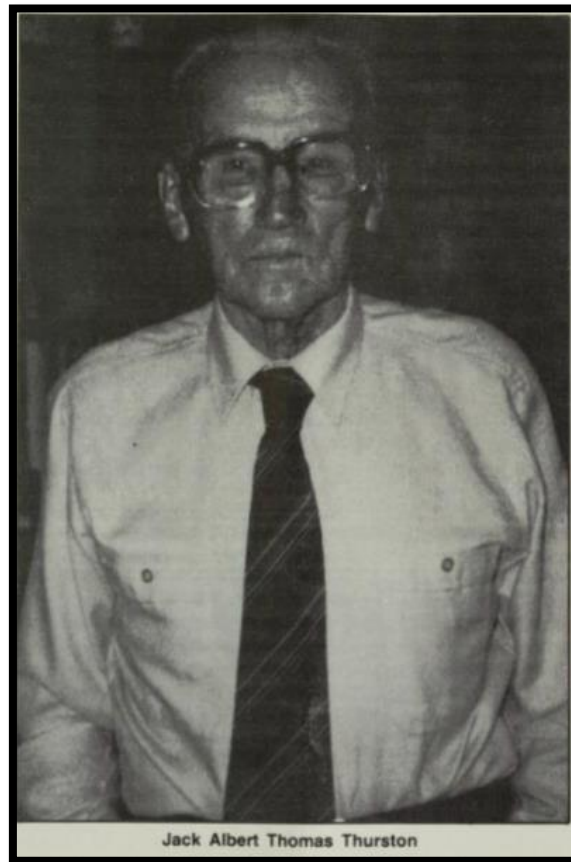


Jack Thurston, 60 years a 'New Guinea hand'



It was somehow typical of Jack Albert Thomas Thurston, who had devoted 60 years of his life to New Guinea, that his retirement in Australia lasted only a few months. He died in Sydney on April 29, his last illness being exacerbated by the sudden death of his wife Betty, his companion of 47 years, on March 29.

Jack Thurston was born on September 20, 1897, in Perth, Western Australia, and was educated at Prince Alfred College, Adelaide. When not yet 17 he faked his age and enlisted in the First Australian Imperial Force, seeing service in France as a despatch rider.

After taking his discharge in Australia at the end of the war he returned to Germany. This expedition coincided with Germany's post-World War I mega-inflation, which allowed him to buy a boat which he sailed in the North Sea when he wasn't occupied with his job in ship surveying. During this period he also acquired a good working knowledge of the German language. Perhaps it was this German experience that, when he finally returned to Australia, aroused his interest in New Guinea where German property and plantations were being expropriated by the Australian authorities and would soon be sold off to Australians.

In 1924 he got a job with the new administration of what had become the Mandated Territory of New Guinea and was posted to Kavieng, New Ireland, where he worked

as native labor clerk, native labor officer, patrol officer and occasionally as post-master. After about two years he left government service to become mate on one of the W. R. Carpenter & Co. smallships, the *Meklong*, which he later ran for himself, having gained a master's ticket somewhere along the way. This was the beginning of his long love affair with boats of all kinds.

He was, as the 107th Psalm has it, one of those "that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters". Although in the years that followed he had a hand in most of the enterprises that New Guinea offered, the over-all impression that old friends have is of Jack buying another boat, selling one, operating one, or surrounded by blueprints of one still on the stocks. *Meklong* was followed by *Boina*, *Drina*, *Nusa* and others; he carried miners to Salamaua, the jumping-off place for the goldfields of Wau and Edie Creek; he picked up copra at plantations; delivered stores and even collected artifacts up the Sepik River for anthropologist Gregory Bateson.

In the early 1930s there were probably few coastal or river anchorages that were unknown to him. It was at this time, too, that he acquired, through the good offices of Phoebe Parkinson, sister of Queen Emma, plantation land at Jacquinet Bay on the south coast of New Britain. As his finances permitted, he began to plant up what was to be Drina Plantation, still in Thurston family ownership.

I met Jack in early 1936 shortly after I arrived in New Guinea to join my husband who was mining in a creek that ran into the Nagum River, about one and a half days' walk from the north NG coast. Jack had turned miner—in the context of his whole life in New Guinea something of an aberration, although a profitable one and had a claim on the Silling River. In NG bush terms he was a near neighbour and one day he and a couple of other men turned up at our camp and stayed for the usual lunch out of cans and campoven bread. I may have been impressed, but the feeling was obviously not reciprocated. In fact, some months later when we all moved six days' walk further out, to an area where Jack had discovered what became the best mining lease in the rather disappointing Wewak goldfield, my reception was distinctly chilly.

