

Eban Edwards



Paul Edwards, Eban's father, was born in Australia to a family that was engaged in farming a rather large allotment in central Queensland in the early 1900's. During World War I, when sugar prices were at a peak, his parents lived a comfortable but not ostentatious life where the finer things became possible without sacrifice.

After graduation from college, Paul felt the need for adventure, and associated himself with a group of planters who set out to harvest the rich resources of New Guinea in a coffee raising venture.

He threw himself into the venture with a fervor that after a few years left him completely immersed in the native culture and customs. He took a Melanesian woman for a companion, and later made the not uncommon decision to make her his common-law wife.

A man-child was born, and as the son of a well-to-do expatriate was carefully educated by the mission schools in preparation for further education back in Australia. He was sent to a boarding school in Brisbane, and later to a Technical college. Eban turned out to be a talented rugby player as well as a competent scholar. He was handsome young man with features of the Melanesian and Anglo-saxon looks that combined the best of both cultures.

During his second year in Brisbane, his mother contracted cerebral malaria and after a painful illness died and was buried in the burial grounds in Madang. Eban's loss was great because his mother was the only real link with the Papuan culture that he was part of.

After graduation from the teacher education course, Eban returned to New Guinea and rejoined his father at the headquarters of the Bundaburg Plantation. The elder Edwards and his associates did rather well in the coffee and copra trade, and were now expanding to land they had acquired in the former German mandate in the northern part of the immense island. Even though the European political situation was getting more difficult every day, Bundaburg managed to work a large concession near Madang in a profitable manner.

Eban, because of his knowledge of Pidgin, went to Madang to act as liaison between the plantation managers and the contract laborers. Coffee bushes and tobacco were planted as well as new strains of coconut palm that produced a better grade of edible oil.

The start of war in Europe increased the market for the products of the plantation, and the Australian administrators of New Guinea were helpful in policing areas where the native population was still involved in village warfare.

Japan's position in the politics of the area was unclear even though the war against China was growing ever more fierce. Finally, when Japan attacked Singapore and Pearl Harbor, it became obvious that the Pacific Islands would be the next target.

All of the planters in the area met and discussed the implications of Japan's imperialism, and realized how precarious their position was. Because of the lack of protective forces it was felt that evacuation to Port Moresby in the south would be the only sensible move if the Japanese made any movement towards the Island.

Inevitably word of Jap landings on the islands north of New Guinea reached them, and it was obvious that the mainland would be the next target. Explaining to the natives was difficult at best, and preparations for evacuation went on in an orderly manner. The

administrators of ANG AU, of course were committed to stay, but the planters felt that the best course was to get out at the first signs of invasion. After Christmas in 1941, Coastal steamers were loaded with families, records and other valuables and one-by-one set sail for the long journey around the eastern end of the Island to Port Moresby.

Most of the families of the planters continued on to Australia, but many of the managers and owners stayed on at Moresby while they figured out how to cope with the coming invasion and its effect on their holdings. Eban's father, Paul, met regularly with other managers, and helped the Australia New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANG AU) revise maps of the North Coast, and of trails near the villages.

As teleradio reports come in from coastwatchers of landings and naval action, the planters became more involved with the war effort even though most of them were too old to take an active part in the fighting.

Eban, because of his breeding and education was much in demand for contacting and directing recruitment of native carriers and scouts for the small Army forces then in Moresby. As time went by, and the invasion became more widespread, both father and son worked at almost fever-pitch to do their part to help. The other managers also became very involved, and soon banded together to exchange information and suggestions on how best to help.

So eventually the Kanga Force came into being, first as an informal group wanting to help, and later as an organization that was willing to supply their expertise to the fighting forces.

Their first assignment originated from a Teleradio report from one of the missions near Madang that an Allied airman had been brought to the mission seriously wounded, and in need of treatment in a large hospital. The Army, busy on the Kokoda trail had no way of getting to the mission, to effect a rescue, and regretfully was unable to help.

