survived to return home. Maelalo recounts his naivety at the start of war when the district officer recruited him along with a friend, Frank Maomaasi (who was later killed). He describes the hard work of training, the fear and novelty of war, conditions of camp and battle. “It was a good life in some ways; very bad in other ways.” When two men (Lio from Ulawa, Selo from Kawara’ae) died in a night bombing, the others were called to see their bodies; “One by one we said, ‘What can I say? I may be next.’ We said, ‘Let us bury them. That is all we can do.’” On Bougainville, Maelalo took on a dangerous mission to disable a Japanese radio installation—an effort in which US and Australian soldiers had already been killed: “one day some men came to camp and asked if anyone wanted to volunteer to go up there, to give his life to save us. I thought, ‘My goodness, the Australians have gone the Americans have gone. What good can we Solomon Islanders do? Now we must represent ourselves in the face of this challenge.’” Maelalo volunteered and succeeded. After three years of fighting, he returned home, but like other combat veterans, he did not easily leave the war behind. He found it hard to adjust to life in his village, and became a seaman, a career he pursued for the next eighteen years.56
Southeast Asia Battlefield Islands

The islands of Southeast Asia, from the Philippines west to Sumatra, include some three hundred ethnic groups, among them many tribal peoples in island interiors who, at the time, were only marginally linked with Dutch, British, Portuguese, or American colonial authority. Japanese occupiers sought to absorb the majority populations of these islands into the empire through Japanization programs, integrating local elites and labor into the war effort. Some nationalist leaders resisted the Japanese, as they had resisted other foreign control; others saw collaboration as a route to independence. But Japanese power seldom reached far into the interior mountains and forests where many Indigenous groups lived. Here, Allies tried to build covert intelligence and guerrilla networks, with varying success.57

Philippines. The Philippine Islands, a US possession since 1898, was transitioning to independence when war began. The archipelago held a majority Filipino population and many small-scale tribal communities, most in the mountainous interiors of larger islands. Unlike the hill tribes of Burma and India, recruited for British military service, Indigenous men had not been recruited by the United States (though Filipinos had been). But they were affected by more than four centuries of conflict: the Spanish conquest of the islands, the Spanish-American war, the US war against Filipino independence (1899–1902), and ongoing opposition to central government. In these wars, the interiors of the larger islands served as a refuge and support system for resisters.

Japan attacked the Philippines on December 8, 1941. The joint Filipino-American Army fought until defeat at Corregidor the following May. Japanese occupation, lasting to July 1945, focused on urban and heavily populated areas. The hard-to-access island interiors became sites of anti-Japanese activity by Allied guerrillas (Americans, Filipinos, Australians) and Communists (Hukbalahap), and also of raids by “bandits” and by mountain tribes with their own goals.58 Occupation forces in turn used local antagonisms, persuasion, threats, and eventually intimidation, torture, and execution to pursue guerrillas.

Memoirs of US officers describe how, at the start of Japanese occupation, Americans and Filipinos who escaped into the hills found safety with tribal communities. For the most part guerrilla leaders worked with Filipino troops, but some recruited and fought with Indigenous men. US Army Lieutenant Donald Blackburn and Major Russ Volckmann in late 1942 made their way (with the help of Igorot guides) to Ifugao province, “headhunter country,” where they got help from “native chiefs” such as Timicpao and Kimayong to set up a guerilla
network. Henry Clay Conner lived with Agta (“Negritos”) for nearly three years and organized a unit of several hundred guerrillas. Australian Major Rex Blow and US Army Lieutenant Colonel Wendell Fertig worked with Moros, Moslem groups in the southern Philippines.\(^5\)

Like Burma, the Philippines had had an independence movement for decades before World War II. Some Filipinos saw collaboration with Japan as a path to that goal, while some minorities saw loyalty to the United States as a way to protect themselves against domination by the Filipino majority. The occupiers faced a confused situation, unsure whom to trust or how to set up army and police forces without indirectly arming anti-Japanese guerrillas.\(^6\) As an example of the complexity, historian Yoshiaki Yoshimi tells the story of Akiyoshi Fujioka, a member of a six-thousand-man force sent to the island of Jolo in October 1944 to confront the American army, but also facing Moro people defending their homes with US-supplied weapons. Moro might be represented in history books as anti-Japanese or as pro-Japanese, but it would be more accurate to say they sought freedom from any outside power.\(^6^1\) They had fought the Spanish; they fought the Americans; they fought the Japanese; and today they continue to fight control by Manila.

