

Somewhere in New Guinea  
 Tuesday, ~~March 4,~~ 1944  
*April*

Dearest Inez, Gene, Carol, Nan and Sue,

From the looks of the sketches--some of em--copied here, you might think this is a wild and savage place. Well, it is, I reckon; about as wild and savage a place that is left in the world. But, really the natives, hereabouts at least, aren't so fierce as these drawings would lead you to believe. They are hard workers--sort of after the fashion of the Mississippi cornfield negro, I admit--and apparently happy over the encroachment of civilization upon their territory. That is, of course, if you could call this business of war a product of civilization.

Some of the Boongs were employed cutting the kunai grass around our camp area last week. You children would have gotten a big kick out of them. Dressed every way imaginable, some in discarded khaki shorts, some in old wool sweaters--hot as it is--some in bright colored calico "sarongs" and many of them merely wearing their native "petticoat"--a couple of dirty pieces of cloth tied around the waist with a thong.

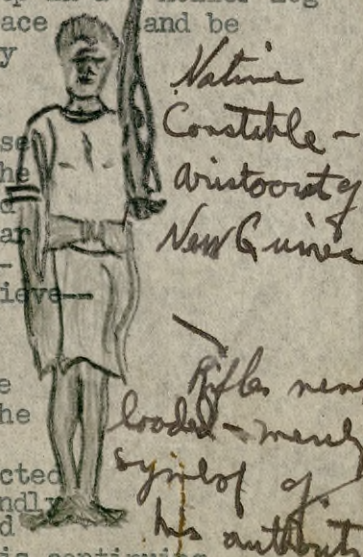
As they took their leisurely time whacking at the grass with their GI machetes, they would hum some sort of guttural tune to themselves. Suddenly one--apparently their chief or boss--would let out a whoop and then the whole lot would start such a yodeling as you never heard--much like the wordless songs of the negro field workers back home. All their songs have a mournful sound. One particular ditty sounded much like "I'd druther drink muddy water and sleep in a holler log than stay in dis place and be treated like a dirty

dog--you recall that old darky song. Of course their singing was very choppy and disconnected and I'm surprised anybody can understand their Melanese dialect. Many of the missionaries do understand the language, however. Near here is a Catholic priest--of the Jesuit order I believe--who has ~~mean~~ conducted a mission for many years among the natives. When the Japs invaded this area he slipped off into the mountains and was protected for many months by friendly natives. He has returned now to his mission and is continuing his work. Most of the natives understand a smattering of English--with an Australian accent--and a good many speak fluently. These mostly are the youngsters who have been



The Smiling Hole - "Gold Mine" of New Guinea -

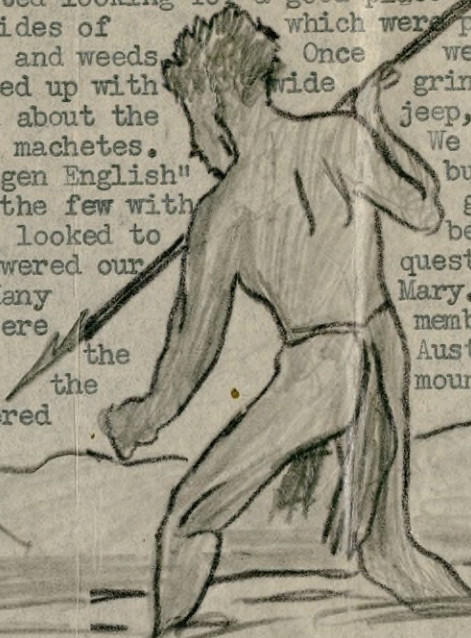
Natives' mode of travel along the coast





educated in the missions. Usually the native the Aussies hire as boss are these boys who can speak English best.

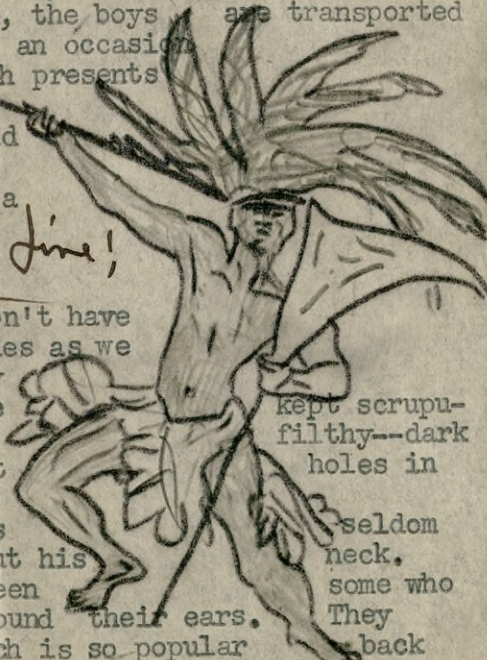
The other day I stopped my jeep and called to a group of boys. I ran across along a jungle trail. They approached warily at first, holding great clubs in what seemed to me to be a most threatening manner. They jabbered among themselves for a few minutes while Morel and I started looking for a good place to turn the jeep around on the narrow trail, both sides of which were pitted with old-Jap foxholes, now overgrown with grass and weeds. Once we caught the word "American" and the natives brightened up with wide grins. They all then laid down their sticks and crowded about the jeep, fingering our jackets and admiring our rifles and machetes. We attempted to talk with them, trying English and "pidgen English" but were getting nowhere. Then one old man--one of the few with graying hair that we have seen--called over a youth who looked to be about 18. The boy listened to us awhile and then answered our questions. "My house long time away. Many houses. Many boy. Mary. Many long time." The boy is a member of the Angau. Later we found out these natives were recruited from villages over the mountains and brought to the large compounds scattered



