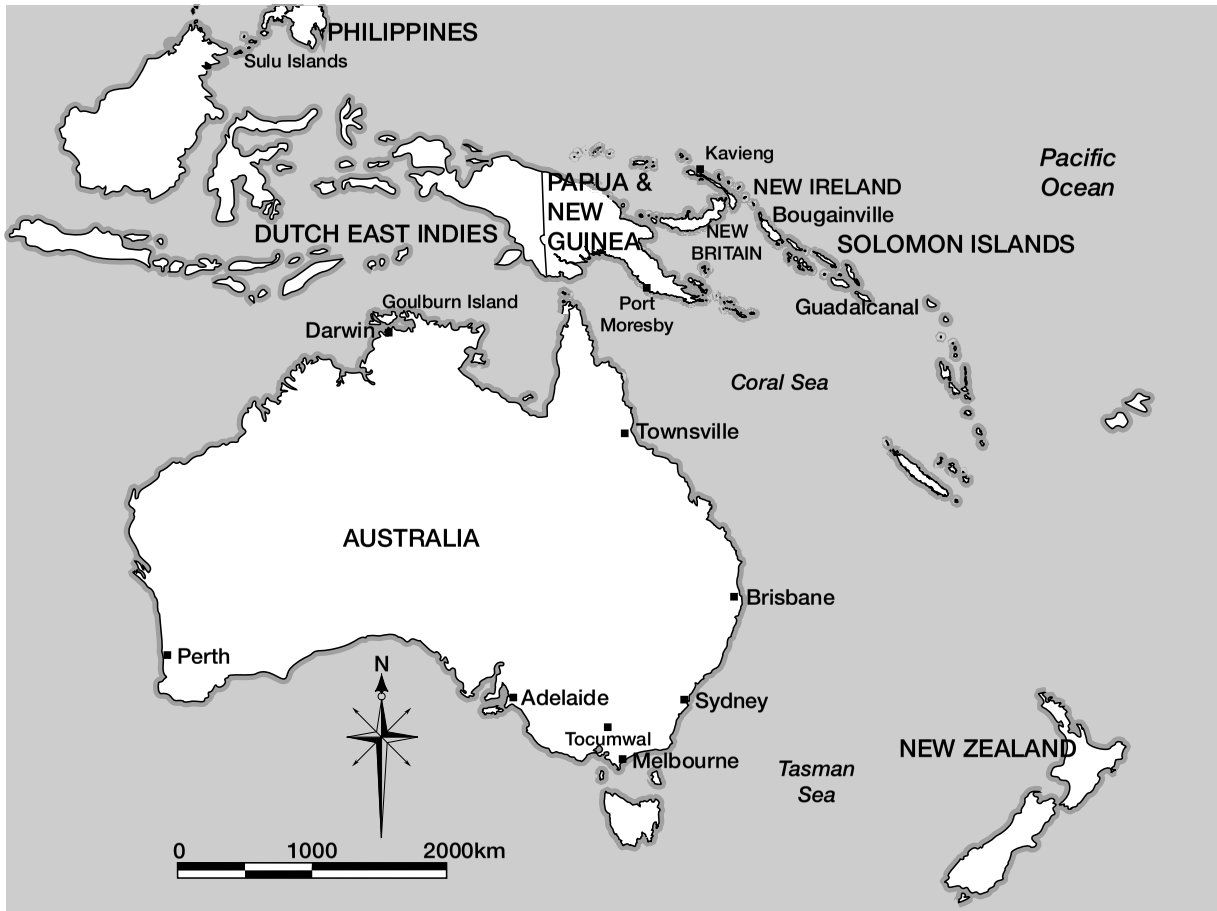
PART 1

The setting, the background, and the crime



Australia, SE Asia and PNG, 1942–44: locations and place names mentioned in the text.