When the Kanga force heard about it, some of the members who knew of the mission and the territory surrounding it begged for a chance to help.

Kanga force had early-on signed up for duty as volunteer reserves, and had some rudimentary military training. The Army was contacted, and agreed to give minimum assistance if a plan could be formulated that showed a reasonable chance of success, and did not involve army manpower or special equipment.

With this encouragement, the planters went to work to plan on getting to the mission and evacuating the wounded airman. The army agreed to let the group use an old ambulance plane to fly five of them in to an abandoned airstrip about ten miles from the mission.

Evacuation of the group and the wounded man was planned for three days later barring unforeseen circumstances. Going in they would carry medical supplies for the mission as well as rations for the entire period. Many of the party had their own weapons and would wear borrowed uniforms from the militia. Because they feared Japanese interception of radio messages, it was decided to fly over the mission and drop a message right before landing on the abandoned airstrip.

The party consisted of two of the younger managers, two of the planters who were familiar with the area and knew the missionary, and Eban who would act as scout and interpreter. The ambulance plane pilot was familiar with the area, and was prepared to skirt the areas where the Japanese might be camped.

The party settled down to wait for a time when weather and Japanese air activity was right for the four hour flight over the mountains to the mission in Madang Province.

Finally the plane took off and flew as low as possible over the mountains and the jungles to reach the mission. After one circle of the area, a message was dropped close to the

mission buildings and the plane flew off to find the airstrip some ten miles away. Although the strip was covered with *kunai* grass, landing was not too difficult and was accomplished without incident.

After the rescue party unloaded they turned the plane around and watched him take off before moving into the jungle to find the track that would lead them to the mission. Before leaving the strip they tried as best they could to trample the grass in such a manner that would cover some of the evidence of the plane's landing.

After getting into the jungle and organizing the march, Eban decided to "go bush" and alter his appearance to look more like a native than a European. He retained his army boots, but tore the sleeves out of his shirt and roughed up his shorts with a generous amount of dirt which he also rubbed into the whiter parts of his skin.

He now felt confident that if he met a native or an enemy he would pass muster. With machetes in hand the party took off down the native track towards the mission which they hoped to reach before dark. After a couple of hours of walking Eban spotted a village which could not be avoided and decided to try out his new identity.

With the rest of the party covering from a discrete distance, he approached the village beside a small stream and soon was discovered by a native dog that announced his presence in no uncertain terms. Armed only with a machete he walked boldly to the center of the village and greeted an old man sitting by the fire.

"*Wanem nem bilong yu?*" the old man asked.

"*Nem bilong mi Eban*" he replied, adding that he was fleeing the Japs who had overrun his village recruiting laborers to act as carriers.

The old man, who was the *luluai* of the village, told him that the Japs had been through there several weeks ago and had taken all the young men for the same purpose, but had not come back since. Eban explained that he was going to the mission, and asked for the best track to take.

The old man advised him to leave the main track and take a less direct track that the Japanese did not know about. After accepting some yams and paw paws, Eban went back into the jungle and found his mates to tell them of the new course. They were now about three miles from the mission and it was getting late in the day.

About a mile out of the village he heard some noise on the track ahead of him. As he slowly crept ahead on the side of the trail, he stumbled on a large blue-wattled cassowary feeding in the bush. Eban hit the bird with the side of his machete, and the Cassowary fled off into the jungle without using his powerful claws.

Finally the planted gardens of the mission were sighted, and Eban went ahead to tell the missionaries they had arrived. Not expecting a Papuan to be with the party, the missionary questioned Eban extensively before sending him to bring in the rest of the group.

Darkness had by this time fallen, and the rest of the party was glad to come inside and be welcomed. The two planters who knew the missionary gave him the medical supplies they had brought and talked for quite a time, and then went in to see the wounded airman.

From what the missionary was able to gather, the flier had been shot down several miles from the mission and had been brought there by members of the mission staff. His head and chest wounds were quite serious, and in moments of lucidity he revealed that he was flying a Boomerang P45 when he was hit by a couple of Zeros. After he crash landed in the jungle, the plane went on fire just after he was able to crawl clear before passing out.

