

Tragedy on the Strickland: Jack Hides and the Investors Ltd Expedition of 1937

By W.A. McGEE

The object of this paper is to examine a calamitous prospecting expedition and its controversial leader. In 1937, Investors Ltd financed Jack Hides [1906-1938] for a gold prospecting expedition up the Strickland River in the then Territory of Papua (now within Papua New Guinea). This venture not only failed but cost the lives of at least nine of the party, including that of Hides himself. Indeed, when the expedition was forced into retreat, it had already lost two men and was in such jeopardy that loss of the whole remaining party of 43 persons was possible. Yet the expedition took to the field with adequate finance, experienced officers, reliable labour, and access to advanced technology.

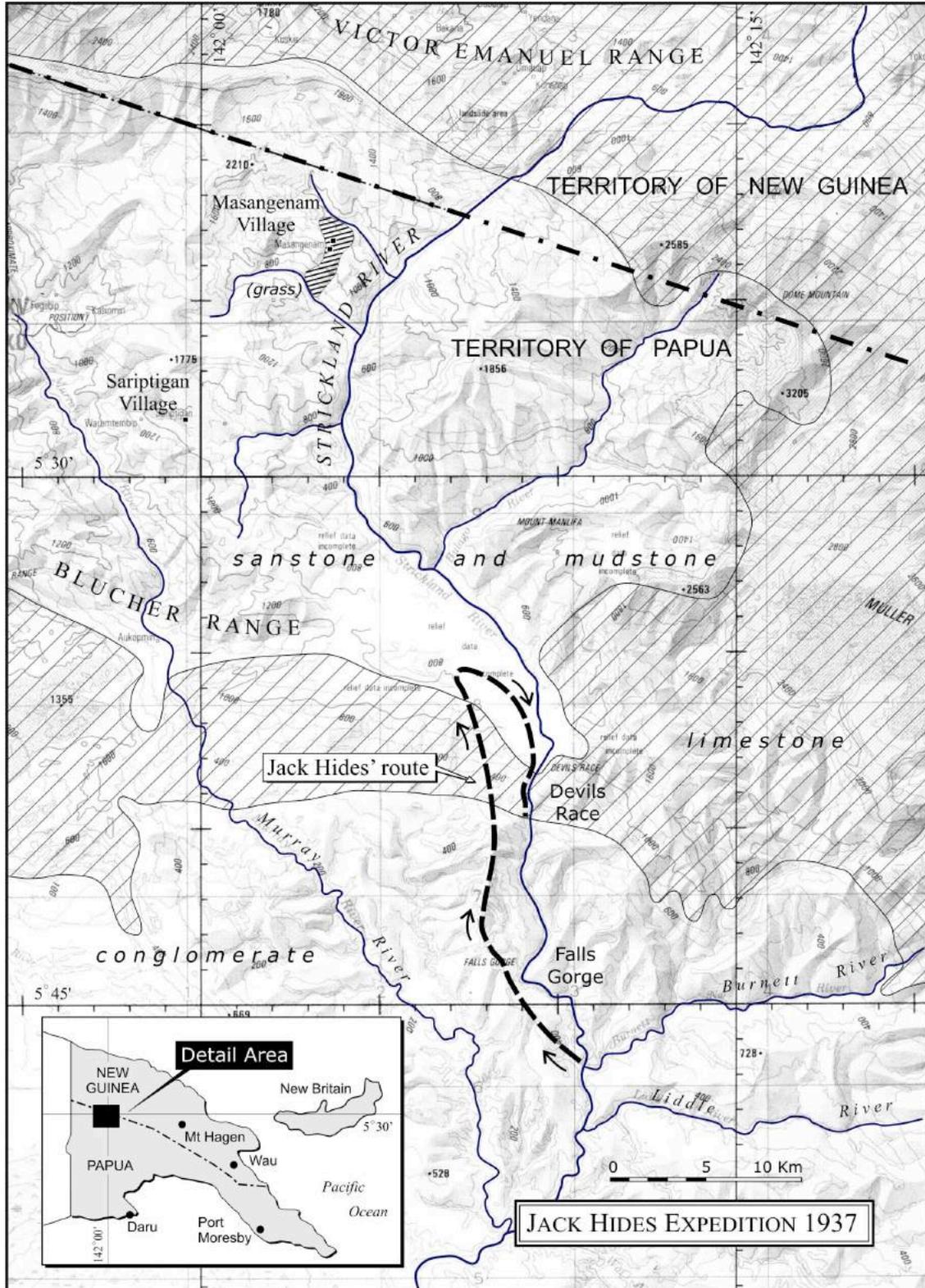
From the outset, the Investors Ltd expedition engendered public interest through the Sydney daily press, the *Pacific Islands Monthly* (the popular journal of Pacific news) and other journals that published reports of the expedition as it progressed.¹ Exhibiting that interest was the condolences of the Governor-General to the mother of Hides' associate, David Lyall, when word reached Australia of his untimely death.²

Two major publications have been written on the expedition. The first, a narrative by Hides that appeared posthumously in 1939 as *Beyond the Kubea*, the other by James Sinclair who also wrote a narrative of the expedition in his 1969 biography of Hides, *The Outside Man: Jack Hides of Papua*. Sinclair has since commented on the expedition in other publications.³

This study examines Hides' narrative to elucidate reasons for the failure of the expedition and the ensuing calamity. Hides' statements are considered in the light of a number of external parameters, knowledge of which were either ignored at the time or have subsequently become available. While the course of the expedition is outlined in this paper, the focus will be centred on the causes of failure. What is suggested is that beri-beri afflicting the party precipitated the problems that emerged in an environment of poor planning and leadership. It appears that Hides disguised this problem through omission or distortion of facts, with the object of shifting the responsibility for the expedition's failure from himself. Hides' version of the expedition has been accepted by

subsequent commentators and writers. Despite its failure, the expedition started as a valid prospecting concept, with the potential for rewarding discovery.

Figure 1: *The Strickland Gorge region and Hides' probable route over the Kubea.*



Source: Ok Tedi 1:250 000 JOG and Blucher Range 1:250 000 Geological Sheets.

