Introduction: The Wartime Search for the South Seas

The use of travelling is to regulate imagination by reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are.¹

(Dr. Johnson)

First impressions at all times very much depend on one’s previously acquired ideas.²

(Charles Darwin’s diary, Tahiti, November 1835)

In December 1942, Flying Officer Peter Hopton, the son of the Reverend and Mrs. Hopton of Hindmarsh, South Australia, arrived with his Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) squadron in Port Moresby, Australian New Guinea. Soon after arriving, Hopton told his father, “We haven’t done much investigating of the surrounding countryside but hope to be very soon when we get some time off.” Two days later, in a reassuring letter to his mother, he noted that he was “feeling very fit and enjoying life just like a holiday—with the open air, the interest of it all, the variety.” Having “hitchhiked” 20 miles up the Kokoda Track, Hopton was pleased to report he had seen some of the countryside.³

The same month Hopton was sightseeing on the Kokoda Track, United States Navy Ensign Frank “Corky” Corkin, of Canton, New York, wrote home to his sweetheart. After a day spent relaxing on the shore of an undisclosed South Pacific isle, and noting that he had “never realized” that “it would take a war to get my vacation in Honolulu—and that the government would pay my way,” he told his girlfriend that after their swim, he and his fellow sailors had “hiked deep into the underbrush and raided nature’s pantry.”⁴

It has been widely assumed that tourism as a cultural phenomenon stops when an environment is disrupted by war. “American soldiers,” wrote Peter Schrijvers in his well-received study of American combat soldiers in Europe, “had come to Europe to fight, not to sightsee.” The
nature of “total war” in Europe, he contended, gave them no chance for “tourist perceptions.” Recent scholarship in tourism studies, however, has challenged this conclusion. While Debbie Lisle has labeled tourism and war as “strange bedfellows,” she has also contended that soldiers are “like” tourists, insofar as their presence in new environments and cultures leads them to the “same consumptive ‘gazing’ practices as tourists.” In common with tourists, service personnel collect “souvenirs,” seek out “the extraordinary,” and relish opportunities to experience locales that have long figured in the popular imagination.

This study is more forthright in stating the relationship between war and tourism. Soldiers are not simply like tourists. Robin Gertser and Peter Pierce’s suggestion that soldiers are the “ultimate package tourists” may be taking the connection too far, but there are occasions during war service when soldiers are tourists. While Allied servicemen and women’s opportunities to experience the Pacific between 1941 and 1945 had not been born from pleasure, many imagined themselves as tourists and adopted the tourist’s guise and gaze. The only difference between Hopton’s and Corkin’s letters home and those one might expect from a civilian tourist in peacetime is that they felt compelled to state explicitly that the behavior they were engaging in resembled a holiday—an acknowledgment that their “tourist” behavior was not something typically associated with war service.

Writing in 1998, Bertram M. Gordon claimed that the study of war and tourism was “an almost unexplored area.” The statement was an accurate reflection of American scholarship up to that time. Beth Bailey and David Farber’s 1992 study of American service personnel and war industry workers in wartime Hawaii, and Gordon’s own study of wartime German tourism in occupied France, were among the few exceptions. Little has changed since the late 1990s.

Across the Pacific, however, the examination of the soldier as tourist has been a persistent theme, first explored in the late 1980s through Richard White’s pioneering studies of the Australian Imperial Force in Egypt and Europe during World War I. White’s work has produced a range of responses, including elaboration by Elizabeth Richards and James Curran, the extension of the thesis to the Pacific and World War II by the current authors, an emphatic rejection by James Wieland, and reconsideration and recalibration by Bart Zino. These studies have left Australian military historiography comfortable with the organizing principle of the soldier as tourist.

Analyses of the relationship between tourism and war form part of a wider discussion concerning the meaning of tourism. Discounting Roland Barthes’s insistence that tourists are simply “a subhumanity by nature