

Deni, Mark

(c.1912–1945)

MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Mark Deni and his wife, Ellen, were missionaries to Papua New Guinea.

Early Training

Mark Deni was a Solomon Islander from the Marovo Lagoon region who attended the Batuna Training School in its earliest years. He was recognized as a quality student with leadership potential and chosen in 1929 as one of three to be sponsored by the government to train in Fiji as a medical orderly.¹

When he returned home he continued his education at Batuna.² Like some of his peers, he adopted a Christian name in admiration of a biblical character. Deni chose the New Testament “Mark” because he wanted to model his life after the young missionary.

Service Away from Home

Deni and his wife, Ellen, were appointed missionaries to the island of Mussau, Papua New Guinea, soon after the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church had commenced work there. He applied himself commendably among a people who were not his own. By 1935 he was assigned to assist Harry Steed at Boliu Training School on the



Mark Deni, c. 1940.

From Robert Dixon collection.

southern side of the largest of the Mussau islands.³ So well did he acquit himself that when Steed looked for someone in 1937 to lead a team to assist in pioneering another training school at Put Put on New Britain he chose Deni. There was timber to fell and pitsaw into lengths in establishing the institution.⁴ The new institution became known as Kambubu Training School. Deni remained at the station to assist Aubrey Hiscox, Steed's successor. By 1941 Deni and Hiscox were making regular visits to the villages in the Baining Mountains behind Kambubu.⁵ Young trainees from the school were placed in among the people. Deni extended their outreach on one occasion with a three-week trek into the Baining Mountains and over to the other side of the island near Open Bay.⁶

Japanese Occupation

Early in 1942 Japanese troops commanded the eastern end of New Britain with headquarters at Rabaul. All but a few expatriate SDA missionaries managed to flee. Hiscox was one of the last expatriates to escape.⁷ He had prepared the minds of the national workers at Kambubu for such an event. Deni was left in charge of the property to continue with teaching as best as he could. In May 1943 an American bomber was shot down over the sea near Kambubu. One survivor, Lieutenant Gordon Manuel, had bailed out and drifted ashore. Deni and Ellen dressed his wounds and hid him among friends in the mountains. He joined a handful of other Americans in hiding. The mountain people cared for them and an American submarine came to their rescue at Open Bay on February 5, 1944.⁸

Local people from another denomination began making accusations to the Japanese that Deni had been looting a downed Japanese plane and assisting a number of allied servicemen. Reports to the Japanese that American airmen had escaped led to the enemy's conviction that Deni had a direct hand in the American submarine's rescue mission. Even though Deni had tried to cooperate with the Japanese and complied with their requests for carriers, except on Saturdays, they turned on him and tortured him.⁹ He never recovered from his wounds. Knowing he was dying, he bravely called for the mission personnel and exhorted them to remain faithful believers. He passed away in mid-1945, just prior to the surrender of the Japanese army.¹⁰ When it was safe to travel Ellen and the children returned home to the Solomon Islands.¹¹ Later, in 1953, she married Kata Rangaso¹² who had lost his first wife, Roda Vizoduri, to tuberculosis in 1948.¹³

Retrospect

Deni was an intelligent and loyal pioneering Solomon Island missionary who made the supreme sacrifice. He was loyal to his Savior, his church and fellow missionaries, his family, and allied servicemen.

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NOTES

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6. A[ubrey] R. Hiscox, "New Territory Opened," *Australasian Record*, vol. 45, no. 37, September 15, 1941, 4.
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