The scene of the tragedy was along the Strickland River, one of the mighty rivers flowing south from the central range of New Guinea (Figure 1). The River cuts southerly from the range through a gorge that is as much as 1,000 metres deep. Lying between five and six degrees below the equator, the area is one of high precipitation and generally luxuriant rain forest. Tall grass, covers some areas and there are clearings for the gardens of inhabitants. Karst limestone, frequently of pinnacles separated by chasms metres deep, characterises the higher country. At the time of the Investors' expedition it was an area remote from any European settlement.

Background to the expedition.

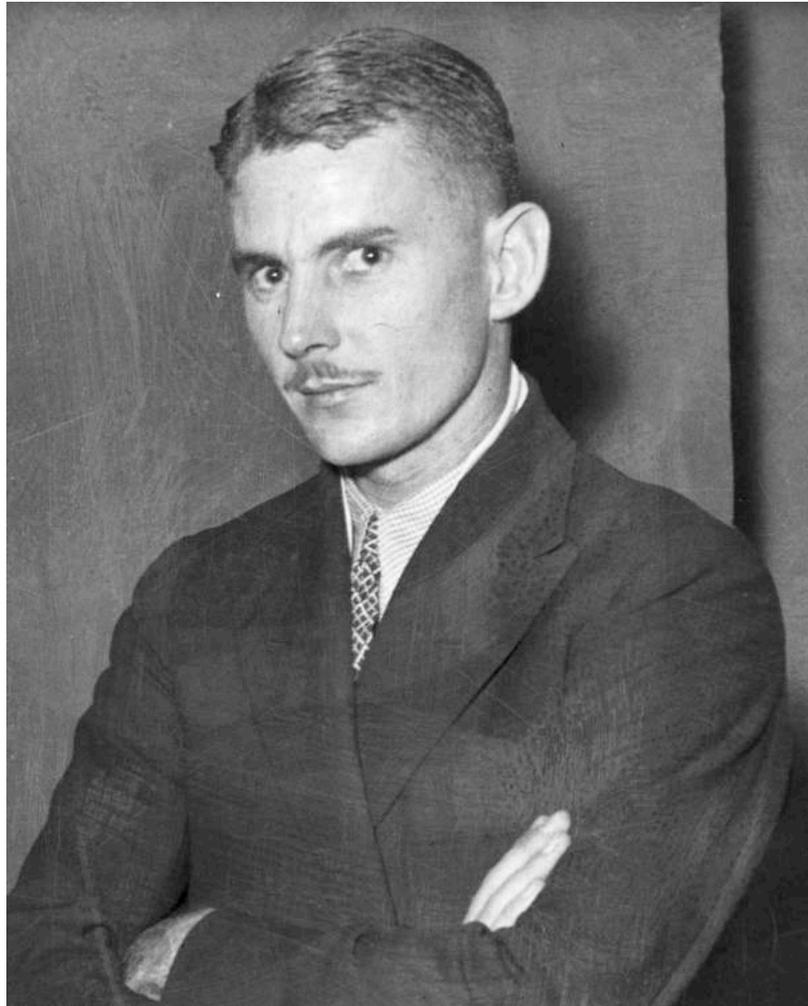
The venture centred on Jack Hides. In 1937 Hides was an internationally renowned explorer. His apprenticeship had been as a field officer for the Papua Administration, his masterpiece having been the Strickland-Purari Patrol of 1935. This was the first official European incursion into the highly populated Southern Highlands and was one of the great exploratory patrols of New Guinea that attracted international interest.⁴

At this time Papua was an Australian Territory governed by an administration headed by Sir Hubert Murray. Hides' recruitment to the Government Service had been under Murray and it had been Murray who had sent him on the Strickland-Purari Patrol. In selecting his fieldmen, Murray placed emphasis on such qualities as energy and local knowledge rather than on high intellectual abilities.⁵ Hides fitted the pattern. The son of an Administration officer, he had passed much of his childhood in the Territory. At school, his sporting, rather than his academic achievements stood out but by the time of the prospecting expedition he had translated his adventures into two successful books and when he spoke in Sydney he attracted large and interested audiences.⁶

As was usual on government patrols, Hides when an Administration officer had prospected creeks on his route. One of his discoveries (Hides Creek) provoked a minor rush.⁷ On the Strickland-Purari Patrol he noted gold in the middle Strickland and on his return the Australian press publicised the discovery.⁸ Hides therefore gained a reputation as a prospector as well as an explorer. Certainly, as James Sinclair observes in his biography, Hides' disposition was that of a prospector, his outlook being ever optimistic.⁹ However, other aspects of Hides' temperament struck some people. The journalist R.W. Robson, editor of *Pacific Islands Monthly*, called Hides an 'irresponsible lad' but one who was 'without guile'.¹⁰ Disappointed miners criticised him for exaggeration after the Hides Creek rush disclosed no bonanza.¹¹ More seriously,

Sinclair records that Hides had been accused of deliberate falsification in his narratives but he himself believed that exaggeration rather than outright falsification was his problem.¹²

Figure 2: *Jack Hides*



Source: F.J. Halmarick / Fairfaxphotos.

The Strickland-Purari Patrol had been an outstanding success in terms of the new country traversed and discovery of a large population that inhabited the area. On occasions, however, it came into violent conflict with the people encountered. Peaceful penetration was the policy of the Papua Administration, and a point of honour of the Papua field officers, so the conflict damned Hides in the eyes of many in the Administration. On resuming normal duties after the Patrol, Hides became disappointed with his standing in the Government Service. In mid-1936, he resigned and contracted

with Investors Ltd to prospect for gold in New Guinea.¹³ The conjunction of speculative money and imagined gold projected Hides into the arms of the Company.

