



Discussion Questions

Ghost Mountain Boys: Their Epic March and the Terrifying Battle for New Guinea, the Forgotten War of the South Pacific by James Campbell

Source: Madison Public Library

1. Malaria, dysentery, trenchfoot, jungle rot; no machetes, insect repellent or waterproof containers: can you even imagine the difficulty of this journey? When you consider the author's difficulties with modern equipment, how do you explain just how these soldiers were able to do it? What about their physical and psychological makeup made it possible that so many did in fact make it to Buna?
2. Were you aware of the 32nd National Guard Division from Minnesota and Wisconsin before you read the book? Were you aware of this part of the South Pacific campaign? What did you know about this time and place? If you'd never heard of it before reading this book, are you surprised there hasn't been more written about these soldiers' amazing feat?
3. For the men of Big Rapids, Michigan (mostly beer-swilling party boys by their own admission), joining the National Guard during peacetime was just something you did. Quotes from First Sergeant Paul Lutjens indicates the evolving state of mind of these 'boys':
 - "When I got my first uniform..." he said, "I was just in my second year at high school and I thought I was pretty big stuff. I wore out the mirror in the hall downstairs admiring myself..."
 - A blast of hot air nearly brought Lutjens to his knees. In the back of the transport truck Lutjens' was already writing in his diary. "September 15, 1942, 5:30 P.M. Temperature 115 degrees. Japs twenty miles away. New Guinea weather is hotter than the lower story of hell."

- “Started through the jungle today,” Lutjens wrote. “It is ten times worse than you can imagine... Wearing green head-nets to keep off mosq.. They damn near smother you.”

Did you grow up during this era? Are you surprised at their transformation?

4. Did you enjoy reading about the native porters from both the 1942 and 2006 trips? Did 64 years change them or their culture much? What was different?
5. The remnants of WWII linger all over Papua New Guinea and the wider region in both a physical form (wreckage from downed planes, downed ships submerged in the water) as well as in the oral histories of the villagers. Some share stories of work their relatives did as porters for the soldiers. Others harbor resentment over the destruction of their villages due to the war. Can you see this war and this campaign from their point of view in a new way since reading *Ghost Mountain Boys*?
6. James Campbell attended the 32nd Division Old Timers gathering at Fort McCoy, WI in the summer of 2005. Some of those present were over 90 years old. Despite many ailments and injuries, they joked with each other for 5 days as if they were young GIs again. Do you know any veterans, or are you a veteran yourself? Do you suppose it is common to reunite with such ease? Do you think the intense difficulty these men faced makes them even more likely to enjoy each other’s company now? Are you surprised to find that many didn’t want to talk about the war at all?
7. Does the book modify your view of General McArthur and his strategies, especially for these campaigns? Do you think his reputation is tarnished now by what he put these boys through?
8. Did Campbell’s re-creation of the 1942 journey enhance the book? Would you have liked it more (or less) without the contemporary parallel slog over the mountains?