chapter 1

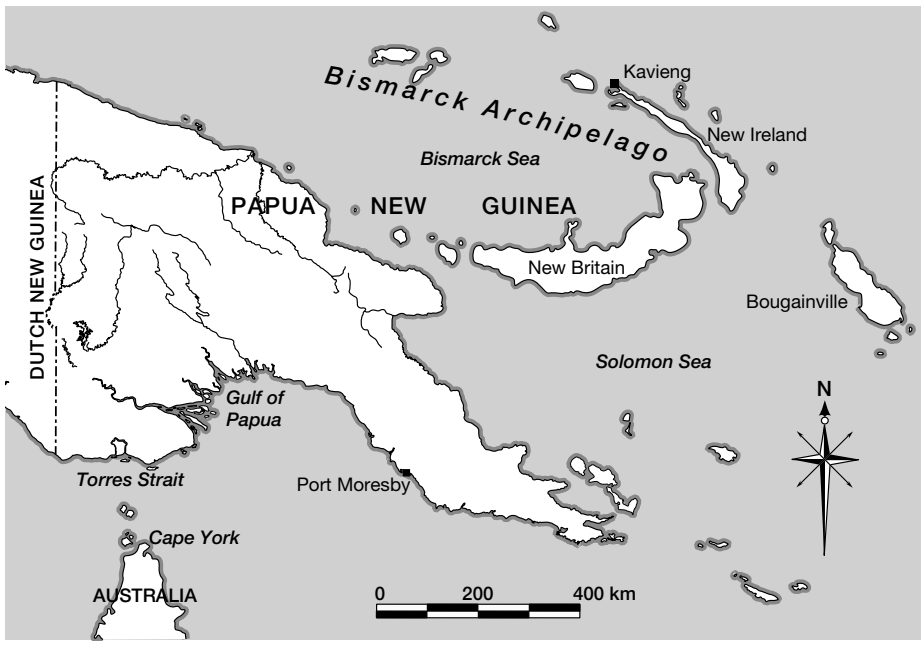
Kavieng, December 1941: a rather wonderful tropical paradise

The tropical South Pacific setting for this story is the small, obscure, and spectacularly beautiful harbour township of Kavieng located at the extreme northern tip of the four hundred kilometres long, narrow mountainous island called New Ireland, first sighted and named by English mariners during the great era of Pacific exploration in the eighteenth century.[1] The first Englishman to arrive in these waters, in 1700, was the British buccaneer and explorer William Dampier on his famous voyage through the south seas in the battered British admiralty barque HMS *Roebuck*. Dampier sailed around what was to be later called New Ireland and its neighbour New Britain, and assuming they were a continuous island, named the whole New Britain. Apart from his legendary career as a pirate, navigator, and explorer, Dampier had a gift for writing, and the published journals of his voyages in the South Seas were wildly popular in England, inspiring Daniel Defoe to invent the wonderful stories of Robinson Crusoe. Dampier's long-ago presence in the waters of eastern New Guinea is permanently memorialised in the Dampier Strait, immediately to the west of New Britain.

In 1767 the next British explorer arrived on the scene and, upon closer investigation, was able to determine that Dampier's New Britain was in fact two separate, large islands. Commander Phillip Carteret was attempting an east-to-west circumnavigation of the globe in the very slow and poor-handling HMS *Swallow*, having left England in August 1766 and finally entering the Pacific through the Magellan Straits at the tip of South America in April 1767. Four months later Carteret arrived at New Britain and in September 1767 discovered the wide

channel immediately to the east of modern-day New Britain, which Dampier had thought was a gulf. Carteret named it St George's Channel after the waterway between Britain and Ireland, and then named and claimed all of New Ireland for the English crown. *Swallow* then headed for home, finally returning to England in March 1769 via Makassar and Batavia in the Dutch East Indies, Table Bay at the tip of South Africa, and Ascension Island in the mid-Atlantic. This had been one of the slowest circumnavigations ever undertaken, but among many achievements Carteret had been able to correctly identify New Britain and New Ireland as separate entities.[2]

New Ireland is aligned roughly north-west to south-east, and lies adjacent to and to the north of the much larger island of New Britain. Together in the tropical South-west Pacific, New Ireland and New Britain and their outlying islands form the bulk of the Bismarck Archipelago, and together with the smaller Admiralty Islands in the north encompass the Bismarck Sea. Further to the west lies the much bigger island usually called Papua[3], immediately to the north of the vast island-continent of Australia. New Ireland and New Britain are in the Pacific 'Ring of Fire', prone to occasional large volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.