Gold was the metal of the '30s. Following the collapse of the gold standard, its price rose so that by 1936 it sold for almost twice as much as in 1930. Also, recovery from the Great Depression released capital for speculative ventures. Collusion of these factors ignited a gold boom that reached its peak in 1936. During the previous decade, across the border from Papua in the New Guinea Territory, prospectors had discovered spectacular gold around Wau, while the great gold dredging project at Bulolo, commissioned in 1932, was producing phenomenal returns.¹⁴ Prospecting parties were utilising advanced technology, especially aircraft, to enable them to penetrate into the New Guinea interior, with success in discovery on reaching Kainantu and Mount Hagen.¹⁵ New Guinea, island of proven gold and of a yet unexplored interior, was an irresistible prospecting speculation. Jack Hides, explorer and prospector of New Guinea, disillusioned with Government service, provided interested parties with the opportunity to try the speculation. A Sydney group, made up largely of speculators eminent in commercial undertakings but with no experience of prospecting nor of New Guinea, formed Investors Limited to exploit the situation. Not that this seemed important, for the company's management thought that it had played its part by commissioning Hides and raising £16,250, a sum seemingly adequate for the venture.¹⁶

Hides' personal commitment to the expedition was considerable. In the economic climate of the 1930s, one did not lightly leave a secure government position, particularly for a speculation. Hides was not wealthy, his income depended on his salary, and he had a dependant family. In addition his reputation was at stake. There had been a dispute with the prospector Michael Lahey over who had been first to enter into the Southern Highlands, and there was criticism regarding the violence of the Strickland-Purari Patrol.¹⁷ This latter criticism was compounded when another Government officer, Ivan Champion, returned early in 1937 from a patrol into the same area without having encountered any violence.¹⁸ Hides needed success to secure his financial future and restore his reputation.

The plan and organization of the expedition

Having seen alluvial gold in the middle Strickland, Hides concluded its source to be up-river in the centre of New Guinea.¹⁹ He therefore intended two targets for the venture: one being the gravels of the middle Strickland, the other a speculation in Hides' words,

into the 'unknown centre'. His plan comprised four phases: establishing a base on the middle Strickland, prospecting the alluvials there, advancing the expedition to the Highlands where relief supplies would be flown in, and prospecting this region. Initially, the planned route into the interior in the third phase would have followed that of the Strickland-Purari Patrol, through the country east of the Strickland.

While Hides was making his preparations, the Administration, fearing a repetition of the violence of the Strickland-Purari Patrol, closed this area to non-Government expeditions. The boundary of the prohibited area was the east bank of the Strickland River.²⁰ This was a humiliation for Hides as it implied that he could not be trusted to repeat his most famous accomplishment. He then modified his plan so as to traverse the western side of the Strickland. The plan was thus altered to take him up the Strickland River and into the Highlands via country explored by Charles Karius [1893-1940] in 1927, when on the Fly-Sepik Patrol across New Guinea.²¹ Hides decided to use a known pass through the Victor Emanuel Range to access the valleys of the interior, where he would establish a prospecting base and an airstrip. This advance from the middle Strickland to the Highland base would be physically the most difficult phase of the plan.

While the expedition planned to harness the new technology of aerial support, Hides chose to utilise an unsupported ground traverse for the movement from the middle Strickland base to the Highlands. His plan involved merely grafting aerial support onto a standard technique; here he was not venturing far beyond the bounds of his experience. The plan also remained within the capabilities of his financiers. More extensive aerial support, as by a dedicated aircraft, would have shifted the required funding to a higher level than that offered by the Sydney group. The plan involved the expedition itself transporting supplies for the advance.

Hides budgeted for a period of five months to take the expedition into the Highlands and to build an airstrip there. The advance was to be by staging, the method of government patrols. Staging was necessary when there were more loads than carriers, causing the carriers to repeatedly traverse the same ground to advance from one supply dump to the next. The size of the carrier line for staging was a matter of fine judgement - neither too few nor too many. Ivan Champion, who was junior officer to Karius on their great patrol, noted, for instance, that on the failed first attempt to cross New Guinea in 1926-27 too few carriers had been employed, so that the work had 'broken their spirit'.²² Conversely, increasing the number of carriers beyond a critical level

invoked diminishing returns as the needed supplies increased in proportion. To minimise the problem, Hides cut his supplies to an amount sufficient for four months, intending to obtain food from native sources on the way and at his objective. This, however, carried the expectation of encountering populations with sufficient food surpluses. Karius had reported a sizable population in one valley within the Victor Emanuel Range and Hides knew there was a large population in the Highland valleys he intended to reach.²³ Hides also knew, that he had to traverse only sparsely populated areas before he would reach these people. Four months' supplies still made a substantial load and so there was need of a considerable carrier line. There was also a risk that the Highlanders would attack the expedition, as they had the Strickland-Purari Patrol. It had therefore to be both well armed and of sufficient size to mount a defence. These factors ensured a large and ponderous expedition.

Hides took considerable care with the equipment and sought to use advanced technology. A key piece of this equipment was a wireless, such a novelty for an exploratory expedition that the press noted it when reporting the expedition's preparations.²⁴ However, the radio equipment of the day was cumbersome and it took four men to carry the set taken by the expedition. In addition, it was fragile. Nevertheless, Hides based the security of the expedition on the use of the wireless, which he believed could be used to call in relief aircraft.

Following the pattern of Papua Government exploratory patrols, Hides was the leader; there was a junior Australian associate; an experienced Papuan to supervise the labour and; a line of labourers recruited from outside the region to be traversed. The associate was David Lyall, a few years younger than Hides, who also carried the responsibility for prospecting. Although he had not previously participated in an expedition into remote country, he was otherwise well qualified. He had experience 'knocking around' the New Guinea Territory and had worked gold at Wau.

Pakai, the senior Papuan, had been an NCO in the Papua Armed Constabulary. He had been on the Fly-Sepik Patrol, during which he had distinguished himself.²⁵ Here Hides chose exceedingly well for Pakai proved to be an effective second-in-command. At a crucial point in the coming events, Pakai was to volunteer advice on a course contrary to that which Hides was proposing and Hides was to accept this advice.²⁶ Such a relationship was not to be assumed in a colonial setting. Another important Papuan was Biji, a man from Rossel Island, who acted as Hides' personal attendant and who had been with him on previous patrols.