The mission boys found him just before a Jap patrol came along to investigate the fire in the crashed plane. They made a sling stretcher and brought him to the mission where he now lay. The missionary staff was afraid that if they were caught by the Japs harboring one of the enemy, they would be in serious trouble, and radioed Moresby for help.

Now the Flier was lying on a cot in the mission infirmary with bandages around his head and chest and in a semi-conscious state. he would have to be carried on a litter back to the airstrip for evacuation.

The missionary agreed to supply four native carriers to get them all to the plane. Because the plane was not due yet, the party decided to rest the next day and then get an early morning start on the following morning. The next day was spent pin-pointing the locations of Japanese camps and patrols and telling the missionary where emergency supplies had been buried for the plantation's use.

Eban went out with some of the natives to look for evidence of enemy activity in the mission area. That night preparations were completed including the construction of a litter for the trek to the airstrip, and the next morning all was ready.

Shortly after dawn a Japanese plane flew over and seemed to be circling over several of the small nearby villages. After the plane left the party got underway with a final inspection of the wounded man and the administration of some morphine to keep him sleeping during the trip.

Staying under cover as they went through the jungle, they soon came to the village that Eban had encountered on the way in. The *luluai* was agitated when he saw them and told them to leave quickly as a Japanese patrol was in the area doing some more searching for laborers to recruit. He spit some betel on the ground and cursed the Japs because they had taken all the fresh fruit and yams with them when they left.

Eban explained about the man on the litter and the carriers from the mission who would be returning this way the next day. The rescue party and the village men all palavered for a while about where the Japs might be, and where they were heading. All agreed that the best route to the airstrip would be through an overgrown track that was likely to be avoided by the Japs. The party took off again on the new track guided by one of the village men.

It now became a race against time, as the new track was overgrown, and slowed down the carriers as vines had to be cut away at all-too-frequent intervals. Eban, scouting ahead with the village guide, noticed as they drew near the airstrip that the track had recently been used--perhaps within the last 24 hours.

He sent the villager back to caution the party to be as quiet as possible, and crept ahead and soon found a fork in the trail, leading away from the airstrip. A few hundred meters down the new track he heard noises ahead, and saw a patrol of six Japanese going down the track ahead of him.

The Nipponese soldiers seemed very relaxed, and were not keeping any patrol discipline. There was no rear guard, and there was no attempt to mask their passage through the bush. Eban withdrew quietly back to the original track and told the party of what he had seen.

As they were close to the airstrip now, it was decided to go ahead with the original plan and lay out identification panels while waiting for the ambulance plane to appear. The mission natives had mixed reactions -- on the one hand they wanted to see the plane pick up the party, but at the same time they wanted to get as far away from the Jap patrol as possible.

When they reached the edge of the airstrip, Eban, after a quick look around, laid out the ID panels and then withdrew to the edge of the jungle with the rest of the party while waiting for the plane. One of the planters went on each flank while the village native went a few yards into the jungle to guard the rear. After an hour of waiting the left flanker came back to

the group and reported four Jap soldiers about a hundred meters away, heading for the airstrip.

If Eban went out on the field to retrieve the signal panels, he would surely be seen by the patrol, and the plane was due at any time now. The carriers took the wounded man back further into the jungle and Eban and the rest of the party crept ahead to intercept the Japs.

The enemy patrol was still unaware of the danger facing them as they came to the edge of the airstrip in loose formation talking to each other and making a considerable racket. Eban and his group had by this time set up a beautiful ambush, and when the first Jap passed the ambush point the planters opened fire at almost point-blank range.

When the firing stopped, the entire patrol was mortally wounded and the sound of the plane could be heard approaching. The plane made one circle and then set down in the *kunai* grass.

