

FRED PALMER ARCHER

(1890 - 1977)



Fred P. Archer was born 17 December 1890 in Melbourne, the second son of two boys and two girls to Tom Palmer Archer (known as TPA) and Laura.

Fred was educated first at home when the family was on the land and then in Melbourne at Working Man's College, where the headmaster described him when aged 14 as "the cleverest boy in the school."

Fred had to leave school early because of his parents' finances.

Fred's uncle offered him a job as an accountant but Fred hated city life and headed off to become a jackaroo in Queensland. There, he saw the potential of motor transport and, with his elder brother John, he set up a wool carrying business based out of Stamford, near Hughenden.

In 1916, both Fred and John joined up to fight in WWI. Fred joined the Light Horse and John the Motor Transport Unit. Both sailed for Europe



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and fought at the Somme. Fred was taken ill and sent back to England where he recuperated and retrained as an aircraft mechanic. John retrained as an aerial photographer.

After the war, both took up soldiers' settlement blocks in south-east Queensland where they tried their hands at fruit growing, Fred at Applethorpe and John at Amiens, near Stanthorpe.

The venture failed and Fred sold up everything except his horse and went to Murwillumbah in northern NSW where he worked at a sawmill.

Then he saw an advertisement for returned WWI veterans to manage former German plantations in New Guinea, expropriated as a result of the WWI reparations. He went to Rabaul in early 1923. It was the start of 54 years living in New Guinea.

Fred started by managing Agita Plantation on Wuvulu Island, about 150 km north of Aitape, New Britain.

In 1927 he successfully tendered £20,225 for Jame Plantation (pronounced Yamie) on three small islands off the coast of Buka Island, north of Bougainville. The plantation was producing

about 18-20 tons of copra a month (around 230 tons a year) when Fred took it over. By 1941 it was producing 300 tons a year and had become famous as a 'showcase' plantation in the region.

In 1939, as war broke out around the world, the founder of the Coast Watchers organisation, Eric Feldt appointed Fred, along with his friend and neighbour, Percy Good, the local District Officer, Jack Read, and others as Coast Watchers, giving them AWA tele-radios to report on enemy movements.

By Christmas 1941, all the women and children in the region were evacuated to Australia. The last steamer, the Malaita, sailed in January 1942. Rabaul was first bombed on 8 January 1942 and invaded on 23 January 1942.

Within the first months, Coast Watchers Tom Ellery, Frank Roach and Con Page were each caught and executed by the Japanese.

On 16 March 1942, Fred's friend Percy Good at the nearby Kessa plantation was captured and killed by the Japanese. Fred, Read and others had been heading to Kessa to warn Percy Good when they heard the Japanese had beaten them to it.

Fred escaped from Jame and took to the hills behind another plantation he owned called Teop on the Bougainville mainland. From his hideout Fred could observe the Japanese along the east coast of Bougainville. He used a trusted group of local scouts to gather intelligence and fed it to Jack Read who passed it on to Moresby and Townsville. Others, like Claude Campbell a Scot and long-time planter, who owned nearby Raua Plantation, also gathered information and passed it, through Fred, to Jack Read.

The Japanese troops arrived at Teop in March 1942, attracted by its excellent harbour and the fruit available. Fred was forced further inland and lived on the edge, ready to move at a moment's notice should his camp be discovered.

Over the following months, the Japanese increased their patrols and added tracking dogs as they tried to hunt down the Coast Watchers. Fred was forced into the highest points on the island, about 2,500 metres above sea level. The natives became very concerned and Fred and the others became uncertain whether some of them would weaken and betray them.

Even in these straitened circumstances, Fred thought

of the big picture. He asked Read to signal Townsville to make arrangements with his bank the Bank of NSW (now Westpac) to invest 10,000 pounds in the Australian War Loans for the duration of the war, with 2,000 of it to be interest free. Apparently the action is recorded in the bank's history. When asked why he did it, Fred replied that he only had one country and money was no good to him without a country.

By December 1942, the Japanese were closing in on the Coast Watchers. They raided the Campbell's plantation but, warned by their scouts, they escaped just minutes ahead of the patrols. They too headed into the mountains as the Japanese razed their plantation to the ground.

Fred realised the time had come to try to make it off the island. He was particularly concerned for the women civilians and a group of nuns at a nearby mission. The American priest at the Catholic mission told Read he was entitled to request help from the US Navy as an American citizen.

Read passed on the request and the Americans agreed. They sent a submarine to Teop harbour and, when it surfaced, it was greeted by, not only the seventeen



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women but also another eight men needing to escape. The sub's commander agreed to the extra cargo and Fred and 29 people in all clambered aboard the USS Nautilus just as the first light of dawn broke on New Year's Day 1943.

Fred recuperated in New Zealand for a month and arrived back in Sydney in early February 1943.

He took up a position with the War Damage Commission in Sydney, assessing claims made by former residents of New Guinea Territories.

On 26 September 1943 Fred accepted a commission as a Lieutenant in the British Solomon Islands Defence Forces, Solomon Islands Labour Corps, based at Guadalcanal. He returned to Guadalcanal in charge of detachments of native scouts and labour units with the US Forces.

During 1944 Fred took part in a reconnaissance mission to Nisaan Island. He was lucky to emerge uninjured after two of his scouts were hit by machine-gun fire while standing on either side of him.

Fred continued to work with the Americans, organising their native labour forces until July 1945, when he joined Jack Read on Torokina, on the mid-west coast of Bougainville, as a Lieutenant in the Australian

Army in charge of the Native Scouts for the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit. Fred's acceptance into the Australian Army by the then Minister for the Army Frank Forde, made him one of only three men to join the Australian Military Forces from within enemy occupied territory.

Fred worked with and was great friends with one of the legendary Coast Watchers, Paul Mason. Mason, along with Jack Read, was credited by the Americans with saving Guadalcanal, one of the key battles of the Pacific.

After Japan surrendered on 11 August 1945, Fred played a leading role in the rebuilding process on Bougainville. He also had the sad task of accompanying the remains of his old friend Percy Good to his final burial place in the war cemetery at Torokina in April 1946.

On 17 April 1947 Fred returned to his beloved Jame. It was completely devastated. The buildings were totally destroyed, even the jetty had been bombed. With little help from the War Damage Commission, Fred set about restoring the plantation.

By 1947 he had begun harvesting again. "By 1950 Jame was nearly back to its pre-war standard and paying handsomely."

Fred was a prime mover in the Planters' Association of New Guinea. As President, on 13 November 1950, he presided over the formation of the Bougainville Company Ltd to take over and control the MV Polurrian, a 450 ton coastal freighter to service their plantations. Paul Mason was one of the founding members of the company.

The company built a wharf at Rabaul for the Polurrian and its growing fleet. The Bougainville Company traded successfully, but by 1959 Fred's health was waning. He decided to sell Jame and retire to Rabaul.

He moved there in 1960, accompanied by his native staff who had been with him for 35 years.

Fred was a great believer in education, and he saw this as the key for New Guineans to develop themselves and their country. He made generous donations for local young people to attend school, he attended graduations and frequently addressed groups of young people.

In 1960 Fred was instrumental in establishing Operation Bootstraps, a self-help scheme to improve conditions on Wuvulu, especially Auna village, home to Fred's staff.

Fred died in Brisbane in 1977, aged 87.

Just before his death, Fred formed his FP Archer Holdings Company into a charitable trust to be managed in perpetuity by Permanent Trustees (now The Trust Company) in Sydney. It was arranged that the dividends from the company be distributed each year to a number of charities in New Guinea, and Australia, and this continues to this day.