**Borneo.** Japan conquered Borneo in its rapid offensive of December 1941–January 1942. The IJA occupied British areas in the north of the island, and the Japanese Navy set up a civil administration in southern Borneo (part of the Netherlands East Indies), supported by those who saw them as liberators from Dutch rule. The north saw greater resistance, including an October 1943 revolt by Chinese and Indigenous groups, followed by deadly reprisals and tightened security. Among the occupation government’s civil defense plans was a North Borneo Volunteer Corps that recruited more than a thousand youths from various tribes for a two-year training course. Dayaks in particular were recruited for policing and intelligence work. But Japanese power did not extend far into Borneo’s interior, where Allied agents, parachuted in and supplied by air, built a resistance network.\(^6^2\)

One of the best-known guerrilla operations was Major Tom Harrisson’s Z Force that recruited a thousand Dayaks, Ibans, Tagals, Muruts, and others, part of a wider behind-the-lines effort in interior Sarawak (northwest Borneo) in 1945, in preparation for the Australian invasion of June.\(^6^3\) The more the Japanese occupation authorities alienated the tribes by demanding supplies and limiting trade, the more willing Ibans and others were to join the resistance. The usual stereotypes attended these fighters: that they were individualistic, difficult to control, “untrustworthy”—all, historian Alan Powell says, characteristics
needed for effective guerrilla warfare. True, untrained tribesmen fled in the face of a firefight, but their own tactics of felling trees on passing boats or picking off patrols with poison darts were effective and their local knowledge was invaluable. Borneo’s interior tribes are among the most visible Indigenous combatants in English-language war reporting; chapter 7 considers why foreigners found them fascinating.

Sakhalin Island and War’s End

Perhaps the last place where front lines crossed Indigenous homelands was the island of Sakhalin on the contested USSR-Japan border. The USSR declared war on Japan on August 8, 1945, and three days later launched a massive land, sea, and air offensive. The invasion of Sakhalin overwhelmed the unprepared Japanese, who surrendered on August 23. Most inhabitants were repatriated to Japan over the next years, but Ainu, Nivkh, and Uilta were, of course, already at home, and those who remained faced dramatic changes under Soviet collectivization and assimilationist policies as Sakhalin was integrated into the USSR (chapter 11).

While Ainu served in regular forces, Japan classified men of smaller Indigenous groups as “natives” (not citizens, therefore not subject to conscription), but both Japan and the USSR used them to patrol along the border. A Uilta man named Dahinien Gendanu, born in 1926 in southern Sakhalin, was called up for Japan’s secret service in August 1942. Overjoyed at becoming a Japanese soldier, he served loyally in challenging missions on the border, sometimes against other Uilta. Despite their service, Tokyo declared these recruits not officially Japanese, ineligible for evacuation when the USSR occupied Sakhalin. Soviets arrested Uilta and Nivkh men for “espionage” and sent them to labor camps, where some forty to fifty died. Surviving prisoners were only gradually repatriated—some not until twenty years later. After more than seven years as a Soviet POW, Gendanu arrived in Japan in 1955, but Tokyo rejected his application for a military pension, saying he had been a civilian employee, not a Japanese soldier.

Throughout war zones, Indigenous military roles in their own territory ranged from enlistment in regular forces, to portering during battles, to unofficial use of civilians as spies. But this is only part of the story of Indigenous combat. In the global strategy of war, thousands of Indigenous men, like Joseph Medicine Crow, whose story is told in the next chapter, spent their formative years fighting or working far from home.