INTRODUCTION

Some sixty years after the end of World War II, Micronesians still speak about their wartime experiences, and those of their parents and grandparents, as a time of profound transition, “the greatest hardship” that they and their societies have endured. These islands, ruled by Japan for decades before the war, contested in the bloody Central Pacific campaigns of 1943–1945, then governed by the United States, play a key role in the military history of the conflict. Yet the many volumes of Pacific War history based on Allied or Japanese sources scarcely mention the Islanders across whose lands and seas the fight was waged. The story of the northern Pacific theater, and most of that global war, is archived as the record of the major combatants’ experiences. Micronesians, like other indigenous peoples, are “missing in action” from the written accounts of World War II.

MICRONESIA’S “MISSING IN ACTION”

Our ethnohistorical research on Micronesians during the war years set out to fill this gap. During 1990–1991, we collected approximately four hundred oral histories from Micronesian elders. Our field research, conducted with the help of Micronesian research assistants and translators, focused on the Marshall and Caroline islands and included accounts from men and women of different statuses, educational backgrounds, and wartime work assignments. We also used existing collections of oral history by other researchers for Palau, Guam, the Northern Marianas, Kiribati, and Nauru.
Our interview design was intentionally simple. We explained our project, asked permission to record and use the interview information, and invited consultants to share their war-related memories. Interviews were conducted in the speaker’s first (or preferred) language and later translated into English. Interviews were largely, though not entirely, open-ended. We asked people to talk about the war within a chronological framework: the Japanese colonial era, war preparations, the conflict itself, war’s end, and initial American occupation. At the conclusion of the interview we invited their reflections on the entire era and asked what they would like others to know about their wartime experiences. Interviewers provided guidance when needed and asked follow-up questions for clarification or elaboration. Otherwise, we allowed speakers to follow their own inclinations in focusing on what they felt to be important.

Despite the passage of so much time since the war’s end, we were not disappointed with what we were able to learn. Because so little had been written about indigenous experiences of the Pacific War in Micronesia, the first book resulting from our research provided a historical overview of the circumstances and impact of the war years (The Typhoon of War: Micronesian Experiences of the Pacific War, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001). In that book, we combined information from documentary sources with oral history, using the historians’ work to set the context of the military events that controlled the circumstances of Islanders’ personal experience.

The use of extensive short passages from our interviews in the first book helped convey—through the voices of Micronesian survivors—the presence of Micronesians during the war, the detailed knowledge, the thoughtful reflection, and the feeling tone contained in their stories. In collecting and analyzing these accounts, we were struck by the wide range of Micronesian experiences. Indeed, one of the challenges we faced in writing the first book was to portray this diversity. But we were also struck by certain regularities in what storytellers had to say and in how they said it. Although people’s memories of wartime experiences were varied, they were also distinctively Micronesian. Our goal is to acknowledge the importance of these memories and their links to Micronesia’s present and future.

**PLAN OF THE BOOK**

Whereas our first book was an ethnohistory of the war in Micronesia written primarily for specialists in Pacific Islands studies and military history, this book...
aims at a wider audience, looking at the common (though not uniform) ways in which Micronesian individuals and communities think about, retell, commemorate, and otherwise represent the war today. Our focus is not so much on the events of the war as on the remembrances themselves—the ritual commemorations, stories, dances, and songs that keep memories alive through a process that social scientists call the “construction” of cultural memory. Keeping alive a community’s memory of an event or experience is not automatic or simple. Instead, it is an ongoing process of social interaction and cultural creation through which people tell themselves, and others, stories about their past. We wish to identify distinctively Micronesian cultural memories of war and to learn how and why they are selected, formed, and perpetuated from one generation to the next.

We begin the book with background information on Micronesia, starting in chapter 1 with some of the underlying similarities but also important differences across that region of the Pacific. We offer an overview of the Japanese colonial administration and of the Pacific War (as told from the perspectives of the two major combatants, the Americans and the Japanese), a summary of postwar conditions of the region, and the modern political statuses of the islands. Chapter 2 offers a short introduction to the idea of cultural memory—how cultural expectations shape personal experiences into recollections that are conveyed to the future. We also discuss how Micronesian cultures encode and transmit memories—in the landscape and in various types of performances—with particular focus on memories of World War II.

The rest of the book presents Micronesian’s memories of the war years largely through their own words in narratives and songs, showing how Micronesian cultural and historical backgrounds help them understand, cope with, and share their wartime experiences. At the same time, the dramatic, novel, and even discordant nature of those experiences created new frameworks for understanding themselves and the wider world, as well as new motivations and methods to use in telling their stories of war.

Part 2 presents Micronesian understandings about war, and the Pacific War, in general terms. In talking about the war, what do Micronesians select as important cultural memories? What do these cultural memories say the war was about? Chapter 3 discusses the fact that Micronesians’ approach to the meaning of the war has little to do with the military strategies of the combatant powers. Instead, their war memories focus on local conditions and certain themes that recur throughout the region. Chapter 4 presents the shock
of the war’s arrival for Micronesians, chapter 5 the hardships and suffering they endured, and chapter 6 their sense of overwhelming fear in combat situations.

Part 3, on Micronesian vantage points, asks how narrative form conveys Micronesian experiences of war. It considers how the way the war was fought in the islands—the facts that Micronesians were caught by surprise in a war that was long distant and then abruptly a part of their lives; found themselves in the middle of a foreign war but marginal to its instigation, prosecution, and resolution; were in a largely fixed position within a war characterized by great mobility across a global expanse; and attempted to understand and cope with two sets of foreigners (one close at hand, one largely unknown)—helps to shape the manner in which wartime narratives are told. Chapter 7 explores the Micronesian perception that “it was not our war,” and chapter 8 discusses the war as a “typhoon.” Chapter 9 examines Micronesians’ continued reassessment of the character and motivations of major combatants—especially the Japanese, but also the Americans—as the war progressed. Chapter 10 demonstrates strategies Micronesians used to cope with wartime stresses.

In Part 4, we examine some dominant Micronesian cultural themes. Every culture has its own key symbols or particular emphases, and as we might expect, when people remember the war years, they tend to remember and to talk about the subjects of greatest interest to them. Chapter 11 considers topics of perennial interest to Micronesians—happiness, harmony, and abundance; romance; and chiefly culture—that are also frequently found in wartime stories and songs. Chapter 12 examines the culturally and historically important farewells and welcomes to the Japanese and Americans that accompanied the war’s end and the transfer of colonial rule.

Part 5, the book’s conclusion, steps back to take a wider perspective on how Micronesian remembrances of the war fit into the broad scope of their vision of history and identity in the modern world. Chapter 13 reveals that, although the war resulted in major dislocations and realignments of Micronesian economies, societies, and cultures, it is only one part of the entire span of Micronesian pasts and futures. How are wartime experiences kept relevant and memorable? How have Micronesians today changed their view of World War II, war in general, and their place within the modern world? Finally, chapter 14 provides the full text of “The Great Airplane,” a song composed on Fais Island, Yap, shortly after the war. This dance song covers the entire wartime period and includes many of the themes we present throughout the book.
We hope readers will take from this book a sense of cultural memory as an active, shaped reality. Students of history know that the past is not concrete or fixed, but is understood anew by each population in terms of its own experience and by each generation in terms of its own needs. In learning about how Micronesians remember the Pacific War, we can learn something about how all groups of people sift, evaluate, commemorate, and rely on their vision of their past as they construct their future.