

Beneath a white flag, the man who brought stability to Buka villages took a message to the victorious Australians. **By Steven Bullard**

the humiliation of Defeat





Facing page: Local officials were ordered by the Australians after the war to destroy Japanese insignia, caps and uniforms, and to ignore further instructions from the Japanese. AWM 096783

Left and below: Australian officers board Kawanishi's barge to speak to French missionaries and Chinese nationals, while Australian soldiers watch on from nearby canoes. AWM 096584; AWM 096585



Naval Lieutenant Kawanishi Shōtarō was apprehensive as the barge slowed within sight of land. The improvised white flag flapped lazily overhead as the morning sun beat down. The French missionaries and Chinese civilian internees in the second barge were not visible, having taken refuge under its tattered canvas cover. On shore, the jungle opened to reveal an impressive Australian base – troops were playing ball games near the shore, and a large theatre-like building rose above the neat rows of barracks.

Suddenly the dreamlike silence was broken by angry yelling. Several Australian soldiers, stripped to the waist, had approached Kawanishi's barge in small canoes. Gesturing wildly with their arms, they jeered and spat at him. The words were foreign to Kawanishi, but the intent, through the menacing looks on their faces, was clear. Kawanishi cast his eyes down; ignoring the Australians, he tried to concentrate on the task at hand. He was the envoy of the Imperial Japanese Navy sent to arrange the surrender of Japanese forces in the Buka Island area of northern Bougainville. But he was also a defeated and humiliated soldier.

He thought back to his departure from Buka the previous day, when five

or six locals had braved the wrath of the Australian guards, donned their surplus Japanese navy caps, and bidden him farewell. "Captain, this is goodbye. We are overjoyed that you treated us as a friend." His last image was of them disappearing into the jungle, the navy caps concealed once more behind their backs.

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goods traded for local products. Once the supply situation on the island worsened, however, incidents of theft of crops and animals by Japanese troops increased. There were even, so he had heard, cases of abduction, rape and murder of local women. Kawanishi and another officer, Lieutenant Gotō Daisaku, were ordered by navy headquarters in Buin to remedy the situation.

Three basic principles underlay Kawanishi's efforts: to reduce contact between ordinary Japanese troops and the locals; to restore the authority of the village chiefs; and to introduce capital punishment

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for Japanese troops who stole from the locals. The village chiefs were given surplus navy caps and uniforms as symbols of their new authority, and were assisted by around 20 non-commissioned officers who were appointed Pacification Officers.

The gem in Kawanishi and Gotō's plan, however, was the establishment of a school for young locals. Situated at Tulatu in the mountains of south Buka Island, the school taught young men from various village districts Japanese agricultural methods; taught them how to produce tools such as shovels and picks from old automobile springs and drum cans; how to collect fish with home-made explosives; and how to collect salt and use it to cure the catch. These skills were spread through the villages, creating surpluses controlled by the village chiefs. The resulting stability, Kawanishi believed, had been a major factor in reducing thefts and other incidents by Japanese troops.

Now all had changed. The arrival of orders from navy command at Buin announcing Japan's surrender had been

greeted at first with disbelief. Kawanishi's first task, carried out half in a trance, was to burn all codebooks and secret documents. The reality of the cessation of hostilities did not truly sink in, however, until the following day, with the complete absence of the sounds of war. Over the following weeks, the 1,800 navy troops at Buka must have allowed their thoughts, and conversations, to stray towards home: to family and loved ones once feared lost forever. Such diversions were tempered only by the need to continue efforts towards self-sufficiency. Repatriation could take some time.

Kawanishi's commander, Captain Katō Eikichi, had appointed him the envoy to meet Australian officers on 14 September off Soraken peninsula. He was anxious lest the nature of fighting in the region had left the Australians "thirsty for blood". Mixed emotions welled inside as his barge reached the designated position, where a large Australian launch was waiting. Several Australian soldiers stood on the deck, guns at the ready.

The Australians had instructed the Japanese to send a single officer as envoy, and to bring all Australian prisoners of war and foreign nationals to the rendezvous point. There were no prisoners at Buka, but four French missionaries and nine Chinese nationals lived on the island during the war. Kawanishi had become acquainted with a particular Chinese family, and had provided them with surplus blankets and sheets. The father, whom Kawanishi knew as Ron Chin, bade him farewell as the family transferred from their barge. As Kawanishi lifted Chin's eldest child and passed her up to the deck of the Australian launch, he noticed she was wearing the canvas sandals he had recently made for her.

Kawanishi was taken to what looked like a mess room inside the launch and given instructions on the details of the surrender in front of ten Australian officers – members of II Corps Headquarters.

Below: Members of II Corps Headquarters, prepared for surrender discussions with the Japanese. They are shown discussing surrender terms with the Japanese Naval Commander Takahashi, and Captain Katō. Bonis Peninsula, Bougainville, 1945. AWM 096593





The presence of the armed guards left Kawanishi uneasy, but the meeting was, somewhat anti-climactically, soon concluded. He was impressed that he had been treated so well, and reflected whether the circumstances of the handover of the foreign nationals had led the Australians to believe there had been no atrocities or ill-treatment in the area. Nevertheless, Kawanishi's local commander, Captain Katō, and his colleague, Gotō Daisaku, were later tried and executed at Rabaul for the unlawful killing of locals during the war. Kawanishi felt the former, at least, was a clear case of "victor's justice".

Within a week, all Japanese troops on Buka Island had been transported to Torokina on the west coast of the island aboard seven tightly packed landing barges. From there, after a stay in a temporary camp some 16 kilometres from the harbour, they were transferred at the end of November to a larger camp on Fauro Island, off the south coast of Bougainville. Kawanishi served as a liaison officer during this time, relaying instructions from the Australian commanders, coordinating administration and preparing for repatriation.



Light spring snow fell softly as Kawanishi gazed from the deck of the carrier Katsuragi over the harbour of Ōdake, Hiroshima Prefecture. He recalled his emotions six months earlier as he had surveyed the victorious Australian base on Bougainville. Now, there were no jeers, no armed guards, but the same apprehension. The future was uncertain. How would defeated Japan welcome its soldiers? How could the ruins be rebuilt? He breathed deeply, and stepped out onto Japanese soil. He was home. 🏠

Above: Kawanishi was proud of his role in improving relations between Japanese forces and locals on Buka Island. These local officials wore surplus Japanese naval caps and uniforms as symbols of their authority under Japanese occupation. AWM 096629



Kawanishi Shōtarō (1920–1969), who changed his name in the post-war period to Fujimoto Takehiro, graduated from the Tokyo Business University (now Hitotsubashi University) in 1942. Conscripted into the Japanese navy, he was assigned to the 8th Fleet after completing training at the Navy Accounting School. He was posted to Buin, in south Bougainville, in July 1943 to oversee supply for Japanese forces on the island. In December that year, he was transferred to Buka in the north of the island, where he remained until the end of the war. Fujimoto had a distinguished post-war business career, rising to president of various enterprises and industry associations. In 1967 he was decorated with the Fourth Order of the Sacred Treasure. His account of his wartime experience, *Būgenbiru senki (Battles in Bougainville)* (Tokyo: Kōjinsha, 2003), was first published posthumously in 1974.

Left: Kawanishi, pictured (with binoculars) just prior to arriving at Soraken peninsula on 14 September 1945, was selected as the envoy to liaise with Australian forces in north Bougainville. AWM 096576