

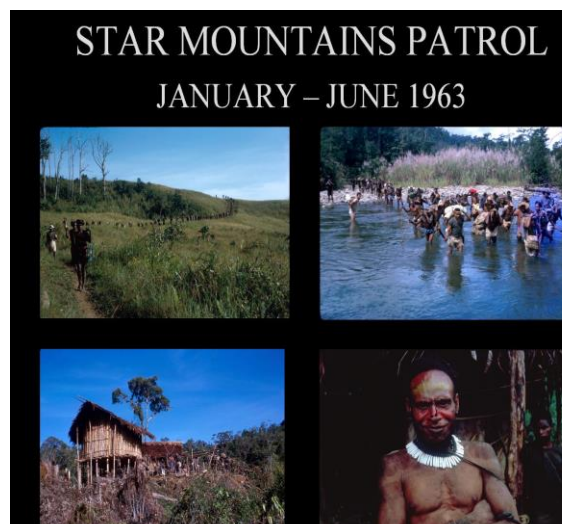
# John Groenewald's Diary of the 1963 Star Mountains Patrol

## Foreword by Ross Johnson:

The following description by Judith Blogg of the 1963 Star Mountains Patrol, led by A/Assistant District Officer, Des Fitzer, was originally published in the December 2016 issue of *Una Voce* (now PNG Kundu). It is an excellent summary of the patrol however as many of John's diary entries are 'word pictures' in themselves, the opportunity has been taken to reproduce those entries in full and where possible, to relate John's photographs to specific diary entries so that viewers can visualise and share the day-to-day workings of an exploratory and first contact patrol.

Included, where appropriate, is the corresponding 'official Patrol Diary' entry as recorded by Des Fitzer in his Patrol Report Kiunga 9 of 1962/63. A comparison of the two entries makes interesting reading, especially to ex-field staff of the PNG Administration.

In the conclusion to his Patrol Report, Des Fitzer writes: 'If it were at all possible to dedicate a patrol report, then this one might well be to people such as Champion, Karius, Hides, O'Malley, et al, who in a bygone era and without its medical benefits nor the organisation available to present day P.O.'s, opened up the rest of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.'



## Judith Blogg's article:

"The 1963 Fitzer patrol of the Star Mountains of PNG, the first of its kind into that high, wild country, is well documented. But for a graphic description of the incredible hardships faced by the patrol you need to read the day by day diary of surveyor John Groenewald. In nearly five months, John reckoned the patrol walked some 500 miles and he should know. Walked? More specifically waded through mud and rivers, slipped from rocks and logs, scaled impossible cliffs, crossed swift-flowing rivers, sweated in the swamplands, shivered at daytime highs of 64<sup>0</sup> F in rain and drizzle and froze in camps at altitudes of 8,700 ft. And these hardships were second to the concern about where the next meal was coming from.

A South African, John was attracted to work with the Snowy Mountains Authority where he learnt to use the Wild T4 theodolite. This skill was a prerequisite for the PNG patrol and he accepted the Department of National Mapping challenge, making his first unforgettable visit to PNG in January 1963. His task was to prepare a rough track map using compass bearings and estimates of the distance they covered and to make astronomical position line fixes. The fix sites had to be marked for subsequent aerial photography in order to ascertain the geographical data. In his words "this was all very well in theory but astronomical observations were virtually impossible" since they were either shrouded in cloud or enveloped by jungle. He managed only 13 fixes over the whole patrol.

Led by ADO Des Fitzer, with PO Ross Henderson and John Groenewald, a small group of police and around 60 carriers, the patrol set off on January 17 from Kiunga on the Fly River. Having previously identified from aerial reconnaissance the "top pocket" near Mt Capella as their ultimate target, the route took them along barely identifiable tracks that led from swampy, leech-plagued low country into the craggy, cloudy, precipitous mountains that span PNG and West Irian (now Papua).