The labourers came from two areas in Papua. Men from the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, called Gosiagos, comprised the larger part. Gosiagos were respected as reliable and tough carriers. Karius and Champion, for instance, had chosen Gosiagos for their epic Fly-Sepik crossing. Goaribaris, men from the Kikori region on the Gulf of Papua, formed the other contingent. Many of the Goaribaris who signed on were veterans of the Strickland-Purari Patrol.²⁷

The food supply was the normal fare of New Guinea expeditions. Rice was the staple, and therein lay a danger for a diet based on only rice lacks vitamin B₁, and a deficiency in this vitamin causes the disease beri-beri. The appropriate measure was to supplement the rice with fresh vegetables and meat but if they were not available, Marmite, which the expedition took along, was to provide provide the vital vitamin.²⁸

Narrative of the expedition.

The party left Port Moresby on the 7 February 1937, calling at Daru before heading up the Fly and the Strickland Rivers. They established a base on the middle Strickland and prospected the gravels there without difficulty. The results being encouraging, they proceeded to secure ground for further testing. Hides was in frequent communication with Port Moresby by wireless. With it he made a request for an aircraft to take him and Lyall to Port Moresby to lodge lease applications. However, arranging the charter proved to be difficult. Guinea Airways, the major operator in the region, was reluctant to accept the risk of operating into such a remote and unsurveyed location. Once mollified, they had to free an aircraft from other work, position it with fuel in Port Moresby and fit it with floats. Eventually the arrangements fell into place and a Junkers aircraft picked up Hides and Lyall from their camp at Bogor Bank. R.W. Robson, acting as an emissary of Investors Ltd, met them in Port Moresby to facilitate the registration of the applications. Their business in Port Moresby completed, Hides and Lyall flew back to Bogor Bank on the 28 April 1937. Robson came down to the waterfront for the dawn departure and marked the occasion with a photograph.²⁹ This was the closest Robson came to the Strickland.

Once Hides and Lyall returned to Bogor Bank, the expedition commenced its next phase, pushing up the Strickland to the Highlands. The plan was to have an airstrip ready to receive the relief aircraft on 30th September. The expedition used its power boat as far as it could, then on 23 May, Hides sent it down river. A number of labourers,

six of whom showed signs of ‘cracking up’, went with it.³⁰ The expedition now fully transferred to canoes until, confronting the Strickland Gorge, it could no longer advance on the river. On 11 July 1937, it began cutting its way over the Blucher Range, still staging its supplies. A limestone-capped dome, which Hides called the Kubea, stood in front of them. Though no more than 30 km across, it reached an altitude of more than 1,400 m above sea level, some 1,200 m above the river at their departure point. It was a formidable barrier.³¹

The expedition now comprised Hides, Lyall, Pakai, Biji, 25 Gosiagos and 15 Goaribaris. Hides believed that they had sufficient food to last to the end of August without considering any native food that they might obtain.³² Yet, all was not well, as the health of the expedition had begun to deteriorate and Hides noted that the carriers were ‘showing signs of strain’.³³ It was also reported that the supply of Marmite had been depleted.³⁴ Worse, Lyall had been unwell for some time, with Hides expressing concern as to his health from at least early June,³⁵ although Lyall continued in good spirits and seemingly unhampered by his discomfort. Nevertheless, before they set out to cross the mountain barrier, Hides considered abandoning the expedition so as to return him to the coast. However, Lyall, being keen to go on, Hides rationalised that once across the barrier, he could call in an aircraft to evacuate him if it was necessary. ‘I could only hope that his health would stand the trial’, he later wrote. So Lyall continued, but the crossing of the Kubea proved to be harder than Hides had expected.³⁶

The early days were miserable with continual rain and fog. On the 26 July, the expedition entered karst limestone. Hides recorded that there was no surface water, the sharp rocks cut the carriers’ feet, and progress required continual climbing or even bridging of chasms. Then the rain ceased and they had no water to cook their rice. One carrier died on the crossing and Lyall was struck by severe stomach distress. In Hides’ narrative he recounted that his troubles began on the 9 August when the party had been unable to cook rice for 36 hours:

Biji had baked us some rice in a frying pan, but this sort of food was dangerous and we could not eat too much of it. Hungry and exhausted with a days struggle through the limestone, I opened a tin of meat and shared it with my companion. It tasted so good and Lyall was so hungry that he opened another tin. When he handed me my share, I reminded him that it was unwise to eat so much tinned meat without any rice.

‘I’m so hungry Jack, I’ll risk anything.’

Late that night I was awakened by Lyall vomiting violently outside the tent. He was terribly sick. 'My stomach,' he kept complaining. It was the commencement of his long and fatal illness.³⁷

A few days later Lyall's condition deteriorated to the extent he had to be carried. On finding himself vomiting blood, he self-diagnosed a stomach ulcer and admitted to a previous ulcer condition.³⁸ On the morning of the 16 August, Hides called Port Moresby and sent a message to Investors Ltd in Sydney saying that Lyall was dangerously ill with dysentery and 'duodenal trouble' and requesting an airdrop of medicines. He optimistically added that they were descending into a large valley with a 'gold river'.³⁹

When they received Hides' message, the management of Investors Ltd, surprised and having no idea of what to do, called in Robson for advice. On the morning of the 17 August, Hides received a message from the company saying it had arranged for radioed medical advice and asking if he could 'return [to] Bogor Bank'.⁴⁰ 'Return Bogor Bank.' It was an extraordinarily stupid suggestion. This was the position he had left more than three months previously.

'Return Bogor Bank.' One can feel Hides' exasperation; he needed an air drop, he could not afford a conference. Hides sent no answer. The situation now changed from being serious, into one of desperation. Transmitting on his last valve, Hides bypassed Sydney and attempted to organise an air drop himself. He sent two messages on the 17 August, both to Wau. One was to Guinea Airways, requesting an aircraft and giving his position, the other to a doctor asking for medicines to come on the aircraft. That evening the party was out of the limestone and during the night the men cut a clearing for the airdrop.⁴¹ Hides tried an all-stations transmission on the morning of the 18th to which he received a response and then the wireless went dead. On the 21 August, no aircraft having appeared and Lyall being now much worse, Hides decided that he must return to the coast and that the only possible route was down the Strickland Gorge.