As the litter bearers raced up to the plane with the planters covering them, the two Japs missing from the patrol appeared at the edge of the jungle and fired at the plane as everyone except the bearers scrambled aboard. The rescue group fired back at the remaining Japs in order for the bearers and the village guide to dive back into the jungle and make their escape. The plane gunned its motors and just barely cleared the tree-tops at the end of the runway as they took off.

The pilot flew low down the length of the valley before climbing to gain altitude for the mountain crossing ahead. The rest of the trip back to Moresby was uneventful and four hours later they landed at Jackson's Strip and transferred the wounded man to an ambulance for the trip to the military hospital.

Word of the exploit soon got around the military base, and then to the civilian population of Moresby. Eban and the planters gained great stature with the officials, and soon Eban was

offered a position with the district office of ANG AU, but elected instead to join the other able-bodied white males in the group to become members of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles.

Eban, of course, was not classified as white, and could not join the regular forces, but stayed with the volunteer group as one of their youngest members.

During his schooling in Australia, Eban had many times faced the reality of his race. Even in the polite boarding school he attended, he was occasionally called a "Boong", which was a term used to identify the aboriginals of Australia. When he went to the technical college, he was occasionally called "boy" by his classmates, but managed to avoid any direct confrontation with the other students.

He was a quick learner, and his athletic ability earned a respect that carried over into his sparse social life. As a talented rugby player, he gained a name for himself on the field, and became one of the stars of the school.

He did not go into town very much, which gave him more time for practice and study, and his social contacts were mainly with the other athletes of the school. When he returned to New Guinea, he was in a world where his intellect made him outstanding in dealings with both white and black, and his status of being the owner's son shielded him from any open discrimination.

Eban's relationship with the other planters and managers was on an equal basis, except for the occasional newcomer who quickly learned that any inferiority was on their part, not Eban's. There was no resentment of his position, because his skill in dealing with the contract laborers was unmatched by any of the other planters.

When he was on the mission to rescue the flier, the other members of the team looked to him for leadership, and there was no indication of any differences of race. On returning to

Moresby, and heard the call for army volunteers, he assumed that he would be accepted without question. When the "white only" requirement was announced, it was like hitting him in the face with a wet towel. He tried to hide his chagrin from the others, but couldn't help feeling resentment at his being rejected.

He stayed in Moresby for a while learning the routine of the NG Rifles, and was sent to Buna as soon as that area was secured from the Japanese. He used his skills learned at the plantation to help the Colonial government in talking to the various tribes in the area, and recruiting laborers for the fighting forces.

ANGAU set up a system for distributing food and medical supplies to the villagers who were not sure that they had been liberated from the enemy. The carriers were now paid in Australian money, and were once again able to buy some goods from government stores. Eban was trusted by the tribal *Lulusais* and dealt with these chiefs in figuring out what the new colonial regulations meant. Occasionally he was assigned to be an advance man in going into areas that had previously been dominated by the Japanese.

Before Lae was retaken, Eban joined a group of the Kanga Force for a clandestine raid on Lae. After he was questioned by Allied intelligence forces, he was asked to join an American unit at Salamaua that was preparing to join the Aussie forces in re-taking Salamaua and Lae.

Eban joined with the HQ of the American 162nd Infantry of the 41st Division and was assigned to the G-2 section to help in planning jungle routes over the mountainous terrain from Morobe to Nassau Bay and then on to Salamaua.

Lt. Victor Cook was the intelligence officer of the 162nd Infantry of the US Army that Eban reported to. Cook was a tall burly man who had been in several battles before getting his present assignment. He explained to Eban that it would be necessary to infiltrate the enemy lines to find out the strength and location of the Jap units. Wherever possible, patrols would operate under the cover of darkness, and avoid direct contact with the enemy.

That evening, Cook's men sat around in a tent drinking captured saki and playing cards. Eban was amazed at the informality of Cook's men--they called him by his first name and did not say "Sir" or salute when entering or leaving the tent. Eban did not play cards, but sat and listened as the others bantered back and forth.