Walking up to seven hours a day, at times they strayed at times across the border into West Irian, always seeking a route to the “top pocket”. They built bridges and contrived ladders to scale sheer bluffs. They fought off bees and mosquitoes, they nursed blisters, they were always damp and dirty and regularly drenched. John struggled with observations and maps in impossible conditions and they encountered villagers who almost certainly had never seen a white man and who, John observed, wore little and looked “rather wild”. They also had moments of sheer delight at the unfolding magnificence of the country they were struggling through, of jumping into crystal clear pools and cleaning up and even, on rare occasions, sunbaking at their camp.

Food was the constant worry; when supplies could no longer be conveyed by river, the higher they went the more difficult it became to find suitable sites for airdrops. Despite the comings and goings of the carriers there were always many hungry mouths to feed and their progress depended entirely on food – when it was scarce they had to wait at the best available site for a drop until it came and when it arrived they could walk only as far as the carriers could progress with their new loads of rice and bully beef. More than once they could hear a plane searching for them and the disappointment was extreme when they realised it had given up trying to find them. On other occasions, the daring of the pilots flying in at treetop level left them stunned. Often, they were able to buy food at the various villages they passed through, largely taro and now and again a pig. They traded with match boxes and small beads.

The three of them devised cunning ways to disguise the “boy’s meat” they inevitably had to fall back on but John wrote that on occasion he felt weakened by hunger as they got further into the mountains. At one stage the food position became so critical the decision was made to turn back just as a drop succeeded with a load of rice and bully beef, a few welcome treats like frozen steak and much sought-after mail.

Des and John were dismayed when, on March 13, Ross was summoned back to Kiunga to present as a witness in a murder case. This was disappointing as the three of them got on well and it was unlikely he would return in time to complete the patrol. He was to be replaced by Dan Claason who failed to materialise. So it was just the pair of them that pressed their party on and ever up.

At several villages they were told there was no track to the “top pocket” but Fitzer decided this merely showed a reluctance to guide them into difficult country and they struggled on. It was slow, slow going. But they eventually proved Fitzer right when, near the foot of Mt Capella, they found a group willing to show them the way. By then they were becoming critically short of food again and were devastated by a radio message from Daru to say if they attempted their goal no airdrop could be guaranteed. John describes Fitzer’s anger and determination to continue regardless. They had come so far! But the terrain was dreadful and it became necessary to hack their way through jungle, at times crawling on hands and knees and at one point wading 200 yards up an icy stream. The terrain, the state of the carriers and lack of food defeated them. The party turned back and finally met up with Dan Claason before heading for Telefomin. John observed their descent into a broad grassy valley on the other side of the “Stars” by writing “It is just unbelievable that two sides of a mountain can be so different.”

Overwhelmed by the hospitality offered at tiny Telefomin, scene of the murder of two kiaps only 10 years before, they ate, drank and partied hard, somewhat embarrassed about the tattered state of their clothing. Ross rejoined them at Telefomin but no sooner had he arrived than he was ordered to take the remnants of the patrol back to Kiunga while Des and John were to wait at Telefomin for the arrival of the Governor-General. Then John would return to Australia and Des was to fly to Daru. The arrangement was frustrating but Des and John filled in time awaiting the G.G. by joining a short medical patrol into the Oliptamin Valley. Back at Telefomin, the big moment finally arrived and the pair was introduced to the G.G. about whom John noted “he seems quite nice but of course very English”. The kiaps were not happy about the tame conclusion to their heroic patrol which was supposed to be a Kiunga to Kiunga round-trip on foot. It seemed cruel now the hard part was behind them but as it turned out only Des suffered the ignominy.