Papua and New Guinea, including New Ireland and New Britain

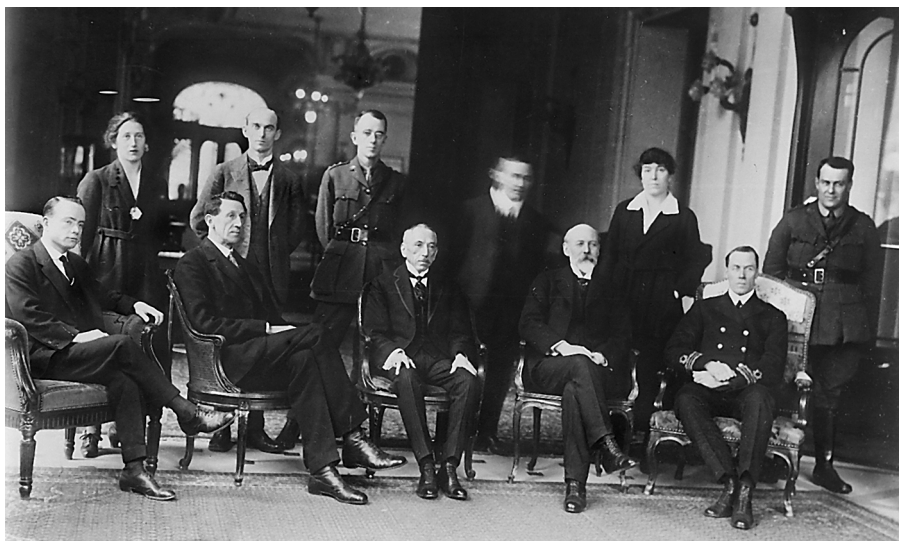
Before the Pacific war of 1941–45, the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago and the large north-eastern section of the island of Papua formed the Australian-administered Mandated Territory of New Guinea. In 1941 the administrative and commercial centre of New Guinea was the large harbour town of Rabaul, sited at the northernmost tip of New Britain. The smaller south-eastern section of the island of Papua formed the Territory of Papua, under separate Australian administration since 1906, with Port Moresby serving as its commercial and administrative centre. In 1941 the entire western half of Papua was under Dutch control and administratively part of the then Dutch East Indies.

Originally annexed by the German Empire in 1884, in 1921 the territory of New Guinea had been formally mandated to Australian care by the League of Nations as one condition of the larger post-World War I political settlement negotiated in May and June 1919 at Versailles in Paris. This international treaty divided the old German colonial empire among the victorious allies, and its onerous conditions had been imposed upon Germany as the price for having been defeated in that terrible conflict between 1914 and 1918. Perhaps anticipating this, long before the Treaty of Versailles was negotiated Australia had in fact already assumed de facto control of New Guinea. In 1914, following the outbreak of war in Europe, an Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force had been sent to sieze the territory from Germany and occupy it for the duration of hostilities.

For the twenty years from 1921 to the outbreak of the Pacific war in December 1941 general administration of the two vast and undeveloped territories of Papua and New Guinea was conducted from Canberra by a small and relatively unimportant bureaucracy, the Department of External Territories, under the political control of a Minister for External Territories who was an elected Member of the Commonwealth Parliament. Detailed administration in the islands was conducted by a network of government administrative officials, magistrates, policemen, patrol officers, medical workers, and educators. Although the citizens, extensive lands, economy, and laws of Papua and of New Guinea were effectively parts of Australia, the distant territories had only marginal significance for most Australians, and were of little interest to them.

Since 1921 thousands of Australians had settled in Papua and New Guinea to administer the law, conduct missionary and education activities among the indigenous people, and establish businesses, especially mines and plantations. Many of the new Australian settlers were encouraged

A typical neatly kept pre-war copra plantation on New Ireland. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER AWM P00001.395



The Australian Plenipotentiaries at the Peace Conference at Versailles, Paris, in 1919. At this conference W.M. Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia (seated centre front), managed to secure the Territory of New Guinea for Australia, against the wishes of Japan and the United States. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER AWM A02615

to purchase expropriated German property for agricultural enterprises, usually coconut plantations for production of copra, then an important industrial raw material used for making coconut oil, a basic ingredient of soap, detergent, shampoo, margarine, candle wax, and industrial chemicals and explosives.

On New Ireland, Kavieng became a settlement for Europeans because of its perfect all-weather deepwater harbour, in an era when steamships were still the most common form of transport for passengers and cargo. Protected by a string of small islands in the Steffen Straits, a narrow stretch of sea separating the mainland from the outlying New Hanover Island, Kavieng harbour was capable of berthing very large vessels and by 1941 was a busy little seaport with four wharves and regularly scheduled passenger and cargo services. With the advent of air transport during the 1930s Kavieng also offered a safe harbour for seaplanes, and with an adjacent expanse of 10 kilometres of flat, open country to the south-east of the town, a perfect location for the construction of airfields. The first airfield had been developed by the territories administration just 500 metres to the east of Kavieng town in 1940 and 1941.

In 1941 about 50 000 indigenous Melanesians and persons of mixed race populated New Ireland. For over half a century they had come under the influence of first German, and then Australian settlers, and in the colonial spirit of the times most had been 'civilised' under the rule of European law. Many had received basic European education, and many had been converted to Christianity by missionaries of the Catholic and Methodist faiths. As they had done for centuries the Melanesians lived an idyllic life, in balance with nature and surrounded by an abundance of the natural resources on which their comparatively easy lives depended. Although some had become regularly employed in the labour-intensive copra industry as copra cutters and plantation labourers, most, to the despair of their colonial masters and the missionaries, shunned 'regular work'.