Robson later explained why the company did not send an aircraft. He said that the management in Sydney received the message of the 16th requesting an aircraft, but received nothing further. They did not know Hides' position, so requested this but never received an answer. Robson said that they would have had to position an aircraft at Mt Hagen, 200-300 miles from Hides' probable position, with fuel supplies for a wide search. Such a charter, he said, was not easily arranged.⁴² Nor indeed would it have been, but it would still have been possible. This flight would not have required a landing

as had the Bogor Bank operation and, as Hides had reported at least his general position, an aircraft could probably have found him without an extensive search. It needed someone with knowledge of the situation to organise the flight and some luck with the weather. It may not have been easy to organise a charter, but the men in Sydney did not try. Not knowing what to do, they did nothing.

The expedition descended into the Gorge, and worked along it, carrying Lyall. At this stage, Hides reports that what he called a 'strange disease', later identified as beri-beri, appeared.⁴³ 'We were alive, and that was all', wrote Hides.⁴⁴ He now threw away the poisonous rice that had absorbed so much of the expedition's efforts. 'It was better to be hungry than dead.'⁴⁵ However, carriers began to die; after five days in the Gorge, five were dead and twenty-two more were sick. Hides himself was a victim of the disease. In desperation, though still in the Gorge, he decided to commit the expedition to rafts. On 1 September, the first of the party launched itself onto the Strickland. 'The flood caught us up and carried us off on the maddest trip I have ever made.'⁴⁶ Indeed it must have been, for down through the gorge they went, through the foothills and out into the plains. They travelled 70 km that day.

There were still more than 400 km to the coast. Lyall's condition being extreme, Hides (following Pakai's council) made a dash for the coast in a canoe with Lyall and just two men. They made good progress down the Strickland and turned into the Fly. Then a tidal bore swamped the canoe. Again they built a raft, but the pace down-river was now slow. Eventually, near the river mouth, they reached a mission station. An oil exploration party working nearby picked them up and took them to Daru, reaching there on the morning of 16 September 1937. The retreat from the far side of the Kubea had taken almost four weeks.

Lyall died the next day. Hides returned to Sydney, but was in ill health. Investors Ltd laid plans for him to return to the Strickland and commenced raising funds for this - but this was not to be, for Hides failed to recover his strength and died nine months after his return. How many of the carriers died from the effects of the expedition after returning to their villages is unknown.⁴⁷

Remembering the disaster.

The memory of the Investors Ltd expedition is shaped by three authors - Hides himself, Robson and James Sinclair. The climactic moment of the expedition occurred when

Hides' decided to turn back. It is the events leading to and resulting from this decision that characterise the expedition.

Hides was clear in his report that the reason for the decision to turn back was Lyall's illness,⁴⁸ for without the necessity of obtaining medical assistance for him the expedition would have progressed as planned. He further claimed that the requirements of native food supplies would have been resolved, as a suitable airstrip was in sight. Hides recorded Lyall's self-diagnosis of an ulcer but never elaborated on Lyall's illness. His account mentioned beri-beri as appearing in the whole party at a particular time, when they were in the Gorge, thus suggesting it played no part in the decision.⁴⁹ Robson, following Hides, placed the reason for the abandonment of the expedition as Lyall's sickness. He also propagated the view, enunciated initially by an executive of Investors Ltd, that Hides' retreat down the Strickland with the incapacitated Lyall counted as a remarkable example of bushmanship - 'one of the finest feats in the history of that country' (New Guinea).⁵⁰

In the biography and in other publications where he discussed the Investors Ltd expedition, James Sinclair too followed Hides in emphasising Lyall's ulcer as the reason for the decision to turn back and also noted the failure of an airdrop to eventuate.⁵¹ Sinclair echoed the assessment of the retreat as exhibiting remarkable bushmanship.⁵² He also noted that the expedition was inevitably futile as it discovered no gold.⁵³

From all this, the view has been established that the expedition was abandoned solely because of Lyall's condition, and that had Hides known of his propensity to such an ulcer before the expedition, things might well have been different. While beri-beri afflicted the expedition it only 'appeared suddenly' after the party had turned back and was not a factor in the decision to do so. The inescapable conclusion here would be that the failure of the expedition devolved on Lyall. Hides had been beset by circumstances not of his making.

An examination of Hides' narrative.

Although Hides' narrative is the only record of events on the Kubea, it is possible to consider constraints on the situation of the expedition from other sources. The path of the expedition over the Kubea can be recovered with reasonable certainty and by using modern maps it can be seen that Hides did not manage to get near his objective in the upper Strickland basin (Figure 1).⁵⁴

Hides' story emphasised sickness. Sickness was present from at least late May when Hides sent downstream carriers who were 'cracking up'; Lyall was ill from at least early June and eventually collapsed; in July the carriers are describes as 'showing signs of strain', one dying about six weeks later;⁵⁵ Hides himself became ill in mid-August. Sickness, then, was in the expedition for an extended period, building up from something mild to the point where Hides says 'we were alive, and that was all'. Other than the vagaries of 'cracking up' and 'signs of strain', the identifications of the maladies in Lyall were as dysentery and an ulcer (on Lyall's own diagnosis), and beri-beri in many of the other expedition members. The question arises, could all these have been related? Beri-beri, it is suggested, could be the common factor.

Hides' report of the 'sudden' appearance of beri-beri, when the party was in the Strickland Gorge, is strange.⁵⁶ Beri-beri is not a disease that attacks instantaneously. It commonly develops over a period of two to three months and the onset is gradual. To have reached the stage that it did in the Strickland Gorge, with men dying on the track, the disease must have been progressing for such a period. Early symptoms of beri-beri include fatigue and loss of appetite. Advanced symptoms would have included increasing fatigue and weakness in the legs.⁵⁷ Indeed, there can be drastic effects on a sufferer's legs and feet, that can result in leg cramps, foot-drop and an awkwardness of gait.⁵⁸ The 'signs of strain' Hides observed in the carriers at the outset of the Kubea crossing may have been an early symptom of beri-beri. Perhaps too, the beri-beri gait caused the injuries to the carriers' feet when traversing the karst. If so, the image of men so afflicted having to carry barefoot across karst is appalling.