“The best laid plans of Mice and Men” wrote John, whose belongings were already on their way south via Moresby when Natmap decided he was to return to Kiunga with Ross, taking astrofixes on the way. The pair, with their police and carriers, left the comfort of Telefomin on April 22 and soon crossed back into Papua. The track they followed was a considerable improvement on their earlier struggles and main points of interest were checking out potential airstrip sites, taking astrofixes whenever possible, mapping and calculating and contending with the Pnyang river, a tributary of the Ok Tedi, which at that time was known as the Alice. One of their two crossings of the Pnyang was by way of a cane suspension bridge, 200 ft long and anchored at each end by large trees. Not having previously experienced this novelty, John confessed that the shaky, swaying contraption was thoroughly unnerving and he was amazed he reached the other bank. The second time they had to cross the same crocodile infested river they had planned on making a raft when a policeman decided to swim across while the others watched in trepidation. He made it safely and hijacked a canoe so they abandoned the raft but John noted that conveying the whole party across this swift-flowing river in a small canoe was a slow and nerve-racking experience.

As the walking became easier, they pushed themselves harder walking often seven and eight hours a day. By the end of May they had left the mountains behind and it was not only getting a lot warmer but becoming popular with binatang. John was bitten all over and wrote that he was getting heartily sick of the discomforts. Now they encountered regularly patrolled villages and, instead of camping, found kiap rest houses where they could stay along the way.

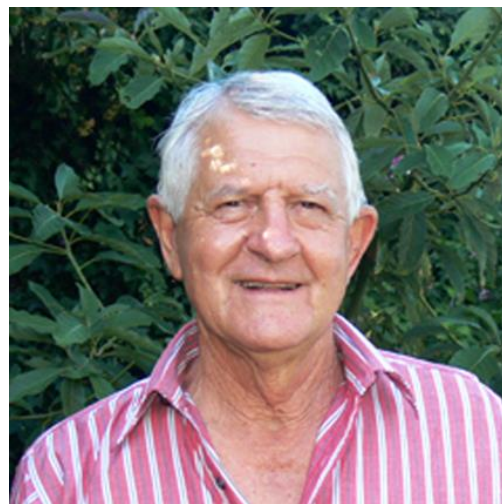
At last, sore of foot in boots with paper-thin soles, sweaty and dirty and beset by festering sores, they struggled through the flat swamp country and arrived back at Kiunga on June 7, 152 days after they left it. Their arrival was acclaimed, their achievement had been recognised by the Governor-General and in the press and there was profound satisfaction in knowing what they had survived despite the frustration of not reaching the “top pocket”. Happy to be idle for a few days and soaking up a cold beer or two before flying out, John was the only one of the three expatriates to complete the entire patrol. He later observed “the Star Mountains Patrol was one of the most exciting and memorable experiences of my life”.

### ***A postscript by John Groenewald:***

#### **MY TIME IN AUSTRALIA 1961-64: P.J.L. (JOHN) GROENEWALD**

In August 1960 as I was writing my final examinations for a B.Sc. in Land Surveying at the University of Cape Town the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority advertised in South Africa for engineers and surveyors. I applied and in early 1961 seven engineers and four land surveyors from all over South Africa arrived in Cooma. We were assigned to different departments and areas of the Snowy Scheme and I went to Khancoban with the Control Survey Section.

Most of the work I did involved fixing control points and setting out structures from these points. To get to the more remote places we went on horseback and used pack-horses to carry our equipment. At other times we camped at places like Mont Water Springs and Windy Creek. The two projects where I did most survey work were Windy Creek Dam and Murray I Power Station.



The Authority owned a Wild T4 theodolite which was used primarily for astronomical observations. I was lucky enough to be taught to use this instrument. In the winter of 1962 (when the T4 could not be used on the Scheme due to the weather) I was seconded to the Department of National Mapping and spent two months carrying out La Place observations at points between Toowoomba and Ayr in Queensland.



Soon after returning to Khancoban the Dept. of National Mapping advertised for a surveyor whose duties would include T4 work. I applied and a transfer was arranged for me to move from The Snowy to Natmap at the beginning of 1963. In early December I was contacted by Natmap asking whether I would be prepared to go to Papua-New Guinea as soon as I started in 1963. I cannot remember but doubt that I knew exactly where it was let alone anything about the country. However I was young and game to do or see anything different and readily accepted the offer.