The indigenous and mixed race population on New Ireland was supplemented by about 200 Australian men, women, individuals and families. Most of these Australians were the owners, managers, and overseers of copra plantations, the 'planters' as they were known. Many of the planters were ex-soldiers of the First World War who had acquired expropriated German plantations and property during soldier-settler schemes organised by the Department of External Territories in the 1920s and 1930s. The Treaty of Versailles had caused the wholesale

eviction of German planters and their families from New Guinea, and the Australian Prime Minister of the time, William Morris Hughes, had promised 'New Guinea for the returned serviceman'.[4] The ex-soldiers who became settlers were survivors of an especially brutal conflict, in which little Australia had lost 60 000 killed and 156 000 wounded, gassed or taken prisoner during campaigns in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Europe. They had been collectively given the affectionate nickname 'diggers' because of their constant trench digging activities during a war which was largely fought at close range from earthworks and dugouts. In New Guinea adventurous ex-diggers were offered easy purchase terms when large numbers of expropriated German plantations were sold by the government after 1925[5], so scores had arrived with their families from all parts of Australia to take up the challenges of becoming copra producers.

A typical copra plantation covered a large area of between 200 and 500 acres.[6] Restoring an overgrown expropriated German copra plantation or clearing and planting a new plantation was back breaking work, only for determined and physically strong men to take on. The planters who succeeded were a tough breed, practical men who could survive and prosper in a difficult environment. Scores of their plantations were soon established along the coastal fringes of New Ireland and on smaller outlying islands, each usually having a large bungalow for the planter's family, copra storage and other sheds, an orchard and vegetable garden, and perhaps a small wharf. On the east coast they were linked by the only well-made road on the island; plantations on the west coast and other islands could only be easily reached by boat. In the 1920s and 1930s, world demand for copra steadily increased, and if prices were good a plantation could turn out to be a lucrative investment. It was entirely possible for enterprising planters to become wealthy and respected by the standards of the time, occupy the best positions in the social order, and generally enjoy a markedly superior standard of living. The government officials, copra traders, and other expatriate 'islanders' employed in the shipping, storage, supply, banking, and repair services in Kavieng, upon which the copra industry depended, also enjoyed similar high status.

The small Australian expatriate community of planters, traders, and administrators on New Ireland was close, and the families well known to each other. They had, in general, only comparatively recently forsaken their lives in faraway New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland to

A 1914 photograph of the waterfront at Kavieng, the year the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force arrived to take control of New Ireland from Germany.
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER AWM H15061

settle in this new, exotic place. They had readily taken to the islander way of life, balmy climate, spacious bungalow homes and domestic servants, and in Kavieng had surrounded themselves with all the comfortable attributes of a small and respectable Australian colony. There was the Kavieng Sports and Social Club, Tsang Tsang's pub; golf, tennis, cricket, fishing and sailing; church on Sundays; a well-attended branch of the Australian Returned Servicemens' League; and picnics on the nearby picture-postcard islands. The regular Burns Philp passenger ships, including the modern MV *Macdhui*, kept them in touch with Australia bringing mail, newspapers, supplies, and visitors from 'down south'. Despite the occasional downturns of the copra trade, and spells in the Kavieng hospital with exotic tropical diseases[7], life for the Australians was generally pleasant, fulfilling, and usually profitable, and by 1941 they thought of themselves as permanent residents of their own, rather wonderful tropical paradise.

Apart from the Australians there were other Europeans living on New Ireland and the surrounding islands. Some were adventurers from all over the world who had settled during the German era, married locally and started families. But most were unmarried, devout Christian missionaries of German extraction who had remained following the

Australian takeover of the territory after 1921. In 1941 dozens of these mainly elderly men and women lived and worked on New Ireland and the smaller adjacent islands. Mainly Catholic priests and nuns of the venerable Mission of the Sacred Heart, they proselytised among the native people from well-established mission stations and managed various useful social services including schools, hospitals, and a leprosarium.

Also long-established in Kavieng was an Overseas Chinese trading community of about one hundred people who had originally settled there with the arrival of the first Europeans in the late nineteenth century.[8] The Chinese lived in their own separate Chinatown in the northern section of the town, and Chinese merchants owned many of the businesses supplying the Melanesian population with consumer goods, and the Europeans with their entertainment. Outside Kavieng there were smaller Overseas Chinese settlements at other locations on New Ireland, particularly far to the south at Namatanai, the island's second largest port and township.