When the card game ended, Cook came over and sat with Eban and asked him about his previous service. Eban told him about rescuing the flier, and how the planters organized the mission, including how he dressed as a native during the patrol so that he could talk to the local people without arousing their alarm.

"That's a good idea" Cook said, "If you don't mind, we'll try that on our next patrol." Eban indicated he would be agreeable, and asked how the rest of the men were reacting to a mixed race man joining the unit. "If you can do your job without endangering the rest of us, we couldn't care less!" was Cook's answer.

The next day Eban went out and got a lap-lap and a machete.

and a cartridge belt. He retained his boots and his wide brimmed hat as well as the Enfield rifle he carried slung at his shoulder. with his dark complexion and his muscular frame, he looked every inch the fierce jungle warrior of the Papuan Constabulary.

Cook went over the maps of the area that they would scout with Eban that night, and asked if Eban felt up to being point for the patrol. At dusk they crossed the perimeter and Eban led the group down a jungle track towards Lae. Cook stayed a little behind Eban and made notations on the map as they went.

After about two miles along the track, they came to a small native village and while the others took cover, Eban crept to the edge of the clearing and softly called to a native who was carrying a bag of rice. he explained in Pidgin who he was, and asked if there were any

Japanese units nearby. A Japanese outpost with about 15 men was just a few hundred meters down the track, he was told, and came through the village every night as they patrolled the area.

The village did not like the Japs, and stole from them every time they had a chance. The rice he was carrying was taken from a supply dump about a kilometer away and was used by the patrol to keep them supplied with food that they couldn't steal from the natives. After getting as much information as he could, Eban went back to Cook and told him what he had learned.

Cook decided to find the Jap's bivouac and see what he could find out about what kind of forces they were up against. Eban took the point again and the patrol moved along the track till the Jap camp was in sight. When Eban got real close, he was able to determine that the camp was empty even though a small fire was left burning. Eban withdrew and apprised Cook of the situation. It was decided to go in the camp and then search for information.

Cook and another man went through the packs and boxes seeking information, while another member of the patrol took canned crab meat and saki as well as several Japanese flags. Eban and another soldier went back along the track a few meters to watch for the enemy coming back.

Just as Cook was finishing the search, Eban came back and warned that a ten-man Jap patrol was coming and headed straight for the camp. Cook's patrol crept into the jungle near the edge of camp just as the first Jap soldier arrived. The Jap immediately saw that the camp had been entered, and cried out for the others to hurry in.

The Japs held a hurried conference, and then fanned out on all sides of the camp to search for the intruders. One Jap stumbled on one of Cook's men, and lunged at him with a bayonet forcing the soldier to fire a shot. It was too late for Cook's men to withdraw as the other Japs immediately started to fire into the jungle where Cook's men were hiding. There

was no hope of avoiding a fire fight, so Cook and Eban tossed grenades into the area where the Japs were concentrated.

When the grenades exploded six of the Japs were writhing on the ground as the rest of Cook's patrol opened fire on the three still standing. When the skirmish was over and firing stopped Cook took a head count and found that his only casualty was the man who had been bayoneted, and was bleeding badly. Another soldier caught a bullet in the fleshy part of the arm but was still able to stand and walk. The aid man treated the wounded as best he could, and two men were assigned to carry the badly wounded bayonet victim.

"Let's go home," Cook ordered, as he took the point and Eban took the rear guard. When they got to the native village, a stretcher was hastily improvised and the patrol withdrew as fast as possible to their own perimeter. They stopped at the aid station to drop off the wounded, and while Cook was delivering the captured documents to G-2 headquarters, the rest of the men went back to their tents and flopped down exhausted.

Information they brought back had revealed the location of most of the main forces of the Japanese, and the next day the Battalion moved out towards Lae for an assault on the town. With the Australians, the Americans, and the Papuan forces all working together, the Japs were routed and forced to withdraw into the hills to avoid capture. Allied casualties were light, but for the Japs it was a bloody defeat.

