



The Coastwatcher & the Scout

The unlikely friendship between a Scottish-born coastwatcher and his native scout; forged during wartime in the Solomon Islands, it sustained them both for a lifetime

INTRODUCTION

Before 1941, when the Japanese came to the Solomon Islands, the relationship between the British colonial *masta* and the Melanesian native was simple, if patronizing and often resented. The Japanese came flying a banner that proclaimed “Asian for Asians”, and promised to banish the white man forever. The Europeans obligingly disappeared, leaving a handful of volunteer coastwatchers behind. Totally isolated and hiding in the bush, they were dependent on native loyalty for everything, including their lives. On some nearby islands, Europeans including missionaries and nuns were handed over by natives to be slain by the Japanese. In the British Solomon Islands, no missionary, no coastwatcher, nor any downed allied pilot was ever betrayed.

The natives revealed a heretofore unsuspected political acumen. They saw through the propaganda and rhetoric and quickly realized that their only real choice was between the old white men and the new white men. It perhaps speaks well of British colonial stewardship that the Japanese garnered enough hatred in a matter of months to persuade most of the natives to support the allied cause. This support had to be nurtured carefully, however, because the Solomon Islanders perceived their former masters simply as men – vulnerable, no longer omniscient, and now dependent on them.

Prologue

Kirk McRae sat under a coconut palm, a few feet away from a handy slit trench. In the moonless night, illumination flickered between pitch-black, punctuated by the flash of bursting shells, and the occasional searing brilliance of a parachute flare. Eerie silence provided sporadic and usually brief interludes between the rising crescendos of automatic weapon fire. Human sounds had little chance against the full chorus of military mayhem, save the occasional bone chilling shriek that marked a man's final protest against his fate.

No place within the small perimeter around Henderson Field defended by the Marines was far enough away from the battle to be considered safe, but only those in the improvised positions on the banks of the Tenaru River had any idea how the battle was going. Not that they had a clear picture fighting nearly invisible movement among the trees and along the beach across the river. Arisaka rifle shots and the woodpecker-like chatter of the type 92 heavy machine guns along with an occasional shout of "U.S. Maline, you die tonight" made the identity of the figures known, but not their numbers.

An American officer came running up and sprawled next to him. By the dying light of a flare, Kirk recognized Lieutenant Fordham, an aide to General Alexander Vandegrift, who commanded the 1st Marine Division. They had seized the partially constructed airfield a fortnight before, and were now facing the first attempt by the former owners to recover their property.

"Quite a show, Leftenant," Kirk greeted him in an accent flavored with a wee hint of the highlands. "I trust our side is winning."

"We're holding our own only we don't really know what we're up against. The old man wanted to know if you had anything from your scouts."

McRae motioned towards a Marine Corps issue field telephone at his knee. "If I had any intelligence, I would have used the tele."

"I told him that, but he thought the line might be broken. I think he's grasping at straws. We need information bad."

"My best scout, Joseph Gubo, crossed over the Tenaru two days ago, but he's not been seen since. I'm beginning to fear he could have been killed or captured."

“Pretty much the same thing when it comes to the Japs. If he was captured though, he knows a good bit about our position...,” he left the thought incomplete.

“Gubo is strong and loyal, he wouldn’t betray any information,” insisted Kirk.

The Marine shook his head. “The Nips can make anyone spill their guts. I’ll head back but pass on anything that might tell us how many are over there and where they’re at... We think maybe we can flank ‘em but we might fall into a trap without knowing more.”

Kirk nodded his understanding and turned his attention back to the ongoing battle, trying not to linger on Joseph’s fate. Tough, headstrong Joseph Gubo, the proud former Sergeant Major of the constabulary. He was independent and inclined to take matters in his own hands, often exceeding his authority. It had brought the two of them into frequent conflict before the war. Joseph was short, like most Melanesians, but stocky. He could travel rapidly along the rugged trails, often leaving an exhausted Kirk struggling to keep up.

Joseph was as black and roughhewn as Scottish-born Kirk was delicate and pale. They had absolutely nothing in common as far as background, outlook, or way of life. Only loyalty and a sense of duty made them allies. It was an uneasy alliance at first, but after a year of hiding from the Japanese as the only white man on the island, Kirk had learned to trust him in a way that he had trusted no man before.

An hour later, a jeep whining in low gear felt its way through the palms and stopped next to Kirk. A corporal saluted. “You McRae?”

Kirk acknowledged the typically informal Yank greeting. Compared to the British soldiers he had known, the Marines dressed and acted like a troop of brigands. Despite that, he found them tough, professional and surprisingly likable.