Given that it is a disease that develops over an extended period, there can be little doubt that the symptoms of beri-beri should have been recognised long before it advanced to the stage where men were dying within a week. Symptoms such as fatigue, and probably weakness in the carriers' legs must have been obvious to Hides.

Beri-beri must also have been a factor in Lyall's affliction. Given that Hides and many carriers developed the disease at least on the Kubea, it is hard to imagine that Lyall could have altogether escaped it at the same time. One form 'begins acutely with signs of gastro-duodenal irritation, epigastric pain and sickness and signs of cardiac failure.'⁵⁹ Lyall's collapse had such characteristics. Though it was four weeks after his collapse, the cited cause of death on Lyall's Death Certificate was 'Beriberi and Heart Failure' (Figure 3). Although Lyall may have been afflicted by an ulcer, beri-beri is

almost certainly implicated in his collapse. Though Hides could not but have been aware of this diagnosis, he did not mention it anywhere.

Figure 3: *Death Certificate for David Lyall.*


PAPUA NEW GUINEA

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH ENTRY
Issued under Section 20 of the *Civil Registration Act* (Chapter 304)

I certify that the following particulars are contained in an entry in a Register of Deaths kept in the custody of the Registrar-General pursuant to the provisions of the *Civil Registration Act* (Chapter 304).

No. of Entry Rg. 985

<u>Details of Deceased —</u>	
Surname	LYALL
Given Names	David
Place of Birth	—
Age	—
Sex	Male
Occupation	Prospector
Place of Residence	Daru, Papua
Conjugal Status	—
Date of Death	17th September, 1937
Place of Death	Murray Road, Daru, Papua
Cause of Death	Berberi and Heart Failure
Place of Burial	—

<u>Parents of Deceased—</u>	
Father: Surname	LYALL
Given Names	—
Occupation	—
Mother: Maiden Surname	—
Given Names	—

Govt. Print.—297/500—8.2000

This certificate is issued under my Hand and Seal of Office this twenty-first
day of January, 2003


Deputy Registrar-General


Source: Papua New Guinea Registrar General.

There were also other weaknesses in Hides' planning that can be criticised. For example, the proximity of the expedition to relief supplies. At the furthest point in the expedition, Hides found himself overlooking a large valley:

...a great valley system of fertile river flats, of timbered and grass plateau, and smooth, rounded domes and slopes ... perhaps not more than seven miles away, numerous little cultivated squares dotted the eastern slopes. To the northward, about twenty miles away, I could see grassland where I thought I could quite easily build a drome for a plane to land on.⁶⁰

It is possible to approximate Hides' Kubea vantage point and his view on the topographic maps. Hides says that he ascended to 6,000 feet, that is 1,830 m.⁶¹ This would seem to be too high, for though the top of the Kubea was unmapped, elsewhere along the Blucher Range elevations around 1,800 m are only met at the summits. But the expedition took a gap rather than going over a summit.⁶² The map shows one gap, at an elevation of 1,391 m that must have been within three kilometres of Hides' highest position. His vantage point would then likely have been around 1,400 m, an altitude allowing an overview of the valley before him, but not a view beyond the first ridge of the Victor Emanuel Range.

The valley he saw was the west-nor-westerly trending low country of shales and sandstones between the limestones of the Blucher and Victor Emanuel Ranges. The geological map does not show alluvial flats here. The topographic maps have this valley as an expanse of forest with only small and scattered clearings for gardens. Even within the valley, the country is rugged: there are elevation differences of as much as 1,000 m over distances of no more than six kilometres. The close cultivation Hides could see would probably have been in the area of the village of Sariptigan, something towards 20 km (say 12 miles) north west of his position. The grassy area would have been around Mesangenam, around 25 km (15 - 16 miles) to his north. Despite Hides' optimism, this was no Eden but an unpromising vista for his sick expedition.

On commencing the assault on the Kubea, Hides had considered that supplies were sufficient to the end of August. As he overlooked the valley, it was already mid-August. The expedition's supplies at this time would have been good for about two weeks, though Hides does say that he had plenty in-hand.⁶³ The advance across the valley, with its far from easy country and his sick carriers, would have been slow and much of his supplies would most likely have been consumed just crossing it. Despite his descriptions, the population in the valley was too small to be likely to yield much food for the forty-odd men in the party.

In addition, with the wireless gone, he had no means of calling in the relief aircraft even if he had built an airstrip. Without such a call, Hides had no reason to expect relief for six weeks. He was essentially near the limit of the capacity of the expedition, and he must have realized it. Lyall's illness may have been the immediate prompt to abandon the expedition, but latent beneath it was the near impossibility of much further advance.

What went wrong?

Why did the Investors Ltd expedition get into so much trouble? It was never beset by a disastrous exogenous force; all the problems arose from within the expedition itself. Beri-beri may be cited as the likely immediate cause of the disaster but beri-beri was generated within the expedition. Hides attributed the outbreak to the diet of rice, the slow crossing of the limestone and the failure to reach the gardens where they could have obtained vegetables.⁶⁴ These, however, would be interrelated factors. Beri-beri, once initiated by the diet deficiency, progressively fatigued the men and so increasingly retarded the expedition. This in turn gave more opportunity for the disease to advance. The disease itself, that could have been cured from vegetable gardens, lay beyond the reach of the expedition, even supposing that those Hides had seen had proved to be sufficient.

