

GENERAL SCIENCE

# Odd Questions Aided War

Far-travelled scientists and missionaries revealed important information about out-of-the-way lands to aid in winning the war. Answers were kept restricted.

► WHAT kind of hospital facilities and police systems are there on Greenland? Where is a man who can speak Fiji? Who can set up a child care program in Albania? How do you make snowshoes for horses? What is the origin and meaning of the name "Guadalcanal"? Where can we find a map of Copenhagen that shows art galleries and museums?

In order to answer such questions, the War and Navy Departments needed to know who had been where, how long, doing what. So more than 5,000 explorers, scientists and missionaries were rounded up to give specialized information required for winning the war, through the offices of the Ethnogeographic Board. This group of scientists was sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, the National Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. The Board completed the final report and critical summary of its work, and went out of existence on Dec. 31.

According to its director, Dr. Henry Collins of the Smithsonian Institution, the Board answered hundreds of improbable questions for all the war-making agencies of the Government, ranging from information about the native process of making sago from sago palms, to requests for pictures and descriptions of Alaskan islands showing the terrain suitable for construction of air fields.

Aiming at promptness in answering these world-embracing questions, the list of 5,000 explorers was arranged by geographic area as well as alphabetically. Indexed under the name of an island in the Southwest Pacific, for instance, there might appear the names of a bird hunter, a shell collector, an anthropologist, an oil geologist and a missionary, with the dates of the days, weeks or years they had spent on the island, and the sort of things they would be likely to know about it.

If the Navy wanted to know about the beaches, the weather, or the language and trading habits of the natives on such an island, the staff of the Board looked on their cards for its name, found

the names of the people who had been there, and looked for the answer in the books or articles written by the most likely one of them. If the answer wasn't there, the man himself was called upon, or written. Franked envelopes addressed to the Government office which had asked the question were enclosed to speed up answers, and also to reassure answerers that the question was official.

Once there came up certain strategic questions about one of the uninhabited Aleutian islands, which had been visited by only a few Americans in its history. Only one of these men was available, a man who had been there recently to study the habits of the sea otter and other animal life. The same day the question was asked, an Army officer flew from Washington to Wyoming to interview the sea-otter man, but not about sea otters.

For certain parts of the world, notably the Pacific islands, detailed information and lists of people were ready to use,

also indexed by areas. Often the answers to odd questions were right on the cards, but the questioner was always given the source so that he could ask other questions if he wanted to.

At one important point in the progress of the war, a missionary was found who was able to supply much-needed photographs of the harbor of an enemy-held African city.

The Weather Bureau itself asked advice on how to get information on weather conditions in certain remote areas. The director of the Board furnished a sample of observations in Alaska from his own diary, and added a list of names of others who might have similar data on many parts of the world.

Now and then the Board had to answer a question by saying there was no information available, but most frequently the staff could call up someone and have the answer the same day. Some of the questions seemed trivial, but the answers were important enough to be kept restricted until the war was over.

*Science News Letter, February 9, 1946*

Transoceanic air traffic may increase foreign pests to American crops.

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