As fighting spread out, many towns were being by-passed by the allied forces and Eban returned to his unit of the Papuan Volunteer forces. He was sent with a native patrol up near Alexishafen, a little west of the area where his father had leased land.

At one point during the scouting patrol he was able to revisit the mission that the flier had been rescued from, and assure the missionaries that soon the Allies would drive the enemy out of the Madang area. The missionaries reported that already, the Japanese were taking to the jungle to move far west to their bases in and near Dutch New Guinea.

The missionaries told Eban that the main Japanese Headquarters for Madang was set up in the Lutheran Mission above the Alexishafen airstrip. Eban took his patrol to the vicinity of the mission and was able to get a good view of the airstrip which still was operating with a group of Bettys, a two engine fighter-bomber that was harassing the allied forces as they drove from Nadzab towards Madang.

From some of the local villagers he was able to learn that the Jap HQ seemed to be packing up for a move, and that the officers were going to be evacuated by plane as soon as the runways could be repaired from some recent Allied bomb raids.

Eban went back to the mission where a teleradio was set up, and managed to get this information to the Allied forces with some good map coordinates. The next day there were several Allied bombing raids on the Airstrip catching some Bettys on the ground, and messing up the runways to the extent that it would take several weeks to make the strip usable again.

On the way back with his patrol, they saw hundreds of transport planes over the Markham Valley dropping paratroopers from Moresby in the area near Nadzab. The sky was almost black with planes, and then with thousands of parachutes looking almost like the nighttime flight of the Bats out of Madang.

Some of Eban's patrol were frightened, and some were sure that promised Cargo was finally arriving. Certainly, the abandoned parachutes and cargo skids seemed to be clear evidence that the spirits of the skies were joining forces with the Allies to drive the Japanese out of New Guinea.

When he got back to the 162nd, he joined them in the final assault on Lae, where they left the occupation to the members of the 9th Australian Division. The 162nd was sent back to Australia for rest and recuperation, and Eban rejoined his unit of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles.

The 126th Rgt replaced the 162nd, and Eban joined them for the drive along the coast from Saidor to Madang. He was now more or less on home ground, having been in the area many times on recruiting trips for the plantation. Some of the village *Big Men* and *Luluais* knew him and were anxious to cooperate with the Aussies and the Americans.

As the soldiers worked their way up along the coast, they came to within a few miles of Bilbil village where Eban's mother had been born. He got permission to stay a few days in the village, and soon went about renewing old acquaintances.

Luckily, Bilbil was spared any of the direct effects of the war, and in fact, earned quite a large amount of trade goods making pots for the Japanese. Their clay banks were protected by the soldiers and their men and boys were not recruited as carriers or laborers. Some of the women had been bothered to become comfort women, but threats of cutting off the pot supply prevented the Japs from bothering them too much. His uncle had become *Luluai* of Bilbil and reported that the town had been relatively untouched by the war.

Eban had to answer many questions about the army, and many more about the growing Cargo cult. A man from a nearby village worked for the Australian army, and told everyone that the marvelous things that the soldiers possessed were given by the spirits, and would come to the New Guineans as soon as the war was over. Some of the villagers had already come across mysterious Cargo in the jungles, and displayed their prizes to whoever would look. When Eban tried to explain how the cargo was really errant supply drops, it seemed only to reinforce their belief that a spirit was behind the whole business.

Although Bilbil had fared well during the occupation, the town of Madang ended up rather the worse for wear. The Market still operated, but most of the staple foods were taken by the Japanese and there was always the risk of an air attack. According to some of the villagers, the Japanese even resorted to killing and eating the flying foxes that abounded in the trees near the marketplace.

After two days of talk with his relatives and friends, Eban rejoined the unit he was with, and led them past the major Japanese camps to a position near the edge of town. It was obvious that the enemy troops were in the process of withdrawing, with only fixed positions being manned along the main road. Two days of skirmishes ended up with the Allied troops being in the center of town setting up a command post near the old German Cemetery.