CHAPTER 10

Cannibalism and the War Crimes Trials

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1 Introduction

The Prime Minister recently discussed with the Commander-in-Chief charges made against the Japanese forces of perpetrating atrocities and practicing cannibalism. It is understood that the Prime Minister decided that a high legal authority should be appointed to investigate these charges.1

In late 1942, during the gruelling counter-offensive of units from the 7th Division AIF and the militia2 from the outskirts of Port Moresby to the coast of Papua, Australian soldiers began to stumble across gruesome evidence of freshly cannibalised bodies. Some of them they recognised as former comrades, killed in engagements in previous days. Who had committed such an abhorrent crime? Could it have been local tribesman about whom lingering suspicions in relation to cannibalistic practices were held? Or was it to be laid at the feet of specific Japanese units, known to be operating in the area? To investigate this and other crimes discovered when territory was re-captured from the Japanese forces, the Australian Government set up a Commission of Inquiry headed by Sir William Webb, later President of the International Military Tribunal of the Far East (IMTFE) at Tokyo.3

Where files have been digitised by the National Archives of Australia, the author has provided the slide reference to assist readers to locate items within large files.


2 For an account of the arrangements for calling up and training men for the militia, see Dudley McCarthy, South-West Pacific Area –First Year, Kokoda to Wau, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series 1 (Army), vol 5 (Australian War Memorial, 1959), pp. 1-2.

3 The Commission of Inquiry was set up on 23 June 1943 by the Acting Attorney-General, JA Beasley, and was extended by the Attorney-General, HV Evatt, on 24 February 1944, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A10943, 2, pp. 3 and 5. This file contains
Webb’s findings, set out in his first report and presented to the Government on 15 March 1944, led eventually to the inclusion of cannibalism as a separate war crime in the list of war crimes covered by the Australian War Crimes Act 1945 (Cth) (‘War Crimes Act’). This set Australia apart from other Allied countries because, as Caroline Pappas has pointed out, it was ‘the only nation which specified cannibalism as a crime separate from mutilation [of the dead]’. Webb’s findings also led to cannibalism being included as a separate crime in the Australian War Crimes Commission questionnaire distributed to returning servicemen (and especially to former prisoners of war) when seeking information about alleged war crimes. It appeared as Question 7 (l), distinct from Question 7 (m) concerning mutilation of the dead.

Before discussing Webb’s investigation and findings, this essay will explore the extent to which cannibalism was accepted as a war crime by the Japanese on the one hand, and by allies of Australia on the other hand in the immediate post-war period. Then it will establish the extent of cannibalism of Australian and Allied bodies in New Guinea that took place during two distinct periods. The earlier phase, investigated by Webb for his first report, occurred during the Kokoda to Gona campaign of late 1942 to early 1943. The second phase occurred during the Aitape-Wewak campaign of late 1944 into 1945. Some evidence from this later period was also collected by Webb and included in his second report. In the course of this discussion, the difficulties in establishing responsibility for specific instances and locating the individual perpetrators will be considered. Only six cases were prosecuted in the Australian-run trials. Before outlining these trials and their outcomes, this essay will address the issue of motivation, interpreted in different ways

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4 War Crimes Act 1945 (Cth) s 3. For the War Crimes Act, see Appendix I. For the Board of Inquiry list of war crimes, see Appendix III.
6 Webb instructed Counsel Assisting the Inquiry, Mr EJC Stanley from the Queensland Bar, to draft the questionnaire ‘for submission to American and Australian fighting units’, NAA: A10943, 2, pp. 4 and 7. For an example of a blank copy of the Australian War Crimes Commission Questionnaire, see NAA: A472, W18153 PART 2.
7 For the cannibalism section in the first report, see NAA: A10943, 1, pp. 193–245.
8 The second inquiry began in August 1944 and investigated five more cases of Australian victims of cannibalism, among other matters. See ‘A report on war crimes by individual members of the armed forces of the enemy against Australians by Sir William Webb’, NAA: A10950, 1, pp. 85–87.