

PHILIP CASS is reviews editor of *Pacific Journalism Review*.

# How Fijians served Britain's Army

**212 Soldiers for the Queen: Fijians in the British Army 1961-1997**, by David Tough. West Geelong, Victoria: Barralier Book. 360 pages. ISBN 978-0-6483552-1-2

WHEN MIKA Vuidravuwalu was asked why he enlisted in the British Army in 1961, he replied: 'Experience, put on the British Army uniform, and fight for the red, white and blue.'

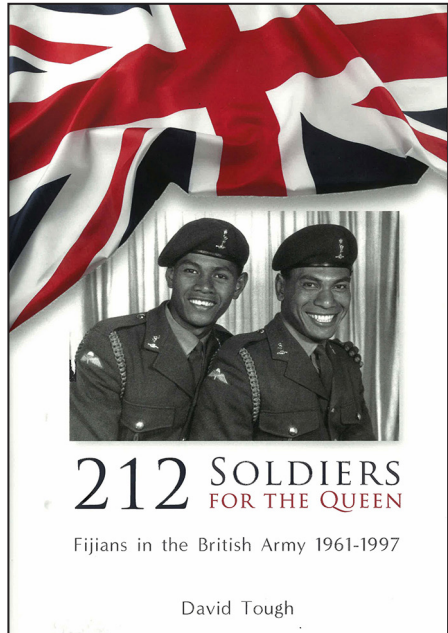
He added that his brother had served with Fijian forces against the Japanese in the Solomons.

Vuidravuwaluwa, one of 212 Fijians who eagerly signed up when the British Army, short of soldiers and specialists, sought recruits from the colonies.

While the British army needed the Fijians, it is a good thing the Fijians were unaware of some of the staggeringly racist attitudes that infected those in power in the UK. It is almost unimaginable today to think of the British worrying about having 'coloured men' in the ranks.

And one is left speechless at a memorandum written by the head of the Women's Royal Army Corps, Brigadier Dame Jean Rivett-Drake, who wrote, in advance of the arrival of a group of women volunteers from Fiji:

I am under the impression that they will be jet black and woolly haired and I feel



most strongly these women will present considerably more problem to us than the coffee coloured Seychellois.

The Fijians proved to be exceptional soldiers, extremely loyal and keen to stay on in the army. Many remained in the UK or Germany and raised families after they were demobbed. Others returned to Fiji and played prominent roles in the development of the Fijian armed forces after independence.

Some, too, played a role in the Rabuka coup which overthrew Fiji's democratically elected government and set the country on the path towards years of instability. Others prospered in businesses large and small.

Tough's book is excellent for invoking the special relationship Fijians believed they had with the United Kingdom, their pride in their traditional role as *bati* (warriors) and the eagerness

of young people everywhere to have adventures and see a wider world.

Books about Fiji's military forces are rare, but this work brings together a fascinating period when Fijians served all over the world under the British flag.

Tough's book has been 20 years in the making and is probably all the better for its slow genesis as he has had time to make connection with many of the survivors of the 212. While he gives a good account of the background to the British recruitment of men from the colonies, the real contribution of this book to Fijian and Pacific history is the personal biographies of the volunteers.

While they fought on the fringes of Britain's contracting empire, other Fijians had some strange adventures. Joe Tuwai and Naiuka Qarau volunteered for an expedition up the Congo in 1974 and found themselves under the command of the eccentric Colonel John Blashford-Snell. Officially the expedition was researching river blindness, but also spent time looking for the Congolese otter shrew.

Some of the men took the opportunity to draw lessons from their service in other part of the empire. Mikaele Yasa, who had studied agriculture in India before joining up, was sent to what was then the South American colony of British Guiana (now Belize) where the British army kept the peace in a country split along communal lines.

As Tough put it: 'Mike identified with all parties to the political turmoil and could see the possibility of similar problems in the future for Fiji.'

Of all the Fijians who joined

the British Army, the best known is Sergeant Talaiasi Labalaba, who was killed during the Battle of Fort Mirbat in southern Oman during the Dhofar rebellion when Marxist guerillas—the Adoo—came across the border from Yemen to try to overthrow the rule of Sultan Qaboos, who had been put in place by the British after they had engineered the overthrow of his father.

Labalaba, should, by most accounts have been awarded the VC for his actions that day. He heroically manned a 25 pounder field gun, which normally required six crew, single handed and held off wave after wave of attacks by the Adoo. Another Fijian soldier, Trooper Sekonaia Takavesi ran to his aid and he and Labalaba were soon firing at point blank range at the attackers.

The rest of the small band of SAS and some Omani and Pakistani soldiers were firing from the small fort behind him and just managed to hold on long enough for strike aircraft from the Sultan of Oman's Air Force to fly down the coast through appalling weather and chase the remaining Adoo away.

Instead of a Victoria Cross, Labalaba—who had already been awarded the British Empire Medal for his bravery in Borneo and Aden was accorded a posthumous mention in despatches. Takavesi was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

In October 2018, during their visit to Fiji, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle unveiled a statue of Sgt Labalaba in Nadi.