One of your scouts has crawled through the lines, more dead than alive. He’s asking for you and ... well, you better hurry...”

Kirk jumped in and held on for dear life as the stiffly sprung little utility vehicle bounced over the rough ground. Their journey ended right at the riverbank battle-zone and the driver and passenger bailed out of the jeep and stayed low as rifle rounds sizzled above their heads. One struck the jeep with a metallic *thwack*.

“Over here,” a voice called.

They crawled over to a Navy hospital corpsman who held a plasma bottle over a figure whose black skin and blood soaked rags made him almost invisible in the dark underbrush.

“You the *bos*, he’s been asking for?” the corpsman asked.

“Yes. He’s my chief scout. What happened to him?”

“Goddamn sadistic bastards,” the corpsman muttered. “They used him for bayonet practice...”

“How bad is he hurt?” Kirk asked.”

“Plenty bad. Best I can tell in the dark, he’s been severely beaten – broken ribs, maybe a ruptured spleen. He’s got five bayonet wounds in the chest – and some samurai son-of-a bitch bloodied his fancy sword trying to slash his throat. I’m amazed he’s alive.”

“But he is alive. He’ll survive?”

The corpsman hesitated before shaking his head. “I’ll be damn surprised if he makes it through the night. But get him to the field hospital. They sometimes work miracles.”

Kirk leaned close to the familiar craggy face. He felt a hand grip his arm, but with little strength, and he saw the agony that distorted Joseph’s features. He turned to the corpsman, “has he been given morphine?”

“No sir, he wouldn’t take any until we could find you. He said he had to report.”

“Can you get me a field telephone and patch me through to Vandegrift’s headquarters.”

A gunny silently handed a receiver to Kirk who got Fordham on the line. He leaned back down, “You can report now Sgt. Gubo, General Vandegrift is listening.”

In his pain, Joseph’s speech reverted to the local *Pijin*. “The Jap no very big fella. He no three chow line, all man’o’war soldiers. No gun very big fella, few gun, very fast fella.”

After years in the island, Kirk understood perfectly. Counting soldiers by comparing them to the typical Marine Corps company chow line was actually his idea when he realized that the natives had no clear concept of large numbers. He knew “man’o’war” meant Navy, so these weren’t Imperial Japanese Army troops.

“The Japanese forces are not very large, about 900 – 1,000, and they’re special naval landing troops, not IJA. They have a few machine guns but no heavy weapons,” Kirk translated on the phone.

“Perfect,” exclaimed Fordham, “just what we needed. Ask him about reserves. Find out if he knows how well their flanks are covered.”

He leaned back down, “Sgt. Gubo, General Vandegrift thanks you. He asks if the soldiers are all here, or are there more in the bush.”

Joseph shook his head. “All here, no fella not here. Gubo go round Jap fella easy.”

The corpsman shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t know how he got here at all, but there damn sure wasn’t anything easy about it,” he whispered.

Kirk took the receiver back. “He says the entire force is here at the beach and their flank is open.” He listened and nodded before giving the receiver back to the gunny.

“Sgt. Gubo, General Vandergrift says you must let the doctor fella give you medicine to stopim pain. That is a direct order.” Kirk knew Joseph would never defy an order from the American war chief he so admired.

The bloody warrior nodded and the corpsman administered the morphine. He was lifted reverently into the back of the jeep by Marines who saluted as he was driven away. Many were the products of a racist upbringing, but all of them respected courage and loyalty above all else, and knew it when they saw it. Kirk rode in the back cradling his head and soothingly stroking the wiry black hair. Joseph grabbed Kirk’s arm and pulled him back down. “I tolkim nogat, I tell Jap fella nothing” he whispered.

CHAPTER 1

The fresh-faced young man stepped off the diminutive rust stained inter-island steamer and into his new life. His wardrobe and pasty complexion loudly proclaimed his newness to the tropics, as if such proclamation were necessary in a world where all white man knew each other. He looked around the dock, having been told he would be met, but saw no likely candidates.

“Are you Mr. MacRae?” a slightly impatient voice demanded in pure Oxfordian diction.

It took a second for Kirk to register that the voice belonged to the very black man who stood in front of him. He had the slightly condescending manner of a butler and was dressed formally compared to the other natives. That is, he was dressed in a white shirt with a black vest. Below the waist, he like all the others, wore nothing but a short kilt.

“I’m MacRae,” he acknowledged.

“I’m Samuel Mewa, your chief aide and clerk,” the man announced proudly extending a hand. “Welcome to Tulagi.”