By 1941 commerce throughout Papua and New Guinea was dominated by two large Sydney-based trading companies, Burns Philp & Co. and W.R. Carpenter & Co., which after 1921 had rapidly developed as the principal shipping, trading, and agricultural enterprises in the territories. Both had branch offices and warehouses in Port Moresby, Rabaul and Kavieng, extensive copra plantation holdings, and regularly-timetabled shipping between these three major ports and the outlying islands.[9] In Kavieng the companies built large warehouses in the port area where the copra was accumulated to await shipment to overseas markets. From the time New Ireland had been a German possession the primary market for copra had been Europe, the product shipped there by cargo steamers as quickly as it was produced. One of these steamers was the German *Bremerhaven*, owned by Norddeutscher Lloyd, which still maintained a regular schedule between ex-colony and motherland until the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 curtailed its Pacific voyages, and also severely interrupted the copra trade. During 1939 and 1940 world copra prices took a tumble, and the copra warehouses at Kavieng became crammed with product awaiting shipment.

Until 1941 another regular visitor to Kavieng was the Japanese cargo and passenger vessel *Carolina Maru* which during the 1930s had added Kavieng to its regularly-scheduled circuit between Japan and the Japanese-controlled Caroline Islands[10], bringing consumer products to the local market and returning to Japan loaded with copra, timber, and trochus

The road from Kavieng down the east coast to Namatanai, the only land link between the north and south of New Ireland at the outbreak of the Pacific war. AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL NEGATIVE NUMBER AWM H15073

shell. Commencing in 1941, and observed with suspicious interest by the Australian community, the *Carolina Maru* began making more frequent calls, now bringing almost no cargo but instead disembarking groups of what the Japanese referred to as 'student-tourists'. These young people freely roamed the highways and byways of the town photographing places of interest including harbour installations, prominent buildings, and particularly the new airfield.

During negotiations in Versailles in 1919 over the future ownership of New Guinea Japan had staked a strong claim to have the territory mandated to its control, a claim strongly backed by another major power, the United States. But Australia, perceived by Japan and the United States to be a very minor participant in the negotiations, had walked away with this prized possession. To put things right, long before 1941 Japan's military government in Tokyo had begun a meticulous secret survey of New Guinea and other areas of strategic interest and economic value throughout the European colonies in Asia and the Pacific ocean. Japan was rapidly emerging as a major industrial nation with a vast appetite for industrial raw materials and energy, which could not be satisfied from within its own borders. Using representatives of the big Japanese trading companies, local Japanese and helpful residents, ships

crews and visiting Japanese 'tourists', very detailed military intelligence was developed about hundreds of places which could be invaded and introduced into Japan's secretly proposed colonial empire, the grandly-named Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. When the time came this vast array of useful information would enable the invading Japanese armies to quickly overrun a large part of the earth's surface with minimal loss to themselves.

Until early 1942 Kavieng was a distant tropical outpost of Australia, a tiny town and port lying far from the main thoroughfares of trade and civilisation and comfortable in its unimportance and isolation. Unfortunately for its indigenous, European, and Chinese residents it had already been secretly selected by Japan to become a major military base, and the whole of New Guinea to become an important economic possession. Kavieng's beautiful deepwater harbour and the new airfield, so important to the town's prosperity in peacetime, would soon become its twin curses. For a few short years after January 1942 the fateful decision by the Japanese to occupy Kavieng would suddenly elevate it to become a prominent landmark, objective, and target in the intense military struggle which would soon play out.

From the point of view of the oncoming Japanese, control of New Ireland was part of a grand plan to create a perimeter of defended island bases across the Pacific enclosing the eastern part of their Co-Prosperity Sphere. As well as seizing Port Moresby and Rabaul by force, occupation of Kavieng for a naval and air base was to be an important step for Japanese dominance of Papua and New Guinea, especially New Britain, New Ireland, and the Admiralty and Solomon Islands. Strategically located at the junction of the Bismarck and Coral Seas and the Pacific Ocean, the little port offered excellent base and communications facilities for an invading force. The protected harbour was an ideal anchorage for naval vessels of almost any size and for the squadrons of naval float planes which would be extensively used for long-range reconnaissance and attacks on shipping. The flatlands surrounding the airfield could be developed as a network of airfields for land-based military aircraft. As the commercial center of the lucrative copra industry Kavieng also offered a fully-developed economic prize.

Never properly appreciated by Australia before 1941, the early seizure of this isolated town was a key step in overall Japanese strategy, and meticulous preparations for its conquest had already been made.