Upon starting with Natmap I was informed that I would be joining The Star Mountains Patrol which would be patrolling along the boundary with West New Guinea northwards from Kiunga towards the Star Mountains. On 15 January 1963 I flew from Melbourne to Port Moresby where I was met by Dave Cook the local Natmap surveyor. Dave was great in assisting me to purchase supplies and acquire suitable clothing and footwear for what lay ahead.

My duties on the patrol would be to prepare a rough track map using compass bearings and estimates of the distances covered each day. Needless to say this was very much hit-and-miss considering the terrain we were walking through. (Oh for GPS!!!) More importantly I had a Wild T2 theodolite with which I was to do astronomical position line fixes which would not only give us accurate geographical co-ordinates but would also be used as ground control for aerial mapping. For this second purpose it was necessary to mark the points fixed by these means with stones or logs forming large crosses which would be visible on future aerial photographs. This was all very well in theory but astronomical observations were virtually impossible on most nights due to cloud. Then on the rare clear night we would be camped in dense jungle with the tree canopy obscuring the sky. As a result I was only able to observe 13 fixes during the 5 month period. To make matters worse the spot photography I did of these points from the air at the end of the patrol was not much use.

As will be seen from my diary (which incidentally is the first and last time I have ever kept a daily diary) the patrol was tough at times and on many an occasion I would have happily got out of there. On the other hand I can say that the Star Mountains Patrol was one of the most exciting and memorable experiences of my life. My only claim to fame was that I was the only European member who did the whole patrol as Ross left for a while and Des did not do the homeward leg from Telefomin to Kiunga. I would however like to pay tribute to Des Fitzer, Ross Henderson and Dan Claasen (who was with us for a short period) for their friendship and camaraderie and to the police and carriers for all the hard work they did and for ensuring our safety. It says much for Des's leadership and character that I cannot remember a single argument or unpleasant incident throughout the period.

After returning to Natmap in Melbourne I spent a week at Parkes at the radio telescope where we did some La Place observations. In August 1963 I set off with 3 field-assistants in two trucks to do more La Place observations across the Nullarbor. We started near Watson working along the railway line and ended close to Kalgoorlie in early December.

I had had my share of camping and bush-life during 1963 and my 3 year contract with the Snowy was completed at the end of that year. In February 1964 I returned to South Africa where I have been in private practise as a land surveyor in Cape Town. For the past 10 years I have lived in Hermanus a lovely coastal town 130 kms. east of Cape Town and plan to retire fully at the end of this month.

I have been back to Australia in 1999 for the huge Snowy re-union and again in 2009 to attend the wedding of a niece in Adelaide. It is a country of which I have many great memories.

John Groenewald

Hermanus, South Africa

May 2013

### ***The Diary:***

John Groenewald's Star Mountains Patrol comprises 156 diary entries together with 116 photographs and covers the period between the 15<sup>th</sup> January to the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1963. It should be noted that the 'official' Star Mountains Patrol under ADO Des Fitzer's leadership, commenced on Thursday 17 January 1963 when Des departed Daru for Kiunga to await John's arrival. To facilitate overall readability, the Diary has been divided into seven parts as follow -

- Part 1 – Port Moresby to Kiunga : 15 – 27 January 1963
- Part 2 – Kiunga to West New Guinea border : 28 January - 13 February 1963
- Part 3 - West New Guinea border to the Bun river : 14 February – 9 March 1963
- Part 4 - Bun river to Fukutu Drop Site : 10 March – 12 April 1963
- Part 5 – Fukutu Drop Site to Telefomin : 13 April – 28 April 1963
- Part 6 – At Telefomin: 29 April – 21 May 1963
- Part 7 – Telefomin back to Kiunga thence Port Moresby : 22 May – 16 June 1963

*Ross Johnson,  
Beecroft, NSW  
May 2024*