The term male chauvinist hadn't then been invented, and nor had women's lib, so I wasn't as infuriated as I probably should have been. My reaction was to assume what is now called a low profile in other words, to make myself scarce.

Perhaps in the end Jack decided that females on goldfields could be relatively harmless and two years later when he went on leave to Australia he returned, not with another boat which would have been in character, but with a bride. Betty then looked a shy 16-year-old although she must have been about 21, and although they proceeded from Sydney to Rabaul by orthodox means that is, a Burns Philp ship there Jack bought a small boat called the *Destiny* and in this they finished the not inconsiderable voyage to Wewak.

Naturally Jack and his bride were subjects of great interest among the scattered miners of the Wewak district and the business of the *Destiny* brought forth the general comment that at least he was seeing that the girl was being broken in the hard way.

By this time Ray Parer had carved out a rough airstrip at Maprik on the edge of the Sepik plain, and when a plane was available it was possible to fly there from the coast. Jack's lease was then no more than a day's walk away.

In the Christmas-New Year period of 1941, European women were evacuated from Papua and New Guinea, but in 1942, after the Japanese invasion, European men of the Sepik district were more or less abandoned to their fate. There were various plans, or rumours of plans, to evacuate them and parties gathered at several points on the Sepik River. When nothing happened, individuals then made their own plans for escape, Jack, leading a party of half a dozen to the headwaters of the river, across the backbone of unknown PNG, and down the Fly River to the Papuan coast which they reached six months after they had left Angoram on the Sepik.

Thirteen years previously, two men of Sir Hubert Murray's Papuan service, Ivan Champion and Charles Karius, had made a patrol in the reverse direction that is, up the Fly and down the Sepik. A book written by Champion covering this heroic effort was published in the early 1930s, but whether any of the assorted 1942 party had read the book or realised what they were letting themselves in for is unknown. This journey was one of many extraordinary efforts put up by ordinary civilians in 1942-45, but left unrecorded in the larger story of a whole country suddenly overcome by war.

Jack Thurston was later commissioned into the Royal Australian Air Force but much of the rest of his Pacific war was on intelligence duties with the American forces. The end of hostilities found him tied to a government job as director of shipping at a time when the Australian Labor government was determined to introduce nationalised shipping into Papua and New Guinea. The so-called Administration "K" ships were brought into service at this time.

After he returned to civilian life, Jack found that Drina no longer existed as a plantation, and that coconut planting had to begin again from scratch. As well as suffering the usual wartime problems that descended on all plantations, it had become something of a gathering place for remnants of the 2/22 Battalion AIF which had been overwhelmed by the Japanese invasion of Rabaul and had tried to escape along the south coast of New Britain. Many of these men got no further, Drina becoming their last resting place.

In the years that followed Jack acquired other plantations Manguna near Drina; Legenda and Volupai at Talasea. Mostly these enterprises were masterminded from H.Q. in Rabaul, but a bungalow was built on Volupai with the intention of living in it. It has now become something of a family joke that the manager of the plantation

occupied a single room in the bungalow on a temporary basis for 15 years in the unfulfilled expectation that the Thurstons would eventually arrive to set up house. This plantation was sold to a company in the 1970s, although Jack remained company chairman until his death.

From plantations his interests extended to sawmilling and timber, finance and real estate, sometimes on his own, sometimes in partnerships with others. Where he made profits, he ploughed them back into something else and, of course, there always were boats. At a rough count, 13 passed through his hands in the postwar period, including *Carla Manus I, II and 111*.

If Jack Thurston can be called a man for his time in New Guinea, it was a time that spanned 60 years and a couple of generations, saw enormous changes and required extreme adaptability not a virtue usually attributed to early pioneers. In his prime he literally never walked if he could run; knew exactly where he was going and headed straight for his target. He was introduced to New Guinea when it was a beaten, backward ex-German colony, saw it survive three years of war that wiped out industry and reduced towns to bare earth, and had his interests still there in 1975 when, joined permanently to the old Australian territory of Papua, it became the independent Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea.

The records he has set in the length of his devotion to the country, the diversity of his interests, are not likely to be beaten; he was, indeed, one of the last of the survivors of an era already past.

Betty and Jack are mourned by their two sons, Jack and Michael; their two daughters, Carla (Mrs Lloyd Illet), Paula (Mrs Bjorn Guldberg), and a healthy brood of grandchildren.

Many old ex-New Guinea friends joined the family at services of thanksgiving for these fruitful lives held at St. Peter's Church, Watson's Bay, Sydney, on April 2, and May 3 1985.

Judy Tudor.

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