Pre-existing conditions, including dysentery, may have facilitated the disease.⁶⁵ There was already a suggestion of sickness among some of the carriers ('cracking up') well before leaving the Strickland, when Hides sent them back with the power boat. Whatever the situation with his putative ulcer, Lyall was sick with stomach disorders long before he collapsed. There may have been separate agents that caused these illnesses. Nevertheless, it is clear that beri-beri, a disease of nutrition, developed because the expedition had inadequate supplies - in particular, insufficient Marmite. The critical moment for the expedition was not at the decision to turn back, but at Hides' decision to commit the unhealthy expedition over the Kubea. Thus the reason for the tragedy can be ascribed to this shortage in the expedition's supplies and to the decision to advance despite the problems.

The stress of Lyall's collapse revealed deficiencies in Hides' organisation. That vital piece of equipment, the wireless, proved capricious. It was vital as it represented Hides' fall-back position. Even if the equipment had survived, Hides had not realised the difficulty of organising a complex operation by radio. To expect an emergency air drop from Port Moresby, let alone Wau, was unreasonable, for there was no one to oversee it. The wireless was only part of the required system; it had deceived Hides into overestimating his power. This exposed a major failing in the organisation: there was no back up to the field party. There was no one in either Port Moresby or Sydney close enough to the expedition to understand the conditions under which it was operating; no one with authority who could make informed decisions; no one to organise a rescue. Worse, at the crucial moment this vacuum drew in Robson. He was thought of as having

local expertise but, as the 'retreat Bogor Bank' message indicates, he must have been as ignorant of the field situation as would have been the management at Investors Ltd. This stultified any possibility of a rescue attempt and exacerbated the deficiency. Hides had organised the expedition in the manner of a Government patrol but he had omitted one factor, the support that the vastly experienced establishment in Port Moresby afforded their patrols. Hides, a field man, was operating beyond his expertise.

Other considerations.

It was questionable to take the expedition over the Kubea. Karius, approaching the barrier from the other direction in 1927 had preferred to skirt the Blucher Range until he found a pass. Hides said that his reason was Lyall's urging to 'keep to the river' so as to stay close to where they could follow the gold.⁶⁶ A passage up the Strickland Gorge being judged inadvisable, climbing the Kubea was the next best option to keep them close to the river. In the event, the route was of no consequence to the final outcome. Though the arduous climb may have hastened its onset, beri-beri was by then inevitable.

While Hides may have been unfamiliar with the symptoms of beri-beri, he would certainly have known of the risk as information on it was current when he was an Administration officer. For instance, among the papers from the Bwagaoia station, to which Hides was attached in early 1936, there is a circular, dated 6 March 1935, reminding officers about beri-beri and recommending Marmite as a prophylactic in the absence of vegetable food.⁶⁷ Hides' realization of the danger is attested by his comment that on commencing the Kubea crossing Marmite was running low. Yet he went on.

Hides made Lyall the scapegoat for the failure of the expedition, marking Lyall's supposed ulcer as its cause. Yet in all probability, without the factor of beri-beri such a condition would not have hampered Lyall to the extent of collapse. Whatever the illness, Hides knew that Lyall was in poor health before he attacked the Kubea, but still chose to take him. Hides says that he considered returning to the coast with Lyall; he could alternatively have sent him back and continued himself. This decision was more than just a miscalculation, it was a failure of leadership, for by it Hides ('only hope that his health would stand the trial') avoided the hard decision of abandoning the expedition.

The mercy dash by Hides from the heart of darkest New Guinea with the perishing Lyall has been acclaimed as a feat of bushmanship. But surely the bushmanship in travelling downstream on major rivers, even with the burden of an

incapacitated Lyall, would seem to have been overrated. Here was one of the most renowned bushmen of the time - could no less have been expected of him? Indeed, desperation forced the most dramatic episode of the retreat, rafting through the Strickland Gorge. In this, good fortune, not skill, averted the loss of the whole party. The hyperbole about the rescue dash has the whiff of an attempt by the expedition promoters to salvage something from the disaster.

The Papuans in the expedition should not be passed over without comment. Pakai and Biji, whose deeds could not be followed here, both showed themselves to be remarkable men. The carriers, despite appalling conditions, never faltered in loyalty to the leaders.

Investors Ltd moved swiftly to test the dredging claims pegged in the middle Strickland. An engineer left Sydney in August 1937 but so discouraging were his results that he was back in Sydney by February 1938. Disappointing as this was to the company, Lyall's report had been only that gold was widespread; he had not commented on tenor, though he was certainly enthusiastic.⁶⁸ His report was correct, as far as it went, for the Strickland gravels do have gold. Several groups since Investors Ltd have thought them worthy of prospecting. The prospect, like so many prospects, disappointed but was not futile.⁶⁹

Nor has subsequent exploration shown the second target of the Investors Ltd expedition to have been a pointless concept. At its point of retreat, the expedition was on the brink of some success. From the Kubea, Hides looked down on the valley of a tributary to the Strickland. With his unquenchable optimism, even as he radioed his plight to Investors Ltd, he described this untested stream as a 'gold river'. The rash assertion was correct, for rivers in this valley do carry gold. Further, Hides' imagined golden 'unknown centre' turns out to have been golden. It is known today that the upper Strickland basin contains two remarkable gold deposits, Porgera and Mt Kare, and it is expected that others remain to be discovered. Perhaps ironically, a Government officer, patrolling westerly from Mt Hagen, discovered gold at Porgera in 1938, at about the time that Hides died.⁷⁰

Conclusion.

The immediate cause of the disaster of the Investors Ltd expedition was most probably beri-beri, that developed because of insufficient supplies. Hides' determination to proceed despite mounting adversities, his poor leadership and the deficiencies of his

plan set the scene for disaster. The responsibility for the expedition's failure devolved on its leader, Jack Hides, who was inadequate for the task. Hides, however, wrote the narrative of the expedition so as to put the blame for the failure onto David Lyall by suppressing or distorting facts that might suggest otherwise. In this narrative, Hides propagated the impression, later taken up as fact, that a medical crisis of Lyall's supposed ulcer necessitated abandoning the expedition, whereas the truth was that the expedition could proceed no further when it was decided to turn back.