spearing Fishing in the Coral Sea

around here. The Aussie recruiting sergeants go to the villages in trucks and ask the chiefs for a certain number of boys, according to the size of the villages. The chief selects the candidates and they are examined to determine the strong and healthy ones. Then these chosen are signed up for a year or eighteen months in the Angau. They are brought by truck to the compounds where they live until their term of enlistment expires. About once a month, I understand, the boys are transported back to their own villages for the week end. This is an occasion for much celebration, of course, the boys showering rich presents upon their women--bright colored cloth, bits of metal, old leather straps and such junk as they are able to find while working about the army camps. Native laborers are paid about 10 shillings a month--about nineteen dollars a year. They are paid in cash, and the Aussies, smart fellows, operate commissaries at which they sell cloth and trinkets to the natives. So, you can see the money gets a rapid turnover. But, the natives don't have many necessities to buy--and they know nothing of luxuries as we know them. They get their food and live better than they ever did back in their villages. The Angau compounds are kept scrupulously clean, while the native villages are literally filthy--dark holes in grass thatched hovels which look and smell much like rat an oat field.

Boong Jim!



The Boong dearly loves to dress up and it's seldom that you see one who hasn't a string of bright junk about his neck. Many have large slits cut in their ear lobes and I've seen some who wear bright red and green and black rings completely around their ears. They look very much like bits of celluloid spiral binding which is so popular back home--and may be just that.

Several times lately one or two native boys have come down to our "private swim hole," and they wade solemnly off into the water, ~~manadim~~ and proceed to bathe right alongside us. They will stand for hours waist deep in the swift water, soaping themselves and occasionally ducking to the bottom of the stream to cool off. Then



they will swim about a little and climb back onto the bank or a log and squat in the sun. These boys are very modest and it's seldom that one goes in the creek without his G string on. Usually they just wade out in their best Sunday suits, and then sit in the sun until they dry off. The natives' ~~most~~ most prized possessions seem to be an old knapsack or gas mask carrier, hanging about their necks and containing food, coconuts--for water--and bits of odd junk--and a mirror. They will sit--or squat rather, for I've never seen one actually sit down--and look at their ugly faces in the mirror for hours. They all carry a sort of comb made of bamboo--it has a long handle and is shaped very like a large fork. They ~~run~~ run this comb through their hair in quick jerky motions, trying to take the kinks out of their wook, apparently, but only succeeding in making it stand out like the quills on a porcupine all over their heads. Most of the natives dye the tops of their mops a shade of red which reminds me of some of Mississippi's clay hills. I suppose they regard their "hair-dye" as attractive but it surely does make them look wierd to me.

One day I picked up a native boy--they are inveterate hitch-hikers and can thumb a ride as adeptly as any Old Miss college boy. Out of curiosity I persuaded him to take all the things out of his sack--an old medical kit with a broken strap. The bag contained a shucked coconut not yet punctured for its water, half a can of bully beef, quite rancid, a few dirty taros--a kind of yam which grows wild--a coil of copper wire, a torn bit of dirty yellow cloth, his bamboo comb, a broken piece of mirror, a colored bottle--and that's as far as I let him go. The odor of the meat was beginning to "get" me.

The Aussie Angau sergeants, by the way, discourage us from giving the Boong boys any kind of meat, for they will eat part of it and cache the remainder away in their knapsacks. The meat spoils, of course, very rapidly in this heat and the native eats it just the same, getting very sick. Then he is sent to the native hospital where he stays until he is "sick finis"--or well again.

The native will eat anything, apparently, and one of the island delicacies is a large white grub found in rotting tree trunks. One of our guide books--which tells how to live off the country when lost in the jungle--says that old sago palms are swarming with these grubs. "You can eat them raw if you are game," the text states. Ugh! I hope I never get that hungry. However, I suppose they might be as palatable to a turnip greens and potlikker taste as the fried snails offered at Delmonico's palatial eatery in New York.

Inez, I don't know how much you like this sort of letter, but I rather think the kids might like them--this is a strange place and interesting, but I hope none of my children ever see it--just living here is a mighty hard job, I tell you. Also, you may send some of this kind of letter to Jack Hancock from time to time--I promised him I would write some, but about one letter a night is as much as I can do--and sometimes not that. I know he won't mind them being relayed to him. You might ask him to return them when he is through with them.

I surely do miss you and you may be sure the happiest day of my life will be when I set foot back on good old USA soil--preferably Mississippi mud.

By the way, will you do something for me? Ask Mr. Terreson if he can find me a good camera and some film--I'd like something like an Eastman Bantam or something small, and at least a dozen rolls of film. I'd be glad to pay up to about \$50 for it and will send you the money, of course. If you do get one, be sure to register the package, air mail first class, then I'd stand a good chance of receiving it without too much delay. Also, could you send me some water colors, good grade, artist's crayons and drawing paper? I'd surely appreciate it.

I'm writing Beacham some Mother's Day instructions--which I hope will arrive not too late.

Lots of love and good night,

Q

