Guest Speaker - Michael Waterhouse, his subject “Australia’s Colonial Experience in New Guinea between the Wars”

In his introduction, John Thom outlined Michael's background including university studies in anthropology, economics and economic history and experience as a senior Commonwealth Government Adviser (Treasury), also in the field of finance with Westpac and as a consultant.

Michael's interest in the subject was expanded when he was requested to write an article on his Grandfather Les Waterhouse who was a Director and Mining Engineer Executive of Bulolo Gold Dredging Ltd., a gold mining subsidiary of Placer Developments operating in New Guinea between the wars. Whilst Michael's presentation mainly related to the development and operation of Bulolo gold mining, his research also highlighted some of the political and social aspects of Australia’s relationship with New Guinea and its people during its role of administering a Mandate granted by the League of Nations following WW1 (previously a German Colony).

Michael found a paucity of information regarding this period in New Guinea and his book resulting from his research - “Not a Poor Man’s Field” - has done much to fill in the blanks.

The area concerned includes names, which became more familiar to Australians during WW2 – Salamoa, Lae and Wau, and the Bulolo River. Discovery of gold in the early 1920’s saw recovery mainly by sluice boxes. Huge deposits were discovered in the mountains in 1926, which triggered a rush to Salamoa. Overland access to the mountainous area was very difficult and costly, and thus the option of dredging near Wau with supplies and equipment to be brought in by air was considered a go. Progress proved difficult and the operation was on the verge of collapse in 1928 when a “White Knight” Placer Developments confirmed that dredging was the best way and Bulolo Gold Dredging Ltd was formed with a plan to buy 2 planes and construct 2 power stations with dredging to start in 1932.

The aviation element in the project is a story in itself. 2 large Junkers – “Peter” and “Paul”, subsequently augmented the original small planes. During the period 1931 – 1942 14,000 flights transported components for 8 dredges, 2 power stations and 3 villages. More airfreight was transported during this period than in any other country. Bulolo outsourced as much as they could with aviation needs provided by Guinea Airways – of which Les Waterhouse was also a director. Planes were virtually taking off and landing continuously. Considering that flight during this period was still a novelty, the successful transporting in this dangerous climate and terrain of components for the 1,000 ton dredges/1 ½ ton buckets (also the 2 larger dredges each of 2,500 tons) and a 6,950 lb. top tumbler shaft – the heaviest load carried by a plane at that time - is remarkable. 1.3 million ounces of gold was extracted.

The latter part of Michael’s presentation involved a most interesting photographic record of the period including coverage of assembly of the Junkers planes, ingenious method of air freighting components, the completed
dredges, the difficult mountainous terrain, local indigenous population – some of whom were indentured and some who were potentially dangerous, and sadly the wreckage of the two Junkers which were destroyed by the Japanese on 21 January 1942.

The company was very safety conscious, a testament to this being the loss of only 2 lives during the period.

Ray Hyslop’s vote of thanks paid tribute to Michael’s contribution to filling in a gap in our Mandated Territories history.