In concept, the Investors' expedition had the potential for success. Hides' exploits as an explorer and Hides' vision as a prospector had inspired the expedition, yet it failed through his shortcomings. Hides may be seen as a tragic figure: a man who could imagine and attempt great deeds but who was brought down by his own failings.

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Endnotes.

1 For example: 'Jack Hides New Secret Venture', *Smith's Weekly*, R.C. Packer, Sydney, 21 August 1937, pp. 1-2; 'Explorer Turns Back', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 1937, p. 12.

2 'Death of Mr David Lyall', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 September 1937, p. 18.

3 J.G. Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1939, republished 1974. A condensed version had previously appeared in K.G. Murray, 'Jungle Journey', *Man*, Sydney, June, 1938, pp. 86-92. This was a very popular magazine. The two versions were essentially similar; See also, J. Sinclair, *The Outside Man: Jack Hides of Papua*, Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1969. Sinclair also comments on the expedition in J. Sinclair, *Wings of Gold: How the Aeroplane Developed New Guinea*, Pacific Publications, Sydney, 1978, p. 251; J. Sinclair, 'Hides, Jack Gordon', in B. Nairn and G. Serle (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography 1891-1939, Volume 9*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1986, p. 283; and 'Jack Hides, A Son Of Papua Who Gave His Life To Papua', *PNG Resources*, Energy Publications, Mt Hawthorn, Western Australia, July-September, 1997, pp. 26-28.

4 J.G. Hides, *Papuan Wonderland*, Blackie, London, 1936; Sinclair, *The Outside Man*, pp. 115-183.

5 F. West, *Hubert Murray: The Australian Pro-Consul*, Oxford UP, Melbourne, 1968, p. 118.

6 Biographical details are drawn from Sinclair, *The Outside Man*.

7 'Gold In Papua', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 20 November 1930, p. 8; 'Papuan News', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 16 December 1930, p. 9.

8 R.W. Robson, 'Central New Guinea Gives Up Its Secrets', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 22 August 1935, p. 7.

9 Sinclair, *The Outside Man*, p. 259.

10 R.W. Robson, 'Jack Hides', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 22 July 1938, p. 36. I have heard a memory of Hides from the Administration (picked up in the bar of the Port Moresby Travel Lodge) as a 'skite'.

11 'Papuan News', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 16 December 1930, p. 9; Sinclair, *The Outside Man*, pp. 56, 58.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 184-92; 'Jack Hides To Lead New Expedition', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 21 July 1936, p. 5.
- 14 H. Nelson, *Black, White & Gold: Goldmining in Papua New Guinea 1878-1930*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1976; A.M. Healy, Bulolo: 'A History of the Development of the Bulolo Region', *New Guinea Research Bulletin Number 15*, New Guinea Research Unit, Australian National University, Canberra, 1967.
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- 16 'Check To Hides Expedition', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 19 August 1936, p. 5.
- 17 Michael J. Leahy, 'Young Explorers Differ', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 22 August 1935, p. 14.
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- 19 Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, pp. 2-3.
- 20 'Check To Hides Expedition', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 19 August 1936, pp. 5-6; H.W. Champion to R.G. Casey, 12 August, 1936, quoted in J. Sinclair, *Last Frontiers: The Explorations of Ivan Champion*, Pacific Press, Gold Coast, 1988, p. 143.
- 21 C. H. Karius, 'Expeditions across the island of New Guinea', *Territory of Papua Annual Report for 1927-29*, Appendix D, pp. 87-89.
- 22 I.F. Champion, *Across New Guinea from the Fly to the Sepik*, Constable & Co, London, 1932, p. 139.
- 23 Karius, 'Expeditions across the island of New Guinea', p. 88.
- 24 'Jack Hides To Lead New Expedition', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 21 July 1936, p. 5.
- 25 Champion, *Across New Guinea from the Fly to the Sepik*, p. 135.
- 26 Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, p. 132.
- 27 Champion, *Across New Guinea from the Fly to the Sepik*, p. 115; M.W. Young, "'The Best Workmen in Papua": Goodenough Islanders and the Labour Trade', 1900-1960, *Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1983; Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, p. 15.
- 28 D.R. Grist, *Rice*, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1953.
- 29 R.W. Robson, 'Jack Hides', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 22 July 1938, pp. 33-36. When the photo was to be taken, Hides, on Robson's instruction, hid an unfinished bottle of beer, the protraction of the previous night's party, behind his back.
- 30 Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, p. 51.
- 31 The highest part of this dome is unmapped and could be as high as 1,800 m above sea level.
- 32 J.G. Hides, *New Guinea Expedition 1937*, ML MSS 5564, Mitchell Library, Sydney; Hides, 'Jungle Journey', p. 87.
- 33 Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, p. 107.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 35 Hides, *New Guinea Expedition 1937*.
- 36 Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, p. 108.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 121; Hides, 'Jungle Journey', p. 89.
- 39 Sinclair, *The Outside Man*, p. 243.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- 41 Hides, 'Jungle Journey', p. 90.
- 42 R.W. Robson, 'Jack Hides's Last and Greatest Adventure', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 15 December 1939, pp. 34-36.
- 43 Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, p. 128.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
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- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 47 No reports of the Administration department concerned with indentured labour for the relevant period appear to have survived.
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- 51 Sinclair, *The Outside Man*, pp. 242-43; J Sinclair, 'Hides, Jack Gordon', in B. Nairn and G. Serle (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography 1891-1939, Volume. 9*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1986, p. 283.
- 52 Sinclair, *The Outside Man*, p. 252.
- 53 Sinclair, *Wings of Gold: How the Aeroplane Developed New Guinea*, p. 251.

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- 54 Relevant maps are Ok Tedi SB54-7 1:250 000 JOG; Pare 7286, Telefomin 7287, Karoma 7386 and Oksapmin 73871:100 000 topographic sheets; and the Blucher Range SB54-7 1:250 000 Geological Series.
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- 60 Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, p. 120.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 62 Hides, *New Guinea Expedition 1937*.
- 63 Hides, *Beyond the Kubea*, p. 123.
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- 65 K.J. Carpenter, *Beri-beri, White Rice and Vitamin B*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, p. 197.
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